

**THE  
HOPE  
WE SEEK**

*Rich Shapero*

**THE  
HOPE  
WE SEEK**

*a novel*



Outside  
Reading

SAN MATEO, CALIFORNIA

Outside Reading  
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Also by Rich Shapero

*Too Far*

*Wild Animus*

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## *The Private*

**O**n an island at the edge of the world, a few years shy of the twentieth century, the Private and his partner landed their boat.

Emerging from a thick fog, they struck the coast in a place of sheer cliffs. The current was deadly, but they made it into a small cove without capsizing. Though they were in their mid-twenties, they acted like boys, tense and laughing by turns, moving quickly, hauling their craft into the rocks out of reach of the surf, retrieving provisions and firearms. The Private's wet hair hung in black hooks around his thin face. He wore a coat of maroon felt. Its cuffs were frayed and an arm was tatted where the chevron had been removed; but the cloth still had its color, and as he loaded his packboard the sun flashed on its golden piping.

The two tramped the shoreline and mountains, heading north. It was March and the peaks were still covered with

snow. The Private led the way. It wasn't a map or notes he consulted. He was guided by voices. There were ghosts in the wind, whispers from the snow or the invisible meltwater flowing beneath. It was the same presence that spoke through his dreams. He believed in the voices, and through some harmony of their natures, his partner believed in him.

On the morning of the third day, the two men crossed an icy ridge and came upon a narrow valley. The slopes of the valley were white and the small river that wound through it was frozen. In places rock was visible—a black metamorphic. Where the river met the coast, it had broken through the cliffs, forming a natural harbor. The Private scanned the harbor.

As he descended into the valley, a breeze reached him. He could taste salt from the sea, and in the wind's murmur he heard the echo of a promise. The spruce on either side were wind-sheared, with crowns like dark clouds, and the snow beneath his boots was littered with needles, as if some testament had been recorded there in a language unknown to man. He mumbled about what the text meant, and his partner mumbled back. Their heavy packs rattled and creaked as they moved.

The head of the valley came into view. Between the sloping confines of the river, a trapezoidal wall appeared, black and thinly forested, grooved vertically, as if it had been clawed by an angry hand.

The Private straddled a fallen tree, pushing aside the upstart saplings rooted on its trunk. His partner followed. They approached the river's bank. In places the ice had melted, and

through the soggy mulch, yellow spikes of swamp cabbage rose, each at the center of a straw-colored star. The Private paused beside the frozen flow and raised his arm, holding his rifle barrel-up. As he stepped forward, he brought the rifle down, cracking its stock onto the river ice. The surface was solid and held his weight. But as the rifle descended, the tip of a branch cocked the hammer, and when the butt struck, a shot rang out.

The men jumped. A jay flew out of a pool and went rasping through the birch. The Private listened to the echoes, his eyes on the willow branch, watching its crystal feathers tremble. The two men crossed the river.

They were mounting the far bank when they caught sight of a bear on the trapezoidal wall, shifting against the snow that covered its crest. The shot had awakened him. He was stumbling out of his den.

The bear's back was icy. It flashed in the sun like the carapace of a beetle—an amulet worked in gold for a pharaoh's tomb. When the Private saw the bear, he knew.

The bear crossed the ridge where it was steepest, cutting through the winter pack.

A groan filled the valley.

As the two men watched, the slopes below the bear's trackline came away in a thick mass—snow, soil and trees, all churning together—and the mountain's top was dragged along. The roar mounted and the valley rumbled as the slide descended. The bear and the ridge vanished in a cloud of rock and ice dust.

They shrugged off their packs, eyes fixed on the sight.

The cloud shredded around the crest. Amid the drifting veils, a giant seam of quartz appeared—a thick white cord, stretching diagonally. Rays played over it, searching as the veils shifted. The Private saw the quartz come alive. It was turning and twisting, and the bright beams piercing its crystal found winking stars and golden flames. A translucent cord, connecting the poor to something of worth; something unborn to something timeless; someone condemned to someone divine.

The Private's partner saw the glittering cord. The Private saw the presence that had summoned him. As he watched, she froze back into the rock.

The Private looked at his partner. Then without a word, they were racing toward the bank, recrossing the river, beating through the straw and the whipping scrub, making toward the mountain and its naked quartz. The Private was in front. A prospector's pick bobbed on his thigh, its haft through his belt. His strides jarred the earth, turning seep gurgles to bird-song and gravel to grasshoppers. Thrushes called, heralding his arrival. The whistling of wrens filtered down from the trees.




It was late that night and the two men were camped by the river. Smoke coiled up from a dying fire. They were in their tent, and a lone candle lit the canvas from within. At the head of the valley, the giant white cord glimmered beneath a full

moon, while on the slopes far below, the burden it had shed continued to settle. A web of splintered trunks heaved and a boulder rolled aside. From beneath the debris, the bear's arms appeared, shoving and clawing, prying the last wooden bars of his prison apart.

He crawled out of the hole and lay licking his wounds. Then he drew a few breaths and tried his legs. He wobbled and growled, then he crossed the rubble, shaking his head and chomping his jaws. His confinement had ended, but his distemper remained. He lumbered toward the river, icy crusts stuck to his back, swiping alders aside, snorting steam into the air, as if to rid his nostrils of a noxious odor.

The bear didn't see the tent. His attention was on the bluff at the mouth of the valley. Then the prospectors' light flickered. The bear shook with surprise, stopping in his tracks. A cool breeze carried the smoke and the man scent into his nostrils. He fixed on the tent. Then he was loping toward it, crashing through birch and willow, ripping up armfuls as he went.



**A** crescent moon had arced through blue sky, burying its tip in the cliffs guarding the coast. There was snow on the ridge tops, and where sun heated the slopes, steam was rising from them. The broad channel and its islands were fair, except for its southern end, where gray clouds lay like twisted blankets. A small steamer emerged from the clouds, towing a black barge behind. A knotted thread coiled from its stack.

The steamer rode the swells uncertainly, tipping and groaning. Its weathered prow read *Bocadillos*. Beneath a canvas awning extending aft of the galley, a tall man stood with an empty bowl in his hands. A shorter man stood before him, and the two were surrounded by other passengers who were spooning dinner into their mouths.

“It’s a pleasure,” the tall man said, shifting from one face to another. “I apologize for taking my meals below. I’m eager



to meet each of you.” His tongue wet large lips framed by long mustaches and a pointed goatee. He was six-four, with a buckskin coat and shoulder-length hair.

“Birch oil?” The short man sniffed. He had a perfunctory smile and a widow’s peak. In his left hand he held a note tablet at chest level, and in his right a pencil was poised.

Zachary Knox shook his head. “Bay rum. You are—”

“Inky Peterson. I have a few questions.”

“A journalist,” Knox said.

“The report on Breakaway was mine,” Inky nodded.

“Thanks for that,” Knox said. “What was the gentleman’s—”

“Percy Schorr,” Inky replied.

“With a wedge of gold ‘like a melon slice,’” Knox smiled.

“A happy simile,” Inky said. “It was cool to the touch and damp. His grubbing days are over. Why are you—”

Zack raised his fist toward Inky’s chin. “I can see my slice here.” He opened his fingers and stared at his palm. “No one will poof that, will they boys?”

“No sir,” a man answered.

A bearded fellow drew his lips back. “I’m gonna plate my teeth with it.”

“Your words fired me,” Knox put his hand on the reporter’s shoulder. “I bought my ticket and packed my trunks that afternoon.” He scanned the gathering. “Board the *Bocadillos*, raise the dead, full speed for the—”

Just then, the ship wallowed. The men reached for something to hold on to. A black billow retched from the stack,

circling over them while a clucking and bleating sounded below deck. Knox clung to a crate until the steamer crossed the trough.

“What about the *Bull’s-Eye West*?” Inky straightened himself.

Knox set his bowl on the crate. Horses stamped and nickered beneath them.

“The show continues,” Knox said.

“Without its headliner?”

“Mister Knox—” A teenager with long blond hair shouldered forward. “We’d like to see—”

Zack raised his hands in protest.

“Why did you leave?” Inky pressed him.

“Personal reasons.”

“Was the show losing its draw?”

“What’s for dinner?” Zack turned to a man at his elbow.

“Rice and beans,” the man replied.

“Were you doing private sittings?” Inky asked.

Amid the onlookers, Knox noticed a young woman dressed in black. She had sharp features and dark hair bound against her nape. He bowed to her.

“Does your skill allow you to—” Inky persisted.

Knox shook his head, his eyes on the young woman.

“—summon the departed?”

The showman was still shaking his head. “Call me Zack.” He extended his hand to the young woman. His eyes pleaded for help.

“There were problems with the law,” Inky guessed.

The young woman took Zack's hand.

"Excuse me," Zack tipped his head to the reporter. And then to the crowd, "She's beautiful, isn't she?" He stepped through the gathering, drawing the young woman beside him, as if to permit a less public dialogue.

As they passed, a man with gray hair and a walking stick grumbled, "Farewell to culture."

His companion replied, "If you had his pedigree, you wouldn't be here."

Zack halted beside a hill of grain sacks. "Thank you," he said.

"You're a spectacle," the woman observed.

"It's my own doing. I'm sorry, miss—"

"Sephy."

She wasn't self-conscious. She eyed him with curiosity, like an onlooker at a carnival sideshow.

"An austere woman," Zack nodded, "but a kind one. I'm surprised to find you here. You're drawn by gold?"

"In a way."

Zack glanced back. Inky was weaving through the passengers and provisions, headed toward them.

"Are you cared for?" Zack asked. "You're not sleeping on deck?"

She stared at him.

"If you don't have a stateroom," Zack grasped her elbow and urged her through the galley, "you must take one of mine."

"I appreciate your concern, but—"

"I'm alone down there. It's like a prison sentence."

Sephy laughed. "You're bold."

"Please," he said, directing her attention to Inky. "The trap is closing."

"If you answer his questions—"

"There's no end to them," Zack said. He led her alongside a pile of crates. The *Bocadillos* was entering a strait, hugging the shore. A wall of spruce spires loomed a thousand feet skyward. Through a gash in the growth, a cataract hurtled from a black ledge and crashed into the sea.

Sephy caught sight of the companionway to the lower deck. "No," she said. As she halted, the chop from the cataract reached the steamer. The deck canted and she stumbled. Zack grabbed her, holding her close while he rode the heave.

"Let go," she said as the *Bocadillos* settled.

But he didn't let go. He held her and stared into her eyes with the gravity and acuity that had earned him his billing.

"The Bull's-Eye Telepath," Sephy said. "Can you hear my thoughts?"

"Test me below." He nodded at the companion ladder.

"Shall I be an actor in your spectacle?" She glanced over his shoulder. A dozen passengers were staring at them.

"You're mistrustful by nature."

"That's not true."

"I know it's not. Please." He gestured at the ladder.

She stared at him for a long moment, then she set her hand on the rail and started down.

Zack turned and bowed to the observers. Inky stood amidships, gazing one way and another. Off the port gunwale, the cliff was sliding past like wet clay beneath a deft hand.

As they descended the ladder, the sea grew calm. There was nothing but the sound of their steps in the narrow space. When they reached the lower deck, Sephy faced him.

“You’re used to being favored by women.”

He laughed. “I like—”

“Lots of them,” Sephy said. Her expression was without bitterness or malice. “I know what a man is.”

A sober silence stretched between them.

“You’re in trouble,” Zack said.

His words disarmed her. He didn’t wait for her to respond.

“Your grief reaches me,” he said. “I feel your desperation.”

“This is your talent?” She tried to smile, but her lower lip quivered.

“Tell me,” Zack said.

“It’s no concern of yours.”

“Tell me.”

She weighed him—skepticism on one side, and the wish to believe on the other. He read her state and let her waver. Then his gaze turned prescient. “Our meeting is no accident,” he said, and that tipped the scales.

“I’ve lost someone,” she told him.

Zack nodded at her black garb. “Husband?”

“My brother.” Sephy regarded him.

Measuring his amity, Zack thought. And his capacity for manipulation.

Her fingers unfastened two buttons below her neck. She turned aside and drew out a small photograph. “Raymond,” Sephy said, handing it to him.

The yellowing image was of a young man with dark hair and features like hers. He had the same mournful lips and high brow, her sharp nose and tapered chin.

“An unusual resemblance.” Zack lowered the photo. “Except for the eyes.”

“Mine are different?”

Zack nodded. “I’ve never seen—”

“What?”

“Such sadness.”

She brushed a loose curl behind her ear.

“An old photo.” He handed it back to her.

“It happened two years ago, at Breakaway,” she explained. “I heard the story from his partner. He escaped with his life.”

“How—”

Sephy shook her head. “It was horrible.” She turned her shoulder and slipped the photo back inside her dress.

“Two years is a long time to mourn.”

She seemed not to have heard him. “You have some understanding of these things?” she said, half to herself.

Her words puzzled him, but he nodded.

“Raymond isn’t dead. I feel his mood, his energy—in a thoughtless moment or when I’m half asleep. He’s like a vapor drifting beside me. There’s no comfort in it,” she said. “He leaves me chilled and trembling—”

Her allure opened before Zack like a dark chasm. There

were a thousand ways to ape the spiritual, but this wasn't a fake.

He touched her chin with his fingertip and raised her head. "My 'powers,'" he said, "were just an act."

The ship lurched, pitching them against each other. This time it was she who embraced him. "Your instinct was right, Mister Knox. I'm frightened."

"Of what?" He peered into the dark eyes.

"Of reaching Breakaway. Of what I might find. He's there, with the gold and the ice."

Her dread, with all its passion and expectancy, drew him like a magnet. He felt acted upon, like a spectator in one of his shows ushered down onto the sands of the arena.

"What is Breakaway to you, Mister Knox?" She put her fingertips on his chest.

"In the world I was born into," Zack said, "every word was a cheat. Every thought and feeling was false. I played the game. Everything I touched, I cheapened."

He expected his words would surprise her, but they did not.

"And gold?" she said.

"Gold is a new life—a real one, a purer one."

"For Raymond," she said, "gold was madness."

She spoke the word "madness" in a measured tone, without prejudice.

"He gave up everything, embraced the worst perils to pursue it—the gold he knew he would find. It became his faith, his reason for living," she said. "I had to choose . . . to fight his madness or join him in it."

"And—"

"I fought," Sephy said with remorse. "It was meant that I should share his madness and his fate."

"His fate?"

Sephy nodded. "I wear black for both of us." Her nose wrinkled. "It smells—"

"Before Breakaway, fish slept down here," Zack said.

He motioned and they started along the corridor.

"How did this promise of a new life reach you?" Sephy asked.

"Through a bellhop. We'd played Ambrose Park the night before. He brought me breakfast and a paper. He was shivering with excitement." Zack stopped before a small door. "I left the show that day."

He opened the door. "We'll keep it ajar." Zack tapped the latch.

But she had already crossed the threshold.

Sephy stepped to the center of the room and looked around. Half a Moroccan rug covered the floor, and the remainder was rolled behind a lowboy. A large mirror in a gilt frame angled out from the ceiling. To the right, a headboard tiled with Moorish stars rose over the bed, while an Arabian coverlet lay bunched where the sleeper had kicked it. To the left, three battered trunks rested among bulging sacks, and tools leaned against the wall. Picks, shovels, axes. The lid of one of the trunks was open. A holster with a silver revolver lay atop another.

"The room next door is packed to the ceiling," Zack said.

Sephy stared at the weapon. “You don’t shoot in earnest?”

“Not often. Elk, moose—”

“Never a man.”

“I’m not brainsick,” Zack said.

She faced him. “An unusual way to entertain people. How did you—”

“Accident and opportunity.” He drew the revolver from its holster. “I learned marksmanship when I was young. I won a shoot at a fair in Wyoming. The local paper wrote me up, and I got an offer to join the exhibition circuit.” He wet his thumb and touched the bead. “My second year, I toured with Doc Feldman—‘Shakti the Knowing.’ I started wearing a blindfold and reading minds to hit my targets.” He faced the mirror. “We filled the stands.” Zack raised his arm and sighted along the barrel, aiming at the reflection of his right pupil.

“Please—”

Zack lowered the gun and set it on the trunk. “It was something—” He gestured, directing her attention around the stadium. “Hearing a thousand people chanting ‘Knox,’ seeing the name big as a three-story hotel.”

“I would expect more modesty, as well-provided as you are.”

“The providing is over,” he said.

Sephy assumed he was joking. “The Knox tree is large and fruitful.”

“I’m the wayward limb. I cut myself off before boarding this tub.”

She frowned. “I can’t tell when you’re acting.”

“I’ve worn the mask so long, it has a life of its own.” Zack spoke with contrition. “All I have is right here. I sent the telegram on the way to the dock.”

“Why?”

“I took a hard fall in Ambrose Park.”

“An accident?”

Zack shook his head. “A family matter. I invited my father to the show. It led to a—”

Sephy watched him struggle for words.

“Scandal,” he said with mock hauteur.

That puzzled her.

Zack was about to give a more blunt answer when the cabin bucked, dashing them both to the floor.

He gripped a leg of the bed. The room tilted and the door slammed. He got one knee beneath him, but before he could rise, the floor plunged, rolling him onto his back. Sephy was beside him, trying to right herself, confusion giving way to fear. The ship was groaning from its depths. The cabin walls thrummed.

Zack hooked his arm around the lowboy and heaved himself up, springing for the door. He wrenched it open and peered around the jam. The corridor was twisting like an eel’s gut viewed from inside. The ship swooned and he was hurled back into the cabin. His arm caught the lantern chain, and as the room leaned onto its side, Zack swung half around, seeing Sephy huddled against the hull wall, white and staring.

The doorframe cracked. The bed grunted across the planks, the bulkhead beside it gabbling inward. There was a

throaty noise and Zack looked down to see a gush of green water pouring over his boots. He grabbed Sephy and pulled her up. The joists above jumped and sagged. The large mirror fell, shattering on a packing trunk.

“It’s over,” Sephy said, watching the rift in the hull widen. The freezing sea invaded the small space, slapping and frothing over Zack’s belongings.

He stepped out of his boots, gaze shifting, lighting on lowboy and trunk, coursing over the sacks with the concentration of a magician preparing for a dangerous trick. He tore off his coat and shirt, opened one of the sacks and pulled out a coiled rope.

“Glad you’re down here?” he said.

Sephy watched him knot the rope.

The rift expanded, the flood nearly toppling them.

“Zack—”

He stripped his pants off, grabbed his holster belt, fastened it around his waist and hitched the rope to it. Nearly naked now, he placed his hands on the throat of her dress and ripped it from neckline to waist. The photo of Raymond fluttered free. “You know what a man is—” Zack smiled and tore open her chemise, then he lifted her out of the rags and circled her drawers with the rope’s loose end, making a harness around her waist and thighs.

Sephy clung to him, shivering, watching his humor fade as the waters raged in upon them. A thick curl kicked her legs out from under her. Zack held her with one arm. She had wanted to see behind the mask, and now she saw: what

remained of his panache was the rictus of a condemned man—teeth bared, powerless, scowling at a verdict from which there was no appeal.

Zack faced the gaping hole. “Take a breath.”



On the main deck, the door to the fo’c’sle flew open. One of the mates bolted along the gangway and as the frightened passengers turned, he herded them aft.

“We’re on a reef. To the stern—now!”

In the pilothouse, the bosun fought the wheel while the Captain glassed the seas. He cursed, collapsed his brass scope and slid it into his pocket as he faced the windscreen. A citadel of dark pinnacles rose through the fog. The ship was heeling toward it, carried by the fierce current that had caught them. “Full steam,” he bellowed into the speaking tube. The wheel moved ten degrees, gears gnashing, rudder lines crying out.

A deckhand appeared. “Torn amidships,” he reported.

The *Bocadillos* stumbled, listing to port. Above the bang and clatter of shifting cargo, they heard planks cracking. “Get the engine gang on top,” the Captain ordered. The port gunwale was underwater and the hull was starting to buckle. Screams rose from below—timbers and horses. The Captain glanced over his shoulder. Waves were breaking across the 15-foot beam that connected the steamer to its tow load. “All travelers on the barge,” he shouted.

Two of the mates started pushing passengers toward the foot-wide beam. The first of them ventured out, hugging and shinnying across. A gaunt man in a gray overcoat helped them over the gunwale at the far end, and a woman with short hair threw blankets around them.

“Save yourselves,” the Captain screamed into the speaking tube. The mouthpiece came away in his hand. He cursed and stepped out of the pilothouse. Suddenly the tow beam tore loose of the *Bocadillos* and the ship rolled onto its side, pitching the Captain over the guard rail, leaving him hanging above the flood by one arm. The emerald water circled below him, cut with sharp waves, raveling with froth. He shook his boots off. “Abandon ship,” he mumbled and let himself drop.



When the word “breath” left Zack’s lips, the torrent roared in his face. The hull opened like double doors, and he had barely a moment to fill his lungs with air before the flood struck him. He was torn from Sephy’s side, splayed against the far wall and hurled to the ceiling. Where there had been air, there was only water. He turned in a vortex, peering through green murk, the drowned cabin like a drugged remembrance of his prospecting ambitions. Pots and utensils, shovels and axes, a melee of boots and oilskins dancing with the cham-ois and flannels sucked from his trunk. His revolver was in the churn along with fragments of mirror and the bedding he’d slept in. His feet were already numb. The vortex slowed,

he sank for a moment, feeling the water loosen around him. Then it hooked him, carrying him toward the gaping hole and through it.

He was free of the steamer now, but without any sense of the sea’s expanse. It was like standing in a railyard as trains sped past, dozens of them, all headed in different directions. The sea wasn’t whole. It was a wattle of disparate wills, each with the power of a god, enormous and supremely violent.

The freezing currents swerved around him, looping, crossing and interweaving. They weren’t hostile to him—they didn’t perceive him. He was nothing to them. Zack found his nerve, his senses reached out, along with his arms. He pulled and the currents gave around his head. They were brutal, insensible, but he wasn’t powerless. He was forcing his way through them.

Where was he going? He couldn’t tell which way was up. His legs were numb below the knees. He caught sight of them, battered and flexing strangely, lit by a glimmer in the distance. He could see the rope knotted at his waist, kinking and shifting with something unseen attached. He turned away from the rope, faced the glimmer and reached with both arms. The light was faint, the currents unremitting, but he found a seam in the wattle and forced himself through. Again he reached, again and again. The pool of light seemed to expand.

Then it winked out.

Zack’s breath shrank, his chest shuddered with cold. *I’m sinking*, he thought. Or he’d been fighting his way into the depths, even as he imagined he was nearing the surface.

Darkness and confusion swallowed him, and as if in response, the currents accelerated. His arms were weak, his breath nearly exhausted—there was no time left. He felt for the rope at his waist and when he pulled, it gave freely.

*I'm lost*, he thought. But he held on. Through some fault in his reason, some abandon of heart, hope found an access.

As the currents careened around him, one especially large and powerful lifted among them, tearing the weave. Zack sensed the change dimly. Was his struggle an annoyance? Would he be dragged forthwith to the bottom of the sea? The current would be fearsome, like the others. But it slid beneath Zack and bent its back, and the waters parted around him. The current rose like a leviathan, lifting him on its freezing hump. The glimmer reappeared, and then a vivid disk of light.

The green was shot with bubbles, grew clear, glassy—

Zack's head broke the surface. He drew a stuttering breath, and the sounds of wind and waves reached his ears. His pulse was quaking, his limbs were numb.

"There," a voice exclaimed.

Zack was within a few yards of the barge. Inky's face was peering over the gunwale at him.

"Hold my legs," Inky directed someone behind him. He pushed himself toward Zack and reached out his arm.

Zack smiled and sank. The rope gathered easily. Was she alive, still conscious? Or just dead weight lifted by the flow? Sephy's naked body came into view. She looked like she was lounging on a divan, head back, hair streaming. He drew her close, grasped her around the waist and heaved her up.

They surfaced together. Inky lunged and grasped Sephy's wrist. The gaunt man in the gray overcoat got his hands on her shoulder. Then a half-dozen others helped raise her from the water and pull her onto the barge. Zack heard someone say, "Untie it, she can't breathe." He felt the rope tugging at his middle. They were hauling him in.

Inky caught hold of his holster belt. Others lifted him, dragging him across the gunwale. He lay facedown, wheezing and shaking while they covered him with blankets. All at once, his desperation burst. He closed his eyes, feeling a profound calm flowing through him. "You've been spared," a woman said. Then he heard Sephy's voice. "I'd given up," she gasped.

Zack rolled onto his hip. Inky was squatting beside him. He put his hand on Inky's knee and tried to raise himself. Inky closed the blankets around him, embracing him.

"Front page," the reporter said with emotion.

Zack coughed from deep in his lungs. Sephy was a few feet away, beneath a gray coat, hugging the short-haired woman breast to breast. The Captain was vomiting over the gunwale. There were fewer than two dozen others spread out on a tarp covering the lumpy contents of the barge. They were bundled and crouching, backs and shoulders to the wind.

"This all?" Zack asked.

Inky drew his gaze out over the chop. There was no trace of anything alive or afloat. The reef that claimed the steamer had vanished in the fog, and the barge was drifting. Zack shuddered.



“Get down,” Inky said. He rose, dragged Zack against the lee of the gunwale and spread more wool over him. Across the barge, Zack saw the Captain turn and mop his face with a dripping sleeve. Three sheep were curled nearby.

The Captain straightened himself and turned to the survivors. Then he cleared his throat to address them. The gaunt man swung around, put a gloved hand on the Captain’s chest and pushed him back down.

“You done enough,” the gaunt man said. He glanced from face to face, wind cracking his wet overcoat.

“Who are you?” Inky asked.

“Snell,” the gaunt man said. “Need to open these crates.” He had long narrow teeth. Below his nervous eyes, his nose made a switchback halfway to the air holes. “See what we can use.”

Snell pulled a knife from a sheath on his hip and crossed the lumpy surface. He pried at the lid of a wooden box and the lid squealed back. “Can’t eat these.” He reached a gloved hand inside and removed a pair of chisel-end drill bits.

A dozen men watched.

“Ya gonna help me?” Snell said critically. “You—” He pointed at a pair nearby—a brown-skinned man with spectacles and the teenager with blond hair.

The two stood.

“Take these.” Snell set the drills down on a crate.

The teenager grabbed one of them and dropped it with a curse. The brown-skinned man used a corner of his blanket to

grasp the other, approached one of the sealed crates, wedged the end of the bit under the lid and started to pry.

Zack rose onto one knee.

“Not you,” Snell said.

Inky stepped forward.

“Come on, the rest of you,” Snell motioned. “Food and matches, that’s what we’re needing. Not those. See the letters *BMC*? That’s machinery, mine supplies. Try this one here. And them over there.”

Zack watched the men set to work on the crates as the barge drifted into a thick mist. The cliffs disappeared, and most of the sea. Where were they headed? Could the barge be landed? The men called out their findings over the gulping of the waves.

“Tins of something,” one said.

“Open ’em up,” Snell directed him. “Use one of them nails.”

“Smokes for the gents.” A popeyed man held a cigar to his chattering teeth. He rummaged through the contents of his box. “Don’t see any matches.”

Nails shrieked as Inky lifted the lid off an oblong container. “Ladies’ stuff.”

The teenager shook a small box. “Sounds like carrots.”

The gray-haired man, Lucky, was on his knees, prying open the door of a large crate. “What’s this?” he wondered. Through the opened door, Zack could see giant gears nested inside a steel cowling.

“A crusher,” Snell said with irritation, gesturing at the *BMC* stenciled on the crate’s side. He swung around. “What else?”

The teenager shook a fist full of candles. “And matches,” he said, raising a small box in his other hand.

Snell stepped over to him. “We won’t freeze,” he nodded. “What’s your name?”

“Winiarski, sir.” The teenager beamed.

“We had ten tons of food onboard,” the Captain said, letting the lid fall back on his crate.

Just then one of the sheep bleated. Zack watched it roll onto its chest in the center of the tarp, eyes hooded against the drizzle. Its jaw shifted idly as attention turned toward it.

“I don’t fancy her raw,” the popeyed man said.

Snell pulled back a corner of the tarp, revealing the contents of the barge: coal.

“Who wants the honors?” Snell asked. When no one responded, he grabbed the top of the sheep’s head with his left hand and put the edge of his blade to its throat.

Zack closed his eyes.



The wind spoke through his dream, like someone whispering in a foreign tongue. Or was he murmuring to himself? He stood before a framed mirror, arguing his choice of costume. Except for the broad-brimmed white hat, he had made himself red—a scarlet bolero, a blood string tie and pants of burgundy

buckskin. Violent. Fearless. His right hand skimmed his holster and he twirled the revolver out, once forward, twice backward, up in the air, then skittering beside his thigh, butt slapping into his palm as he drew it toward his chest, silver barrel raised. The mirror was webbed with cracks, anticipating the lines along which it would shatter on the *Bocadillos*.

Then magically he was in the prep tent, hurrying through the horse flop and straw, trying to calm himself for the entrance. Two women followed, both elegantly dressed with complex coiffures. One was silent, the other fawned as she jabbered. Zack came to a halt, kissed her hand and urged her to leave. She pulled a feather from her fan, stuck it in his hatband and embraced him. Then she fell into tears. Zack spoke in low tones, comforting her, continuing forward. The silent woman caught up with him as he strode toward his mount. “Row five,” Zack directed her. “Two o’clock from the center.”

“Two o’clock,” she nodded. “Everyone’s in their usual positions.” She hurried off. The tearful woman was still standing where he’d left her. When Zack glared, she gathered her skirts and departed.

Ambrose Park was packed. The crowd was buzzing beneath the big top. Zack could see a section of seating through the entry arch. One of his assistants stood before it, tightening his mount’s cinch. Her cheeks were rouged and her hair was in braids. Above her buckskin skirt, she wore a skintight vest.

A man in a dark suit was standing beside her. As Zack approached, the man hailed him.

“Zachary? Firstborn of Charles Knox?”

Zack nodded.

“May I? It’s a privilege.” The man extended his hand.

Zack shook it.

“Your timing’s perfect,” the man said. “We caucus next week. I’m Brad Chillingood, secretary to Congressman Tippet.”

“Down from the capital for the show?” Zack said.

“Precisely.”

“Are they here?” Zack asked his assistant.

“Orchestra seats,” the man intruded. “It’s some revenge, I must say.” He gave Zack a conspiratorial look. “They’re calling you the ‘Thorn of Rose Hill.’”

“Over here,” Zack shouted, motioning to a boy with a rake.

“No offense meant,” the man said.

“Escort this ass to his stall,” Zack ordered the boy.

The boy led the man away.

Zack grasped the silver pommel, sent his boot toward the stirrup and missed.

“Clear your head,” his assistant said.

Zack drew a breath and nodded.

She gestured for him to raise his leg, and when he did, she guided his foot into the silver cradle. Zack swung up onto his mount.

The girl’s hand lingered on his thigh. “After the show, we’ll unwind.”

“Marksmanship,” Zack said, taking the reins. “He’ll respect that.” His hand was shaking. His mount stamped the

straw and started forward. Zack’s heart drummed in his chest. When they reached the archway, he paused, raised his arm and whistled.

The horse charged into the crowd’s midst. Zack sat straight in the saddle, revolver spinning in his right hand as he circled the ring. The bandleader pricked his baton, the horns blared and the horse halted, rearing and whinnying. Zack gave her the bit, fired at the heavens painted on the big top and lifted his hat with his left hand, waving it at the crowd while he scanned the box seats.

His father wasn’t there. The horse continued to rear, and as Zack surveyed the stands, he realized there were no males present. The spectators were women, every one of them. Could they sense his agitation? Did it puzzle them or mute their enthusiasm? No, the clamoring mounted. Zack’s mare seemed to have lost her senses. She was groaning and snorting, twisting like a mustang as the sound from the bleachers grew increasingly shrill.

The women were cheering, crying out to him, tossing hats and combs, shaking their tresses loose, removing gowns and skirts. They were all new faces—word had reached them and they wanted a taste. But they appeared not as women do before they’ve been seduced, but rather as the conqueror would see them in the lantern light after he withdrew. They were sweaty, their makeup was running, their armpits had tufts. They were on their feet now, waving their arms, hurling their garments at him, shrieking, stirring harsh winds. Clothing

covered the sands. Suddenly the big top lifted like an umbrella in a storm, the shrieks grew deafening and the canvas blew away. The arena was tipping, garments churning like a restive sea.

Zack reined back his mount, too late. An undertow gripped them, the downpour of clothing redoubled, the chop rose to Zack's thighs. The waves were seething, capped by bodices and knickers, spraying salt spit and sea stench while a thousand defiled women screamed from the stands—"Knox, Knox, Knox." All at once the laundry opened beneath him, and Zack and his mount plunged into a dank abyss.

2

A voice was humming.  
Zack turned toward the sound and droplets of water tapped his face. He flinched, peering through slit lids, unsure where he was.

Gray sky. The ragged edge of a mountain eaten by clouds.

He shifted, feeling the weight of blankets and a human form. Beneath the wool, Sephy lay beside him. She was like a hearth, radiating warmth and safety. Her hand had settled on his chest in an attitude of protectiveness, and her temple rested on his shoulder.

"Is your chill gone?" she asked.

Her head lifted. Her face had a freshness he'd not seen on the steamer. Damp had sickled her dark hair over her brow and cheeks. He nodded, raising himself on an elbow. Over her shoulder, Winiarski, the teenager, was pulling a piece of roasted meat from a skewer. Again Zack heard the voice.

When he glanced around, he saw Snell standing at the rear of the barge with his hands on the rudder wheel, humming to himself as he scanned the fog. Through it, segments of coastline were visible: sheer gray cliffs, their tops toothed with conifers.

There were changes in the barge. Crates had been broken down. Forward, two posts had been erected and reinforced with bar stock, and the tarp had been stretched between them, raising a square sail to the wind. Leftover panels were wedged inside the gunwale to form a windbreak. Nearby a fire burned atop a steel plate, serving the dual purpose of roasting the slaughtered sheep and warming the survivors. They were all smudged with soot, huddled beneath blankets on the bare coal.

“You saved me.” Sephy’s voice was hushed, masked by the gusts.

Her eyes had a new depth for him. Where was her trouble now? Had the sea flushed it out of her? He felt joyful, lucky to be there beside her. He recalled his first glimpse of her face—its strict lines, its pallor, the fleeting gaze. Now it seemed like the most beautiful face in the world.

“We were so close to—” Sephy stopped herself.

Zack thought of those the sea had claimed.

“They will be cared for,” she said.

“There’s company, I suppose, even if you’re headed for damnation.”

Sephy didn’t respond.

“I should be thankful,” he said.

“It’s no accident you were spared.”

He smiled at the echo of his show spiel.

A chill gust struck them. Sephy shivered against him. “This is your new world,” she said. “Your new life.”

“It’s a gift that must be opened,” he agreed. And then, “I want to ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“It’s hard for me,” he tried to explain. “On the circuit, I didn’t speak my mind to anyone. I was afraid I’d be exposed.”

Sephy waited.

“What do you dream of—with a man?” he asked.

Silence. Sephy turned away.

*I’ve broken the spell*, he thought.

“When I’m blissful, so is he.” She spoke softly, but with assurance. “When he’s in trouble, I know the way. His head is full of wild thoughts, wondrous ideas—like Raymond. No one understands him as I do. The heart pounding in his chest is mine. Our spirits draw breath from the same soul.”

Her words hollowed him with desire. His arm circled her and he sought her lips. She seemed to find no fault with his advance, but the mention of her brother had given outlet to her grief. A sob rose in her throat, and she turned and put her cheek to his.

Zack breathed her sweetness, feeling her loss—a moment of intense pleasure mingled with pain—feeling her longing for a man wandering the wilderness, searching for the substance

of inestimable worth. It was not just Sephy in his arms—it was the passion of Raymond burning within her, mysterious and alive.

A tall man with a trolleyman's cap approached them. He had a blanket draped around his shoulders. "Hungry?" He held out a skewer of roasted lamb.

Sephy raised herself and reached for a piece.

"Thanks," Zack said.

"I'm Streetcar," the man nodded self-consciously. "You're in my underwear."

Zack glanced at his sleeves. He was wearing a red union suit.

Streetcar lifted his cap and returned to his spot beside Inky.

At the border of the blankets that covered them, Zack could see Sephy's bare foot and a rolled-up cuff. She had trousers on and was wearing a man's shirt. Her small breasts moved freely within it, and as he slid closer, their rosy points jumped.

Zack's heart raced. He put his lips to Sephy's, and this time she didn't turn aside. Her breath mingled with his own, and then her mouth opened to receive him. Were people watching? He didn't care. A world was opening inside him, a place of freedom. The breath he was drawing—from Sephy and the wind and the water—was a breath of hope, a breath that started things over.

She recoiled, gasping.

Zack held on to her.

Sephy's arm was raised. The charred lamb was dripping fat down it. "I'll be a—"

"What?"

"Quick meal for you."

"I know nothing about love," Zack said.

She tried to laugh. "You're chaste then?"

He stared at her. "Marry me."

His words shocked them both. The proposal echoed in his head, plunging him into doubt and lifting him up again, challenging his impulse. It was true, Zack thought. Thorn of Rose Hill, satyr of the exhibition circuit— Everything that came before was nothing. His life led straight to this moment.

Sephy raised her hand to hide her face.

"Answer me," he whispered.

She shook her head. "There is a lot to explain. I owe you—"

"No," Zack said. "And you've heard enough about Zachary Knox. We had fears when we met, and now we have more: we may die on this barge." He turned her face toward him. Her eyes were closed and there was a tear on her cheek. "Sephy—"

Her lips were trembling.

"Answer me," he said.

"I will," she sobbed, rocking her head on his chest. "I will, I will."

Zack held her close and kissed her brow.

"I had a hundred pounds of bacon." Winiarski, the teenager, glanced around the barge at the men seated or curled on the coal, speaking to no one in particular. "Lean cut, packed in salt."

No one responded.

"I'm a clothier," Winiarski said.

A few men looked up.

"A clerk," he confessed.

"Tough luck," someone said finally.

The fire snapped.

"I didn't buy a thing," Streetcar said. "Braked my trolley, told the fares, 'It's the end of the line,' and headed for the docks. Nothing but the cash in my wallet—" He stopped, came to his knees and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Left it in my bedroll."

"Pencils," Inky said, pulling a handful from his coat.

Now the others were checking.

"Still have my ticket home," one announced, waving it.

"You boys—" The popeyed man laughed. "Arnie's got our grubstake in his boot." He glanced at the fellow seated beside him.

"I put it in the valise this morning," Arnie replied. His face drooped like a basset hound's.

"What are you saying?"

"It's in the valise, Wag."

"But you took it back out, didn't you? Shit for jam." The popeyed man, Wagner, kicked his companion. "You should've gone down with your steamer," he fumed at the Captain.

"We must count our blessings," the short-haired woman said to the group.

"For what?" Wagner scowled, gesturing at the barge. "No better than dying in the street."

No one challenged him.

"My cousin went that way," the man beside Streetcar said.

"What way?"

"Starved on a park bench."

The world they'd left hovered before them.

"A great nation gone bust," a man said.

There were nods.

"Granddad would be sick."

"Tycoons and politicians."

"It's the damn machines. They don't need men. We're obsolete."

"The school where I was teaching shut its doors," the brown-skinned man with spectacles said. "My name is Dinesh," he introduced himself, using his fingers to comb his hair. "I was taking quarter pay at the forge. After what I set by for supplies, there was nothing for transportation. I had to beg the conductor to let me sleep under the seats with the dogs."

"No work at all where I'm from."

Arnie, the man who'd left the valise behind, shook his head. "I was on the dole for a year. They took our house away. Wife's living with her folks. I got here on borrowed money, from anyone who'd give it to me."

"Borrowed's your name alright," Wagner griped.

"I hoped to make enough to start my own school," Dinesh told them.

Streetcar smiled. "Farm's what I want. Lettuce, far as you can see."

The men traded glances.

“My brother could be a doctor if we had the dough.”

“Life of ease for me,” one laughed. “Not another day of honest labor.”

“I wanna be known,” Winiarski said. “Someone the world respects.”

“Ink’s plugging for his own paper,” Streetcar volunteered.

“*The Morning Sun*,” Inky smiled. “‘Intelligence, Fresh and Sound.’”

“Least we ain’t dodging bullets like the boys overseas.”

“Or freezing to death,” a fellow in overalls said. “Where I come from, coal’s dearer than corn. You go down by the tracks and pick up the pieces that fell off the hoppers.” He gestured at the black ore. “Here we are, sitting on forty wagons of it.”

Laughter circled the group and died.

“I’m not going back,” Streetcar said.

“Not empty-handed,” Dinesh agreed.

“We’re all in the same spot.”

Wagner glanced at Zack. “Not all of us.”

Zack saw the faces turn toward him. He didn’t respond.

“A man can rest easy,” Wagner shrugged, “when he’s got a fortune beneath his pillow.”

Zack kept his silence.

Wagner snorted.

“He hasn’t any more than the rest of you,” Sephy said.

Winiarski squinted at her. The men waited for more.

“He’s given back his inheritance.”

Lucky, the gray-haired man, cleared his throat. “There’s a question if he’s mentioned in the will.”

Zack regarded him. “It was a blind trust,” he said.

“What’s the secret?” Inky glanced from Zack to Lucky.

“The cowboy created quite a stir before he left,” Lucky said. “He was the talk of the capital. He’s only half a Knox, and that’s fifty percent more than suits his father.”

Zack felt Sephy shift. She was facing the group, allying herself with him. He wanted to vindicate himself for her sake, but when his lips parted, cynicism got the better of him. “I’m an embarrassment,” he nodded.

Sephy gripped his arm.

“The ghost of a teenage trespass.” Zack spoke to everyone on the barge. “My mother died bringing me into the world. Charles Knox got himself properly married a dozen years later.” He peered into Sephy’s eyes. “He gave his name to his second son, as if he was first. As for me—” He turned and looked out over the water. “I was Zack McDermott. Origin unknown.”

The breeze died, leaving his words hanging in the silence.

“Raised as an orphan,” he said. “I didn’t know who my father was until I was sixteen.” The rudder ropes groaned, and when Zack looked to stern, he saw Snell had turned his attention from the shoreline and was eyeing him with curiosity.

“When I found out,” Zack said, “I changed my name to Knox.”

“Most people think you’re his lawful son,” Dinesh observed.

“How about that.” Zack looked at Sephy. Some of her sadness had returned.



“You gave the money back?” Streetcar was perplexed.  
“Don’t you want to be worth something?”

“That’s why I’m here,” Zack answered.

“Particular where it comes from,” Wagner pointed out.

“I can understand that,” Dinesh said.

“I can too. It was just hush money to his pap.”

“I’d keep the cash.”

Streetcar shook his head. “You care what your dad thinks. They planted mine six years ago, and the old scratch is still frowning over my shoulder.”

“A man spends his whole life trying to prove himself to his father,” Inky said.

They thought about that.

“Pa had a dim view of Breakaway,” one said. “Called me a fool.”

Zack watched the grim gazes wander over the gunwales, imagining a wasting end, adrift on the cold sea or stranded on some black beach.

“We’re done for,” Wagner said to the Captain.

Snell turned to him. “Now what do *you* know?”

Zack felt Sephy shiver. He coaxed her head back onto his shoulder and drew the blankets around them.



**A** sound like thunder invaded Zack’s sleep. Something sharp dug at his shoulder. He shifted, aching in a dozen places, then opened his eyes. Sephy lay motionless beside him. Her face was smudged and sooty. He slid from beneath the blankets and looked around, seeing others lifting themselves from the coal.

How long had they slept? The sun was halfway down the sky. Snell was piloting, still staring at the coastline. It was much closer now and the mists had dissolved. Burnished black walls rose from a stripe of sea crust. Higher up, the peaks were tiered with trees, rows set back one behind the other. Where the sun found aisles, the forest glowed bottle green.

Inky came to his feet silently, pointing. Zack spied the object of his excitement. Through a break in the cliffs, an arm of white water emerged. On either side, the earth was speckled with stumps where men had felled trees. Winiarski was

up, grinning through a mask of coal dust. He turned to wake Dinesh.

They were entering a natural harbor. A river had forced its way to the sea, leaving a crescent-shaped beach of black rock. Above the beach, a clutch of crooked tents clung to a knoll. The thundering mounted. Sephy opened her eyes. Zack got his legs beneath him and stood, the red union suit climbing to his ankles. His feet were bare. He helped Sephy up. She followed the gazes, then straightened her trousers and tucked her shirt.

The rudder ropes moaned in the stern. Snell was turning the wheel, scanning the tidewater with a careworn smile. More tents were visible on a low hillside. The men on the barge were speechless. All stood now, blotched with soot, rumped and damp, except for the woman with short hair who knelt in prayer.

“Sephy,” Zack said.

She gave him a look of relief, but her hands were knotted on her chest.

A valley opened before them, bounded by dark forests and black palisades, its lower slopes stripped of timber. Down its middle, the river rushed, angling between the steep walls and tumbling through a mouth crammed with boulders. Above the mouth, the low hills were crowded with tents and a few small buildings.

“Breakaway,” Snell said, so all could hear.

“What’s that noise?” Winiarski wondered.

“Stamp mill.” Snell pointed at three giant sheds, one above the other, halfway up the valley.

Wagner hooted and the others joined in, stumbling across the coal to congratulate each other.

“No more fares.” Streetcar raised his cap and gave Zack a hug.

Zack laughed. “Look at that.” The tent camp seemed a brave thing, planted in the eye of the wilderness. Canvas lean-tos, square tents, pup tents, bell tents, weathered and patched, a few blown to rags. They perched on inclines and in depressions, canted at odd angles, smoking from log fires and stovepipes—bedded at the river’s end, with the ledges of gold somewhere near. He scanned the walls of the valley. Sephy took hold of his hand.

She was smiling. Her distress seemed to have vanished. Raymond, Zack thought. The camp had nothing threatening about it. Some of its inhabitants had caught sight of the craft and were running to greet them, hurrying down muddy paths, hollering and waving.

“Here’s the news,” Inky shouted and spread his arms.

Arnie cupped his hands around his mouth. “Make room!”

“Lead us to it,” Winiarski joined in.

Lucky was troubled. “They’re filthy.”

“Give yourself a gander,” Streetcar laughed.

“No place to spend it,” Inky pointed out.

“Look.” Sephy was gazing over the gunwale.

The water was boiling around the barge. A great swarm of fish circled beneath them, flashing silver and pink, quivering and clenching as their backs broke the surface.

“Here they come,” Winiarski cried.

A dory had set out from a spindly wharf. Zack saw a man in a dark three-piece suit standing in the bow. He shouted, "Snell," and raised a coil of rope in one hand.

"Get that," Snell said.

The man in the suit threw the line toward them. Its end looped over the top of some crates and landed beside Zack. He grabbed it, crossed the coal barefooted and knotted it to a cleat. Then the dory pivoted and began towing the barge in.

Sephy drew beside him. The men of the camp had a strange uniformity, Zack realized. Their clothing was of similar design, spattered alike with mud and grease. They wore heavy boots with the pants cut off at the shins.

The barge settled against the piers, and two men on the wharf secured it with chains. Others extended a gangplank. The man in the suit crossed onto the barge. He was in his mid-thirties, medium height and clean shaven. His carriage was crisp. A bemused disbelief shone in his eyes. Snell made a fist over his chest and brought it forward, and the man in the suit smiled at the gesture. He stepped over the coal, shaking his head, and when he reached Snell, he circled him with both arms.

"The mayor," Dinesh observed to Zack.

"Mister Lloyd," Snell greeted the man warmly. He stood with his arms hanging, accepting the embrace with a self-conscious grin.

"What happened?" Lloyd took in the survivors on the barge.

"Steamer hit a rock," the Captain said. "Crew went down with her."

Lloyd raised his chin, as if perceiving some hidden significance in the tragedy. "Terrible." He read duty in the Captain's face. "Your boat?"

"You know whose boat it was," the Captain said bitterly.

Lloyd seemed baffled.

"To the store." Snell stepped between them. His arm thumped the Captain's back to urge him onto the gangplank.

Zack saw Snell give Lloyd a look that promised more in private.

"How many lost?" Lloyd asked.

"Twenty-nine," Snell replied. "Horses and mules too."

Lloyd blanched. "Anyone need doctoring?" He glanced around the barge. Two men stepped forward, one cradling his arm against his middle.

"I could use a banker," Lucky said. "Some of us might like to arrange a loan."

"Until we get our gold," Winiarski added.

Lloyd raised his brows, caught a wary look from Snell and answered with a thoughtful nod. "Any Cousin Jacks?"

Snell shook his head. "They're raw as your ma. The drilling goods made it." He indicated the crates. "Steel, powder, fuse. Pair of new everhards—they cost me dear." He took a breath. "What about Hope?"

Lloyd's eyes dulled.

"You want her, don't you," a voice spoke from the wharf.

Zack watched Snell face the miners and beam at them. "Sure do," he replied. "It's hell back there." His head ticked over his shoulder, marking where he'd come from.

Lloyd signaled to one of the miners.

“Who’s Hope?” Inky asked Snell.

“Welcome to you all,” Lloyd said to the newcomers, and then to the miner approaching, “Take them to the dry room.” He waved the other men on the wharf forward. “Let’s unload this barge.”

Lloyd was treating them like cargo. Zack stared at the coal beneath his feet, trying to calm himself. His breath was constricting. Sephy linked his arm with her own.

“Can we bother you for an introduction?” Zack said. His voice quavered, but he spoke loudly enough to halt the proceedings.

Lloyd regarded him with surprise. “Pardon me. I’m Lloyd.” He tipped his head. “Chemist, sawbones and bookkeeper. My time’s not my own.”

“My name’s Knox,” Zack returned the nod. “I’m free and clear.”

“It must be grand,” Lloyd smiled. “You’re far from home.”

Zack saw the irony in his eyes. “A man’s freedom travels with him.”

Lloyd faced the others. “It’s no triumph of civilization,” he gestured at the camp, “but we can dry you out and put food in you. It happens you’re in time for dinner. What’ll you say to that?”

“Grace,” Winiarski responded.

“All choosing to be dry and fed—” Lloyd swept his hand toward the gangplank.

Lucky tugged his lapels and stepped forward. Zack met Lloyd’s questioning gaze, then nodded to Sephy, and they joined those filing off the barge. He was a sight, with his showman locks, bare feet and red underwear.

The path into camp was thick with miners. Up close the dirt looked permanent, ground into their clothing. Their faces were gritty as well, but humanity shone through. They were shaking hands and talking to the new arrivals. Still, there was something covert in the welcome. Zack could sense it in their pauses and the looks they traded with each other.

On the path ahead, Winiarski had stopped to question one of them.

“Where’s the gold?”

“She’s there.” The miner pointed up the valley.

“Hot peppers—” Winiarski followed his gesture.

Between the thighs of denuded slope, a trapezoidal wall rose. It was black with vertical grooves, giant gutters with edges that were ragged and spalled. Zack noticed a winding trail on the wall, and a dozen men strung out along it, descending. “Lots of new faces?” he asked the miner.

The man shook his head. “You’re the first since February.”

Zack was puzzled.

“Steamers don’t stop here,” the man explained. “Too dangerous.”

“What about ours?” Winiarski said.

The man glanced at the barge. “What about it?”

“The new strikes have you in fine humor,” Zack observed.

“Strikes?” The miner squinted and twitched his mustache.

“The ledges,” Zack said. “The new lodes.”

The miner returned a blank stare. Another man had stepped beside them—a big man, nearly Zack’s height.

“There’s only one vein in Breakaway,” the mustached man said. “We hold her dear.”

“She’s our Hope,” the big man told them, tipping his head to Sephy. “I’m Bluford,” he introduced himself. “They call me True.”

His jaw was square and so were his shoulders. His eyes were kindly.

“We’re believers,” the mustached man said.

True nodded. “It’s not like it is where you come from,” he assured Zack. “Here a man has something to live for.” He clapped Zack on the shoulder. “You passed your first test.” He gazed at the barge and the sea. “Hope’s in your future.”

“Is the war over?” the mustached man asked.

“They’re fighting on three continents,” Zack said.

The miner was surprised. True clinched his cheek, as if he expected no better.

Zack looked at Sephy. She was as puzzled as he. “Glad to meet you,” he nodded to the men, and they continued up the path.

An odor reached them—fish reek—and it grew stronger with every step. There was a nimbus of smoke hanging over the camp, and as they entered it, a suspicion took shape in Zack’s mind. “BMC,” he muttered, eyeing the tents through the smoke.

The gravel path turned into a corduroy road that wound among the bluffs, arriving at a broad shelf beside the river where a two-story building stood amid piles of raw planking. There the road divided, one branch continuing up the valley, the other leading to large double doors in the building’s side. A loud whistle blew, and as the rumble of the stamp mill faded, the man escorting the new arrivals reached the double doors and slid one open. They filed through, collecting in a dim warehouse, trading information.

There was bewilderment and dismay on every face.

“Of course,” Inky protested to a half-dozen men. “I heard about the reefs when I was scouting the docks. ‘I know those waters,’” he mimicked a blustering voice and glared at the Captain. “That’s what he told me.”

“We’d best be drying ourselves,” a broad-chested bald man spoke loudly, embracing the group with thick arms. He had a genial look and it landed on Zack. “At the back of the supply store. ’Tis nice and warm.” He pointed.

“Who are you?” Zack asked.

“Owen,” the man said. He made a fist over his chest and carried it forward.

Zack took in the gesture and the simple smile, then he shrugged at Sephy and they did as the man suggested.

“Chatter your little hearts away,” Owen said as the survivors filed past.

The corridor led between stacked drums and grain sacks. At the rear of the building, they entered a small room where a large steam heater gasped and creaked. They lined up alongside it.

“Percival Schorr,” Inky looked at Zack. “The only man to return to the States.”

“Incredible,” Lucky scowled.

“The whole thing was bogus,” Streetcar said.

“Who the hell was that?” Inky turned again to the Captain.

The Captain didn’t reply.

“There were a couple of steerers,” Inky told them. “Kids in short britches. Walked right up to my desk. ‘This fellow’s found gold!’ Took me to the Bostwick, up the stairs to Schorr’s room. He was packing. ‘Sure, have a look.’ Big smile, black chops and chin, like Abe Lincoln.” He glanced at the Captain. “Well? Say something.”

The Captain stood eyeing the creaking heater. “Snell engineered it. Hired Abe to play Schorr. And the kids got sarsaparilla.” He faced his passengers. “Then he bought a dry-docked tramp and found an old drunk to pilot her. Your fares paid for the ship.”

Zack gazed at Sephy, stunned.

“Why?” Lucky wondered.

“They’re short on men,” the Captain replied.

“The Breakaway Mining Company,” Zack said.

“I believed the story because it was in the paper,” Dinesh said.

“Me too,” Winiarski nodded.

Wagner threw himself at the Captain. “You worthless—”

The Captain held him off. “It made me sick,” he said, “watching you puff on your pipe dreams.”

Sweat beaded Zack’s face. He turned away from the furnace.

“Zack—”

He saw the alarm in Sephy’s eyes, and then he was moving, headed back through the storage area. Pipe dreams, he thought. Secrets and lies.

“Zack—”

He reached a door. Sephy’s footsteps sounded at his rear. He opened the door and stepped out.

A yard spread before him. Dozens of miners stood talking. Behind them, timber tables and benches were arranged to form an open-air mess hall. The fish reek was overpowering. Zack approached, scanning the gathering for a face with the look of authority.

Someone whistled, and the sound was like ice in Zack’s veins—a wordless summons, laden with contempt.

When he turned, he saw a man a few yards away, leaning against the supply store wall with one leg flexed. His hairline was low, his cheek lumpy as nut brittle. He unpuckered his lips and resumed jawing a wad of gum. “Hats off to Snail,” the man said. “I’m getting hopeful just looking at ’er.”

He spoke loudly enough for everyone in the yard to hear.

Zack felt Sephy beside him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the new arrivals filing into the yard. He fixed on the man. “Who’s in charge here?”

The man kicked himself free of the wall. “DuVal,” he greeted Zack. “What’s the price?”

He has too much bluff, Zack thought. The man was a flunky.

“Give you seven hundred,” DuVal said, nodding at Sephy.

“Swine,” Dinesh spoke out.

“No disrespect meant.” DuVal addressed Sephy.

She drew away from Zack, face averted, trembling. Inky stepped beside her.

“You’re her cadet, aren’t you?” DuVal asked Zack. “Make it a thousand. One thousand bones. That’s good money, Knox.”

Zack started toward him.

“Give him a pasting,” Winiarski yelled. The miners were silent.

DuVal acted confused. “I’d just like to be first.” He rocked onto the balls of his feet. “There’s a tip—for you.” DuVal’s tongue slid out. He pinched the lob of gum from it. “A sweet,” he said, extending the lob.

Zack sprang at him.

DuVal recoiled and waltzed aside. He stuck the gum to his nose.

“Yokel,” Zack said, following.

DuVal turned to face the miners. “That’s us, boys.” Then he whirled around.

Maybe it was the chill of the northern sea that slowed his reflexes. Zack saw the blow coming, moved to cross it and missed. DuVal’s fist plunged into his middle. He doubled over, guts twisting, and DuVal kicked him sideways into the mud.

“There’s your ‘tall drink,’” DuVal jibed.

Zack lay sucking the air. DuVal’s comment was directed at Snell, who was watching from a spot near the cookstoves at the supply store’s rear. Zack could feel the eyes of the world on him—miners, spectators in the stands, eager as magpies at a dogfight. He got his knees beneath him and heaved himself up. DuVal saw him and wheeled, but not in time. Zack’s right fist hammered his temple.

DuVal stumbled back, pocked cheeks bloating. As Zack lunged, DuVal drove his boot up. The toe struck Zack in the chest. He went down, rolled, stood in time to avoid a second kick, regained his balance and spun around, pounding DuVal’s ribs. His adversary heeled back and Zack aimed at his brow. The *crack* filled the yard.

“Bull’s-eye,” Streetcar shouted.

A babble of encouragement rose from both the miners and the new arrivals. DuVal was shuffling backward toward the cooking area. Zack closed the distance and sprang, bashing DuVal’s chin, sending him clattering against tables loaded with pots and pans. DuVal snarled, kicked the loose granite-ware and swung around, blinking and wagging his head. “You’re making me mad.”

Zack threw himself toward him. This time DuVal dodged. Before Zack could turn, he was snagged and jerked around. DuVal plowed a fist into his belly. Zack buckled without going down, gasping for air, reaching blindly. DuVal was up against him, battering his kidneys. Then something like cannon fire went off in Zack’s head. He felt his legs fold beneath him and he landed hard on the gravel.

DuVal was kicking his shoulders and chest, trying to get at his face. "I'll chop your legs off—"

"Stop," Sephy cried.

"Cut off your arms," DuVal huffed. "Run you to the mill in an ore bucket—"

"Alright," a miner growled.

"That's enough," another yelled.

Through a fog, Zack could see DuVal shifting over him.

"Please," Sephy implored the miners. Inky was holding her.

"Unbutton my fly," DuVal ordered Zack.

The crowd cursed him as one.

DuVal swung toward a cook table and turned back with a grilling fork in his hand. Zack saw Dinesh fling his arms around DuVal's waist. DuVal battered Dinesh loose and continued forward. "You're the bum here, Knox."

Zack lifted himself.

Sephy was sobbing. "Someone—"

DuVal struck Zack down and dropped onto his chest, brandishing the grilling fork. "Beggin' time." The tines quivered over Zack's eye. "Beg me to take her."

Zack gripped his wrist, trying to shift the fork. Sephy was screaming.

The tines touched Zack's eyelid.

"Beg, you bastard," DuVal said.

Zack convulsed, jerking the fork aside. His back arched and his fist powered into DuVal's groin. DuVal groaned and shuddered. Then a shovel blade sliced through the air, cracking

against DuVal's head. His features went slack and he slumped from view.

Zack was gasping for breath. He rolled onto his hip. "He don't belong here," he heard someone say. Sephy's voice sounded nearby. "Are you hurt?" DuVal lay unconscious on the gravel beside him, eyes staring, blood leaking from his brow. The lob of gum on his nose was dashed with dirt.

A boot bumped DuVal's head. "Harder than it looks."

Zack peered up, seeing a grizzled man with sloping shoulders and a kettle belly. The shovel's haft was split in two, and he held a length in each fist. His right cheek was crosshatched with scars, and the top of his right ear was folded over. The man sighed, gaze shifting from DuVal to Lloyd and Owen, who were hunching over him. "Had it coming."

Lloyd ignored the comment. He was checking DuVal's pulse.

"He's a pit dog," Owen said, "like some paddies hereabout." He glanced at the man who'd split DuVal's head.

Zack drew a leg in. Sephy was on the ground beside him. He rose to a squat.

"Nice swing," one of the miners said.

"Run these to the shop, will you?" The man with the folded ear handed the broken shovel over.

Lloyd shouted something in a foreign language and three Asian cooks hurried from behind the stoves. He looked at Zack. "You alright?"

The man with the folded ear knelt. "This boy's beyond pain."



The cooks helped Owen lift DuVal and carry him toward the store.

“None of this should have happened,” Lloyd said, glancing at Sephy. Then to the man who’d leveled DuVal, “Could have used your fist.”

“Could have,” the man agreed.

Lloyd hastened after his patient. The miners had turned away. Inky and Winiarski were helping Dinesh toward a table.

“Crazy,” Zack said.

His rescuer laughed. “There’s your madman.”

Zack followed his gaze to the corner window of the supply store’s second floor. He got a glimpse of a large head with thick brows swimming in the dimness on the far side of the glass. The face had a fierce intensity. As Zack met the dark eyes, the earth seemed to dissolve beneath him. Then a finger unhooked itself and the gap in the curtains closed.

Sephy gripped his arm. Zack got his feet beneath him and stood, and his rescuer stood with him. “Who are you?”

“Miner,” the grizzled man replied. “Dog-Eared Bob.”

“And the fellow you conked?”

“Odd jobs. He does his best to please the boss, but— He only has half a brain.” Bob considered Sephy. “Got a quarrel with him?”

Zack nodded. “And with the rest of this BMC. They shanghaied us.”

“We did?” Bob looked surprised.

“You’re one of them?”

Bob nodded. “We all are.”

One of the Asians was rattling his spoon in an iron triangle. Miners were forming a line behind the stoves.

Bob motioned them toward the line. “You call yourself Knox?”

“Zack.”

Heads turned to follow them.

“Where’d you get that shave?” Bob asked. “Like a goat my uncle had.”

“He was a performer,” Sephy explained, “in a shooting show.”

Bob eyed her as if she was a puzzle that needed solving.

“My name is Sephy,” she said.

“Welcome to Breakaway, miss.”

“When did this become a company town?” Zack asked.

“Six months after Hope appeared,” Bob said. “Prowler came out of his hole in March, two years ago. Trevillian arrived in August and bought up the claims.”

“The man upstairs?”

Bob nodded.

“Did anyone hit it? Before he got here?”

“Some of the early boys—those who were in the neighborhood when Hope first showed. Jimmy Soboleff staked a hot shoot and headed south two months later with eighty pounds of gold.”

“What about you?”

Bob laughed. “They were on either side of me, jumping up and down whenever they found jewelry. I was sure it would be my turn next.” He motioned upriver, at the black trapezoid.

“We were up there—where the gallows is now—two hundred feet in the air.”

“In the air?”

Bob nodded. “Before the mountain got chiseled down. Hope wasn’t lying flat. Once the gold on top was dug out, you had to angle in after her.” Bob pointed his fingers and sent his hand sliding. “Can’t do that with a pick and shovel. The boss came in. Bought up the claims, brought in miners and equipment, built the mill. Some of the boys left. A lot of us stayed on.”

“To work for the BMC,” Zack said.

Bob regarded him. “To be with Hope. No one understands her like Trevillian.”

They were beside the cook tables now and Sephy was passed a plate. A young Asian ladled beans and greens onto it. His black hair was braided and hung down his back. Another added a plank of grilled salmon and a biscuit.

“Good chow,” Bob said. “The Bangshu can cook.”

A miner stood post at the head of the food line. “Lemme guess.” He grinned. “Knox, Zachary.” He wrote the name in a black pocket ledger.

“Give yourself a hug,” Bob said.

“What’s to celebrate?” Zack watched as the food was put on his plate.

“You’re in Lloyd’s book.”

Bob got his dinner and led them among the tables.

Heads lifted and turned to follow them. Winiarski and Dinesh were seated. Worry showed in their faces as Zack

passed. When Bob reached the edge of the yard, he pointed. “We’ll park here.”

“Expecting trouble?” Zack asked.

“You stay out of Trevillian’s way till this fuss with DuVal blows over.”

“There aren’t any women,” Sephy said, scanning the yard.

Bob looked as if the puzzle she posed had grown in difficulty. “Separate camp.” He gestured up the valley, then he set his plate on the table and gave it a spin. “Let’s eat.”

Zack took the bench opposite and Sephy sat beside him. Bob licked the loose flour off his biscuit and bit into it.

“March, two years ago,” Sephy said.

Bob nodded. “Waking Prowler. That’s how it started.”

“Who’s Prowler?” she asked.

“Hope’s bear,” Bob replied. “We find her and lose her, and when she comes back, sometimes Prowler comes with her. She tests us, and that bear is one of the tests. When Hope first surfaced, she brought Prowler along. It was the Private who was tested.”

“The Private?”

“He was our prophet.” Bob gazed up the valley. “Prowler was sleeping beside Hope, in a den on that peak. The Private and his pal were crossing the river, where the mill is now. Hope put her finger on the Private’s rifle—” Bob paused to chew his beans. “Food’s getting cold, miss.”

Sephy sat motionless, staring at him. Zack reached his hand out and she took it.

“The rifle went off and the shot woke Prowler,” Bob

continued. “Crawls out of his den.” He made a groggy face. “Doesn’t know what he’s doing. Instead of going down into the valley, he heads across the cliff through the snow pack. The top of the mountain came clean away.” Bob’s brows lifted. “The Private and his pal—they rubbed their eyes. They raced up to get a look. It was her alright.”

“Hope,” Zack said.

Bob nodded. “I can see you’re believing me.” He pointed with his spoon. “They pitched a tent in the wash—up there, beyond Blondetown. Prowler went down with the avalanche. You’d think, ‘Well, that’s the end of him.’ But it wasn’t.” Bob wiped his mouth. “He was wicked mad when he dug himself out of the cement. As Hope intended.”

Zack felt Sephy’s hand pull away. She crossed her arms over her front.

“It’s not a happy ending,” Bob apologized.

“Go on,” Sephy said.

“Middle of the night, Prowler tears open their tent. Pulls off the pal’s arm. Then Prowler grabs the Private. The pal lay there bleeding, watching while Prowler dragged the Private up the side of the wash. The Private had his prospector’s pick, and when Prowler raised him up, there they were silhouetted against the moon, with the Private swinging and Prowler roaring and shaking him like a rag doll. Then Prowler carried him off.”

Sephy gazed into the forest.

“The Private’s pal managed to bind himself up. He made it back to their boat and set it loose. A steamer happened on him a week later. When they reached Gastineau City, he told

the local boys everything. Plenty of danger, but they came quick. By rights, the Private and his pal should have been first to stake claims. But no one ever saw the Private again, and his pal didn’t come back. Soon as we got here, Hope sent Prowler to test us. Big gash over his left eye—” Bob touched his brow with his spoon. “Everyone figured the Private did that.”

“You knew him?” Zack asked.

Bob shook his head. “No one here ever met the Private.”

“Why do they call him that?” Sephy wondered.

“His coat,” Bob said. “He poached it from a soldier.”

Just then, the triangle rang again. The miners grew quiet. A half-dozen men were filing out of the supply store. They moved as a group through the eating area and circled a vacant table in the yard’s center. Owen took a position at one end.

“Here he comes,” Bob said.

Through the crowd, the mine boss appeared. Zack recognized the face in the window—the piercing eyes and black brows. His expression was benign. He was average height and looked to be in his early forties, but he carried himself with the stiffness of someone much older. His gaze aimed beyond the gathering, as if there was something only he could see. He stepped onto a bench and from there to the tabletop, turned to check his lieutenants, then tipped his head back and regarded the crowd beneath the eave of his brow.

“Left the Reminder upstairs,” Bob said.

“A good evening to the day shift,” Trevillian boomed, “and a good morning to the night.” He spread his smile through the yard. “You want her, don’t you.”

Men responded with shouts, making fists over their chests and carrying them forward. Bob was holding his fist out like the rest, brimming with emotion. Sephy gave Zack a fearful look. Twenty feet away, Inky caught his eye.

“Our band is greater today by nearly a score,” Trevillian said. “Welcome them with compassion, for the trial they endured; with respect, that they survived her test; and gladly, for the spirit they will add to our own. We are all castaways, fallen from our vessel, left bobbing in the gulf.”

Zack watched the miners. Most seemed to receive Trevillian’s message as it had been delivered, soberly and with humility.

“This little valley, this ripple at the earth’s edge, is home to a rare creature.” The mine boss turned his gaze to the switch-back trail. “A creature with crystalline flesh, lit with gold. She’s our dream, our purpose, our sustenance.” He scanned the men, picking out the new faces. “When we work and when we mate and when we pray—we are thinking of her. Hope is her name.” He opened his arms. “Hope.”

“Hope,” a hundred voices spoke, and the echoes filled the valley.

Zack saw a range of feelings in the men around him—inspiration in one, defeat in another. Passion and dread. Pride, brazen or self-possessed. Dog-Eared Bob had intoned Hope’s name with the rest, but weakly. There was resignation in his eyes, as if Hope was a woman whose favor he expected to lose.

“Remember the moment,” Trevillian said. “It will be precious to you— The moment you decided to leave. Like all of

us who found our way here, she reached you. The unwavering, irresistible voice—of Hope.

“What pledge does a man get from life? What promise?” He spoke softly now. “He has the certainty of the grave. Nothing more. Our prayers for worth, for purity of purpose, for the will to persist— Who can answer them? Those who give their hearts to Hope turn their backs on a doomed world.”

His expression grew pensive. “We have so much to talk about, you and I.”

Trevillian tightened his lips, then laughed. “Half the mountains on the continent have been mined. The earth is crawling with drillers. They have a contest every spring in the middle states. Last year, the man who won—the fastest drill in the country—walked away from his prize. He’s here, in this yard.” Trevillian turned his palms up. “What does my champion say? Noel?” He looked around the mess.

“I’ll never go back,” a voice answered from a table at the rear.

“My brother,” Trevillian smiled. “And yours. We’re kin here. All of us who seek her. All of us with the glow of Hope in our eyes.

“I know—it’s a lot to swallow. Don’t worry. I’m not going to force my beliefs on you. Hope reveals herself in a personal moment and men embrace her. That’s how it happens. There’s no other way. We have doubters among us.” He nodded. “They want to believe, but their hearts aren’t yet hers. They test our faith. Bunting. Carew—” He pointed to a man at a nearby table. “Someday you’ll be with us.”

Across the mess, voices rose, encouraging Carew.

Trevillian's arm fell and he stared at his boots. Silence followed. No one ate or spoke. When he raised his head, his look was distant, detached.

"Two shifts a day," the mine boss said. "Ten hours each. In the waste time, we eat and repair ourselves. Then we're back in the mountain, seeking her out. It's hard work and it's dangerous. We hear the war consumes many lives." He shook his head. "No boy on the battlefield is braver than a soldier of Hope."

"She's worth the fight," a miner shouted.

"She'll be back," another said.

"Sometimes she's mindful about the injuries we endure. Often she's not." Trevillian's expression hardened. "She's fickle. She lures us, then withdraws, slipping deeper, leaving us only a scarf to snuffle. Right now— We're chasing trifles she's thrown behind her. Hope's gone behind a cloud. We're brutes and she wants nothing to do with us. It seems like we'll never see her again. Then, when we least expect it, she'll be at our elbow, keen and reassuring, whispering in our ear."

The mood in the yard had changed. Zack could sense the unrest. There was anxiety in many of the faces.

"When I speak, Hope listens. You can see that." Trevillian's gesture took in the new arrivals and the barge moored to the wharf. "She's replaced those she's taken. Our mining supplies are restored." He was addressing his faithful.

"What about our feed?" a man asked.

Trevillian shook his head. "The groceries went down with

the ship. Our flour's nearly gone, and the beans and rice won't last to the New Year. We have salmon and greens, and the Bang Boys' root mash. We won't starve, but our lives will be harder. Canvas, soap, boot soles— What Snell purchased would have filled the store's shelves," he sighed.

"I'll do," one miner affirmed.

"Same here."

"As long as Hope comes back," a man said grimly.

A brown-skinned miner rose to his feet. "What's the news from Ardent?"

"Just threads," a voice answered.

"How about Slick Liver?" the miner looked around.

"Not a thing," a man replied.

"Is she saying anything to you?" the brown man asked the boss.

Trevillian raised his arms. "Faith," he said firmly.

There were curses and sour looks.

"We'll find her," the mine boss said.

"When?" A haggard man stood. "I can't stand this," he confessed.

"Tis an urgent need," Owen said. "No one is more pained by Hope's absence than our boss."

Zack glanced at Bob.

The haggard man swore. Hope's name crossed the yard, woven through with expressions of doubt and frustration. Trevillian let them vent.

"You new fellows can see," he said when the upset lulled, "how precious Hope is to us." He smiled. "And you will share

in the triumph when she returns. You're our brothers and our bunkies. We'll make room in our tents."

He looked from table to table. "Our fish sits well in your belly," he nodded. "The flesh is renewed. The meal was an advance against work in the mine." Trevillian glanced at Lloyd. "You're registered with our payroll master."

Zack put his fingers on his chest, where DuVal's kicks had landed. His blood was boiling.

"Half of the new boys will go down tonight," the mine boss said. "The others will report to the Glory Hole in the morning, 8:10 sharp. Rolls are posted by the cook shack."

"What did the meal cost us?" Wagner shouted.

"Twenty bones," Trevillian answered. "You'll make a hundred a shift, like every man here."

Winiarski held up his hand. "Do we have a choice?"

Trevillian shrugged. "If you want to take care of yourself," he motioned toward the wilds north of the valley, "dinner's on me."

"If there's more treasure, do we get some of it?" Streetcar wondered.

"I'll trade my Hope for gold," Lucky chimed in.

"I'm not going to lift a finger for you," Wagner barked.

Zack drew his shoulders back and put his hands on the table. As he stood, he saw Bob's confusion and Sephy's alarm.

"I don't care much for your generosity." Zack spoke as evenly as he could.

The yard was instantly quiet. "What are you doing," Bob growled.

"A host who claps irons on you while you're eating," Zack said, "is a freak of nature, not a man."

Trevillian turned. Zack met his stare.

"This is Hope's doing, my friend," the mine boss replied.

"Treachery put me here, not Hope."

"Step up, step up," Trevillian said. "Let me face my accuser directly."

The mine boss was motioning him to rise. Zack swallowed his fear and put his foot on the bench. He boosted himself onto the tabletop, hearing the whispers, eyeing the boss over the heads of the men.

"Our passion seems strange to you," Trevillian said.

"That's not my beef," Zack replied. There was a storm inside him.

"Well?"

"I'm not your slave," Zack said.

"No, I am yours. I serve your soul." Trevillian raised his chin, inviting a response. He could see Zack's rage. Zack was choked with it.

"My soul—" Zack's rapid breath fouled his speech.

"We're not tromping the boards here," Trevillian said. "This is serious business. Men must be led."

"Men choose who will lead them." Zack turned to the miners. "You don't applaud this. I know you don't."

The boss said nothing.

"A man has a birthright," Zack told the camp. "He's not beholden. He asks for no other man's mercy. No other man decides if he's discarded or used."

“He plays the hero nicely,” Trevillian said.

“Will one of you speak up for us?” Zack asked the miners.

The silence was deathly.

“Words without faith don’t count for much,” the boss told him. “Not here.” He cocked his head, considering. “You might earn a few bones in the Wheel. *‘Long John Settles the Score,’*” he smiled, sweeping his hand across an imaginary marquee. “Try your tongue on the madam.”

Laughter convulsed the mess.

Zack wiped the sweat from his cheek. “Is this what Hope’s done for you?” His legs were quivering. The dam was about to burst. “Have you sunk this low?”

The yard swelled with grumbles and insults.

“You’re slaves—every one of you,” Zack said. “You deserve your poverty, this lunatic, your worthless Hope—”

“Show us your teeth,” Trevillian’s voice rose over the booing miners. He nodded appreciatively and began to clap. A few followed his example, and then the camp caught his spirit and the bristling turned to applause.

Zack withered, but he didn’t stop. “A man’s a fool— No escape— A trap, a prison, people like you—” He was shuffling broken thoughts, trembling with abasement.

“This moves me,” the boss told the camp. “Bravo, bravo!” He lifted his hands.

The men rose at their tables, raucous and whistling, giving the showman a standing ovation.

Zack looked down. Sephy was hiding her eyes. He faced

Trevillian, saw him shoot Owen a silent command. Then the boss gestured to the men. “Meal’s over,” he shouted.

Zack watched him descend from his table. The miners began to disperse.

He felt a hand on his foot. Sephy was peering up at him.

“You gonna stand there all night?” Bob said.

Zack set his jaw and climbed down.

“We were keeping you out of trouble.” Bob spoke to Zack, but his eyes were on Trevillian. “C’mon.” He grabbed Zack’s arm and nodded toward a footpath. They had not gone three paces when a voice called from behind.

“Knox.”

Zack stopped and turned.

Owen smiled affably. “The boss wants you.”

Bob sighed and let go of his arm.

Zack was still bleary. “Watch out for her,” he said.

“Watch out for yourself,” Bob replied.

Zack followed Owen toward the store.

Trevillian stood waiting a few yards from the outside stair. His hand rested on the prospector’s pick hanging from his belt.

“Not the way to introduce yourself,” the mine boss said.

Zack didn’t trust himself to speak.

“The news story, the steamer—that was Snell’s work, not mine.” Trevillian spoke calmly. “He lacks the power of persuasion, so he found another way.”

Zack stared at the ground.

“Surprising, isn’t it?” the boss said. “You’d expect a man in

his circumstance to desert. Instead, he risked his life and sacrificed his scruples to return with labor and provisions. What do you call that?"

"Servility."

Trevillian laughed. "Look at me, Knox."

Zack did as he asked.

"You can help us," the boss said.

"I came here to help myself."

"Want to put your hands on some gold, don't you?"

The boss's expression was passive, but as Zack watched, the piercing eyes reached for him. Zack stiffened.

Trevillian turned to Owen. "He thinks it should belong to him."

"Tis a common foolishness," Owen nodded.

"In the earth or out," Trevillian said, "gold isn't something a mortal can possess."

"You have a high opinion of yourself."

"Not as high as you think. I draw a wage like everyone else. We're all unfortunates here," the mine boss said, "searching out Hope together."

"Your man tried to kill me."

Trevillian swallowed his frustration. "I told him to take you down a peg."

"'Twas well meant," Owen assured Zack.

"You dig with the spades you have," the boss said. "I've put you on the day shift, to make up." He fretted. "It's a bad beginning. Snell's deception. DuVal. Falling in with—" He shook his head.

Owen brushed some straw off Zack's shoulder.

"I swear to you," Trevillian said, "there's more to Breakaway than woe. As for me, don't jump to conclusions." He tapped his chest with his forefinger. "I know what it is to feel powerless. When I wear the judge's robe, I give a man a fair shake."

Zack watched the finger move between them.

"You do the same," Trevillian said. "Steady the balance and weigh me from here forward." His expression softened. "We have something in common."

Zack didn't take the bait.

"I'll carry the blame for now," the mine boss nodded. "Sooner or later, you'll understand—it was Hope who brought you here."

Zack had recovered enough self-possession to answer him. "I don't want any part of Hope or your mine."

Command slid back over Trevillian's face like a mask. Through it, his eyes peered, invidious as a snake. "You've reached my limit. Do as I say, if you value your life. I'm not an asking man."

He turned and started up the stair.

"You'll be knowing him better," Owen smiled. "Run along."

Zack returned down the path.

"Still in one piece," Bob marveled. He motioned. "There's something you need to see."

He headed toward the supply store. Zack and Sephy followed.

"What did he say?" she asked.



“He threatened me,” Zack replied.

“A few months ago,” Bob said, “a man could chirp the way you did and get away with it. With Hope in his arms and Lloyd coaching him, he was almost civilized.”

“But Hope’s disappeared,” Sephy said.

“That’s right.” Bob was leading them along the store’s wall. “You were lucky tonight,” he told Zack. He stopped and faced the wall. “You make trouble for the boss—” He touched the siding. “You’ll play a show *here*.”

The wood planking was raw in places, chafed around a vague silhouette—more a phantom than a man. The head was elliptical, the neck was absent, the left leg vanished below the knee.

“He wasn’t wearing the Reminder tonight—his whip.” Bob patted his hip.

Sephy put her hand to her mouth.

“The boss was schooled by teamsters. Spaniards,” Bob nodded at the wall. “That’s how they talk to their mules. One makes trouble—you pull it out of its traces and carve it to pieces. Makes an impression on the rest.”

Zack imagined a man writhing there in full view of the yard. The heads of two bolts protruded at chest level on either side.

“He’s heartless,” Sephy said.

Bob laughed. “So they say. You hear a lot of babble in the camp. Truth is, the boss’s Hope was more than any of us had coming—” He stopped. “*Is* more,” Bob corrected himself.

Sephy stared at him. Zack said nothing.

“As cruel as it looks,” Bob nodded at the wall, “it keeps us together.” He motioned toward the cook shack. “We’ll check the lists.”

“Zack’s with us,” Inky reported, stepping toward them with Winiarski by his side. “On the morning shift.” Inky glanced at Zack. “He put you on the spot.”

“I was eating,” Winiarski told Sephy, as if he’d missed the confrontation.

“You’re leaking.” Bob touched Zack’s chest. A carnation of blood had bloomed on the union suit. He unbuttoned Zack’s collar. “It needs dressing.”

Dinesh approached with Streetcar and the Captain.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Bob told Zack. “You stay here with your pals,” he warned. Then he squinted at Sephy and grabbed her arm. “Come with me, miss.” They headed toward the warehouse doors.

“I’m on tonight,” Streetcar told Zack. “They put Dinesh in the forge.”

Dinesh had his arm in a sling. Behind his spectacles, his deep-set eyes had a haunted look. The orbits looked like they’d been daubed with boot-blackening.

“Thanks for trying,” Zack said.

“Thanks for standing up for us,” Dinesh replied.

“It’s like the Farnsworth Family,” Inky told them. “Up in the mountains, with the god they invented. They kidnapped people and made them believers.”

“And had orgies,” Winiarski recalled.

“We’re not staying here,” Zack said.

“We have to leave,” Dinesh agreed.

Winiarski eyed the valley wall. “Think there’s any place we could get to on foot?”

“The shift’s starting.” Streetcar looked miserable. He glanced at Winiarski and patted Dinesh’s shoulder. “Bye, Ink. Bye, Mister Knox.” He lifted his cap and started toward the switchback trail.

Zack turned back to his bargemates. “Might be indians nearby. Or prospectors.”

“From a high point, we could spot them.” The Captain pulled his hand from his pant pocket and raised his spyglass into view.

Zack stared at it, then scanned the surrounding ridges.

Inky pointed at a peak on the north side of the river. It was forested nearly to its top, where a brown capstone caught the sun. “You’d see a lot of the coast from up there.”

“Who’s going with me?” Zack said.

“Me,” Winiarski replied. The Captain nodded, as did Dinesh.

“When?” Inky asked.

“Right now,” Zack said. “We have enough light to get there. By the time we’re on top, it’ll be bright enough to see any neighbors.”

“You’re barefoot,” Winiarski pointed out.

Inky motioned the group to silence. Bob and Sephy were returning.

Sephy carried clothing. Bob had a pair of gumboots in one hand and bandages in the other. “Store credit,” Bob said.

“Size twelve,” Winiarski guessed.

“Right you are.” Bob passed the boots to Zack.

“What’s that?” Zack eyed a loop of cord on the clothes pile.

“Fuse,” Bob said. “It keeps your pants up. Handy for other things too. Get some sleep,” he told the group. He motioned to Zack and headed along the path away from the store.

Zack nodded to Sephy, and they followed. She seemed distracted.

“The Captain badgered a tent for us,” Inky called after him.

“On the sea side of the yard,” the Captain added.

Bob led the way to the corduroy road.

“Where are we going?” Zack asked.

“Hotel Bob,” the older man answered over his shoulder. “I guess I’m your friend.” He laughed to himself.

Twenty yards down the slope, they turned onto a track that twisted through the encampment. Sephy moved in front of Zack. It had grown colder and she was shivering. His feet sank to the ankles in mud. On either side, the miners’ homes flapped in the wind.

“If the coast is so hazardous,” Zack said, “why did you come here?”

“Back then, no one knew about the reefs,” Bob answered. “Or the tests Hope would put to anyone trying to make harbor. One of the boats from Gastineau went down. I had chums on that wreck.”

Sephy was looking out to sea. A red dusk glowed on the southern horizon.

Bob pointed. "Every so often you see them between those islands. But here in the channel, the currents are deadly. Most skippers know better. The boat that landed in February—the one Snell shipped out on—that was a fluke."

"Why didn't you go with him?" Zack asked.

"And kiss Hope goodbye? This is my pup." He gestured at a small tent pitched on the moderate incline to their left. It was patched and soiled, with a sagging ridgeline and a black stovepipe sticking out of its side. In front was split wood, a pile of small crates and some tools crusted with mud.

Up the hill, the shift whistle blew. Bob stooped, threw back the flap and drew out a small quilt. "I'll be over there, unless it rains."

"Thanks," Zack said.

Bob motioned Sephy inside. "Your love nest—tonight." He stared at her.

Sephy stared back, and in the stare, Zack saw a new side of her. She seemed defiant.

Bob took the clothing. Sephy crawled into the tent.

"Pull your suit down," Bob said, bending to retrieve a sponge from a bucket.

Zack unbuttoned his top. "You saved my hide."

The wind wuffed harder, tents flapping like a hundred flags.

"What's been saved can be spent." Bob's tone was grim. "I'm hoping you make it through the week." He put the sponge to Zack's wound.

The earth trembled and a rumbling mounted between the valley walls. Sharp cries rose from the sawmill, and as the stamps reached full volume, the cries swooped through the thunder like tethered spirits. The night shift had begun.

"I'm going to have a look around," Zack said.

Bob raised his brows. Then he laughed and shook his head.



By the time Zack had put on the clothing, Bob was settled beneath his quilt. Zack ducked inside the tent.

Sephy was drawing a rabbit blanket over her. Her eyes met his.

"It's not what I imagined," she said.

Zack thought she meant the camp, but there were other ways in which the cup had been dashed from her lips. She had watched him come apart in the yard.

Rather than speaking, he leaned forward and kissed her.

She responded warmly. But when he drew back, she acted as if she saw a different person in his place.

"What happened at Ambrose Park?" Sephy asked.

"I invited my father to the show."

"And?"

"He sat in the box I'd reserved for them. He and his wife, Rose."

"What was the scandal?"

"He was running for office," Zack replied.

Her lips parted, but she didn't speak. Zack couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"You wanted to hurt him," she said.

He ran his hand over the rabbit blanket. "I suppose so."

Sephy sighed. "You're more like him—"

Zack heard the disquiet in her voice.

"—than I would ever have guessed."

"Your brother," Zack said.

"Gold was the future," Sephy nodded. "The past was all fear and anger."

Zack didn't reply. The unlit pup tent seemed airless. The prospect of a new life had vanished completely.

"Did you speak to him," Sephy asked. "After the show?"

"He didn't stay."

"They left?"

"He did."

"By himself?" she asked.

"Rose tried to keep him there, but he shook her loose. It was after the entry. I lowered my mare onto one knee and tipped my hat to them. He looked me in the eye—taking his punishment. Then he stood and headed for the exit."

"He wasn't there to see you," Sephy said.

"No. He was proving he couldn't be cowed."

The rumble from the stamp mills filled the silence between them.

"You'll be alone tonight," Zack said.

"Where will you be?"

"Looking for some way out of this."