

# **The Best of Frontier Tales**

**Volume 3**

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ISBN: 978-1-940222-30-1

Cover art *Cowboys in the Bad Lands* by Thomas Eakins, 1888

Interior and cover design by Kimberly Pennell

# **The Best of Frontier Tales**

**Volume 3**

**Winning short stories from  
FrontierTales.com**

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Pen-L Publishing  
Fayetteville, Arkansas  
Pen-L.com

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# **Stoddard's Gold**

**By John Putnam**

An old, all-too-familiar voice haranguing a small knot of drunken miners outside a riverside grog shop caught my ear as I hurried back to my home. I'd long thought him dead, and he looked near to it, beard wild and gray, eyes sunk deep inside a face with cheeks as bilious as any corpse. Busy men rushed past him without a glance but I stopped, just as I had three years ago. Today, here at the junction of the Yuba and Feather Rivers, Marysville had boomed as a supply center for the gold mines upstream, and I'd become an important part of that growth, all because of Stoddard.

After mining along the American River near Greenwood Creek that first winter, and doing quite well until our claim finally played out, Anderson and I had opted to move north in hopes of finding an even more productive spot. We'd heard rumors of big strikes near the Yuba River; so in late May we'd arrived in Nevada City, just another gold boom mushroom town called Deer Creek Diggings in those days. I'd left Caldwell's Store heading for the Bella Union where a French lady was supposedly dealing twenty-one when I first saw him. He stood out front, a smattering of drunken miners around him much like today, except back then Stoddard had fire in his eyes, grit in his voice, and one of the biggest nuggets I'd ever seen in his hand.

"Myname's Stoddard and this is what I found. Look at it," he cried, shaking the gold high overhead. "It's big and coarse, not smooth and small like the gold you mine downstream. Most men think that means it comes from closer to the source, closer to the mother lode. There's a lake full of nuggets just like this one high up in the mountains and who knows what else is there, but I need help to get it out. Injuns jumped us just after we found these nuggets.

We were forced to run for our lives and I haven't seen my partner since. I think they might've killed him. I need twenty-five good men who can shoot straight and aren't afraid of a scrap. Who here is ready to go? Step up."

"I'll go." It was Anderson, my close companion for the past year. He took a step forward into the circle of men then noticed me. "Come on Micah," he pled. "This is just what we're looking for, our big chance to make enough to get a good start in life."

"But it sounds so risky," I replied, my mind stuck on Stoddard's dead partner.

"Yeah, but is it any more risky than the dangerous trip we made together last summer, all the way from St. Joseph across plains, mountains and deserts just to get here?" he pointed out with a bit of heat in his normally well tempered voice.

"We didn't have a shooting fight with Indians then," I replied with my own fire.

Stoddard stepped right into our little dust up. "It ain't for sure we'll have a set-to with Injuns. The ones I saw could've been a hunting party. They weren't likely to live near the lake so I reckon they're long gone from there, but it's always best to be safe."

Anderson grinned at me. "See Micah, it's not so scary now is it?" he said in that cocky way he had.

I shrugged, knowing Anderson had won me over again, but still unsure of the size of the mess I was about to walk into. "Okay, I'll go, but only because you talked me into it," I countered; remembering the many things Anderson had convinced me to do since we'd been together. He'd been right more often than not.

As the other men moseyed off—either they already had a good paying claim or were far wiser than I—Stoddard stuck his nugget back into a leather bag. "Come inside," he offered. "Let's have a drink and I'll give you the details. We leave in two days."

Inside the saloon I saw her at once, sitting near the back playing cards with eight or nine miners. She was lovely, and the first woman I'd seen in months. I barely listened to Stoddard as he recited chapter and verse the details of our trip. When he was done I found a seat at her table. I lost a hundred dollars that night. Folks might think that a lot but I never minded one bit. Here men often lost ten times that at the turn of a card.

And even though she barely spoke to me, just being around a woman was worth every cent.

The next two days were busy. On Saturday Anderson went with me to buy two stout mules with packsaddles from a man on Brushy Creek to add to the two we'd come here with. We spent the rest of the day getting four months worth of food and our mining gear ready to go. Then on Sunday, while Anderson helped Stoddard recruit more men for our daring adventure, I rode to Selby Flat where I'd heard of a man willing to sell a new Colt revolver at a reasonable price. The idea of a fracas with a party of wild Indians still had me inordinately disconcerted and the pistol was a big step up from my one shot rifle.

And in spite of a planned early start in the morning, I couldn't resist the urge to see Madame Reynard one last time before we left for Stoddard's mysterious lake. Like before she looked as winsome as anyone I'd ever seen, her face flush and full with lips red like a ripe cherry, and her hair, soft and buff as a young spring fawn, draped about her slender neck in tight coils. I sat across the table from her and quickly lost fifty dollars while beguiled by the sparkle of the lamplight reflected in her deep blue eyes.

Then she stood and, looking directly at me, said in her thickly accented English, "It is hot here. I need air," and calmly sauntered across the room with every man's gaze following her, leaving me feeling uncomfortable, unsure if there was some special meaning in her look.

It seemed impossible that a woman so pleasing could have any particular regard for me, but without her here I also had no interest in gambling and, with a long, hard day likely in store for me tomorrow, I knew it was best to return to camp. I gathered the remnants of my funds and walked outside into the night. Once there I looked around for the Madame but since I didn't see her anywhere I went on to my horse.

"You are going with Monsieur Stoddard tomorrow, oui?"

It was her. I spun to the sound of the voice just as she stepped from the shadows, a look on her face that I could interpret in no other way than concern, but concern for what, for who? "Yes, how did you know?" I replied, honestly at a loss.

"One hears things in the Bella Union, mon ami. But you must be careful. There is a man, Monsieur Raush, who has pledged to follow you and take your gold for himself."

“Raush,” I exclaimed. “I’ve never heard of him.”

She stepped closer and I felt her hand on my arm. “He is a very big man and a very bad man, très mal. He has many others with him. He will kill you all if he must,” she whispered, her mouth close to my face.

Once again my poor mind couldn’t grasp the right words, but without a warning she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me quickly full on the mouth. “Be careful, Micah Poole,” she breathed as she pulled away. “Find your gold then look for me when you return, s’il vous plaît.” With that she disappeared into the darkness, leaving me still bewildered and unable to believe what had just happened.

Riding back to our camp along Deer Creek on that warm, moonlit night, my blood turned chill more than once at an unexplained sound from the woods, or a shadow that loomed threateningly over the trail. Madame Reynard had left me perplexed and ill at ease in no small way with her tale of Raush and his threats to kill us all for the gold that Stoddard would lead us to. But even more unsettling was why she’d done it, and the taste of her lips that lingered still on mine.

Her soft voice flowed again through my clouded mind. “Be careful, Micah Poole,” she’d said, but I’d hardly spoken twenty words to her. How did she know my name? Few people here did. And then I’d let her run away without even asking her full name in return. Whatever caused such a lapse in my well-learned manners was beyond my reasoning at the moment.

“Look for me when you return,” she’d said next. No matter which way I turned the words over in my head it all came out the same. She cared about me somehow. Why I couldn’t fathom but the kiss seemed the proof of the pudding. Women don’t do things like that for no reason, or are such things different in France? I had no idea. The only girl I’d ever kissed was Betsy Pike and that only one short buss before I left for California.

Then there were the Indians who’d probably killed Stoddard’s partner. Maybe it was a hunting party that they’d happened to stumble across, but that was no guarantee that we wouldn’t run afoul of another group along our way. Nearly every week on the trail to California there came a rumor of Indians killing white men, but I had personally seen no sign of any serious trouble. Still, deadly incidents happened, and all too often.

I knew little of Indians, and that mostly from the wild tales told on the trip west. We’d seen Pawnee riding in the distance as we crossed the



prairie to Fort Kearney. Soon after fording the South Platte a whole party of Sioux, men, women and children, passed right in front of us. And near Fort Bridger Shoshone came into our camp wanting to trade. They were a pathetic, lice infested lot but seemed harmless enough.

I tied Buddy, my young chestnut, to a long tether in the grassy meadow behind our camp, then pulled out the new Colt revolver from my saddlebags and stuck it into my waistband. I was a fair shot with a rifle, but had had little use for a handgun on my family's farm in Kentucky. Yet knowing I had a new repeating pistol so close at hand gave me some small comfort against the host of demons so recently rising around me.

The fire burned low in our camp and I was disappointed to find Anderson tucked into his bedroll. I'd thought of nothing better than to talk with him about the events of tonight. Ten years my senior and married to a woman in Pennsylvania that he adored and spoke of constantly, I hoped he would have some soothing words for my troubled spirit. But not wishing to disturb my only true friend in California, I pulled off my boots, and crawled under my blanket as quietly as I could, making sure the Colt would be easy for me to get to, just in case.

Then Anderson rose on his elbow. "You've been at the Bella Union with Michelle Reynard again, haven't you?" he asked with a chuckle to his voice.

"Yes, I—"

"How much did you lose this time?" he demanded, still with a smile to his tone.

"Not so much," I mumbled, "but how do you know her first name?" I inquired with a lot more mettle, knowing Anderson to be dead set against gambling. He hoarded every ounce of gold he found and sent most of his money home to his wife.

"She asked about you today, while you were at Selby Flat. I think she's sweet on you, Micah."

I could tell from his manner he was teasing me about her now, and enjoying himself a great deal at my expense, but I needed some answers. "She warned me about a man named Raush who plans to follow us and take the gold we find at Stoddard's lake. Out of the blue she kissed me and afterwards told me to look for her when I get back. Then she ran off into the shadows." I said, all the while wondering if I would ever make it back here from wherever it was we were going.

"She kissed you, did she? I was right. She has set her cap for you, you Romeo," he laughed openly, enjoying his joke.

"I'm no Romeo!" I retorted, only knowing the meaning of the word because he'd used it to tease me about Betsy Pike when I'd told him about her one night along the trail. "But what about Raush," I asked. "He could be more dangerous than the Indians."

Anderson turned serious. "He could be. I saw him today too. He made quite a rhubarb when Stoddard told him we had as many men as we needed, threatened to follow us, and, yeah, even kill us if he didn't get his way. But he was drinking heavy. The truth is we'll likely slip out tomorrow before he sobers up. I'd worry more about the Indians than Raush."

"Well, if you say so," I muttered, unconvinced.

"You bet I say so. And when we get back here this fall, pack mules loaded with nuggets like the ones Stoddard has in his poke, you find that French gal and marry her. She's a catch. Her husband got killed a while back by a road agent who stole his gold. It left that lady in a whale of a pickle but she's done right well for herself it seems."

In spite of his teasing, Anderson's reaction to Madame Reynard and his suggestion that I marry her after we return from our trip did ease my mind a good deal, although the idea of wedding a woman I'd just met seemed too farfetched for my taste. Yet I knew that if I lived long enough I had to see her again, no matter what I had to do to find her. But it was the living long enough part that sat hard in my gut, twisting my insides into tight knots. The dual threat of unknown Indians and the all too real Raush wore deep across the grain of my better judgment.

"I still think this trip is risky, Anderson. First it was just Indians. Now there's Raush. Maybe we'd be best to stay here. Men are finding gold everywhere. Just tonight I heard more than a little talk about big finds on Rock Creek. Let Stoddard have his lake full of nuggets. Let Raush go with him," I implored.

"Micah, if you want to stay here and woo the French lady then you go right ahead. Lord knows you're at that age when a woman tends to settle heavy on a man's mind, and I'll grant there's a wagon load of danger in Stoddard's plan, but a man has to take some risks in life if he's going to make something special for himself. This is one of those things that could pay off beyond anything we've ever imagined. Now, you're as level headed

as any young man I've ever met, and you've grown as close to me as a brother, but you need to make your own decision about going."

As was his habit, Anderson had hit the core of my dilemma dead on, and moreover he'd trusted me to decide for myself, like he usually did. He was more a brother to me than my own flesh and blood who had never treated me with the respect Anderson does. I'm the youngest and Jacob is about Anderson's age. After our Pa died he'd run the farm with an iron fist, never once leaving me any say in what happened there, and because of his bullheadedness I'd left for California without his blessing. But I couldn't imagine parting with Anderson just yet, not after all we'd been through together.

"I feel the same about you, Anderson, and I can think of nothing I'd like less than our splitting up." I said without reservation. "But this venture with Stoddard has me as skittish as a raccoon that my old blue tick hound, Babe, ran up the elm tree beside our house, and it isn't just the Indians and Raush, it's Stoddard. I mean, what do we really know about him? Is he telling the truth? He could have gotten those nuggets anywhere."

"It's a good point, Micah. I believe his story about finding that gold in the lake," he said. "But in all truth, Raush has been rattling at my predilections more than I wanted to let on to you. I got a sense Stoddard knew him somehow, that there was bad blood between them. But when I asked Stoddard about it he denied knowing the guy. How about we meet up in the morning like we planned. If Raush is there causing trouble we'll back out of this trip. But if everything looks good, then we go. Sound fair to you?"

"Well, I guess I'm willing to go that far anyhow," I agreed, mostly because the idea of saying a final farewell to Anderson right now seemed a whole passel less appealing than the more distant and uncertain danger from Indians or Raush.

"Fine," Anderson declared. "Now let's get some rest. Lord knows we'll need it. Good night." And with that he rolled over and pulled his blanket tight.

"Good night," I echoed and curled up under my own bedroll, but sleep came slow. Yet when it did, in colors more vivid than any provided by nature, I watched an unfolding tableau as my mind dove deep into the many and various plots and ploys a band of angry Indians would use to protect their land. Then the brightness paled, just as colors do after sundown, and I probed the dark shadows of subterfuge and skullduggery

that Raush might ply to wrest our hard earned gold from us after we'd beaten back the savage attack of the red men.

All too soon I woke to the sounds of Anderson working over an early morning campfire, coffee brewing over the flame with leftover beans and bacon warming nearby.

"Morning," I said, then flipped back my blanket and sat up.

"Breakfast will be ready in few minutes," he said in the down to earth manner he started each day with.

I picked up my bedroll, and walked to the meadow where I saddled Buddy and loaded the mules. By the time I returned Anderson had a plate of food and a cup of coffee waiting for me. I ate quickly and soon we were riding up to Caldwell's Store. There I counted ten men waiting, none seemed like they might be Raush. But I looked over to Anderson and, understanding my trepidation well, he shook his head no. It was a good sign. Maybe all my fretting had been for nothing.

Stoddard arrived before we'd had a chance to greet the others in the party and with a hard look around he asked, "Any more men coming?" When no one spoke up he added, "Let's go then," and without further ado struck out toward the Yuba River.

Anderson and I waited for everyone else to leave town just in case Raush would show up late, but when he didn't Anderson turned to me. "Do we go?" he asked.

I shrugged, still ill at ease about it all. "I guess so," I said. We had made our deal last night, if Raush wasn't around causing trouble we would go, and I wasn't about to break my word to a friend. "I thought there would be more men here though," I went on.

"It just means more gold for us," Anderson asserted and then led our four mules northward. I followed, head swiveling constantly to the rear, right hand on the handle of my new Colt revolver, nerves ragged. Raush could show up at any time.

Just north of Selby Flat we came to Rock Creek, and though no one was mining where we crossed men were hard at work both upstream and down and the place had all the signs of productive gold country. Again I had to wonder why we were chasing Stoddard's dream of a golden lake when we could find all a man would ever need right here. And yet I'd worked in the gold fields long enough to know how fickle a miners fate can be. One claim

along a stream like this can hold pockets worth thousands of dollars while just a few feet away another plot can be close to worthless. Still, the men who worked hard and kept at it almost always made money while those who lazed the day away then gambled late into the night most often didn't.

We came to the South Yuba a little after midday and nooned across the river from a large group mining along Illinois Bar. The break gave me a chance to get acquainted with the men that would be my companions for the near future. There were three eager, friendly brothers fresh down the Siskiyou Trail from Oregon named Carl, Thomas, and the youngest, Zeke, who was about my age. And so too was Lem, who'd mined Deer Creek last winter with his father, Jedidiah, and done pretty well, according to Lem.

Four southerners, Ike, Jake, Luke and Harry, were all business. They called themselves the Natchez Mining Company, and had traveled by steamship to Panama then crossed the jungle before taking another steamer to San Francisco. They'd gotten to the mines early last summer and then worked the rich placers around Hangtown for almost a year. None of these men had gotten wind of Raush's threats and I wondered if there were a dozen more miners somewhere who had heard them and then decided not to show up.

But the most peculiar guy in this whole impromptu expedition looked more like the mountain men around Fort Bridger than any miner in California. He gave his name simply as Bird and carried a rifle with a bore as big any I'd ever seen. He called it a bear gun and that's about all the tight lipped Bird bothered to disclose before he walked off to the riverbank alone.

Stoddard roused us from our rest much sooner and with a sense of urgency far more pressing than I thought necessary. His face taut, eyes darting repeatedly to our back trail, he badgered men to mount up and cross the river with wild waves of his arms and language strong enough to bring a blush to the cheeks of a lumberjack. But if others in the group felt as I did they hid it well. The Oregon brothers and Lem splashed into the water laughing and joking as if this was a simple summer outing. Bird had already crossed and I caught sight of him through the trees as he climbed the ridge.

I took the mules from Anderson. He'd put up with them all morning and deserved a break. We crossed the South Yuba together then Anderson dropped back behind our mule string much like I had this morning. Wary

that Raush would soon show up, I'd kept a close eye to our rear all along the way, and now I noticed Anderson spent as much time looking over his shoulder as I did. He worried about Raush too.

Soon we were enveloped in a deep forest of sugar pine with trunks as large as twenty-five feet around. I thought of the sawmill not many miles from my home in Kentucky and how just a few of these monstrous trees could keep it in timber for a year. In this one stand of pines alone there must be enough wood to build a thousand towns each a thousand times as big as Nevada City. The wealth of California lay not only in its gold, it seemed.

One of the new mules we'd picked up Saturday caused me no end of bother and I'd fallen behind the rest of the group. But I had no trouble following their track; eleven horses and twenty-one mules leave a clear trail along the forest floor. Near sundown I came to a small creek running southwest down from the ridge. I stopped to let the animals drink their fill of the cool, clean water. Anderson rode up from behind me.

"Any sign of Raush," I asked as he jumped to the ground and led his pinto to the creek.

"I saw no indication of Raush or anybody else following us," he said and then pointed upstream. "But he sure looks interested in something down our back trail."

I turned to look and there, atop a large rocky prominence above us, sat Bird on his mustang, peering into the valley we'd left just hours earlier.

"Yeah, he seems real engrossed in something," I agreed. "He's a strange one. He's the only man here who only brought one mule, and I'd bet everything we found last winter that he's never washed out a single pan of gold in his whole life."

"If you'd been more interested in what Stoddard said and less in what Madame Reynard looked like that night in the Bella Union you might remember how we were told that Bird was a trapper who worked around here for years and he's supposed to help Stoddard find this lake we're going to," Anderson said in the condescending tone he always used when I'd not been paying attention to business like he thought I should. And he was right.

"Do you think he's looking back at Raush?" I wondered.

"Why don't you ride up and ask him. I'll take care of the mules. They don't seem to cause me as much trouble as they do you anyhow," he said.

"But you had them all morning," I protested, always one to pull my fair share.

"Go on now. We'll both rest easier if you know what's happening down in the valley."

I grinned. "Thanks Anderson," I said sincerely, then hopped on Buddy and sped up the hill. Near the top of the outcrop Bird's mule stood at the forest's edge contentedly chomping at the lush saw grass that grew there. I saw no sign of a pick or shovel handle sticking out anywhere from the pack, it seemed like Bird didn't have any plans to mine.

He sat there on top of his horse as still as the statue in front of our county court house back home. He didn't move a muscle, not even a twitch, as Buddy's iron shoes clattered across the rock to his rear. And when I stopped beside him he didn't turn to me, but instead calmly raised his big bore bear gun to point down the hill to where a thin blue ribbon of the South Yuba slashed across the dark green tops of sugar pine. "That what you come up here to see?" he asked.

Far below, in the middle of the stream, I saw a man on horseback, looking no bigger than an ant, headed this way. And as he passed from view behind the treetops another man, this one leading a mule, rode into the river, and then another, and after him still more until I had counted fifteen men and maybe twice as many mules, and I knew others had crossed before I got here. If it was a mining party it was awfully big and very well supplied. "Is it Raush?" I asked.

"Like as not," Bird said with a voice as smooth as a traveling tent preacher, and completely lacking the faintest tinge of fear.

"How many did you see," I asked as my hand instinctively caressed my Colt.

"Four dozen, maybe more," he said then turned to me. "You scared, boy?"

I looked deep into his cold gray eyes and knew he could read me like a book. "I guess I'm a little on edge," I muttered. It was all I could force myself to admit to.

"If that's Raush you'd damn well better be more than a little on edge. The man's more dangerous than a mad dog," he asserted, still without a hint of fear about him. Then, as he calmly turned and rode away, I broke out in an icy, bone shivering sweat.

For the next two days Stoddard pushed us relentlessly, leaving me little doubt that he thought Raush was indeed following us, but I'd heard no mention of it among the other members of our party. I'd also talked with Anderson about wanting to go back to Nevada City. He pointed out that if I did I would run smack dab into Raush on the way. So I continued on, much like I had the first day, sharing time leading our mules or bringing up the rear of the column and keeping a watchful eye to our back trail.

We'd crossed the Middle Yuba late Tuesday and camped up the ridge on Kanaka Creek, named for the Sandwich Islanders from Honolulu who were mining there. And like so many others we had passed, the place had all the indications of gold, but Anderson urged that we press on, assuring me that Stoddard's mythical lake would, in the end, bring us a bounty we could find nowhere else. But I wasn't the only one who saw missed opportunity. The four men of the Natchez Mining Company had begun to openly carp over passing by so many prime locations to mine such easily available placer gold.

The next day saw more of the same. We were in the saddle before sunup, crossed a stony Oregon Creek at midday, then another high ridge beyond and by sunset were descending into the valley of the North Yuba River alongside a small brook that tumbled from rocky pool to rocky pool under a thick canopy of fir trees. After skirting a large boulder I led our four mules into a small clearing where I saw a stranger dressed like a miner talking with the men from Natchez.

It was clear right off that Ike and the rest of the Southerners were grilling the man about the amount and location of gold strikes along the North Yuba. News of gold in the California mines traveled by mouth faster here than it could on the new fangled telegraph wires back east. Practically everybody had heard how a Scotsman named Downie and the handful of colored men partnered with him had spent last winter at the forks of the North Yuba, and how they got snowed in and almost starved to death. Even the two Goodyear brothers, who'd worked a gravel bar downstream from the forks since last summer, had stayed the winter. Nobody would tolerate cold Sierra snows without a reason. Miners were pouring into this area now. That likely meant a lot of rich finds around here.



But if you cornered a miner working a good paying claim and asked him straight up, face to face, if there was much gold around, he'd hem and haw worse than an old mule bedeviled by a swarm of horse flies in the middle of August. And as soon as I got within earshot I heard the fellow rambling on about all the rich finds on Rock Creek and the South Yuba, or Kanaka Creek and the Middle Yuba, and how he thought that smart fellows like us should head back south where a lot more gold could be found.

"I see your point," agreed Ike, the oldest and cagiest of the Natchez boys. "But we've heard of a brand new mining town nearby and could all use a drink or two and maybe a good meal that ain't been cooked over an open fire before we go."

The miner stuck his thumbs into his waistband and grinned wide. "Oh, yes sir, we got a town alright," he bragged. "More saloons than you can count, bakeries with fresh bread, butcher shops with lean beef, a whole passel of tasty places to eat, a number of hotels, if you're a mind to sleep with the bed bugs, and everything here built since the winter snow melted. Some folks already call it Downieville, after the Scotsman."

He climbed up on a pretty mustang filly then looked back to Ike. "Heading there myself to play a little faro at Craycroft's Saloon. Look me up. Name's Tucker." He gave a quick tip of his beat up felt hat and rode off down the hill.

Ike watched until the miner was out of earshot. "Well, you heard what the man said. Is there anything else you need to know?" he asked the rest of his companions. When no one spoke out he continued. "Are we all of one mind then?"

To a man the three other members of the Natchez Mining Company sounded their agreement with him.

"Good," he continued. "We still have an hour or so before dark. Let's make sure we find the right spot to camp tonight," And the four of them rode off down the stream, leaving me feeling like a fly on the wall. It sure seemed like they'd made some sort of pact and were all agreed on doing something. Whatever it was must be pretty important because they'd been so wrapped up in it that nary a one of them had noticed me, even though Buddy and I'd been right behind them with all four of our mules for a good while.

Later, over a simple supper of beans and salt pork, I told Anderson

about what Ike had said earlier to the Natchez boys and my suspicions that they had made a plan to do something that they weren't letting the rest of us in on.

"Micah, you worry too much," he'd told me in his warm but reproving way. "First it was the Indians, then Raush, and now it's the Natchez crew. You need to learn how to take things as they come. Worrying over what might be is nothing but a waste and causes a man too much unnecessary consternation. We've had a hard day and tomorrow is likely to be worse. Get some sleep." And with that he rolled over and pulled his blanket tight.

He was right about the hard day and likely about tomorrow too. Each day had been like that as we climbed up from the last river valley and over a higher and a rockier ridge. We were heading deeper into the Sierra and Stoddard said that now we would follow the North Yuba east directly into the high backbone of the mountains.

I snuggled dog tired into my bedroll, but sleep didn't come so easily for me. And, like Anderson had said, it was because of the worry that boiled and churned in my mind much like the water in the small stream beside our camp that sloshed and spumed as it scurried down the steep, rocky slope of the river valley. But my turmoil wasn't from Indians, or Raush, or even Ike and the Natchez boys. It came from a blue eyed, brown haired French girl who'd somehow stolen my heart with one fleeting kiss on a moon swept night outside the Bella Union, and whether she'd be waiting if I ever returned.

But at last my exhaustion overcame my fixation with the beguiling Michelle Reynard and all to soon I woke into the half-light before sunrise to the smell of wood smoke and the sizzle of bacon frying. Anderson looked over to me but before he could offer a morning greeting a string of wild oaths erupted from downstream where the Natchez party had camped in a small clearing separated from us by a large rock outcropping. Instinctively I grabbed my Colt revolver and cocked the hammer.

Anderson held up his flat palm to stop me. "Easy, Micah, that sounds like Stoddard and he's coming this way."

Trusting my friend I put the pistol down, but close to hand, and tugged on my boots just as Stoddard rode into our camp, his face as heated as the embers of the cook fire. "Did either of you see them damn Southerners sneak off last night?" he yelled.

Anderson glanced at me with a raised eyebrow then turned to Stoddard.

"No, but I take it they're gone," he answered.

"Ran off in the dead of night like thieves. Ought to shoot 'em." Stoddard shouted.

Anderson grabbed the skillet in a gloved hand and, with one sure motion, flipped the salt pork to brown on the other side. Then he calmly asked, "What did they steal?"

Stoddard sat on his horse and spewed and sputtered, unable to answer.

So my wise friend stepped in to help him out, as was his wont. "I believe Ike and his crew have stolen nothing. They are all honest and upright fellows, but they did make an agreement to this expedition that they've reneged on. Since there was no binding contract there is little we can do. We still have enough men to find the lake, but I think an open and frank talk with everyone is called for before we start out today. And if any more of us wish to leave, there isn't much we can do to stop them either."

"But we're shorthanded now," Stoddard fumed. "What about the Injun's?"

"What about the Indians?" Anderson retorted.

"Yeah," I piped in. "Worrying about what might happen just causes unnecessary consternation." I said, suddenly seeing the truth in what Anderson told me last night exposed in the creases across Stoddard's face that read as clear as the lines in a book.

"But they killed my partner," Stoddard rebutted with fury.

"And you've never mentioned his name, have you?" Anderson countered. "Could he have also been a Raush, and could it be that it's his brother who follows us now?"

"Damn you," Stoddard yelled. "How do you know that?"

"I guessed, but now you've confirmed it. Do you care to tell us what happened?"

Stoddard's face paled, but he looked Anderson square in the eye. "My group crossed the Sierra by Lassen's northern route, a big mistake. We were starving. Two of us went hunting, got lost and wandered for days. Then we found the gold. I was high up the ravine when I heard his shot. He didn't have a chance. They were all over him, so I snuck away. Raush thinks I killed his brother for gold. I didn't, but I did run out on him."

And with that short speech I took pity on Stoddard for the first time.

Just before sunup we met with all the men who were left, except for Bird who wasn't around much anyway. Anderson did most of the talking

and made as fine a job at it as any famous orator I'd ever heard of. He informed everyone about the Natchez crew's leaving for what they thought was the easy gold at hand around here, and then went on to explain why he believed in what Stoddard had said and how, if we just held together a little longer, we'd all have more money than some old king named Midas, who could turn anything he touched into pure gold.

Then Anderson did what he'd always done with me and told us that it was our choice and each man had to make up his own mind. He explained how nobody would hold it against anyone who backed out. I'd long thought Anderson had a quality that made him special, but now I saw firsthand how he held a power to persuade men to his way of thinking that was far beyond what most others could ever hope to achieve. Every man among us cheered and eagerly vowed to continue on no matter what lay ahead.

The sun still hung low above the mountains to the east when we came within view of the North Yuba. The dark silence of the forest was broken by the loud splash of water, white and fast, breaking over a host of boulders and snags in the riverbed then boiling together in great convulsions at the forks where the North Yuba, rushing in from the east, collided with the Downie River ramming into it from the north. At the edge of the Yuba stood a tall stand of fir trees with graceful willows on each side, and above them, across the flanks of the deep ravine, sturdy oaks interspersed with towering pines and a few white flowered dogwoods climbed high into a clear blue sky as broad as all eternity.

Nestled in the forest east of the Downie and just across the Yuba lay the town, a motley collection of several log buildings, a few crude shacks, and a number of tents in all sizes and shapes, and all mostly hidden by the trees. Yet to me, the tiny settlement exuded a wonderfully brave demeanor. Humbled by the majesty of the mountains, cowed by the sheer power of the swirling water, and shrouded under the thick cloak of nature's foliage, the town seemed to bravely lift its collective face to us and say, "I am here, built by the hand of man, and I intend to stay." Although there lurked an understated fragility to the place that led me to wonder if it would all blow away in a strong wind.

But in spite of the lure of multiple saloons, fresh meat, a soft bed—bedbugs excepted—or a more savory meal, we kept heading east along the river. By a unanimous vote of all who remained with us we had determined that the town, as tempting as it appeared, would only be a time consuming

distraction likely to cause more problems than the small comforts it provided would be worth. And, after crossing to the north shore at the first good ford we found, we rode on, climbing ever higher into the mighty Sierra along the frothing torrent of the North Yuba River.

I soon realized we rode on a well used path and, judging from the amount of fresh mule droppings I came across, it must be frequented by the supply trains, often fifty animals long, that traveled the river valleys all the way from Bidwell's Bar supplying miners with food, clothing, tools and just about everything else a man needs to survive so far from civilization. It was a clear sign that more mining was happening upriver. But traveling along a well used trail was easier than cutting through the raw country like we'd done the first three days and we made good time.

It was near midday when I heard the hoof beats pounding from my rear. It sounded like one horse coming at a run. My old fears of Raush overwhelmed me and I spurred Buddy off the path and into a narrow defile in the steep side of the ravine. No sooner had I gotten turned back toward the trail than the hoof beats stopped and a chilling quiet descended over the forest. The birds stopped their endless prattle, even the wind refused to rustle the leaves; the only sound the deafening chatter of my teeth.

I looked all around me but saw no one. Sweat oozed from under my hat, stinging my eyes. The man on the trail had simply stopped riding and the only reason I could think of was that he knew I was here. Who was he? What was he planning on doing? Then came the unmistakable click of a gun hammer cocking. It had to be the most bloodcurdling sound I'd ever heard. I pulled out my new revolver then held my breath, hoping that would stop my whole body from shaking.

"I eat rattlesnake raw and rassle grizzlies with my bare hands," the rider yelled. "I can shoot the eyes out of a hawk and gut a deer quicker than a mountain lion. I know where ya are. Come out, 'fore I come in and get ya."

Oh, Lord, I'm dead, I thought. Then it dawned on me that I knew that voice. "Bird?" I asked in a weak but ever so hopeful tone.

A loud roar of laughter erupted from the trail. Bird was enjoying himself mightily at my expense. But right now I didn't mind a bit, so happy was I that he wasn't Raush or some other rapsallion. I nudged Buddy and rode out onto the path. Bird sat on his mustang, the bear gun across his lap, and wore the biggest grin I'd ever seen.

"How'd you know where I was?" I asked.

“Ya spend a lifetime in the wilds ya learn to read sign, son,” he said and pointed to Buddy’s feet.

Even I could see where I’d turned and left the trail. A heavy horse with a rider atop leaves a deep print in soft earth. “Okay, but how’d you know it was me?” I asked.

“Every animal, every man, leaves a clear mark on the land—personal like. Ain’t hard t’ see once ya learn how. Besides I been followin’ ya all day.”

Along the trail to California I’d heard endless tales of the mountain men and how they knew the wilderness nearly as well as the Indians did. It seemed a pretty good skill to have, especially in the midst of the rugged country we were in now. “Do you think you could show me a little about how you read these signs, Mr. Bird?” I asked.

He looked at me with squinty eyes and the grin he’d had turned suddenly sad. “The days of men like me are done, son. Won’t be long ’fore the wilderness is gone, a lotta the animals too. The gold brung all these men to California. It’ll bring others.”

“But everyone I know plans on going back East as soon as the gold is gone. Most say it can’t last more than another year.” I offered, hoping to provide him some comfort.

“Men say a lot, then mostly do the opposite. They’re here now. More’ll come. They ain’t going back. There’s too much in California. It’s a rich country, mighty rich. And it ain’t just the gold.”

He nudged the mustang to a walk and I rode alongside him since the trail was wide enough here. I wanted to learn more from this down to earth man who had such a deep love for the wild and seemed so convinced that his way of life would soon end. “What are you going to do then? I mean when the wilderness is gone,” I wondered.

“Oh, men like me’ll find a way to stay alive, but this ain’t no time for a young, smart feller like yourself to turn to what I do. The world’s changing and it’s folks like you what’s got to lead the way. Anderson say’s you got a gift, say’s you’re special, and he’s ’bout the smartest man I ever met. You’ll be stayin’ in California I ’spect, and like as not you’ll do somethin’ important too.”

I felt the blood rush to my face. Back on the farm, Jacob had always told me how I didn’t know anything, that I was stupid. Now Bird tells me Anderson thinks I’m special. Well, I didn’t feel special. Here I was, just

twenty years old, miles away from any but the most rustic trappings of civilization, a continent away from home, and feeling awful puny under the shadow of the mountains towering above me. But knowing that someone I respect as much as I do Anderson could feel that way left me feeling real pleased.

Still I had a lot of questions, so I started in. "How long have you been here, I mean in California?" I asked.

"Been a long time son. Started out working the Rockies twenty year ago, been here near ten. But it's been some good years," he said with a wistful sigh.

"How do you make money," I continued. Bird sure didn't look like he had much of it. Except for his felt hat and leather boots his clothes were hand made from deerskin. Still, he had a fine horse and saddle and, with the bear gun and the huge knife he carried, it all must've cost a pretty penny.

He eyeballed me with the same broad grin he'd had before. "Sort of had a job, son, trappin' beaver and other critters and sellin' 'em at the Hudson Bay Company's Fort Vancouver in the Oregon Territories," he said, sounding like a man who loved his work.

"But you just said you had a job," I pointed out. "What happened to it?"

"Things are changin' everywhere, son. Oregon is a part of the States now. Don't know what'll happen to the fort. Hudson's Bay Company's out of Canada ya know. Maybe I'll just take some of this here gold we're after and settle down somewhere. It's a hard life and I'm gettin' on in years." And then a strange sadness crept into his eyes.

"Do you know where Stoddard's lake is, sir?" I asked, to change the subject.

He looked to me again, the sadness replaced by a sudden sparkle. "I ain't sure, but it just could be I do," he boasted without a whiff of bluster about him.

The trail we were on had gradually climbed along the side of the ravine high above the level of the river. I'd been so enthralled in my talk with Bird that I'd paid little attention, but now, riding abreast of him, I realized how close to the edge of a sheer cliff I was and how far down the rocky stream seemed. It gave me an uneasy feeling, a fall would be deadly, but I'd not had such a good opportunity to talk to Bird and I still had one abiding question for him for which my sense of survival demanded an answer.

And so I dared ask. "I wonder, sir," I began. "You just rode up pretty fast

from behind me somewhere and without your mule, would I be correct if I thought you'd looked into Raush and the men with him? Are they still following us?"

A raised brow enhanced the sparkle in his eye, and he chuckled softly. "I can see how what Anderson said about you was right. You do have a way about ya, son," he said. "Raush is still behind us all right but—"

Then the chilling scream of a man came from the trail ahead, and another scream in a different voice that went on far too long and was mixed with the roar of some deep-throated and fierce sounding beast.

"Damn!" Bird exclaimed and immediately galloped off. I followed as best I could, afraid to ride fast so close to the sharp edge of the treeless cliff. In no time all hell had broken out, shouts, more terrifying screams, mules braying wildly, two gunshots, the appalling squeal of a badly hurt horse or maybe two horses, then the loud boom of a rifle—Bird's bear gun—and another deep-throated roar, a pistol shot, then another and finally only the bray of the mules and the voices of men trying to calm them.

Then the path widened and I came upon Anderson, feverishly trying to settle our four skittish mules and his own panicky horse. He waved me on without a word and Buddy and I managed to squeeze by. Next I found the Oregon boys, Carl, Thomas and Zeke, hard at work soothing their panicked mules and horses. All of them had faces as white as the stars on our flag. But here the trail had narrowed again so I tied Buddy to the branch of a small fir, checked my new Colt revolver and pulled out my rifle.

As I wound through the unsettled pack animals I looked directly at Zeke, "What happened?" I asked.

But he gazed back at me with blank eyes and slowly shook his head like he didn't want to talk about it, so I hurried on until I could see Bird's mustang standing twenty yards ahead in the middle of the path, completely calm and untroubled by the frightened animals all about, a remarkably well trained mount. Another thirty yards on Stoddard stood on the trail holding a rifle. Behind him his horse and three mules were tied to a branch, one mule I recalled as Bird's from that first day when he'd waited beside the rock outcropping where Bird and I had watched Raush and his men cross the South Yuba.

But I'd seen no hint of Lem, his father Jedidiah, or their animals. Normally they would be traveling between Stoddard and the Oregon boys.



Then, as I passed the mustang, the scene that unfolded in front of me turned my stomach. Bird was bent over Lem, at least I thought it was Lem. The skin had been ripped from his face and blood was everywhere.

I turned my eyes from this spectacle of horror and saw Lem's pretty mare lying beside the cliff, guts spilled onto the ground, a gunshot wound in her head from someone who'd taken pity and ended her suffering. Just past the mare lay the brown body of an enormous grizzly bear who, on her hind legs, must have stood over twelve feet tall, and undoubtedly was the cause of this whole ghastly scene. Blood dripped from a huge hole in her head, a reminder of why Bird called his large bore rifle a bear gun.

As I stood there, trying to stifle an almighty urge to bring my breakfast back to the light of day, it came to me that I hadn't seen Jedidiah or any of their other animals. And though my mind was near numb from all the death around me, I knew without asking what else must have happened here. While it wasn't hard to look away from this scene of gore, I shook like a leaf in the wind as I walked to the edge of the cliff.

Loose flour, sugar and coffee covered the rocky face of the ravine. Tools, supplies, pots and pans were strewn everywhere along the descent. Jedidiah lay near the water's edge, dead without a doubt. No human body could contort itself in such a way. Close by him the rear end of a mule could be seen on the shore, it's head under water. A few hundred feet downstream another mule had hung up on a rock in an eddy. The rest of the animals were gone, likely washed away by the power of the North Yuba.

I raised my head a bit and gazed out into the emptiness of the ravine. Several small flat objects floated on the up drafts, playing cards that had fallen from Jedidiah's pocket. My mind, perhaps seeking escape, or relief or some simple semblance of sanity, harkened back to that last night of gambling with Michelle Reynard at the Bella Union. I could feel the pressure of her lips as she kissed me. I heard her voice, as clearly as I did that night, as she urged me to look for her when I returned from this fateful undertaking.

Her words, which had at first seemed a plea, now sounded more like a command that I should live in order to return and marry her, as Anderson had once suggested. And for a man who'd fled across the continent to avoid the oppressive orders of my own brother on a farm left to the both of us by our father, I suddenly felt this mandate from Michelle to be the very

breath of life itself and the only reason for hope amongst all this despair. I would live. I would find the gold we sought, then I would find her again. She was now my reason to survive against Raush, the Indians, and the very wildness of the country we crossed, and what an enticing motive she was.

How long I stared into the void of the canyon, I don't know, but at last I heard Anderson. "Micah, we need you over here," he cried. "We have things to discuss."

I walked back toward where I'd heard his voice, back to where Buddy waited tied to a tree, and found all the members of our party already gathered except Zeke. The Oregon boys were adamant; they had had enough. The death of Jedidiah and the mauling of Lem were too much for any of them to digest. We all understood.

As we talked, Zeke was tending to Lem's broken bones and patching up his many gashes, including sewing his face back together. No one really thought Lem would live, except Zeke and he wouldn't leave his friend. Carl and Thomas would stay with their brother and meantime they would rope Jedidiah back up the cliff and give him a proper burial. Even Anderson agreed this was for the best.

Stoddard, however, was beside himself after Bird informed us all that Raush was still a half-day behind, but along the way more and more miners had joined his cause. Now there could be four or five hundred men with him. It was a testament to the vast pull of temptation that a mere tale of a lake full of gold could have on the minds of men.

With heavy hearts those of us who were left moved on, our numbers reduced from thirteen to four in less than a day. But I went with a new resolve. I would find the gold we sought and live to see Michelle Reynard again. It's what she wanted. I knew it now.

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After an hour of hard riding we passed the last miners working the river below. That night we made a cold camp with no fire and only leftover beans and biscuits to eat. Well before sunup we were on our way again and by midmorning we'd come to the southern edge of a huge valley covered with sagebrush, dotted with bright, sweet scented wildflowers and ringed by snow capped peaks that loomed thousands of feet above us. Except for

the marshes fed by melt water from the winter snows, the whole place resembled the high deserts Anderson and I had crossed on the way to California.

Again we stayed in the saddle until the last of the daylight had faded, but as we prepared for another cold camp all of us noticed a red glow that spread wide across the horizon from somewhere along our back trail.

"Campfires," said Bird. "Looks like a whole army's behind us, don't it?"

"Mount up," yelled Stoddard. "It's Raush. We gotta ride all night."

"No!" countered Anderson. "We're all dog tired. We need rest."

Stoddard started in again. "But Raush—"

"Raush ain't gonna catch us just yet," Bird interjected as calm as ever. "I got a little trick in store for him, if you fellers can stand more hard mountain ridin', but it'll save us three, maybe four days at least."

Bird's idea cheered us all and well before the next sunrise we rode out of our camp heading slightly east of due north so we would give the impression that we were going to follow the valley as far as the flat land would take us. Then, when we came to a marshy area fed by snow run off flowing from a gap in the mountains, we turned and rode northwest through the stream, thereby leaving no tracks for Raush and his followers to find. But to add to his ruse, Bird took all our mules with him and continued on in the same direction we'd been going. He seemed sure there would be yet another stream coming in from the west that he could take so as to rendezvous with us later.

And sure as shooting by midday he'd caught us. Together we climbed steadily up a ravine that drained the melt water of two peaks, one to our right and the other to our left, the flanks of both covered with the same sugar pine and red fir we'd seen all along the way. There was no trail and our progress was slower than it had been.

That night we all camped together in a narrow canyon sheltered from the view of the valley. Somehow, while he led our mules off in the wrong direction, Bird had managed to bag two prairie hens and we enjoyed a hot meal of fresh meat for the first time in days. Our spirits were high, even Stoddard seemed to think that Raush and the men with him might have been fooled by Bird's clever play.

We started out again just after sunup and soon crossed a flat saddle on the high pass we traveled and began to descend. By mid afternoon we came

to another valley, long and narrow and vastly smaller than the first, but covered in the same sagebrush and wildflowers and fed by a meandering stream that often jumped its banks and flooded the ground around it.

Stoddard, his two mules in tow, rode up beside me as I led our string of four along easily. The animals walked willingly now, like they were grateful for the flat, soft earth of the valley after the hard rock of the mountains we'd just been through. But Stoddard seemed unusually nervous and continually looked around in all directions.

"Is everything alright, Mr. Stoddard?" I asked.

"It's the Injuns," he asserted, fear in his voice. "They're out there watching us."

"Have you seem them," I wondered as my hand grabbed the handle of my Colt.

"No, you never see 'em, not till it's too late," he claimed. "But they're out there."

Anderson rode up beside me. It was plain he'd heard what we were talking about. "The Indians here in California are pretty friendly, Stoddard. If we stay peaceable we shouldn't have any trouble with them," he divulged.

"They killed my partner," Stoddard responded. "Never gave him a chance."

"Did he shoot first?" Anderson inquired and I knew it was a good question.

Stoddard's head jerked around, his eyes pinched. He was still edgy and ill at ease. "They jumped him, sudden like. They didn't have no guns," he said, and then swept his arm across the ridges that rose on both sides of us. "They could be watching us from anywhere out there, we got to keep a sharp eye out, all of us," he urged.

"I'll keep looking, don't worry," I promised, just as scared of Indians as he was.

"See to it," he declared then yanked on the reins to his mules and loped off toward Bird who rode alone in front of everyone.

When Stoddard had gotten out of earshot I turned to Anderson. "Is he right about the Indians?" I asked.

Anderson smiled reassuringly. "I don't know if he's right or not, but I think our biggest concern if we do meet Indians is that Stoddard just might do something dumb, like shoot at them. Maybe we should keep an eye on him," he said.

"Do you think Stoddard's partner shot first?" I mused.

"I wouldn't doubt it," he answered.

The rest of the afternoon my head swiveled from side to side just like Stoddard's had, searching the mountainsides for any sign of an Indian. At dusk we camped in a small copse of oak trees and I kept my Colt revolver ready, just in case they snuck up on us in the twilight. Then, when I bedded down, I carefully placed the pistol under the saddle that I used as a pillow where I knew I could get to it quickly if I needed to.

Still, the idea that Indians could be anywhere around us had me so fretful that I couldn't sleep. Eventually, perhaps in an effort to escape my fears, my mind returned to the Bella Union and I could see again the soft curls of Michelle Reynard's hair as it bounced about her neck while she passed out cards at the gaming table. The red glow from the lanterns brought a warm, comfortable hue to her soft skin and cast a dazzling fire into her beautiful blue eyes.

I could even see her long, thin fingers as she shuffled the cards then dealt one to each player in turn, and still hear her voice, so heavily accented yet incredibly lyrical, as she asked the simple questions of a twenty-one dealer to the players. And I'll never forget her cozy, almost gleeful smile as she raked in her winnings at the end of each play.

Somewhere amidst my musings I must have drifted into sleep for the next thing I remember was a loud voice that woke me to the grunts of men scuffling. Immediately I grabbed my Colt and rolled out from under my blankets and hid behind a tree. The Indians were here, I was sure. Then a light blazed into the moonless night. Someone had lit a twig from the embers of the fire. I could see Stoddard's face in the glow.

"Yeah, this is him. Get your rope ready, Grimes," a man ordered in a rough bass voice. I didn't recognize it but it wasn't an Indian, that's for sure, so it must be Raush. My hands were shaking. I knew if I tried to shoot I couldn't hit anyone.

Then somebody threw a rope over a limb of the oak tree I hid behind and I could see shadowy figures coming closer. One was a big man who pushed Stoddard toward me while holding a pistol to his head. The same man who'd thrown the rope put a noose over Stoddard's head. They were going to hang Stoddard right here, right now and right in front of me. Where were Anderson and Bird, I wondered? Were they all right?

"There's an empty bed roll here, Raush," the one called Grimes said in a shrill, nasal kind of voice and I knew he was talking about my blankets.

"Get him," the low voice of Raush ordered.

Grimes would find me soon. Then they would hang Stoddard. I knew I couldn't let that happen. Raush was only five feet away, tightening the rope around Stoddard's neck. I stepped out from behind the tree and cocked the Colt. "Let him go, Raush, or I'll shoot," I yelled in the bravest tone I could muster.

"What?" he barked. "Who the hell are you?"

"Just let Stoddard go. I mean it," I ordered.

"Hah," he laughed. "It's the boy," he said to Grimes and then looked to me. "You got the guts to pull that trigger, boy? You brave enough to kill a man in cold blood?"

"You're planning on killing Stoddard aren't you?" I yelled back.

"He killed my brother!" Raush bellowed.

"He says Indians killed your brother," I retorted.

"He's a damn liar!" A burning rage spewed from the big man's mouth.

Then I felt cold steel against my temple, and heard the incredibly loud click of another Colt cocking close by my ear. It was Grimes. Somehow he'd managed to sneak up beside me without me having any idea he was coming.

"Put the gun down, boy," he said in his reedy, whiney voice.

"No! If you shoot me I'll still shoot Raush," I cried, and regretted it at once.

A wave of terror washed over me and I was ready to fall to my knees and beg Grimes for mercy when I heard another gun hammer clicking loud and sounding all too familiar. "Ever seen what a big bore bear gun'll do to a man's head, Grimes?" said Bird, who must've had the drop on Grimes, and so welcome relief flooded back into my heart.

But then came another loud, big bore bear gun hammer click, "But, mon ami, you know well what such a gun will do, oui?" And the dread washed over me again. Someone had a gun trained on Bird, I was sure, someone who had an accent like Michelle Reynard, and it bothered me no end that anyone whose voice reminded me so much of her could be threatening my friend Bird, and then, I guess, me too.

"Frenchy Chabot, as I live a breathe," Bird said, still sounding as calm

as he always did. "I thought the Piutes south of the Truckee did you in two years ago,"

"Mon Dieu, they came very close, monsieur, but Chabot, he knows the trick with the melt water too," Frenchy Chabot said with a smug chuckle.

"That's too bad," Bird groused. "I should've known Raush would dig up a skunk like you."

"It is too bad for you, mon ami," Frenchy went on.

"Maybe not, my friend." It was Anderson and he'd stressed the words my friend real loud just as his own Colt revolver cocked.

Then he added, "I take it you're the last of this little party of murdering swine, Frenchy, and that makes me the only man here without a gun aimed at his head. Am I right, Raush?" Anderson yelled out the last few words.

Then came a silence that seemed to go on forever.

"I ain't saying," Raush finally growled.

"Oh, so you're not saying, Raush," Anderson reflected. "How about you, Frenchy? Are you the last one of this little party of pigs?" There was an edge in his tone that I hadn't heard before, a fierceness he'd never shown in the year we'd been together.

"Mon Dieu," was all Frenchy could say.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. There's only the three of you. It seems we have situation here, gentlemen." Anderson continued. "Well, I got nothing to worry about, so how about I just shoot you, Frenchy?"

"Sacrebleu!" Frenchy exclaimed.

I'd never heard Anderson talk like he just had. Sure that he'd lost his mind and that the fat would soon hit the fire, I thought about Michelle Reynard once more, convinced I'd never see her again. The hand that held my Colt shook harder than ever.

Then Raush yelled out. "I don't care what ya do to the damn Frenchman. I paid him to find my brother's killer and he's done it. Now I'm gonna hang Stoddard,"

"And all those men following you will be real happy that you killed the only man here who knows where the lake of gold is, right Raush?" Anderson replied.

"They can find their own gold," Raush hollered back.

"Maybe they will," Anderson agreed. "But maybe some of them might be mad enough at you to string you up beside Stoddard. What do you

think, Frenchy?” Anderson asked and at once I realized his plan. Maybe I would see Michelle one more time after all.

“Mon ami,” said the Frenchman quietly, like he was talking directly to Anderson. “I think I will shoot Raush myself, s’il vous plait.”

“Oh yeah, Frenchy, you go ahead. Shoot away,” Anderson sang out, loud.

“I’ll still kill the boy,” yelled Grimes and pushed the pistol hard up against my temple. My newfound hope instantly drained away.

“Before I blow your fat head into little tiny pieces, Grimes,” Bird chirped in. “What axe you got to grind here?”

“It’s family,” answered Grimes. “Raush is my cousin.”

“Wait up!” barked Raush suddenly. “Don’t nobody shoot. How about we sit tight till sunup. Then we can settle this right.”

“What do you think about that, Stoddard?” Anderson asked.

“Yeah, anything, anything, just don’t let him hang me,” Stoddard whimpered. He sounded like a young schoolboy who’d been pounded on by the class bully.

“All right, Raush,” Anderson hollered out. “Let Stoddard go. We won’t shoot.”

Raush looked around warily, but pulled the noose from Stoddard’s neck then gave him a hard shove toward me. Stoddard tumbled to his hands and knees and started blubbing like a two-year-old baby that hadn’t been fed all day.

“There’s your killer,” Raush growled. “Grimes, you and Frenchy get over here.”

I felt the hard steel of Grimes’ Colt leave my temple. “Be careful, boy. I still got my eye on you,” he whispered in my ear before he slithered away.

“Frenchy, you comin’?” Raush snarled.

“I stay here, s’il vous plait,” Frenchy said real calm like.

“To hell with ya,” Raush snapped back. “We’ll string you up too. Come on, Grimes.” And both men disappeared into the darkness.

In spite of my own fear I ran the few feet to Stoddard and knelt in front of him. His eyes were wild and unfocused, spit dribbled from the corner of his mouth. He mumbled over and over again, “Don’t let him hang me, mama. I’m a good boy. I am. Don’t let him hang me.” And for the second time on this journey I felt pity for Stoddard.

“Sacrebleu,” whispered Frenchy and I realized he stood beside me.



I looked up into a round, frowning face with a bushy moustache that drooped below the chin. "This Stoddard, he knows. There are more of the Grimeses," Frenchy held up four fingers, "and more of the Raushes," three fingers now. "They will be here after the sunrise."

"No," I blurted. "I won't let that happen. I can't." I turned back to Stoddard. "Can you ride?" I asked in a soft voice.

"I can ride, Mama," he said. "I can ride real good."

Oh, Lord, I thought, he's lost his mind but he still deserved a chance at least. I found his horse and in no time had him saddled and ready. Then I filled the saddlebags with as much food as I could cram into them and led the horse back to Stoddard.

Anderson grabbed my arm. "But the lake, Micah?" he whispered.

"I can't let him hang," I protested

Then in a hushed, confident tone Bird told Anderson, "We'll find the gold."

I pulled my arm free. "Here's your horse, sir," I said to Stoddard, and helped him into the saddle.

The panic flashed in his eyes again. "But the Injuns are out there," he cried.

"Don't worry about the Indians," I said, thinking fast. "They're on our side. They like you but they don't like Raush and Grimes. Just remember not to shoot at them."

"I won't shoot at anybody, mama, I promise," he muttered.

Then Bird walked up and pointed into the distance. "Do ya see the bright star just above that dark mountain peak?" he asked and Stoddard nodded. "Just ride towards it till ya get to the river then turn downstream. You'll be fine." And he whacked the horse's rump so hard that Stoddard near tumbled off as he galloped into the night.

"It'll be light soon enough. Best we get an early start," Bird said as he tossed a pile of kindling onto the smoldering embers of our campfire and stuck a large pot of leftover beans close by to warm. The small fingers of flame quickly grew bright.

"I hear horses coming," I announced, pointing to the direction we'd come from.

"Sacrebleu!" Frenchy exclaimed. "Raush has heard Monsieur Stoddard leave, I think. We'd best stay out of the light. He will shoot if he can."

“Good thinking, Frenchy,” Bird said and we all moved away from the fire.

I hid behind the same oak tree as before and watched as Raush slowed from a gallop to a walk along the dim shadows across from the flames.

“Frenchy,” he yelled. “Was that Stoddard who rode outta here?”

“That was Monsieur Bird, mon ami,” Frenchy called back, lying through his teeth.

“Like hell!” Raush roared. “Come on Grimes, let’s ride,” he yelled back and spurred his mount just as Grimes rode up. In no time they’d disappeared into the dark.

After a quick meal of leftover beans, and in the dim twilight before the sun rose over the mountains, we also rode out of camp, following the prints of three horses pressed deep into the soft earth. Not long afterwards we heard a gunshot from somewhere ahead of us, then came frightened shouts and another shot. Soon terrible screams began, chilling my blood to the very bone. But I couldn’t tell who it was. None of us could.

Then Frenchy stopped. “Mes amis,” he began with a somber look on his face. “I think maybe the Indians have killed Raush and Stoddard. So I am safe now. I will go back and tell the men behind you that Stoddard is dead. They will not follow you then.”

Bird nodded. “Much obliged,” was all he said as Frenchy turned and rode off.

Soon more tracks came from the west. Bird said they were from unshod Indian ponies. It looked like they followed the same path as had Stoddard, Raush and Grimes, but there were so many that they covered the marks of the shod horses. Then the prints got all muddled together like everyone had stopped and milled around some. There was a lot of blood on the ground, and two sets of tracks led off, one to the west and the other on up the valley in the direction we were going, like the Indians had split up. We all figured that somebody had given up the ghost here, but had no idea who.

We’d all heard the terrible screams earlier this morning, and now we were sure some Indians were ahead of us so my hand never got far from the handle of my Colt and my head whirled constantly from side to side. No wild, savage Indian would sneak up on me, not if I could help it. Yet Bird and Anderson rode along as cool as could be, totally unruffled by

what I knew to be our impending doom. By late afternoon the soft ground gave way to hard rock again and the tracks vanished.

Soon we rode northwest atop a deep, steep chasm thick with red fir, with a river at the bottom that ran a calm deep blue in some spots but mostly roared along spewing white foam across the many rocks in its path. The country here struck me as even more rugged than what we'd encountered around Downieville, and we were certainly much farther from any hint of civilization. Yet, in spite of keeping as close an eye out as I could, I'd still seen no sign of Indians, Raush, or Stoddard.

After two more days we came to a narrow valley, a half a mile long by thirty paces wide, at the bottom of a gorge hemmed in by near perpendicular hills thick with fir where the river plunged past a bar of gravel that even from the height at which we rode seemed to sparkle with the luster of gold. Unable to believe my eyes I stopped and stared. But I'd mined gold for a whole year now and never had any mining site I'd ever seen shown as many signs of wealth as this one, in spite of it sitting so far down the bluff.

The others had ridden on, like they hadn't noticed. "Anderson, Bird," I cried. "There's gold down there. I'm sure."

They stopped and looked into the gorge. Suddenly Bird grinned like he'd just gotten a plate of the best beefsteak in California cooked by the prettiest girl around. "This might be the spot Stoddard found, son," he said more excited than he'd ever been.

"But this isn't a lake, sir," I replied.

"Naw," he said. "Stoddard lied about the lake. He had to say something to throw folks off his trail."

Then Anderson added, "I think you're right, Micah. It sure looks like there's gold in that gravel. Why don't we find out?"

Leading his mule and the two Stoddard left with us, Bird began to work his way down the cliff face to the river. I followed Anderson, each of us with two mules, something we'd decided to do because of the incident with Lem and Jedidiah. This way, if anything happened to one of us as we snaked our way along the steep descent, the other would still have supplies.

Then, as I neared the bottom, I noticed both of them had stopped alongside the river. They stared up into an ancient dead fir tree that had grown stunted in rocky ground, with two twin trunks splitting from a

single base about eight feet up, the tops of each long since broken off, one at fifteen feet and the other a little higher.

I reined up behind them and followed their eyes. There I saw a well-worn felt hat tied down tight over a tattered black coat and a pair of ragged wool trousers, and all wedged between the trunks with a lot of feathers and the rear end rattles of sidewinders hanging in front. Then I realized that bones were inside the clothes. I could see the lower part of a skull under the hat and a shinbone stuck out from one torn pant leg. I started to shake. This had been a person, and whatever happened hadn't been pleasant.

"It's Raushes' brother isn't it?" I asked to no one in particular.

"Likely," said Bird.

"How did he . . ." I mumbled, unable to finish.

"Injuns," Bird answered. "They caught him then tied him up there. The snake rattles kept the buzzards off. That way he'd die real slow after they'd had their fun."

"Fun?" I moaned, not understanding Bird's sarcasm at all.

Anderson dropped to the ground. "Let's give him a proper burial," he suggested. Bird went with him but I couldn't bring myself to help with such a gruesome task. Still, I aimed to do my share so I pulled out a pick and shovel and began to dig. When we were done Anderson quoted some bible passages from memory and said a short prayer.

I wanted to get away from the gravesite as quick as I could. The whole thing had my mind bouncing around like a kid's rubber ball. I didn't know what the Indians had done to Raushes' brother exactly, but it had to be downright horrible and I felt sure now that Stoddard had seen the whole thing, but here we were right on top of the place where he'd found those huge nuggets and I was determined to get what we came for.

So right off I rode toward the gravel bar I'd seen from above. After pulling the packs from both mules I left them to water in the river and walked over toward a likely looking spot and sank my shovel into the sand, slopped it into my gold pan and squatted at the edge of the river and began to wash out all the lighter sand and dirt and pick out the rocks with my hands. It didn't take that long until I realized I had gotten rid of everything but the gold and I still had a whole pan brimming with stuff, all of it gold.

"Anderson," I screamed. "Look here!"

He was beside me in no time. "My God," he exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like it. Most men feel real good to find an ounce of color in their

pan. You must have nine or ten here. That's a hundred and fifty dollars at least, in one shovel full of ore." Then he turned and pointed to the gold for the benefit of Bird who'd just rushed up beside us. "Take a gander at this, Bird!" he crowed.

A look I knew well swept instantly across Bird's face, just like I'd seen in so many men when they got that first sight of pure gold that came from the bare earth around them and the idea instantly started to percolate inside their head about how much more gold could be buried in the gravel of the very bar where they stood. It's called gold fever and like all the others that glint of gold gleamed bright in Bird's eyes, eyes that grew as big as the very pan they stared into. He'd had caught the fever all right, hooked like a trout in a mountain stream.

We started panning with the single-minded zeal that the fever metes out in large doses to its victims, and in what seemed like no time Bird yelled out, "Here they are, Stoddard's nuggets. Look at 'em! Look at 'em!"

Both Anderson and I dropped our shovels to rush over by Bird. He'd only run a splash of water across his ore, enough to clean the dust away, and the whole pan gleamed of gold in huge lumps just like the ones Stoddard flashed that day in Nevada City.

I pulled one out and held in front of my eyes, lost in its special lure, my heart pounding like a racehorse. "That pan full must weigh five pounds," I said.

"More," added Anderson. "Stoddard was right. This place is loaded with gold."

"Just in case the Indians didn't get him, shouldn't we put a quarter of what we find aside for Stoddard?" I said. "We wouldn't be here except that he told us about this." It came over me quick. My mother had called it the goodness of my soul.

Bird and Anderson both nodded. "Done," said Anderson. "There's plenty here for everyone. We'll save a share for him until we know for sure."

We worked the bar all summer, and though a lot more men showed up, many who were with Raush, we never said a word about finding the body, or let on that this was the spot Stoddard had found and that there was no lake of gold. Then, that fall, we loaded our mules with all we'd mined and made our way down the North Feather River to where it joined the Yuba. There we came to a new town, Marysville, growing rapidly by supplying miners in places just like where we'd been and so we decided to stay.

The three of us, with Stoddard as a silent partner, built a wildly profitable business bringing up mining supplies on a steamer then hauling them by mule train to the remote camps strewn along the Yuba and Feather rivers. And now, after these three years, here was Stoddard, ranting on madly about his lake of gold until even the drunkest of his listeners left, and he began to mutter much as he had the last time I'd seen him.

"Stoddard," I called. "I'm Micah Poole. Don't you remember me?"

He gazed back through unfocused eyes, clothes in rags, hair and beard unkempt and littered with the straw he must've slept in last night. "I've got nuggets," he mumbled and frantically searched through the pockets of a well-worn frock coat.

"Are you hungry," I continued, knowing he must be.

His head bobbed up and his eyes finally found me, but he said nothing.

"My wife is an excellent cook and you're more than welcome," I added.

Then he shook his head, almost in fear, "No, no, I can't. I'm not dressed—"

"You're fine I'm sure. Michelle would love to see you."

"Michelle Reynard?" he blurted, sounding as sober as a judge.

"Well, yes, before we were married, she's Michelle Poole now."

"A beautiful woman! It would an honor, sir," he said and began to straighten his hair. "Have we met before?" he suddenly asked of me.

"Come along, Stoddard. We have a lot to talk about." I replied then walked off toward my home. He followed like a puppy, appearing by any measure as the most down and out man in California, while, in truth, he was now among the richest.

An old, all too familiar voice haranguing a small knot of drunken miners outside a riverside grog shop caught my ear as I hurried back to my home. I'd long thought him dead, and he looked near to it, beard wild and gray, eyes sunk deep inside a face with cheeks as bilious as any corpse. Busy men rushed past him without a glance but I stopped, just as I had three years ago. Today, here at the junction of the Yuba and Feather Rivers, Marysville had boomed as a supply center for the gold mines upstream, and I'd become an important part of that growth, all because of Stoddard.

After mining along the American River near Greenwood Creek that first winter, and doing quite well until our claim finally played out, Anderson and I had opted to move north in hopes of finding an even

more productive spot. We'd heard rumors of big strikes near the Yuba River; so in late May we'd arrived in Nevada City, just another gold boom mushroom town called Deer Creek Diggings in those days. I'd left Caldwell's Store heading for the Bella Union where a French lady was supposedly dealing twenty-one when I first saw him. He stood out front, a smattering of drunken miners around him much like today, except back then Stoddard had fire in his eyes, grit in his voice, and one of the biggest nuggets I'd ever seen in his hand.

"My name's Stoddard and this is what I found. Look at it," he cried, shaking the gold high overhead. "It's big and coarse, not smooth and small like the gold you mine downstream. Most men think that means it comes from closer to the source, closer to the mother lode. There's a lake full of nuggets just like this one high up in the mountains and who knows what else is there, but I need help to get it out. Injuns jumped us just after we found these nuggets. We were forced to run for our lives and I haven't seen my partner since. I think they might've killed him. I need twenty-five good men who can shoot straight and aren't afraid of a scrap. Who here is ready to go? Step up."

"I'll go." It was Anderson, my close companion for the past year. He took a step forward into the circle of men then noticed me. "Come on Micah," he pled. "This is just what we're looking for, our big chance to make enough to get a good start in life."

"But it sounds so risky," I replied, my mind stuck on Stoddard's dead partner.

"Yeah, but is it any more risky than the dangerous trip we made together last summer, all the way from St. Joseph across plains, mountains and deserts just to get here?" he pointed out with a bit of heat in his normally well tempered voice.

"We didn't have a shooting fight with Indians then," I replied with my own fire.

Stoddard stepped right into our little dust up. "It ain't for sure we'll have a set-to with Injuns. The ones I saw could've been a hunting party. They weren't likely to live near the lake so I reckon they're long gone from there, but it's always best to be safe."

Anderson grinned at me. "See Micah, it's not so scary now is it?" he said in that cocky way he had.

I shrugged, knowing Anderson had won me over again, but still unsure of the size of the mess I was about to walk into. “Okay, I’ll go, but only because you talked me into it,” I countered; remembering the many things Anderson had convinced me to do since we’d been together. He’d been right more often than not.

As the other men moseyed off—either they already had a good paying claim or were far wiser than I—Stoddard stuck his nugget back into a leather bag. “Come inside,” he offered. “Let’s have a drink and I’ll give you the details. We leave in two days.”

Inside the saloon I saw her at once, sitting near the back playing cards with eight or nine miners. She was lovely, and the first woman I’d seen in months. I barely listened to Stoddard as he recited chapter and verse the details of our trip. When he was done I found a seat at her table. I lost a hundred dollars that night. Folks might think that a lot but I never minded one bit. Here men often lost ten times that at the turn of a card. And even though she barely spoke to me, just being around a woman was worth every cent.

The next two days were busy. On Saturday Anderson went with me to buy two stout mules with packsaddles from a man on Brushy Creek to add to the two we’d come here with. We spent the rest of the day getting four months worth of food and our mining gear ready to go. Then on Sunday, while Anderson helped Stoddard recruit more men for our daring adventure, I rode to Selby Flat where I’d heard of a man willing to sell a new Colt revolver at a reasonable price. The idea of a fracas with a party of wild Indians still had me inordinately disconcerted and the pistol was a big step up from my one shot rifle.

And in spite of a planned early start in the morning, I couldn’t resist the urge to see Madame Reynard one last time before we left for Stoddard’s mysterious lake. Like before she looked as winsome as anyone I’d ever seen, her face flush and full with lips red like a ripe cherry, and her hair, soft and buff as a young spring fawn, draped about her slender neck in tight coils. I sat across the table from her and quickly lost fifty dollars while beguiled by the sparkle of the lamplight reflected in her deep blue eyes.

Then she stood and, looking directly at me, said in her thickly accented English, “It is hot here. I need air,” and calmly sauntered across the room with every man’s gaze following her, leaving me feeling uncomfortable, unsure if there was some special meaning in her look.



It seemed impossible that a woman so pleasing could have any particular regard for me, but without her here I also had no interest in gambling and, with a long, hard day likely in store for me tomorrow, I knew it was best to return to camp. I gathered the remnants of my funds and walked outside into the night. Once there I looked around for the Madame but since I didn't see her anywhere I went on to my horse.

"You are going with Monsieur Stoddard tomorrow, oui?"

It was her. I spun to the sound of the voice just as she stepped from the shadows, a look on her face that I could interpret in no other way than concern, but concern for what, for who? "Yes, how did you know?" I replied, honestly at a loss.

"One hears things in the Bella Union, mon ami. But you must be careful. There is a man, Monsieur Raush, who has pledged to follow you and take your gold for himself."

"Raush," I exclaimed. "I've never heard of him."

She stepped closer and I felt her hand on my arm. "He is a very big man and a very bad man, très mal. He has many others with him. He will kill you all if he must," she whispered, her mouth close to my face.

Once again my poor mind couldn't grasp the right words, but without a warning she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me quickly full on the mouth. "Be careful, Micah Poole," she breathed as she pulled away. "Find your gold then look for me when you return, s'il vous plaît." With that she disappeared into the darkness, leaving me still bewildered and unable to believe what had just happened.

Riding back to our camp along Deer Creek on that warm, moonlit night, my blood turned chill more than once at an unexplained sound from the woods, or a shadow that loomed threateningly over the trail. Madame Reynard had left me perplexed and ill at ease in no small way with her tale of Raush and his threats to kill us all for the gold that Stoddard would lead us to. But even more unsettling was why she'd done it, and the taste of her lips that lingered still on mine.

Her soft voice flowed again through my clouded mind. "Be careful, Micah Poole," she'd said, but I'd hardly spoken twenty words to her. How did she know my name? Few people here did. And then I'd let her run away without even asking her full name in return. Whatever caused such a lapse in my well-learned manners was beyond my reasoning at the moment.

“Look for me when you return,” she’d said next. No matter which way I turned the words over in my head it all came out the same. She cared about me somehow. Why I couldn’t fathom but the kiss seemed the proof of the pudding. Women don’t do things like that for no reason, or are such things different in France? I had no idea. The only girl I’d ever kissed was Betsy Pike and that only one short buss before I left for California.

Then there were the Indians who’d probably killed Stoddard’s partner. Maybe it was a hunting party that they’d happened to stumble across, but that was no guarantee that we wouldn’t run afoul of another group along our way. Nearly every week on the trail to California there came a rumor of Indians killing white men, but I had personally seen no sign of any serious trouble. Still, deadly incidents happened, and all too often.

I knew little of Indians, and that mostly from the wild tales told on the trip west. We’d seen Pawnee riding in the distance as we crossed the prairie to Fort Kearny. Soon after fording the South Platte a whole party of Sioux, men, women and children, passed right in front of us. And near Fort Bridger Shoshone came into our camp wanting to trade. They were a pathetic, lice infested lot but seemed harmless enough.

I tied Buddy, my young chestnut, to a long tether in the grassy meadow behind our camp, then pulled out the new Colt revolver from my saddlebags and stuck it into my waistband. I was a fair shot with a rifle, but had had little use for a handgun on my family’s farm in Kentucky. Yet knowing I had a new repeating pistol so close at hand gave me some small comfort against the host of demons so recently rising around me.

The fire burned low in our camp and I was disappointed to find Anderson tucked into his bedroll. I’d thought of nothing better than to talk with him about the events of tonight. Ten years my senior and married to a woman in Pennsylvania that he adored and spoke of constantly, I hoped he would have some soothing words for my troubled spirit. But not wishing to disturb my only true friend in California, I pulled off my boots, and crawled under my blanket as quietly as I could, making sure the Colt would be easy for me to get to, just in case.

Then Anderson rose on his elbow. “You’ve been at the Bella Union with Michelle Reynard again, haven’t you?” he asked with a chuckle to his voice.

“Yes, I—”

“How much did you lose this time?” he demanded, still with a smile to his tone.

"Not so much," I mumbled, "but how do you know her first name?" I inquired with a lot more mettle, knowing Anderson to be dead set against gambling. He hoarded every ounce of gold he found and sent most of his money home to his wife.

"She asked about you today, while you were at Selby Flat. I think she's sweet on you, Micah."

I could tell from his manner he was teasing me about her now, and enjoying himself a great deal at my expense, but I needed some answers. "She warned me about a man named Raush who plans to follow us and take the gold we find at Stoddard's lake. Out of the blue she kissed me and afterwards told me to look for her when I get back. Then she ran off into the shadows." I said, all the while wondering if I would ever make it back here from wherever it was we were going.

"She kissed you, did she? I was right. She has set her cap for you, you Romeo," he laughed openly, enjoying his joke.

"I'm no Romeo!" I retorted, only knowing the meaning of the word because he'd used it to tease me about Betsy Pike when I'd told him about her one night along the trail. "But what about Raush," I asked. "He could be more dangerous than the Indians."

Anderson turned serious. "He could be. I saw him today too. He made quite a rhubarb when Stoddard told him we had as many men as we needed, threatened to follow us, and, yeah, even kill us if he didn't get his way. But he was drinking heavy. The truth is we'll likely slip out tomorrow before he sobers up. I'd worry more about the Indians than Raush."

"Well, if you say so," I muttered, unconvinced.

"You bet I say so. And when we get back here this fall, pack mules loaded with nuggets like the ones Stoddard has in his poke, you find that French gal and marry her. She's a catch. Her husband got killed a while back by a road agent who stole his gold. It left that lady in a whale of a pickle but she's done right well for herself it seems."

In spite of his teasing, Anderson's reaction to Madame Reynard and his suggestion that I marry her after we return from our trip did ease my mind a good deal, although the idea of wedding a woman I'd just met seemed too farfetched for my taste. Yet I knew that if I lived long enough I had to see her again, no matter what I had to do to find her. But it was the living long enough part that sat hard in my gut, twisting my insides into

tight knots. The dual threat of unknown Indians and the all too real Raush wore deep across the grain of my better judgment.

"I still think this trip is risky, Anderson. First it was just Indians. Now there's Raush. Maybe we'd be best to stay here. Men are finding gold everywhere. Just tonight I heard more than a little talk about big finds on Rock Creek. Let Stoddard have his lake full of nuggets. Let Raush go with him," I implored.

"Micah, if you want to stay here and woo the French lady then you go right ahead. Lord knows you're at that age when a woman tends to settle heavy on a man's mind, and I'll grant there's a wagon load of danger in Stoddard's plan, but a man has to take some risks in life if he's going to make something special for himself. This is one of those things that could pay off beyond anything we've ever imagined. Now, you're as level headed as any young man I've ever met, and you've grown as close to me as a brother, but you need to make your own decision about going."

As was his habit, Anderson had hit the core of my dilemma dead on, and moreover he'd trusted me to decide for myself, like he usually did. He was more a brother to me than my own flesh and blood who had never treated me with the respect Anderson does. I'm the youngest and Jacob is about Anderson's age. After our Pa died he'd run the farm with an iron fist, never once leaving me any say in what happened there, and because of his bullheadedness I'd left for California without his blessing. But I couldn't imagine parting with Anderson just yet, not after all we'd been through together.

"I feel the same about you, Anderson, and I can think of nothing I'd like less than our splitting up." I said without reservation. "But this venture with Stoddard has me as skittish as a raccoon that my old blue tick hound, Babe, ran up the elm tree beside our house, and it isn't just the Indians and Raush, it's Stoddard. I mean, what do we really know about him? Is he telling the truth? He could have gotten those nuggets anywhere."

"It's a good point, Micah. I believe his story about finding that gold in the lake," he said. "But in all truth, Raush has been rattling at my predilections more than I wanted to let on to you. I got a sense Stoddard knew him somehow, that there was bad blood between them. But when I asked Stoddard about it he denied knowing the guy. How about we meet up in the morning like we planned. If Raush is there causing trouble we'll back

out of this trip. But if everything looks good, then we go. Sound fair to you?"

"Well, I guess I'm willing to go that far anyhow," I agreed, mostly because the idea of saying a final farewell to Anderson right now seemed a whole passel less appealing than the more distant and uncertain danger from Indians or Raush.

"Fine," Anderson declared. "Now let's get some rest. Lord knows we'll need it. Good night." And with that he rolled over and pulled his blanket tight.

"Good night," I echoed and curled up under my own bedroll, but sleep came slow. Yet when it did, in colors more vivid than any provided by nature, I watched an unfolding tableau as my mind dove deep into the many and various plots and ploys a band of angry Indians would use to protect their land. Then the brightness paled, just as colors do after sundown, and I probed the dark shadows of subterfuge and skullduggery that Raush might ply to wrest our hard earned gold from us after we'd beaten back the savage attack of the red men.

All too soon I woke to the sounds of Anderson working over an early morning campfire, coffee brewing over the flame with leftover beans and bacon warming nearby.

"Morning," I said, then flipped back my blanket and sat up.

"Breakfast will be ready in few minutes," he said in the down to earth manner he started each day with.

I picked up my bedroll, and walked to the meadow where I saddled Buddy and loaded the mules. By the time I returned Anderson had a plate of food and a cup of coffee waiting for me. I ate quickly and soon we were riding up to Caldwell's Store. There I counted ten men waiting, none seemed like they might be Raush. But I looked over to Anderson and, understanding my trepidation well, he shook his head no. It was a good sign. Maybe all my fretting had been for nothing.

Stoddard arrived before we'd had a chance to greet the others in the party and with a hard look around he asked, "Any more men coming?" When no one spoke up he added, "Let's go then," and without further ado struck out toward the Yuba River.

Anderson and I waited for everyone else to leave town just in case Raush would show up late, but when he didn't Anderson turned to me. "Do we go?" he asked.

I shrugged, still ill at ease about it all. "I guess so," I said. We had made our deal last night, if Raush wasn't around causing trouble we would go, and I wasn't about to break my word to a friend. "I thought there would be more men here though," I went on.

"It just means more gold for us," Anderson asserted and then led our four mules northward. I followed, head swiveling constantly to the rear, right hand on the handle of my new Colt revolver, nerves ragged. Raush could show up at any time.

Just north of Selby Flat we came to Rock Creek, and though no one was mining where we crossed men were hard at work both upstream and down and the place had all the signs of productive gold country. Again I had to wonder why we were chasing Stoddard's dream of a golden lake when we could find all a man would ever need right here. And yet I'd worked in the gold fields long enough to know how fickle a miners fate can be. One claim along a stream like this can hold pockets worth thousands of dollars while just a few feet away another plot can be close to worthless. Still, the men who worked hard and kept at it almost always made money while those who lazed the day away then gambled late into the night most often didn't.

We came to the South Yuba a little after midday and nooned across the river from a large group mining along Illinois Bar. The break gave me a chance to get acquainted with the men that would be my companions for the near future. There were three eager, friendly brothers fresh down the Siskiyou Trail from Oregon named Carl, Thomas, and the youngest, Zeke, who was about my age. And so too was Lem, who'd mined Deer Creek last winter with his father, Jedidiah, and done pretty well, according to Lem.

Four southerners, Ike, Jake, Luke and Harry, were all business. They called themselves the Natchez Mining Company, and had traveled by steamship to Panama then crossed the jungle before taking another steamer to San Francisco. They'd gotten to the mines early last summer and then worked the rich placers around Hangtown for almost a year. None of these men had gotten wind of Raush's threats and I wondered if there were a dozen more miners somewhere who had heard them and then decided not to show up.

But the most peculiar guy in this whole impromptu expedition looked more like the mountain men around Fort Bridger than any miner in California. He gave his name simply as Bird and carried a rifle with

a bore as big any I'd ever seen. He called it a bear gun and that's about all the tight lipped Bird bothered to disclose before he walked off to the riverbank alone.

Stoddard roused us from our rest much sooner and with a sense of urgency far more pressing than I thought necessary. His face taut, eyes darting repeatedly to our back trail, he badgered men to mount up and cross the river with wild waves of his arms and language strong enough to bring a blush to the cheeks of a lumberjack. But if others in the group felt as I did they hid it well. The Oregon brothers and Lem splashed into the water laughing and joking as if this was a simple summer outing. Bird had already crossed and I caught sight of him through the trees as he climbed the ridge.

I took the mules from Anderson. He'd put up with them all morning and deserved a break. We crossed the South Yuba together then Anderson dropped back behind our mule string much like I had this morning. Wary that Raush would soon show up, I'd kept a close eye to our rear all along the way, and now I noticed Anderson spent as much time looking over his shoulder as I did. He worried about Raush too.

Soon we were enveloped in a deep forest of sugar pine with trunks as large as twenty-five feet around. I thought of the sawmill not many miles from my home in Kentucky and how just a few of these monstrous trees could keep it in timber for a year. In this one stand of pines alone there must be enough wood to build a thousand towns each a thousand times as big as Nevada City. The wealth of California lay not only in its gold, it seemed.

One of the new mules we'd picked up Saturday caused me no end of bother and I'd fallen behind the rest of the group. But I had no trouble following their track; eleven horses and twenty-one mules leave a clear trail along the forest floor. Near sundown I came to a small creek running southwest down from the ridge, I stopped to let the animals drink their fill of the cool, clean water. Anderson rode up from behind me.

"Any sign of Raush," I asked as he jumped to the ground and led his pinto to the creek.

"I saw no indication of Raush or anybody else following us," he said and then pointed upstream. "But he sure looks interested in something down our back trail."

I turned to look and there, atop a large rocky prominence above us, sat Bird on his mustang, peering into the valley we'd left just hours earlier.

"Yeah, he seems real engrossed in something," I agreed. "He's a strange one. He's the only man here who only brought one mule, and I'd bet everything we found last winter that he's never washed out a single pan of gold in his whole life."

"If you'd been more interested in what Stoddard said and less in what Madame Reynard looked like that night in the Bella Union you might remember how we were told that Bird was trapper who worked around here for years and he's supposed to help Stoddard find this lake we're going to," Anderson said in the condescending tone he always used when I'd not been paying attention to business like he thought I should. And he was right.

"Do you think he's looking back at Raush?" I wondered.

"Why don't you ride up and ask him. I'll take care of the mules. They don't seem to cause me as much trouble as they do you anyhow," he said.

"But you had them all morning," I protested, always one to pull my fair share.

"Go on now. We'll both rest easier if you know what's happening down in the valley."

I grinned. "Thanks Anderson," I said sincerely, then hopped on Buddy and sped up the hill. Near the top of the outcrop Bird's mule stood at the forest's edge contentedly chomping at the lush saw grass that grew there. I saw no sign of a pick or shovel handle sticking out anywhere from the pack, it seemed like Bird didn't have any plans to mine.

He sat there on top of his horse as still as the statue in front of our county court house back home. He didn't move a muscle, not even a twitch, as Buddy's iron shoes clattered across the rock to his rear. And when I stopped beside him he didn't turn to me, but instead calmly raised his big bore bear gun to point down the hill to where a thin blue ribbon of the South Yuba slashed across the dark green tops of sugar pine. "That what you come up here to see?" he asked.

Far below, in the middle of the stream, I saw a man on horseback, looking no bigger than an ant, headed this way. And as he passed from view behind the treetops another man, this one leading a mule, rode into the river, and then another, and after him still more until I had counted fifteen men and maybe twice as many mules, and I knew others had



crossed before I got here. If it was a mining party it was awfully big and very well supplied. "Is it Raush?" I asked.

"Like as not," Bird said with a voice as smooth as a traveling tent preacher, and completely lacking the faintest tinge of fear.

"How many did you see," I asked as my hand instinctively caressed my Colt.

"Four dozen, maybe more," he said then turned to me. "You scared, boy?"

I looked deep into his cold gray eyes and knew he could read me like a book. "I guess I'm a little on edge," I muttered. It was all I could force myself to admit to.

"If that's Raush you'd damn well better be more than a little on edge. The man's more dangerous than a mad dog," he asserted, still without a hint of fear about him. Then, as he calmly turned and rode away, I broke out in an icy, bone shivering sweat.

After an hour of hard riding we passed the last miners working the river below. That night we made a cold camp with no fire and only leftover beans and biscuits to eat. Well before sunup we were on our way again and by midmorning we'd come to the southern edge of a huge valley covered with sagebrush, dotted with bright, sweet scented wildflowers and ringed by snow capped peaks that loomed thousands of feet above us. Except for the marshes fed by melt water from the winter snows, the whole place resembled the high deserts Anderson and I had crossed on the way to California.

Again we stayed in the saddle until the last of the daylight had faded, but as we prepared for another cold camp all of us noticed a red glow that spread wide across the horizon from somewhere along our back trail.

"Campfires," said Bird. "Looks like a whole army's behind us, don't it?"

"Mount up," yelled Stoddard. "It's Raush. We gotta ride all night."

"No!" countered Anderson. "We're all dog tired. We need rest."

Stoddard started in again. "But Raush—"

"Raush ain't gonna catch us just yet," Bird interjected as calm as ever. "I got a little trick in store for him, if you fellers can stand more hard mountain ridin', but it'll save us three, maybe four days at least."

Bird's idea cheered us all and well before the next sunrise we rode out of our camp heading slightly east of due north so we would give the impression that we were going to follow the valley as far as the flat land would take us. Then, when we came to a marshy area fed by snow run off flowing from a gap in the mountains, we turned and rode northwest through the

stream, thereby leaving no tracks for Raush and his followers to find. But to add to his ruse, Bird took all our mules with him and continued on in the same direction we'd been going. He seemed sure there would be yet another stream coming in from the west that he could take so as to rendezvous with us later.

And sure as shooting by midday he'd caught us. Together we climbed steadily up a ravine that drained the melt water of two peaks, one to our right and the other to our left, the flanks of both covered with the same sugar pine and red fir we'd seen all along the way. There was no trail and our progress was slower than it had been.

That night we all camped together in a narrow canyon sheltered from the view of the valley. Somehow, while he led our mules off in the wrong direction, Bird had managed to bag two prairie hens and we enjoyed a hot meal of fresh meat for the first time in days. Our spirits were high, even Stoddard seemed to think that Raush and the men with him might have been fooled by Bird's clever ploy.

We started out again just after sunup and soon crossed a flat saddle on the high pass we traveled and began to descend. By mid afternoon we came to another valley, long and narrow and vastly smaller than the first, but covered in the same sagebrush and wildflowers and fed by a meandering stream that often jumped its banks and flooded the ground around it.

Stoddard, his two mules in tow, rode up beside me as I led our string of four along easily. The animals walked willingly now, like they were grateful for the flat, soft earth of the valley after the hard rock of the mountains we'd just been through. But Stoddard seemed unusually nervous and continually looked around in all directions.

"Is everything alright, Mr. Stoddard?" I asked.

"It's the Injuns," he asserted, fear in his voice. "They're out there watching us."

"Have you seen them," I wondered as my hand grabbed the handle of my Colt.

"No, you never see 'em, not till it's too late," he claimed. "But they're out there."

Anderson rode up beside me. It was plain he'd heard what we were talking about. "The Indians here in California are pretty friendly, Stoddard. If we stay peaceable we shouldn't have any trouble with them," he divulged.

"They killed my partner," Stoddard responded. "Never gave him a chance."

"Did he shoot first?" Anderson inquired and I knew it was a good question.

Stoddard's head jerked around, his eyes pinched. He was still edgy and ill at ease. "They jumped him, sudden like. They didn't have no guns," he said, and then swept his arm across the ridges that rose on both sides of us. "They could be watching us from anywhere out there, we got to keep a sharp eye out, all of us," he urged.

"I'll keep looking, don't worry," I promised, just as scared of Indians as he was.

"See to it," he declared then yanked on the reins to his mules and loped off toward Bird who rode alone in front of everyone.

When Stoddard had gotten out of earshot I turned to Anderson. "Is he right about the Indians?" I asked.

Anderson smiled reassuringly. "I don't know if he's right or not, but I think our biggest concern if we do meet Indians is that Stoddard just might do something dumb, like shoot at them. Maybe we should keep an eye on him," he said.

"Do you think Stoddard's partner shot first?" I mused.

"I wouldn't doubt it," he answered.

The rest of the afternoon my head swiveled from side to side just like Stoddard's had, searching the mountainsides for any sign of an Indian. At dusk we camped in a small copse of oak trees and I kept my Colt revolver ready, just in case they snuck up on us in the twilight. Then, when I bedded down, I carefully placed the pistol under the saddle that I used as a pillow where I knew I could get to it quickly if I needed to.

Still, the idea that Indians could be anywhere around us had me so fretful that I couldn't sleep. Eventually, perhaps in an effort to escape my fears, my mind returned to the Bella Union and I could see again the soft curls of Michelle Reynard's hair as it bounced about her neck while she passed out cards at the gaming table. The red glow from the lanterns brought a warm, comfortable hue to her soft skin and cast a dazzling fire into her beautiful blue eyes.

I could even see her long, thin fingers as she shuffled the cards then dealt one to each player in turn, and still hear her voice, so heavily accented yet incredibly lyrical, as she asked the simple questions of a twenty-one dealer to the players. And I'll never forget her cozy, almost gleeful smile as she raked in her winnings at the end of each play.

Somewhere amidst my musings I must have drifted into sleep for the next thing I remember was a loud voice that woke me to the grunts of men scuffling. Immediately I grabbed my Colt and rolled out from under my blankets and hid behind a tree. The Indians were here, I was sure. Then a light blazed into the moonless night. Someone had lit a twig from the embers of the fire. I could see Stoddard's face in the glow.

"Yeah, this is him. Get your rope ready, Grimes," a man ordered in a rough bass voice. I didn't recognize it but it wasn't an Indian, that's for sure, so it must be Raush. My hands were shaking. I knew if I tried to shoot I couldn't hit anyone.

Then somebody threw a rope over a limb of the oak tree I hid behind and I could see shadowy figures coming closer. One was a big man who pushed Stoddard toward me while holding a pistol to his head. The same man who'd thrown the rope put a noose over Stoddard's head. They were going to hang Stoddard right here, right now and right in front of me. Where were Anderson and Bird, I wondered? Were they all right?

"There's an empty bed roll here, Raush," the one called Grimes said in a shrill, nasal kind of voice and I knew he was talking about my blankets.

"Get him," the low voice of Raush ordered.

Grimes would find me soon. Then they would hang Stoddard. I knew I couldn't let that happen. Raush was only five feet away, tightening the rope around Stoddard's neck. I stepped out from behind the tree and cocked the Colt. "Let him go, Raush, or I'll shoot," I yelled in the bravest tone I could muster.

"What?" he barked. "Who the hell are you?"

"Just let Stoddard go. I mean it," I ordered.

"Hah," he laughed. "It's the boy," he said to Grimes and then looked to me. "You got the guts to pull that trigger, boy? You brave enough to kill a man in cold blood?"

"You're planning on killing Stoddard aren't you?" I yelled back.

"He killed my brother!" Raush bellowed.

"He says Indians killed your brother," I retorted.

"He's a damn liar!" A burning rage spewed from the big man's mouth.

Then I felt cold steel against my temple, and heard the incredibly loud click of another Colt cocking close by my ear. It was Grimes. Somehow he'd managed to sneak up beside me without me having any idea he was coming.

"Put the gun down, boy," he said in his reedy, whiney voice.

"No! If you shoot me I'll still shoot Raush," I cried, and regretted it at once.

A wave of terror washed over me and I was ready to fall to my knees and beg Grimes for mercy when I heard another gun hammer clicking loud and sounding all too familiar. "Ever seen what a big bore bear gun'll do to a man's head, Grimes?" said Bird, who must've had the drop on Grimes, and so welcome relief flooded back into my heart.

But then came another loud, big bore bear gun hammer click, "But, mon ami, you know well what such a gun will do, oui?" And the dread washed over me again. Someone had a gun trained on Bird, I was sure, someone who had an accent like Michelle Reynard, and it bothered me no end that anyone whose voice reminded me so much of her could be threatening my friend Bird, and then, I guess, me too.

"Frenchy Chabot, as I live a breathe," Bird said, still sounding as calm as he always did. "I thought the Piutes south of the Truckee did you in two years ago."

"Mon Dieu, they came very close, monsieur, but Chabot, he knows the trick with the melt water too," Frenchy Chabot said with a smug chuckle.

"That's too bad," Bird groused. "I should've known Raush would dig up a skunk like you."

"It is too bad for you, mon ami," Frenchy went on.

"Maybe not, my friend." It was Anderson and he'd stressed the words my friend real loud just as his own Colt revolver cocked.

Then he added, "I take it you're the last of this little party of murdering swine, Frenchy, and that makes me the only man here without a gun aimed at his head. Am I right, Raush?" Anderson yelled out the last few words.

Then came a silence that seemed to go on forever.

"I ain't saying," Raush finally growled.

"Oh, so you're not saying, Raush," Anderson reflected. "How about you, Frenchy? Are you the last one of this little party of pigs?" There was an edge in his tone that I hadn't heard before, a fierceness he'd never shown in the year we'd been together.

"Mon Dieu," was all Frenchy could say.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. There's only the three of you. It seems we have situation here, gentlemen." Anderson continued. "Well, I got nothing to worry about, so how about I just shoot you, Frenchy?"

"Sacrebleu!" Frenchy exclaimed.

I'd never heard Anderson talk like he just had. Sure that he'd lost his mind and that the fat would soon hit the fire, I thought about Michelle Reynard once more, convinced I'd never see her again. The hand that held my Colt shook harder than ever.

Then Raush yelled out. "I don't care what ya do to the damn Frenchman. I paid him to find my brother's killer and he's done it. Now I'm gonna hang Stoddard,"

"And all those men following you will be real happy that you killed the only man here who knows where the lake of gold is, right Raush?" Anderson replied.

"They can find their own gold," Raush hollered back.

"Maybe they will," Anderson agreed. "But maybe some of them might be mad enough at you to string you up beside Stoddard. What do you think, Frenchy?" Anderson asked and at once I realized his plan. Maybe I would see Michelle one more time after all.

"Mon ami," said the Frenchman quietly, like he was talking directly to Anderson. "I think I will shoot Raush myself, s'il vous plait."

"Oh yeah, Frenchy, you go ahead. Shoot away," Anderson sang out, loud.

"I'll still kill the boy," yelled Grimes and pushed the pistol hard up against my temple. My newfound hope instantly drained away.

"Before I blow your fat head into little tiny pieces, Grimes," Bird chirped in. "What axe you got to grind here?"

"It's family," answered Grimes. "Raush is my cousin."

"Wait up!" barked Raush suddenly. "Don't nobody shoot. How about we sit tight till sunup. Then we can settle this right."

"What do you think about that, Stoddard?" Anderson asked.

"Yeah, anything, anything, just don't let him hang me," Stoddard whimpered. He sounded like a young schoolboy who'd been pounded on by the class bully.

"All right, Raush," Anderson hollered out. "Let Stoddard go. We won't shoot."

Raush looked around warily, but pulled the noose from Stoddard's neck then gave him a hard shove toward me. Stoddard tumbled to his hands and knees and started blubbing like a two-year-old baby that hadn't been fed all day.

"There's your killer," Raush growled. "Grimes, you and Frenchy get over here."

I felt the hard steel of Grimes' Colt leave my temple. "Be careful, boy. I still got my eye on you," he whispered in my ear before he slithered away.

"Frenchy, you comin'?" Raush snarled.

"I stay here, s'il vous plait," Frenchy said real calm like.

"To hell with ya," Raush snapped back. "We'll string you up too. Come on, Grimes." And both men disappeared into the darkness.

In spite of my own fear I ran the few feet to Stoddard and knelt in front of him. His eyes were wild and unfocused, spit dribbled from the corner of his mouth. He mumbled over and over again, "Don't let him hang me, mama. I'm a good boy. I am. Don't let him hang me." And for the second time on this journey I felt pity for Stoddard.

"Sacrebleu," whispered Frenchy and I realized he stood beside me. I looked up into a round, frowning face with a bushy moustache that drooped below the chin. "This Stoddard, he knows. There are more of the Grimeses," Frenchy held up four fingers, "and more of the Raushes," three fingers now. "They will be here after the sunrise."

"No," I blurted. "I won't let that happen. I can't." I turned back to Stoddard. "Can you ride?" I asked in a soft voice.

"I can ride, Mama," he said. "I can ride real good."

Oh, Lord, I thought, he's lost his mind but he still deserved a chance at least. I found his horse and in no time had him saddled and ready. Then I filled the saddlebags with as much food as I could cram into them and led the horse back to Stoddard.

Anderson grabbed my arm. "But the lake, Micah?" he whispered.

"I can't let him hang," I protested

Then in a hushed, confident tone Bird told Anderson, "We'll find the gold."

I pulled my arm free. "Here's your horse, sir," I said to Stoddard, and helped him into the saddle.

The panic flashed in his eyes again. "But the Injuns are out there," he cried.

"Don't worry about the Indians," I said, thinking fast. "They're on our side. They like you but they don't like Raush and Grimes. Just remember not to shoot at them."

"I won't shoot at anybody, mama, I promise," he muttered.

Then Bird walked up and pointed into the distance. "Do ya see the bright star just above that dark mountain peak?" he asked and Stoddard nodded. "Just ride towards it till ya get to the river then turn downstream.

You'll be fine." And he whacked the horse's rump so hard that Stoddard near tumbled off as he galloped into the night.

"It'll be light soon enough. Best we get an early start," Bird said as he tossed a pile of kindling onto the smoldering embers of our campfire and stuck a large pot of leftover beans close by to warm. The small fingers of flame quickly grew bright.

"I hear horses coming," I announced, pointing to the direction we'd come from.

"Sacrebleu!" Frenchy exclaimed. "Raush has heard Monsieur Stoddard leave, I think. We'd best stay out of the light. He will shoot if he can."

"Good thinking, Frenchy," Bird said and we all moved away from the fire.

I hid behind the same oak tree as before and watched as Raush slowed from a gallop to a walk along the dim shadows across from the flames.

"Frenchy," he yelled. "Was that Stoddard who rode outta here?"

"That was Monsieur Bird, mon ami," Frenchy called back, lying through his teeth.

"Like hell!" Raush roared. "Come on Grimes, let's ride," he yelled back and spurred his mount just as Grimes rode up. In no time they'd disappeared into the dark.

After a quick meal of leftover beans, and in the dim twilight before the sun rose over the mountains, we also rode out of camp, following the prints of three horses pressed deep into the soft earth. Not long afterwards we heard a gunshot from somewhere ahead of us, then came frightened shouts and another shot. Soon terrible screams began, chilling my blood to the very bone. But I couldn't tell who it was. None of us could.

Then Frenchy stopped. "Mes amis," he began with a somber look on his face. "I think maybe the Indians have killed Raush and Stoddard. So I am safe now. I will go back and tell the men behind you that Stoddard is dead. They will not follow you then."

Bird nodded. "Much obliged," was all he said as Frenchy turned and rode off.

Soon more tracks came from the west. Bird said they were from unshod Indian ponies. It looked like they followed the same path as had Stoddard, Raush and Grimes, but there were so many that they covered the marks of the shod horses. Then the prints got all muddled together like everyone had stopped and milled around some. There was a lot of blood on the ground, and two sets of tracks led off, one to the west and the other on up



the valley in the direction we were going, like the Indians had split up. We all figured that somebody had given up the ghost here, but had no idea who.

We'd all heard the terrible screams earlier this morning, and now we were sure some Indians were ahead of us so my hand never got far from the handle of my Colt and my head whirled constantly from side to side. No wild, savage Indian would sneak up on me, not if I could help it. Yet Bird and Anderson rode along as cool as could be, totally unruffled by what I knew to be our impending doom. By late afternoon the soft ground gave way to hard rock again and the tracks vanished.

Soon we rode northwest atop a deep, steep chasm thick with red fir, with a river at the bottom that ran a calm deep blue in some spots but mostly roared along spewing white foam across the many rocks in its path. The country here struck me as even more rugged than what we'd encountered around Downieville, and we were certainly much farther from any hint of civilization. Yet, in spite of keeping as close an eye out as I could, I'd still seen no sign of Indians, Raush, or Stoddard.

After two more days we came to a narrow valley, a half a mile long by thirty paces wide, at the bottom of a gorge hemmed in by near perpendicular hills thick with fir where the river plunged past a bar of gravel that even from the height at which we rode seemed to sparkle with the luster of gold. Unable to believe my eyes I stopped and stared. But I'd mined gold for a whole year now and never had any mining site I'd ever seen shown as many signs of wealth as this one, in spite of it sitting so far down the bluff.

The others had ridden on, like they hadn't noticed. "Anderson, Bird," I cried. "There's gold down there. I'm sure."

They stopped and looked into the gorge. Suddenly Bird grinned like he'd just gotten a plate of the best beefsteak in California cooked by the prettiest girl around. "This might be the spot Stoddard found, son," he said more excited than he'd ever been.

"But this isn't a lake, sir," I replied.

"Naw," he said. "Stoddard lied about the lake. He had to say something to throw folks off his trail."

Then Anderson added, "I think you're right, Micah. It sure looks like there's gold in that gravel. Why don't we find out?"

Leading his mule and the two Stoddard left with us, Bird began to work his way down the cliff face to the river. I followed Anderson, each of us with two mules, something we'd decided to do because of the incident with Lem

and Jedidiah. This way, if anything happened to one of us as we snaked our way along the steep descent, the other would still have supplies.

Then, as I neared the bottom, I noticed both of them had stopped alongside the river. They stared up into an ancient dead fir tree that had grown stunted in rocky ground, with two twin trunks splitting from a single base about eight feet up, the tops of each long since broken off, one at fifteen feet and the other a little higher.

I reined up behind them and followed their eyes. There I saw a well-worn felt hat tied down tight over a tattered black coat and a pair of ragged wool trousers, and all wedged between the trunks with a lot of feathers and the rear end rattles of sidewinders hanging in front. Then I realized that bones were inside the clothes. I could see the lower part of a skull under the hat and a shinbone stuck out from one torn pant leg. I started to shake. This had been a person, and whatever happened hadn't been pleasant.

"It's Raushes' brother isn't it?" I asked to no one in particular.

"Likely," said Bird.

"How did he . . ." I mumbled, unable to finish.

"Injuns," Bird answered. "They caught him then tied him up there. The snake rattles kept the buzzards off. That way he'd die real slow after they'd had their fun."

"Fun?" I moaned, not understanding Bird's sarcasm at all.

Anderson dropped to the ground. "Let's give him a proper burial," he suggested. Bird went with him but I couldn't bring myself to help with such a gruesome task. Still, I aimed to do my share so I pulled out a pick and shovel and began to dig. When we were done Anderson quoted some bible passages from memory and said a short prayer.

I wanted to get away from the gravesite as quick as I could. The whole thing had my mind bouncing around like a kid's rubber ball. I didn't know what the Indians had done to Raushes' brother exactly, but it had to be downright horrible and I felt sure now that Stoddard had seen the whole thing, but here we were right on top of the place where he'd found those huge nuggets and I was determined to get what we came for.

So right off I rode toward the gravel bar I'd seen from above. After pulling the packs from both mules I left them to water in the river and walked over toward a likely looking spot and sank my shovel into the sand, slopped it into my gold pan and squatted at the edge of the river and began

to wash out all the lighter sand and dirt and pick out the rocks with my hands. It didn't take that long until I realized I had gotten rid of everything but the gold and I still had a whole pan brimming with stuff, all of it gold.

"Anderson," I screamed. "Look here!"

He was beside me in no time. "My God," he exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like it. Most men feel real good to find an ounce of color in their pan. You must have nine or ten here. That's a hundred and fifty dollars at least, in one shovel full of ore." Then he turned and pointed to the gold for the benefit of Bird who'd just rushed up beside us. "Take a gander at this, Bird!" he crowed.

A look I knew well swept instantly across Bird's face, just like I'd seen in so many men when they got that first sight of pure gold that came from the bare earth around them and the idea instantly started to percolate inside their head about how much more gold could be buried in the gravel of the very bar where they stood. It's called gold fever and like all the others that glint of gold gleamed bright in Bird's eyes, eyes that grew as big as the very pan they stared into. He'd had caught the fever all right, hooked like a trout in a mountain stream.

We started panning with the single-minded zeal that the fever metes out in large doses to its victims, and in what seemed like no time Bird yelled out, "Here they are, Stoddard's nuggets. Look at 'em! Look at 'em!"

Both Anderson and I dropped our shovels to rush over by Bird. He'd only run a splash of water across his ore, enough to clean the dust away, and the whole pan gleamed of gold in huge lumps just like the ones Stoddard flashed that day in Nevada City.

I pulled one out and held in front of my eyes, lost in its special lure, my heart pounding like a racehorse. "That pan full must weigh five pounds," I said.

"More," added Anderson. "Stoddard was right. This place is loaded with gold."

"Just in case the Indians didn't get him, shouldn't we put a quarter of what we find aside for Stoddard?" I said. "We wouldn't be here except that he told us about this." It came over me quick. My mother had called it the goodness of my soul.

Bird and Anderson both nodded. "Done," said Anderson. "There's plenty here for everyone. We'll save a share for him until we know for sure."

We worked the bar all summer, and though a lot more men showed up,

many who were with Raush, we never said a word about finding the body, or let on that this was the spot Stoddard had found and that there was no lake of gold. Then, that fall, we loaded our mules with all we'd mined and made our way down the North Feather River to where it joined the Yuba. There we came to a new town, Marysville, growing rapidly by supplying miners in places just like where we'd been and so we decided to stay.

The three of us, with Stoddard as a silent partner, built a wildly profitable business bringing up mining supplies on a steamer then hauling them by mule train to the remote camps strewn along the Yuba and Feather rivers. And now, after these three years, here was Stoddard, ranting on madly about his lake of gold until even the drunkest of his listeners left, and he began to mutter much as he had the last time I'd seen him.

"Stoddard," I called. "I'm Micah Poole. Don't you remember me?"

He gazed back through unfocused eyes, clothes in rags, hair and beard unkempt and littered with the straw he must've slept in last night. "I've got nuggets," he mumbled and frantically searched through the pockets of a well-worn frock coat.

"Are you hungry," I continued, knowing he must be.

His head bobbed up and his eyes finally found me, but he said nothing.

"My wife is an excellent cook and you're more than welcome," I added.

Then he shook his head, almost in fear, "No, no, I can't. I'm not dressed—"

"You're fine I'm sure. Michelle would love to see you."

"Michelle Reynard?" he blurted, sounding as sober as a judge.

"Well, yes, before we were married, she's Michelle Poole now."

"A beautiful woman! It would be an honor, sir," he said and began to straighten his hair. "Have we met before?" he suddenly asked of me.

"Come along, Stoddard. We have a lot to talk about." I replied then walked off toward my home. He followed like a puppy, appearing by any measure as the most down and out man in California, while, in truth, he was now among the richest.

## About John Putnam

John came west as a young man and settled in Berkeley where he graduated from the University of California. He still lives and writes there and often gives a talk on the California gold rush to the gang at the Freight and Salvage.

John spent a lot of time digging into that gold rush too and many of his stories take place back then. His characters are so real they'll jump right off the page and talk to you; his villains have hearts as cold as midnight and his heroes almost always do the right thing in the end.

He's working up quite a reputation for his knowledge of that era too. His blog, *My Gold Rush Tales*, attracted the interest of some TV folks and he appeared in a segment for the Travel Channel about Henry Meiggs, the man who built San Francisco's famous Fisherman's Wharf.

John's first novel, *Hangtown Creek*, is a story of adventure, romance, and coming of age in the early days of the gold rush. His more recent



title, *Into the Face of the Devil*, moves between Hangtown and the sawmill where James Marshall first found gold, and pits a young man in love for the first time against a killer so evil he could pass for Satan.

Visit John's website at [JohnRosePutnam.com](http://JohnRosePutnam.com) or his blog at [MyGoldRushTales.com](http://MyGoldRushTales.com) for more information.