

“High Country Quest”

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All individuals or characters are totally and completely fictional. The story locations cited are correct, and the historical notes are as accurate as research can provide. The Author has taken certain liberties as to the exact historical data that could not be supported by research. This novel saw its beginnings in 1991. I wrote “parts” of it off and on (more “off” than on) until it was copyrighted in 2002.

There is a possibility that there would be a “follow-up” novel, if I live that long.
I hope you enjoy this story.

Dedication

Of those people I have personally known, it would be impossible for me to choose only one to dedicate this book to, as there were so very many friends and relatives who either helped or encouraged me to write and finish this book. To all those wonderful individuals I wish to thank you for your kind assistance, and I hope you will enjoy the final version of High Country Quest.

I would rather “dedicate” this book to a man who influenced my “style” of writing more than anyone else, even though I never personally met this great man. I did however, read many of his books. His passing away in 1988, left a void which will never be filled. I have written this book in a style similar to his, in his honor. I consider Louis L’Amour, the best western writer of the 20th and 21st centuries. Therefore, if a dedication is in order, I not only dedicate this book to Louis L’Amour, but in some small way I would like to also honor his memory.

HIGH COUNTRY QUEST

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By Ira W. Bryant Sr.

CHAPTER 1

Dusk of early evening settled over the mountains and the prairie like a soft blanket. The sun had disappeared an hour earlier, crawling slowly behind the Beartooth Mountains, which were on the left of the lone rider heading north on the Meeteetse Trail in the Montana Territory. The rider topped a ridge and paused to survey the landscape around him. He was covered with dust from several days on the trail. He wore a elk bone handled Colt revolver on his right hip.

John O'Malley was 42 years old, six feet tall, lean, and muscular. His eyes were blue as the sky in the Montana Territory. He had a well tanned face from many hours in the sun. His face had a strong chin and was clean shaven except for his mustache which drooped down to almost even with his jaw. His hair was blond and stopped below his ears. He was intense, intelligent, and had learned to survive in the wilderness. O'Malley was riding a steel gray stallion, which he raised from a foal. The stallion had a white star on his forehead inspiring O'Malley to name him Star. The horse and rider knew each other well. Many a time O'Malley gave the horse his head and slept while forked in the saddle without fear. O'Malley loved and revered the horse as only a man who has ridden such an animal for years can.

O'Malley scrutinized the stagecoach road like an eagle on the hunt. North and East was flat country, treeless, with sagebrush everywhere, as if painted there by an artist. Mountains to the west bore the remains of winter snows nestled in the deep time-scared gorges. In the uninhabited mountain peaks, Fir and Aspen stood magisterially clad in a late summer coat of green. The only moving things were several mule deer and a few antelope. O'Malley was at the edge of the Crow Indian Reservation. He had been traveling the stagecoach road for several days and on the Crow Indian Reservation. He had not seen any Indians, but the Virtue Stage Coach from Billings and Red Lodge had passed him heading South to Meeteetse.

Instinctively, O'Malley looked over his shoulder. He stared at his backtrail for several minutes, and felt a strange uneasiness, but saw nothing to confirm the feeling. Behind him a hundred miles was the town of Meeteetse, Wyoming Territory. He looked to his East and saw the Pryor Mountains and knew that Chief Plenty Coups' of the Crow Tribe lived there. O'Malley thought of the many who had fought and died just ten years earlier in 1876, a few miles further East at the "Battle of the Little Big Horn". Only ten years; O'Malley pondered on what had happened in that short time span that saw the last of the Indians had been beaten into submission. He felt mixed emotions about what had been done to the Indians both the good and the bad. He knew and liked many Indians and knew his Country had not been fair with many of the tribes. He also knew there was little he could ever do to change the past or the future for the Indians.

The ride north had been dry from the Shoshone River until he reached the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone. As he had traveled north along the stagecoach road he crossed the path that Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, and his tribe had taken in 1877, as they traveled north to the

Bear Paw mountains trying to escape a pursuing US Army. It was in those mountains on October 5, 1877, the poor remains of the Nez Perce people surrendered to the General Nelson A. Miles.

O'Malley camped that night on the Clark's Fork. He shot a jackrabbit and roasted it over an open fire. He had not seen a living soul other than the Virtue Stage Coach during the two-day ride, but he was used to being alone. O'Malley was a loner. It didn't bother him, only described him. He was also a man of few words and spoke only when it counted.

John O'Malley was part cowpoke, had worked as a trail hand, and now owned a small ranch in the Smith Valley, Montana Territory. He was once an Indian scout, working with General Miles, and rode with Buffalo Bill Cody. He could live off the land and keep his scalp when other men were losing theirs. No one knew where O'Malley came from. Some said he was from down south, some thought he was from Florida. O'Malley never said, and no one ever asked. A man's past was his own, to do with as he saw fit. And O'Malley saw fit not to share his.

About six miles South of Red Lodge at the northwestern edge of the Crow Reservation, in the gathering dusk, shades of purple covered the land. Orange and dusty red clouds enhanced the sunset marking the end of another day. O'Malley picked a camp site for the night, which was going to be protected from the wind and near a small stream. He picketed Star and the pack horse, gathered wood, built a small fire, made coffee, and ate some elk jerky. As he drank his coffee, he thought about events which had brought him to this spot. O'Malley still had an uneasy feeling in the back of his mind. Was this the beginning of a dangerous adventure? Dangerous or not, he had to answer his brother's call for help.

After the Civil War he and his younger brother Tom, had gone West to find a future. Each had fought in the Civil War and had survived. Both having been wounded but they recovered. After all the killing each wanted a new start and a better life without the bloodletting on a massive scale. John had taken up ranching and Tom had tried the gold fields, gambling and being a cow puncher. Tom was the type who always looked for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Tom was honest and had never rode the owl hoot trail.

A letter from his youngest brother, Tom came to him at his ranch in Smith Valley. The letter was a shock. He had never received more than three letters from Tom in his life. He hadn't seen much of Tom since they arrived in the Montana Territory. John expected bad news as he tore open the letter.

The letter didn't reveal many details, except Tom could be in a life or death situation. Tom wrote of an opportunity to make a fortune, and asked John to meet him in Meeteetse. Tom was not one to exaggerate. If he said his life was at risk, you could rest assured, it was true.

O'Malley read the letter again, searching for any hidden meanings. Finding none, he turned and walked to his cabin. He felt the emotions that only a brother can feel for another brother. He had to do everything he could do to help.

Reaching above the fire place, O'Malley took down the Winchester. The rifle felt good, almost like shaking hands with an old friend. Working late into the night O'Malley cleaned the Winchester and his Colt .44 and prepared for the long ride to Meeteetse.

Next morning at dawn, O'Malley saddled Star and put a blanket and saddle bags full of coffee, beans, a little bacon, and elk jerky. He put other supplies on a pack horse. He had no idea how long this trip would take or where it would lead him. He mounted up and headed south toward Meeteetse. He had one stop to make first. He reined Star in at the L Bar B Ranch. Lonnie Butcher was walking to the main house. Butcher, a pioneer cattleman in Smith Valley, was short and stocky, with lines of a hard life deeply etched into his sun bronzed face. Burned out by the Indians twice, Butcher had seen his wife and two sons shot and killed by Indians. He had stopped two arrows himself. Butcher was too tough to die from a couple of Indian sticks, he said, and would not give up the ranch he had built.

Butcher stopped at the front door and watched O'Malley ride up.

"Mornin' Lonnie", O'Malley said, looking the leather tough old man in the eyes.

"What gets you going so early in the morning? Have you got trouble?", asked Butcher, looking behind O'Malley for smoke on the horizon or an Indian war party.

"Nothing quite that bad," answered O'Malley. "I need to hire one of your men to check my herd to make sure they have water. I'm going to Meeteetse for a few days."

"Kinda' sudden ain't it?" questioned Butcher.

O'Malley respected Butcher, but was irritated by the question. He thought to himself, "Ain't none of your damn business." But he only answered, "I have urgent business with my brother Tom. Can one of your hands do the job?", he asked again.

Butcher saw he was not going to get any more information, nodded his head, "I'll have my foreman see to it."

"I'm much obliged to you." O'Malley said. He nudged Star with his heel, turned and rode off leaving Butcher to wonder about O'Malley's sudden departure to Meeteetse.

Several days of hard riding and O'Malley rode into Meeteetse, about an hour before sunset, heading to the sheriff's office as Tom's letter directed. The sheriff's office was new, with four cells for prisoners. The cells were empty except for one. The prisoner in that cell was tall and lean, and looked part Indian, with eyes like a rattlesnake. Deadly! O'Malley had seen eyes like those before, just before someone died.

The Sheriff was reading behind his desk, feet propped up.

"I'm looking for Tom O'Malley or a letter from him."

The Sheriff was a short, tough man who looked to be about thirty-five, with enough scars on his face to be an ex-prize fighter. He cast a suspicious eye on O'Malley and asked, "What business do you have with Tom O'Malley?"

"I'm his brother, John O'Malley", he answered.

From the corner of his eye O'Malley saw the prisoner turn his head.

Reaching in a desk drawer, the sheriff pulled out an envelope, and handed it to O'Malley, "Tom left town several days ago", he parried.

"How many days ago? Two, three?"

The sheriff thought a moment. "Well, let me think, I guess it would be about ten days now. I arrested this jaybird here, two days ago and Tom left about a week before that, so that would make it nine, maybe ten days."

O'Malley thanked the sheriff and left for the nearest saloon. He ordered a beer, found an empty table in the corner, so he could watch the door, and have enough light to read Tom's letter.

"Dear John,

I can't wait any longer, time is of the upmost importance. Events and information may let a well kept secret become public. I am going to Red Lodge, Montana Territory. It is about a four day ride north and west of Meeteetse, just follow the Meeteetse Stage Coach Road. I will be making final arrangements for something which could make us both very, very rich. However, there is some danger involved, if the wrong people become aware of the fact that I know the secret.

It is too dangerous to give you anymore information in this letter, in case it should fall into the wrong hands.

John, please meet me at the boarding house in Red Lodge without delay.

Your Brother, Tom"

John, was intrigued, and irritated at the same moment. What was the "secret" and how could it get Tom killed, and by whom?

O'Malley folded the letter and drank his beer. He thought about the snake-eyed man in the jail cell. He ordered another beer from the barkeep. "What did the man in jail do to get thrown in there?"

The barkeep looked O'Malley over, "You a friend of Bob Catman?"

"Nope, I just happen to be in the sheriff's office and he looked like an unbroke bronc."

The barkeep wiped the counter slowly, "Catman, is tough as rawhide and fast with a gun. He comes to town from time to time and he's always broke. About two days ago he shows up with a pocketful of money, gets drunk, and shoots up the Blue Slipper Saloon. So, the Sheriff throws him in jail."

O'Malley thanked the barkeep, paid for the beer, and walked out into the dark.

At the general store he bought supplies, and rented a room for the night, he read the letter from Tom again and went to bed.

In the cool gray dawn, O'Malley saddled Star at the livery stable, swung into the saddle and headed north toward Red Lodge.

The Meeteetse Trail began creeping into the east foothills of the Beartooth Mountains about 15 miles south of Red Lodge. Wild game was to be seen over every rise in the foothills. Mule deer were plentiful. Running, they looked like big jack rabbits bouncing over the sagebrush. In the bottom of small draws he saw several white tail deer.

At a small creek he paused to let his horse rest and drink. He drank from the cold clear stream and filled his canteen.

Then looking around, there were the remains of several camp fires, some quite recent. After his horse rested, O'Malley swung back into the saddle and headed north to Red Lodge.

Red Lodge, was built on the banks of Rock Creek. The creek flowed north out of the Beartooth Mountains starting at Glacier Lake. Down the valley the creek increased in size due to the many snow-fed streams which emptied into it as it coursed its way down the valley. The old mountain men who had trapped the area had called it "Rocky" Creek, but later the name was shortened to 'Rock' Creek. One of the mountain men who had trapped in the area was Jim Bridger. He established a town named after him 'Bridger', located east of Red Lodge on the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone.

The town of Red Lodge was nestled in a narrow prehistoric river bed, which formed a valley. On each side was a bench, one on the east, one on the west. Each was flat and rose a few hundred feet above the town. Red Lodge had rutted, dusty streets in the summer, which turned to rivers of mud in spring and after heavy rains. There really wasn't a town, just some cabins here and there in no reasonable order, with a store or two and a cafe.

Red Lodge was only thirty miles east of the highest elevation in Montana Territory, Granite Peak rose to twelve thousand seven hundred and ninety-nine feet. Also located in the area was a peak which was round and pointed skyward. The Indians said the peak looked like a 'bear's tooth' from which came the name Beartooth Mountains.

How the name of 'Red Lodge' came to be is not absolutely certain, but one of the stories told was that the town was named after an Indian teepee which was painted red with clay to warn others of sickness in the teepee. When the sickness had passed the "Red Lodge" was left behind as was the sickness. Others say it got its name because a red rock formation viewed from a distance of ten or twelve miles, presents a striking resemblance to a huge Indian teepee or lodge.

No matter how the name began; on December 9, 1884, a post office was established and the name "Red Lodge" was suggested by E. L. Benton who became the first postmaster of the town.

The town served the needs of farmers and ranchers in the area, and was a supply point for items brought by wagon from Billings, located about sixty miles northeast of Red Lodge. The Virtue Stage Coach came through from Billings once each week and followed the Meeteetse Stage Coach Road south to Meeteetse.

O'Malley rode slowly into town, looking for his brother and observing everything. There was no hint of "gold fever". No railroad to support industry or mining activities. It was just a quiet, small western town. What did Tom discover about Red Lodge that would make a man rich? More important, who would want to kill a man for the knowledge Tom had discovered?

O'Malley spotted the boarding house. A man behind the desk looked up as O'Malley approached.

"Can I help you?" asked the man.

"Is a Tom O'Malley staying here?" O'Malley asked.

The man's face went white. His eyes darted about, "I, I, No.! He is no longer staying here." The man answered visibly shaken and nervous.

"When did he leave?", demanded O'Malley, not liking the answers he was getting.

"I am not at liberty to give you any more information," snipped the man.

O'Malley reached across the desk and grabbed the man by his jacket lapels, pulling him halfway across the counter. Nose to nose O'Malley growled, "When did Tom O'Malley leave?"

Swallowing hard, the man blurted out, "See the sheriff, he's in charge of the murder."

"What murder?", snapped O'Malley.

"Why, the murder of the man you are asking about. Tom O'Malley, of course." Quipped the man, regaining some composure.

O'Malley felt sick to his stomach and weak. He released his hold on the man and stared in disbelief. "Murdered? When?"

"About a week ago over by Bearcreek. That's all I know." the man said flatly, "If you have any more questions, see the sheriff. I'm not supposed to talk about the matter until the investigation is over." He turned and walked into a back room, leaving O'Malley standing at the desk.

The stunned O'Malley, walked slowly from the boarding house and stood outside the front door, trying to regain control. Numbing cold settled over his body. Then, slowly, pain and rage began to build inside.

"Why? Why? and Who?" Questions would not go away. Nor would they, until he found the answers.

The Sheriff would be the first step for answers. He might provide some answers, but who ever murdered Tom could still be around. What was the "secret" which killed Tom? All O'Malley knew was that Tom was dead. And for all he knew the sheriff could have shot him. Now was not the time to trust anyone, only himself. Some checking on his own, without letting anyone know he was Tom's brother was vital.

O'Malley swung into the saddle and rode slowly to the south out of Red Lodge.

He camped that night just south of Red Lodge on the West Fork of Rock Creek. He picketed Star and the pack horse and there was plenty of grass for them to graze on. A small fire flickered as he sat on the ground drinking coffee, staring into the flames with memories of his young brother flooding his mind. His stomach knotted. Burning pain was in his heart, but tears would not come. He had not cried since his wife Sarah was taken by the fever. O'Malley thought of the task at hand. He would find his brother's killer. Justice would be served western style. The key was the information or knowledge Tom had discovered. Whatever it was would eventually lead to someone. Money, must be involved. Why else would Tom have mentioned becoming very, very rich? How could he, as a stranger ask questions, without arousing suspicion? An idea came to him. As a rancher looking to buy cattle, he could ask questions without arousing too much suspicion. Another name to use. Smith? Jones? No, too common. Roberts? Sure, that would do. John Roberts would work fine.

O'Malley pulled his blanket over his body, hiding from the cool, night air and stared into the inky, star-studded night sky.

"God bless you, Tom. You were a good brother, and I loved you. I promise I won't rest until whoever took your life is punished." O'Malley spoke the words aloud and closed his eyes and slept. The Winchester under the blanket laying in his right hand.

CHAPTER 2

At dawn, O'Malley awoke feeling the same burning pain inside over his brother's death. Smoldering rage was still there also. Pain and rage would provide resolve for the task at hand.

O'Malley washed in the cold creek, broke camp, and rode into town without breakfast. In Red Lodge, he looked for a place to eat. Most of the buildings were either small log cabins or a few canvas buildings here and there. There were some situated near the creek in a helter skelter manner. He saw a wagon or two, a few horses and several Crow Indians on the rutted streets. Not much of a town in size. He spotted a small log cafe with an "Open", sign beckoned. He could smell coffee and bacon cooking. Hitching his horse, he grabbed the Winchester from the saddle scabbard, and went inside.

A few locals, setting around didn't pay much attention to O'Malley, only a casual glance or two. He picked a table in the back corner and looked over the menu.

Then she walked into the room from the back kitchen. The woman was absolutely beautiful. She was tall for a woman, thin, and she had long raven black hair, braided, hanging down her back. Her eyes were like those of a falcon, so dark the iris was difficult to determine. She had high cheek bones, with a strong chin. Her tall, lithe body moved easily, with a stride of confidence. O'Malley figured she was in her mid-twenties.

Suddenly, an emotional shock wave hit him. She had the same features as Sarah, his wife.

She gazed in O'Malley's direction and their eyes met. The shock waves returned. She smiled with beautiful white teeth and moved in his direction. Her body flowed with her pale blue dress.

"Good Morning," she said. Her voice was warm and husky.

Beautiful, self confident, and poised. O'Malley was entranced by this woman.

"Good morning," was the only reply he could produce, and dropped his eyes to the menu. As she stood beside him, he could smell soap, and perfume.

O'Malley felt blood rush to his temples and his heart race. He swallowed hard. Death had been his companion on many an occasion, but he could not remember being as tense and excited during those times as he was at this very moment.

He looked up from the menu and ordered breakfast. Not for one second did he take his eyes off her face.

"Thank You. Your breakfast will be ready right away," She said, with a smile, then walked away.

O'Malley looked around the cafe. Almost everyone had left, except for one old-timer in the opposite corner of the room. He had a scruffy white beard and silver hair which hung below his collar. He wore a black felt hat with a Crow Indian hat band, a buckskin shirt, pants, and moccasins set him off as an old mountain man. It was difficult to tell exactly how old he was, with the beard and white hair, but he was big and looked strong as an ox. He sat quietly drinking coffee. The old timer sensed O'Malley's stare and his eyes darted in O'Malley's direction.

O'Malley looked away, but could feel the man's eyes on him. He looked back.

Smiling, the old timer picked up his cup and walked to O'Malley's table.

"Howdy, Pilgrim," said the old timer, "The name's Nine Mile Bill. You just passing through Red Lodge?" His voice was friendly.

"Just passing through." O'Malley replied.

"Are you from around these here parts?"

"Nope, I have a ranch in Smith Valley." O'Malley offered.

"Smith Valley. I know an old timer named Butcher in that country," said Nine Mile, "I wonder if that old buzzard still has his scalp. You wouldn't happen to know Butcher would you?" Nine Mile Bill's eyes twinkled.

"I know Butcher. He's a neighbor, so to speak." O'Malley replied.

"Well now, it's a real pleasure to meet someone who knows Butcher. Mind if I sit a spell, chew the fat and find out what old Lonnie Butcher has been doing for the last five years?" Nine Mile chuckled, as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

"I'm John Roberts." O'Malley shook hands, and accounted for some of Butcher's activities for the last 5 years.

Nine Mile listened attentively, smiling occasionally and nodding.

As O'Malley talked about Butcher's cattle, the woman returned with O'Malley's breakfast.

"Kate, this here young feller is a neighbor of an old friend of mine. What was your name again?" Nine Mile asked.

"John Roberts" O'Malley lied.

"This is Kate Johnson, the lady who owns this here fine eating establishment, and the best cook in the Territory."

O'Malley stood, removed his hat and extended his hand, "It's a real pleasure to meet you Miss Johnson."

"It's Mrs. Johnson", she said giving O'Malley her hand. "It's nice meeting you, Mr. Roberts. I appreciated your business. Not too many folks live around Red Lodge to have as customers. Everyone, even new ones are appreciated."

O'Malley lightly held her soft but firm hand. "Married", he thought "No wonder about that, she's one of the finest women I've ever seen."

"Are you in Red Lodge on business?" She queried.

"Why, yes, as a matter of fact. Looking to buy some cattle." O'Malley felt uncomfortable.

"Well, I'm sure you'll find cattle in this area to buy. Prices should be good too. Many cattlemen don't want to feed a large herd all winter." Kate bubbled. "Well I've work to do in the kitchen, so I'll let you eat your breakfast. It was nice meeting you, stop in again."

O'Malley studied her movement as she walked to the kitchen.

"I was real surprised to hear you tell Kate you're here to buy cattle." Nine Mile noted with a curious gleam and a half-smile.

"Why do you say that?" O'Malley squirmed.

"Well, there are a lot more cattle around Smith Valley, than here, and there's been a lot of strangers and locals buying up land around here of late." Nine Mile offered "Are you sure you are here to buy cattle not land?"

"Just cattle." O'Malley felt more secure. The old timer was a crafty old fox. He knew something was wrong with the story. This might be a chance to find out more information.

"You say folks are buying up land around here. Got any idea, why?" O'Malley leaned closer to Nine Mile.

"Well , now, I don't understand it at all. They're buying land here in Red Lodge, and over on the East bench around Bearcreek. I prospected this whole area for years. Ain't no gold or silver worth working here 'bouts. The only thing I ever found around here was a little coal. Coal ain't worth hauling out by wagon. It's over 60 miles to Billings and nobody wants to pay for coal when there is plenty of wood to keep you warm in the winter. It's even stranger when folks are buying up land along each side of Rock Creek. Ain't nothin' there worth having." Nine Mile rubbed his knee with a palm.

Anyone in particular seem to be buying most of the land?" O'Malley's eyes tightened.

"Yep, a man named Sam Slade. Sam owns the Four Kings Saloon on the north side of town. Now, what would a saloon keeper want with so much land? The ground is so bad you couldn't raise a herd of cattle on any of it." Nine Mile observed.

"Does sound strange, doesn't it." O'Malley said without looking up as he finished breakfast. This old timer wanted to talk, so why not take advantage of it? "Do you think the murder of the fellow named O'Malley has any connection to all this?"

Nine Mile's eyes narrowed and her looked around cautiously. Then looking straight into O'Malley's eyes, he whispered hoarsely, "Pilgrim, that boy was murdered for asking too many questions. He found out something someone didn't want everyone to know. How'd you hear about it?"

"The man at the boarding house mentioned it." O'Malley's mouth was a thin line. "But he wouldn't give me any details. Did they catch the murderer? How was he murdered?"

"Nope, the sheriff ain't arrested nobody and he probably won't." Nine Mile leaned back in his chair "That O'Malley fellow was shot in the back, over near Bearcreek. The sheriff said there was only two sets of tracks where the shootin' took place. It was an ambush. He found one empty shell near the body."

"Why do you say the sheriff won't find the killers?" O'Malley felt rage building inside.

Nine Mile Bill was silent and looked at O'Malley for a long minute. "Pilgrim, if you're here to buy cattle, I'm a Crow Chief. Let's get out of this place and go to my cabin where we can talk."

O'Malley cursed himself mentally for letting Nine Mile Bill see through him so easily, but he followed his instincts, and somehow knew he could trust this man. And he wanted to know more about Tom's death. Besides, Nine Mile knew a lot about Red Lodge and its people. O'Malley decided to confide as much as needed.

"Sure, I'd like to find out more about the shooting." O'Malley said, matter-of-factly.

Kate Johnson returned to the table with more coffee. "More coffee, or can I get you anything else?" She smiled.

"No, no thanks, but it was a pleasure meeting you." said O'Malley as he rose.

As Nine Mile Bill and O'Malley left the cafe, O'Malley looked over his shoulder once more as sunlight from a window landed on Kate's angelic profile.

Nine Mile Bill's cabin nestled on Rock Creek at the base of the East bench.

Nine Mile was met by a large half-wolf and half-dog, he raised from a pup. The wolf-dog growled and showed his teeth when he saw O'Malley.

Nine Mile spoke lovingly, but firmly, "Friend, Buck!" The dog wagged his tail, walked to Nine Mile and laid at his feet.

"Best damn dog I ever saw." Commented Nine Mile. "This here dog can smell an Indian, a quarter of a mile away. Buck saved my scalp more than once out in those mountains."

There was no doubt about the devotion shared between this man and the dog. And no doubt, you would have to kill the wolf-dog to do any harm to Nine Mile.

A fire blazed warmly in the log cabin, which was small, cozy, and warm. A pair of snowshoes hung on one wall, several books were lying about the room the cabin felt like home.

Nine Mile grabbed a coffee pot from the stove and set two cups on the homemade wooden table. "Well, now, pilgrim, set a spell. Have a cup of coffee and we will find out just how many head of cattle you plan on buying." Nine Mile smiled slyly.

O'Malley was not good at lying. He had always been honest with himself and others. He didn't want to lie to Nine Mile, but how much could he reveal? O'Malley sipped his coffee, buying time. Changing the subject would work for awhile, but sooner or later he would have to be honest with Nine Mile. "Nine Mile, I hope you understand when I say I can't tell you everything, but I'd like to find out more about the murder of Tom O'Malley, and why land around this area is being bought."

"Are you some kind of a lawman? Maybe a United States Marshal come up from Salt Lake?"

"No. I'm just interested in the how or why Tom O'Malley was killed."

"How well did you know this Tom O'Malley fellow?" Nine Mile eyed O'Malley closely.

"About as well as one man can know another." O'Malley sighed.

"He was kin, wasn't he?" Nine Mile said softly.

O'Malley leveled with the old-timer. "I want your word you won't repeat anything I'm about to tell you."

"You have my word." Declared Nine Mile solemnly.

O'Malley watched Bill's eyes and knew this man was good to his word. "My name isn't John Roberts. It's John O'Malley. Tom was my younger brother. I'm here because my brother asked for help. He wrote and told me had information which could make us wealthy, but also

having that information endangered his life. From what you've told me, I think he was killed because of what he knew, and to keep that information to himself. I have no idea what it could be."

"I knew you were an old timber wolf in sheep's clothing when you sat down in the cafe." chuckled Nine Mile, smiling inwardly because he guessed right. "I'm sorry about your brother's death."

"Can you help me?" asked O'Malley.

"Well, I ain't too sure if I can or not, but I will dang sure try, anyway I can." Nine Mile assured O'Malley.

Do you know what Tom did while he was in town? Who he had any business dealings with? Did he make any enemies you know about?" O'Malley questioned in rapid fire order.

"Whoa, slow down. No, I don't know much about what your brother did while he was here. I do know he was in town on three or four separate occasions for several days at a time. I heard he rode to Billings on one of those times." Nine Mile answered slowly and thoughtfully.

"Can the sheriff help or be trusted?" asked O'Malley.

"Don't bet your life on the sheriff. He's just a local boy, elected to the job not too long ago. I don't know if he can keep quiet about anything." Nine Mile noted.

With no help from the sheriff, Nine Mile was ever more important to O'Malley. O'Malley began to feel better about revealing his true purposes for being in Red Lodge. "The way I figure it Nine Mile, I've got to find out what information Tom found. When I find that out, maybe that will lead me to who killed him."

"Well, I can ask a few questions around town." Nine Mile seemed to be committed to O'Malley's quest.

"I'd be real careful, Nine Mile. Whoever shot Tom may still be around and may be a bit partial to the idea of not being hung or shot for murder." O'Malley warned.

"I ain't aimin' to get shot in the back. I'll be real careful." Nine Mile said, "Have you got a place to stay while you are in Red Lodge?"

"Well no, but I can camp out south of town at the West Fork." O'Malley suggested.

"I ain't lettin' no friend of Lonnie Butcher and mine sleep on the ground when I have this here cabin. You pack your gear in here and put your horse in the corral. You are a guest and company for Buck and me. No I won't take 'No' for an answer." Nine Mile stated with resolve.

O'Malley nodded appreciatively. "OK, you win, but just for a day or two. The ground does git kinda hard."

Depositing his gear in the cabin, O'Malley asked Nine Mile if he could direct him to the area where Tom was shot, as he wanted to look around. Nine Mile drew a map of the trail to Bearcreek. While O'Malley was near Bearcreek, Nine Mile could check around Red Lodge to see what he could find out. They agreed to meet at the cabin after dark.

O'Malley saddled Star and rode southeast up the East Bench and down into the Bearcreek drainage. He looked over the sagebrush covered landscape. The land was not irrigated. It couldn't support much of a cattle herd. "What could be in the area worth killing a man?" thought O'Malley as he rode slowly toward Bearcreek. A stand of cottonwood trees stood magisterially on both sides, marking the path of the creek.

The well worn trail leading to Bearcreek had a fork. One trail turned north, leading into the Dry Creek drainage. Near the fork leading into the Bearcreek and Dry Creek drainage's was where Tom's body had been found. O'Malley reached the fork and stopped. He looked at the blue sky, the clear, cool creek, and the cottonwood trees. He could feel Tom's spirit close to him. He dismounted, and walked around the area, not looking for anything in particular and at the same time observing everything. After an hour or so O'Malley still had no clue. O'Malley mounted up and followed the Bearcreek trail on into the small settlement of Bearcreek. O'Malley observed Bearcreek through half-closed eyes. A canvas building held both the saloon and general store, and there were a few log cabins along the creek. O'Malley got down from Star and walked into the canvas saloon. He ordered a beer and introduced himself to the barkeep as John Roberts. He was looking for cattle to buy.

The barkeep named a couple of ranchers in dry creek who might be selling cattle.

"I understand a man was shot and killed here recently. Anybody find out who did it or why he was shot?" asked O'Malley, matter-of-factly as possible.

"Nobody seems to know for sure." The barkeep seemed more intent on cleaning a spotted glass than interested in O'Malley's question. "But it may have just been a robbery. As I understand it, nobody was caught and the law has no idea who to look for now."

O'Malley finished his beer, thanked the barkeep for the information about the cattle, and strode into the mid-afternoon sun. He pointed Star back toward Red Lodge. O'Malley felt frustrated, but resolved again to find Tom's killer as he rode past the area near the fork where Tom was shot on his way back to Red Lodge.

Night was approaching when O'Malley rode to Bill's cabin. He could see a lamp burning. Unsaddling Star, he put the stallion in the corral, and saw Nine Mile coming out the door.

"Did you find out anything over in Bearcreek?" Nine Mile asked as he held open the door.

"Not a thing." O'Malley sounded tired.

"Well, pilgrim, I had better luck than you then." Nine Mile said intently. "I found out a lot, but I'm afraid it's in bits and pieces. I can't put it together yet."

As O'Malley and Nine Mile entered the cabin, Buck accepted the presence of O'Malley this time and only raised his head before resuming his nap.

"Well." Nine Mile said, as he poured two cups of coffee and sat at the table. "It seems Tom kept company with a gal, named Maggie Stark, who works at the Four Kings Saloon. They had an argument over a trip Tom was taking to Billings. Seems Maggie didn't want Tom to go for some reason. Tom went anyway. Another thing is, Tom may have been on his way to see a man named George Grant at his ranch near Dry Creek. That's the day he was shot. Not only that, but, Tom bought quite a bit of land near old Fort Rockvale, which is about forty miles northeast between Red Lodge and Billings. What do you make of all that so far?" Nine Mile raised his eyes to O'Malley.

Land, a woman, and Billings, none of it connected. O'Malley could see nothing which would get his brother killed.

"I don't know Nine Mile. Does Maggie have a jealous boy friend?"

"Naw, just a typical saloon girl, she belongs to anyone with the price of a drink." Nine Mile answered, not placing much credence in the jealous boyfriend theory.

"Maybe, we don't have enough pieces of the puzzle to make a picture, but I think I'll talk to the Maggie Stark and then, maybe ride over to Grant's place to find out what Tom wanted from him. I would also like to take a look at the land near Fort Rockvale. Then maybe even ride on up to Billings. After that maybe it will begin to make sense."

"I need to get to Billings for some things. Do you mind if Buck and me ride along?" Nine Mile asked.

"I'd like the company."

After a venison stew supper, O'Malley left for the Four Kings Saloon, to have a chat with Maggie Stark.

The Four Kings Saloon was a canvas building on the main street, directly across from the boarding house. O'Malley sauntered easily through the swinging doors and looked around. He took a table in the corner which was empty. Momentarily a woman approached his table, "Would'ja like a drink, stranger?"

"Sure, I'll have a beer. And what might your name be?" asked O'Malley.

"My name's Becky, wanna buy me a drink?" She smiled enticingly at O'Malley.

"I'll buy you a drink if you can get Maggie Stark to come have a drink with me." O'Malley's tone indicated more favors than one drink.

"I'll tell Maggie someone is asking for her." The dance hall queen responded, and swung her hips provocatively as she walked away.

She returned with O'Malley's beer and smiled as if they shared a secret. She disappeared behind a curtain at the back of the saloon. Shortly, Maggie Stark appeared at the curtain. Her long blond hair trailed down a tall, thin frame. She looked as if she had been rode hard and put up wet a few times in her life of about 25 years. Not the kind of woman O'Malley thought Tom would find enticing. Maggie ambled over to O'Malley's table.

"I understand you want to buy me a drink and have a little company." Maggie said flatly. "I'll have a whiskey."

O'Malley ordered whiskey. "I'm looking for a friend of mine. He wrote me a letter and said if I wanted to find him here to look you up. You would know where he could be contacted." O'Malley lied.

"Your friend got a name?" Maggie curled her lip and downed the whiskey.

"Tom, Tom O'Malley." O'Malley watched Maggie's eyes.

The woman went rigid. Her eyes darted, her voice was cold. She spit the words from her mouth. "Who the hell are you? What business do you have with Tom O'Malley?"

"Don't get a burr under your saddle, Maggie." O'Malley soothed. "I am a cattle buyer. The name's John Roberts and Tom O'Malley was going to help me find cows to buy around Red Lodge."

"Just how long have you known Tom O'Malley?" Maggie eyed him coldly.

Why didn't Maggie tell him Tom had been shot and killed? Why was she digging for information about how long O'Malley had known Tom? At times, O'Malley was a gambler, and he took chances. It could cost him his life, but he stood a chance to win the high hand by finding Tom's killer, or in this case let Tom's killer find him.

"Look Maggie, I don't know you well enough to discuss the plans Tom and I have worked out, but he and I are business partners. He finds the investments and I supply the gold dust."

O'Malley hoped he was baiting a trap. If this woman had any under-the-table knowledge of Tom's death, he had just developed a path to Tom's killer.

"How long you been in town?" Maggie snapped, squinting her eyes suspiciously.

"I just rode in a few minutes ago and came straight here looking for Tom." O'Malley lied again.

"Tom O'Malley was shot and killed a few days ago." Maggie said coldly. "And I don't want to talk about it no more."

Maggie stood up and left O'Malley sitting at the table. At the end of the bar, Maggie motioned for the barkeep to bring her a drink. With the drink in front of her, Maggie spoke softly to the barkeep, who went back to cleaning glasses for a minute, then spoke to the other girl. The girl ambled to the back of the saloon and disappeared through a canvas curtain.

Shortly, a man came through the same canvas curtain and joined Maggie at the bar. He wore his gun low on his hip, tied down. His dark hair had streaks of gray. It was neatly trimmed, so was his handlebar mustache. Just under six feet tall, weighed around 250 pounds, and he had a large pot-belly. O'Malley guessed him to be around forty. He ordered two whiskeys and lit a cigar while listening intently to Maggie. O'Malley guessed the pot bellied man was Sam Slade. Nine Mile had described him well.

The well groomed man finished his drink and returned to the rear of the saloon through the canvas curtain. Maggie took the last swallow of her drink and returned to O'Malley's table.

"Let me buy you a drink, since you were a friend of Tom's." Maggie said huskily, edging closer to O'Malley.

O'Malley knew he had hit some kind of pay-dirt, and he was willing to play out the hand. "Sit down and I'll have another beer." O'Malley replied.

"I'm really sorry I was rude to you earlier." Maggie coyed. "I took Tom's death kinda' hard, we were such good friends and all."

O'Malley knew she was lying, and digging for information. Why not play the game to his advantage. "I'm going to miss Tom. He was a great partner." O'Malley touched the woman's hand lightly.

"Well, I hope Tom's being dead hasn't ruined your business plans." Maggie touched his cheek with her fingertip.

"This gal is about as subtle as a charging buffalo, and smart as a stump." O'Malley thought ruefully. Her orders were coming from the neat fat man. "No, Tom's death won't be a problem. He gave me all the information I need to make a lot of money." O'Malley said as he touched her hair lightly.

"Now, just how could anyone make a lot of money around this town buying cattle?" Maggie giggled, carrying out her innocent role.

"I've found it's best not to tell everything a man knows." O'Malley taunted.

"I must tell you, I find you as attractive as I did Tom, but Tom was not one to succumb to a ladies real charms." Maggie batted her dark eyelashes. "I hope you aren't so, shall we say; shy." She placed her hand on O'Malley's leg gently moving her fingers.

"I would love to find out about your real charms." Leaning forward, O'Malley traced a finger down the neckline of her dress. "But not right now. I have business to take care of. Some other time?"

The trap was baited!

Maggie looked honestly disappointed. "Well, I do hope I'll see you again when you have more time for us to spend together."

"You bet, Maggie." O'Malley wondered how long he could hold the facade. "But right now I have a business meeting. Thanks for the drink and letting me know about Tom's death." He emptied his glass of beer and walked out of the Four Kings Saloon.

CHAPTER 3

It was still early in the evening when O'Malley walked out of the Four Kings Saloon into the cool evening air. O'Malley felt his stomach grumble, he was hungry. It was the beer, he always got hungry when he drank alcohol. There was still a light on in the Silver Grill Cafe and the company of one Mrs. Johnson would help him fill two yearnings. A beautiful woman to look at and filling his alcohol-imposed hunger. "Good food and a beautiful woman." O'Malley smiled inwardly at the thought. He failed to notice a man waiting outside near the saloon. The man made no hostile move, but scrutinized O'Malley's path to the Silver Grill.

Nine Mile was drinking coffee when O'Malley walked in. "John Roberts. Fancy meeting you here. Have a seat." Nine Mile almost shouted, and pushed out a chair with his foot.

As O'Malley lowered himself into the chair Kate Johnson was at his side. She was more beautiful than he remembered. Her hair was unbraided and free. The flowing black hair cascaded down her back. Her dark eyes held untold promises and sent warm sensations through his body.

"Are you eating, or just coffee Mr. Roberts?" Kate smiled broadly.

"I'll have a steak. Cooked medium well and all the trimmings. And please, call me John. Mr. Roberts seems a bit formal to a cowhand." O'Malley gathered composure.

"All right, John, your steak will be ready in a few minutes. Coffee to drink?" She grinned mischievously.

"Coffee will be just fine." O'Malley smiling his answer.

When Kate left their table, Nine Mile put on an all-knowing, coy smile. His eyes danced. "Seems you got a sweet-tooth for a widow woman." Nine Mile snickered.

O'Malley could feel himself flush. "A Widow!" He felt a rush of excitement. "Damn your Nine Mile, you sure know how to get under a man's skin." O'Malley said defensively, with some embarrassment and irritation. "What gives you the idea I have a sweet-tooth for Kate?"

"Oh, no reason. Except maybe how the expression on your face changed and your eyes lit up when you heard the word, 'Widow'. Just thought I'd do a little fishing, and it looks like I caught a real whopper." Nine Mile laughed.

"I'll admit she's a very attractive woman, and that's all I'll admit." O'Malley said staunchly.

"So much for your love life. What did you find out at the Four Kings Saloon?" Nine Mile spoke in a low, serious voice.

O'Malley told Nine Mile about his conversation with Maggie.

"Son, you have opened a hornet's nest if Sam Slade is involved. There's two gunslingers on his payroll. Those two, have shot four men I know about and no telling how many more I don't know about." Nine Mile said with concern.

"From what you say, Nine Mile, we may know who shot Tom, but we still don't know why. And we can't connect them together or to Sam Slade." O'Malley pondered the problem aloud.

Kate returned with O'Malley's steak. "Here's your steak. I hope it's cooked to your liking. If not, just let me know." Kate dazzled O'Malley with her smile.

"If you cooked it I'm certain it'll do just fine." O'Malley grinned.

"I have a fresh apple pie for dessert, so you save some room for it, you hear?" Kate mocked a stern motherly voice as she shook a finger in O'Malley's direction.

"Yes Mamma, I'll make certain I do." O'Malley said sincerely.

Kate returned to other work and prepared the cafe for closing. As he ate the steak, O'Malley and Nine Mile rehashed the information, planned strategy and considered possibilities of the trap O'Malley had set by talking with Maggie. Neither of them noticed a man who stood across the street in the shadows, watching intently through the front window of the cafe. O'Malley planned to visit George Grant's ranch the next day to see if he could find out Tom's purpose for visiting Grant. Nine Mile said he would check around town and try to see how much land Sam Slade may have purchased, and where the land was located. He would also see if Tom bought any other land besides the land around old Fort Rockvale.

Kate returned to the table. "Are you ready for apple pie now?"

"You bet." Assured O'Malley.

Kate left to get the pie.

Nine Mile stood up and said, "Well, I ain't about to sit around and watch a man make a pig out of himself. Besides, it's time I got home and fixed Buck his supper before he chews off the table legs." Nine Mile winked and offered a silly smile. "This will give you a chance to have your apple pie and the widow woman all to yourself."

Nine Mile laughed and ducked as O'Malley's napkin sailed past his head.

Kate returned with the pie. "Where did Nine Mile get off to?"

"He had to get home and feed Buck." O'Malley replied.

"I'm really tired. Do you mind if I sit down and have a cup of coffee?" Kate asked.

"It would be an honor." O'Malley felt himself turn red. His heart raced. "This woman has quite an effect on me." O'Malley thought. He liked the effect, and he definitely liked the "widow woman" part.

The pair talked long after the pie was gone. Kate had been the wife of a rancher who was killed when his horse lost footing and fell. She ran the ranch for two years by herself, but found the task too hard to do alone. She sold the cattle and running stock and bought the Silver Grill cafe a year ago. She was a good cook and the cafe prospered.

O'Malley thought it best not to tell Kate about Tom and recent events in his life. He did tell her about his ranch and past experiences as an Indian scout. When Kate asked if he was married, O'Malley told of the fever and Sarah's death.

"Well, if you're finished, I'll take your dishes to the kitchen, close up, and head home." Kate finally said.

On an impulse O'Malley said, "I'll walk you home if you don't mind. It's dark out there and the bears are always digging around the garbage."

"I would like that, John." Kate said softly.

Kate picked up her shawl, extinguished the lamps, and locked the front door. The pair walked slowly past several log cabins, talking about everything from the weather to the one black bear that sat eating garbage as he watched them pass.

O'Malley felt very close to the woman as they walked slowly toward her cabin. He could smell the perfume she wore and the sensual odor that only a woman can possess. The moon was on the rise and the glow which bathed and illuminated her face and hair made O'Malley feel as if he were a school boy again.

"Here's my house." Kate said, stopping in front of a small log cabin.

"It looks like a really nice place." O'Malley said, fishing for an invitation inside.

"When I have it neat and clean, I'll invite you over to see the inside." Kate said, as if she could read O'Malley's thoughts.

"I'll accept that invitation without any hesitation." O'Malley said eagerly.

Kate smiled, and said, "What about next Sunday evening? The cafe is not open on Sunday. That will give me three whole days to get everything ready." "I'll be here. What time Sunday?" O'Malley asked.

"Say around 5 o'clock and I will fix you dinner." Kate touched his arm.

"Oh, don't go to all that trouble on my account." O'Malley said trying to be gracious.

"I insist." Kate said sternly.

"I'll be there." O'Malley felt his spirits lift. "Good night, Kate. It has been a real pleasure spending time with you."

"Thank you for walking me home tonight, and I am certainly pleased you came to Red Lodge." She smiled again, turned and walked into the cabin.

O'Malley walked back toward the main road in Red Lodge. He thought about Kate. She was the first woman to touch his heart since Sarah had died. He wondered what would happen between them in the future. He thought about holding her close and wondered what her skin would feel like to the touch. He wondered what it would be like to hold and kiss a woman again. It had been a while since he had experienced that sensation. But, for now, there was a more pressing task at hand. Finding Tom's killer.

The sound O'Malley heard was small, but he was aware he was not alone. Someone was following him. O'Malley cursed. He had set a trap and was too wrapped up in a woman to pay attention to what was going on around him. O'Malley quickened his pace, looking for a place

he could lose whoever was following. Looking over his shoulder, he turned and saw the outline of a man in the darkness. O'Malley ducked behind a cabin, and froze in the darkness pressing his back against the wall of the cabin. Momentarily, the man walked into view. He paused near the cabin and looked about peering into the darkness. O'Malley felt the butt of the Colt .44 in the palm of his hand. Not seeing O'Malley, the man went down the main road. O'Malley waited for a few seconds, then walked to the corner of the cabin, and looked in the direction the man had walked. The man was still looking for O'Malley. He stopped and looked back in O'Malley's direction. O'Malley was too well concealed to be seen, so the man turned, and walked directly to the Four Kings Saloon.

O'Malley followed at a distance until the man was inside. From across the street looking through the swinging doors of the saloon, he looked inside. The man was sitting at a table talking to Sam Slade.

Paydirt! O'Malley was certain Sam Slade either had something to do with Tom's murder or knew plenty about the killing. O'Malley also knew somewhere down the line he and Sam Slade would come head to head. O'Malley didn't like Sam Slade's looks or anything about him.

O'Malley turned and walked back to Nine Mile Bill's cabin. He hoped he would find out something from George Grant the next day.

During the night a storm rolled down off the Beartooth mountains, with strong winds accompanied by thunder and lightning, which lit up the night sky, heavy rains followed. Before dawn the rain slacked off to a steady drizzle, but the wind continued to blow from the northwest in heavy gusts. It was a cold wind for summer, but in country over a mile high, snow was always only moments away on any given day of the year.

Nine Mile put wood into the stove to warm the small cabin and to cook breakfast.

O'Malley had not slept much that night, not just because of the storm, but he could not put the death of his brother behind him. Nor did he want to. He also had an uneasy feeling about being the cheese to trap the rat. He knew the man who was following him the night before was working for or with Sam Slade. That in itself spelled trouble, deadly trouble. He knew it must have something to do with his brother's murder. Just who and why was still the nagging question. O'Malley let Nine Mile get the cabin relatively warm and had coffee brewing before he got out of his blankets.

O'Malley pulled on his pants and boots, walked to the wash basin poured cold water into the bowl and washed his face.

"Well, if it isn't the 'widow chaser' come to life after all." teased Nine Mile.

O'Malley was not a morning person. He did not get serious about anything until after at least one cup of coffee. He even talked less in the morning than usual. Nine Mile's jab about Kate was ignored. With uncanny insight, Nine Mile sensed that O'Malley was not about to engage in conversation until he had got his first cup of coffee.

"Here is a cup of coffee for the sore headed old bear." Nine Mile said, as he poured the freshly brewed coffee and handed it to O'Malley.

O'Malley only grunted a thank you, took the hot cup, took a sip and wrapped both hands around the hot metal cup, warming his hands as the coffee warmed his insides. O'Malley sat there quietly sipping his coffee and slowly coming to life. The coffee seemed to really help. The smell of bacon seemed to add another lift to his awaking.

"Thanks for the coffee. I really need it in the morning to get me going."

Nine Mile only grunted his response to O'Malley.

O'Malley liked the old timer. Nine Mile was the type of man who could make a good friend for life and ride the river with. Never asking for anything for himself, but always willing to share with others even when he wasn't asked, and never imposing his standards or values on others. Nine Mile was a frontier philosopher and mountain man all rolled into one unique individual.

After breakfast, O'Malley saddled Star and headed east towards George Grant's ranch. The wind was still blowing from the northwest strong and steady and occasionally in hard gusts. The trail up the east bench was familiar to both horse and rider this trip. O'Malley pulled down the brim of his hat and turned up his jacket collar in a vain attempt to block out the early morning windy chill. Star was given his head and he followed the trail from memory. The pace was slow but steady with the wind at their backs. They reached the top of the East Bench and rode on to the east with the wind tearing at them worse than when they were protected down in the valley. As O'Malley and Star began their movement toward the fork in the trail between Bearcreek and Dry Creek drainage's O'Malley had that strange uneasy feeling crawl through his body starting at his neck and working its way down his back. O'Malley gave a quick glance over his right and left shoulders at his back trail. Nothing! He looked to the south, nothing! The trail had began to drop down and on the north side and the bank blocked his view to the south. On a hunch, O'Malley turned Star south to get to the crest of the bench again for a view to the south. As they topped the ridge O'Malley saw a movement of something dropping into a coulee and out of view. He wasn't exactly sure what it was, it could have been a deer, a cow, or it could have been a horse and it could have had a rider. O'Malley stared for a long moment in the direction of the unknown movement.

"Maybe we have a rat going for the cheese." O'Malley thought to himself. "No sense taking chances. Stay alert!"

O'Malley slid the Winchester out of the scabbard, levered in a cartridge, lowered the hammer, and placed the rifle across the saddle. O'Malley retraced his path to the north and the trail to the Fork. As O'Malley approached the fork in the trail that lead northeast into dry creek, the Grant ranch, and the Clark Fork valley beyond. He recognized the fork as the same location where his brother had been murdered. Three hundred yards before O'Malley reached the fork he sensed danger once again. O'Malley could feel he was being watched. Without looking to either side he urged Star into a gallop. None too soon for O'Malley. The distinctive whine of a bullet passed close to his head, then he hear the sound of the rifle shot a split second later. O'Malley hung low in the saddle as Star lurched forward into a full run. The second bullet whined past his head as he raced toward the cottonwood trees, the rifle report followed. O'Malley played a strange trump card, he turned parallel with the cottonwood trees in thick sagebrush, the sagebrush did not offer the same protection as the trees and little protection from a bullet and did not hide the horse or rider. The third bullet whined and

O'Malley was falling from the saddle. The bullet had missed its mark, but O'Malley fell to the ground and did not move. The high sagebrush hid a man lying on the ground. Star pulled to an abrupt halt when O'Malley left the saddle. He turned and slowly walked to within a few feet where his friend and master was lying. O'Malley hoped the gunman would come to his location to check on his deadly handiwork. Moments passed, then minutes. In that time O'Malley had cocked the hammer on the Winchester and kept it at the ready. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Star and knew if anyone approached Star would look in the direction of the approaching stranger. Star did not fail O'Malley in that task, Star watched as a lone man on foot, with a rifle slowly and cautiously approached the riderless horse and the fallen rider. O'Malley knew he would only have a single chance to take the man with the rifle. He knew the direction the man would come from by watching Star. O'Malley positioned himself so he could watch through some sagebrush. O'Malley wanted to take the man alive. He would have the answers to questions as to why and who killed his brother. The sagebrush provided good concealment for O'Malley. The slowly approaching man wore a brown dusty hat, a blue shirt, brown vest, and faded blue denim pants. He wore his pistol on his right hip, and he looked to be in his mid twenties. The Winchester rifle he carried was at the ready and he was looking about frantically in an attempt to locate his quarry. O'Malley slowly and carefully aimed at the mans right shoulder. By shooting him in the right shoulder he could reduce the possibility of a right handed man using his pistol after the first shot. He aimed carefully and squeezed the trigger. As the rifle fired, the man was knocked back, and he spun around as the bullet smashed into his right shoulder. The rifle he was carrying went flying into the sagebrush as the man spun backward and hit the ground. O'Malley sprang from his hiding place and rushed to where the man was lying on the ground moaning and holding the already blood soaked right shoulder. O'Malley took cover behind a large boulder. O'Malley had reached a spot a few feet from the man.

"Move and you're a deadman!" O'Malley said between clenched teeth and with meaning.

The man's face grimaced in pain, his eyes were wild with fear and anger. O'Malley remained low to the ground behind the boulder.

"Use your left hand unbuckle your gun belt!" O'Malley said with calculated control.

With some difficulty the man unbuckled the belt.

"Get up and move over here." O'Malley said as he pointed the rifle directly at the man's heart.

The man had great difficulty in gaining his feet and staggered slightly as he moved slowly and hesitantly toward O'Malley's position.

O'Malley glanced at the shoulder wound and said, "You'll live long enough to answer questions and then hang." Standing a few feet away from O'Malley while holding his shoulder, blood oozed between the fingers of his left hand and flowed down his right arm.

O'Malley asked, "Why did you try to ambush me?"

"I thought you were a cattle rustler." The man lied.

"Like hell!" snapped O'Malley, "There ain't a cow within a mile of where we are right now."

"Who are you and who do you work for?"

The man gave no answer and never would! The blood spattered on O'Malley as the bullet passed through the man's heart. The distant report of a rifle reached O'Malley as the man crumpled to the ground. O'Malley moved lower and closer to the boulder as the whine of

another bullet ricocheted off the boulder very close to where he was standing. O'Malley's Winchester answered the shots, as he began to return fire at the rocks on the small knoll above his position. O'Malley mentally thanked the experience he had gained while fighting Indians. Indians always seemed to travel in pairs or more. Had he exposed himself he would be the one laying dead instead of the ambusher. Yes, there was more than one man involved.

After a half a dozen rounds of return fire there was no answering fire from the knoll. O'Malley waited. Time went slowly by. Nothing! O'Malley looked to Star to see if he could give any indication as to any movement he might detect and would be looking in the direction. Star was pawing the ground disturbed by the smell of blood and gun smoke on the wind. There was a small coulee about fifty feet to O'Malley's left which would give cover, and he felt he could not wait forever. In one agile and quick move he was on his feet and running. He hit the coulee, rolled and hit the ground. No bullets whined. He was either too quick or the other man was gone. O'Malley looked over the terrain and planned the best path with cover and concealment to assault the ambusher's position. While planning the attack he reloaded the Winchester. Moving from predetermined position to the next O'Malley expected a whine of a bullet. He continued to look and move strategically, moving ever closer to his objective. The closer he got the more certain he was the rifle shooter was gone. The rocks where the shots had come from were now only about fifty feet away. O'Malley cursed the strong and gusty wind for covering the sounds which would have told of a horse leaving, a dust trail, or a sound of movement in the rocks. O'Malley belly crawled the last fifty feet. Carefully he peaked over the rocks. There was a horse tied to a juniper tree. Only one horse and at least two men. The other man had probably left. A slow and careful inspection of the area confirmed his suspicion. There were two other men and they had left. O'Malley found five spent rifle cartridges on the ground in the rocks. All were .44 caliber. O'Malley examined the saddle bags of the horse tied to the tree. Nothing of interest, or any information as to who the owner might be. Extra shirt and pants, .44 caliber ammunition, and nothing else. O'Malley examined the tracks left by the other men's horses which led away in the general direction of Red Lodge. O'Malley looked at the bootprints left in the sand by one of the men. The stride indicated the man was less than six feet tall, and weighed around 175 pounds. The other man was at least six feet tall and weighed over 200 pounds. O'Malley's old scouting skills were being used once again. O'Malley considered what his next actions would be. He could hide the horse and body in the rocks and trees, and continue on to the Grant ranch and pick the horse and body up on his way back to Red Lodge. Maybe the sheriff or someone could identify the man in Red Lodge. Then again, if the men were still in the area they might come back and find the body and horse. The body could be gone when he got back. O'Malley suddenly felt very tired as the excitement drained from his body. He would not take anymore chances. He would take the body to Red Lodge. He could always go over to the Grant ranch tomorrow.

O'Malley picked up the gunbelt and tied the body across the man's horse and he and Star led the way up the trail to the east bench and down into Red Lodge. O'Malley did not want to call any unnecessary attention to himself or to Nine Mile or provide any information to anyone else interested in the shooting.

O'Malley took the most inconspicuous route to the sheriff's office. He dismounted at the back door, tied the horses and walked around to the front. The sheriff was not in the office, but the deputy went to find the sheriff when O'Malley told him of "finding" a body on the trail.

O'Malley figured if he told the whole story the sheriff might not believe him and after all the man was shot in the back as well as the front.

The sheriff sauntered up to O'Malley but did not speak. He walked directly to the body grabbed the greasy hair on the man's head and lifted it high enough to get a good look at the man's face, squinting and bending at the knees as he did so. "Local drifter. His name's Al Kingsley do you know him?"

"Never laid eyes on him before and the name doesn't mean anything to me." O'Malley answered.

"I've seen him around town a few times. How'd this happen?" asked the sheriff, as he dropped the head and wiped his greasy hand on his pants.

O'Malley told of riding over toward the town of Bearcreek and as he approached the fork leading into Dry Creek he hear a shot and thought it might be a hunter. When he got closer, he saw a man on foot, holding his right arm and running away from a rocky knoll. A second shot dropped the man in his tracks, then a third shot was in O'Malley's direction. O'Malley returned several rounds at the rocky knoll without really seeing anyone on the knoll, and the shooting stopped. When he got to where the man had fell, he was dead, shot once in the shoulder from the front and once through the back. O'Malley worked his way up to the rocky knoll and could not find anyone, except three empty cartridges.

O'Malley took three shells from his shirt pocket and handed them to the sheriff. O'Malley then continued. "The man's horse was close by, so I caught the horse loaded the body and brought it to town. That's all I can tell you."

The sheriff examined the shell casings very carefully and then the body. "What's your name and what were you doing over around Bearcreek? The sheriff turned his attention to O'Malley.

"The name's John Roberts and I was on my way to see George Grant over in Dry Creek about some cattle." O'Malley half lied. "I have only been in town a few days."

"Where you been stayin'? Here in town, or camping out?"

"I have been bunking at Nine Mile Bill's place down near the creek beneath the east bench."

"Friend of Nine Mile's are you?" the sheriff said as he raised an eyebrow.

"Not exactly, he is a friend of a neighbor of mine up north of here."

"That neighbor got a name?" the sheriff asked.

O'Malley felt his temper flare a bit. "Now look here sheriff, I brought the body in, I could have left it on the trail. I am just trying for be a good citizen. I ain't looking for trouble. Why all the questions?"

The sheriff backed down a bit. "This is the second killing we have had in these parts in less than two weeks, and as near as I can tell, it happened in the same area."

"Well I have told you all I know and have given you the three empty cartridges I found. That's all the help I can be. If you find out anything, I will be at Nine Mile Bill's." O'Malley said with finality.

"OK, lets start over what's the name of the friend of Nine Mile's where you're from?"

"Butcher, Lonnie Butcher."

"Where you from?"

"Smith Valley."

The sheriff rubbed his chin, turned to his deputy and said, "Get this body over to the undertakers this man and I are going to take a ride out to where this feller was killed. Mr. Roberts you and I are going to take a ride."

"All right, if you think it will help." O'Malley agreed. It would give him a chance to talk to him about the other murder. Maybe he could find out something about Tom's death.

The sheriff and O'Malley rode back out of town and back to the fork where the shooting took place. O'Malley showed the sheriff where he "found" the body.

The sheriff looked around, found the Winchester Kingsley had dropped when O'Malley had shot him. He checked the rifle to see if it had been fired recently and began to backtrack Kingsley to the knoll. O'Malley followed along.

The sheriff looked over the area in the rocks where O'Malley had found Kingsley horse.

"How did you find the horse again?" the sheriff asked suspiciously.

"I came up to this knoll to see where the shots were coming from and found a horse here. I figured it belonged to the dead man." O'Malley said truthfully.

"There were three men here. Kingsley started out from here. He left his horse here and walked down the slope to where he was shot. It doesn't make sense. Why would he leave his horse, walk down the hill and then who ever was with him or followed him shot him while he was on foot." the sheriff said aloud.

"It doesn't make any sense."

"Did the last murder around here make any sense?" O'Malley asked.

"Well the man didn't have any money on him and all his pockets were turned out. I think he was robbed."

"Well maybe I got here too soon for them to rob the dead man." O'Malley offered.

"Possibly. But I don't like the looks of things." the sheriff looked around again and then looked at O'Malley.

"What were you doing over here?"

"I was on my way over to George Grant's place to talk to him about some cattle." O'Malley lied.

"How long you planning to stay around these parts?"

"For awhile. I plan on buying some cattle before winter sets in."

"Buying cattle?" the sheriff said suspiciously.

"That's right sheriff. Buying cattle."

"Let's ride back to town there's nothing else to see up here." the sheriff said.

"Any ideas who shot this man or the other man?" O'Malley asked.

"Nope."

"What was the other man's name?" O'Malley asked.

"O'Malley, Tom O'Malley."

"Was he from around here?"

"Nope, but he came through this area from time to time. No body seems to know what he did for a living. Some say he was a land speculator. We haven't found any next of kin to give his personal effects to. Had to sell his horse and saddle to pay for the burial. Still have a suitcase that belonged to him in my office." The sheriff said.

When O'Malley and the sheriff got back to town O'Malley turned Star toward Nine Mile's cabin.

"Don't leave town right away. I may want to talk to you about what happened out on the trail again." The sheriff ordered.

O'Malley nodded, and rode to the cabin.

CHAPTER 4

O'Malley unsaddled Star gave the stallion a ration of grain and left the horse munching away as O'Malley walked to the front door of Nine Mile's cabin. O'Malley opened the door slowly to give Buck time to recognize him. Buck did indeed raise his head from the floor, but he did not rise. For the first time Buck even wagged his tail at O'Malley. Nine Mile had beans, venison, and coffee cooking on the wood stove when O'Malley walked into the cabin.

"Good vittles tonight." Nine Mile said, as he stood in front of the wood cookstove and stirred the pot. "Got a fresh killed mule deer and I cut out the backstrap for tonight's supper." Nine Mile said proudly. Nine Mile was proud of his ability to cook, but would never touch a pot or pan if there was a Indian squaw around. An Indian squaw would have no respect for any man who would actually cook when there was an Indian squaw about.

O'Malley sat down at the table and said, "I almost got dry gulched down near Bear Creek."

Nine Mile dropped his spoon in the pot and faced O'Malley with a scowl on his face. "How'd it happen? Did you see who it was? Are you OK?" Nine Mile asked in rapid fire succession.

"It was a close call. They tried to ambush me with rifle fire, but it cost one of them with his life."

Nine Mile sat at the table and did not say a word and listened intently as O'Malley told him what happened. He nodded his head occasionally but didn't even get up from the table to stir the food cooking on the stove.

When O'Malley had finished Nine Mile spoke. "I knew it would be just a matter of time before there would be trouble. I know Sam Slade knows about you and is out to kill you before you find out who killed your brother." Nine Mile said with some resolve. "I would say your trap has been sprung, but you missed the papa polecat."

O'Malley did not reply immediately. He had been thinking what his next step would be every since he had picked up the body of the dry gulcher on the trail. He only reflected on his first plan. Being the bait had worked, but it had not caught the man he sought.

O'Malley spoke to Nine Mile. "I guess the plan to find out who shot Tom has got to be modified a bit. They know that I was close to Tom, but what they don't know is just how much I know about the secret information that must have gotten Tom killed. I am going to try a more direct approach. I am going to give Sam Slade a direct challenge." O'Malley rambled on out loud to Nine Mile, as if to share his thoughts. O'Malley hoped that the old Indian fighter would help improve the plan or at least agree with it.

Nine Mile grunted. Scratched his head, rubbed his bearded chin and grimaced. "Sleeping in a bed of rattlesnakes would be a whole lot safer than going head to head with Sam Slade. He ain't never give a man a fair shake. One of his men would back shoot you for sure."

O'Malley knew Nine Mile was right. He had to figure a better way. If you were going to get the drop on Slade, it would have to come from his blind side. He decided he would work on the problem later right now he was hungry. "Let's eat."

Nine Mile finished dishing his beans and venison on the plate, poured a hot, strong cup of coffee and sat down at the table opposite O'Malley.

O'Malley asked, "How did you get the name of 'Nine Mile'?" he said smiling and genuinely interested.

Nine Mile looked straight at O'Malley and then looked away at some distant and invisible horizon. He seemed to be wandering back into time within his mind.

"Well it was back in 1862, when I was in the western part of the Montana Territory. I had left the great divide at the head waters of the Clark's Fork of the Columbia river near a place called Butte. I was doing some prospecting in those days and I was headin' to an area called 'Hells Gate' (later this would become Fort Missoula) a place which was home to the Salish Kootenay Indians sometimes called 'Flatheads' by the white man. It was where the Blackfoot and Bitterroot rivers met the Clark's Fork and near the 'Mullen' road. * There was a place called 'Frenchtown' because some many Frenchies lived and traded at that location, and was the only real settlement in the area in those days. I had prospected for gold most of the summer from Butte to Frenchtown. I got to Frenchtown and bought some supplies with most of the gold I had found along the way, and then prospected a creek nine miles north and west from Frenchtown. I found enough gold to tickle my fancy and was worth working for awhile. I built a small cabin on Nine Mile Creek, worked the creek and spent a winter and a summer

there. I was the only white man who lived on the creek and after the winter everyone in that neck of the woods called me 'Nine Mile Bill'. Over the years the name just stuck. Never did get much gold out of the creek though." **

* A road which was built by the US Army under the command of a Lt. John Mullen from Fort Benton to Fort Walla Walla.

** Later in history Nine Mile Creek would give up millions in gold to Chinese miners and other miners who used a large dredge. In time, a stagecoach house would be built at Nine Mile Creek at the Mullen road apply called the "The Nine Mile House".

Nine Mile smiled, as if he was remembering fond memories as he traveled back in time within his mind. With a twinkle in his eye, he looked back at O'Malley and said, "I have had one hell of a good life. I have done things that some men will only dream about doin'."

After cleaning up the two decided it might be safer to head north the next morning and check out the land Tom bought around Fort Rockvale. O'Malley could see George Grant later. After Fort Rockvale they would go on northeast to Billings. They could find out what kind of land it was and who Tom may have talked to in Billings.

The next morning O'Malley and Nine Mile loaded trail supplies on the pack horse for the trip. They mounted up and rode into Red Lodge with Buck trotting along side of Nine Mile. They stopped at the Silver Grill for breakfast, while Buck waited patiently outside.

"Good morning." Kate said, and then she suddenly remembered something else and asked, "Are you all right? I heard you found a man shot over by Bearcreek and brought the body in to the sheriff." The concern for O'Malley was evident in her voice.

"I'm just fine. The shooting was over with before I got there." O'Malley lied, to calm Kate's concerns, and secretly appreciated Kate's apparent concern for him.

"What happened?" she asked.

O'Malley told her the same story her that he had given to the sheriff as she poured him a cup of coffee. Kate just nodded and shook her head through out the story and was totally engrossed.

"Did the sheriff have any idea who might have shot the man?" she asked.

"None." O'Malley answered

"Two men murdered in almost the same place. Do you think we have a gang of robbers in this area?" asked Kate with much concern.

"I really don't know what to think." O'Malley solemnly answered.

"Nine Mile and I are going to be out of town for a few days. We are heading up to Billings." O'Malley offered.

"Well you two be careful." Kate said, and left to fix their breakfast.

When they had finished, Kate brought out several fresh biscuits and gave them to Nine Mile and O'Malley for the trail.

"Thanks for the hospitality. I am sure they will come in handy." Nine Mile smiled.

O'Malley stopped by the sheriff's office on his way out of town to let the sheriff know he was going to Billings for a day or two, but would be back.

They followed Rock Creek north out of Red Lodge. The road was well traveled, flat and slightly downhill. A stagecoach had recently began to run from Billings once a week through Red Lodge and on south down the Meeteetse Trail into Wyoming Territory.

Around noon Nine Mile suggested they let the horses have a rest. He turned toward Rock Creek and the shade of Cottonwood trees. They dismounted and let the horses drink their fill.

"We have company." Nine Mile said.

"How do you know?" O'Malley asked.

"Buck knows. Someone has been dogging our trail since we left Red Lodge." Nine Mile answered.

"Have you seen them?"

"Nope. Probably won't, if they are smart. But after dark things could get a little rougher."

"Do you think they will try something?"

"Don't know for sure, but we had better keep a close eye on things. Buck will let me know if anyone tries to come into camp. You know you could be bad for a feller's health. Seems like you draw dry gulchers. I guess I will just have to pick better trail partners in the future." Nine Mile said jokingly.

"You can bet Sam Slade has something to do with this." O'Malley said.

"You will have a hard time proving it." Nine Mile reflected.

They remounted and rode north again keeping a close watch for anything unusual along the trail.

That evening they camped on the west bank of Rock Creek. Nine Mile and O'Malley fixed supper.

As it began to get dark O'Malley asked, "Do you think one of us should sit up and keep a watch?"

"I ain't about to lose no sleep when I got a wolfdog like Buck along. He will let me know if anyone or anything gets near this camp. If, anyone wanted to do us harm they would already have tried it today. There were plenty of places where we could have been ambushed. I think they are just watching us to see where we are going and what we are up to."

"I think you might be right. Just the same let's don't take any unnecessary chances or let our guard down." O'Malley said.

The night was quite, cool for sleeping and peaceful. Just as dawn was breaking they started breakfast and were on the trail by sun-up. They rode into Fort Rockvale before noon. Nine Mile had a map he had got at the land office in Red Lodge that showed where Tom had bought the land.

They spent about an hour finding the land and then looking around to see if there was anything unusual about it. The land was west of Rock Creek about a mile. It was flat and full of sagebrush. There wasn't any streams or springs anywhere to be found. Nine Mile said no one had ever found any silver or gold in the area. The land didn't even look good for cattle without water, and there wasn't any natural streams anywhere.

After riding all over the land, they finally gave hoping to find anything unusual about the land.

"Why would Tom go to so much trouble to buy this land?" O'Malley asked, Nine Mile.

"It is so useless that it would be real cheap to buy, but I don't know what you could use it for. Cattle maybe, if you had access to water." Nine Mile guessed.

Frustrated, O'Malley said, "Let's ride on to Billings, maybe, that will tell us more."

The trail turned northeast, where Rock Creek emptied into the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone. They continued their trip along the west side of the Clark's Fork. They kept a close watch, but never saw anyone following. Buck seemed to be the only one who knew for sure that someone was there.

They forged the Yellowstone River and late that afternoon they rode into Billings. It was a railroad and a cow town. The Northern Pacific had brought a railroad from the east running up the Yellowstone River valley.

They found a livery stable and left their horses overnight.

"Let's get a beer at the Golden Palace Saloon. I have an old friend who works there. Besides, I need to wash the trail dust out of my throat." Nine Mile suggested.

The Golden Palace was near the railroad tracks, which is normal for a large and busy railroad town.

They walked into the saloon which was alive with cowhands and railroad men alike. There was the Faro table and plenty of saloon girls. The bartender was a giant of a man who looked to be nearly seven feet tall and weighed three hundred pounds or more. He had a full beard and mustache. He was pouring whiskey at the other end of the bar.

Nine Mile pounded his fist on the bar and demanded, "Give me a beer you big buffalo!"

The bartender looked at Nine Mile, turned and walked to their end of the bar. "I don't serve anyone who looks as ugly as you and smells as bad as you do."

"Ugly? Smells bad?" Nine Mile sounded astonished. "Why I wouldn't let a nasty, ill tempered, worn out, old buffalo skinner like you serve me, even if you had the last drop of watered-down whiskey in this Territory." Nine Mile growled.

The saloon suddenly became deathly quite. The local patrons knew the disposition of the big bartender. Surely there would be trouble.

"Now apologize, you old has been." The bartender ordered.

"I apologize, Cheyenne." Nine Mile smiled and extended his right hand.

The big bartender smiled from ear to ear and said, "Where have you been hiding? I haven't seen you since last spring?"

"Still up in Red Lodge country. I want you to meet a friend of mine from up in Smith Valley. Names, John Roberts. He is a neighbor of old Lonnie Butcher."

He shook O'Malley's hand and said, "The hell you say. You know Lonnie Butcher, hell, we go back almost as long as white men have been in this Territory. Me? The names Cheyenne McAllister."

"Cheyenne McAllister. I've heard of you, but you are bigger than the stories go." O'Malley said admiringly.

"Well all this lazy livin' has caused me to put on a pound or two." Cheyenne said. "How about a drink?"

"Two beers, and he's buying." Nine Mile spoke up. "Now this here fellow hands are so big he still has to give two drinks instead of one for a pinch of gold dust." Nine Mile said.

"Why two?" O'Malley asked.

"Show this pilgrim your right fore finger Cheyenne." Nine Mile requested. "See the size of the finger and the long fingernail. Well it has always been a practice of a bartender to take a 'pinch' of gold dust for a drink. Most bartenders grow their fore finger nail long so they get all the gold dust they can in a "pinch". This here fellar has fingers so big that he has to give two drinks for a 'pinch'" Nine Mile laughed.

"What brings you to these parts?" Cheyenne asked.

"Just a few supplies and my partner has to check on a few things here in town."

"Women? How about splittin' the blanket with a squaw?" Cheyenne smiled.

O'Malley spoke up, "Maybe next trip, but not this time."

"Well if there is anything you need while you here let me know. It was good meetin' you John. Anyone who knows this old coot and Lonnie Butcher is always welcome in the Golden Palace." Cheyenne said, he turned and went about his business.

"You know Cheyenne was raised by the Cheyenne from the time he was just a pup. They found his Ma and Pa scalped along the Bozeman trail. He left the Cheyenne and became a trapper, a scout and one hell of a mountain man." Nine Mile said with some admiration. "We trapped the Yellowstone country together when this was all Indian country. His legs started going bad on him, so he took up bartending. Don't never seem to have much trouble where Cheyenne McAllister is the bartender, and if it does start, it don't last long."

They finished their beer and told Cheyenne goodnight and left to get a steak for supper.

They found a hotel and rented a room for the night. Nine Mile had to sneak Buck into the room up the back stairs.

The next morning Nine Mile and Buck went to the general store for supplies and O'Malley went to the land office.

The clerk was helpful and remembered Tom coming into the office to register the purchase of his land in Fort Rockvale. He did recall that Tom had asked about other cheap land for sale southwest of Billings. Tom had never come back to register any other purchases of land after that.

"Has Sam Slade registered any land purchases in the last six months?" O'Malley asked.

"As a matter of fact he has registered several pieces of land."

"Could I see a list of them?"

"They're all in this book. You may look through it if you like." The clerk said handing O'Malley the large book.

O'Malley took the book to a desk nearby and began to write down the locations where Slade had recently bought land.

O'Malley returned the book, thanked the land office clerk and went looking for Nine Mile and Buck. Buck was still sitting outside the General Store waiting.

Nine Mile came out the door with his arms full of packages. "Here make yourself useful." Nine Mile handed some of the packages to O'Malley. "What did you find out at the land office?"

They walked toward the livery stable to get their horses. O'Malley said, "Tom only registered one piece of land but I got a list of land Slade has registered in the last six months. I would like to compare it with the list you got in Red Lodge."

They got the horses saddled and the packhorse loaded, they headed toward Red Lodge not really knowing very much more about the cause of Tom's death. They did know that Slade had bought land between Billings and Red Lodge in the Rock Creek Valley.

They spent the night on the trail near Fort Rockvale on the way back. They did not see their "shadow" on their way back but Buck seem to know for sure he was still with them. From time to time he would stop and look back and growl. Then again he would sniff the wind and stare at some unknown object, that only Buck could seem to see.

The next morning they moved out before dawn as the last leg was going to be a long haul. They got to Nine Mile's cabin long after dark, and it was much later when they had taken care of the horses, unloaded the supplies and fixed something to eat. They were all very saddle weary by the time they got to bed about midnight.

O'Malley couldn't sleep, he got up at dawn. He quietly got dressed as Nine Mile was still snoring gently. Buck quietly watched O'Malley as he slipped on his boots, picked up his coat and hat. The cabin was very cool that morning as the stove had burned out during the night. O'Malley buckled on his six gun, unlatched the cabin door and slipped outside. A north wind was blowing and was sharp indeed. The wind held the promise that winter would soon come to the high country of the Montana Territory. O'Malley pulled his hat down against the cold and persistent wind and tugged his coat up around his neck and snuggled down inside the coat attempting to ward off the biting cold. He could see his smoky breath stream away with the wind.

Star stood at the corral fence with his ears pointed forward and watched as O'Malley strolled away toward the main part of Red Lodge.

O'Malley walked slowly toward town and was deep in thought as to what his next move should be. Nine Mile was right. He shouldn't come at Sam Slade head-on, at least, not yet. He had to tie Tom's death to Slade, then a rope would do just fine for Slade. The vigilantes around Virginia City and Alder Gulch had a sure cure for murders and had reportedly hung over a hundred men who would never murder and rob again. O'Malley remembered the vigilantes had hung the sheriff named Henry Plumber and many of the members of the "Plumber gang". So much for trusting the sheriff of Red Lodge. O'Malley had heard of the three numbers "3, 7, 77" used by the vigilantes. No one outside the vigilantes really knew what the numbers meant. Some had speculated when it was scrawled on someone's door it would mean "straighten up you act or we will find a hole 3 feet wide, 7 feet long, and 77 inches deep for you". *

The smell of freshly brewed coffee broke through to O'Malley's mind. He suddenly realized he was at the Silver Grill cafe and it was already open for business.

* The Montana Highway Patrol still has "3-7-77" on their uniform patch to this day.

O'Malley stepped on the boardwalk and then through the door. The warmth of the room and aroma of coffee and bacon enveloped O'Malley. The cafe was empty except for Kate. He saw her coming from the kitchen in a quick stride.

She looked up a bit surprised and stopped, placed her hands on her supple womanly hips and asked, "Just what are you doing out and about so early?" Not waiting for an answer, "When did you get back from Billings."

"We rode in after dark."

"Well it is good to have you back. How about some coffee?" she smiled.

"I sure could use a cup."

Kate poured a fresh cup for O'Malley.

The door to the cafe opened and a man came through the door with a gust of cold wind. Kate's face became stern and her body stiffened. The man walked to a table in the corner of the cafe and sat down.

"Trouble!" Kate whispered under her breath to O'Malley.

Kate did not approach the table, but asked from across the room, "Can I get you something?"

The man ordered breakfast and coffee.

O'Malley looked at the man's face. He knew the face, but where had he seen it before? "Snake eyes!" It was the man in the jail cell in Meeteetse. His name was Catman and Kate was right, he was trouble. He worked for Slade. O'Malley looked away, sipped his coffee and understood the uneasiness he now felt.

Kate returned with Catman's breakfast. She set the plate in front of Catman from the opposite side of the table.

Catman leered at Kate. "What's the matter? Afraid to get close enough to a man who will pat that nice bottom of yours? I know you widow women like that sort of thing."

Kate's face turned crimson with anger and contempt. "You useless excuse for a man, you aren't good enough to be a swamper in a saloon, so you have become a drunken hired gun."

Catman's eyes looked holes through Kate. The black snake-like eyes did not blink. He stood up slowly, took his breakfast plate and threw it to the floor, shattering the plate and splattering food. His eyes never left Kate's eyes. He took a step toward Kate, drew back his arm to hit her.

"Don't do it! It'll be the last thing you ever do on this earth, except die!" O'Malley said loudly.

Catman froze his backswing. His eyes darted to O'Malley, who was now standing and facing Catman.

"You man enough to carry out that threat?" Catman said in a rather quiet, even and pleasant voice as he slowly lowered his arm to his gun side.

O'Malley had seen men like Catman before. A cold blooded killer. No emotion. This man thought no more about killing someone than spitting in the street. Over time, if they lived long enough his type grew to enjoy the killing. O'Malley knew it was too late for talk. There was going to be gun play. His heart pounded, his mouth was dry. Time seemed to drag. Seconds seemed to strangely turn into minutes.

"Prepare to die!" Catman said with an evil demented smile. He faced O'Malley with his hand just above the butt of his low hung pistol.

O'Malley was not a gunfighter. He was a good shot, but he knew Catman could clear leather before he could. It was time to think of some way to even the odds. Either that, or die. O'Malley wasn't exactly afraid to die, but right now just didn't seem to be the best time. He knew Catman's draw would be one quick movement. Catman would draw using his thumb to cock the single action revolver as the palm of his hand brought the butt up. His finger would move to the trigger. As the revolver cleared the front of the holster, the barrel would arch up and level at O'Malley's heart, an instant later the bullet, which would send O'Malley to the hereafter as the bullet tore through his heart. Not what O'Malley had in mind when he got out of bed this morning. It could spoil a man's whole day.

O'Malley knew some things about how gunfighters honed their skills. They would spend hours practicing their fastdraw, then hours drawing and firing hundreds of rounds at a target.

That's it! They fire at a stationary target! Maybe, just maybe, there was a way to even the odds. When Catman made his move, O'Malley would move to his right. O'Malley was betting his life on the repeated practice of a gunfighter to draw and fire in one movement at a 'stationary' target. With so much practice in that manner it would be next to impossible to change the technique for a moving target if he didn't expect O'Malley to move. If Catman did miss the first shot, a second shot would be deadly. O'Malley would have to make his first shot count, before Catman got off his second shot. O'Malley shifted most of his weight to his left leg and bent his right knee slightly in preparation for the move.

Catman's smile faded away and the black snake-like eyes glared. O'Malley saw Catman's right hand move. O'Malley moved to his right as he reached for his Colt. Catman's movements were a blur. O'Malley saw the flash and the smoke billow from the barrel of Catman's gun. Searing pain and shock impact hit his left arm. O'Malley fired and shot for the heart. Catman's face showed surprise and his jaw dropped. A small black hole had appeared in the center of his chest. Catman was dead before he hit the floor as his knees buckled. Smoke was thick and the smell of death and gunpowder filled the cafe. O'Malley felt weak and sick to his stomach. Pain tore through his left arm and he felt warm wet blood flow down his arm and begin to drip from his fingers to the floor.

A scream from Kate startled O'Malley back from the edge of unconsciousness. O'Malley looked at Kate who stood as if she were cast in stone.

"My God, you have been shot!" Kate exclaimed as she moved to O'Malley's side. She saw the crimson red blood pattern on the coat about half way between the left shoulder and the elbow.

"Sit down and take off your coat!" Kate ordered.

A man came through the cafe door.

"Get Doc. Carpenter and the Sheriff!" Kate yelled. She was now firmly in charge of the situation and appeared to have total control as she issued her latest order. Kate slowly removed O'Malley's coat and ripped his left shirt sleeve up to the shoulder exposing two holes on the outside of the arm. Blood oozed from both openings and flowed down the arm. Kate ordered, "Sit still!" and left for the kitchen to get a towel and water.

She returned moments before the doctor arrived.

The doctor checked Catman for any signs of life, he shook his head and turned to a man in the crowd which had gathered outside the cafe. "Get the undertaker." Doc. Carpenter checked O'Malley's arm. "Missed the bone, went clean through, in and out."

Kate cleaned the wounds and applied a bandage under the doctors supervision. The doctor added a sling and said, "Come by my office tomorrow, and don't use the arm for a while. It will be very sore tomorrow and will probably throb tonight."

The sheriff pushed through the crowd as the doctor finished talking to O'Malley.

"One dead; one winged. Catman was shot once in the chest. From the front. This man over here is just plain lucky." the doctor said as he was leaving.

The sheriff looked at the man lying on the floor, "I'll be damned. It's Bob Catman!" He turned and walked to O'Malley and asked, "What happened here?"

Kate answered first. "Catman went for his gun and Mr. Roberts shot him."

The Sheriff looked suspiciously at O'Malley, but didn't say a word. He looked from O'Malley to Catman and back to O'Malley. Not really believing what he saw. "You a gunfighter?" the sheriff asked pointedly.

"Nope." O'Malley answered.

The sheriff didn't like O'Malley's answer. How could a "cattle buyer" kill a fast gun like Catman in a fair gunfight? The sheriff pulled his revolver, held it on O'Malley and took his Colt. "You two come with me. You have a lot of explaining to do until I get to the bottom of this. You, Mr. Roberts, have given me two bodies in less than a week. Now let's go."

The sheriff put O'Malley in a cell and questioned Kate for over an hour. He then turned Kate loose and had O'Malley come into the office. The sheriff questioned O'Malley over every detail several times and compared O'Malley's version of what happened against what Kate had told him. At long last the exasperated sheriff said, "Here is your gun. You are going to need it. Once the word gets out Catman was killed in a fair gunfight you will have fast guns from all over the Territory coming to town to try you. If, I knew who caused the two other murders, I would run you out of town. Until I say different. Don't leave these parts."

At that moment, Nine Mile stormed into the sheriff's office carrying a double barreled shotgun. "What in thunderation is going on here? Why is this pilgrim under arrest? I hear tell he shot a no account, killer, polecat in a fair gunfight, so why is he under arrest?"

The sheriff scowled at Nine Mile. He looked at O'Malley and said, "You are free to go. And as for you." Looking back at Nine Mile, "Get the hell out of my office with that scatter gun."

Nine Mile and O'Malley left the office together. "What were you planning to do with the shotgun?" O'Malley asked.

Nine Mile didn't answer. "Kate wants to see you at the cafe Mr. Smarty Pants Roberts." He grumbled on, "Luckiest damn pilgrim I ever seen. Winged in the arm, and actually kills the 'fast gun.' Now I'm a totin' a shotgun all over town. It must be the company I have been takin' up with lately. Just got to keep better company."

There was a "Closed" sign in the window of the cafe. Kate was scrubbing blood stains from the wood floor.

Seeing Nine Mile and O'Malley she said, "Sit down. I'll get some coffee." She pulled the curtains closed and got the coffee. She poured each of them a cup, wiped her hands and sat down. "You were set up and lucky to be alive." Kate said flatly. "Bob Catman came in here to get you in a gunfight and kill you." She said with certainty.

"How do you figure?" O'Malley asked.

"Simple. Bob Catman has been in here many times, but he has never touched me or said anything out of the way. I didn't like Catman and he seemed to know it, but I always served him and kept my distance. He knew you and I were friends and probably wouldn't let him hit me without getting involved. And; Catman knew you were in the cafe."

"How do you know that?" O'Malley asked.

"I saw Catman walk by the cafe several times this morning after I was open, but he did not come in. I think he was watching and waiting for you. The fact is he came in right after he saw you come in." Kate said with certainty.

"I think you may be right. Now that I think about it I agree with you. Slade must have put him up to it." O'Malley said.

"With Catman dead, you will never be able to prove that Slade had anything to do with the shooting." Nine Mile reflected.

"John, you have lost a lot of blood. You need to get some rest. Nine Mile, you take him to your cabin and have him get some rest." Kate ordered in a firm voice.

Nine Mile looked at O'Malley and nodded. O'Malley did not feel like discussing the order from Kate. He got up slowly and walked on his own to the door. Slowly, but steadily Nine Mile and O'Malley walked to Nine Mile's cabin.

CHAPTER 5

Nine Mile let O'Malley nap most of the afternoon. About dark O'Malley woke up feeling rested, but his arm was stiff and very sore.

Nine Mile was cooking supper. "How is the arm?"

"Sore as hell." grumbled O'Malley.

"Serves you right for playing gunfighter and protecting a widow woman." teased Nine Mile.

"Now surely, you are not dumb enough to get that 'gunfighter' all riled up are you?" parried O'Malley.

"You're right. Your seedy reputation alone is enough to scare me to death." chuckled Nine Mile.

After supper, Nine Mile and O'Malley talked strategy and discussed "puzzle parts" to the mystery of Tom's death.

O'Malley and Nine Mile compared the list of land Slade had registered in Billings against the list Nine Mile had found in Red Lodge. None of the land was the same, so Slade had bought a great deal more land than just around Red Lodge.

"Why would Tom and Slade want land down the valley?" O'Malley asked.

"I haven't got the slightest idea. If you offered all the land they bought to me, I wouldn't give you five dollars for all of it. Most of it isn't even decent graze land. Most of it don't have water for cattle. No body could farm that much land. Don't make no sense at all." Nine Mile grumbled.

"I think it isn't land so much, as something else. Tom was shot when he was on his way to Grant's ranch. I think what ever he was going to talk to Grant about has a lot more to do with his killing. Not so much the land. He only had a few acres. Slade wouldn't kill him over one small piece." O'Malley reasoned.

"Slade sent Catman to gun me down. But, I don't own any land and haven't tried to buy any. Slade must want me killed because he thinks I know the 'secret information' Tom wrote about." O'Malley continued. "Problem is, I don't have the slightest idea what the secret is."

"Well you will just have to get out and see Grant." Nine Mile suggested.

"Another thing. I saw Catman in jail down in Meeteetse when I picked up a letter from my brother from the sheriff. I told the sheriff my name, and I remember Catman looking at me. It didn't mean anything to me at the time, but I am sure when he got back to Red Lodge he must have told Slade I was Tom's brother. Since I am going to tell Kate the whole story tonight, I may as well tell the sheriff the whole story and pickup Tom's personal belongings. There may be some information there that will help us solve this mystery."

"I'll take care of that tomorrow, but right now I need to get to Kate's by eight o'clock.

O'Malley shaved, washed up, changed his shirt and jeans and combed his hair. He took a lot of ribbing from Nine Mile about getting all "duded up".

As O'Malley walked out of the cabin Nine Mile hollered after him, "The dumbest creature on God's green earth is 'a buck in the rut'."

O'Malley removed his hat and knocked on the door.

Kate opened the door. Soft light captured the loveliness of the woman. Her hair was flowing down, and freshly brushed. She wore a blue velvet dress which showed enough cleavage to make any man blush or at least turn his head for a better look. Her warm brown eyes twinkled and consumed O'Malley's gaze.

"Come on in." she purred. All the coolness from earlier in the day was certainly gone. "How is your arm?"

"A bit sore." Awkwardly, O'Malley walked into the front room. The house reeked of womanliness from the smell to the furnishings.

Kate walked to the sofa and sat down, she patted a spot next to her and said, "Sit here unless you think I will bite." a coy intimate smile was upon her face.

O'Malley sat down and was determined to keep his composure. He began to tell the 'truth' about himself. "My name is John O'Malley, I am a rancher and I really am from Smith valley. I am not here to buy cattle, but to find out who killed my brother and why." It all rolled out in rapid fire as if the truth would change if not spoken immediately. O'Malley continued to take Kate into his confidence by telling her every detail, including the attempt to dry gulch him. He spoke of his suspicions that Sam Slade either killed Tom or had him killed. He explained why he felt it was important to him to keep his real identity a secret.

Kate listened attentively, never once interrupting O'Malley. O'Malley continued, "I think Sam Slade is the man behind Tom's death. I have three goals. Prove Slade shot or had Tom killed. See Slade shot or hung with justice done, and find the reason behind Tom's death." O'Malley paused and looked at Kate.

"I understand why you didn't tell me the whole truth when I first met you. I forgive you, and I would like to help you accomplish those goals." Kate offered. "Will you let me?"

"You bet. I don't know how, but sure, I would like that. I will need all the help I can get. So long as you don't endanger your life too." O'Malley answered.

"Thanks for being honest with me. I feel I know you so much better now. We even share a secret together." she smiled. "How is your arm doing?" She asked for a second time.

"Sore and stiff." O'Malley lamented as he moved it slightly.

"It could be getting infected. Let's take a look at it." Kate's nursing instinct emerged. Here let me help you take your coat off."

O'Malley complied with her wishes.

"We don't need to rip the sleeve of this nice shirt, so take it off." She ordered.

"What!" O'Malley said and protested, "Wait just a minute!"

"I was married once, so I doubt if you have anything I haven't seen before."

"Yea, but you haven't seen me before." O'Malley swallowed hard.

Kate already had his coat off and had begun working on the buttons of his shirt. She was not to be denied. The shirt soon followed the coat and lay on a chair. She made him sit down on a kitchen chair.

O'Malley's chest was bare, he was well muscled, and lean.

Kate turned her attention to the bandage, removing it very carefully. The closeness and womanly smell began to stir yearnings within him. Not strongly, but noticeable. Her warm soft hands both soothed and raised the desire within him. She leaned forward and he was given an intimate view of her ample breasts. He felt a warm flush spread through his body. He began to breath deeply and slightly faster. The wound did not appear to be infected.

She went to the next room and came back with a salve which she said, "Would take the soreness away and help prevent any infection". She began to gently rub the salve on his arm. Her hands moved slowly and sensuously over the hard muscles above the wound and to his shoulder.

He dared not speak for fear she would stop.

"My, your muscles are all tight and tense. Let me fix that." She moved behind him and began massaging his neck and both shoulders, then down the upper part of his back.

He responded to the slow pulsating touch. Passion made an undeniable appearance.

She reached across to begin to massage the muscles in the upper part of his chest as she did this he felt her breasts brush the back of his neck in a rhythmic fashion. Somehow, almost magically the message had become a caress. He could stand it no longer. He reached up and held her hands stopping the movement. He stood up, turning around facing her and looking down at her upturned face. No words were spoken. He looked deeply in her warm brown eyes and saw passion glowing inside. He gently reached and touched fingers beneath her chin. He began a slow and deliberate move toward her warm glowing lips. She did not resist. He placed his lips to hers, gently pressing against the warm softness of her mouth. Her body moved toward his and she began to press against his, her hand began a slow glide up his chest and slowly upward until her hands cupped his neck. The kiss had not been broken. A more insistence of urgency was now being expressed through the contact of their lips. The movements and contact of their bodies amplified their passions. The sensuous kiss continued with her tongue darting between his lips and seeking an intimate caress from his waiting tongue. With the kiss their bodies began to melt and join emitting an aura of intense passion which was not to be denied. He slowly released his hold on her and broke the kiss ever so slowly. He said, "You are the most sensuous woman I have ever met." She looked deeply into his eyes, holding his hand she turned and led him toward the bedroom. He did not hesitate and followed willingly.

O'Malley got back to Nine Mile's cabin before dawn, but not by much. He quietly crawled into bed and fell fast asleep.

"Git up you lazy tom cat. You're gonna buy me breakfast at the Silver Grill, and we are going to have a council of war." Nine Mile said, as he poked O'Malley's foot.

O'Malley opened one eye, but only partially. "Go away you old squaw chaser." he pleaded.

"Nope! Git up we got work to do and a pow wow at the cafe." Nine Mile insisted.

Slowly, ever so slowly, O'Malley got out of the bunk taking care not to bump his extremely sore arm. He decided not to wear the sling any more and try to begin to work out some of the soreness. O'Malley took his sweet time getting ready while Nine Mile grumbled about how hungry he was.

"I guess you know I heard you come in about daylight." Nine Mile said quietly, fishing a little bit.

"I am old enough to stay out as late as I like. I don't need no squaw chaser to keep a tight rein on me."

"Well you must have had plenty to talk about to stay up all night." Chuckled Nine Mile.

"Do you want me to buy you breakfast or not?"

"You're right. Ain't none of my damn business. Let's go eat."

Most of the breakfast crowd had left by the time they arrived at the cafe.

Kate was brighter and more pleasant than usual to everyone. O'Malley envied her for her energy and abilities to be "Miss Wonderful".

Kate greeted them cheerfully, took their order and bounced off to the kitchen. She returned with coffee.

Nine Mile said in a knowing way, "Who put the bee in your bonnet this morning?"

She flushed, and said, "I don't have a clue as to what you are talking about. I'm just my everyday pleasant self. Are you eating breakfast or just taking up room?"

"Yep, the "tom cat" is buying." Nine Mile smiled and ordered his breakfast.

O'Malley ordered his breakfast.

With her orders taken, Kate bounced off to the kitchen again.

Nine Mile saw Charlie Small Bear in the street outside the cafe. "I need to see Small Bear for a few minutes. I'll be right back." He left the table went outside leaving O'Malley alone, but not for long.

The "she panther" pounced on O'Malley. Kate asked in an indignant voice, "Did you tell Nine Mile anything about last night?"

"Nope, didn't have to." he smiled.

"What does that mean?" she snapped.

"You're walking sorta funny." he snickered.

She hit him across the head with her dish towel and stomped off to the kitchen.

Nine Mile returned in time to meet Kate coming from the kitchen with their breakfast.

They ate their breakfast and drank coffee waiting for the other customers to leave.

O'Malley, Kate, and Nine Mile finally set down together. Kate set between the two men and occasionally play "kneesie" with O'Malley. Kate showed she had plenty of horse sense and Nine Mile added his years of living savvy as a plan was finally formed.

It was decided Sam Slade was too slick to be directly connected to Tom's death. The plan would be to first find out why Tom was killed and then maybe that would lead to a way to connect Slade to his murder.

O'Malley and Nine Mile would go to the sheriff and admit the fact John was really Tom's brother and pick up Tom's personal effects.

Kate went back to work in the kitchen and O'Malley and Nine Mile went to the sheriff's office.

The sheriff frowned as he looked up from his desk when the two walked in.

"What, no shotgun Nine Mile?" scoffed the sheriff. Nine Mile didn't answer.

"I know this is going to be difficult to explain, but my real name is John O'Malley. Tom was my brother and I am here to pick up his personal effects." O'Malley reached into his pocket and took Tom's letter out and gave it to the sheriff. "This letter will explain part of the story and I will explain the rest. Also you can contact Sheriff Gary Wilson in Smith valley, he will vouch for me."

The sheriff reacted as though his whole day was ruined because of this news.

After a lengthy explanation by O'Malley, many questions from a rather grumpy sheriff, he finally agreed to give Tom's personal effects to O'Malley.

"Don't leave town until this mess is cleared up." Were the last words from the sheriff to O'Malley.

O'Malley and Nine Mile left with a suit case full of Tom's gear and went to Nine Mile's cabin.

The suitcase contained mostly clothes, Tom's gunbelt, a Colt revolver, a billfold, a deed for land near Fort Rockvale, a set of spurs, and not much else.

They found an envelope addressed to Tom from a Gene Conrad of the Ft. Dodge Company from Ft. Dodge, Iowa, but there was no letter inside. On the back of the envelope was a hand written note by Tom which read, "spring, mineral rights, George Grant". They went through everything twice, but could not find any other clues.

"I wonder what was in the missing letter." O'Malley said.

"Send him a telegram and ask him to confirm the information in the letter and telegraph the information back to you." Nine Mile suggested.

Nine Mile was brilliant at times O'Malley realized.

"Not a bad idea." O'Malley said with admiration.

Nine Mile gave O'Malley a snuggled toothed smile, puffed out his chest and was proud he had such a great idea.

O'Malley asked, "What about 'spring', 'mineral rights', and 'George Grant'?"

Nine Mile's peacock feathers suddenly wilted as he gave O'Malley a blank stare. "Hell, I don't know everything. Do a little thinkin' on your own. Let's go send that telegram and give me some time to think."

O'Malley read the telegram.

GENE CONRAD
FT DODGE COMPANY
FT DODGE, IOWA

SEND CONFIRMATION OF INFORMATION IN LETTER BY RETURN WIRE. SEND TO MY BROTHER JOHN IN RED LODGE, MONTANA TERRITORY.

TOM O'MALLEY

handed the telegram to the telegrapher and said, "Send this."

O'Malley paid him and they left the office.

"Well I'll be skinned!" exclaimed Nine Mile as he looked at the land office across the street. "Mineral rights. Sure, territorial law says you can buy the land, but if you want to mine the land you have to buy the mineral rights separately. 'George Grant'-- that's it too. George Grant owns lots of land over around Dry Creek and Bear Creek and he owns the mineral rights to all his land."

Nine Mile looked at O'Malley to see if what he had told him answered some questions.

"OK. That sounds reasonable, but what about 'spring'?" O'Malley asked.

"Well there are 'water rights' here in the Territory. If it is a creek or river you can file for so many 'miners inches' of water for farming, drinking or livestock. With a spring you can file for

all the water from the spring if no one else has filed on it, and the spring don't even have to be on your land."

"Why would Tom want a 'spring'?" O'Malley wondered out loud.

"Grant has to be the key. Tom talked to him before he was shot. In fact, he was on his way to see George Grant again when Tom was shot."

"land--mineral rights--spring--lots of money--big secret." With some frustration, O'Malley spoke the words aloud as he tried to make sense of it. "The land deed at Fort Rockvale is forty miles from here and the deed said, 'no mineral rights'." O'Malley shook his head. "Let's go talk to a pretty and smart lady and I'll buy you lunch."

As they walked toward the cafe O'Malley said, "I know, it's not gold or silver."

Nine Mile shook his head. "Nope. I've prospected this whole country around these parts. The closest gold is the land of the Yellowstone over the plateau near Cooke City. Ain't no silver around for over fifty miles."

"Damn! What on earth can it be?" O'Malley was totally frustrated.

The Silver Grill Cafe was busy as usual for the noon meal. Kate was a good cook.

Nine Mile and O'Malley had lunch, finishing with fresh apple pie. They drank coffee waiting for Kate to have time to sit down for another council of war.

The last customer left and Kate come over to talk.

O'Malley explained what they had found in Tom's personal effect, the empty envelope, the Tom's hand written word on the backs of the envelope, and Nine Mile's idea to send a telegram.

Nine Mile gave Kate the same information on 'mineral rights', 'George Grant' and 'spring'.

Kate listened attentively and drank coffee. When there was nothing new to add, she did not speak, but was obviously thinking and trying to piece together the puzzle. "I agree you need to see George Grant. He would at least be able to tell you what Tom wanted or talked to him about."

"I'll plan to go see him tomorrow morning." O'Malley told her.

Kate stood up, smiled warmly at O'Malley and said, "I have work to do. So pay your bill and you and Nine Mile get out of here."

CHAPTER 6

O'Malley and Star arrived at the Grant ranch around nine in the morning. The ride had been pleasant, the morning was cool, the sky clear.

He reigned Star to a halt at the hitching post in front of a hued log cabin. There were flowers planted around the front of the cabin, and calico curtains showing thorough the windows. Staying in the saddle, O'Malley called out, "Anybody home?" and waited.

A tall, very thin man who looked to be in his sixties came out the front door. He carried a Winchester rifle in his right hand. His head was bare, almost bald and very white when compared to the leather brown skin on his face, neck and arms. He squinted, turned his head to the side looking at O'Malley trying to recognize O'Malley. When he was sure he did not know this man, he asked, "What do you want?"

"My name's John O'Malley. I want to talk to you about my brother, Tom O'Malley."

"Tom O'Malley was dry gulched. Don't know nothin' else 'bout it."

"I know. I am trying to find out why he was shot."

"Git down, water your horse. Come inside, We'll talk." Grant said, as he turned and went inside the cabin.

O'Malley watered Star, walked to the cabin, removed his hat, went inside to where Grant was sitting at the table kitchen table. Grant told O'Malley to have a seat.

"I'm real sorry about your brother Tom gettin' killed. Were you two close?"

"Sorta, when we were kids. When you grow up, well, we saw each other from time to time." he said honestly. "Can you tell me what you and Tom talked about? I think it may have had something to do with his death."

"Tom wanted to buy some land and mineral rights to an area over in Bear Creek. I told him there wasn't any gold or silver hereabouts, just some coal." Grant explained. "He also wanted to buy just the mineral rights to land I own on the east bench, outside Red Lodge. We were talking price and were pretty close to a hand shake deal when he got shot."

"What if Tom wanted the land for the coal?" O'Malley asked.

"Then your brother would have been pouring gold dust down a gopher hole." he scoffed.

"Why is that?" O'Malley continued.

"You ain't from these parts, I can see that. If you was, you would know coal ain't worth nothing in this neck of the woods. A few people use it to heat in the winter, the blacksmith uses some and that's it. I sell coal by the wagon load. I let folks dig out a wagon load for a dollar. I might make ten dollars, maybe fifteen in a good year."

O'Malley thought for a moment. "What if I hauled the coal to Billings where the railroad is located?"

Grant laughed. "Son I weren't born yesterday. I have done it all just to scratch out a livin' in this country. Do you have any idea how much money it would cost for such an operation? Look at it this way. I already thought of trying the idea. It costs thousands to start a coal mine, the equipment needed to work the mine and the miners pay. Then a whole bunch of heavy duty wagons, horses, driver's pay, and then haul it sixty tough miles. You would have to charge ten time as much for it than what the railroad can buy it for anywhere else. Like I say, it would be like pouring gold dust down a gopher hole."

O'Malley thought Tom was no fool. Was he trying to buy the mineral rights for the coal or something else that he may have had "secret" information about. That might explain Grant's land and mineral rights, but why buy land forty miles away with no mineral rights. O'Malley tried to solve another piece of the puzzle.

"Do you have any springs on your land and would you be willing to sell your water rights to the spring? Did Tom ask you about any springs?"

Grant looked at O'Malley like he had really lost his mind. If, I had any water rights to a spring or creek, I wouldn't sell a drop of water to anyone. I need all the water I can get just to keep the stock I run. To answer your other question, your brother never said a word about a spring and there ain't no springs on the land he wanted to buy."

O'Malley felt he had a "key" that would not unlock any part of the mystery. Grant was no key after all. No sense wasting anymore time here. "I'm much obliged to you for telling me about your dealings with Tom." as he stood up, shook Grant's hand, turned and walked out of the cabin.

O'Malley returned to Nine Mile's cabin around noon. He unsaddled Star, putting him in the corral, gave him some grain and went to the cabin.

"I'm glad you're back. There is a telegram at the telegraph office for you. Dang fool clerk wouldn't give it to me. Let's go see what it says. What did Grant tell you?" Nine Mile asked, as he put on his hat and pushed O'Malley out the door.

As they walked to town, O'Malley told Nine Mile what Grant had told him.

O'Malley took the telegram from the clerk walked outside and opened it.

Nine Mile kept asking, "What does it say? What does it say? It was my idea!"

"Well I'll be damned!" O'Malley exclaimed as parts to the mystery began to come together.

"What in thunderation does it say!" Nine Mile demanded and pleaded at the same time.

"Here, read it for yourself. I'm going to see Kate and let her know."

Nine Mile read the telegram as he stumbled along behind O'Malley.

JOHN O'MALLEY
RED LODGE, MONTANA TERRITORY

BILLINGS SPUR LINE TO RED LODGE WILL BE COMPLETED BY LATE
SPRING---STOP

RAILWAY ROUTE SAME AS PREVIOUSLY INDICATED---STOP

GENE CONRAD
BILLINGS-RED LODGE RAILWAY

O'Malley worked to fit all the parts to the "why" mystery together as he walked to the cafe.

Tom had somehow found out a rail line was going to be built to Red Lodge from Billings. He even knew what the route would be. Made sense. Buy the land cheap in the path of the route and sell it high to the Northern Pacific. Then buy the mineral rights to the local coal cheap and sell the mineral rights to the coal at a real nice profit. With a rail line it would be very profitable to transport the coal from Red Lodge. 'Spring'? Of course, 'spring' of the year, not a spring of water. Slade was buying land along the proposed rail route and mineral rights to where coal could be mined. Slade did not want Tom as competition for the land or the coal, so he had him killed. The why pointed the finger directly at Slade. No one else in the area seemed to know about the railroad coming to Red Lodge. How was he going to prove Slade killed Tom. Everything was circumstantial. No; Slade would never be hung for Tom's death without more evidence to tie him to the shooting.

"Well Hell!!! There goes this country. I may as well pull up stakes and move on. If a railroad comes to Red Lodge, there will be more people here than quills on a porcupine. I see why Slade was after all the land, and why your brother was shot. Slade couldn't stand the competition. If the news got out too soon the price of land would go sky high and Slade would have no chance to make a hefty profit." Nine Mile rambled on.

The Silver Grill Cafe was closed, but O'Malley could see Kate still working in the back. A knock on the door brought Kate to find O'Malley and Nine Mile waiting. She let them in and asked, "Have you found out anything new?"

"Better get some help in here, you are going to need it." O'Malley said with some mystery in his voice.

"Why on earth would you say something like that?" she asked with a skeptical and inquisitive look on her face.

"The railroad is coming to Red Lodge."

Kate's mouth dropped open, her eyes opened very wide and she looked dumbfounded. "The railroad is coming to Red Lodge? That has got to be a joke. Why on earth would they bring a railroad to little old Red Lodge?"

"Coal." Nine Mile smugly stated.

Kate sat down. She looked back and forth from O'Malley to Nine Mile shaking her head in disbelief and said, "Coal???"

Nine Mile handed the telegram to Kate. She read it, looked up and shook her head. "It seems like the world for Red Lodge has suddenly been turned upside down." Kate reflected.

Kate's eyes widened, "Slade knew about the railroad and so did your brother. It all makes sense now. It also explains why Slade would have wanted Tom dead. What are you going to do now?"

"Hang Slade!" O'Malley answered with conviction, "I just don't know how; yet."

"With a new rope, I hope." Nine Mile sneered.

"We need a plan." O'Malley said firmly. "Slade may not know I have found out about the railroad coming. I don't think we can get to Slade directly, but we may get to one of his hired guns. Nine Mile, what do you know about Bill Brown?"

"He has worked for Slade for about a year. He is a weasel who will do any dirty job that Slade needs doin'"

"Where does he hang out when he is not at the Four Kings Saloon." O'Malley asked.

"Well he has a lady friend over on the northeast side of town, down near Rock Creek." Nine Mile said.

"If we got him away from Slade do you think we could get him to tell what he knows?" O'Malley asked.

"Not voluntarily." Nine Mile smiled. "But, as an old Indian fighter, I know ways to use that I can get anything you want to know from him."

"Well?" O'Malley said. "What are we waiting for?"

"Are you sure you want to do it this way?" Kate objected. "I don't hold with using Indian torture."

"I am going to see Slade hung for killing Tom." O'Malley said, through clenched teeth, "No matter what it takes."

"Exactly what will happen to Brown, Nine Mile?" Kate asked.

"Indian torture is a strange thing. It can work more on the brain than on the body. If an Indian wants to kill an enemy he does it quick like. But some torture is reserved for the mind more than the body. Many time a person's body can recover from torture, but not always the mind. I once found a man who was spread-eagle and staked down to the ground. There was one mad rattlesnake staked down close to this fellows head. The Indians had punched a hole in the snakes tail, tied a piece of rawhide through the hole and then measured the snake's length. They staked the rattlesnake so when it would strike, it would miss the man's head by about an inch. The snake never hit this fellow, but when I found him about a day after he was staked out and released him he was plumb loco. Never was right in the head again after that. The Indians didn't really want him dead or they would have killed him before they left. That is one form of Indian torture. The kind I expect to use on Brown. He will think he is about to meet a horrible death, but really, I ain't gonna kill him. But---he don't know that. I'll make sure he lives. I can guarantee you he will tell us and the sheriff everything he knows."

"I am still against torture, even to prove Slade killed your brother." Kate said with firm resolve.

"It isn't your decision." O'Malley snapped, as his face flushed.

Kate stared at O'Malley as if she really did not know this man. She had seen a side of him she had not wanted to see.

Nine Mile broke the tension in the air. "I don't like the thought of torture either, but I don't see any other way out. I am open to any ideas anybody might have."

Kate did not answer, but only nodded her head in resolution.

"Then unless someone comes up with a better idea Brown will be who we go after." Nine Mile said.

"I think we would have the best chance to get the drop on Brown when he goes to visit his lady friend." O'Malley said planning their next move.

"I know where her place is and we can wait there for him to show up. It'll take two of us to watch the place from both sides. He usually shows up around dark." Nine Mile added.

"We will wait until just before dark and go over there and watch for Brown." O'Malley continued, "We will get the drop on him and take him back to the cabin. It will be better if we

take him out of town in case Slade misses him. He just might figure out what is going on. It will be dark and maybe we can slip him out of town without being seen."

"Where will you take him.?" Kate asked.

"There is an old cabin up the West Fork of Rock Creek a few miles out of town, and not many people come around." Nine Mile offered.

"That sounds like a good place. Just make sure there isn't any gunplay, we need Brown alive. We have got to get a stone cold drop on him." O'Malley said.

"I will head on back to the cabin and do my chores and fix supper early so we can be ready to go before dark." Nine Mile offered.

"You go ahead. I'll be along in a bit and give you a hand." O'Malley said.

Nine Mile left for the cabin.

O'Malley turned his attention to Kate. He knew he had some fence mending to do.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said what I did earlier about it not being your decision."

O'Malley said apologetically. I guess I took my brother's death pretty hard and have simply forgotten that you and Nine Mile have helped me find out who and why he was killed. I guess you do have a say, but I don't have any other ideas on how to prove that Slade was behind everything. I am honestly open to any other ideas you might have."

Kate reached across the table and took his hand. "John, I wish I had another plan, but I don't. I wish I did, because I know you would try it. I don't like the idea of torture. It seems like we are sinking to a level equal to Slade. That is what I hate most."

"Not quite. We won't be killing Brown. He will just think he is going to die. I promise we will try something that doesn't physically injure Brown." O'Malley thought a moment longer and asked, "Know where we could catch a rattlesnake this time of the year?"

"You wouldn't."

"The more I think about it, the more I like the idea. Brown wouldn't be injured, but it would make almost any man talk. Once he talks, we can turn him over to the sheriff and make him tell everything over again. That will put a noose around Slade's neck."

"What a horrible thing to do. I hate snakes. I would tell you anything you wanted to know. But, of course we would never be friends again I hope you understand that?" Kate said, trying to smooth their differences over.

"I had better get to the cabin and give Nine Mile a hand or he will be ornery and cantankerous." O'Malley said as he got up to leave.

"Be careful. Very careful!" Kate warned.

Nine Mile and O'Malley finished up around the cabin, and rode horseback down the back streets to where Brown's girlfriend lived. They looked over the area and picked two places where they could watch for Brown and not be seen. It was getting dark as they took their places.

There wasn't much activity in the area, but O'Malley saw an old Crow Indian come down an alley.

O'Malley watched as the old Crow Indian staggered to the corner of a building. The Indian stepped around to the side, looked around, reached inside his shirt, pulled a bottle of whiskey out, opened it, and took a long drink. He put the bottle back inside his shirt and sat down

heavily, he leaned back against the building and let the alcohol slowly envelope his body and mind like a fog bank covers a mountain.

O'Malley thought about the unholy alliance that had been brought to the Indians by the white man and his "firewater". It seemed the Indian was attracted to alcohol much in the same way a moth was attracted to a candle. Neither, seemed to have any power to avoid the candle or the alcohol and both eventually would be equally fatal. The white man had passed laws which prohibited the sale of "firewater" to the Indians, but the law was seldom if ever enforced.

O'Malley thought how cruel the white man had been to his red brothers. He had stolen and killed to take most of the desirable land. Killed the great herds of buffalo, and brought disease and death to the Indian.

The drunken Old Crow Indian reached down with his right hand and filled it with dirt. He held his hand away from his body and watched as he slowly opened his hand and let the dirt flow and trickle between his fingers falling to the ground.

O'Malley looked at the ground beneath his feet and remembered the land around Red Lodge for hundreds of miles in any direction had once been a part of a huge Crow Indian Reservation. Red Lodge, until just a few short years before had been part of that Reservation as had much of the land around him. There had been three distinct tribes of the Absorkee or Crow Indians. There were the River Crows, the Mountain Crows and the Kick in the Bellies Crows. Each living in a different area of their land.

In 1825, a treaty had set the boundaries of the Mountain Crow Indian Reservation, which covered all of Montana and Wyoming, half of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and the northern half of Colorado. In September of 1851, the boundaries were reduced to the Missouri River on the north, the Power River on the east, the Musselshell on the northwest, the Yellowstone on the west and down into central Wyoming on the south. More land was taken in a treaty of May 1868, the Mountain Crow Reservation was reduced to the area inside the Yellowstone River on the north and west, the Montana, Wyoming Territorial line on the south then east of the Big Horn River. More land was ceded in 1882, which removed a quarter of the land on the Reservation which removed Red Lodge from the Reservation. * The white man's unquenchable thirst for land found much of the Indian Reservation land was "too good" for just an Indian. Yes, Red Lodge was once "Crow Country"; but no more.

* In 1891, again land was ceded and half of the remaining land of the Reservation was removed. For the last time in 1904 almost one-third of the remaining land was ceded which ran along the Yellowstone River.

O'Malley was not an "Indian lover", but he had a certain respect for many Indians and as a white man, felt some guilt for the injustices which had been done to the Indians by his white brethren.

The old Crow Indian was living proof of such injustices. The Indian had slumped over and was sleeping off the immediate effects of the white man's "firewater".

O'Malley saw another man riding up the street. As he moved into the light he knew it was Brown. His heart began to pound and his mouth became dry. He had to take Brown without causing any disturbance and especially not kill Brown. O'Malley moved in the shadows to intercept Brown. O'Malley drew his Colt, moved to the corner of a house and watched as Brown tied his horse and walked in his direction. He flattened out against the building and waited. Brown passed within a few steps on his way to the doorway. O'Malley moved quick as a cougar and hit Brown on the back of the head with the Colt.

Brown moaned and collapsed in a heap on the ground. O'Malley holstered his Colt, reached down picked Brown off the ground and lifted the dead weight over his shoulder. O'Malley whistled for Nine Mile. Nine Mile came around the corner of the building and grinned at O'Malley.

"Now we are on the right track. Let's git before anyone sees us." Nine Mile whispered. They put Brown across the saddle of his horse and led him away.

After a quick dash to Nine Mile's cabin through the back streets and alleys of Red Lodge, they put Brown down on the floor of the cabin.

"Better hog tie and gag him before he wakes up from his little nap." Nine Mile said, taking Brown's six gun and getting a rope.

"We had best wait until about an hour before dawn to take Brown to the cabin up the West Fork. Be less of a chance of anyone seein' us." Nine Mile said, as he tied Brown.

"OK, you watch him when he wakes up. I am going to see Kate and let her know that we got Brown without any problems." O'Malley said, preparing to leave. "Know where we can get a good size rattlesnake?" O'Malley asked.

"Yep, I know just where to look. They're beginnin' to den up this time of the year." Nine Mile grinned.

Kate was waiting for O'Malley when he arrived.

"Brown is hog tied and gagged at Nine Mile's cabin." O'Malley said proudly, "He is going to have one big headache when he wakes up. Other than that, he didn't know what hit him."

"Well, I guess a bump on the head is a lot better than a bullet any day." Kate remarked. "When are you going up the West Fork?"

"About an hour before daylight. There will be less chance for anyone to see us."

"If Brown does tell all he knows what will you do then?"

"It will be too risky to bring him back into town in the daylight, so we will have to return after sundown or bring the sheriff up to the West Fork."

"What if he won't talk to the sheriff, and denies everything?"

"That is a chance we will have to take." O'Malley resolved. "But for Brown's sake I hope he doesn't change his story."

Kate was quiet. She looked at O'Malley and it was evident she had other thoughts on her mind. "What will you do when all of this is over?"

"Well I really haven't thought too much about that simply because I have been so rapped up in finding my brother's killer. I do have a ranch in Smith valley that I have worked hard to build up over the past few years and I certainly can't just walk off and leave it." O'Malley

answered rather uncomfortably. "I think I know why you're asking, and I think you have a right to know, but when this is all over with we will sit down and talk about it."

"I really think we need to do that. But don't read too much into my question."

"I'll keep that in mind. I had better get back to the cabin and check on Brown, who knows, he may talk without taking him anywhere, but I doubt it." O'Malley said, as he walked out the door.

Nine Mile was sitting at the table watching Brown when O'Malley walked through the door. Brown was awake, lying on the floor and the look in his eyes was of evil and fear, he seemed none the worse for wear and tear.

"How long has he been conscious?"

"About ten minutes."

"Have you said anything to him?"

"Nope, not a word."

O'Malley walked over to Brown pulled him to a sitting position and leaned him back against the wall, "Have you got any next of kin? I think they are going to need to know about how you died."

O'Malley pulled the bandanna down from across Brown's mouth. Brown spit in O'Malley's face. "Go to hell!"

O'Malley's anger was immediate and responsive. He back handed Brown.

As blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, Brown sneered. "Big man; hit a man when he's tied up. Let me up from here and I will break your damn neck."

O'Malley pulled the bandanna back up over Brown's mouth and walked away. This man was going to be difficult to break, he was tough as rawhide. He just might not talk.

"Don't you fret, Nine Mile said, "he'll talk plenty up the canyon."

"You watch him close until midnight," O'Malley said, "then I will take over until it is time to leave. I don't want to take any chances of him getting loose."

"You get some shut-eye and old Buck and me will hold down the fort until then." Nine Mile agreed.

Brown appeared to have gone to sleep shortly after O'Malley laid down on his bunk and did not move until the change of watch when he shifted his position and went back to sleep. O'Malley didn't think this was too good of a sign. Apparently, Brown wasn't too worried if he could go to sleep. O'Malley hoped the rattlesnake trick would work.

CHAPTER 7

O'Malley woke Nine Mile to watch Brown and went outside to saddle the horses. O'Malley untied Brown's legs and walked him outside in the dark. The dawn was beginning to show in the east, but just barely. It was cool. The three of them mounted up and O'Malley led Brown's horse while Nine Mile and Buck led the way south up Rock Creek toward the West Fork. They did not see anyone on their way out of town. They turned west and followed the West Fork for several miles finally crossing the West Fork and followed Ingles Creek a short distance from the West Fork. On Ingles Creek was a small abandon cabin.

"Here she is." Nine Mile reported. "Ain't nobody gonna bother us here."

They dismounted Brown and took him inside. They tied him to a post and tied his feet.

"Well, I guess it is time for me to go a huntin'. Nine Mile winked at O'Malley. I like to catch them critters when it's cool. It sorta makes them slow to bite."

After Nine Mile left, O'Malley made some trail coffee and fixed breakfast. Brown watched every move O'Malley made with evil and contemptuous eyes.

After a cup of coffee, O'Malley decided it was time to let Brown know what was expected of him. He did not remove the gag so Brown could listen rather than run his mouth.

"Just in case you don't know, my name is John O'Malley. I am sure Catman let you and Slade know that though. I am going to ask you who killed my brother. I know Slade had something to do with it, and I know why. When you tell me everything you are then going to tell the sheriff. Now I know that isn't what you think you are going to do. But you will tell the whole story or die." O'Malley said. He had set the rules now what would Brown say? O'Malley removed the bandanna from his mouth.

"You ain't killin' nobody. When Slade hears about this and finds me missing he'll come a lookin'. Then you will be full of lead. I ain't tell you nothin'."

"How do you feel about snakes Brown?" O'Malley grinned.

"What the hell do you mean?"

"More exact, rattlesnakes." O'Malley smiled.

"Rattlesnakes!?" Brown's eyes widened. He looked perplexed and a mite concerned, but only for a moment. "I ain't scared of no damn snakes."

O'Malley thought to himself. 'I hope for your sake you are deathly afraid of rattlesnakes. No telling what other Indian torture Nine Mile would come up with if the rattlesnake didn't work. He had mentioned "skinned alive" once back at the cabin.'

O'Malley ate his breakfast and did not share with Brown.

Nine Mile didn't return until almost noon. O'Malley heard him ride up. O'Malley left the cabin to meet him outside. Nine Mile was grinning from ear to ear and carried a canvas bag tied over the saddle horn. There was no doubt about what he had in the bag.

"I had to cut the damn rattlers off the snake. The horse wouldn't let me get anywhere near him when he heard this critter 'sing'. Now, mister, this here one is big, about five feet long and big as your arm. A mite mad right now since I whacked a bit of his tail off." Nine Mile chuckled. "I'm hungry as a bear just out of his den in the spring. What's there to eat?"

They returned to the cabin leaving the "critter" safely stored in a bag hanging from a fir tree. Brown eyed the two with some suspicion, but did not speak.

Nine Mile ate, and over a cup of coffee spoke in low whispers to O'Malley. "I think we should ask a few questions about the killin' of your brother. If we don't git no answers, I'll tell him what is about to happen to him. Then, if we don't git no answers we will take him outside and introduce him to our sore tailed friend."

O'Malley turned and looked at Brown who was sitting on the floor. "This is your last chance; either you talk," O'Malley said solemnly, "or you are going to die a very painful and slow death."

"They'll hang you, if Slade don't kill you first." Brown sneered.

"You know a lot of things can kill a man in this country." Nine Mile spoke softly and smoothly. "It don't have to be a bullet or a rope. There are the natural things like being thrown from a horse, a griz catchin' a man, get caught in the open in a blizzard and freeze to death. Yep, lots of things can kill a fellar. You know the worst of all I think is a rattlesnake bite. I saw a fellar die from a snake bite once. He was a looking for something he dropped on the ground and when he reached down to pick it up the snake hit him in the side of his face on the cheek. He screamed and we come a running. We killed the snake right away, but it was too late. There wasn't much we could do for him. This fellar was pukin' his guts out in less than an hour. He was in terrible pain. His face and whole head swelled up so bad that his eyes even swelled shut. His head got so big that the skin begin to split, nasty, big long splits. You could hear his screams for miles. This went on for hours, it sure was pitiful. Finally the swellin' got down into his neck and throat and he couldn't breath. No tellin' how long he would have suffered if he hadn't choked to death. Terrible, terrible, way to die."

"Shut up, you damned old fool! What are you running your mouth about?" Brown was clearly irritated and concerned.

"Well for a fellar to git hung. Someone has to die from other than natural causes. Snake bite is a natural cause."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Brown was clearly disturbed and beginning to get the drift of the conversation.

"I am not about to get hung for the likes of you." "So you will just have to have a little accident." O'Malley said. "Say a snake bite problem. It will be a natural death. Need I say more."

"You're bluffing!" Brown snarled, "You ain't got the guts."

"Let's just put it this way. If I don't get the answers I want about my brothers murder. You'll die a slow painful death." O'Malley said with absolute conviction.

Brown was looking at his options. He had none. It was either talk to save his hide or then again they could be bluffing. He could stall for time. Slade would know by now he was missing and would be looking for him. He just might come looking in this area it wasn't more than five or six miles from town. Then again someone could have seen them leaving town in the morning.

"Who killed my brother?" O'Malley demanded.

"I don't know." Brown answered firmly.

"I know why he was killed." O'Malley continued.

"Why?"

"In one word; Railroad." O'Malley challenged.

Brown's eyes narrowed. He looked at O'Malley long and hard. "I don't know what you're talking about. You sound plumb loco."

O'Malley got to his feet and picked Brown up by the front of his shirt. "Get the rawhide and stakes Nine Mile. We have some work to do."

O'Malley dragged Brown outside to the rear of the cabin to a level area. He untied Brown's legs. He then pushed him to the ground on his back.

Nine Mile tied a piece of rawhide to each of his legs and started driving two stakes into the ground about four feet apart. He tied each leg to the stakes.

Brown was not at all quiet during these activities. He was struggling, cursing and making threats during the entire time.

Nine Mile drove another stake into the ground. One about head high on the left side of Brown

Nine Mile tied a piece of rawhide to each wrist then untied the rope for his hands while O'Malley sat on his chest. Nine Mile held Brown's left arm while O'Malley continued to sit on Brown's chest and hold the right arm.

Nine Mile tied the left wrist to the stake. Then O'Malley got up still holding Brown's right arm and stretched and pulled Brown's body so the rawhide was tight between the three stakes. O'Malley pulled Brown's right arm straight out from his body to the right at shoulder level. Nine Mile drove the last stake into the ground by Brown's right hand. He then used rawhide to securely tie Brown's right hand to the ground.

Nothing was said for a few minutes while Brown struggled to pull loose. He finally realized it was useless and stopped struggling but continued to curse the two of them.

Once again O'Malley asked. "Who killed my brother?"

"Go to hell!" Brown screamed venomously.

"Get the snake." O'Malley ordered and watched Brown's eyes.

Brown could move his head to the side and lift it up but his body was secured with little or no movement possible.

Nine Mile returned with the canvas bag. He brought along a forked stick, a piece of rawhide and a stake. Nine Mile untied the canvas bag and poured the contents out on the ground in plain view of Brown.

The snake immediately coiled and struck in Nine Miles direction, but missed by a considerable distance. However, as a reaction Nine Mile jumped. "I think this one is a little bit upset." Nine Mile said. He took the forked stick and held the snake's head to the ground.

O'Malley watched Brown as the snake fell to the ground and struck at Nine Mile. Brown began to sweat visibly. His eyes went wild and he began to tremble.

Nine Mile pleaded. "Give me a hand with this critter, while I put a hole through his tail a tie off the rawhide."

O'Malley took the head from Nine Mile and was surprised at how strong the snake was. Nine Mile held the snake's tail to the ground using his knife put a slit through the tail, then tied a foot long piece of rawhide tightly through the opening.

Brown began struggling, and trying to talk them out of the ugly deed which they were about to do.

They took the snake to the right side and above the head of Brown. O'Malley stretched the head of the snake toward Brown's head. Brown recoiled away as far as his restraints would allow. Nine Mile had a rough estimate of the distance and drove the last stake into the ground. He then tied the tail of the snake with the rawhide to the stake carefully adjusting it so the snake would come within an inch or two of Brown's head.

Nine Mile nodded to O'Malley and said. "We're ready."

"Who killed my brother?" O'Malley asked again.

Brown looked at O'Malley then the snake, but did not answer. He only shook his head.

O'Malley dropped the snake's head close to Brown's head. The snake coiled and struck at the closest warm object, which was Brown's head. Nine Mile had measured just right. Brown jerked his head back, the snake missed by an inch or so, Brown screamed, "Wait! I'll talk! I'll talk!" The snake struck twice more before Nine Mile could get the forked stick on the snake, both times the snake missed, but that didn't stop Brown from screaming each time.

With the snake pinned down. O'Malley asked once again, "Who killed my brother?"

"Catman! Catman shot your brother." Brown watched the snake for fear it would strike again.

"Why did Catman shoot my brother? O'Malley continued.

"I don't know." Brown lied.

"Let our little critter loose." O'Malley said.

"Wait! Wait! Because Slade paid him to."

"Why did Slade want my brother killed?"

"Because he knew the railroad was coming to Red Lodge. Your brother bought land out from underneath Slade around Fort Rockvale. Your brother was trying to buy the mineral rights to coal. Hell I don't know everything ask Slade yourself." Brown was exasperated.

"Now, you are going to tell this story one more time. Next time to the sheriff." O'Malley said.

"I can't do that Slade would kill me." Brown pleaded.

"Either you agree to tell the sheriff everything about Slade or this little critter is going to have a few more chances at hitting your face. Who knows the stake could pull out or---"

"All right, All right! Just don't let that snake strike again." Brown said, resigned to his fate.

"If I let you up from here and you don't tell everything to the sheriff, I promise you this won't be the last time you see a rig like this. It can be done again."

"I'll tell the sheriff. Just let me up from here."

"What do you think Nine Mile?" O'Malley asked. "Do you think we can take him at his word?"

"We can always tie him down again. I ain't lettin' the snake loose. I'll just keep him until later, just in case he gits a case of lockjaw." Nine Mile grinned.

Nine Mile untied the rawhide for the stake which held the snakes tail and put the rattler in the canvas bag for safe keeping.

O'Malley released Brown and did not tie him up but told him he would shoot him if he made any funny moves.

Nine Mile, O'Malley and Brown went back inside the cabin. O'Malley offered Brown food and coffee, which Brown took without a thank you, but the tough, harsh exterior of Brown was gone.

While Brown ate O'Malley asked Brown, "Tell me about the murder of my brother."

In between bites Brown told the entire story. "Well, I don't know how Slade found out about Tom O'Malley, but he did. The first thing he heard about, was the land that Tom had bought around Fort Rockvale, it was right in the path of the railroad spur line. So Slade figured that your brother knew something about the railroad coming to Red Lodge. Tom was real friendly with one of the saloon girls named 'Maggie Stark'. Maggie found out enough from Tom to know that he was going to Billings to get some information from the Northern Pacific Railroad and about how mineral rights were bought and sold. Slade had Maggie try to talk Tom out of going to Billings. It didn't work as your brother was pretty stubborn, he went anyway. When Tom told Maggie he was going to talk to George Grant, Slade knew that Tom was after the mineral rights to the coal. Slade had spent most of his money for the land he bought up and didn't have enough to buy the mineral rights right away. But, he figured if he could keep the news of the railroad coming to town quiet for a while longer he would have enough money to own the mineral rights for the coal too. He had to stop your brother from buying the mineral rights from Grant. Maggie found out when Tom was riding out to Grant's place and Slade paid Catman two hundred dollars to dry gulch your brother. Catman killed your brother when he was on his way to see Grant."

"Who was it that followed me over to Kate Johnson's house?" O'Malley asked.

"That was Al Kingsley the kid that was killed when you got the drop on him when we tried to dry gulch you."

"So you were the one who shot him." O'Malley accused.

"Nope. Slade went along to make sure the job was done right." Brown answered.

"Why did Slade want me out of the way?" O'Malley asked.

"When Maggie found out you and Tom were business partners Slade figured that you knew about the railroad and the coal. Catman had gone down to Meeteetse got drunk on money from Tom's killing, got thrown in jail for a few days. When Catman got back from Meeteetse he saw you on the street and told Slade you were Tom's Brother. Slade had Al and me keep an eye on you. If you left town towards Grant's place we were to kill you. I saw you getting ready to leave town and told Slade. We followed you."

"Why did Slade shoot Al?" O'Malley asked.

"Slade didn't want any connection with the shooting. If, Al was dead there would be no connection."

O'Malley could see the noose drop around Slade's neck, but he had to get the sheriff up to the cabin. It would be too risky taking Brown to town. Slade would shoot Brown as quick as he did Al Kingsley.

"Nine Mile can you sneak into town and get the sheriff to come up here? I don't think it is a good idea to take Brown into town. Slade would shoot him on sight." O'Malley asked.

"You bet. But, I think it would be safer to go after dark. Slade had lots of eyes around town. If any one of them sees the direction I come from that might give you away. Less likely to be seen after dark." Nine Mile suggested.

"OK, we wait until dark."

"I'm gonna leave Buck here and keep him inside, he'll let you know if anybody comes around." Nine Mile added.

Time passed slowly. Brown was watched closely by O'Malley and Nine Mile in case he had a change of heart. They knew he would be gone in a heart beat if he was given a chance. They decided to tie him up before Nine Mile left for town. No sense taking any unnecessary chances.

At dark Nine Mile mounted up, picked up the canvas bag with the rattler in it intending to let him loose along the trail and rode off in the gathering darkness toward Red Lodge.

O'Malley had not built a fire so as not to expose their presence, and as the darkness came so did the coolness of the night in Montana. O'Malley put on a coat and stood at the window looking out toward town. Brown did not talk and seemed to set and brood over being tied up and the possible fate that awaited him.

Time passed slowly. About eight o'clock Buck stood up, with his ears pointed and began to growl. Then came the faint and then distinct sound of horses coming toward the cabin.

O'Malley had his Winchester at the ready. As the darkness began to release the two riders O'Malley could make out the form of Nine Mile and the sheriff. They rode up to the cabin dismounted and came inside.

"This better not be a wild goose chase the sheriff complained." as his frosty breath puffed out. "Why in thunderation haven't you got a fire going?"

"I thought it would be safer without one." O'Malley answered.

"Then build one and light a candle or two so a person can see where he is walking in here." the sheriff complained.

Nine Mile and O'Malley build a fire and lit two candles. They untied Brown and had him sit at the table across from the sheriff.

"I understand you can shed some light on who did the killings over by Bear Creek." the sheriff said looking directly at Brown.

Brown did not answer right away. He looked at Nine Mile and O'Malley. Nine Mile hissed like a snake and grinned.

Brown started by saying, "You have got to promise to protect me from Slade or I ain't talkin'." Brown said flatly.

"If what Nine Mile says is true, Slade will be dangling from a rope, and no one will need protecting. Now quit stalling. I didn't ride all the way up here to make some sort of a deal to protect your hide." the sheriff growled.

Brown began by telling the sheriff that he hadn't killed anyone, it was all done by Slade and Catman. He told the sheriff everything he wanted to know. The sheriff asked many questions and got answers to every one. At long last the sheriff leaned back pushed back his hat and asked, "You got any coffee made?"

O'Malley started to the stove to get a cup when Buck growled.

Nine Mile pulled his revolver and blew out the candle nearest him. "We got company! Put out that other candle."

Everyone except Brown had drawn their guns. O'Malley turned to Nine Mile and said, "Tie Brown up, just in case things get a little wild around here."

"Sheriff you can't let them tie me up. What if it's Slade. He'll kill me." Brown protested.

"You let me worry about Slade. Right now you are under arrest, and I ain't about to lose a prisoner. Tie him up." The sheriff said.

Nine Mile tied Brown's hands and feet and set him on the floor.

Buck continued to growl and looked around. The first shot went through the thin wooden front door. Everyone hit the ground.

"Did anybody get hit?" The sheriff asked.

Everyone answered they were all right.

It was quiet for a few minutes.

The sheriff ordered, "You two cover a window and I will cover the door. Stay low and don't shoot unless you see something."

All hell broke loose! Bullets were coming from all sides of the cabin. It seemed like there were twenty men outside firing at the cabin. The bullets began to chew up parts on the inside of the cabin and every window was broken out within the first two minutes.

The firing stopped after about five minutes and all was quiet.

"You inside the cabin. Come out with your hands up." A voice called out from the darkness.

"This is Sheriff Collins from Red Lodge. Stop your shooting. Who's out there?"

No answer at first. "Send out Brown and the rest of you can go free." The voice offered.

"Brown is my prisoner. He ain't for trade Slade." answered the sheriff.

"How do you know Slade is out there?" O'Malley asked.

"Who the hell else would want Brown, except Slade. If Brown can't testify and he can get the rest of us, Slade has just slipped the hangman's noose off his neck." the sheriff reasoned.

"This is your last chance. Send out Brown or you will all die." the voice warned.

No one in the cabin said a word. Then as before the bullets began to assault the cabin from all sides. Everyone inside was lying on the floor. Nine Mile had Buck under his body to protect the dog.

Once again, after more than a hundred rounds had been fired, it was quiet.

"They may try to rush the place." The sheriff warned. "You two take a look out of your windows and watch for movements. I'll take a look out the front door, and be careful." The sheriff cautioned.

The night was pitch black with no moon and low hanging snow clouds. The trees around the cabin were thick and numerous. The chances of seeing anything move was not good. They could get close to the cabin before anyone could see them. Buck growled and looked at

the side of the cabin where O'Malley was standing. O'Malley heard a small sound and knew someone was slipping up to the cabin and to his window. O'Malley flattened out against the wall of the cabin by the window frame and pointed his pistol in the direction where he last heard the sound. There was an unexpected blinding flash of flame directly in front of O'Malley as someone fired through the window. O'Malley returned the fire immediately. There was a moan from outside and then the sound of a heavy object falling to the ground.

"I hope that was Slade." O'Malley said. "Did anyone get hit in here?"

Everyone answered, except Brown, he continued to whimper in the corner. O'Malley figured if he could make noise he was still alive.

Time dragged on no more shots and no other sounds could be heard from outside the cabin. Buck even stopped his growling but remained attentive.

"Do you think they pulled out?" Brown asked.

"Sure! Why don't you just step outside and have a look around to make sure." suggested the sheriff.

Brown didn't answer.

Another hour passed. Nothing.

Everyone was beginning to think Brown might have been right. They could have pulled out when one of them got hit. It was getting colder as time went on. Then Buck stood up and growled at the front door. Everyone waited expectantly. Nothing happened.

"They're still here." Nine Mile said. "Buck knows it, and they are just waitin' us out."

No one slept and was expecting at any moment something would happen. It never did. The dawn began to break in the east just as the water was freezing in the cabin.

"We will wait until good daylight before we make any move." The sheriff ordered. "Then we will be extra careful. O'Malley you and me will go outside and take a look around. Nine Mile you cover us. I ain't so sure they have left yet."

O'Malley held the door and prepared to open it. O'Malley would go to his left to a wood pile about ten feet to the side of the cabin, the sheriff would follow and go to his right and use a large pile of rocks for cover. The sheriff nodded; and they were moving hard and fast.

O'Malley held his breath as he dove for the woodpile expecting to hear a whine of a bullet. The sheriff got to the rock pile, then there was two quick shots which hit the rock he was behind. O'Malley could not tell exactly where the shots had come from but it wasn't far. He peered over the wood pile and saw the smoke floating away from a stand of fir trees. O'Malley saw a small ravine to his left. Nine Mile fired several rounds at the shooter. O'Malley moved to the ravine and hit the dirt as a bullet struck a tree uncomfortably close. O'Malley flattened on the ground. The sheriff and Nine Mile opened fire on the shooter. O'Malley looked around to see if he could see any others in the area. His vigilance paid off; he spotted a man circling around to the back of the cabin. He had not seen O'Malley. O'Malley moved to cut the man off before he got to the cabin. O'Malley picked a large fir tree to hide behind. The man came running past O'Malley without seeing him.

"Drop the gun!" O'Malley ordered.

The man turned in O'Malley's direction.

O'Malley fired one shot which hit the man square in the chest. The man dropped his gun grabbed his chest as blood began to flow, he dropped to his knees, looked at O'Malley and fell forward without saying a word.

More shots were being fired at the cabin. O'Malley quickly looked around. He decided he would back-track the man to where he had come from and try to get behind the shooter in front of the cabin. Slowly and cautiously O'Malley worked his way to where he could see a man with a rifle lying on the ground occasionally firing in the direction of the cabin.

O'Malley quietly and cautiously moved toward the shooter scanning the area for any others who might still be in the area. The man was so intent on trying to hit the sheriff or Nine Mile he did not know O'Malley was behind him until O'Malley pushed the barrel of his gun into this back and said, "Drop the rifle, or you won't have a backbone left."

The man froze. He slowly lowered the rifle to the ground.

O'Malley took his six gun and put it in his belt. "Get up real slow and easy like." He ordered.

The man slowly got to his feet.

"How many of you are out here?" O'Malley questioned.

The man did not answer.

O'Malley prodded the man in the back with his revolver and asked again, "How many?"

"Two."

"You and one other?"

"Yea."

"Well your partner is dead. I shot him and you will get the same unless you do as you are told." O'Malley picked up the rifle and ordered the man to walk toward the cabin. "Hold your fire! We're coming in!" O'Malley shouted.

The sheriff watched as O'Malley and the man walked toward the cabin.

O'Malley shoved the man through to cabin door. Buck attacked the man. It took Nine Mile a minute to get Buck pulled off.

"He ain't exactly neighborly to anyone who shoots at me. Bad, Bad dog." Nine Mile faked an apology.

The sheriff grabbed the man by the front of his shirt and pulled him close looking him in the eye. "Where's Slade?"

"I don't know, he pulled out last night. He took Billy back to town to get him patched up, he took a bullet in the shoulder. Slade told us to keep you pinned down and kill Brown if we could. He said he would be back."

"How did you know we were up here?"

"We followed you and the old man up here from town. We were watching you to see if you had Brown or you might know where he was. When the old man came and got you Billy followed you up here to the cabin, then he came back to town to get the rest of us and Slade."

"Why did Slade want Brown killed?" the sheriff asked.

"Slade said, 'he knew too much to be talking to the sheriff, that he could get hung'."

"Well that cinches it. Let's round up our horses and hunt down Slade. Tie this one up for now." the sheriff ordered.

Star was easy to find, he would not wander far from his master. It took over an hour to round up the other horses.

"Nine Mile. You and Buck take the lead and keep a good lookout we don't want to be ambushed on the trail. We could meet Slade and his bunch coming back." The sheriff ordered.

"Why don't we take an old trail on the north side of the West Fork close to Nichols Creek? That way we would have less of a chance of meetin' up with Slade." Nine Mile suggested.

They rode north along Ingles Creek and crossed the West Fork. They continued north until they hit the base of the mountains and then turned east toward Nichols Creek. Past Nichols Creek they turned north again toward the Palisades and Drainage Creek across the West Bench to Red Lodge. They did not see anyone along the trail.

The sheriff locked Brown in a cell and with O'Malley in tow the two went to the Four Kings Saloon to arrest Slade for Tom's murder.

"There will be no more gunplay unless Slade makes the first move. Is that clearly understood?" The sheriff said solemnly.

"Understood."

The saloon was quiet and Slade was no where to be seen.

"Where's Slade?" The sheriff asked the barkeep.

"Said he had some business to take care of. Said he would be out of town for a few days. I'll tell him you were asking about him when he gits back." the barkeep said disrespectfully.

"When did he leave?"

"This morning about ten, I guess."

"Where was he headed?"

"Didn't say. I didn't ask."

The sheriff turned and walked out of the saloon.

"Where to?" O'Malley asked.

"Livery stable."

The sheriff found old man Jones and ask, "Did Sam Slade take his horse out this morning?"

"Sure did sheriff, and a pack horse too."

"Which way did he go out of town?"

"He took the road south."

"Did Slade say where he was headed?"

"Nope, but he had enough grub on the pack horse for several days and carried a heavy coat."

"He's headed to the high country. Maybe the Line Creek Plateau or the Silver Run Plateau. He wouldn't need a heavy coat if he was going down the Meeteetse trail or into the Clark's Fork valley. And there would be several places in the valley he could get grub. Yep. It's the high country and beyond my jurisdiction. I'll send out some telegrams to the law in areas near here. He won't get too far. He is a wanted murderer." The sheriff almost seemed relieved that he wouldn't have to face Slade right away.

"He ain't beyond my jurisdiction." O'Malley stated.

"Don't do anything stupid." The sheriff said.

O'Malley didn't answer, he turned and walked to the Silver Grill.

CHAPTER 8

Kate and Nine Mile were waiting for O'Malley.

"I've been looking all over town for you!" Nine Mile gripped.

"Slade left town for a few days." O'Malley said.

"A few days hell! That's what I wanted to tell you. He's gone for good. The banker is really mad because Slade came into the bank this morning and took all his money out. Take my word for it, the skunk is on the run."

"I'm going after him." O'Malley vowed.

"Not without me, Buck and Charlie Small Bear, he's the best tracker in these here parts. You go to the cabin git the horses and gear ready, and I will round up Charlie Small Bear and pick up a few extra supplies. We will have to move fast there isn't too many hours of daylight left."

"I'll wait for you at the cabin." O'Malley said as he looked in Kate's direction.

"I'll come by the cabin as soon as I can get a couple of things, I want you to take with you." Kate said.

O'Malley had the horses saddled and the pack horses practically loaded when Kate arrived.

She was riding a buck skin mare. She handed O'Malley a heavy coat, "You will need a heavy coat on the plateau this time of the year. It belonged to my husband."

"I appreciate the coat. I'll take it. But you; I won't take. So, no need for your horse."

"John O'Malley, this is a free country and I will damn well go anywhere I please. I can ride a horse as well as any man. I run my ranch for over two years and I know hard times."

"What about the cafe. Who will take care of it?" O'Malley asked, looking for some excuse.

"I have a good friend of mine coming in tomorrow, and she will run the place until I get back."

"Look, this is not a camping or fishing trip to the back country. We will be after a killer, and I don't want to take a chance you might get hurt or caught in the line of fire." O'Malley tried to make sense to Kate.

"It will be no more dangerous for you, than for me. You have chosen to go. I am a grown woman, and I chose to go." She said flatly.

"We will be traveling hard and fast and the going will be tough." O'Malley tried again to persuade Kate to stay behind.

"John O'Malley, I can, and will, ride as long and as hard you can." Kate was not going to be left in town. "I would much rather put up with the hardships of the trail, than to wonder and wait here in Red Lodge. I'm going!"

O'Malley knew he couldn't talk her out of going and there was really no way to keep her in town. If they left without her, she could follow at a distance for a few hours and then join them and they could not turn back to take her back to town. O'Malley tried for a compromise.

"I want your word. If, and when we do catch up with Slade and it looks like there will be gunplay on the wind. I want you to stay behind a respectable distance. Will you agree to that condition?" O'Malley asked.

"My word. I agree." Kate answered.

When Nine Mile and Small Bear showed up it was nearly thirty minutes later. Nine Mile asked, "Where did you get the buck skin mare?"

"It's Kate's" O'Malley answered.

"Well what's it doing here?"

"Kate's going with us."

"What in the name of heaven are you thinking? Have you lost your senses? This ain't no Sunday picnic we're goin' on!" Nine Mile shouted.

Kate rallied to O'Malley's defense, "Nine Mile, I have known you for years, and you know me well enough to know that when I make my mind up to something it is going to happen. It is my decision to go on this 'man hunt' and I will not be told by Nine Mile Bill or John O'Malley or any other man when or where I can ride. Is that clear?"

"I hope you realize just what you are getting into. This is going to be dangerous." Nine Mile said, calming down just a bit.

"I understand. I will do as I am asked once we are on the trail and not hold you back." Kate affirmed.

"I don't like it one little bit." Nine Mile grumbled. "Not one little bit."

They finished loading the rest of their gear for the trail and one last check was made by Nine Mile before he closed the cabin door.

"If Slade is heading to Cooke City he can take several trails up to the Plateau. There is a trail up the East Rosebud Creek canyon, but that could be the long way around. He could take the shortest trail across the plateau by going up either Silver Creek or follow the West Fork up to the Plateau. He could then go across the Silver Run Plateau to the Lake Fork trail to Sundance Pass and work his way west until he hits the trail from East Rosebud to Cooke City. I think the Silver Run trail is the first trail up the West Fork and that is the trail me and Small Bear will scout first." Nine Mile suggested.

"Why don't you check the Silver Run trail out and see if there is any fresh sign and Kate and I will trail along behind with the pack horses." O'Malley said.

"If we find Slade's trail I will double back and let you know. If we don't find his trail there we will have to go up the canyon and hope he takes the West Fork trail." Nine Mile said. "See you in a couple of hours."

Nine Mile, Buck and Small Bear left heading southwest toward Silver Run Creek.

O'Malley and Kate left at a leisurely pace, with few words spoken between them for several miles.

Finally the silence was broken by O'Malley, "Kate, I am really worried about you on this trip. I wish you would change your mind and stay in Red Lodge."

"I appreciate your concern for me John, but I am strong minded and I am interested in your health. I would not be able to rest wondering what was going on in the high country of the Plateau." Kate said warmly. "Besides it will give us a chance to talk about what your future holds and mine."

O'Malley did not miss the parts about "interested in your health" and "what your future holds and mine." He knew he would have to talk seriously to Kate. He cared for her very much, but was it enough to make it a more permanent relationship. O'Malley hadn't thought too much about it, but he knew in time he would have to make a decision. She was a beautiful woman, strong willed with a wonderful mind. Not the normal type of woman you found out west. They had made love with the passion that O'Malley had only known with his first wife. Having a permanent relationship might not be too bad an idea. Would she go to Smith Valley with him? Would she leave Red Lodge for him? It was very clear she cared for him. Would it be enough to make a commitment and leave with him. Slade would have to be handled first, then he would decide if he should ask Kate to go away with him.

"We'll talk more about 'us' after Slade is either in hell or in jail." O'Malley said with resolve.

No more was said. They rode on in silence passed Nichols Creek and crossed the West Fork about a half mile west and then turned south up Silver Creek.

Two hours on the trail brought Nine Mile and Buck back to meet up with O'Malley and Kate.

"We cut a trail with two horses going up Silver Creek. The trail is about four hours old; the second horse is loaded and leaves tracks much deeper than the first. We can't be sure it is

Slade, but there ain't too many people going up to the Silver Run Plateau this time of year. My best guess is that it is Slade. The only way to find out for sure is to dog the tracks until we catch up with him. Small Bear is still tracking."

"The sun is getting low, we had better move at a faster pace." O'Malley suggested, "We want to make as much time on the flat before sundown as we can and before we begin the climb."

They all broke into a gallop to the south in the Silver Creek valley. The trail abruptly took a right turn to the west and the climb began. The horses walked at a steady pace for about an hour.

Small Bear came back down the trail and met them. "Find something." he said. He reached in his pocket and pulled out the stub of a cigar. It smelled freshly smoked and was well chewed on the end.

"Slade smokes cigars." Nine Mile observed, "And he chews the ends. I think we're on Slade's trail."

It was beginning to get cool and the sun had long since gone behind the mountains to the west. There was just a strip of sunlight left of the tops of the mountains to the east of the Silver Creek valley. It would be dark soon.

"I find a place to camp." Small Bear said, "No can trail in dark."

"Take us to the camp." Nine Mile said. They followed for another two miles where the trail flattened out on a ridge. They would camp there for the night.

"I want to be ready to leave as soon as there is daylight enough to follow the trail." O'Malley said anxiously. "If we ride hard tomorrow we can catch up with Slade."

"Well, that will depend on whether or not Slade camps tonight. He may know the country well enough not to get lost on the Plateau. If he moves on in the dark he could get lost on the Plateau. It is flat and not too many land marks to be seen at night. There are piles of rocks in the shape of a pyramid about three or four feet tall that have been set along the trail so you won't get lost, but it is hard to see them at night. He may also want to put as much distance as he can between him and Red Lodge, in case someone comes after him. He's on the run even if he doesn't know someone is following or not." Nine Mile reasoned.

They made camp, built a fire, cooked supper, and set around drinking coffee.

"Do you think Slade will give up without a fight?" Kate asked. "If, we get the drop on him."

"Slade will fight. I would just as soon fight a cougar as go after Slade. A cougar will run if he can, but if you corner him, he will fight. Slade will be like a cornered cougar. He'll fight." Nine Mile stated flatly.

"I expect there will be gunplay before it is over." O'Malley reflected, as he stared into the dancing flames of the camp fire.

As the fire began to die the blankets and heavy coats were brought out. It was beginning to get cold. There would be a heavy frost in the morning. Even for early September there could be snow in the high country. The horses were picketed and O'Malley hobbled Star. The cold gray snow clouds drifted down the valley from the north touching the tops of the mountains.

"Snow come soon." Small Bear said, as he looked skyward.

"How soon?" Nine Mile asked.

"When fat gray cloud have belly ripped open by mountain top, then snow come. Snow come tonight." Small Bear predicted.

They all turned in and snuggled down in the folds of their blankets letting the fire die out. During the night Small Bears prediction came true, the clouds gave birth to three inches of new snow.

Nine Mile was the first one up. He began to find dry wood to build a fire. It wasn't even pink in the east so it was well before dawn. When the fire was roaring and coffee was cooking Nine Mile began kicking each one out of their blankets. "Get up you lazy bones. Daylight is a comin'. We got a long day ahead of us. Coffee is ready. Small Bear check the horses." he sounded like a top sergeant in the army issuing orders.

After breakfast the horses were saddled and the pack horse was loaded the first faint rays of red began to show in the east above the mountain top promising the coming of a new day. They sat around the fire drinking coffee and warming themselves. The night had not only brought snow, but with it had come an intense cold for so early in the year. Heavy coats and gloves were the uniform of the day until it began to warm later in the morning, even for Small Bear.

As daylight came a winter wonderland was exposed down the valley. "Damn, now isn't that a pretty sight?" Nine Mile said, as he looked out over the snow covered valley. "I remember when this country was this pure and innocent. It's a damn shame that this country will be chopped up and there will be people all over this area." Nine mile grumbled.

"Why do you mean by 'chopped up'?" Kate asked.

"Have you ever seen a mine underground?" Nine Mile asked.

"I guess not." Kate answered. "But that would just put a hole in the ground."

"When they dig a shaft they have to shore up the roof to reduce the chance of a cave-in. To do that they use timbers. The coal people will hire crews to come up in this country to cut those timbers. These woods will have crews living up here in timber camps. They will cut the trees and the mules and wagons will haul them back to the mines. When they cut the trees they will limb and top them here in the forest. They will just let the branches lay there and rot. They will cut the best and easiest and then move on like a plague of locust. These mountain will never be the same. It will take a hundred years to return to what it is today if it ever does." Nine Mile spoke remorsefully. He had a love for the forest, the mountains, and the animals around him. He did not care for the idea that it could be destroyed or taken away.

"Now, white man know how Indian feel." Small Bear said. "Big trouble, read tracks; we follow trail; much snow hide track, must go slow; not to lose."

They had no trouble following the trail, but the tracks under the snow were hidden. As the morning went on the sun appeared in the east and began to warm the air. Coats were removed by mid morning. Here and there the sun had melted the snow on the trail. Small Bear would get down and study tracks in the bare ground. The trail went steadily upward, turning back and forth at times following the side of a mountain and at others times would follow a ridge top. As they neared the Plateau Small Bear told them to wait until he returned. They dismounted and let their horses rest. It had been a long and hard ride.

Small Bear returned shortly and said the top was just over the next rise and he did not see anyone on the open plateau.

They mounted up and rode for the top. Five minutes later the ground began to flatten out and as they broke out of the fir trees there was a sight to behold. The Silver Run Plateau was flat with a few low rolling hills, and patches of trees here and there, but for the most part it had large open areas with little or no cover. Off to the south across the Lake Fork canyon was the Hill Roaring Plateau which only connected to Silver Run at Sundance Pass. To the east looking across Rock Creek canyon was the flat and almost treeless Line Creek Plateau, to the west was Silver Run Peak and southwest was Sundance Pass.

O'Malley reached into his saddle bag and pulled out his binoculars. He scanned the open areas for horses, a rider or tracks in the snow. All he saw were hundreds of elk. He also looked for any smoke rising from what could be a camp. There were plenty of tracks, but from that distance there was no telling whether they were made by elk or horses. The snow was only left in patches and drifts on the plateau. Small Bear dismounted, squatted down and looked closely at the tracks left by two horses. He walked along for a few feet studying the direction and pointed in a direction of a pyramid of rocks which marked the trail. "Trail go there." Small Bear announced. He remounted and began to follow.

O'Malley watched the open areas ahead for any movement of horses and rider. In places you could see for miles. They followed the trail as it went in the direction of the Silver Run Peak.

Small Bear stopped once again and dismounted. He walked the trail and then came back. "Him head for trees. Maybe camp."

"Kate, I want you stay behind and follow us in when it is clear. Slade could still be in camp or holding up in the trees watching us. I don't want you in the line of fire." O'Malley ordered.

Kate nodded her head and held her place on the trail.

"We had better spread out just a bit before going into the trees." Nine Mile suggested.

They rode into the trees slowly and cautiously. Small Bear found the camp and called them over. Slade had spent the night there. Small Bear checked the ashes and the horse droppings and said "Him leave after sun come over mountain top."

"This time of the year that would be about two hours ago." Nine Mile contributed.

O'Malley rode to the edge of the trees and waved Kate over. He also glassed the area ahead for any sign of a rider. Nothing.

They all dismounted let their horses rest and decided on their approach on Slade.

"I think we should let Small Bear lead out for a quarter of a mile or more and the rest of us follow. That way one man on horse back will have less chance of being seen. If he spots Slade he can wave us on up and keep him in sight." Nine Mile suggested.

"Well that would keep Kate out of harms way if Slade tries to ambush us on the trail." O'Malley agreed.

Small Bear followed the trail as it led across the Plateau. The trail abruptly turned north and Small Bear waited at that point.

"Man leave trail him head to Sundance Pass. This trail go back to West Fork down Timberline Creek." Small Bear pointed. Small Bear took the lead and followed Slade's tracks across the plateau. The going was an easy ride with very little change in elevation.

O'Malley stopped occasionally to glass the vast open landscape ahead of them. Beside the great numbers of elk and a few foxes he did not see another living creature. As they approached a stand of trees Small Bear had dismounted and examined the ground where he was standing.

"What did you find?" Nine Mile asked.

"Man stop here, watch back trail. He leave in big hurry." Small Bear answered.

"Damn! I knew it would be hard to trail Slade in this open country without being seen. He knew that too. I was hoping he wouldn't be watching his back trail. He's a crafty old fox." Nine Mile lamented.

"What do you suggest? He knows we are trailing him." O'Malley said.

"Hanged if I know for sure." Nine Mile shook his head. "If you follow his trail he can set us up and pick us off with a rifle. We can circle around to the south and come up on Sundance pass from a different direction. If, he has already gone through the pass we can ride west to Elephant Lake and then down the creek to Rainbow Lake. The trail to Cooke City goes on the west side of the lake. If we try that way we might get between him and Cooke City. Then we would have the drop on him. If we don't cut him off, we will see his tracks going into Cooke City and we will be in the same spot as we are now of having to follow him into Cooke City"

"What if he doesn't go to Cooke City? Where else could he go from up here?" O'Malley asked.

"Well, he could always double back and go down the East Rosebud follow that to Absorkee, Bozeman, Billings or just about anywhere along the Yellowstone." Nine Mile answered.

O'Malley felt frustrated. The man who was responsible for his brothers death was just an hour or so away but just exactly where could not be determined. A decision had to be made. "Let's try to cut him off on the trail to Cooke City. If we don't find his tracks on the trail we will ride back up the trail to meet him. We will just have to make sure he doesn't see us first. One thing in our favor is that he is expecting us on his back trail. If he does see someone coming up the trail from Cooke City, it won't spook him so bad."

"We will have to ride hard and fast to get ahead of him. We had better move out. Small Bear and I will lead the way, you two follow our trail." Nine Mile said and spurred his horse southwest.

They all broke into a gallop and maintained the pace for several miles across the nearly flat open ground of the high country. The horses were all lathered up and all the previous snows had melted as they rode on. They turned to the west in the late afternoon and soon hit the Lake Fork trail near September Morn Lake. They followed the trail for another mile and found Slade's track going through Sundance Pass. They followed the trail and began to descend toward Sundance Lake. As they reached the headwaters of the West Fork the trail turned north and they saw where Slade had left the trail and head west. Slade was heading toward Elk Mountain.

"I kinda thought this might happen. Going cross country with no trail to follow it looks like one of two things. Slade is either a little lost and riding too far north or he isn't going to Cooke City." Nine Mile said.

"Should we follow his tracks or go to Rainbow Lake?" O'Malley asked.

"In high country if you haven't spent much time up here it is easy to get a few miles off of where you want to be. Slade knows if he keeps going west he will eventually hit the East Rosebud trail to Cooke City. What he may not know is that there ain't no easy way to get to the trail in direction he is going except for Snow Creek. There are plenty of cliff and steep slopes that a man on horseback would risk breaking his neck if he tried to go down anywhere except Snow Creek. We will have a easy ride after we pass Bowback Mountain." Nine Mile said.

"What if he isn't lost?" O'Malley asked.

"Then he isn't going to Cooke City and he changed his mind about that since he came up on the plateau." Nine Mile speculated.

"Let's stop following Slade's tracks and ride hard for Rainbow Lake." O'Malley said. "It's a gamble, but I don't want to be ambushed following Slade's tracks. He can pick us off at a place of his choosing."

Small Bear, Nine Mile and Buck led the group around the north side of Sundance Mountain and toward Elephant Lake. They rode mostly down hill for the next six or so miles getting to Rainbow Lake after dark.

O'Malley saw Small Bear and Nine Mile waiting beside a pyramid of rocks on the trail to Cooke City.

"He hasn't come by here on the trail yet." Nine Mile said. "He is either still coming, camped out or he has changed direction completely and isn't going to Cooke City."

"Do you think he would leave this trail and still go to Cooke City?" O'Malley asked.

"Not likely. If a fellar was to try and come off the Plateau in the wrong place he could get his neck broke. If you go off the wrong ridge or into the wrong drainage you could wind up twenty or thirty mile away from where you want to be. No; in the high country it is better to stick to the trails when there are some." Nine Mile reasoned.

"There's a stand of trees about a quarter of a mile up the trail from here. We could camp there for the night. Buck would let us know if anyone came down the trail should Slade decide to ride at night. We can take turns watching the trail." Nine Mile said.

They all rode into the trees and fed some grain to five very tired horses. It felt strange to walk around on two feet after being in the saddle all day. O'Malley felt stiff and noticeable sore. The camp was set up and a fire built. Small Bear and Buck watched the trail as they prepared something to eat. Coffee was ready and everyone except Small Bear had a hot cup. After they ate O'Malley volunteered to relieve Small Bear on the trail watch while Small Bear had something to eat. When O'Malley wandered out of camp for trail watch Kate tagged along.

"How do you feel?" O'Malley asked Kate.

"Oh fine considering I haven't done any riding like that for over two years. It is almost as hard as herding cattle. I'll be just fine."

"I hope so. I know it's hard on you. But, you were the one who wouldn't stay in Red Lodge." O'Malley grinned.

Small Bear left the two of them watching the trail.

The stars came out in the dark heaven by the thousands. A crescent moon began to rise in the east and a coyote howled off in the distance. The night was cold but the wind was

gentle. O'Malley could smell the womanliness of Kate as she stood close and wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the cold.

"Kate, about the other night. I want you to know I really didn't mean for things to go as far as they did." O'Malley said softly and sincerely.

"John, we were two people who are attracted to each other. It has been a very long time since I have been in a man's arms. The other night was the first time since my husband died. I guess we just got caught up in our own whirlpool of feelings and lust and then natural desires took over for awhile. It doesn't make you or me a bad person. It is not a life long commitment. I don't regret it and neither should you."

"It meant a great deal to me because of the feelings I have for you Kate."

Kate looked deeply into John's eyes, and said, "Believe me, if I didn't have such strong feelings for you I wouldn't have done what I did the other night. But, I want you to understand something else. You have no obligation to make an 'honest' woman out of me. If you feel you want to continue our relationship I am open to that but, without obligations on either of our parts.

"Kate, I have been thinking. How committed are you to staying in Red Lodge? Would you consider living some place else? I mean on a ranch again." O'Malley asked.

"Well I haven't really thought about it. Since my husband died I never really had any reason to leave Red Lodge. I have made many friends there and I would hate to leave them, but it would depend on what reason or where else I would go. As far as living on a ranch again, I guess it would be all right. I know from personal experience that it is a very hard life for a woman alone. Why do you ask?" Kate answered honestly.

"We have gotten very close in a short period of time Kate. I was just thinking maybe about the future." O'Malley continued.

"John, I don't want you to misunderstand what I am about to say. I would like to have another man in my life again. I would like to marry and have the children I have never had. More importantly, I want to love and be loved by the man I marry. While we have been lovers, once; I am not certain you are in love with me and I am not sure if I am in love with you. Physical attraction is a strong motivator, but over time people need much more to keep them together. Commitment, love, understanding, caring, compromise, patience, fidelity, and being able to talk when problems do come up and then work them out, together." Kate said solemnly.

"Kate, I am not sure about my feelings either. I know I care for you a great deal, but I am not sure you could call it love. I wanted to talk about this now because I know when this thing with Slade is over with I will go back to Smith Valley because I have a ranch to run. We really haven't had much time to get to really know each other and it doesn't look like there will be much time left when we get back to Red Lodge. I just thought we should talk about it."

"I like a man who can talk about his feeling and is honest and up front. There are many things about you that I do like, at the same time there are still many things I don't know about you. We may as well accept the fact that we may not have the time together to fall in love and have a future together. One last point. I would not consider such a change in my life without it including marriage. I think we need to know each other much better before any marriage plans are a part of our future."

"I guess life can bring two people together for a while to ride the same trail and when the fork comes along they can ride off in a different direction, always remaining friends and never to be forgotten." O'Malley said philosophically.

"I know we will always be friends and certainly never forgotten." Kate confirmed O'Malley's philosophy.

"I feel better since we talked and let each other know where we stand."

"Friends are always like that." Kate smiled and held O'Malley's hand.

Kate stayed and talked about many things over the next hours. It was really cold by the time Nine Mile came to relieve O'Malley. Kate and O'Malley went to the campfire had a hot cup of coffee and turned in for the night.

Everyone was up at dawn. Nine Mile and Small Bear had watched the trail the rest of the night without anyone passing the camp. After breakfast they broke camp, packed up and prepared to follow the East Rosebud toward Absorkee hoping to meet up with Slade.

Small Bear would take the lead and if he saw anyone coming down the trail he would hightail it back to the group.

Small Bear got a half mile head start and they followed in his tracks. They rode past Rimrock Lake, Arch Creek, Five Mile Creek, and Elk Lake. They rode until nearly noon when they saw Small Bear waiting on the trail where Snow Creek emptied into the Rosebud.

"Man take Rosebud Trail north." Small Bear announced.

"Damn! Slade is slicker than a greased eel." Nine Mile cursed. "He sure as hell ain't going to Cooke City if he is headed north. He could have led us up on the plateau just to make sure no one was doggin' his trail, or he could have changed his mind when he saw us following. Cooke City is too small a place for him to hide."

"We have plenty of supplies, so we follow Slade down the East Rosebud." O'Malley said.

"Let's let Small Bear take the lead in case there is an ambush somewhere along the trail." Nine Mile said.

"OK. What type of country are we going into?" O'Malley asked.

"We have East Rosebud Lake about two miles north of here, trail goes steadily down and flattens out pretty much after Rosebud Lake. East Rosebud Creek goes on past the old Crow Indian Agency to where the West Rosebud meets up about four miles south of Absorkee. We will get into some open rolling hills and some flat country and we'll be about fifteen miles west and north of Red Lodge and pretty close to the Bozeman Trail. Slade could hookup with the Bozeman Trail or swing back east along the Yellowstone to Billings." Nine Mile said.

"How rough is the country?"

"Not too bad after Rosebud Lake."

"Let's ride. Slade won't wait for us." O'Malley said. "The sooner we cross paths with Slade the sooner this thing will be over with."

The rate of travel was slow as Small Bear tracked Slade. The trail was well traveled and Slade would have no trouble making good time. O'Malley was anxious to catch Slade. Small Bear once again waited on the trail by a camp site.

"Him leave not long. We see him bye and bye. Pack horse lose iron shoe" Small Bear said as he held up the thrown horseshoe.

Nine Mile and O'Malley checked the camp site and found a cigar stub. Nine mile figured Slade left about an hour before they got there.

"Small Bear you keep a close watch for Slade he ain't far ahead." Nine Mile warned.

They rode on until dark without catching Slade as he was pushing hard. He was not running his horse but pushing hard. Nine Mile guessed Slade would stop for the night and camp. He knew that no one could trail him in the dark.

When Small Bear could track Slade no longer because of darkness he stopped and waited for the others.

"Follow trail or camp? No can see track." Small Bear asked.

"We camp we don't want to ride by him in the dark." O'Malley reluctantly answered.

They had been after Slade for three full days now and were closer, but had not even caught a glimpse of him on the horizon. They were all getting saddle sore and tired. The cold was bitter that night and dropped below freezing shortly after sundown. They camped in a stand of fir trees to be sheltered from a sharp north wind and build a fire.

Hot coffee and food made them all feel better.

"Do you think we will catch Slade tomorrow?" O'Malley asked Nine Mile.

"Well if we do; I think of the brave Indians who said, 'It is a good day to die'; because I think someone is going to die tomorrow."

Small Bear spoke, "Death flies the wind tonight, will land close tomorrow."

No one spoke for awhile, each watching the fire dance, hiss and crack. Each was looking inward examining all their inner thoughts. High country can do that to anyone who has ever spent the night on a high country plateau. A place like that can make you realize how really small you are compared to the country around you and how fragile and uncertain life really can be. It makes you wonder about all the great mysteries of life. What am I doing here? Is there really a plan for me by the 'Great Spirit' and what is the meaning of my life? When you finally realize you will never answer those questions, just decide to go on with life and keep looking for the answers never really expecting to find the answers to the great questions of life. You look around at the most beautiful country you have ever seen and return to reality with a new found sense of appreciation for just living your life and your surroundings.

Everyone turned in soon after the fire began to die. The warm blankets were appreciated as protection from the cold north wind and everyone was bone tired. They would be up at dawn again. Maybe Slade would be seen tomorrow. O'Malley wondered about Small Bear's prediction, that death would be close by tomorrow.

CHAPTER 9

With frosty coolness, dawn broke and held the promise of a cloudless day. The horses were saddled, breakfast eaten, by the time it was light enough to track Slade on the trail. It would be a lot easier since the one unshod hoof of the pack horse would stand out. They would follow the same pattern as the day before. Small Bear would track ahead about half a mile in hopes of spotting Slade, if he did he would return for the rest of them.

The high mountains surrounding them began to drop behind and open country with rolling hills lay ahead, which would be less tiring on the horses than going up hill. When going down hill the horse's metal shoes would slide on rocks, and it was much more difficult for the horse to maintain their footing.

Less than an hour of riding brought them to a camp site where Small Bear was waiting. "Man close. Not leave long." Small Bear said.

"Then be careful, we will drop back about a quarter of a mile. If you spot Slade ride back and get us." Nine Mile told Small Bear.

Small Bear was given time to lead out. Nine Mile said, "Slade was camped less than two miles ahead of us last night. I am glad we camped when we did. If he didn't have a fire going and we didn't see his camp we could have rode past him and not known it until this morning."

They rode on north, following the East Rosebud.

Suddenly, two shots rang out up ahead on the trail. O'Malley and Nine Mile reined up.

"Slade." O'Malley said. "Stay here Kate."

Nine Mile and O'Malley spurred their horses forward down the trail with Nine Mile in the lead. They had only gone a few hundred yards when Nine Mile was falling from the saddle as a shot rang out to his right. Buck stopped and went to his master's side. O'Malley reined Star to a halt and dismounted and found cover behind a rock. Nine Mile was laying beside the trail. Blood was showing on Nine Miles shoulder. He was not moving. The area was on a flat bench with trees and rocks for cover.

"Nine Mile. Nine Mile." O'Malley coarsely whispered. "Are you alive."

No answer. O'Malley continued to scan the trees and rocks looking for Slade. He was certain it was Slade. Where was Small Bear? O'Malley wanted to get Nine Mile behind cover and see if he was still alive. One last look around and O'Malley moved in a crouched run to Nine Mile, grabbing him by his right arm he pulled him behind a large boulder beside the trail. No shots were fired as he moved.

Nine Mile moaned.

"Well at least you are still alive you old squaw chaser you." O'Malley said gratefully.

O'Malley checked the wound and the bullet had passed clean through going in at the top of his left shoulder and coming out the back. He was bleeding pretty bad. O'Malley couldn't understand why he had not been shot at when he moved. Then he got his answer.

"Don't move! Drop the rifle! Put you hands over your head! Do it now!" A man's voice ordered from behind O'Malley and up the trail.

O'Malley knew he had no choice. If he did not drop the rifle he would surely be shot in the back. He dropped the rifle, raised his hands and stood up slowly. He slowly began to turn around to face his assailant.

Slade stood about fifty feet away holding a rifle pointed directly at him.

"I am going to enjoy this. You and your brother have cost me a once in a life time fortune. I am tired of you dogging my trail and this is where it ends." Slade reveled in every word.

"Drop the rifle!" Kate ordered.

Slade jerked his head to his left in the direction of the woman's voice.

Kate had not stayed behind as she was told. She had slipped up on Slade with her saddle rifle.

Slade knew he was in a bad spot. O'Malley still had his Colt. If he shot O'Malley, Kate would shoot him. He could try to shoot Kate and move before O'Malley could draw and fire and at fifty feet O'Malley would have a good chance of missing.

"I said, drop the rifle or I will shoot you." Kate ordered again with meaning.

Slade made his move. He turned and fired one quick shot from the hip at Kate, and dove for the cover of rocks to his left.

Kate's rifle fired.

O'Malley had not expected Slade to fire at Kate, but when he saw Slade swing the rifle toward Kate he began his own draw. He fired an instant after Slade and Kate had fired. Then Slade was diving for the cover of the rocks. O'Malley missed! O'Malley fired again, but only hit the rocks Slade had taken for cover. O'Malley moved for cover behind a large fir tree beside the trail.

"Kate. Kate. Are you all right?" O'Malley hollered.

No Answer.

"Damn you Slade!" O'Malley cursed.

Bark was peeled form the side of the fir tree as Slade fired several shots at O'Malley. O'Malley returned three shots. He then reloaded the four spent chambers.

"Kate, answer me!" O'Malley shouted.

"I'm hit in the leg. But it isn't too bad." Kate answered. "I'll live. Just get Slade. I'll be all right!"

Slade looked at the rocks where Slade had taken cover. There was plenty of cover for Slade to move around behind. O'Malley decided to move in Kate's direction to check out her gun shot wound. He moved to another large fir tree. No shots. O'Malley moved again behind rocks. He crawled to Kate's side. She had already torn her shirt and bandaged the wound. It was half way between the knee and hip of her left leg and had missed the bone.

"Where's Slade?" Kate asked.

"He's behind some rocks beside the trail. What did I tell you? Wasn't it 'stay put'?" O'Malley said between clinched teeth.

"I thought you might need some help. Apparently, I was right." Kate answered, somewhat pleased with herself. "You could be dead now if I had stayed where I was told to stay."

"You wouldn't be shot in the leg if you had stayed where you told to." O'Malley argued.

"You're worth a hole in the leg." Kate answered.

O'Malley could not argue with that logic. She had the last word and he knew it. He only shook his head at her.

"I am going after Slade. I think I can find him in the rocks. You stay here. Understood?" O'Malley said.

Kate nodded her head and the pain caused by the gunshot was apparent.

He moved away from Kate and worked his way toward the rocks where he last saw Slade. O'Malley saw Small Bear come back up the trail and dismount. O'Malley whistled, and waved his arm at Small Bear. He motioned to him to circle around to where Kate was laying.

"Small Bear is coming back." O'Malley warned Kate so she wouldn't shoot him.

Small Bear worked his way up to O'Malley.

"Man leave trail and circle back to watch for you. I fire shots to warn you. Where Nine Mile?" Small Bear asked.

"Nine Mile took a bullet in the shoulder, but he should live, he's losing a lot of blood. Kate took a bullet in the leg, but she will be all right. Slade is in those rocks over by the trees. I'm going after him. Cover me. If he fires try to put a bullet between his eyes." O'Malley ordered.

O'Malley ran crouched low to a fir tree near the trail. He waved Small Bear forward. The two of them worked their way slowly back to where O'Malley had last seen Slade. No shots had been fired.

"Blood." Small Bear said looking at the ground where Slade had been.

"Then either Kate hit him or I didn't miss after all." O'Malley said smiling. "But just had bad is he hit?" O'Malley wondered aloud.

"Not much blood. Not bad." Small Bear offered.

They followed the blood trail for several hundred feet and found where Slade had tied his horses. Apparently Slade had slipped back to his horse and was continuing his journey down the East Rosebud trail.

"We go after man now?" Small Bear asked.

"Not until we get Nine Mile and Kate patched up. Then we have got to get them to a doctor in Red Lodge. I will go after Slade. You go back up the trail and bring Kate's mare and the pack horse down here. There are bandages in the supplies."

O'Malley returned to Nine Mile. He took his canteen and gave Nine Mile a drink. Nine Mile came around.

"Thunderation! What damn buffalo ran over me?" Nine Mile growled and tried to get up.

"You be still or you will start bleeding worse than you are now."

Nine Mile looked at the wound. "Slade is gettin' to be a bad shot. We can fix that hole, we will just have to cauterize it. Then there won't be no more bleeding. Did you get Slade?"

"Slade is wounded, but he got to his horse and is on his way down the trail. Lie still until I get back."

O'Malley went to Kate and told her Slade was wounded and that he was on the run again. He picked her up in his arms and took her to where Nine Mile was laying.

"How in God's name did you get shot?" Nine Mile asked as he saw Kate's leg.

"Slade was just a little faster than I was."

Small Bear brought the bandages to O'Malley and they bandaged both of their wounds.

"Do you think you can both ride? We need to get both of you to a doctor in Red Lodge."

"I ain't going to no doctor in Red Lodge or anywhere else for that matter; now or ever. I'm going after the low down pole cat that shot me." Nine Mile announced.

"I want you and Small Bear to take Kate back to Red Lodge. I'll get Slade." O'Malley said.

"You can't go after him alone." Kate protested.

"I shouldn't have let you come along on this manhunt in the first place. You wouldn't have got shot." O'Malley said, changing the subject.

"It is a little late to worry about that now. You can't mean to get yourself killed by going after Slade alone. That would be a mistake too." Kate argued.

"I'm a grown man and I can go anywhere I please and there isn't a woman who can tell me to do otherwise. I think that is about what you said to me when I brought you along on this high country adventure, and it almost got you killed. There are things in life we all seem to have to do. At the time it seems like the right thing. Only time determines whether we were right or wrong." O'Malley had made his point.

They would ride along together and follow Slade's trail. For now, they would all be going the same direction, down the creek. Small Bear would take the lead and O'Malley would stay close to him. Kate would look after Nine Mile.

O'Malley warned Small Bear to keep a sharp lookout, Slade just might try to ambush them on the trail again. The ride for Nine Mile was painful as it was for Kate. Kate's wound was not bleeding too badly, but Nine Mile was losing quite a bit of blood. After an hour they all stopped to rest a bit and re-bandage Nine Mile's wound. Nine Mile looked white as a sheet. Kate changed his dressing. He was not in the best of shape. Kate was holding up quite well and her wound had almost completely stopped bleeding.

They rode on and worked their way down the creek. Small Bear pointed out drops of blood from time to time along the trail. The further they went the less blood they found. When they got five miles north of Rosebud lake they were well out of the canyon. Soon Kate, Nine Mile and Small Bear would turn east toward Red Lodge and Slade's trail would either continue north or northeast. North would take him past the Crow Indian Agency and on to the little town of Absorkee and Bozeman beyond. If he continued northeast that would take him to a small place called Columbus on the Yellowstone River and then down the river east to Billings. It was mid afternoon when they came to a fork in the trail where the everyone but O'Malley would turn east for Red Lodge. They would have to ride fifteen or so miles to get to town. They would first come to the small community of Luther, about five miles east of the trail and then ride on, getting to Red Lodge after dark.

The pack horse and most of the supplies would go back to Red Lodge with them. O'Malley took a minimum of supplies and put them in his saddle bags. There would be a few places up ahead where he could get food and anything he might need.

"You two take care of each other. Make sure you see a doctor Nine Mile." O'Malley said.

"I think you are a damn fool for going after Slade alone." Nine Mile chided, "If it is somethin' you got to do, then good luck and don't give that low life polecat a chance. If you do, he will kill you."

"I won't ask you not to go." Kate said, as she rode up beside O'Malley. "I will ask you to come back to Red Lodge alive." Kate reached out held O'Malley's hand warmly. "You mean an awful lot to me John O'Malley."

"I'll come back. I'll be alive and Slade will come back; dead or alive, but he will come back." O'Malley vowed.

Small Bear took the pack horse and led the way working back to the east. Kate and Nine Mile followed with Buck trotting along side of his master.

O'Malley watched as they rode off. When they reached the knoll of the last hill Kate turned around and waved. He waved back and felt very much alone. He hoped he could keep his word and come back alive.

O'Malley followed Slade's track with ease since Slade's pack horse had thrown a shoe from his right hind hoof. O'Malley was soon moving at a fast pace. He followed until dark and camped close to the East Rosebud. He did not build a fire for fear of discovery.

It was much warmer that night since he was not on the cold plateau and was four thousand feet lower. O'Malley did not eat breakfast, but was sitting in the saddle waiting for enough light to begin following Slade's tracks.

O'Malley followed all morning due north and along the East Rosebud, he passed the old Crow Agency building, and on to where the West Rosebud met the East Rosebud. Soon after that he began to see smoke on down river and knew Absorkee was close at hand. He had watched the trail ahead carefully. Slade could try to dry gulch him at almost any turn.

O'Malley rode into the small collection of cabins, a general store and a saloon. The big town of Absorkee.

O'Malley looked for a horse and a pack horse some place in town. He rode up to the general store and dismounted. It felt strange to walk again, and his legs were stiff. He tried to slap and brush as much of the trail dust off as he could.

He walked into the general store and walked to the storekeeper.

"I'm looking for a man who came into town from the south in the past hour or two with a pack horse. He may have been shot." O'Malley said.

"Yep. A fellow just left here about fifteen minutes ago headed north." The storekeeper offered. "He came in here bought some ammunition, bandages and antiseptic. He had a bandanna rapped around his left leg. Had blood on it and his pant leg. He wasn't talkative and I didn't ask how it happened. He didn't look like the type you ask questions."

O'Malley bought some ammunition, thanked the storekeeper and walked outside. Fifteen minutes. Not much of a lead for a man shot in the leg. O'Malley vowed to catch Slade before sundown.

O'Malley rode out of town to the north. He found Slade's pack horse's unshod track without any trouble. Still going north. O'Malley urged Star into a gallop. Five miles from town as O'Malley topped a rise he saw Slade. He was riding at a gallop and at a distance of about three miles. O'Malley reined Star to a halt and moved behind some brush and watched Slade ride on. O'Malley knew if he followed Slade in the open Slade would have too many options. Slade really didn't know if he was still being followed or not. If he saw O'Malley he would know for sure and there would be no chance to surprise Slade. You could also be certain Slade would set up another ambush if he knew O'Malley was following. Or Slade could make a hard run for it and leave the trail trying to lose O'Malley. Not far ahead of Slade was a knoll. As soon as he had topped the knoll and gone out of sight O'Malley would race to the top to get as close as possible to Slade without being seen.

Slade stopped on top of the knoll turned and looked back for a long minute. Then he turned and disappeared behind the knoll. O'Malley urged Star into a break-neck run to the top of the knoll. As he approached the top of the knoll he reined Star to a halt and dismounted, grabbed

his rifle and carefully looked over the rim of the knoll for Slade. He was below in an open valley and moving. Shag thought only a buffalo gun would hit Slade at that distance. He would not chance a shot. He was closer, but not nearly close enough. O'Malley thought about riding hard and fast down on top of Slade and hope he could get close enough before Slade knew he was there. If Slade saw him right away he had too much a lead for O'Malley to catch him. He would make the top of the next knoll and O'Malley would be a sitting duck riding up to the top. Not a smart move.

O'Malley looked to the east. There was a divide ridge running to the north, parallel with Slade. It might just work. When Slade went over the top of the next knoll, O'Malley would ride hard north and angle for the ridge to the east. If he could get to the ridge and then still see Slade he could circle and get ahead of him. A much better plan than riding up to a ridge as a sitting duck. O'Malley put the rifle away and mounted Star. Once again when Slade got to the top of the knoll he stopped and looked back for a long minute and then turned and rode out of sight.

O'Malley rode hard to the ridge to the east and angling toward the knoll Slade had just crossed.

He made the east ridge and quickly crossed to the other side where Slade could not possibly see him. O'Malley rode hard north along the blind side of the ridge trying to get even with Slade. When Star began to get winded O'Malley stopped dismounted and carefully looked over the ridge top to the west where he expected to see Slade. It had worked. There was Slade. The same distance from O'Malley as before, but now he was riding left to right instead of away. O'Malley looked at the country ahead of him. The ridge continued for several miles and O'Malley would have a chance to get far enough ahead of Slade that he could slip down a coulee and get the drop on Slade.

O'Malley mounted Star and continued to ride hard north for several miles. Finally he turned west and glassed the country south and east for Slade for several minutes. Damn! Where the hell is he? O'Malley began to get a very uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Had Slade seen something? Guessed something? O'Malley waited. There!. Two ridges back Slade rode into view skylighted on the ridge. O'Malley slowly backed Star away from the ridge top. He rode north again and then crossed the ridge going west into the coulee. He slowed his pace so as not to leave a dust trail on the horizon to give Slade any type of warning. O'Malley came to a well traveled trail and turned south riding up the knoll to the ridge to meet Slade. The show down was going to come at last. O'Malley's heart was pounding, his mouth was dry and he could feel the tension in his body. O'Malley dismounted near the rim of the knoll, and looked to the south where Slade would ride up. Slade topped the next ridge to the south. He stopped once again and checked his backtrail for some time and then came riding down the trail toward O'Malley. O'Malley had about ten minutes to decide how he would handle Slade when he got there. O'Malley moved Star back behind some brush, took his rifle and moved to within fifty feet of the trail where he had rocks for cover and brush for concealment.

O'Malley was no cold-blooded killer. He would give Slade one chance to surrender, but he would kill Slade if he made one wrong move. O'Malley levered a shell into the Winchester and waited. He was breathing heavily and he could hear and feel his heart pounding.

O'Malley could hear the horses coming up the knoll, then Slade's hat, head and body rose above the rim. He stopped and looked back. He was only a hundred feet above O'Malley. Slade turned and rode down the trail toward O'Malley. When Slade was fifty or sixty feet away O'Malley revealed himself.

"Freeze; Slade, or you're a dead man."

O'Malley could see the surprise of Slade's face, then the panic as he stared down the barrel of O'Malley's Winchester.

Slade's face turned from surprise to determination and then rage. He had made up his mind. He was either going to die here, or kill O'Malley, but he would not be hung.

Slade moved to draw his revolver.

O'Malley had expected the move, he really didn't think Slade would give up. He fired; knocking Slade from the saddle. Slade hit the dirt and raised up off the ground still trying to draw his revolver. O'Malley had levered in another shell and fired as Slade drew his revolver. The shot spun Slade around and he fell face down in the dirt and did not move.

O'Malley let a long breath out and moved to check Slade. O'Malley stood a few feet from Slade and watched him for a long minute. He knew Slade was dead.

"I have kept my promise Tom. I killed both the man who shot you, and the man who had you shot. I hope this will help you rest in peace. God bless you." O'Malley said aloud as if Tom were standing beside him.

O'Malley tied Slade's body to his horse and they rode southeast toward Red Lodge.

CHAPTER 10

The sun was beginning to set as O'Malley began the long ride back to Red Lodge. He rode slowly toward the south and east with Slade's body draped over Slade's horse. It was a good twenty to twenty-five mile ride to Red Lodge. It would be midnight or later before he got into town.

O'Malley wondered about Nine Mile and Kate. They should be in Red Lodge by now. He hoped the old coot Nine Mile would let the doctor do something for him. As he rode toward Red Lodge in the gathering dusk he thought about what had happened over the last few days.

He had lost a younger brother to the greed of a man. Three men had died for what? Coal and money. O'Malley stopped Star on a knoll and looked at the country around him. Somehow facing death had made life much more precious to him. The Beartooth Mountains were to his south and a Montana sunset had turned the sky into orange and purples. He could smell the sage and feel the chill of the winds blowing down from snowcapped peaks and the plateau. It was a bountiful country, with timber, grass, water, and unlimited beauty.

The land of the Montana Territory had blood spilled in almost every square mile. First, it was the rivalry between the Indian tribes. The killing of the buffalo and the beaver. Then the white man and the Indians. And last but not least was the killing which had occurred between "civilized" people the white man verses white man. O'Malley felt a pain in his heart knowing that so many peoples lives had been lost fighting for this land. The animals that were slaughtered for the coats and hats of people in the eastern United States and foreign countries. How many scars had been placed on this beautiful land by men who had little or no appreciation for the beauty and grander. They saw this land as something to be raped and pillaged. He was beginning to understand the reverence the Indian had for the land and all God's creatures. O'Malley knew the coal and the railroad would add new scars to this land. He was aware that nothing in life remained the same, but the rate or change was what hurt the most. If a change took a man's lifetime to be brought about; then, whatever was to change did not seem so drastic and gave people time to accept what had come to pass. O'Malley had seen what a gold boom-town was like and how over night hundreds and even thousands of men and a few women would cover a few square miles like locust. When there was no more gold to be found, they moved on leaving behind scars on the land and the streams. Left behind would be wooden buildings, which over many years would rot and fall in and metal to rust over centuries. The land would be scarred with stream banks dug out and tailings piles left by the gold seekers. The stream and the land would never really recover from that misuse even after many many years to come.

A strong gust of bitterly cold wind brought O'Malley back to the present time. He pulled the brim of his hat down, reached into his saddle bag and pulled out the heavy coat that Kate had

given him. He pulled the coat on and buttoned it up. He turned up the collar and he felt a bulge in the pocket. He reached in and found a pair of leather gloves. He put them on and urged Star in the direction of Red Lodge. It was going to be a cold night and he was grateful for the coat that Kate had given him.

O'Malley's thoughts turned to Kate as he rode on. What future if any could there be for him and Kate? He knew she was a very special woman and that he knew he cared for her. Could he call it love? No; not yet. It might be in time. O'Malley knew he would have to go back to his ranch in Smith Valley. He had put many years of hard work into building the ranch up and poured the last few years of his life into the land. He could ask Kate to go with him. He could not do that without asking her to marry him. She was not the type of woman to go without being married. O'Malley knew he was not in love with Kate and he was not sure he was ready for another marriage. Kate had made it clear in the talk on the plateau that things were not totally serious, yet. He knew in his own mind that it was also possible that he would leave Red Lodge without Kate. It caused a small pain in his mind and heart to realize that he would have to leave Kate behind. Besides, what made him think she would marry him or leave Red Lodge with him. He accepted the realization, his life would go on without Kate, and she would probably be happier without him.

It was well after midnight when he reined up in front of the Sheriff's office. O'Malley stepped down and tied up Star and the other horse with his grizzly cargo. He knocked loudly on the office door. He saw a lamp being lit inside and the dim glow as it moved across the room to the door. The sheriff opened the door and peered outside into the darkness.

"What do you want at this time of night?" the sheriff asked with a distinctively irritated voice.

Then he recognized O'Malley in the light of the lamp. "You're back! Where's Slade?"

"Slade's already in hell!"

"How did he die?"

"In a fair gunfight. Shot in the front. I gave him a chance to surrender, he chose to die."

The sheriff walked to Slade's body and lifted his head and looked at his face for a long time.

"Never did like him anyway. Had shifty eyes. I'll get the undertaker. Come by the office later in the morning and I will complete a record I need." The sheriff said matter of factually and walked back inside the office leaving O'Malley standing in the street.

O'Malley mounted Star and before he turned to ride away he looked one last time at Slade's body draped over his horse. O'Malley felt that he had the justice and vengeance which he had sworn to his brother, but he felt little else. It did not change the fact that Tom was dead. Nothing would ever change that. Emptiness which comes from losing a living family member would forever more be a part of his life. He then turned away with new resolve and rode to Nine Mile Bill's Cabin.

O'Malley was beginning to unsaddle Star in the corral, when Nine Mile came out of the cabin with Buck at his side.

"Well?" Asked Nine Mile anxious for an answer.

"Slade is being tormented in Hell." O'Malley answered.

"I told Kate you would not let that low down pole cat git away." Nine Mile said, as proud as if he had shot Slade himself.

"How is Kate?" O'Malley asked.

"She is a mite sore but fit as a fiddle. She told me when you got back to let her know right away. I guess this is a little late to go a callin'." Offered Nine Mile.

"First thing in the morning will do." O'Malley said.

"Did you see the doctor for that bullet wound?" O'Malley asked.

"That consarned woman didn't give me no choice." grumbled Nine Mile. "She told me, 'I couldn't come into her cafe no more if I didn't let the doctor at least look at me.'"

O'Malley finished up by giving Star a ration of oats and they walked to the cabin together. Nine Mile was asking a hundred questions all the time. He wanted to know every detail of what had happened.

Nine Mile started a fire in the wood stove and fixed a pot of coffee. "Want somethin" to eat?" asked Nine Mile.

"Nope, just some coffee. I'm going to turn in and get some sleep. It has been a rough few days." O'Malley said honestly.

"Well things ain't the same here in town." Nine Mile said. "There is a whole heap of new folks coming in on the stage and by horseback from all over the country. The word has got around that the railroad is coming to town. There is already an outfit cutting timber for cross ties and shoring for the coal mines that they expect to start this coming Summer." There is a fella here from some mining company and he has paid big money for land to build houses on for the miners they expect to come to Red Lodge." Nine Mile rambled on. "I guess the town has almost doubled in the number of people in just a few days. It reminds me of a gold strike."

Nine Mile went on with the news, "There's a crew of lumbermen from Billings up in the hills with a string of mules going up the West Fork and started a logging camp they call Basin."

“The coal company is puttin’ up new buildings and a string of freight wagons are coming into Red Lodge every day. It’s the end of the little town I have lived in and learned to love.” Nine Mile lamented. “I will be packing up am moving on. Ain’t gonna stay and watch the changes about to happen. I sure as thunder ain’t staying around hundreds of people.”

“Where will you go and what will you do Nine Mile?” O’Malley asked his friend.

“Well, I might head up north near Hell’s Gate. I hear there is still gold in the Bitterroot range that ain’t been found and then maybe on north to the Canadian border. Don’t know for sure, but Buck and I will be moving on.” Nine Mile said with certainty.

“I can understand how you feel about being crowded in by people. Never cared for big towns.” O’Malley said.

“What about you Tom? You and Kate got any plans? Nine Mile asked.

“Well for sure, I will be going back to my ranch in Smith valley. As for Kate, I really don’t know what will happen there. I will talk to her tomorrow morning.” O’Malley said

The sun wasn’t up yet when in the cabin, Nine Mile and O’Malley were building a fire in the cook stove. They had decided to have coffee and eat breakfast at the Silver Grill. O’Malley took time to take Star an apple and another ration of oats. Star snorted his approval.

Nine Mile and O’Malley would walk to the cafe. Nine Mile turned as they walked way from the cabin and spoke to Buck the wolf-dog. “Stay Buck!” The wolf-dog looked disappointed, but followed his master’s command by laying down in front of the cabin door to await his return.

The air was cool and crisp with the hint of the Fall that would soon come to the high country. The elk would so be in the rut and the bugle of the bulls would be echoing through the Beartooth canyons and on the Plateaus.

Kate was sitting at a table drinking coffee. She had a girl named Emma working and waiting on the tables. Another girl named Sue was working in the kitchen doing the cooking the place was packed and there was standing room only. The table which Kate was setting had two extra chairs that were empty. When she saw O’Malley she smiled and stood up and motioned for them to come over and sit down. She had been saving the table and two chairs for them. “How is your leg?” O’Malley asked.

“My leg is doing well. It is noticeably sore but, I just have to stay off of it a few days. I am glad you kept your promise and came back John O’Malley”. Kate said warmly.

“I told you I would be back.” O’Malley said.

"I know what you said, but in this wild country one never knows for sure; no matter how good your intentions are." Kate went on. "I heard from the sheriff that you brought Slade in across a saddle late last night."

"Slade gave me no choice but to shoot him. I would have just as soon seen him stretch a rope." O'Malley said solemnly.

"How did you catch up with him and not get dry-gulched?" Kate asked.

O'Malley gave her the story and how he had got the drop on Slade.

When O'Malley had finished telling Kate about his adventure Nine Mile asked. "John, will you be moving on anytime soon?"

"Well, I will be around for a few days more. I really don't have to be back at my ranch at any set time. You have a reason for asking?" O'Malley questioned.

"I will be selling my cabin. Four miners from Wyoming Territory have offered me cash money, and that would give me a real good grub-stake for my trip to the Bitterroot Range. I will be pulling up stakes in the next day or two so I won't be able to offer you a place to stay as I won't own the place anymore." Nine Mile said, almost apologetically.

"Nine Mile, you have been a friend and a great host. You are one of the few men I would be glad to "ride the river" with anytime. I certainly understand that selling your cabin will put you in the chips and give you money to grub-stake you for this coming winter of prospecting. Star and I will make out just fine." O'Malley smiled, and said warmly.

"I knew you would understand. If you will excuse me I have to go find those miners who want to buy the cabin. I can tell them I will sell the cabin and they can move in day after tomorrow. That will give us both time to make other arrangements." Nine Mile said as he stood up to leave. "Kate, I will see you before I leave town. Right now, I have a bunch to do and make arrangement for my trip North."

But, Nine Mile you haven't even had breakfast yet. Sit down and eat." Kate scolded.

"Times a wastin'. I'll eat later when I have a few things done." Nine Mile got up from his chair, turned and left the cafe.

By now the breakfast customers had mostly left the cafe and only a few remained. Kate had her new waitress take O'Malley's order for breakfast.

"What does the future hold for you?" Kate solemnly asked O'Malley.

"I really don't know exactly. I can't stay away from my ranch much longer. Winter is coming on and there is a lot of work that needs to be done before the snow flies. I remember our talk on

the Plateau, and I know I have very strong feelings for you. I can't say it is love. But I can say what I feel for you is the strongest feelings I have had for anyone since my wife died. I know you are not the type of woman to go away with me without being married and I am not sure I am ready for another marriage yet. I honestly don't have the time to spend here in Red Lodge to build the type of relationship we would both need to decide to spend the rest of our lives together. It is not our time and we are going to be in the wrong places to build any future. I want you Kate, but I have the ranch. I have spent the last eight years of my life building a dream. That dream is about to come true. I can't give that up. Not even for you. You are the finest lady I know. You deserve much better than me" O'Malley said with total honesty.

Kate reached across the table and held O'Malley's hand. She looked deeply into his blue eyes. "John, you are the finest man I have ever known. You are honest, hard working, and strong of character. I can't go with you without a marriage being a part of it. I also have very strong feelings for you. I don't know if you would or could call it love; but the feeling is there. I understand about the ranch and your commitment there. I also have obligations. This restaurant for one. I have lived in Red Lodge for many years and made many good friends. I want to see this little place grow and become a town. Unlike Nine Mile I like people and don't mind progress. Even if I knew for certain that I loved you I am not absolutely certain I could leave Red Lodge, as I love this place too. The time we have spent together and the things we have experienced together will always be very special to me. I will never forget them as I will never forget you. I will keep you in a special place in my heart always." There was tears running down Kate's cheeks as she spoke her heart and mind.

O'Malley felt a lump in his throat and he swallowed hard, trying in vain to make it go away. He didn't say another word; he only looked deeply into Kate's eyes. He gave her a warm heart felt smile of understanding and patted her soft hand that held his.

Kate returned the understanding smile warmly and then abruptly she stood up, turned, and left the cafe going to the back kitchen.

O'Malley felt very empty and alone at that very moment in his life. His heart was aching. He knew he had just seen the finest woman he had ever known walk away and that she had reserved a place in his heart and in his never to be forgotten past.

O'Malley didn't wait for his breakfast. He had suddenly lost all appetite. He wanted to be alone. He got up and walked out of the cafe, not looking back. He really didn't think about where he was really going. He just had to move away from Kate for awhile. He walked down the main street of Red Lodge. He heard the sounds of hammers falling and striking new nails and newly cut lumber. There were buildings going up everywhere. Mule teams of freight were coming into town and a newly built warehouse was already unloading newly arrived freight. There were many people on the street and the town looked much like an active bee hive. The message all this gave O'Malley was that change is inevitable and that life goes on. As he walked, slowly and aimlessly down the dirt street, his thoughts returned to Kate. He was right

and she was right. Their lives would never be as one. O'Malley accepted that final analysis. No sense in waiting any longer in dealing with the inevitable. He changed his direction of travel and with new determination headed towards Nine Mile Bill's Cabin.