

A MESSAGE TO SANTA FE

Chapter 1

March 1, 1861

The mail coach to San Antonio tested Blackstone Wolfe's patience with its heat, dust, and boredom. The coach might be faster, but he preferred go by horseback, even if he had to ride four days longer. *What's the rush?* From the Gulf port at Indianola to Santa Fe and return took five grueling months, especially when escorting my godfather Pascal's loaded freight wagons in each direction. A few days meant nothing. And safer? *Hell, no one at the freight line ever wasted a thought for my safety when they ordered me to scout the trail for bandits or Comanches.*

The unpainted mail rig paled in comparison to the elegant Concord coach he had expected. *Not even a real coach ... nothing but a slat-sided mud wagon covered in raggedy canvas for a top and sides.* The tawdry rig held three bare plank seats laid in rows, like the hard pews in his father's tiny church. He slapped the wooden strut supporting the canvas top, shaking the coach.

The doubletree chains jingled songs of team and wagon so familiar to him. He glanced at the high-stepping mules as they snapped at horseflies. One relieved itself, causing the other to bray at the splatter. Such antics told him the mule pair had yet to tire, unlike the slow, plodding steps of weary mule teams that drew the laden wagons he guided across the distant prairie.

At mid-day, the relay station hands changed teams on a sultry Texas day. Blackie asked the driver, Daniel, to tie the side curtains onto the canvas top to allow a fresh breeze inside.

"Made good time this morning." Daniel spoke in a nasal, whiney drawl. "With a fresh team, we'll stay right on schedule. Make another twenty-five miles 'fore dark."

Unable to match such a fast pace with only one horse, Blackie understood the logical reasons behind Pascal's orders to ride the mail coach. Yet he resented them as orders not meant for a partner, but for an errand boy.

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An hour later, the coach slowed for a sharp curve around a rocky outcrop along the Guadalupe River road. Before gathering speed again, the coach lurched sideways as it jerked to a stop in a swirl of dust. The abrupt halt tossed a drowsy Blackie to the coach's floor. He rubbed a sore elbow and cursed the careless driver before he glanced outside to where a thick pine log rested against the wheels. The log had struck the coach and kicked the light rig off the road sideways.

*I expected trouble at some point, but this isn't in the plan.*

He glimpsed three riders, guns drawn, as they followed the path made by the log down the grassy slope. Before the riders reined in beside the mail coach, their warning shot barked.

The rider nearest the coach, a bone-skinny lad akin to a tattered scarecrow wore its sun-bleached, ill-fitting clothes with a rope belt. The squirt dressed dirt-poor, but he owned a pistol.

The squat man in the middle sported a gap-toothed fool's grin, but signaled his resolve with a smoking revolver. He licked thick lips while his bulging eyes flitted. The dumpy little man's furtive motions reminded Blackie of a pop-eyed toad in search of horseflies.

The last rider, a hairy, ugly brute, freed his leg from a stirrup only to kick a braying mule into silence. Jug-handle ears and a jagged knife scar from nose to ear added to his ugliness.

Three red-necked peckerwoods trying to rob him added insult to the indignity of riding in this piddley mail coach. After rising from the floor, Blackie eased through the coach's open side and stepped across to stand on the pine log resting against the coach's wheels. The move let him stand closer to the armed riders. His throat tightened, unable to swallow spit.

He stood like a supplicant, his silk hat held chest high in his left hand. Once before, he used the scared pilgrim trick. Against three guns, this time might be touch and go, unless the coach guard helped. Inside his silk hat, Blackie hid his cocked 36-caliber Colt Navy pistol. He faced the bandits, added a quaver in his voice, and exaggerated his slight English accent.

"Gentlemen, do we have a problem?"

The big ugly bandit flicked a glance at the other two riders and nodded toward Blackie.

"Dang tenderfoot," the guard said. From his perch next to the driver, Elmore spat tobacco toward Blackie. Elmore stood as he swung his shotgun toward the riders. "You ain't robbing—"

A blast from the ugly brute's old Starr revolver knocked Elmore from the coach and sent his shotgun flying. Big Ugly guffawed in a raspy growl at Elmore's tumble. "Dumb sumbitch."

The dropped shotgun fired when its muzzle struck the ground. Buckshot slammed into the hard roadbed as rock and pellets blew outward. The outlaws' horses flinched from the ricochet.

The thunderous boom of the double-barreled scattergun resounded in echo as Blackie fired his Colt through the top of the silk hat. His slug plowed deep into the brute's chest.

Big Ugly's face twisted with pain. "You bastard." He aimed his pistol at Blackie.

While he flipped the top hat aside, Blackie thumbed the Colt's hammer and blasted. His shot punched a third eye in Big Ugly's forehead. Big Ugly leaned before he toppled from the saddle.

Toady fought to control his bucking horse as he reined it toward the coach. He twisted in his saddle, snapping a quick shot.

Toady's slug sang past Blackie's head, buzzing like an angry wasp. The next round Blackie fired knocked the squat Toady sideways.

A blood red rose blossomed in middle of Toady's shirt. Before he slid from the horse, his crooked fool's grin faded.

The last outlaw, Scarecrow, regained control of his pellet-pocked horse, but stared slack-jawed and wide-eyed at the fallen men. He appeared unable to decide whether to run or shoot.

Blackie fired before Scarecrow decided. The bullet's impact jerked Scarecrow from the saddle. He collapsed in a heap like a puppet without strings. Distant crows cawed in alarm.

A shiver shook Blackie, almost like when he needed to piss. *Toady's shot came too close.* The tension eased as he flexed his shoulders and stretched before a flash of recognition jerked at him. Big Ugly had patrolled along the Indianola docks when Blackie inspected Pascal's in-bound freight. A big man spots other big men for their potential threat. *Why did Big Ugly nod to the other riders before he killed Elmore?* These bandits wanted no mail. *They wanted me—dead. If these jerks had killed me and stolen Pascal's money, the freight line might not survive.*

He had last visited San Antonio four years ago, before he grew to six-feet-five and a beefy two hundred twenty pounds. Only the Ortega Freight crew knew him by sight. Until he found the trail of the people who sent these bandits, he decided not to use his true name in San Antonio. No need to tell his name to a killer.

After he stooped to recover the silk hat, Blackie stuck his pinky finger through the bullet-hole. "Damn. Ruined my hat." He glanced at the shaken driver. "Daniel, tend to Elmore." He hurried to examine the downed outlaws. Open, unfocused eyes signaled them dead. He collected the bandits' weapons and holsters. To render them safe, he removed the percussion caps from their pistols. Next, he gathered the saddled horses and tied them to the coach's boot.

Daniel shivered like a whipped dog and jittered at Blackie's every movement. "I hain't seen none kilt before. Let alone kilt by a fancy-dressed drummer. Never did see you draw your Colt before it belched fire." He eased alongside the team and patted one's rump.

"You two gossiped as loud as magpies. Thought you told Elmore I carried a hidden Colt."

"Aww ... we're just jawing, not meant to offend." Daniel removed the fringed-cuff gloves used to work the leather reins. "Your fancy coat and shiny silk hat made me and Elmore wonder what kind of gent you was. Elmore said just being as big as a full-grown grizzly don't make you tough as one. He figured you for a city boy, play-acting mean and rough." Daniel spat a gob of tobacco and wiped the dribble off his chin. "That silk hat had us flummoxed. You put me in mind of an undertaker or a hangman."

To Blackie's eye, the runty driver dressed like a shop-worn dandy. A paisley wool vest hung over a collarless dingy-white shirt with corded pants stuffed into his boot tops. On his head sat a high-crowned, floppy-brimmed, brown felt hat adorned with a long turkey feather.

Daniel squeaked, his voice thin and strained. "Your fancy hat and trim chin-strap beard gives a city look. But I were near right about a hat fit for a hangman. Them *bandidos* is dead."

Blackie tipped the top hat. "I intended this as a gift to Black Kettle, a southern Cheyenne chief. I lived with him for a trade season years ago. He favors fancy hats and shiny foofaraw."

"I knowed you got too much tan for a drummer selling trinkets and wares. You done lived with them Cheyenne, fought with injuns on the prairie, and still got your hair." Daniel shook top to bottom in a shiver. "Elmore doubted you had grit or he'd have let you lead this here fracas." He gathered Elmore's hat, its crown crushed by the fall, and covered the lifeless face.

He studied Daniel's chatty, fidgety remorse at Elmore's death. Blackie expected grief would visit Daniel later, when alone. Blackie knew Death's torment—it called upon him far too often.

The coach's boot served as a worktable to reload his "cap and ball" 1851 Colt Navy with fresh black powder and lead. He loaded all six chambers before deciding to load another weapon. From the hub, he gathered a dab of wheel grease to seal each chamber, preventing a flashover.

As Daniel sidled near, Blackie asked, "Can we move this log with the mule team?"

"Nuh, I doubt it. We ain't got no chain to snatch it up with. Makes no matter. We cain't roll."

The nearside steerage wheel hangs catawampus. The log must've broke it."

After reloading the Navy, Blackie shoved the pistol into the shoulder holster under his coat.

"You want to ride a mule to the next town, bring the law, and a chain to haul off this log?"

"No sirree, bob." Daniel leaned away, his arms crossed, and his lower lip puffed in a pout.

"Why the hell not?"

"I cain't ride off and leave the mail unguarded. Not with Elmore dead."

"A little late to worry about a robbery."

Daniel sang a litany of tired excuses, which sounded too practiced. "Want you to know I'm the conductor of this here mail coach. Ain't nobody's go-fetch boy."

"Quit whining. Being an errand boy is a boil on my ass, too." Blackie lifted a breech-loading Sharps long-rifle from a canvas bag in the boot. After he loaded a paper-wrapped cartridge and a cap, he slid the Sharps into a buckskin scabbard decorated with Cheyenne beadwork. From the same bag, he yanked loose a heavy 44-caliber Colt Dragoon still wrapped in its gun belt. In a few minutes, he wore a belly holster with another loaded pistol.

Unfazed by Daniel's blather, Blackie unhitched the mules. He removed a rolled blanket and rope from a saddled horse and then tied his travel baggage onto a blanket-draped mule. After lifting Scarecrow's body onto his horse, he roped limp hands and feet to the cinch ring. Moving the mortal remains spread the stench of blood, guts, and death's final discharge.

Daniel twitched before he spoke. “You want help to lift them up there?”

“If it is not too much trouble, given how busy you are guarding the mail.”

In silence, they lifted the other two bodies onto saddled horses. Uncomfortable around the scent of the dead, the horses shuffled their feet, snorted, and grew skittish.

Blackie tied the horses’ reins to the rope leading his baggage mule. “I will send some help when I reach Seguin. Wrap Elmore in the boot’s canvas to keep the blow-flies from feeding on him.” Mounted on the other mule, he called over his shoulder. “I decided not to chance a ride on one of their mounts. Be my luck, leading such a grisly load, to meet a lawman. You Texans get cranky and short-tempered with a horse thief and murderer.”