

Chapter One

O'BRIEN WAS JUST finishing off the last bite of a late breakfast when two men pushed in through the batwing doors and glanced around. A moment passed, and then the taller of the two jerked his black-bearded chin in O'Brien's direction, and together they weaved between scattered tables toward him.

O'Brien followed their approach from beneath the rolled brim of his tobacco-brown Stetson. He'd never seen either one before, but in his line of business it always paid to know what was going on around you, just in case.

When they were close enough, the man with the beard said, "Carter O'Brien?"

He was about forty, which made him three years younger than O'Brien himself. He was barrel-chested and thick around the waist, dressed for the trail in a red cotton bib shirt under a fringed jacket, and high-waisted canvas pants tucked into cracked cavalry boots. Around his waist he wore a .45, the beaded pouch set high and a little behind his right hip.

His companion, shorter by six inches, older by a decade, was dressed in a collarless striped shirt, a well-worn sack coat and green pants. His squinted hazel eyes were tired, his jowls reddened by the sharp fall air outside. He wore a neatly-clipped chevron mustache the same black-gone-gray as the hair that just showed beneath his slouch hat, but no weapon that O'Brien could see.

"I'm O'Brien," O'Brien confirmed after a moment.

"Mind if we join you?" asked the man with the beard. "I'm Bob Shannon, and this here is Jack Gresham."

O'Brien's gesture told them to help themselves.

As Gresham lowered himself into one of the well-worn captain's chairs on the other side of the table, he tried to study O'Brien without making it look obvious. He hadn't really known what to expect from a man who was said to deal in trouble; maybe a cool-eyed, gun-hung killer whose capacity for violence constantly simmered just beneath his surface. But he saw none of that in O'Brien. O'Brien might wear a Colt at his hip—Gresham was no expert in such things, so he didn't know that it was a double-action .38-caliber Lightning—and have two cauliflowered ears that suggested time spent in a prize ring, but beneath a salt-and-pepper stubble, his rugged features appeared amiable, the face itself dominated by good-natured eyes as pale blue as duck eggs.

Neither was he especially bulky. Gresham estimated that he weighed around one-eighty, and though the shoulders under his sheepskin jacket appeared broad, his waist was narrow, his stomach as flat as a beaten coin.

Shannon took a seat beside his companion, then used a bandaged right hand to sweep off his wide-brimmed Plainsman hat. Long, Indian-black hair curled to well below his collar.

"Understand you take on work for hire, Mr. O'Brien," he said. "Leastways, that's what Marshal Wayne just now told us. Said as how you're a ... how did he put it?"

"A freelance fighting man," offered Gresham.

Shannon nodded. "Well, I doubt it'll come to fighting," he continued, "but Mr. Gresham here's got a job for you anyways, if you're interested."

"And I can pay," Gresham added quickly.

O'Brien pushed his plate aside and reached for his coffee. "What's the job?" he said.

"You seen the wagon train outside town?"

"Couldn't miss it. Don't see that many wagon trains around anymore."

That was certainly true. It was 1889, and to all points of the compass the country was becoming more settled by the day.

"I'm leadin' it south to a place called Songbird," said Shannon. "Not that there *is* such a place, yet. Only thing there right now is a trading post run by a man named Adkins. But it's a good spot, I've seen it. Got the railroad coming in, and plenty of good land around it. Adkins figures it'll make a right smart place for a town, so he put a notice in the papers, inviting folks to come out and settle. Got a good response, too; that's how come I got hired to take them down there."

"And you're one of these settlers?" O'Brien asked Gresham over his coffee cup.

"I am. Me, my wife, my kids." The man's throat tightened noticeably. "It's about one of my kids I need help."

"The girl's fifteen years of age," said Shannon, finally coming to the point. "Name's Nancy. Pretty girl, red hair."

"What's the problem?"

"She's run away," said Gresham. "Just upped and left, night before last."

"I found the tracks yesterday morning," added Shannon. "Two horses, headed north."

"Two horses?"

"She'd been seeing this boy," Gresham explained. "Eddie Marker, he calls himself. He just came out of nowhere, started hanging around our wagon, sweet-talking her. I told him to quit it, that she was just a child. Sonofabuck laughed in my face."

"Did you take it up with his folks?"

"He didn't have any," said Shannon. "It's like Gresham here said. He just rode in one day and joined up, offered to help me out in order to pay for his keep." His snorted. "What a joke *that* was."

"No good, huh?"

"Gresham just now called him a boy," said Shannon, "but he's closer to twenty or so. In my book, that makes him a man full-grown—or *should* do. But I can see why Gresham made the mistake. In his ways Eddie Marker is *still* a kid. Worse'n that, he's a bully. Hadn't been with us more'n five minutes before he started riding folks real hard if he didn't think they was pulling their weight. I also heard he was a thief."

"Oh?"

"He was always being spotted hanging around the wagons after dark, and there was some reports of things going missing; cash money, a couple of rings, gewgaws and the like. So I went through his saddlebags—oh, he hated that—and sure enough, there was all the missing stuff, hidden away right at the bottom of one pocket. Realized then he was the kind of man who'd steal the color from your eyes if he could."

"So you threw him off the train?"

"Damn right I did!" said Shannon, holding up his bandaged hand. "But not before the sonofabitch drew a knife on me, slashed me before I could knock him down. He lit out after that, but from the tracks it 'pears he came back later and took young Nancy with him."

"Any signs that she was *forced* to go with him?"

"Nope."

O'Brien set the empty coffee cup down. "What did your daughter see in him, Gresham?"

"Oh, he wasn't all rattles," the girl's father replied miserably. "He could be a charmer when he wanted to be. And like I say, my Nancy's only a child. Far as she was concerned, he was God's own cousin."

"So the two of them ran off together, night before last?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why has it taken you this long to do something about it?"

“At first we thought she’d come back of her own accord,” said Gresham. “You know, have a change of heart, get cold feet, whatever you want to call it. But she didn’t. Maybe she didn’t want to. Maybe she *did*, and Eddie wouldn’t let her. Any case, I figured I’d go after her myself, first thing this morning. But if I do that, Mr. Shannon here’ll have to leave us behind, and I can’t let that happen. One way or another, we’ve got everything pinned on a new start down south.”

O’Brien turned his gaze to the wagon master. “When are you pulling out, Shannon?”

“This afternoon,” Shannon replied. “We’re all ready to go, and carrying just about all the supplies we’re likely to need for the rest of the journey. I’d wait if I could, but it’s my job to get these folks through before winter sets in. Any delay and we could get snowed in long before we reach Songbird.”

“So we came into town and had a word with Marshal Wayne,” said Gresham. “Asked if there was anything *he* could do about it. He said his hands were tied, him havin’ no authority beyond the town limits, but that you were in town, that he knew you and thought maybe you could help. He said you sometimes took on work like this.”

“Where do you think this Marker feller could be headed?” O’Brien asked.

“They rode north, like I said,” replied Shannon. “My guess’d be Cedar Ridge.” It was a town about seventy or so miles north by west of their present location. “There’s nothing else out that way.”

“And that’s all you want?” asked O’Brien. “Your little girl back?”

“That’s it,” said Gresham. “I don’t care how you do it, or what happens to Eddie Marker when you find her. But I’m damned if I’ll let her run off with that kid.”

“What if she’s set on staying with him? I can’t just drag her off by the hair, you know.”

“You do whatever you need to do,” Gresham authorized fervently. “If we don’t get her back, he’ll be the death of her, I *know* he will.” His lower lip worked a little. “You just get her back, Mr. O’Brien, and me and the missus’ll deal with the consequences.”

Finally overcome by the emotion he’d been trying hard to keep in check, he quickly turned away from them. O’Brien used the opportunity to throw a questioning glance at Shannon. Shannon gave him a slight nod. He agreed with Gresham’s assessment, then ... and he had the wounded hand to prove it.

O’Brien drew a thoughtful breath.

His mostly aimless wanderings since leaving his last job down on the Kansas-Oklahoma border had eventually led him here to Mineral Springs, in his home state of Colorado, where he’d decided to stop over for a time to rest both himself and his blood-bay horse. And frankly, he’d needed the break.

Marshal Wayne had told it straight. He *was* a freelance fighting man, who hired out himself out when the job—and the money—was right. But his two most recent jobs had been even tougher than usual. The first had almost killed him,ⁱ and when a stick of dynamite had exploded too close for comfort, the second had left him partially deaf for a while.ⁱⁱ

Both jobs had served to remind him that he wasn’t getting any younger, and that it was getting harder and harder to bounce back from the kind of rough treatment he put himself through in order to complete the often impossible missions he undertook.

So he’d decided to find someplace quiet to rest up and really give himself a chance to heal. Mineral Springs had seemed the ideal spot.

Trouble was, a man like O’Brien could only rest up for so long. Then time began to drag and he’d find himself wondering if his days in the gun-for-hire business really *were* over. That was something he didn’t even want to *consider*, for though he was by nature a peaceable man, the quiet life, the *safe* life, just wasn’t for him.

In any case, if all they said about Eddie Marker was true, then Gresham's daughter really *could* be in danger, and now that he knew it, O'Brien, ever the altruist, wasn't sure he could just sit back and ignore it.

He finished his coffee.

"Tell me about their horses," he said.

"Eddie rode a flea-bitten gray," said Shannon. "I b'lieve you said your Nancy took your skewbald, didn't she, Mr. Gresham?"

Gresham nodded.

"All right," said O'Brien. "I can't guarantee how long it'll take, but I'll find her. Where should I fetch her when I do?"

Gresham almost slumped with relief.

"Barring heavy rain, which doesn't appear likely, we'll be leaving a clear trail ourselves, all the way south," said Shannon. "Thirteen wagons ... if you can't follow sign like that, you're not the man Lester Wayne said you were. But I'll tell you what. That's lonely country out there, O'Brien. You can go weeks and not spot another soul. So every day at noon we'll spell the horses for an hour, and send up smoke. You spot that smoke, it'll lead you straight to us."

Gresham reached into his pocket. "I can pay you now," he said, adding impressively, "I got thirty dollars right here."

O'Brien only shook his head. "Forget it, Gresham," he answered with a crooked smile. "You can have this one on the house."

And that was how the whole bloody business began.

ⁱ See Draw Down the Lightning

ⁱⁱ See Flame and Thunder