

Zach's Gold

(excerpt)

Chapter 1

“Ya skinny little punk. Get outta here before I shoot yer whiney Texas ass,” a raspy voice roared.

Someone backed into him in the murky saloon's dim interior.

“I hope you're not talking to me, stranger,” Zach Daughtry replied in his low baritone, thick and slow like tupelo honey on a cold morning. He laid his left hand on the short fellow's neck what backed into him, shifting Shorty aside. “I don't take kindly to folks disparaging Texas.”

Zach eased Shorty behind him as he drew his right hand pistol. He carried two Remingtons in shoulder holsters under his butt-length riding jacket, not quite hidden, but not as blatant as the two-pistol holster rig in tooled leather tied to legs of this yammering Yankee.

The double-click of Zach thumbing the Remington's hammer to full cock stopped the tubby blowhard where he stood.

In the silence, six-foot-tall Zach glanced below to Shorty. *Why he's a lad what ain't shaved yet. He's wandered into deep water arguing with this blathering bully.*

“I weren't talking to ya,” the bully snarled. “I meant the snot-nosed runt hiding behind ya. I'm gonna teach—”

“You mean my young cousin?” Zach asked, nodding at the lad. “If you're giving free lessons, why don't you give me one?”

The bully's face reddened, his lips tightening as he exhaled a snort. His eyes locked on Zach's as unblinking heartbeats passed.

“He can't come here and accuse me of shooting somebody. Hell, he ain't carrying a pistol.”

“I've got one, stranger.” As casual as if asking the Yankee to pass the salt, Zach said, “You want to try taking it?”

The flap-yap bully straightened, his lips forming a sneer.

“One more thing,” Zach said with a smile, “if your friends waiting at the table behind you stand, I'll kill you with the opening shot.”

The Yankee ran his dark tongue over his thick lips, glancing behind to the table. “It's all right, boys. We're only jawing.”

Zach flashed him a smile. “I do apologize if my young cousin got mouthy. Please, let us

leave so you and your friends can enjoy your drinks in peace.” He reached behind to grab Shorty’s arm before backing them through the saloon door.

Outside, Zach dragged Shorty around the corner to the water trough where he’d tied his horse and pack mule.

He surveyed the lad, top to bottom. The longhaired youngster wore a miner’s canvas pants with a two-inch wide leather strap belt holding the pants on his scrawny hips. On his feet, he wore a miner’s lace-up boots. “How old are you?”

“Why does everyone ask me that?” The lad huffed aloud. “I’m fifteen, and man enough to work at mining. I can take care of myself. The fat Yankee bully shot my dad. He—”

“You figure getting killed will bring your dad to life, or are you planning to join him in the Great Beyond?” Zach leaned forward to dip a hand in the water trough, scooping a handful to splash on his face. He reset his hat, flipping the sweat from his long dark-brown hair pinned in a leather cuff behind his neck.

When Zach Daughtry arrived in Tarryall four minutes ago he thought, *Some things don’t change. A new town, a new saloon, same old rotgut whiskey.*

His aching butt signaled he’d grown soft during his adventures in Eagle Pass two months earlier. Today’s ache came from five weeks of steady riding to reach Tarryall, Colorado. After reading an old El Paso newspaper, he expected to find this near deserted place a loud and roaring boomtown with nearby gold strikes.

Another thing hadn’t changed. If he passed a saloon, he stopped to wet his whistle. One glass satisfied his desire. After dismounting, he’d cast the unpainted batten-board saloon a longing glance, but a horse needed a drink as often as its rider. He’d led his gelding and a pack mule to the water trough on the saloon’s shady east side. One piece of his old Confederate cavalry discipline still held.

After watering his animals, he climbed three warped pine steps before opening the saloon’s plank door. The dark interior caused Zach to pause a step, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the dim room, but his hesitation let trouble sneak in. Until the short fellow bumped into him, he intended nothing more than to enjoy one glass of whiskey before riding into South Park’s basin.

“Dad ain’t dead, thank God. I carried him to the doctor in Fairplay soon enough he’ll make it.

But none of us sluice miners will make it if them claim-jumping killers inside have their way.” Shorty puffed up like a rooster. A bantam rooster.

“What’s your name?” Zach asked.

“Matt. Well, Matthew Humphrey. Me and my dad got a claim upstream on Tarryall Creek.” He pointed to a slat-sided farm wagon hitched to one mule. “I gotta return the wagon to the General Store. Harvey, the owner, let me use it to carry Dad to the doctor.”

“I’m Zach Daughtry.” He shook Matt’s hand. “It won’t help your pa if you get killed. Tell the sheriff. Let the law handle this.” Zach furrowed a brow and glanced at the lad’s face.

“What’d you expect to happen inside when you braced that bully and you don’t carry a pistol?”

“I wanted him to fistfight. I ain’t afraid of fatso,” Matt said, puffing his chest.

“I admire your grit, but you’re gonna need more than sand in your belly if you intend to take on his crowd,” Zach said, scratching the back of his head.

“I’m pretty good with my fists and faster on my feet than those fat lummoxes.”

“Your problem is you haven’t learned to count. You faced four men. If they came at once, you can’t dodge them all,” Zach said, wiping his mustache and Vandyke beard. “My problem is I been chased from the only saloon in town, and I’m thirsty.”

“Across at the General Store, Harvey’ll sell you a whole bottle. He sells everything in there. I’ll introduce you.” Matt glanced at his miner’s boots, shuffling his feet. “Might be, you’d show me what kind of gun to buy. You sure handled them claim-jumpers with yours.”

Zach shifted his stance to spread his feet, balancing his weight between them. “Look me in the eye,” he barked, pointing to his eyes with one finger.

Matt jerked straight at Zach’s sharp command. He held eye contact for ten seconds before he blinked, glancing away.

“The bully blinked sooner than you did,” Zach said. “He blinked because he knew I’d kill him. None of his bunch figured it worth dying for hooraying a kid. Face it, Matt. They cut you a bit of slack ’cause you *are* a kid, but you’ve used your slack. The next time, they’ll dot your ‘eyes’ with lead. If you’d walked in the saloon wearing a gun, he wouldn’t have blinked at killing you. Worse yet, if you’d worn a gun, I wouldn’t have stepped in. Let the law handle it.”

“I may not know a bunch, but I can tell you this much. You got something to learn here.” Matt curled his lip, tugging his hat tight. “’Cause there ain’t no law in South Park.”

Chapter 2

If Zach hadn't been so thirsty, he'd spit. When his best friend, Jeb Benjamin, and he skedaddled from the damned Union POW camp in Chicago, they tried to right every Yankee wrong riding south to Eagle Pass, Texas. It had no law either. Not one man stood to stop the *bandoleros* from kidnapping Jeb's niece. But here, without Jeb in Colorado to cover his play, or to conjure a plan, he had no option. *No sir, this ain't my problem. I'm staying clear of this mess.*

Boots clattered on the steps around the saloon's corner before a deep voice called, "Hey, Linc, our horses are on this side."

"Yeah, yeah, Carl," the bully's raspy voice barked. "I'll catch ya along the road after I hold a prayer session with the kid and his nosy cousin. They'll pray I stop hitting 'em."

"You want for us to wait?" Carl's deep voice called again from around the corner.

"Nah. I wanna keep these miners from getting uppity. If I cain't handle 'em two, I'm in the wrong line of work." Linc barked a laugh and strolled around the corner.

"If you're more than an hour catching us, you'll buy the first round in B-Joe," Carl called, with his voice fading as the men rode away from the saloon's west side.

Zach stepped away, toward the building's rear, to prevent the men leaving from glimpsing his face before they rode west.

Linc reacted as if he assumed Zach stepped away from fear, and strutted closer. "Ya didn't expect to get away with yer sneaky draw in the dark, did ya cousin?"

"I want to avoid trouble if I can, stranger. I'd apologize again if it'd satisfy you," Zach said. "I'll take my licks, if such is on your mind, but I won't let you manhandle the lad."

"Ya won't *let me*?" Linc roared, before laughing. He touched his holster on the right. "How the hell ya gonna stop me? It ain't dark now. Yer sneaky draw won't play in the sunlight." Linc stood a bit shorter than Zach, but his blubber outweighed Zach's lean 180 by forty pounds.

Zach smiled at Linc as if meeting an old and trusted friend. "Sneaky?" Zach said, shifting his left foot forward a step. He raised his right arm, shoulder high, away from his body before he glanced at his open right hand, wiggling its fingers. He lifted his left hand across his chest, pointing to the other. "Are you worried my right hand is sneaky?"

"Think you're fun—"

Zach continued moving his left hand, drawing his second pistol from under his raised right armpit before extending the left hand pistol to touch Linc's chest as he fired. By shoving the muzzle against Linc's chest, it helped muffle the sharp edge of the bullet's explosive crack, limiting the distance shots sound carried. "My left hand is the sneaky one."

He waved at Matt. "Climb to the top step. Tell me if those men stopped or turned around."

"Nope. They rode on outta sight," Matt called, after reaching the porch.

"Walk. I mean *walk* to the other side. Lead his horse over here," Zach said. "Tell me if folks are glancing around to find who fired the shot."

After Matt brought the horse close, Zach threaded the saddle's rope under Linc's armpits, looping it around the saddle horn as a pulley to lift the heavy man upright against his horse. Zach draped Linc's left arm across the saddle while he pulled Linc's right arm across his shoulder. To a casual observer, Linc appeared as a drunk supported between his horse and Zach.

"What ya doing?" a bald man called from a doorway across the wide street.

"Damn fool can't hold his liquor," Zach called. "Trying to show he could still shoot straight. Fired one shot before he passed out. I'm gonna walk him for a while to find if I can get him sober enough to ride."

"Damn fools are lucky ya didn't kill one another." Baldy waved a hand as if saying *go away*.

"Is there a gully or a ravine nearby?" Zach asked.

"N-n-no, sir," Matt said. "This is how they shot my dad. Deep voice called Dad's name, and when Dad glanced away, Linc shot him. They claimed Dad drew first. Nobody'd listen to me."

"Why do you think he came around the corner after us?"

"I dunno. I guess you showed him up inside. He wanted to beat you up if you wouldn't draw on him."

"Let this be your first lesson. Stay focused on the man trying to kill you—beat him to it."

"Wasn't you scairt?"

"Sure. It's normal to sense the tingle of fear, but don't allow it to control your actions. Enough lessons. I need to find a place to dump him until we ride clear from this area. You stay away from hereabouts until your dad is with you."

"Hey, I have just the place," Matt said. "There's an old mine shaft or a dry well. Folks've called it both. It's past the east edge of the town. Wanna drop him inside?"

"Lead me to it before you go find your wagon and return it to Harvey," Zach said. "I don't

want you mixed up in this more than you are. I'll meet you at Harvey's. If it's the only store in town, it won't be hard to find."

Matt led the man's horse into the brush before he kicked a wooden hatch cover with his foot. Despite the afternoon sun, the thick brush shielded Linc's body from view of anyone nearby.

"You go ahead," Zach said. "I'll meet you at Harvey's in a four minutes."

After Matt departed, Zach stripped Linc's two-gun holster, money pouch, and boots before he searched Linc's pouch, collecting \$65 in gold coin.

Hard to believe this man earned such money working a job other than thievery.

Zach used his belt knife to slice open and strip Linc's clothes. He dropped the saddle into the shaft first. After dumping the saddlebag's contents on the ground, he dropped the bags inside. Linc carried Allen & Wheelock pistols re-chambered for brass rounds. *Unusual weapon for a gunfighter.* He slipped the nude Linc headfirst into the shaft, listening for the body to hit bottom. Zach removed the bridle and reins from Linc's horse before he slapped its rump, letting it free.

He returned to the saloon's water trough to gather his gelding and pack mule as if nothing happened. Once mounted, he rode to Harvey's store where he found Matt waiting outside.

Harvey's General Store differed from the town's other buildings because Harvey arranged merchandise for sale outside, while the other buildings sat abandoned.

"I'll introduce you to Harvey," Matt said. "I gotta return the mule to the man with the claim next to ours. Harvey's decent for a Yankee, an' like the rest, he don't offer much in credit sales."

"Funny how merchants expect payment for their goods," Zach said, swatting the brim of Matt's hat as they entered the store.

"Harvey, this is Zach Daughtry. He's a new miner in the area. Zach, meet Harvey Goodman. Dad says he lives up to his name."

"How's your dad doing?" Harvey asked, laying a hand on Matt's shoulder.

"The doctor says bed rest for two weeks. No heavy lifting when he's ready to walk again. Bullet went under the shoulder joint, letting him use his left arm almost normal. Doc says his left lung is part collapsed, which leaves him not breathing too good at this altitude."

"Let's hope he continues to improve," Harvey said.

Matt waved a hand at the men in goodbye before leaving through the store's half-light door.

Harvey faced Zach. "I saw your loaded mule outside. What can I sell you? Zach, is it?"

"I answer to Zach, or 'dinner's ready,'" he said with an easy smile. "I need a slab of side

meat, or fresh beef if you have it, and five pounds of potatoes. I'm sick of eating beans on the trail. I want a bottle of whiskey, if it's decent."

"I've the food you requested. I don't rebottle my whiskey like the saloons that add water and flavoring. My whiskey is whatever the drummer's selling this month."

"You'll give me a taste to tell what I'm buying?" Zach raised an eyebrow.

"Sounds like an excuse for a 'wee nip' as my Scottish friends say." Harvey slipped behind the counter to retrieve a bottle, pouring a splash in a coffee cup.

Zach swallowed the drink and gave a lip-smacking sigh. "I'll have the bottle in your hand."

Harvey busied himself filling Zach's order. "How'd you meet Matt?"

"I bumped into him at the saloon," Zach said. "It didn't appear like the right place for him. I suggested we find another, but there isn't one. Is the town closing or is this a breathing spell before more building?"

"Tarryall Creek produced large nuggets and thick flakes before winter froze it shut last year. The easy, surface sluicing played out by April. I haven't seen a nugget of any size since then. It's only gold dust and tiny flakes now." Harvey canted his head, raising his eyebrows. "Thinking of buying a claim? You have any idea of how to mine or sluice?"

"Before the war, my granny on Mama's side owned land with gold mines in north Georgia. Granny's son, my uncle, his two sons, and I worked her mines. After the war, the carpetbaggers claimed Granny's properties for back taxes. By the time I got home, it'd changed hands three times. My uncle taught me what elements to search for and how to get it out."

"You're way ahead of most sluice miners working on Tarryall Creek."

"If the easy pay is gone, why are claim-jumpers rousting the sluicers?" Zach asked. "Do the jumpers believe a thick vein up the mountainside is spawning those nuggets?"

"Those are questions for a geologist. I only understand the mines at Fairplay are digging deep and producing gold. I'm a follower. If gold played out here, I'm moving to Fairplay."

"They reported the claim office is located in Buckskin Joe. Why not move there?"

"The Platte's headwater ran hot for a while, but it's playing out too. Even the U.S. Assay Office is moving to Fairplay. No point having the only store in an empty town, *again*." Harvey shrugged. He pushed a bundle wrapped in brown kraftpaper and the bottle across the counter.

"The food and the bottle are nine and a half dollars. Food's expensive in the mining towns."

"If I can break my long habit of eating regular, I'll be set until the snow flies." Zach dropped

a half-ounce gold Mexican coin on the counter, a memento from Miguel's strongbox in Mexico.

Harvey placed the coin in his mouth, biting on it. He examined the coin before weighing it on a balance and nodded acceptance. "We're not often offered Mexican coins, but gold is gold." He gave Zach four silver dollars and four-bits in change.

"Are coins minted at Denver like they did at the U.S. Mint at Dahlonega, Georgia?"

"No, it only became an official U.S. Mint this year. Denver stores the gold before shipping it east for minting. I learned about the U.S. Mint in Georgia when they sent my detachment there after the war."

"Please, tell me you're not one of Sherman's men." Zach's eyes hooded.

"Only in the sense we served in the same Union Army. I escorted three Pinkerton agents to Dahlonega in an attempt to find the missing gold," Harvey said, shaking his head. "As if the Confederates left their gold behind."

"Lot of stories about whatever happened to the Confederate gold at war's end."

"It made for wild tales while sharing a bottle of whiskey over a campfire," Harvey said, laughing. "On a more serious note, I'd suggest don't flash your gold coins around the basin. Too many people are found shot in the back in South Park of late. Watch *your* back."

"The man in the saloon one of them?" Zach asked.

"Which one? Can you describe him."

"An inch shorter than me and you," Zach said. "Your age. Thick arms and shoulders, pushing 200 pounds. Going bald on top with dark brown hair. Right handed to a belly-gun on the left, with a Colt Navy re-chambered for brass cartridges. Button-front blue flannel shirt over sky-blue Yankee britches with the yellow stripe ripped off. Voice deeper than a bullfrog's croak."

"But you didn't get a good view of him?" Harvey said, barking a laugh. "Sounds like Carl, or Carlton. I don't have an idea if it's his Christian or family name. He leads a group riding hereabouts, but they're from a larger gang in B-Joe. Watch yourself around Linc. I suspect he's a back-shooter."

"His kind don't last long," Zach said. "What's a B-Joe?"

"It's what the early miners called Buckskin Joe. Don't ask where the names came from. You get a different answer from each man you ask. As to Carl, the rumor has it these jackasses served in the same unit in the war, and their former captain is their leader. I've noticed several people in B-Joe appear to give orders to Carl, so I don't have a guess at which one is the leader."

“And Linc shot Matt’s dad?” Zach asked.

“I’m not happy about it either. Linc shot him but Carl instigated it. They had witnesses who said Cameron drew on him. Only Carl’s men claimed to witness it, come to think on it.” Harvey furrowed his eyebrows. “You act and talk like a lawman. Is mining the *only* reason you’re in the basin?”

“My partner and I ended up as the only law in a Texas border town. The Reconstruction Governor appointed him County Sheriff by ignoring our military service. I decided to move on. I wanted to find if these tall mountains hide more gold than I found in the Georgia hills. I expect gold has brought out the worst in men.”

“The sluice miners are a decent lot. The troublemakers are the gamblers, sharpers, and thieves who come out at night. When the gold played out here, the town grew quiet the next day. Don’t ride along Tarryall Creek at night—the miners are apt to shoot first.”

“Thanks for the information. I’ll return when I need more,” he said, lifting the bottle. Zach carried his goods outside, loading them on his mule. He gazed along the empty buildings before heading into the grassland south of town to camp in the open prairie for the night. He tossed away Linc’s clothes and holster as he rode in the grass, tossing each pistol in different directions. A lesson learned in Chicago after leaving the POW camp. *Never carry a dead man’s pistol.*

After dismounting, he stepped away from his sorrel gelding to slap trail dust from his faded blue cotton shirt and brown canvas work pants with his broad-brimmed, flat-crowned, brown felt hat. He removed the saddle from his gelding before lifting the pack from the mule. With an iron rod from his pack, he drove the rod deep to picket the animals for the night in the basin’s lush prairie grass.

“To think I left friends in Eagle Pass for this,” he muttered after he stretched on his bedroll. “It’s a sorry state when a man sleeps alone and has to furnish his own whiskey.”

Chapter 3

Snow-capped mountains ringed South Park, leaving an oblong-shaped grass-filled basin twenty miles wide and fifty miles long. Zach surveyed the basin's grassland. He might not be a seasoned cattleman, but he understood horses and the pasture needed to raise a good herd. If he wanted to raise horses in these high meadows, he needed a stake of gold. He figured to try his luck in South Park until snowfall.

If he didn't find paying gold this season, he planned to ride south through the winter before turning west to the Pacific, then angling north to Sacramento by next spring. *It's time to find out if I learned anything from my uncle's lessons on how to recognize gold-bearing strata.*

The sluice miners along Tarryall Creek didn't welcome another prospector. Eleven miles northwest of Tarryall town, Zach found Matt with two other men. Matt waved his hat, beckoning Zach to ride close.

"Scouting for a place to claim?" Matt said after Zach rode to the group of three miners.

"I thought you said no open land for claims remained along this creek."

"It is true," a tall blond man said, who wore bib-front overalls like a farmer. "I'm Per Rolfson. If you're a hard worker, I'll sell you a piece of my claim on shares. There's gold here, but it needs digging deep to expose the old streambed."

"You make a fine offer, Rolfson." He glimpsed Matt behind Rolfson, shaking his head. "Let me scout around South Park for a few days while I consider it."

He waved a hand at Matt as he rode away, following along the upper Tarryall.

The next morning Zach rode southwest searching for Buckskin Joe. Two rocky ridges ran parallel to one another twelve miles east from the basin's western edge. The western most, Red Hill, formed a long narrow ridge with a road across a saddle. East of Red Hill lay Reinecker Ridge. It resembled a giant's backbone—wide, craggy, without a path for horse or wagon to cross it. He continued south between the ridges, seeking the South Platte as a landmark to follow west.

Zach planned to visit the U.S. Assay Office in B-Joe to learn their procedure for selling gold once he staked a claim. In Fairplay, he expected the District Mining Office to have maps and information about areas claimed or available to claim. Anyone could claim land. The trick

became claiming land with gold, which lead him to search the basin for land bearing gold.

The time wasted loading and unloading the mule each day instead of searching for gold frustrated him. He wanted a base camp to leave his gear as he searched for a promising area to sluice, but he needed another man to guard the gear.

As midday neared, Zach sought shade or water for a rest. He didn't plan to camp or unload the mule. After crossing a rise, he surveyed a stream running southeast across the basin. *Let's hope this is the South Platte.*

He rode closer to observe a sluice miner working downstream, while to the west three tents or camps dotted the creek. Farther upstream, water flowed from the line of snow-capped peaks, marking South Park's western edge.

The first sluice miner waded from the creek, strode to his threadbare tent, and stood holding a rifle. "Move on. This land is claimed," the miner shouted.

With his mule in tow, Zach continued upstream, noting the uprooted banks and rock piles from rerouted streambeds where it had meandered in goosenecks across the grassland. Two more miners refused to let him approach their claim before he called to a man sitting by his tent.

"Can I let my animals drink?" Zach shouted.

The man removed a pipe from his mouth and waved an arm for Zach to lead his animals to the creek. He loosened the saddle on the gelding before glancing at the sluice miner—a short, broad-bottomed man with kinky hair and a curly beard. The camp appeared sparse and unkempt. Miners wasted no effort in cleanliness, throwing trash and broken gear wherever it landed. Trash replaced grass and flowers along the upper South Platte, little more than a step-across stream.

"I'll share last night's beans and side meat in my Dutch oven if I can use your fire to reheat my pot," Zach said, pointing to his pack mule.

"Yah. Better your cooking than mine. If you call it salted beef, me, I will believe you," he answered in a German accent where the "w" sounded like a "v."

Zach failed to understand, but if the man wanted to pretend he ate beef, it made no matter to Zach. He offered his hand to the pipe-smoker when he drew near. "I'm Zach Daughtry." They shook hands. "Thanks for letting me water my animals. You mind if I sit a spell?"

The miner pointed to the ground with his pipe stem. "I'm Otto Dietz. I don't understand why those men chased you from their claim. I can assure you, there is little to no gold for you to steal along here."

Given the sparse conditions of the camp, Otto appeared well fed with heavy jowls and a thick waist. He reminded Zach of the German farmer Karl Dorfmann, whom Jeb and he helped drive two dozen calves across Indiana a year ago after leaving the POW camp.

Zach hung his cast-iron pot by its handle on an iron tripod's hook Otto used over his fire pit.

"Before the war, I mined gold-bearing ore in the low mountains of Georgia. We lost the mine after the war. You finding any pay?" He raised an eyebrow at Otto while he stirred the pot with a long-handled wooden spoon.

"Too little. I thought I followed an old streambed giving good pay at first, but now it doesn't pay to dig. The first-comers grabbed the good land upstream. We're too far from the source."

"You mean the hard-rock mines?"

"Yah. They go deep inside the mountain. The miners claim to have veins of gold wider than a man's hand, running and twisting for miles underground." Otto gave his head a single shake.

"The gold we mined in Georgia lay imbedded in hard quartz. The big mines crushed the ore in stamp mills, using mercury to extract the gold. In our mine, we crushed ore to a powder by hand, sluicing the powder for flakes and dust. Mercury cost too much for us to use. We never found a vein, only seams." Zach ladled beans and meat on two pie tins as he spoke, offering Otto a hardtack biscuit.

Otto poured a thick, black coffee into tin cups for each man. They finished their meal in silence before Otto retrieved his pipe.

"The men sluicing on the Tarryall are being raided by nightriders. Any problems here?"

"They come, but I have nothing for them." Otto shrugged. "They're suspicious I have a stash, but I spend it on food as soon as I find it. I think they understand there is too little gold this far downstream." He muttered a curse under his breath.

"Where do you buy supplies?"

"I ride to Fairplay. B-Joe is too wild. Too many drunks. Too many shootings. A group of us go together to prevent robbery when we sell our pay. Only five other miners remain on the Platte. Soon, we lack the numbers to protect ourselves. If another leaves, it forces the remaining men to leave for safety."

"There's a Deputy U.S. Marshal assigned to this area. Does he help?"

"*Nein*. He spends his time in Denver City or Colorado City. The basin is too dangerous for him to visit."

Zach carried the iron pot to the stream to wash it. He glanced at Otto for approval before using sand to clean the pot. He didn't want Otto to think he spied on the man's claim.

"I'm riding into B-Joe to check at the U.S. Assay Office and the Territory Mining Claims Office. Can I bring you anything from town when I return?" Zach offered.

"Yah. If coffee is under three dollars a pound, buy two pounds," Otto said.

"Arbuckle's is three dollars a pound? It's low-down *mean*. A man needs his coffee." Zach glanced at Otto. "If I buy three pounds of coffee for you, will you guard my mule and gear for a few days?"

"Yah. You risk more than I do by leaving your pack mule here," Otto said.

Fairplay sat in a quarter-mile wide valley five miles downstream from B-Joe with the South Platte River connecting the two. Fairplay grew with new buildings and trade from steady-paid mine workers, while B-Joe faded as did its easy-to-find placer gold.

Zach reined his horse to the hitch rail in front of the U.S. Assay Office in B-Joe. A pair of men loaded wooden packing crates into a wagon parked with its tail edged to the boardwalk on the right side. He strolled inside where two additional wooden crates sat on the floor.

"Is the Office open for business?" Zach asked a harried, portly man.

"It is, but we're busy moving records to storage in Fairplay. I'll be busy for another hour if you can come back later," the clerk said, while he checked a list in his hand.

"There's a signal to spend an hour wetting my whistle," Zach said, smiling.

The clerk wrinkled his nose with a sour grimace before showing Zach his back.

As if a true Texan, Zach mounted his gelding to trot thirty yards to the saloon, only to dismount again. The Pike's View Saloon offered a watering trough, obligating him to water his horse before watering himself. After mounting the boardwalk, a commotion farther along the storefronts drew his attention. He glanced along the boardwalk to figure what happened, when the shouting erupted into a fistfight at street level. A deep voice croaked fighting words.

There's a familiar voice.

"Don't get uppity with me, *boy*. I wasted too much time trying to teach ya idjits to march in the war. Just 'cause ya're free, it don't mean ya can talk to a white man any ol' way ya please."

"I was born free to parents born free," the black man said. "I can read and write. My parents sent me to France for an education, proving I'm aware of who my parents are, which is more

than you can say.”

Zach laughed aloud. *Whoa, what a good line to start a fight. I ought to save that line.*

“He got you with his comment, Carl,” Zach called from atop the boardwalk stairs. Calling his name caused the roughneck to twist in Zach’s direction.

He jerked his head at the black man. “Ya claimin’ this one as a ‘cousin,’ too?” Carl barked.

“He’s one of God’s children, so he’s kin in a Christian fashion, but not by blood.”

“Ya got a bad habit of buttin’ into other folks’ business, Reb,” Carl said, as he faced Zach.

“Your man offered to give my young cousin lessons the other day. I’m mighty curious if y’all are good enough to give lessons to each man you meet,” Zach said. He caught the man on the bottom step glance his way. If Zach had to bet, this man sat at the saloon table with his back to Zach during the time he spoke with Linc.

The man on the lower step shifted his body weight as if he planned to tackle Zach’s legs.

Zach drew his left-hand Remington from his right shoulder holster, whacking the pistol’s butt behind Shifty’s right ear. Shifty folded like an empty gunnysack, while his dark hat flew away, rolling in the mountain breeze.

Carl jerked away a step, pointing a finger. “What call ya got hittin’ my man?” He knew better than drawing with Zach’s pistol leveled at him. “Say, I ain’t seen Linc since meeting ya and yer cousins. Where did he go? Did ya bushwhack him after we left him?”

“I don’t have the time or patience for gossip, Carl. It’s not my job to keep track of your men. Drop your gun belt or die where you stand. The same goes for you other two. Shuck them. Now,” Zach said, cocking the Remington.

“Ya got the drop on us this time. It’ll go different next time,” Carl said.

“Only if you’re a back-shooter.” Zach waved to the black man, pointing with the pistol barrel. “Could I ask you to gather their hardware to toss in the trough?”

After the black man complied, Zach whispered, “They got some licks on you while they ganged you. You want to return the favor, one on one?”

“I do, if it’s a fair fight,” he replied with a wide smile. He stood an inch or two taller than Zach.

Zach waved at Carl. “You wanted to give lessons. Show me what you got.”

Carl didn’t need to be asked twice. He charged like an angry bull with his head lowered, expecting to butt the tall black man to the ground.

The black man pirouetted like a dancer, sitting on his heels with one leg extended as he spun. He swept Carl's legs from under him, causing his huge nose to plow a furrow. The black man rose from his spin, grabbing Carl's collar to lift his head. With a fist the size of a pile driver raised above his head, the black man delivered a tooth-loosening blow into the joint of Carl's jaw, knocking him out. After straightening, the black man nodded to Zach.

"Next." Zach waved his pistol for the next man to wade into the fight.

Curly-hair stood shorter than his friends, but carried heavy shoulders and thick arms. He threw long roundhouse punches. If one connected, it ended the fight.

The black man raised his fists in front of his face in the pugilistic style Zach once witnessed in Louisville. Instead of standing and waiting for Curly to hit him, the black man danced side-to-side. He stepped close to hit Curly's face with stinging left jabs before dancing away from Curly's sweeping haymakers.

To avoid the man's stinging jabs, Curly raised his hands to protect his face.

The black man feinted with a left jab, and when Curly lifted his hands, the black man shifted to deliver a right-hand uppercut into Curly's exposed gut.

Curly dropped to his knees as air whooshed from his lungs. On the ground, he lifted his head to draw a deep breath, but the black man rotated his shoulders to deliver another head-high pile driver, knocking Curly unconscious.

Slim, the last of Carl's men, didn't wait. He rushed the black man before he turned to face Slim, but it didn't work in his favor.

The black man twisted to loop his left arm around Slim's neck, clamping him in a headlock. After several right uppercuts to the head, Slim sagged to his knees, calling, "Enough. Enough."

The black man straightened, glancing around for danger before he caught Zach's eye. He nodded to Zach, leading him to lift his hat brim to acknowledge the black man's quiet thanks.

Now may not be the best time to visit the Pike's View Saloon. It'll rile Carl's friends. Zach gathered his gelding from the hitch rail before riding along the street past the U.S. Assay Office. He expected to visit on his next trip.

While he descended beside the mountain stream, Zach glimpsed Fairplay nestled alongside the South Platte, grasping why this village caused the decline of others in the basin. Northwest of Fairplay, on the steppes below the snow-capped peaks, wood buildings and iron tracks cluttered the mine entrances. Narrow-gauge iron tracks ran north or south from the mine entrances. Ore

cars carried detritus removed from the tunnels as the miners burrowed deep into the rock. The miners split rock to follow the treasure, dumping the broken rock outside in piles. Zach failed to imagine hand-width thick seams of gold.

His uncle and namesake, Big Zach, taught him to work in Granny's mine. He worked the mines everyday but Sunday from age twelve. He and his two cousins, Big Zach's sons, ran away before their seventeenth birthday to join the Alabama Cavalry once the War Between the States exploded. The Alabama Cavalry unit accepted the young cousins because they rode their own horses.

Zach's cousins died at Shiloh. In the Confederate retreat, he fell in with the Texas Cavalry when unable to locate his Alabama company. Later, he learned most died and they disbanded his company. He met Jeb Benjamin, the scout for a Texas cavalry company, for the first time. Jeb and Zach rode rear guard to delay the Yankees harassing the retreating wounded and defeated men. Impressed with Zach's skills as a skirmisher in his assignments, the Texas company commander requested a transfer reassigning Zach to Echor's Brigade, Texas 10th Cavalry.

A strapping lad before the war, Zach handled a small burro to pull ore carts from Granny's mine. Big Zach opened three mines into the steep hills on Granny's property. He hated the mines with their dark, dank passages and the moaning, grinding rock overhead. He developed the arm, shoulder, and chest muscles he carried today by slinging a sledgehammer or a pickax daily. Zach knew one thing: he had no desire to work underground again. Big Zach had an innate sense of how the gold-bearing strata meandered in igneous rock's folds and seams. His uncle tried to teach a young Zach what the rock formations meant and how to read the rock's formation and pressure. If his memory contained enough of his uncle's lessons, he expected to find gold others missed in the mountains of South Park.

The craggy mountains of Colorado brought him solace. He hoped they'd let him find peace after the bitter years in the POW camp, but the claim-jumpers aggravated him like a pebble in a shoe, mocking each step he took forward.