# **Prologue**

**Barry County, Missouri, 1865**

Wade Nash squinted at the figures on the low hill ahead of him and eased Charger, his chestnut stallion, into a slow walk.

*Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve seen trouble on this trail.*

Around Wade, the steep wooded hills of southern Missouri rose to where they would edge onto Arkansas Territory. It was lush and green, with creeks running every which way around here. Wade had been thinking that even the air changed as soon as he rode into Barry County.

*Home.* *Finally.*

The young man reached up to push a lock of ragged, dark brown hair out of his face. His gray eyes caught the sun. Golden-headed and tall Aspen trees lined the hills that Wade was following, their branches quivering in the prairie winds. Their sun-burnt leaflitter crunched on the narrow trail under Charger’s hooves. At the end of the trail, a rise of land broke through the tree’s, and it was here that the riders were waiting.

There were three up ahead; all with heavy cloaks and hats not unlike the straight-brimmed hat the twenty-five year old Wade wore himself. Wade couldn’t see rifles, but that didn’t mean these men didn’t have guns.

The colonel had warned them all that the road back was littered with deserters and lowlifes who “wanted nothing better than to take your out-pay with them”. If he was being honest, that was probably the only piece of good advice that Nash had ever heard the colonel give any of them.

A wave of nausea and frustrated contempt rose in Wade’s throat. He’d had enough of this. Of living every day wondering if it was going to be his last. The sudden memory of cannons booming and screaming horses ran through his mind. *Gettysburg.* It had been a charnel house.

But it wasn’t here. It wasn’t now.

Wade gently whistled to Charger to step forward a little more briskly, and his steed responded perfectly. He was a good horse. Battle-hardened and worth every penny.

“Howdy!” Wade lifted his chin and his hand, waving at the group of riders, as he made his way past them. They were still too small for him to see their faces, but he made sure that they could see his long rifle by his side.

*And I know how to use it, too.*

Perhaps it was his soldier instincts that told him to keep them in view, or maybe it was older, earlier instincts he learned at his father’s knee—and later as a lawman himself.

Either way, a good, strong shout was enough to tell them he wasn’t afraid of nobody. Not after what he had seen.

One of the men raised a hand in silent greeting, but then turned his horse around, and the group set off north.

*Huh.* Wade kept moving forward, but kept his eye on the hill just the same.

He rode out from between the two low hills, and that was when he saw the thin pillar of smoke in the distance. Smack bang where the Nash farmstead would be.

\* \* \*

“Pa! Sarah!” Wade hollered. He rode hard, demanding Charger put any energy the beast had left in him into the sprint.

The smoke billowed as Wade rode towards it, marring the blue Western skies with black. It wasn’t long before Wade was seeing sights he was sure he recognized. The old chestnut tree at the top of the Maplethorpe place. The steep cutaway in the side of a hill where he had seen his first coyote. Everywhere looked familiar, but at the same time not. The Maplethorpe land was overgrown and untended. The fence by the side of their track was sagging and hadn’t been fixed.

*No.*

His heart leapt to his throat. How many young men—just like him—had been called up to fight, abandoning their homes? Who was there to protect their families?

*Sarah.*

His beautiful, blonde-haired fiancée was supposed to be staying at the ranch with Pa. But surely his father, the great Samuel Nash, feared and respected sheriff across southern Missouri could have looked after them both?

Wade rounded the final bend in the trail and the sight before him choked the shout in his throat. He reared Charger in shock, his horse’s hooves skidding in the dirt.

There was his ranch, or what was left of it. The large, plank-built house was a smoking ruin. Its front porch had collapsed, its windows were nothing but blackened holes into hell.

A snarl burst from Wade, and he rode forward as if he could ride into the past.

“Sarah, my heart; my sweet, my love—Sarah!” He shouted. He threw himself from his horse, tumbling onto the ground in his haste. He tore up the lane to their yard to see that the fires had already taken hold of the rear of the building.

“Pa!” He ran toward the porch—and as he did so he saw the humped shapes on the other side of the well, sitting up as if they had only just sat down a moment before.

*No-no-no!*

Dead bodies never look they’re asleep. That was something he had learned in the war. There was a stillness to them that something in his body registered. The sound of the flames in the background faded to nothing as a terrible tinnitus whine split Wade’s ears.

“But, but…” Wade refused to believe it. Sarah couldn’t be taken from him. Pa was too stubborn to die.

But Wade couldn’t find it in him to call out again. The still forms, staring eyes and the blood that had soaked their chests made it clear what had happened.

Sarah was wearing her yellow and white dress, still with the striped blue apron over the top of it, now ruined by blood. It was the apron that Wade used to tease her about, saying it made her look ten years older.

*“And somehow I’m still prettier than you!”* she teased right back, often with a playful pinch or a swipe with a towel.

Sarah Lewis, the love of his life, lay dead with her back to the well. Wade remembered the first time he had seen her; he’d had grazed knees and she had grazes on her arms where she had been picking berries from the thorn bushes.

*“What are you doing on my land! Are you some kind of outlaw?”* Sarah Lewis, then aged all of nine years old, had challenged him.

*“This isn’t your land. This isn’t anyone’s land!”* Wade had answered.

*“Yeah? Who says it isn’t mine then?”* Sarah shot right back.

Sarah Lewis—never to be Sarah Nash—had introduced herself, and she had never changed. Everyone in the town knew that they were destined to get married one day. When Wade had become a deputy for Barry County, the other wives had commiserated with Sarah that she would need ‘to get her babies in quick!’

Wade walked up to her. Gently, he closed her eyes, and kissed her forehead.

“It was meant to be me who went first. Not you.”

Next to her, in the same position, sat Pa. Killed the same way, but his face was a still a snarl of fury. Wade couldn’t imagine the fierce strength of him suddenly being snuffed out like that. How could a mere bullet stop Samuel Nash?

*“You do the right thing in this job, that’s all I ask. And in the times when your back’s up against it—when you can’t even do that—then you do the wrong thing, but for the right reasons. You understand me, son?”*

His father hadn’t always been a kind man, but he had been fair. Something had hardened in him when Wade’s mother had passed away.

Wade couldn’t think of a fitting epitaph for his father. Weren’t there things you were supposed to say at times like this? The Lord’s Prayer?

Without realizing, Wade had sunk to his knees. One of his hands sought Sarah’s cold one. He looked up at the sky, and howled.

*What world had done this? What outlaw had done this to him?*

His hand fumbled at his breast pocket, pulling out the one souvenir he had kept all those long fighting years. It was his sheriff’s star, wrapped up in the silk handkerchief that Sarah had bought for him. It was the same star that Pa had awarded him the winter before war had broken out.

*“You’ll follow in my footsteps, and I dare say you’ll make a better lawman than I ever did. Watch out, Barry County! The Nashes will put you straight!”*

It was one of the only times Wade remembered his father beaming with pride.

But what good had his sheriff’s star done him, out in the war? Had it saved Sarah’s life? *No.* Had Pa’s sheriff star saved their lives? *No.*

An icy stillness settled on Wade’s heart. What good was the law, if it couldn’t even save his family?

His fist’s clenched around the sheriff’s star so hard that he didn’t notice the pain.

*No.* The law hadn’t saved his family when they needed it most. What justice could there be in a world like this? One where wars chewed up young men and spat out their lifeless bodies, or where Sarah and Pa could be executed so easily, all for just a scatter of coins?

Wade’s hand sprang open, he stared at the star he held in his hand, and the beads of blood that his fierce grip had caused. Maybe this was all it was—a useless piece of metal. It didn’t mean anything.

*What have I spent the last five years of my life doing?* Wade demanded answers, but there was nothing but the dead to give them.

*I could find the men who did this. I could track them down, make them suffer, one by one…*

Wade felt a terrible, black anger consume his heart. But his rage tasted like the ashes of his burnt home in his mouth. What good would revenge do? He had killed many, and there were probably many mothers and fathers of young soldiers who would just as surely want to find *him* for who he killed during the war.

*And revenge won’t bring them back, will it?* Wade Nash lifted his eyes to the skies, and wept.

# **Chapter 1**

**Thirteen years later, Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

*Cheyenne sure did look like a lively little place*.

Wade eased himself off Charger’s back, who whinnied softly.

“I know boy. It’s been a long road today, but you’ll get a warm stable tonight” Wade confided to Charger, who huffed thoughtfully. Wade paused, waiting for the clip of the wagons to pass by and the dust to die down.

*And this will be a good place for me pick up a trail job. Maybe even a trail boss,* he thought.

Cheyenne was a busy town. One of those end-of-the-line towns as the railways had reached here but no farther yet. That meant that there was business; prospectors and wagon trails starting up to make the crossing to the Pacific Coast—lots of opportunities.

Wade heaved a weary sigh. In truth it had been a long day’s ride for both of them, but longer for Charger he feared, who was already showing gray through his mane.

*He’ll be fine!* Wade shoved down the worry that he was asking too much of his steed. No. Charger had been with him through thick and thin. Halfway across this glorious land of America and back again. Together they had tracked and trapped along the Oregon trail, and they had guarded cattle running the Shawnee Trail. Everything that could have conceivably been thrown at a man—from floods to wildfires, outlaws and bandits and storms, had happened to him and his steed over the last thirteen years—and they both made it through just fine. Charger might be seventeen, but he still had plenty of years in him. Didn’t he?

*But still, it would be nice to have a bed and some steady work for a change.* Wade fed Charger some slices of dried apple from his pack as he regarded the town ahead of him.

Cheyenne wasn’t large, but the Pacific Railroad Company must have done it wonders. Wade could see the freight yard and the miasma of dust that hung over it from where he stood. Barns larger than most churches sat around it. A fierce whistle split the air, and Wade saw the long line of a black locomotive slowing as it came into the station.

The town itself was busy with carts, riders, and foot traffic. Wade recognized the heavy riding gear and grime of trails men, as well as the sharp clip of businessmen as they walked their expensive shoes on the board walks.

*Yes sir, Cheyenne is a town on the up.*

Wade saw the stone buildings at the heart of the town, and scaffolding ladders beyond that.

In truth, Wade preferred the peace and quiet of being on the road. He wasn’t sure he liked being bothered by other people’s shenanigans and foolery.

*But there’s not much money in furs right now.* Wade sighed. But that was okay. Maybe he could hire on as a guide, or a guard with someone. Just so long as they treated him well and didn’t expect him to talk too much.

Life was simpler that way.

“Come on boy, let’s see what she has to offer us,” Wade led Charger by the lead into the town. He kept himself to the side of the roadway. Wagons and carriages trundled past. He heard a group of teamsters laughing and shouting loudly outside a saloon. He raised his head warily in their direction.

Charger whinnied softly again at his side.

“Oh, don’t worry old man. I’m not borrowing trouble today,” Wade said. The teamsters were already drunk on some cheap rye or whatever rotgut they could get their hands on. Their laughter wasn’t reserved for him.

*Keep your head down. Keep on your own trail.* Wade forced himself to keep walking, even though his senses jangled.

It was places like this—towns, cities, places where lots of people washed up—where Wade could sense the danger. Not out there on the open plains, under prairie skies.

Wade passed by the rowdy streets, instead heading for the one which had an actual stone bank and stone post office. Across the street was a large saloon called *Gilmour’s,* with a green painted sign, and whose lettering was in fancy gold swirls.

Gilmour’s had a free to use stable for guests, just so long as he didn’t mind paying the extra pennies for the feed. Wade would take that cost, if only to get Charger somewhere warm and dry for the night, and himself an actual bed. Maybe even order a hot bath tub drawn up.

Inside, the place was as busy as Wade expected it to be, with a group of men singing harmonies in the background as a woman in formal dress caressed a piano. There were teamsters and cowboys in here too, but most of them looked a little older, with the air of lead scouts or project bosses. The other half of the clientele appeared to be made up of well-to-do travelers. Wade saw men in tailored dress coats and with canes, and women with small hats and shortened riding jackets.

*Probably just got off the train and looking to make their fortune*.

Wade afforded himself a brief chuckle. The west was changing all right. The railroad wasn’t just sending cattle and ore back east. It was also bringing eastern money out west. Young couples were starting out on new claims, while others were setting up milliners and haberdashers and tailors and print shops. Wade didn’t think it would be too long before Cheyenne even got a playhouse all of its own.

Wade selected a spot at the end of the bar, paying his dues for a room, a hot meal and a tub, before leaning over and passing another few dimes over the counter.

“You know someone in here looking to take on staff? They got to be reliable, good reputation. Treat people right,” Wade said to the skinny barman with a balding head, who made up for it with an over-large mustache that joined up to his sideburns.

“Work? You’re looking for work, you say? Try the Cheyenne Star, down at the front of town,” the barman frowned at him. The small man looked about to move, when Wade added another couple of dimes to the counter.

“I’m not looking for that kind of work, mister. I know my worth, and I’m looking for someone honest. Not chump work,” Wade said seriously.

In all honesty, Wade had done his fair share of ‘chump work’. He had grubbed out trees for mining companies. He had dug ditches and driven bolts for railway firms. He didn’t mind the hard work, but it was the monotony that got him.

*And those contracts always pay terribly, and couldn’t care less if you died on the job.*

The barkeep looked down at the counter and then back up at Wade, who held his eyes steadily. He wondered what the barkeep saw in him then, as he straightened up a little, cleared his throat as if addressing someone with much better clothes than Wade currently wore.

“Well, there’s the Pacific man at the end of the bar over there. He says he’s looking for someone, but hasn’t found him yet. Mr. Hayes, I think he said.” The barkeep pocketed the money, and pointed towards a young-looking man with dark hair and a yellow cravat under his dark jacket.

*Might as well go introduce myself.*

Wade walked down to the bottom of the bar to see the man in question grinning, and already holding forth with a small circle of well-dressed travelers.

“No, honestly, New York is the worst. If you’re that good at cards then *please* don’t go there!” the man said with a cackle, earning a round of laughter from the crowd.

This Hayes was older than Wade had first thought, he realized. He had crow’s feet around his ears and traces of silver touching his hairline. But there was something about his demeanor—his cheerfulness, his casual confidence, that made him seem younger.

“And well, if you’re looking for an investment, then it has to be Carson City to the south, or Boise in the north,” the man announced to another of their number, a well-dressed man clearly younger than either Wade or Mr. Hayes. “Busy routes, main trails for settlers and prospectors. I tell you, as soon as we get a railway through to either of them, they’ll explode.”

There was an admiring titter from the crowd. Wade was starting to wonder if he had come to the wrong man. It didn’t look like Mr. Hayes had want of anything.

“But now, that’s enough! Leave me to my meal, please gentlemen, ladies,” Mr. Hayes nodded graciously, as one of the serving women set down a bowl of something steaming, that looked delicious. The serving woman saw Wade in the background and nodded.

“You’re next, mister. I’ll bring it out shortly,” she said.

The crowd dispersed, and Wade found himself standing in front of the Union Pacific Railway man sitting at a small table, looking up at him.

“I’m sorry sir, I don’t mean to interrupt your food, I’ll come back in a moment,” Wade said at once. Already the serving woman, dressed in apron and red skirts was swaying back through the swing doors at the back, laden with another bowl of some steaming broth, and a plate with hunks of bread and cheese.

“Oh, you’ve come off the trails, haven’t you? Sit yourself down, man. Just keep me busy so those jackals don’t come back again!” the businessman hissed, gesturing to the seat opposite him. At first Wade wondered if he meant it, but he saw the man grinning and rolling his eyes at the well-dressed hangers on starting to flock around the singers.

The railway man waved at the serving woman moving from the kitchens to the saloon floor. “Another of the same for my friend here!”

“Thank you,” Wade half smiled. *Although*, Wade admitted, *this act of kindness was probably to appear busy so he wouldn’t be bothered again.* A few moments later, and a steaming dish of stew, with a fat hunk of bread by the side arrived at his table.

“Every town we go to, it’s the same,” Mr. Hayes said. “Everyone wants to know where to spend their money but doesn’t have a jot of sense to go with it. Give me one decent man who can work hard for every ten of them, I tell you!” Mr. Hayes laughed, sopping up his broth and tearing into the bread. Wade waited for a pause, and realized he appreciated that. He appreciated a man, no matter what finery they wore, who got down to the business of eating. It was a soldier’s trait.

“You served?” Wade asked.

“Of course. Infantry. Made it all the way to sergeant before they realized the whole thing was over,” Hayes nodded. “You?”

“Infantry,” Wade nodded. It was a long time ago now, but he could still read the signs of the war on another man’s face. Despite his joviality, Mr. Hayes had a crinkling around the eyes, an immediacy of speech that said, *I’ve seen death, and I’m not going back there!*

“But before that I was a sheriff in my home state. So I already had a fair bit of experience.”

“Which was where?” Hayes ate as he asked questions. He appeared genuinely interested.

“Missouri. Barry County,” Wade said easily. He worked his way through his own dish.

“Barry County? Say… you, you wouldn’t be Wade Nash, would you?” Mr. Hayes looked at him in surprise.

Wade blinked. A shiver ran down his spine. “Sir, yes, I am. How come you know my name?”

Mr. Hayes wiped his hand on a handkerchief and leaned over to offer his hand to Wade.

“Frederick Hayes. Representative for the Union Pacific Railway Company. Very pleased to meet you, Sheriff Nash.”

Wade shook the hand, finding the man had a surprisingly strong grip.

“You still haven’t answered my question, Mr. Hayes,” Wade said seriously.

At that, Frederick Hayes laughed. “Ha! I was told you were a serious fellow. I’ve heard your name a couple times on the railroad, that’s all. If you’re looking for a good tracker, trail boss, or a better guard, then hire this ex-sheriff out of Barry County. Goes by the name of Wade Nash. Son to a lawman family. The only problem is, he never stays long enough in any one place to track him down.” Frederick laughed once again. “Well, am I pleased to finally meet you, Mr. Nash. I don’t suppose you would be open to the offer of employment?” Frederick said.

Frederick’s charm and eagerness put Wade on edge. He wasn’t used to employers being so effusive. Or upfront.

“Well, yes, I am, but…” Wade said.

“Good! Good, I hope so. Because I’ve been looking for someone to help us with a rather delicate matter on the Union Pacific,” Frederick leaned forward, his voice low. “There’s been some trouble with the tracks. A couple of accidents, some stuff going missing. I need a guard, just in case.”

Frederick’s happy go lucky tone had changed in a moment. He was serious. Wade could see the soldier behind the railway man once again.

“Sabotage? Outlaws?” Wade murmured quietly. It wasn’t the first time he had heard of such things happening to the ever-advancing railroads.

The railways were the cutting edge of civilization, after all. They brought opportunity and riches. But they also set plenty of noses out of joint, from landowners who didn’t want to sell, to Native Americans, and even to rival businessmen.

“I honestly don’t know. It could be nothing. Maybe the work crew I have isn’t happy. But I need a man I can trust to look into it. And to keep everyone safe.”

“And the work moving ahead?” Wade said steadily.

Frederick Hayes held his gaze for a moment. His face had that serious, unreadable line—before he suddenly broke into a grin. “Well yes of course, that too.”

This sounded like a lot. More than the simple, straightforward job that Wade had been after.

*But you’re nearly out of money, Wade. And Charger might not even last another winter.*

“Come on then man, what say you? You’ll get your worth, I guarantee it,” Frederick once again extended his hand.

Wade shook it.

They had finished their meals, swapping stories about the war and about how their lives had become something very different since then. Frederick finally begged off to retire upstairs, and Wade found himself nursing a single shot of rye, and wondering just what he had signed up for.

“You signed up with that Union Pacific guy?” a man, dressed in heavy shirt and much harder leathers than most in here said, as he barged past Wade’s seat.

“Do I know you, friend?” Wade looked up at him.

The man was large and well-built, with a shaved heard, and a busy black beard; he was older than Wade by at least ten years. He looked as strong as an ox and loomed over Wade’s table.

“Nope. But I saw everyone fawning over him. I tell you now, friend, there’s trouble on that railroad they’re driving through. Take my advice and be careful, son,” the giant of a man said in a voice that could split mountains, then turned and marched into the press of the crowd.

# **Chapter 2**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“I heard about the accident,” Anna Turner kept her tone light, but it was hard to disguise the small waver in her voice.

Jacob was a whole six months gone now. She’d done her crying, hadn’t she?

The twenty-eight year old Anna collected herself, before picking up the coffee tray and turned to her kitchen table where her friend, Abigail Rowe, was already seated.

Abigail was always a picture of elegance, even given her job as Cheyenne’s foremost doctor, nurse, and surgeon all rolled into one. Abigail’s jet black hair was trained into a queue down her back, and she wore a smart, fitting green form-fitting jacket over her more sensible trousers.

“Yes, some damn fool forgot to put the chocks on the rail carriage. Slid forward and crushed a man’s foot,” Abigail spoke frankly, in that practical tone that all doctors had.

*I remember when you talked to me in that voice,* the thought flashed through Anna’s mind. But that had been about something far more serious than a broken foot.

“Will he be alright, the man at the railroad?” Anna asked. Ridiculous question. Of course the poor man wouldn’t. Not for a while, anyway.

Abigail, her hair black as pitch compared to Anna’s golden, auburn curls, nodded briskly. “He will. Two toes lost, but the man will be fine. I think he was more worried about being laid off. The church is collecting some funds to feed his family until he can get back on a horse again, at least.”

“I’ll see what I can spare,” Anna said at once. She sat herself down and remembered how hard it had been in the months after the accident had taken her husband’s life. It wasn’t just the shock of losing such a sweet man, but the financial hardship as well.

*As if you should be thinking about that!*

Anna frowned at her own thoughts. Jacob Turner had honestly been everything that she could have wished for in a husband; dependable, hardworking, loyal, he didn’t waste his money on gambling or gin—but that was as far as their connection went. Anna’s heart fluttered in one of those too-often moments of panic.

*Shame. That’s what it is.* Anna knew that she had never loved Jacob in the way that he deserved.

Had she loved him at all? Not in the way that he would have liked, perhaps. Theirs wasn’t the kind of love that she had dreamed about as a young girl. She felt guilty because she knew that theirs had been a marriage of convenience. Jacob was a landed man with a small but well-respected ranch, and she had been a single woman with few prospects. She had thought that friendship would eventually grow into affection, and real love in the years to come. That was what people said happened, didn’t they?

But then Jacob had gone and died on that awful railway.

“Don’t be silly, Anna. I’m sure you have your hands full on the land as it is. You haven’t got a penny to spare!” Abigail laughed. It was good-natured, but felt at odds with Anna’s train of thought.

“Actually, that is one of the things that I wanted to talk to you about.” Abigail took a strong glug of her coffee (once again, Anna thought this was her doctor’s need for energy) before her friend gave an approving groan.

“See? If you make coffee this strong, then we can certainly use you at the practice. It might be a way to make some more money?” Abigail’s eyes were encouraging.

“Ah,” Anna blinked for a moment. The thought of getting another job seemed impossible right now. She only had a small herd of horses, but they were traditional Morgans, and they’d had three foals this spring gone. Anna knew she needed to keep an eye on their development. Then there were chickens that constantly needed feeding and fencing from the cougars and coyotes, as well as the two aging nanny goats…

“Okay, I can see your answer already,” Abigail laughed once more. Anna admired her friend for that; she was practical and direct, and able to switch between professionalism to a cheery nature in the space of seconds. It was probably what made her patients in Cheyenne think so highly of her.

“Thank you, honestly… If I had any more time at all, I think I would take the offer,” Anna said.

Anna’s heart fluttered once again. It did that every time she lied to herself. The real reason she didn’t want to work at the surgery with Abigail was that she would be forced every day to see the terrible effects that new railroad was having.

Accidents. Exhaustion. Crushed limbs like the man last night. Overwork. Fights between the workers. Sometimes even worse things…

Like the explosion that had taken Jacob.

Anna felt a surge of hot and hungry anger rush through her. It was so strong that she had to put her coffee cup down for fear of spilling it. The explosion had been an accident according to Union Pacific, the company who were building the railway.. The demolitions team had used two much dynamite. Jacob must have not have heard the order to stay off the trestle bridge. The blast that should have cleared the gully of debris had gone off in the wrong place.

There were too many conflicting stories about what had happened, and even now, six months later, Anna was still to find a story that made sense.

*Jacob was a thoughtful man. He wouldn’t have been so stupid as to walk out onto a bridge that was about to explode! Why had they tried to blow up their own bridge anyway?*

Accidents, accidents, miscommunication, tiredness, sloppy workmanship… That was all that the workers had said. Anna didn’t like it, and she could smell the fear in Frederick Hayes when she threatened to sue the Union Pacific.

Not that she had anywhere near the sort of money to even attempt legal action!

“I don’t think I would be best suited to working in the practice just yet,” Anna settled for, and averted her gaze from her friends compassion. It was easier to say that, then admit she didn’t want to get Abigail into trouble when she lost her temper at the latest evidence of negligence and corruption she would see.

“Well, the offer will still be open when you need it,” Abigail said warmly. “Anyway. It wasn’t just that, I wanted to see how you were doing.”

*How am I doing?*

Anna struggled to find the words. How was she supposed to tell her friend she found herself wracked by guilt every day. She hadn’t loved her dead husband enough. She was convinced that something was going on at the railway but no one would talk to her. She was starting to sound like a crazy person. Every time she thought of the railway, she felt a ball of hatred and resentment.

Oh, she knew it was good for Cheyenne. She knew that it was good for the country, even. A railway that connected Wyoming to the western territories would be a boon for every township on the way.

*But did it really have to cost so many lives?* Anna had head from a man at the cattle market about how men died laying tracks every day for the new railroads. Sometimes the railroad companies even used people who couldn’t even speak English, so they wouldn’t be able to complain about their work practices.

“Well, the ranch is keeping me busy…” Anna said.

Her friend made a soft sigh. She reached out a hand and laid it on Anna’s own. That simple act of kindness diffused her anger to a dull ember.

“When you’re ready, come and talk to me,” Abigail said. Her eyes swung to the clock Anna kept on the table and, as was Abigail’s style, her mood shifted in an instant.

“Right. I’ve got to go. The young practice nurse is good, but he’s terrible with stitches. If I’m gone any longer, then half of my ward will run away screaming!” It was an attempt at humor, but Anna wasn’t feeling up to it right now. She saw her friend to the door, feeling vaguely let down by her own foul mood.

*Never mind that. There’s a fence on east paddock that needs fixing!*

Anna busied herself around the kitchen, and once again felt like she was rattling around her ranch. It was strange, having three rooms plus a living room, kitchen, and two barns all of her own. She wondered what the older folks at the Cheyenne Civic Association would be saying about her if she carried on like this, a widower and with no children to boot.

“Well, let them gossip all they want. I’m too busy for their blathering,” she muttered, clearing away her things. She drew on her stiff leather work jacket, and took her work satchel from behind the door which contained the most necessary tools she would need: Water, gloves, nails and hammer, twine, a simple first air kit, and liniment for the horses.

The sky was clear today and the sun beat its blazing heat down on her as she moved through her tasks. Her old, floppy hat had seen better days, but it kept the worst of the heat off. By the time that midday had come and gone, and then aged into mid-afternoon, Anna had worked up a good sweat and had seen to the goats, chickens, and foals. Now she was busy hammering wire into fence posts.

“*Hoi!”*

A distant shout interrupted her work, and Anna realized that she had been completely lost in the rhythm of unspooling, holding, and hammering.

It didn’t sound like Abigail, she thought as she leaned on the fence post, pulling her hat against the sun’s glare to see who it was.

There was a rider on a black Saddlebred, Anna recognized the height and head of the breed even from here. The man sat straight-backed, with a white jacket.

*Oh.* With a sinking heart, Anna realized who it was. That man always wore the small cream hat with the red and gold cuff.

“Silas.” She stated. Anna refused to raise her hand in greeting to the wealthy Cheyenne financier and probably one of Cheyenne’s richest men.

Silas Laramie was a man in his prime, with blond hair that was only just starting to fade into white. Perhaps forty, if Anna had to guess.

He had a broad grin plastered over his good looks as he rode up her track confidently.

He was also the man that Anna hated the most in all of Cheyenne.

“What are you doing here, Silas?” Anna said at once. She wished she had a dog she could set on him.

“Always a pleasure to see you, Ms. Turner,” Silas said in return, taking off his hat briefly to nod. He was every picture the gentlemen, until you saw the cruelty in his clear blue eyes.

“*Mrs.”* Anna corrected.

Silas feigned shock for a moment, before recovering with a cheeky grin. “Of my, of course. I am sorry I almost totally forgot. How long is official mourning supposed to last these days? Times are changing so quick, you know, I was sure that a young, good-looking woman like yourself would have some new suitors by now.”

This wasn’t the first time that she had been told she was pretty; even beautiful. Her auburn-chestnut hair would hang in waves when she didn’t have it tied back in a braid as she did now, and her eyes (which she had been told were a striking) she got from her Irish grandparents. It was true that she had no lack of suitors before she was married. But all of them either seemed the brutish sort who talked about heads of steers and how many wolves they had shot, or else the wasting-away, pale sort from the ‘more cultured’ east.

Jacob had been a cut above them, she admitted with a shade of guilt.

*Then why didn’t I love him?*

“Say what you came here to say, Mr. Laramie.” She kept her tone formal, and made it clear that she didn’t want him and his ilk on her ranch.

*Her* ranch. Because that what this was all about, wasn’t it? Jacob hadn’t been in the ground for two weeks before Silas Laramie had ridden up here to offer to buy the place from her.

“Oh, I’m just taking in the air, seeing how a widow on her own is doing out here,” Silas said with a grin. It was clear he knew that she did not like him.

“Just fine thank you, praise be. Now if that is all—” Anna started to turn back to her fence posts.

“And the offer, of course,” Silas’s tone dropped to a low, serious growl.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Laramie?” Anna turned around, and fixed him with a strong glare.

“My earlier offer still stands, you know. Although I’ll have to take fifty dollars off the top, what with the price of things and the waiting. Making deals takes time, and there’s a lot of paperwork. The longer we dally about this the more trouble it will be to enlist my legal men in Cincinnati.” Silas said.

Anna couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Here he was, as bold as brass, pretending the sale of her ranch—Jacob’s family ranch before her—was a done deal. As if she had already agreed.

Anna struggled to control her temper. “I’ll tell you now as I told you exactly the same back then, Mr. Laramie,” Anna said forcefully. “My ranch is not for sale. I don’t care how much you offer for it. I don’t care if you say it’s halting the railroad or stopping the spread of civilization or some such nonsense. This is my land, and it’s going to stay that way,” Anna said sharply.

Silas smiled in response, as if he had been expecting such an answer.

“Ah, Anna. That’s the problem, isn’t it? Progress is coming whether you like it or not. I would sell it now if I were you, because pretty soon that decision will be taken out of your hands.”

“Are you threatening me?” Anna said. She was suddenly hot and flustered. The handle of the hammer she had been using felt comfortable curled into her fist.

“No! Of course not. I would never threaten a lady,” Silas smiled sweetly.

But Anna wasn’t done yet. She felt her heart beat quicken and her anger flowed out of her.

“And another thing, Mr. Laramie. I know you’ve been buying up all the land around here, claiming it’s for the railroad. Buying land cheap and selling it on at inflated prices,” she accused him.

“Business is business, Mrs. Turner,” Silas said.

“And I know there’s been an awful lot of accidents at the railroad, too! Some say you’d benefit if the railroad was canceled and someone else had to step in to finance it. Others say Union Pacific is giving a lot of money away to make sure their railway goes ahead!” Anna shouted.

Instantly, she wished she’d kept her mouth shut. Most of what she’d said were her own theories, put together by the bits and pieces that Jacob had told her he had seen on the yard. He had seen suitcases full of cash going from Union Pacific to teamsters and land owners to make sure their railway passed ‘without a hitch’.

“What exactly are you accusing me of, Mrs. Turner?” Silas’s tone was deadly cold.

Anna glared at him. She had not a shred of evidence apart from the half-remembered words of a dead man. All she knew was that Silas Laramie was getting very rich off the railroad.

“I’m not selling.” Anna repeated. She refused to answer his question.

“I’d be careful, Mrs. Turner. Casting bad gossip like that only brings bad things in turn,” Silas said, wheeling his horse around and breaking into a canter up the trail.

“And good riddance, too,” Anna muttered after him. She lifted her eyes to the west. She couldn’t see the railway from this far out, but she swore she could feel it’s baleful presence beyond the hills all the same.

She wasn’t going to get any answers shouting at Silas Laramie, that was for sure.

# **Chapter 3**

**Union Pacific Railroad Works, Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

Shouts and snarls and dust filled the air as Wade rode in for his first day at Union Pacific. To say it was noisy was an understatement. The constant clang of hammers rang in his ears as iron track was pegged into the ground. Foremen and workers shouted as they dragged iron track off the back of open railway carts. Further out, Wade could hear the muted thunder of mattocks and picks as people prepared and filled the ground ahead of the iron road.

Charger stamped and pawed at the ground at all this noise. Wade patted his neck, offering him a piece of dried apple before sliding from his side.

“Easy there brother, I feel the same,” he whispered into Charger’s ear. The horse appeared to calm just a little as Wade led him to the temporary stable block made of fresh pine planks.

A cloud of heavy dust hung in the air over the entire construction site. Wade could see why the workers wore their kerchiefs pulled up over their nose and mouths. It was a heavy grit that Wade knew would get under his collar and stick to his skin as soon as he turned a sweat later in the day.

“Greetings. Wade Nash. Just been hired today,” he greeted a burly-looking man with only a grimy vest on, short hair, but a full black beard. The man blinked at him in confusion for a moment, before picking up the wheelbarrow full of gravel and turning back to the line of tracks that crossed in front of them.

“I heard about you. Union hire, aren’t ya?” the man said. His accent was southern and heavy. Wade guessed that he was an itinerant worker who went anywhere the work was.

“Mr. Hayes,” Wade said, following the man as they hurried forward. They passed by the first of three open-backed carts on the section of tracks that were already laid and stapled. They were the sort of carts that didn’t have any engines themselves, but with pump handles that could be operated by people to transport workers or equipment up and down the tracks.

“Yar. Someone said we’re getting a new guard chief or something,” the man shrugged his muscled shoulders. It was clear from the dismissive way he talked what he thought about the difference that would make.

“You’ve had a lot of trouble then?” Wade asked.

The man shrugged once more, and fell silent.

“I mean, is it regular trouble? Accidents? Or has there been something else?” Wade asked.

Still, the man remained stubbornly silent. Irritation flashed across Wade’s face as he frowned. He had been a guard before, and he had to discipline younger, wilder cowboys before too.

But jumping in like that on the first day of his work would be a bad idea. He wanted the men to know he was on their side against any and all threats—but that he was also no slack. He wouldn’t have troublemaking on his watch.

“*Grit!”* the man hollered as he approached the line of men who were busy pounding the spikes into the iron tracks. The tracks stretched like twin black snakes across the land, winding for leagues behind them. A little way ahead of the pounding iron rails was the track team. Wade saw men clearing and bashing away at the ground, digging grooves out of the land before tamping it down with heavy rods with fattened metal ends.

The rail team paused for a moment as the young man with the wheelbarrow jogged past towards the track team.

“Grit!” He called again, for another man, this one thinner with black hair in a side parting, looked up and pointed a few meters ahead, to where a hole was waiting.

Wade watched as the young man skidded to a halt, lifted the handles of the wheelbarrow with a grunt and dumped the entire lot into the hole, before turning back around. He didn’t stop for a moment as he jogged back towards the gravel pile a good hundred meters away.

“Got a new warden for ya, too!” the wheelbarrow man shouted over his shoulder, leaving Wade suddenly surrounded by young men with hard eyes, and dangerous weapons in their hands.

“Charles—”

“Abe—”

“Clint—”

“Bodie—”

The names rattled around Wade after he had introduced himself. He would never remember all of them, but he tried to fix at least one characteristic from each he could remember. Charles was older with a limp. Abe was the thin, black-haired man who appeared to be a ringleader of sorts for this small group. Clint chewed tobacco, and Bodie glared…

“You gonna fix everything right, are you, Boss?” the one called Abe said. His language wasn’t the best, but the others appeared to hold him in high regard.

“Is there something that needs fixing?” Wade said with a smile. He had meant it as a joke, but instead he just got a scatter of pointed looks as the men looked at each other silently.

*Clearly there was.*

“We work hard, Boss. And we don’t cause trouble. We’d just as sooner get back to it, sir,” Abe huffed, puffing his chest out.

“Nash, or Wade,” Wade corrected him. “So, none of you want to report anything? No complaints? Nothing you’ve seen about your work here? No one skulking around at night? No one making threats?” Wade asked.

It was a bit early for coming straight in with the suspicions, but Wade thought it best to get everything out into the open, at least. He had been hired because the railway had problems. The work was delayed, and there had been a number of accidents. He intended to find out what was going on.

*Were some of these workers unhappy?*

*Was there a feud between one lot of workers and another?*

*Had any of them actually heard of threats to the railway?*

These were all questions that he knew he needed the answers to. And he also knew it would probably take some time to get them.

“Nothing like that sir. We just do the work, that’s all, sir,” Abe said firmly.

Wade cast an eye around the track crew. They appeared closed off, and wouldn’t meet his gaze. Bodie and Charles fidgeted.

These men were worried. Wade might even go so far as to say they were scared. But what of?

“Well, if you have any problems just holler me. That’s my job,” Wade insisted, tipping his hat before making his way to the track-laying crew.

A railway as large as this one worked across multiple sites at the same time, Wade learned. There were different crews spread out across the plains around Cheyenne, and he had arrived at one of the lucky times when the trail-breakers had worked their way back to the track-layers.

A railway was built in sections, it appeared, with the ground being grubbed and cleared and prepared first, before grit and dirt was laid down, and large wooden sleepers were ‘bedded’ almost a foot apart in this. Then the long sections of iron rail were laid onto these wooden sleepers and nailed into place.

Carts with heavy draft horses pulled a wagon with the wooden sleepers at the front, while the iron bars were on the train ‘pump’ carriages a few hundred meters behind. Sometimes, the track men were sent far ahead to work their way back to the rails or work on particularly difficult sections. A team of scouts were ahead of that, checking the route ahead and clearing any fallen trees, or marking off areas that needed dynamiting.

“It sure is a lot of work,” Wade said to the track men as they took the welcome second to pause as he introduced himself.

Wade had laid tracks himself a few times, but when he told the workers that they just nodded, not saying much. The track men worked as a team, and were less communicative than the first crew that Wade had talked to.

No one had seen anything. No one would own up to any fights or feuds.

*That is odd, isn’t it?* Wade thought as he thanked them, heading back for the construction yard he had started at. This was just as busy as deliveries of wooden posts, iron bars, grit, gravel, and tools were shipped through constantly.

Wade looked back over his shoulder

*Usually a work team is only too happy to stop and chat*. *Or they would admit to a drunken row or two. It was a part of the way of life, after all.*

Wade had fully expected to hear a few grumbles here and there. Tired, hard working men had a right to grumble, didn’t they? Especially when it looked as though half of them hadn’t been given work gloves, or proper boots.Wade frowned. He was sure that a supply of heavy gloves and work boots had been promised in the contracts he had seen.

*Not one of these men had offered him anything. It was almost as if they were scared to open up to him.*

“Well, I’m not looking to fire anyone yet!” Wade shook his head. He paused outside the barns, smelling the acrid bitterness of the tar barrels. These were large tin metal buckets sitting on blocks over a banked-up fire, keeping the tar for posts and fences hot.

No one was watching them, Wade frowned. There weren’t even any guards on the sheds where the equipment was stored.

“Sloppy,” Wade muttered to himself. Maybe someone had been pulled off to do another task. Or maybe the person supposed to be back here was sick today. He was sure this was breach of regulations—especially as there would be a crate of dynamite inside one of these barns too.

Wade waited until the lunch whistle, and when the tired men filed back, he quietly suggested to Abe that he should keep some people back to shovel the grit, unload the deliveries, and watch the sheds and tar barrels.

“Oh, right. Of course, Boss. Just so busy, you know. We’re losing time every day, and I don’t want my pay docked,” Abe said, before suddenly clamping his mouth shut.

“Your pay gets docked for poor performance?” Wade asked. This was something he fully expected, but Hays hadn’t mentioned it. It was at least a reason why the rail workers didn’t want to talk to him.

“I’ll see there’s a team back here tomorrow, Boss,” Abe said, before joining the others for his lunch.

By the end of the day, Wade had learned very little about the actual nature of the accidents or how they had occurred. All he knew was that the men didn’t want to talk about them.

*Maybe this was a bad idea,* Wade thought. He wasn’t one of those genial, light-up-a-room talkers like Frederick Hayes clearly was. Wade preferred having work in his hands, and a problem to solve. He clearly had the second, but he wasn’t sure about the first.

The final whistle sounded, and Wade waited around, helping to load things up and lock the barns as the rest of the workers got on the pump carts to ride back towards Cheyenne.

*I’d much prefer to ride, anyway.*

Wade gratefully walked back to the stables to retrieve Charger, who stamped eagerly at the chance to get out into the fresh air.

“Mr. Nash?” A voice disturbed him as he walked Charger out of the open door of the stables.

There was a woman on a horse at the entrance to the construction site.

The first thing Wade noticed was that she had the most striking green eyes he had ever seen on a person, and the second thing was that she wore sensible, heavy riding clothes and trousers that had seen a fair share of mud and dust already. She wore her golden brown hair in a braid, and fixed him with a hard stare.

“I hear you’re the new private investigator for Union Pacific,” the woman said tartly. She stuck her chin out, like she was expecting a fight.“I own a ranch near here. I’ve been trying to talk to someone from Union Pacific, and Franklin Hayes pointed me towards you.”

“Investigator. Chief guard. Warden,” Wade waved a hand. “I’ve been given a lot of names today so far. Wade Nash, lately of Missouri,” he tipped his hat.

*And I’m not here to dispute land claims,* he thought about adding. *But if there’s an argument, I want to hear it.*

“Good. I hope you’re up for good work, Mr. Nash,” the woman said, before nodding. “Anna Turner. I run a ranch not too far from here.”

“Glad to hear it, ma’am,” Wade said. *What did this woman want from him?*

Anna didn’t seem to like his response, for her eyes narrowed a little.

“There’s been a lot of accidents on this line of late, Mr. Nash,” she said heavily.

“I’ve heard. That’s why they brought me in, actually,” Wade said. He wondered what her angle was. “Can I ask what you might have heard, Miss—?”

“Mrs.” She said quickly. “Formerly. I’m a widow now.”

Wade nodded respectfully once again. “I’m sorry to hear that, Mrs. Turner.”

The woman sniffed, and her hands brushed dust off her trouser leg. When she spoke again, her voice was sounded clipped.

“I’m a widow because my husband died on this here railroad, and there isn’t anyone who has given me a straight answer as to what happened, yet.”

He saw her bristle, her shoulders rising before the woman took a deep, calming breath.

“There was an explosion. TNT. I don’t know what kind of operation the Union Pacific is running, but aren’t there supposed to be safety procedures for that? How does a bridge almost blow up while men are working on it?” she asked.

“Is that so?” Wade asked. This was news. None of the workers had mentioned an explosion.

“Can you tell me everything you know about the accident, ma’am?” he said. “I’m here to get to the bottom of everything that’s holding up the railway…”

“I don’t give a damn about the railway, Mr. Nash, and I hope that’s not *all* that you are interested in while you’re here! There are people who have *died* on this line, Mr. Nash. I hope that means something to you.” she said, the anger dripping out of her.

“It does, believe me, it does,” Wade said. “If you tell me everything you know, then I can conduct a proper investigation…”

“We can work together. I am not going to stop until I get answers.” Anna Turner said.

Wade winced. He was hired by Union Pacific. As much as he was alarmed by what he was hearing, he needed to know if this was the fault of the workers or outside elements. This woman—who was clearly upset—had an axe to grind, and for good reason.

Wade was suddenly aware of the different groups around this railway. There were the workers, there were the landowners, and there might even be outlaws or Native Americans—all whom might have reason to be upset with the railway.

Last, and most importantly, there were the bosses, who he was supposed to be working for.

“I promise I’ll get to the bottom of everything, ma’am,” Wade said.

The widower gave a startled snarl of a cough, before wheeling her horse around. It was clear that she hadn’t got the answers she needed.

“I won’t stop, Mr. Nash! You can tell your bosses that!” Anna Turner shouted, before kneeing her horse into a fast trot, back towards Cheyenne.

Wade stood still for a long pause, certain that he had said the wrong thing, but not quite sure what it was.

# **Chapter 4**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

The next day at the construction site proved just as uninformative as the last. Wade sat on his horse by the side of the tracks, watching the long line of men stretch out in both directions across the plains. Occasionally one of them would set up a song as they worked, a sharp, shanty sort of a song that reminded Wade of the war.

*How many of these men were soldiers like me?*

Wade thought that at least half of them were his age or older, and so they would probably have served. He was careful not to speculate on which side. Even now, thirteen years after the war, he knew there was still a terrible rivalry.

The heat was merciless, and two of the youngest men ran back and forth from the carts with canteens of water, ladling a scoop of water to any of the men who asked for it. The incessant drum and drub of hammers on iron and steel were forming a rhythm to Wade’s day.

*Most of them are drifters, like me.*

Wade recognized the self-contained, independent nature of others who had chosen to drift from job to job after the Civil War. A small portion of them were Mexicans, but the majority of the workers here appeared to have no great allegiance or belonging to Cheyenne itself.

*What did that mean? Did that make them more susceptible to bribery, or fights? Or less?*

As Wade was pondering these things, he thought back to his conversation with Abe, the worker that Wade had spoken to yesterday, and who Wade was recognizing as an unofficial foreman for the rail workers. Wade had managed to grab him at the water tank, and mentioned the bridge explosion.

“Yeah, the explosion was pretty bad,” Abe had confessed. Abe looked uncomfortable being singled out for Wade’s attention, but Wade knew he had to get the one the others looked to as a ringleader on board with his direction. Otherwise, nothing was going to happen.

“Someone sent the wrong message down the line. The scouts messed it up,” Abe said, and shrugged. “That’s what I heard, anyway. I wasn’t there to see it myself.”

“You remember the man who died? Turner?” Wade asked.

Abe nodded at that. “Local man. Said he was taking up extra work because there wasn’t money in horse sales.”

Wade nodded. That sounded about right. When the railroad came through, people who had the time should always be able to pick up some work, even if it was just laboring.

“He made friends here? On the work crew?” Wade asked.

Abe was starting to look uncomfortable. “Sure. He did just fine. He threw himself in. Wasn’t afraid of hard work. That’s all we expect.” Abe said, before excusing himself and heading to take his water and finish his lunch with the track crew.

Wade heard from another of the workers that Jacob Turner had brought it on himself, walking out into the danger area when he had been warned not to.

*So, there were at least two stories of what happened there.*

Wade retired to his horse by the side of the tracks to think. There was every reason to think that maybe the workers didn’t know exactly what had happened. They all seemed cagey, but none of them seemed angry.

*But had one of them maybe taken a dislike to Jacob Turner? Was that what they were trying to cover up? Blowing a man up was a pretty harsh punishment, wasn’t it?*

Wade rode back to the construction sheds. A three man team of workers were unloading canvas bags of grit and wooden beams, but as Wade approached he saw them stop work, and look behind them.

A man on horseback was trotting purposefully towards the sheds. He was no worker, Wade saw at once. The man wore a white suit jacket and a cream, short-brimmed hat. His clothes were far too clean and expensive for any rail worker.

“Can I help you, sir?” Wade asked, riding up. Although his job was to find out what had gone wrong, Frederick Hayes had also made it clear that this also extended to “keeping the workers safe” if danger arose. Not that this man looked to be a danger in his fine clothing, Wade saw at once. At least, not the sort of danger that carried a gun.

But then again, there were many types of dangers in the west these days, weren’t there?

“Do you own land around here, sir?” Wade pressed, as the man in the white jacket and cream hat looked at him speculatively. Suddenly, a large, welcoming smile was plastered over the man’s face.

“Silas Laramie. Actually yes, I own a good stretch of the land you see up ahead of you.” The man sat a little straighter on his saddle, and pulled his jacket so that it’s brass buttons caught the sun.

“And you are the new warden, I take it? Mr. Hayes informed me he’d hired you to help move things along. I’ve been helping Mr. Hayes get things sorted around here, including keeping an eye on the work teams for him,” the man said, before leaning across and extending his hand.

“I see.” Wade shook the man’s hand. “Wade Nash.”

*So Silas is important enough that Hayes—the Union Pacific agent—gives him updates?* Wade could almost feel the web of power and loyalties swirling around this railroad. It made his head ache.

*Was this man some sort of foreman then?*

Wade didn’t think so. Frederick Hayes would have mentioned him. But it wasn’t entirely surprising that the railroad would try to get the influential people around here on board.

“And your role here with Union Pacific is…” Wade frowned.

The man’s brows lowered. Wade could see he wasn’t used to being questioned.

“Union Pacific hired me as their business enforcer for the project, Mr, Nash. It’s all very well drafting in someone from the *outside*, but only someone like me actually *knows* the area, and Cheyenne, and who owns what,” Silas said.

*And I guess I’m that someone from the outside?* Wade tried to suppress the smallest smile, as Silas continued.

“Franklin Hayes asked me to keep an eye on the work while he’s busy. It’s a partnership that benefits both of us.” Silas said firmly.

“Okay,” Wade said evenly. He still hadn’t heard Silas say he had an official job, and Franklin Hayes hadn’t said anything about Wade having a boss here.

“I hear you used to be a sheriff? Missouri?” Silas Laramie leaned back, once again smiling.

“Word gets around,” Wade said. He felt like he was on unstable ground. Exactly what role did Silas Laramie play at the railroad? Was he more important than Franklin Hayes, or just some local magnate?

“Can I ask why you’re visiting today, Mr. Laramie?”

Silas cast him a look as though he was sharing a guilty secret.

“Oh, as I say, I like to keep an eye on things. And keep informed on my investment. I sold a good portion of my holdings to Union Pacific, and I care deeply for the town of Cheyenne. I want to make sure that everything is going according to schedule.”

“I see,” Wade said. He narrowed his eyes. Usually, land owners would be happy to sell, get their money, and leave well enough alone. Silas had a look that there was something *political* at stake.

This man said he cared for the town of Cheyenne, but Wade couldn’t see a sheriff’s badge or a mayor’s chain. He was probably trying to work out how to make as much money from the railway as he could.

“You have everything you need out here? Food? Supplies? Materials?” Silas smiled.

“I think everything is in hand, Mr. Laramie. The workers are good men, and know their job,” Wade said. He frowned. Perhaps, if this important Mr. Laramie had the ear of Frederick Hayes at some level, then he could prove useful.

“Actually, seeing as you’re helping Union Pacific out, I have to tell you I’m taking a look at the safety procedures here,” Wade announced, watching Silas as he talked.

“Oh?” the man’s eyes widened just a little.

“Yes. There’s some work to be done to tighten up the operation, I think. It’s dangerous work, and we don’t want anyone getting hurt,” Wade pointed out. “I am going to recommend that we take longer to reach the next quota of track length. Go slower, but go surer—as my old pa used to say.”

“Oh, these are tough men, Mr. Nash,” Silas shook his head, smirking as if Wade had told a ridiculous joke. “And the railway has to run on a very tight schedule. I was promised by Mr. Hayes myself that this stretch to Coyote Creek would already be done by now. I have to explain to the other landowners why they can’t loose their cattle on the northern stretch once *again*,” Silas rolled his eyes.

“But you do care about the safety of these men, though?” Wade asked. He kept his tone light.

“Of course, of course. I don’t think anyone is arguing that. Just that I think you are worrying too much, Mr. Nash,” Mr. Laramie said firmly.

*Is that so?*

Wade felt his fists bunch on his reins. This man, Silas Laramie, must have picked up on some of Wade’s mood, as he cleared his throat and brushed dust off his jacket hurriedly.

“Well, do get in touch if there are any more problems you are having, I am sure that I can find some solutions for you,” Silas said heavily, before thanking Wade and turning to ride off.

Curious, Wade watched him go. He wasn’t entirely sure how important Silas Laramie was, or what role he had to play—but he seemed eager for the work to go ahead, even if it meant that unsafe practices were being permitted.

*Which leaves people like Anna Turner without a husband.*

Wade winced at the memory of yesterday. He needed to talk to her again. Maybe between the stories he had heard today of her husband’s death and whatever she knew, they could build a picture of what had really happened.

\* \* \*

The Turner ranch was pretty, in a small, homely sort of way Wade thought as he crested the rise that led to the hollow of hills within which the Turner ranch sat.

It hadn’t taken Wade too long to learn the location of the widow, Anna Turner. The barkeep at Gilbert’s Saloon (for the expense of a few *more* coins) had been only too happy to tell him where it was.

As Wade had ridden up here, he had looked at Cheyenne with new eyes. He saw a frontier town on the cusp of something. If people were lucky—and if the right investment and businesses came in here—he guessed it could become a ‘great’ city. It would be one of the gateway cities to the western territories; an important stopping off place for the plains, mountains, and eventually the sea beyond that.

But Cheyenne could also be ruined, like so many frontier towns had been. The railway could be a blessing, but it could also drain all the life and youth from the town, taking them with wonder in their eyes and gold dust in their minds. If Cheyenne wasn’t careful, it would become a nothing town, owned by only a handful of out-of-town barons.

It was with these heavy thoughts that Wade reached the Turner residence to find the widow in her near paddock, trotting one of her horses in a wide circle.

“I haven’t seen Morgans like that since the war,” Wade called from the track, as Anna saw him and dismounted.

“You know your horses, Mr. Nash,” Anna said. Her tone was still stiff, but it seemed she approved of one thing about him at least.

“The infantry never used horses, but most of the cavalry and officers had Saddlebreds. But the ones who *really* knew their horses—well, they had Morgans,” Wade said with a smile that was surprisingly easy. He liked horses. His father had kept a few, but his work had never given him the time to work them. It was one of the trades that Wade had always liked over the years he had traveled.

*Horses were honest. Loyal. They were what they were; no lying, no judging. They would give you their all and all they’d ask is for your respect.* Wade approved of that.

“I hope you are here to reconsider my offer, Mr. Nash,” Anna Turner said, leading the young bay into the stable to take off the saddle and rub her down. She was a woman who didn’t mind the work, and who wasn’t going to wait on manners to get it done. Wade approved of that, as well.

“Well actually, that is what I came up here to talk to you about. I’ve been making inquiries about the accident that took your husband’s life,” Wade said as respectfully as he could, before dismounting himself and tying Charger by a long rein to the fence. His older horse immediately started to nibble at the verdant grass Anna had up here.

“Good. What have you found out, Mr. Nash?” Anna called out. A moment later she reappeared at the stable door, and crossed her arms in front of her.

She clearly wasn’t happy, but why should she be? Wade tried to be tactful.

“There are... conflicting reports as to what happened,” he started to say.

“And so you’re putting it down as just another unfortunate accident?” Anna said acidly. “Don’t you think that even accidents need to be accounted for? Who was responsible? What happened?”

Wade winced a little. He had known this was going to be difficult. He hadn’t expected her to jump down his throat within five minutes.

“Yes, of course. That is what I am trying to say…” Wade pointed out.

“So you don’t really have anything, and you came here to tell me that you have tried, but it’s beyond your powers?” Anna snapped at him.

“What? I never said that. If you will listen to me—” Wade started to say. The look on Anna’s face stopped him in his tracks.

“Why should I listen to a man who is only going to parrot exactly the same nonsense they have been trying to feed me ever since the day my husband died?” Anna said. She stabbed a finger at him.

“*You* have got to decide, Mr. Private Investigator, who you really work for. Are you just going to take the money and wash your hands like some Pontius Pilate? Or are you going to do better than the people employing you?” Anna almost shouted.

Wade felt like he had been slapped. “Now listen here, that is a bit much. I came up here to try and help.”

“I’ve had quite a few offers of help recently. Funny how they all end up trying to convince me to accept my losses and move out!” Anna said.

“I never said *anything* about moving,” Wade shook his head. He was annoyed now. He didn’t deserve to be treated like this. He glared at the woman, who raised her hand to point down the track behind him.

“You know your way out, Mr. Nash. Please use it.” Anna Turner turned, and marched back to her stable.

Wade stood for a long moment, feeling hot, bothered, and annoyed. Beside him, Charger whinnied a little eagerly at the horses in the stable, who whinnied back.

“Not likely, friend. I think it’s clear we haven’t made any friends here, today!” Wade snapped, untying him and mounting to ride back the way he had come.

# **Chapter 5**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

A crash, and the sudden alarm of chickens split the air. It was mid-afternoon, and Anna looked up from where she stood in the near paddock. In her hands she held one end of a rope, while at the other was a rather belligerent foal.

The foal, a dark bay color already with a strong neck and back, was refusing to walk around the paddock. He stamped the ground and snorted every time Anna tried gently encourage him.

“Dammit!” Anna knew exactly what that crashing sound was. But she couldn’t just leave the foal here. With a snarl, she looped and tied off the line against the paddock fence, sprinting not towards the chicken coop—for that was where the sound was coming from, along with the distressed clucks of the birds—but instead to the small barn next to the paddock.

“Dang foxes again!” She grumbled, almost tripping over herself as she grabbed the long rifle she kept behind the bar door, and a handful of shells from the box on the shelf beside it.

She was already late. The fox would be gleefully snapping the necks of her fattest hens, before it took them back to its summer larder somewhere on the prairie.

Anna hopped the fence and ran across the yard, tearing around the house as she hollered, hoping to scare it away.

“Hey! Get! Out of here!” She shouted, turning the corner of her house. In front of her was the small kitchen garden where half the salad crops were already bolting, and the vines of squashes sprawled. Another job she needed to do.

And there was the large pen where she kept her chickens, and the spilled triangular coop, lying on its back, it’s door busted open.

But there was no fox leaping away with its prize. Instead Anna was looking at the hissing snarl of a cougar, crouched directly on top of her coop.

*Darn!*

Anna swore, skidding to a halt. The tan mountain lion’s body rippled with muscles. When it hissed at her she could see its long canines. It was a much bigger foe than she had been expecting to see.

Anna’s hand shook with adrenaline as she pulled back the catch and slammed home a bullet, and then another into her rifle’s mechanism. She lifted her rifle back, but by the time she had it level with her eye, the cougar had leapt back over the fence—Anna’s fattest hen in its mouth as it ran for the edge of Anna’s yard.

She fired a shot, but the creature was too quick. It was gone in a flash, disappearing into the scrub.

“*Anna?* Anna!”

Just then, a shout came from the front of her house. Anna heard the clatter of hooves and the panicked thump as the rider jumped from the saddle, and ran towards the gunshot.

“Anna! What’s going on?”

She recognized the voice at once, and by the time that Josiah Thompson—her younger brother—had skidded around the side of the house with his pistol in hand, she was already leaning her rifle against the chicken fence.

“Darn cougar got Bessie,” Anna said irritably. Her white and orange chickens were in uproar, running from one corner of the coop to another. She cursed herself for having their wings clipped at all. If she hadn’t then at least they might have been able to fly away.

“Oh, thank heavens,” Josiah said. He was a stocky man—a shade smaller than Anna, but with the same gold-auburn curls—and he looked visibly relieved. “After everything you’ve been saying, I thought…”

“You thought Silas had finally decided to drive me off my land?” Anna said irritably. She crossed over to briefly hug her brother, but it was a stiff embrace. She held onto her anger, and let it fuel her.

“Well, either that or you’d shot him,” Josiah said. He was grinning as he said it, but his voice was a little too loud, and too strained. He was probably serious.

*Maybe it be for the best if I did!*

The wicked thought flashed through her mind. She knew it was awful, and of course she wasn’t about to turn vigilante, but it was nice to daydream sometimes.

“Not that lucky, I’m afraid,” she settled for. She hopped the fence to her chicken coop and surveyed the damage.

“First time I’ve had a cougar here though. I reckon the railroad is scaring them off the hills, forcing them to come down to the ranches for food,” Anna muttered. She grabbed the edge of the large chicken coop. “Help me with this, will you?”

Josiah was only too ready to help. They’d had this relationship ever since their parents had passed. Their mother went when they were young from the smallpox, and it hadn’t been a full three years before their father died as well.

Although devastated, Anna and Josiah had made it work. The unspoken bond of sister and brother only deepened with the trauma, and Josiah had followed her around silently, accepting whatever task his older sister had set.

*Still wasn’t enough to keep the farm though.*

Anna tried not to think about that. Losing their parents’ farm because they were too young and it was too much work was too close to how she felt about Jacob’s ranch right now.

They heaved the chicken coop back into place, and Anna squatted down to see the damage the cougar had done. The door had been ripped from its hinges. She’d need a new door, and a bigger rock to wedge against it at night.

“There’s feed in the pantry,” Anna said, taking the broken door and proceeding to ply the hinge out of the coop as Josiah hurried to the back of the house, returning with a tin cup of millet and dried corn, which he scattered for the distressed chickens.

“You should get a hound, Anna. That’ll scare off the cougar. And it’d be good for a woman on her own out here,” Josiah said. “Actually, the Hamptons I’m working for are going to have puppies in a month or so. I’ll pick up the strongest-”

“As if I’ve got time for a dog, Jos!” Anna grumbled, beckoning him with her as she left the coop and made for the small barn where her woodworking tools were.

“It’ll need looking after and training, and it’ll be another mouth to feed,” she sighed. She suspected that Josiah mainly wanted her to have some company. Maybe he was right, but she couldn’t bring herself to be responsible for another living thing now.

“Oh, come on, Anna. It’ll be good for you. What do you say?” Her brother, for all of his sweetness, was utterly incapable of reading other people’s wishes. Anna shot him a dark look. He rolled his eyes and accepted.

“How are the Hamptons?” Anna changed the subject. They arrived at the barn and started dividing the task of selecting one of the planks of wood and clamping it to the long work table.

“They’re fine,” Josiah said immediately, before he paused. A shadow crossed his face. “Well, maybe not actually. They say they’ve had an offer on the farm, but they don’t want to sell.”

The Hamptons were just one of many landholders and homesteaders around Cheyenne. They were one of the ‘originals’ meaning their family had settled here a couple of generations ago.

*And THEY’RE having trouble?* Anna shook her head. That darn railroad was changing everything.

“Why would they sell? They’ve got one of the biggest heads of cattle in the area,” she said, wiping errant strands of hair from her brow as she worked.

“Oh, the farm is doing well, I think. It’s just the numbers. Old Joe knows that with that kind of money he could move to Oregon and get an even bigger head of cattle. But Mrs. Hampton doesn’t want to go. Says they raised their kids here, and wants something for them to come back to,” Josiah said. He spoke quickly, unsure of himself. Difficult emotions like this had never been Josiah’s strong point. Ever since their father had gone, Josiah had been scared of conflict.

*Maybe that was why he found work with them,* Anna realized. The Hamptons were an aging couple who needed the help. They doted on having a young man like Josiah around like he was their own son. Heaven only knew where their own sons were in the world.

Her brother took a breath. He pulled at his ear, something he did when he was nervous.

“A lot of people are considering it, Anna. Selling, I mean,” he said.

“Not this again,” Anna finished her work, but set the door on the table. She’d fix it to the coop later. Right now she couldn’t look at her brother. She walked past him back into the yard, and across to where she had left the stubborn foal on the long leash.

“Anna, wait. Don’t be like that. I’m not saying this to be unkind. It’s just… I worry about you,” Josiah followed her out, and, foolishly, he carried on the conversation.

“You worry about me?” Anna said archly. It was a fine thing to say, but wasn’t she the one who had looked after him all those years? Who had gotten him into pants and jackets, and taught him how to shoot and lasso?

“Yeah. There’s folks been saying there’s troubling characters about. Low men in the hills. Outlaws, you know? And then there’s this feud you have with Silas…” Josiah carried on.

“Feud? *Feud!”* Anna pulled up short, spinning around. Her sudden stop meant Josiah had to skitter to a halt. She saw him realize that he had pushed her too far.

“Silas Laramie is a leech. He’s snapping up all the land around here and selling it on to cattle barons. When my Jacob died, you know the first thing Silas did? He told me that now there was no reason for me to keep this place, seeing as I was only a woman!” Anna snapped at him.

*It was mighty handy for Silas when Jacob suddenly wound up dead.*

Anna glowered at her brother, but saw the smarmy, grinning Silas Laramie. She couldn’t prove it, but she had been paying close attention ever since the accident. One of the other homesteaders on the other side of town had had their fences cut just before winter and lost half of their herd. They had sold up shortly after that.

And of course, Silas Laramie was busy buying up almost all the land left around Cheyenne.

*Did Silas have something to do with the explosion? Was he trying to get my land?*

The questions never went away, and they kept her awake at night. The infuriating thing was, Anna knew she had no way of answering them. Not yet, anyway.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I didn’t know that,” Josiah said, although Anna was sure she he listened to her shouting about it a few months ago.

*Is that what I’ve become? An angry, shouting woman who everyone thinks is a crazy widow?* Anna huffed. She was annoyed not just at the world, but at herself for letting people get the better of her. She was better than this. She would make this work.

They got the foal out of the training paddock and returned it (gleefully) to its mother, and Josiah slipped into talking about his work. She wondered if there was a part of her brother that was lonely. Once again, she wondered if it was about time he thought about marriage.

“Oh no. Not until I’ve got some good money behind me,” Josiah blushed as red as a strawberry. Anna wondered if there was someone who had caught his eye in town.

Before the afternoon had begun to fade, Anna and Josiah turned towards the main track, see another visitor approaching the ranch. Not just one visitor, but two on horseback.

“Who are they?” Josiah asked, shielding his eyes against the harsh sun.

“I don’t know.” Anna had never seen them before. One was a round man with an overlarge ten-gallon hat, while at his side was another man with a much more rugged look about him. Anna spotted the riding chaps and weather-beaten cloak. The second man was probably older, although that could have been the creases and tan that came from working outside much of the time.

“Can I help you folks?” Anna said, walking slowly to the edge of the fence line.

The older, harder man said nothing, but his blue eyes were shrewd as they took in Anna and Josiah, and then flickered to the land around them.

“Anna Turner?” the rounder man said.

“Speaking,” Anna nodded.

“Elijah Constable. I’m considering moving into Cheyenne this fall, and I was told that the Turner ranch was for sale,” the man, Mr. Constable said. He gave Anna a sympathetic smile, before raising his head to the land beyond her. “The house is good, if small. I can see the near meadows are improved, but there is still much work to be done on the brush out back.”

*The brush where the cougar now lives,* Anna glowered.

“It’s not for sale. You were informed, Mr. Constable.”

“Really? I can stretch to $3 an acre. Perhaps $350 for the buildings and equipment. My agent here will negotiate the livestock fees.

“$3 an acre! $450 for a story-and-a-half house, two barns and a stable?” Anna was shocked. The land *was* improved. Jacob’s family had worked this land for a generation. That alone would fetch anywhere from $8 to $12 an acre if it was in any other state.

“I imagine you will be looking at almost $500 dollars all told, my dear. That is no small sum in today’s world, I can guarantee you,” Mr. Constable waved a hand at her objection.

“In *today’s* world, my ranch would be worth double that Mr. Constable, and that is before you factor in the new railroad. Anyway, like I already said—this farm is *not* for sale!” Anna said hotly.

The older man—the agent, apparently—had even dared to step his horse a little nearer to get a better view.

“Anna…” Josiah murmured beside her. He sounded worried. Like she was going to blow her top.

*Well, maybe I might!*

“Mr. Constable. I have told you that you are misinformed, and that is the end of it. If you spend one minute more on my ranch then I am going to have to consider you intruders and I will get my gun. Do you understand me?”

“Now, my dear, there is no need for that…” Mr. Constable immediately frowned.

“I am not, nor ever will be *your dear,* thankfully. Now please wait there while I get my rifle!” She shouted at them, turning towards the gate. She hadn’t taken three steps when she heard a snort of anger, and the sound of two horses riding off. With haste.

“Anna! You weren’t really going to shoot at them, were you?” Josiah sounded breathless and shocked.

*Don’t know. Maybe.*

A wave of exhaustion fell on Anna’s shoulders. She was tired of endlessly battling. All she wanted was to find the truth.

“This was Jacob’s land. He died, thinking it was still going to be his, and mine. Me selling now would be admitting defeat, Josiah, don’t you see? I can’t do it. I won’t do it.”

Anna refused to cry as she walked back to the house, and back to the endless chores that she had waiting for her.

# **Chapter 6**

**Cheyenne Railroad, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

*Just what do we have here, then?*

Wade paused, holding ajar the closet door he had finally managed to open. He stood in the construction office of the Cheyenne Union Pacific railroad, and the entire place looked as though no one had been in here for a month. The air was hot and stuffy, and the blinds were down. It had taken him this long to find the keys to the place, and then the right keys to this closet at the back of the room.

In front of him lay a stack of ledgers and document boxes. Wade groaned a little to himself, and his eyes felt tired merely looking at it.

*But this is the job I am paid to do.*

He grabbed the first stack, blowing dust from the ledger covers and took it to the small table.

The construction office sat up a flight of stairs at the top of the main barn of the construction site. It was a place that no worker had admitted to ever being inside, although someone must have dropped off these ledgers and order books.

“Right. Let’s see now.” Wade opened the blinds, and then cracked open the window. The sound of hammering and shouts instantly washed into the room. But there was a fresh breeze that came in also, adding a little life to this dreary place.

Wade had already found the Union Pacific official stamps, as well as empty order books that could be written out and handed to store houses in town.

“Those are worth something!” Wade was shocked. If anyone knew about them, then it would be a simple matter to write whatever supplies they wanted, and use the company stamp to charge it to their account. The next time Frederick Hayes was in town, Wade guessed one of his jobs was to settle up with the relevant construction yards, laborer markets, and traders in Cheyenne.

He put those to one side, and started leafing through the ledgers. There were notes of the general construction of the railroad, including long and complicated notes by a surveyor and architect. After this came permits and regulations, covering everything from land sales to the use of equipment, and the operation licenses obtained from the United States Government.

Wade leafed through endless pages of numbers and entries. He tried to focus. By the end of an hour, the only solid thing that had turned up was one name that turned up *a lot*.

Silas Laramie.

“Land purchase: $400 dollars. Land lease: $55 dollars per month. Donation to Cheyenne Public Improvement: $75...” Wade tapped the latest line. Silas was one of the biggest leasers and sellers of land for the Union Pacific buy out. The man had already made a lot of money.

“Huh,” he settled back in his seat, and scratched his chin. There was something here, he could feel it.

Wade felt a sensation that he hadn’t felt for a long time. Not since he had been a sheriff. He wasn’t a believer in sixth senses, but he trusted his gut. His gut had never proved him wrong when it came to a case.

“Silas was selling the railroad land, and he was brokering the land rights between the ranchers and the railroads.” Wade thought it through. He looked at the numbers again, and they looked *high*, especially the ‘Donations to Cheyenne Improvements’ which happened every month, and varied from as low as a hundred dollars all the way up to five hundred.

And those donations were all made payable to *Laramie Associates, et al,* which Wade guessed was either a company that Silas had set up, or for which he sat on the board.

*Why was the Union Pacific handing so much money over every month?*

He had heard of the railroads offering gifts to the towns they passed through, perhaps investing in a new school or a hospital, but these payments repeated every month and went back to the beginning of the project.

“This goes way beyond Union Pacific trying to appear charitable,” Wade murmured. He had a bad feeling. If anything, it looked like the company was paying Silas Laramie off. But what for? His silence? His co-operation?

*What hold did Silas have over Union Pacific?*

Wade sighed. Another mystery. He made a note of the name and turned to the licenses section of the ledgers. At the back of the third ledger was the collection of documents he was looking for.

“Safety and Inspection Report for the Cheyenne, Wyoming branch,” he read the first paper.

*‘A safety inspection had been carried out at the start of the project, with a promise of ‘full safety and preventative reports to be filed every month with the company office’.* Wade looked past the first document, and could find no more.

*So, does that mean they weren’t done, or…?*

Wade turned back to the original documents at the start of the first ledger, and tried to muddy his way through. Near the middle, surrounded by dense, closely typed script, he found the section on safety inspections.

‘...to be carried out by a company representative, or locally chosen professional.’ Wade read out loud.

*That made more sense,* Wade considered. The Union Pacific probably had teams of engineers, but they would be spread throughout the entire length of the country. The job of the inspection would then be given to the foreman or a local mechanic or engineer wherever the railroad was stationed.

But Wade couldn’t see anywhere that a piece of paper had been filed or reported.

“There isn’t even anything on the explosion?” Wade realized. He had to double check, and then triple check to make sure. It seemed crazy that an explosion that had set work back for a month and had claimed a life hadn’t been noted at all.

“That isn’t just unwise, it’s illegal, isn’t it?” Wade said. If there was no official report of the accident, then it might as well never have happened. There was no report to offer the grieving widow of what had happened. There was nothing for investigators—like him—to follow up on.

*What if Union Pacific was at fault?* They would have to pay compensation.

*What if it was a suspected murder?* Then the Cheyenne sheriff would have to bring the perpetrator to justice.

But this...absence though..? This was the company avoiding all responsibility of what had happened.

*Anna Turner,* Wade suddenly thought.

She needed answers. She *deserved* answers. She was a widow, on her own, probably struggling after the loss of her husbands wage.

*I need to talk to her. Ask if Union Pacific ever got in touch with her about the accident. Offered a settlement...anything!*

All Wade found of any safety concerns or injuries at all was a note, written badly in the ledger, saying *Man ingord. TOMMY BLAKE. Sent hom with pay.*

“Man *injured*?” Wade translated. He packed the ledgers away, and returned them to their closet, which he locked and slipped the key into his pocket. This was the third accident he’d heard about in less than a month.

Wade locked up the office and saw that the supply teams were busy loading track and boxes of nails onto one of the pump carriages. He saw the large red-bearded man he had first met here at the site.

“Jaspeth? Have you heard of a guy named Tommy? Tommy Blake?” he asked.

The man froze where he was packing loose nails from a bag into a box, and looked at Wade as though he had just docked him several weeks of pay.

“Don’t know, Boss. Must have been before my time,” he said hurriedly, before carrying the box of nails out to load onto the carriage.

“You don’t have to call me *boss*,” Wade muttered to Jaspeth’s disappearing back, and tried again with another member of the team. This time the reaction amounted to much the same thing, with vague recollections of someone injured, and no one admitting to writing in the ledger what had happened. Absolutely no one could say what had happened.

*Is that so?*

Wade left the men to their work, returning instead to Charger.

*There’s something bad going on at this site.*

Wade was certain of it. He just didn’t know what. He wished the workers would confide in him, but he couldn’t make them like him. He seemed to be regarded in the same way that the Union Pacific bosses were—with fear.

*What if Union Pacific itself is to blame?*

Wade considered the long black lines of metal, snaking off into the distance. The railroad was going to be built, come hell or high water. It wouldn’t be the first company to ignore the workers for progress.

*And what would I do if my investigation proves that?* Wade considered. His weekly stipend from the company was no laughing matter. Indeed, it was generous.

Who do you complain to, when it was the bosses themselves at fault?

# **Chapter 7**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

*If this doesn’t work with them, I don’t know what will.*

Wade sighed and eyed the long, but rather cheap-looking saloon that the workers favored. The sun was just setting over the western mountains, and already the town was cast in shadows and fading ruby light. He’d let it be known that there would be a one-drink tab for any worker that needed it tonight as their ‘first week under a new warden’.

It was a peace offering, Wade knew—but it was the only trick he had left. It had already almost burned through his spare dollars he had been saving from the Union money.

“Told you he was a good’un!” Abe chorused as he walked past Wade in the company of Brodie, Charles, and some of the others.

Wade tipped his hat at the man. *Maybe this is going to work.*

The workers had chosen the Cheyenne Star for their night’s relaxation. It was clearly the teamster bar of the town, with cheap drinks and cheaper food. Wade bristled a little at the ruckus of sound that was already spilling from its swing doors, but he’d spent time in worse establishments in his life.

*A watering hole is a watering hole, after all.*

Wade went to the bar to find a trio of doughty bar women staffing the long, wooden bar top, serving drinks almost as fast as they could pour them. The crowd seemed made up mostly of cowboys and laborers, and the volume of their arguments, laughter, and conversation was deafening.

“A shot of rye for seventeen,” Wade ordered, earning a surprised look from the leading bar woman with short red hair and heavy skirts.

“I wouldn’t make a song and dance about your money, honey. Not in here,” she leaned over and told him, but accepted his coins all the same.

The whiskey ploy mostly worked, Wade was pleased to see. The workers toasted him or tipped their hats, and even if they still weren’t very forthcoming, at least they had smiled at him once. Wade settled in to a stool by a corner table, dropping in to light talk with those nearest to him.

In truth, Wade was surprised at how similar his story was to many of the men’s here. Almost half of them were post-war drifters like himself, who had turned their hand to cattle driving or trail work, just as he had. They compared notes and commiserations on some of the well-known names in the cattle business, where Wade at least earned a laugh from some of the old timers.

“Yeah. Never could seem to fix on something, that was my problem,” Abe said, joining Wade at his table with his second pint of ale. Wade had seen the salary figures that these men got paid, and knew that would probably be Abe’s last for the night if he wanted to preserve some of his wage.

“Not since my sweetheart left me back home in Tennessee, anyway,” Abe muttered.

There was a chorus of rough laughter from some of the nearest workers, as one of them suggested just why any sweetheart of Abe would be dissatisfied. For Wade however, a chill had run down his spine.

*Like I lost Sarah.*

He was surprised at the thought. He hadn’t thought of Sarah Lewis for a long time. He covered the moment of pain with a harsh laugh, echoing the others.

“So. This Tommy Blake? What was his deal?” Wade asked, keeping his tone as casual as he could.

“Tommy? Ah, that was a shame. He was a good lad. Ended up breaking his leg. It was a nightmare; we had to divert the entire line!” Abe’s tone was distracted. He had turned around to watch one of the bar women deliver a tray of drinks to the table.

“What happened?” Wade asked.

“Oh, it was—” Abe turned back to his drink, and suddenly startled. He looked up at Wade, remembering who he was talking to.

There was a moment of silence. Before Wade could ask again, there was the sound of smashing glass and a sudden yell of anger.

“*You idiot!* You’re gonna pay for that, right now!”

Wade turned to see the older Charles had shot to his feet, and was pushing one of the other workers in the chest. The other man was wider and younger, but smaller. Charles had seniority in the work team, but the burlier man appeared to want a fight.

“You should have kept a hold of it, instead of swinging it around like that,” the younger laughed, and made to push himself past Charles.

*Oh darn it.* Wade stood up. He was just in time to see Charles throw the first punch.

“Hoi!” Wade leapt forward, elbowing his way through to them as a roar of glee spread through the crowd.

The second punch was thrown, knocking Charles onto the table, but it was clear that the older man had handled plenty of punches in his life, as he righted himself immediately.

“*Hold it!”*

Wade jumped forward, one hand grabbing the younger man’s shoulder and wrenching him back while the other shoved Charles. He heard Charles growl, and the younger man strained against his grip.

“That’s enough for tonight. I’m sure you both just want some hot food and your beds,” Wade glowered at the pair of them.

“Like hell…” the younger man swore.

Wade turned on him, releasing Charles and instead thumping the younger on the chest, forcing him back, and showing his dominance. The spilled drink was the younger man’s fault, and Wade knew that if he let that be challenged so openly then it would open the door for any young buck to try it out, too.

“I suggest you settle your dues first. You pay our Charles for the drink. If you’ve still got a problem after that, then you can find another job,” Wade snapped.

The younger man blinked as the threat settled in. “Wait, but…”

“Listen up,” Wade didn’t give the man time to make excuses, or get himself riled up. “This is to both of you. Railroad work is dangerous. If you two can’t trust each other than you’re not on my team. You got that?”

Charles clearly knew how this went, and was the first to answer. He nodded, “Boss.”

“I got it.” The younger muttered a moment later, throwing some coins on the table before sauntering back into the crowd.

“Okay. Nothing to see here. Go back to your evening, folks!” Wade clapped his hands as there were some scattered applause and a few boos from those who had wanted to see a fight.

When he retired to his table, Abe had gone, and Wade cursed losing his chance to find out any more. Still. It was something. The accident with this Tommy Blake had been so serious that they’d had to divert the entire line? What could have caused that?

“Mr. Nash?” A shadow loomed over his table. Wade looked up to see a young man about his age but taller, with dark brown hair in a side parting, and a sheriff’s badge on his breast.

“Sheriff,” Wade said. “Sorry about that little ruckus earlier; the men won’t be a problem now.”

“I can see. You’ve got a good handle on them.” The sheriff sat down without being invited, before leaning to shake Wade’s hand. “Tobias Cain. Sheriff for Cheyenne. I was just about to get involved myself, but you did a good job there.”

Wade winced. “A better job is not having to do it at all,” he quoted his father, earning a bark of a laugh from Cain.

“Yessir. But life isn’t that easy, is it?” Tobias nodded. “I’ve heard about you. Or more accurately, I’ve heard of Sheriff Samuel Nash.”

“My father,” Wade nodded.

“He was before my time, but lawmen still tell the story of him bringing in the Daley Gang,” Tobias nodded.

“Thanks.” Wade said. He wondered what he was thanking the sheriff for. Perhaps just for the memory.

“How are you finding the railroad?” Tobias asked. His voice was light, and Wade detected a hesitation there. Like Tobias was holding some of his cards back.

*Can I trust you?*

Wade figured he’d risk it. The man had talked well of his father, after all.

“It’s getting more complicated by the day. I’ve got a history of accidents that no one can quite rightly figure, and I’m trying to work out if half my men hate the other half,” Wade said.

Tobias shrugged a little at that. “There’s always rivalries in the work gangs.” His tone dropped lower. “That’s not what I would be worried about.”

*Oh really?*

Wade waited, picking his words carefully. “There’s been an awful *lot* of accidents recently. And I’m seeing a few names turn up a lot.”

“Silas Laramie?” Tobias surprised him by saying.

Wade nodded. He studied the sheriff then. The man seemed to be struggling with his own words for a moment.

“Silas has wound his way right through all this railroad business. There isn’t an account or business or ranch nearby that either doesn’t owe Silas something or hasn’t got his fingerprints on them. He set himself up as some sort of unofficial manager, and somehow there’s all this trouble you mentioned.” Tobias fixed Wade with a hard stare. “Some folks think that Silas would make a lot of money if the railroad failed, *and* if it succeeded.”

*What?*

Wade startled. He hadn’t considered that. “How so? How would that help anyone?”

Tobias leaned back in his chair, spreading his hands out as if it was all beyond him. “All I know is that the railroad is going to make someone very rich. Either the person who owns the land when Union Pacific buys it, or the company who comes in after them.”

*Huh.* Wade turned over this new piece of information. *Interesting. Silas Laramie said he was protecting his investments when I saw him, and the ledgers suggested Silas was making an awful lot of money out of Union Pacific, every month.* And the railway has had an awful lot of accidents recently, hadn’t it? Without filling any safety reports…

*Who was the one man getting rich off of all of this?*

Silas Laramie.

*If the railway went under, if the workers walked out because of all of these accidents...then Silas would still own all the land. He could resell to the next rail company, and make double, couldn’t he?*

Tobias Cain cleared his throat, bringing Wade’s attention back to the moment. “I just wanted to introduce myself, Mr. Nash, because as I say, your father’s name held some weight once. You take care of yourself out there. Cheyenne doesn’t need any more bad news coming from that railroad,” the sheriff said, standing up. There was a note of threat to the man’s voice, and Wade wondered if he was being warned off.

Was the sheriff trying to protect his town from the railroad? Wade wondered.

“Oh, don’t worry, Sheriff,” Wade said. “If there is any trouble at the railroad, I intend to put a stop to it.”

Now all he had to do was to fulfill on his promise.

# **Chapter 8**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

Fire. *Fire!*

Wade awoke with a start, with flames in his dreams and smoke in his nose. He threw the blanket off him and scrambled for the flap of the tent.

“Boss. *Boss!”*

Abe’s distraught voice met him as he jumped outside. The night sky over the railway construction yard was lit by an angry orange. A gust of wind brought thick, acrid smoke and the crackle and pop of flames.

“It’s the yard, Boss. Someone’s set it on fire!” Abe shouted. The senior worker skidded to a halt in the dust, already turning back to race towards the rest of the worker encampment.

Wade swore, dragging his heavy trews over his long johns, and throwing on his thick jacket.

“Get the mules to the watering hole! Fill everything you can! Someone ride for town!” Wade was shouting. A moment’s hesitation struck him but then he grabbed his gun belt too, buckling it on as he tore off in the direction of the cataclysm.

There was no way that a fire had started itself. Of that, he was sure.

Most of the workers of the Union Pacific railway had chosen to stay at the Cheyenne Star or other cheap boarding houses in town, but some of the poorer ones (or those seeking to save as much of their pay as they could afford) had elected to form a temporary encampment on the edge of the low plain. Wade himself had set his tent fifty yards from them, not being so close that he would impinge on his workers’ behavior, but far enough that he could keep an eye on the tracks.

*In case something just like this happened!*

“Who was it? Where are they?” Wade barked as he climbed the rise to the tracks—and instantly almost fell over the length of iron bars.

*What?*

Several sections of the iron tracks had been pulled up and cast aside. Wade ran down the side of the tracks, his boots crunching on the fresh earth and grit. Ahead of him, one of the construction barns was fully ablaze, and there was the scream of terrified horses from the small stable.

“Get the horses and mules out!” Wade shouted, arriving at the scene of the conflagration.

The destruction wasn’t just limited to the fire. A pump carriage had been tipped over, and supplies including bags of nails had been torn open and cast over the ground. The tar barrels had been tipped, and were now a large, black stinking mess over the rocks.

*Can’t let that catch or we’ll never put it out.*

He saw Abe, Charles, and several of the Mexican migrants who had stayed overnight were already flinging open the door of the stables, to suddenly leap aside as the horses bolted—their eyes rolling and frothing at the lips.

*We’ll capture them back later. Tomorrow, when we can see.* Wade knew the safest thing for the horses was for them to run free right now. They probably wouldn’t go too far in the night.

Good. That left Wade to deal with the tar. Luckily, some of the shovels and tools had been left outside the barn after yesterday’s shift. Wade grabbed one, and started shoveling earth onto the thick, black tar.

Within moments he was joined by Abe, covering the edges of the black goop before piling more earth on top.

“Anyone hurt?” Wade asked. He muttered through his kerchief. The swirls of the thick black smoke were choking.

“No. One of them men, Andrei, said he saw people riding off and came to get me, but by then it was too late,” Abe’s eyes were almost as wide as the horses had been.

“Did he get a description?” Wade hissed quickly.

Abe nodded quickly, glancing at the flames ahead of them. It was clear that getting a description of the attackers was the last thing on his or Andrei’s mind. “Red hair, I think. What do we do about the barn?” Abe said, looking at the next building over. One half of it was already in flames.

Wade winced. If they had axes and mallets they could try to take it down, but it would be too dangerous without heavier gear. There was no way that they were going to get one of the new firefighting wagons this far from town—that is, if Cheyenne even had one yet.

He didn’t even entertain the notion of going into the burning building to save what supplies were left in there. It was too dangerous, and he wasn’t about to have a man killed on his watch for stock the company could replace.

“We’re going to have to let her go, and concentrate on the smaller works shed,” Wade said at once. There was no saving the main supply barn.

“The danger we got is when she falls, and cinders,” Wade pointed to the smaller shed that sat a good ten meters away.

“Get the mules to bring up water, and concentrate on damping down that near wall,” Wade said. He knew it was a bad job, but it was the best he could think to do with limited resources.

Abe didn’t question it. The younger man immediately ran to organize the rest of the workers.

Wade and the rest of the crew worked through the night. At some point before dawn they were joined by a posse of riders from Cheyenne, including a lot of the railmen who had stayed in town. The night faded into a blur of shouts, aching backs, and smoke-seared throats. Wade worked to throw dirt on any cinders that fell on the bush around, before returning to throw water and dirt on the wall of the small barn.

*We were lucky.* Wade finally looked up from his work at some point in the chill grays of the new dawn.

No one had died. The horses and mules had survived. The smaller barn had been saved. Now all they had to do was to put right everything that the saboteurs had destroyed the night before.

Saboteurs. Wade didn’t doubt for a moment that this was what had happened. There should have been no open flames in the barn, and the ruined and torn tracks proved it.

“Andrei?” Wade called the young rail worker forward who had seen the riders last night. Abe came along with him, limping with exhaustion.

“His English isn’t so good, Boss. But I picked up a bit of Spanish down south,” Abe gratefully accepted the water flask Andrei offered him.

“Ask him exactly what happened, and what he saw. How many, what did they look like, were there any distinguishing features?” Wade asked.

He watched as Abe stumbled through a few phrases in Spanish, using his hands as much as his mouth to convey the words. Andrei, who was younger still and barely looked into his twenties, nodded and rattled off his answer.

“Uh, well, I’m not too good on numbers,” Abe said, until Andrei flashed one hand with splayed fingers twice.

“Ten? Ten riders?” Wade held up his own hands, and Andrei shrugged, then nodded.

*Around a dozen, give or take.* Wade felt a sinking feeling. That many people didn’t just turn up for nothing. They might have been hired by an angry landowner, or it was a gang.

*Or both,* Wade glowered. An angry landowner could hire a gang, couldn’t they?

Wade knew that outlaw gangs were rife across the mid-west, but hadn’t heard of them up here around Cheyenne. He had figured they would be more interested in the mining towns or the wagons heading along the Oregon Trail… *wouldn’t they?*

*But something had brought them here.*

Andrei mimed the riders throwing something, and then running. He then mimed pulling a rope over his shoulder.

“Andrei says he was supposed to be on watch, but had been on the other side of the encampment. When he got back, he saw the riders pulling the tracks with ropes and their horses,” Abe said. “They fired the barn and ran.”

*They didn’t stay to shoot anyone then.*

Wade narrowed his eyes. That was unusual, wasn’t it? If a gang attacked a railway, then surely they would be after the promissory notes or the cash box. At the very least, they would strip the workers of every coin they had made.

“Thank him for me. Every worker here will get an extra salary for last night. I’ll make sure of it,” Wade promised. There wasn’t so much a cheer as a weary nod from most of them. He got a better response when he told them all to take an hour off, before coming back to work on repairing the tracks later.

*And I guess I have to file a report*.

Wade looked at the main construction barn, which was now in ruins. It’d have to be his tent.

“… Red Devils!”

He overheard Bodie, the usually silent worker loudly exclaiming as he trudged back to the encampment tents. The blond, bearded man was smeared with soot and ash, like the rest of them.

“Bodie. What was that?” Wade asked, for the taciturn, grim worker to throw him a wary look. Wade didn’t think he would admit to anything, and then he shrugged.

“I was on another team last year. Same railroad, laying her out from North Platte, Nebraska Territory,” Bodie said. For someone so quiet and brooding, Wade was surprised when the man spoke exceptionally good English.

“It was attacked by a group called the Red Devils. Some old timer said they had attacked a few company towns and such,” Bodie shrugged.

“Is that so?” Wade thanked the man and left him to his gossip.

*So there was an outlaw group that was going for the railroads? Or only Union Pacific?*

Again, Wade struggled to see what was in it for the bandits if they didn’t stop to loot.

For a moment, he wished that his father was still alive and nearby, so he could pick the old lawman’s brains. Samuel Nash had traveled across Missouri and out of state on the trail of bandits and lowlifes. He had seemed to have an encyclopedic knowledge of lawlessness in the United States mid-west.

“Let’s see if Sheriff Cain knows half as much,” Wade thought.

He wrote up his report of the events that night, and asked Abe to keep at least four men on horses to stand watch throughout the day until he came back.

“If the riders come back, you don’t put up a fight. You scatter or give them what they want, y’hear?”

He made Abe promise, and was surprised to see Abe’s glower of disgust at that. The young foreman appeared to take pride in his work. Wade didn’t want that pride to get him killed.

After Wade had finished his paperwork, he rode at a quick canter back into town, to find the news of last night’s fire abuzz in the town. He was hailed at least twice by people who he didn’t know but knew *him* apparently, asking how it was going. One inquirer had been dressed well enough to be someone invested in the railroad, but the other had been a Cheyenne old timer, who had promised to run up some pies if the men needed cheering up.

*There’s never anything as kind or as generous as some of the people who haven’t got much.* It wasn’t the first time that Wade had been struck by frontier kindness.

Wade mailed the hard copy of the report at the Cheyenne Pony Express, where it would race back to North Platte where they had an oversight office. He also sent a telegram via the Cheyenne post office, telling them the basics and to expect his paperwork.

“Sheriff?” Wade found Tobias Can outside the sheriff’s station, leading his horse back to the small stone-built stables at the back.

“Ah. Warden Nash! I was just going to ride on over to you. I heard about the fire. A couple of deputies went over last night with some of your men,” Tobias stopped, and looked seriously at Wade.

“It’s a terrible business. I figured you’d want to see me personally about it.” Tobias nodded to the stables, where he finished bringing his horse in. He dug out an extra feed bag for Wade to give to Charger.

“I do,” Wade took a breath, and then recounted everything that had happened last night. First he told it from his perspective, and then he told it from the perspective of a warden, including the information Andrei and Bodie had told him.

“So, as well as alerting to you to what’s going on, I have to ask you about gang activity in the area. You ever heard of the Red Devils?” Wade finished up. He brushed through Charger’s mane and tail as he talked.

Tobias Cain, although younger, was a reserved sort of man. He had a quiet strength that Wade respected. He could see that Cain was not one who was quick to judge, and who kept his own counsel.

“I’ve heard a little, and I know less,” Tobias admitted.

“The Red Devils first showed up last year, mostly in reports coming out of Nebraska. Since then, I’ve heard their name is *rumored* to be connected to two more attacks on rail tracks, and one on a company outpost. A telegram came from one of the other sheriffs on the line, warning us to look out for them, but so far they hadn’t showed,” Tobias said.

“But what do they want? Are they blowing up the lines?” Wade asked. He had heard that some outlaw gangs did that, either to stop a train and then rob it, or to derail it and then rob it.

“Attacking them in parts, but I never got to the bottom of actually *why* they did it. I was guessing they were stealing equipment, or maybe holding Union Pacific to ransom?” Tobias wondered.

*Huh.* Wade nodded slowly to himself. That might make sense, but the gang would have to be cleverer than most. Had the Red Devils figured out that the railways were worth a lot of money, and were then exacting a toll on the company?

*Oh, darn it!*

Wade suddenly thought about his conversation with Frederick Hayes. Wade had thought him a very open, engaging man. But had the Union Pacific representative actually been trying to hide the fact that the company was being bribed? Is that why Hayes had hired *him—*an ex lawman himself?

“You don’t know anything more about them? Who their ringleader is? Known bases?” Wade asked.

Tobias shook his head. “Sadly not. Even Union Pacific haven’t told us about it, calling it just another hazard of the west. The other sheriffs along the line are puzzling it out just the same as we are.”

*Why was Union Pacific keeping it quiet?* Wade wondered for a moment, before the answer hit him.

Competitors. There had been a great boon in private rail companies over the last few years. If another company heard that the Union pacific was in trouble and being targeted, then wouldn’t they try to muscle in?

“I’ll have to take proper statements, Warden,” Tobias Cain said heavily. “I’m sure your men are tired, but I’ll be coming up tomorrow morning.”

“Any time,” Wade said. “What about guards? Deputies?”

It was a long shot, but he thought he might as well try. Tobias pulled a sour face.

“You lot are a private company, remember? That’s why they hired *you*, isn’t it? I don’t want my deputies to get dragged into some shooting match because one of yours is trigger happy.”

“I’m the only one with the gun, sir. And I’ve never pulled the trigger when I didn’t mean to,” Wade said heavily. He wasn’t entirely sure he could promise on being the only man there with a gun, but he was certainly the only one who openly carried his pistols and his long rifle around with him.

“I don’t like splitting my forces, Warden. I promise I’ll send a couple of deputies to do a patrol out past the railroad, but we’re here to protect the people of Cheyenne, not some private company—no matter how important they are.”

Wade nodded. He knew he should be annoyed at this decision by the Cheyenne Sheriff but, in truth, it made him respect the man a little bit more.

# **Chapter 9**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“Someone call the boss!”

Wade looked up from his paperwork as the shout echoed down the line of rail workers.

*Oh drat it!*

Wade grimaced. Something else had happened. They hadn’t even finished clearing the debris from the fire, which was now a whole two nights ago. He sighed, urging Charger forward and shoving the letters he had been looking at into his shirt. The letter had been delayed, informing him that Franklin Hayes was due to be back in Cheyenne for the end of the month—which was today.

*And I need to have a talk with him. A serious talk.*

It had been a busy few days, and progress on the line had slowed to a crawl as Wade diverted much of the work teams to clearing the burnt-out barn and ordering supplies to build a new one. As it was, Wade had to store the arrivals of new posts, staples, and track on open ground, meaning he had to further take out a group of eight men to watch it, day and night; four on, four off. What made it all worse was that the weather was heating up now that they were heading towards midsummer, and the men had nothing but a couple of large tarp awnings to shelter inside.

*Which meant shorter work shifts, and more supply runs for water.*

Wade scowled. All of it meant that the rail line had gone from days to weeks behind schedule.

Wade lifted up his hand and hollered to the railway scout that had reached the front of the line. The work had halted as soon as the count had arrived on pony. That could only mean bad news, couldn’t it?

“What’s going on? Why has work stopped?” Wade rode up to see the forward track team had stepped back from the track bed, leaning on their picks and shovels or else sitting on the bank of dirt. Any excuse to get some water and roll up some tobacco. Almost all the men had small clay pipes and cheap, harsh tobacco they brought in paper bags from the General Store. A few of the men rolled their own using handbills ripped from noticeboards. Wade wondered how long that would continue before Sheriff Tobias would start muttering about their ‘unsocial behavior’.

*A problem at work meant a problem in town,* that was a motto that Wade had found to be true on the trails he had worked before. When work was running smoothly, the men were generally happy with a job well done. They congratulated each other, took pleasure in hot food at the end of the day or a drink at the saloon, and went to bed tired.

But if the work day had been full of problems—whether it was late supplies or the wrong supplies or stolen supplies, or difficult ground or a hundred other things that could go wrong—then workers liked to blow off steam in the evening. Wade had seen this equation time and again when he worked all over the Midwest. A frustrated worker meant arguments, then fights... and then who knew what else.

“It’s the seventh bridge over Crow’s Foot, Boss. She’s gone down,” the scout said, taking off his floppy canvas hat and wiping his brow. The young man looked barely old enough to sign the papers of employment. Wade guessed the skinny youth with the dusting of blond, downy stubble was a local lad who knew the plains and could ride well enough for his job. Their work team had a total of two scouts, both of them local men who had been down the route the railway was to take.

Their job was a simple one, ride up and down the length of the track, replacing the white stick markers if they were down, and checking nothing untoward had happened to the route like landslips or trees in the way. They were also supposed to keep an eye on Native American movements, and herds in the area.

“Crow’s Foot Creek?” Wade pulled out the route map from his pocket, unfolding the section over the pommel of his saddle.

The rail route had been specifically plotted to choose the flattest, easiest terrain up to the mountain pass in the distance. However, there were still a dozen small creeks that straggled their way across the plains, as the winter thaws caused new creeks to be cut every year.

“I see it,” Wade found the spot the scout was talking about. Crow’s Foot Creek was one of the more established creeks in this part of the plains, and though it wasn’t wide, it would need a reinforced bridge for the train to cross.

“I’ll come and look,” Wade said, before turning to Abe and the rest of his men. The track layers were already slowing up, seeing the halt in the tail works ahead.

“Get your break, but then get back to it. It’s better to make distance than it is to wait.” Wade’s tone was a little harsh. He saw Brodie pull a face, but Wade shot him a hard glare until the man looked away.

*I’ve been good to you, ever since the fire,* Wade thought. *But don’t push it. Push me, and you’ll regret it.*

The scout—a young man named Jeremiah—led the way as he and Wade cantered up the rail route. They passed by singular, white-painted staves in the ground, hammered in place by the surveyors when the route had first been plotted.

The distant mountains were on their left, and the sky was a blistering blue. Wade watched as a small haze of gray clung to the distant mountains. He hoped that would descend and provide a bit of cloud cover by the afternoon, but he reckoned it probably wouldn’t.

“We can’t divert the rail route,” Wade called to Jeremiah as they rode. Crow’s Foot Creek was deep for a few miles in either direction, and planning that big of a detour would require surveyors and architects.

*So, we’ll have to make this work.*

Wade rolled his eyes. He knew that they also didn’t have the manpower or the time to divert the creek, either. Wade had been a part of work teams in the past that had done that, but he always thought it would just present problems later down the line as the water had to go somewhere.

“Here we are, Boss,” Jeremiah said.

“Nash, please,” Wade muttered wearily as they reached the end of a hump of land, clustered with short, thorny trees. He didn’t like being called boss, but no matter what he preferred, it seemed to be what the workers called him.

The creek already had the beginnings of a simple platform bridge put in, with long beams forming a bed across the bare three-meter gap they had to cross, shorter struts rising from the creek bed to secure it.

*Or SHOULD have held the bridge,* Wade narrowed his eyes to see the collapsed timber ahead of him.

The struts below the bridge were gone. Wade could see fresh, darker tears in the gorge walls where they had been ripped from their footings.

Crow’s Foot Creek was very narrow, but it was deep. Wade reined Charger in at the edge to look down at a cut that was easily three times his height. A glimmer of water shimmered at the bottom, edged by flowering shrubs.

“What happened here? The wood stapled in?” Wade frowned.

They had used four large flat beams to span the short distance, but all four of them had tumbled into the creek, with great gouges in the ground where the wood had been ‘stapled’—or wooden pins driven into the ground.

“I don’t know, sir. We came to check it this morning, and found it like this,” Jeremiah said dolefully.

Wade led Charger (who was confident on edges) along the creek side, until he could see the problem.

The beams underneath had been knocked out. And then the main flat stretches had been dug out.

Wade growled, spitting over the edge. “No storm flow did that.”

He turned back to the ground, dismounting as he did so to inspect the holes.

*Yep, it was as clear as day.* There were spade marks in the ground.

“This ground had been dug out,” Wade said. It was impossible to say exactly when the attack happened, but Wade could see hoof prints around the area.

“The Red Devils!” Jeremiah whispered.

“As good a guess as any.” Wade looked up from his crouch, his eyes scanning the hills and the horizon. No sign of anyone. His mind raced. There was simply too many miles of track to keep it all secure. The best they could do is to keep a closer eye on the areas they would work a few days in advance.

*Until we catch whoever did this.*

“But...what are we going to do, Boss? The route’s totally halted now!” the rail scout said.

Wade caught his eye. The young man was scared. It was probably the prospect of the bandits being so close, as well as the rail route being canceled and Jeremiah potentially losing all that money.

“Halted? Nah. This is fixable. Ride back to the others. Call up the second work team, with tools, and as many mules as we have spare,” Wade sent, sending Jeremiah back the way he had come.

Wade led Charger to the grasses and let him feed as he quickly made a plan for the repairs. It wouldn’t be so different from the bridge repairs he had to perform on the trails, would it? The creek span was only five meters, meaning that a train carriage would stretch across it, pinning the bridge down . The difficulty would be the weight of the *first* engine, Wade realized. When a train of carriages was in full crossing, the carriages in front would distribute the weight, but the very first engine wouldn’t have that security. It would be putting tonnes of metal onto that thin structure.

It didn’t take long for the workforce to arrive, riding two to a pony each. Wade set them to work at once.

“Use the mules to haul those lengths out of the creek. They’re going to be the new beds,” Wade said, before directing the other half of the team to the shorter, stubby trees up the hill.

“You got lumberjack experience?” Wade asked.

All of the work team had, apart from Jeremiah. Wade had guessed as much. Being a working man in the Midwest meant picking up a lot of useful skills.

“Right. You’re going to take out those four smallest ones near us, and skin the branches, I need trunks about…” Wade mimed a wide circle between two hands. He turned back to the creek.

“We’re going to make a real simple trestle; an arch on each side of the creek—then sharpen the ends of the trunks and dig post holes for them. They’ll be angled like this, and lashed on top.”

Wade quickly set out his plan. They would use staves and nails to attach the board lengths to the wooden frame, and the frame lengths would secure the entire structure in place. As the trestle poles were driven into the ground by at least a meter or more, and were held in place by the frame, it would be almost impossible to dislodge. It was also fairly easy to put together.

“You reckon we can do it before the track catches up to us?” Jeremiah said, his voice was full of wonder.

“Easily,” Wade was confident. “We’ll replace the team and work through the night. By the time the tracks team gets here, it’ll be ready to support the weight.”

“Huh,” Calum, one of the work team that had come up to help them nodded encouragingly. “Here was me thinking you were just another boss. Looks like you know your stuff, Mr. Nash.”

Wade shrugged. “Wasn’t so long ago I was doing the same work as you. I got an eye for solving problems, I guess.”

*Now all I have to do is ‘solve’ the problem of the Red Devils.*

Wade’s thoughts turned heavy. He stripped off his jacket and worked alongside the team for the next hour until he was sure they had the design and skills, and then made his leave.

*I have to find Franklin before he disappears.* Wade promised the team there would be a drink for them if they finished before morning, and rode back along the track. He checked briefly with the rest of the workers, encouraging them to try and reach the creek before the bridge was finished.

*A little competition never hurt anybody, did it?*

Finally, he let himself ride, giving Charger full rein to gallop as he wanted to. A few minutes into his journey, with the wind whipping at his face, Wade had already forgotten the stress of the morning.

This was what work in the Wild West was supposed to be, wasn’t it? He wondered about the sort of life that Franklin Hayes must have had, most of it behind desks and filling out reports, or always meeting people.

*He doesn’t see this. Doesn’t know this is what drives men to work out here.*

The route back to Cheyenne was getting longer with each day of work taking the trail further out, and it was late afternoon by the time Wade caught up with Franklin at Gilmor’s Saloon, where the Union Pacific Agent had hired a room to act as his stay and his office.

“Hayes, we’ve got a problem,” Wade greeted the Agent without so much as a handshake. Hayes was the official representative of the company, sent about the companies business to receive reports, authorize payments—and hear the complaints.

“Another one?” Franklin looked up warily.

“A gang has been attacking the railroad. First we got our barn torched, and then one of the new bridges was sabotaged. My guess is that it’s the Red Devils.” Wade explained to his superior when he finally got into the room.

“The Red Devils? Ah. You’ve heard of them then?” Franklin looked no different than the month previous, apart from the fact he had had a new frock coat and he’d had a haircut.

*Times are treating you well, I see.*

Wade did his best to hide his scorn.

It was hard for Wade not look at Franklin in a different light after everything that had happened. Hayes had said absolutely nothing about the trouble that the Red Devils had been causing. Hayes had said nothing about the fact that Silas Laramie was some sort of unofficial guardian of the Cheyenne stretch of the railway.

“I heard about them when I woke up half the works on fire a few nights ago,” Wade’s voice was heavy.

“I heard. I came as soon as I got your report. Are the men alright? Anyone hurt?” Franklin asked.

He got points for asking that first, Wade considered. Then, Franklin inquired as to how far behind they were going to be.

“At this rate, we’ll be a month off schedule,” Wade shrugged. He really didn’t care for the timings, despite the way that Franklin clutched at his cravat as if it would save him from choking.

“It’s clear that this stretch is being targeted. We’ve had slowdowns and accidents and just today the bridge over Crow’s Foot Creek was out. You’re going to need to hire guards and patrols as a bare minimum,” Wade pointed out.

Franklin flashed an embarrassed grin. “I’m not authorized for that much of a change in personnel, but I’ll take your suggestion to the CEO. I can release funds for the repairs though…”

Franklin had come with two guards himself, as well as two small, locked chests with enough bullion to pay off the various wages for all the workers and Wade himself. There was an extra stipend to settle the construction accounts. Secretly, Wade wondered just how over budget the Cheyenne line had become, as Hayes had lost his usual generous, charming air and now appeared tense and worried.

“But there’s the local sheriff and his deputies. And you. There is no reason that *you* can’t—” Franklin said.

“I need a team of eight mounted shooters at least, Mr. Hayes,” Wade said from experience. It wasn’t just to chase the Red Devils off. It was to be able to keep an eye on the track both ahead and behind them.

“I…” Franklin extended his hands helplessly. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“You do that.” Wade said. Inwardly, he railed.

*What was the point of doing this job if he wasn’t given the resources to do it properly?*

“Silas Laramie.” He moved on to the next thing he wanted to raise.

Franklin blinked. “What of him? He’s been a good friend to Union Pacific.”

“He controls about sixty percent of the land we’re heading through, and he’s the agent supplying most of the orders to the railway,” Wade pointed out. “That puts him in a very powerful position concerning the success or failure of your railway.”

At this, Hayes let out a low sigh, leaning back on his chair and drumming his fingers on the arm rests.

“I know. But it is what it is, Wade. I can tell you from my experience this isn’t unusual. There’s always small-time businessmen who try to make their money off the railway…” Franklin’s eyes slid to one side. He was obviously nervous.

*There’s something he’s not saying. Either he doesn’t like it, or he’s heard bad things about Laramie.*

“It’s better if we don’t rock the boat. We’re here to deliver a service. And it will help the whole town. Let guys like Laramie make their dollars; they’ll move on to something else afterwards.”

*Don’t rock the boat?*

Wade frowned. He pulled the sheath of papers he had brought with him, stripping the ribbon that tied them together.

“A lot of the sales reports here are for the goods that proved faulty. They’re goods authorized and supplied by Laramie,” Wade said. He didn’t want to spell it out. Either Laramie was useless at his job, or he was a crook.

*Another reason to speak to that widow,* Wade thought of the woman who had come to talk to him, Anna Turner. She had been fierce, and strong, and it wasn’t just her looks that were so striking. From the way she had glared, and not seemed scared of riding into a camp full of working men at all, Wade thought she was probably a force to be reckoned with.

*Mrs Nash lived here in Cheyenne, so she probably knows a thing or two about this Silas Laramie, right? She could tell me if he was a crook or not.*

“Wade.” Franklin drew himself up, one hand slapping the arm rest a little too forcefully. “You need to drop it. We can’t afford to make enemies. Not if we’re already behind by a month. There are countless other rail companies who want nothing more than to see Union Pacific fail.”

*Oh really?*

Wade hadn’t considered that. Did that mean that some of the attacks and faulty machinery would benefit another company, if Union Pacific pulled out?

Wade’s head spun. He had been hired to investigate a series of accidents, and protect the workers. The thought of spiraling out into a full company war was not something he had signed up for.

*Just give me the trails; a decent job before my hands, and some honest men,* he sighed.

Life was so much easier when he was out on the prairie, on his own or with smaller groups, Wade thought wistfully. He had jobs guiding wagons over the great trails when it was just him and them and the long, rolling plains of the Midwest. Any trouble that occurred could be fixed with words, or, if need be, with a gun.

*But this, what I’m doing now?* Wade thought about all of the men who were under his care. This was a whole lot more to worry about than one family trying to get from Kansas to California. He had near thirty men, all of whom needed listening to, and sometimes needed straightening out.

More than that, Wade *understood* the lives of the men who worked for him. He had been in their position, many times. They were worried that they were targets for some gang. They lived from paycheck to paycheck, barely saving enough money to pay for the food they ate.

Wade dreamed of the quieter nights under the open skies, but something in him—the part that remembered wearing a badge—told him that these men relied on him. They needed him.

*I can’t leave them in the lurch. Not when they are in danger.*

“Are we done, Mr. Nash?” Hayes moved a ledger in front of him. “I’m authorizing the wages for you and the thirty-five men you have employed.”

From Hayes’s tone, it was clear that the discussion was at an end, as were Wade’s questions.

# **Chapter 10**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“Miss Turner?”

Anna looked up from the butter churner at the worried-sounding voice in her yard.

*Oh cripes.*

Instantly, she remembered she had agreed that Mr. Smith, one of the livestock merchants from town would come over this morning to look at prices for her new Morgan foals.

She stood in the small barn, sleeves rolled up and a sweat on her brow. She had been spinning the butter churner for the last fifteen minutes.

“I’m coming! I’m just in the barn, Smith!” she yelled, once again looking between the churner and where sunlight streamed in through the open door. How long was she going to be negotiating? Would the butter be good in this heat when she got back?

She’d already been a day late getting the milk collected and separated. That was because one of the younger studs had kicked down a fence at the top paddock—probably because of the cougar that was still in the area.

*Dear heavens,* Anna groaned. When was it ever going to get any easier? There were always a hundred jobs to be done. More now that the summer was in full swing. The veg garden was a state, and hadn’t been weeded in months. The chickens needed their run expanding so they could peck at the new grass. Already, Anna knew, she had lost some of her beans to black spot.

“Miss Turner? I really don’t have a lot of time…” said the voice of the worried Mr. Smith, and the jangle of harnesses outside met her ears.

Anna swore under her breath, and threw the churn handle into one wild turn before hurrying to the door. She had splashes of curd across her apron and up her arms, and she only had her light shift on in the heat.

“Oh, yes, excuse me…” It was Mr. Smith the younger, the son of Mr. Smith the older who ran Cheyenne’s biggest livestock market. The lad had the same well-tailored black jacket and waistcoat that his father wore (although his father wore it better, Anna had to admit). The poor lad must be boiling, although the red in his cheeks could have been due to the sudden appearance of a woman in a light shift and trousers instead of a dress, bodice, and jacket.

“Four foals, Mr. Smith. You can see them from here.” Anna used her hair kerchief to mop at her brow, before tying back her flowing golden locks. This simple movement only made Smith the younger blush all the redder.

*Well, maybe he’ll give me a better price.*

Anna decided she didn’t have time to spare this man’s manners.

“They’re all strong and healthy. No illness. Two boys, two girls. Their parents are fine stock. Morgans, so they’re the best base breed for anything,” Anna reeled off automatically. She didn’t have to remind him that Morgans were prized by the United States Cavalry for their steady and reliable nature. Whoever brought them would have almost guaranteed a sale to the military.

“Oh yes, yes I see. They’re—a bit young yet, aren’t they?” Smith the younger frowned.

“Of course they are,” Anna said immediately. “They’re five months now, and I won’t want to see them weaned before seven months. But if I can get the certificate of sale now, then I can prepare them.”

“Oh. Really Miss Turner, that won’t do at all.” Smith the younger shook his head.

“Mrs. Turner.” Anna said pointedly. “You always did early sales for my husband, or your pa did, anyway!” Anna spun around to the young man. It was a part of life out here. Smith the older would advance a part payment because he knew that the horses were in good hands, and it would help them out enormously. Why wouldn’t the younger man do the same?

“Oh. Well. The agreement has changed. My pa said I had to renegotiate…”

“*What?*”

Anna was furious, as she listened to a well-rehearsed speech about the difficulties of raising foals, especially single handed, and that ‘given Mrs. Turner’s recent situation’ they would have to come out to assess the foals at the point of sale.

*They thought I wasn’t up to rearing the animals on my own?*

Anna was almost dumbfounded. What was wrong with people? It had always been her who did most of the work on the livestock, as her husband had mostly been working on the railroad. Why was it, as soon as she was a single woman, everyone thought all sense went straight out of her head?

“I guess I’ll have to be having a conversation with Mr. Broderick instead,” Anna said icily, referring to the other major livestock merchant in town.

Smith the younger flinched as if struck. “Five months you say? We can come back before fall, and then I’m sure—”

“Good *day*, Mr. Smith.” Anna said coldly, turning and marching back to her shed, and her butter churner. She pointedly did not acknowledge Smith the Younger’s feeble goodbyes as she marched back to the churner.

At least the butter hadn’t completely separated she thought as she started work. She was still fuming at the utter stupidity of young men, and of her current balance books.

*If I had one of those newfangled mechanical churners then I wouldn’t even have to stand here and be doing this!* Anna grumbled to herself. She put that frustration into the churn as well. Of course, she had nowhere near enough money to afford one of those.

“Mrs. Turner? Anna?”

There was another man’s voice from her yard, deeper but still uncertain.

*What is it, now?*

“I’m churning butter! And if you can’t handle seeing a woman work then I suggest you turn right around and ride out of here, whoever you are!” Anna shouted. She thought that Smith the Younger had probably ridden back to offer his sincere apologies.

*Well I don’t want them! I don’t want any charity, and I don’t want any one’s pity!*

“Never been scared of people working before,” said a voice from the barn door, and she turned around to see that it wasn’t Smith the Younger or Smith the Older—it was the new guard boss from the Union Pacific.

“You.” Anna fixed him with a hard stare.

The man—Wade Nash, she recalled—actually took his hat off and nodded as he stepped inside the barn. He cast a quick, perfunctory look around the space, and apparently it was to his liking as he nodded, approvingly.

“Ma’am, I’m not here for a fight. I’ve come here because, well, it seems that you and me got off to a bad start before,” the man said quickly. He turned back to regard Anna.

*He really has the most incredible eyes,* Anna found herself thinking, and then grew angry at herself for thinking that too.

“All’s well and good, Mr. Nash. But I’m busy, so—” Anna said.

“You want help? I have only a few questions, but like I say, I’ve never been scared of hard work.” Mr. Nash offered a small, shy smile.

*What’s your game?* Anna wondered. She nodded to the churn. “You know how to churn butter? Keep that turning until I say so.”

“I’ve churned a fair bit of butter in my life, ma’am.”

Wade rolled up his sleeves and got straight to the barrel, grabbing the lever and starting to turn it in smooth, powerful strikes. Anna finally let herself breathe, taking a step back as she saw the way his shirt pulled and stretched at the powerful muscles across his shoulders.

*There was something to be said for having men work for you,* she thought.

She waited until Wade was into the rhythm of the churn, knowing when the movement would turn from a churn to a chore.

“Right then, Mr. Nash. What was it that you wanted to ask me?” she said.

The man grunted a little with the effort, but she was sure she caught a wry grin on his face.

“Actually. It’s about what you said. About Laramie. I’ve been doing some digging and—”

Anna’s heart skipped a beat. “You have something?”

*I knew it. I knew that self-righteous bully was behind all of this.*

“I don’t know. Nothing I can take to Sheriff Cain. But his name keeps on turning up. In all the paperwork. He’s supplying the land, the equipment, signing off on most of the supplies…”

“All the equipment that keeps on breaking?” Anna squinted her eyes. So that was it, was it? That Silas was making money out of Union Pacific, and walking away laughing?

*And was it faulty equipment that led to Jacob’s death?*

Wade was silent for a moment as Anna seethed. When the man spoke again, his voice was low and angry. “There’s something here. I just can’t see it yet. Maybe Silas is just corrupt. He wouldn’t be the first businessman to line his own pockets. But there’s also this Cheyenne Civic Improvement Fund that he’s apparently in charge of. The railway is paying him off to help the community every month.”

“Paying him off?” Anna frowned. “But it sounds like they’re already giving him so much. And I have never heard anything about a Cheyenne Improvement Fund.”

He was right. Something *was* off here. Anna was surprised that the Union Pacific Guard Captain had done his homework.

*Maybe he’s not so bad after all.*

“Okay. That’s enough. I’ll need to separate it out and store it. Do you mind getting your hands dirty, Mr. Nash?” Anna said, completely forgetting to be angry with him.

“Never been scared of dirt, either. And please, call me Wade,” he said, straightening up and rolling his arms. His shoulders gave a loud crack, and Anna was suddenly reminded of how tall the man was.

Wade was taller than Jacob had been, and broader. Anna’s heart fluttered for a second, and instantly she hated herself for it. How long had she been around fit, healthy, strong men? How long had it been since she had felt this easy around one, instead of thinking about her hair or how she presented herself?

*Stop it, Anna.* She huffed in annoyance. What was she thinking about, at a time like this?

“The thing is, Silas is a powerful man in these parts. Whatever he’s up to, no one wants to upset him,” Anna said, as she grabbed one of the butter casks and dragged it over while Wade grabbed the second. He didn’t make a noise about being asked to work, but fell in to her instructions with intelligence and skill.

“He owns most of the land the railway wants,” Wade agreed.

Anna sighed. “Silas was the son of a gold tycoon. One of the early ones,” she explained. “Silas’s father helped finance Cheyenne from the fort it used to be to the town you see today, and now everyone walks around him like he’s a king.”

Wade listened as she talked. She liked that about him. Perhaps she had been too quick to judge him after all.

“His father sent him off to some New England school, and everyone says that he’s is going to be governor one day; he’s also best friends with Senator Whitaker,” Anna grimaced.

“So he’s powerful then? Or wants to be.” Wade said.

Anna agreed. “He’s a bully, really. All I know is that he went away for business a few years ago, before coming back richer than ever, and started buying everything he could.”

“Just before the railway?” Wade asked.

“Yes. Of course!” Anna couldn’t believe she had never put those two things together. “He knew the railroad was coming in!”

“And he got ahead of it,” Wade agreed, before frowning. “But if only there was a smoking gun. Some proof that he *knew* his equipment was faulty, or a reason *why* he’d want to slow the railway down!”

A thought struck Anna. “Let me do some digging. You can’t very well go snooping about town because everyone *knows* you’re Union Pacific. But I can. I’m sure there must be someone who knows more about what Silas Laramie is up to.”

Anna nodded to herself. She knew that Silas hated her, and wasn’t about to admit anything even if she was clever about how she asked. But there were a few people who were closer to the Laramie’s than she was.

“There. Did I do a good job?” Wade straightened up. They had finished packing the butter into the tubs, and his arms were covered with dabs of cream.

Anna nodded to where there was a bucket in the corner to wash down.

“Fair,” she said.

Wade turned to wash off his arms, and Anna regarded the strong, mature man in her butter shed for a moment. Despite herself, she found that she liked him. It wasn’t just his good looks—the chiseled jaw helped, admittedly, and his steady nature—but now that she had a chance to actually talk to him, she found he was more thoughtful than she had first thought. He listed to her. He didn’t brush off her questions like most ‘important men’ did.

And there was a quiet strength that she admitted she was drawn to. His dark eyes hid a capability that seemed quite at home taking direction from women or pulling a gun on those that threatened him.

*Yes, maybe you’ll do well, Mr. Nash.* She found herself wondering about his story. How did a man retain his sense of decency doing the work he did? Working for companies like Union Pacific, who hadn’t told her a darn thing about her husbands death?

But for all that, he seemed committed to uncovering the truth. Anna respected that.

“I look forward to working with you, Mr. Nash in getting to the bottom of this,” Anna said.

Wade turned around, drew himself up to his full height, and looked at her steadily, in a way that showed her he took her seriously.

“It would be an honor,” he said gravely, and the way he was looking at her made her heart flutter.

Anna coughed abruptly. “Well. I’m sure you have plenty of work to be do, Mr. Nash. As have I.”

She didn’t want to like him. He was still working for Union Pacific, after all.

# **Chapter 11**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

Wade was met with a tense atmosphere the next day at the railroad. The workers were nervous, and were getting short with each other. He spent half the morning breaking up quarrels before eventually retiring to the newly built shed, to walk through the supplies that Franklin had sent up.

*Everyone’s nerves are on edge.*

Wade sighed, leaning against the open door as he looked at the long lines of track that stretched into the distance ahead of him. In truth, *his* nerves were on edge too.

“Look at all that track. I haven’t got anywhere near enough guards to watch it!” A surge of annoyance at Franklin Hayes swept through him once again.

The fact was, he wanted to like Hayes. Franklin appeared in all efforts to be a generous, honest man—until it came to business. In truth, Wade didn’t detect any greed or ego coming from the man. The Union Pacific Agent genuinely seemed to believe that he was doing the right thing, and was even scared of upsetting Silas.

*But why?* Wade couldn’t figure it out. Silas Laramie was supposedly supplying a service; he was purchasing equipment for the railway. If he was doing a bad job, then why didn’t Franklin just go to any other supplier that he must have, as the agent for a railroad company?

Wade groaned, and shook his head. He looked at the sacks of aggregate and nails that had been left in the new barn behind him.

“Cheyenne Construction Stores,” he read from the branding on the canvas sacks. That was the company that Silas was brokering with. He pushed his hand into one of the sacks, pulling out some of the steel ties that were meant to secure the tracks, and looked at them.

It was impossible to tell if they were any good.

*Had they been smelted to the right temperature? In the right way? What if they used cheap materials?*

These were only ties, but then of course there were the more important things like the rail engines themselves, and the TNT used to clear obstacles.

“All of it has been signed off by the Union Pacific engineers,” Wade murmured. But how long ago was that? Had there been another safety report done since then?

“Boss?” Wade looked up from his dark musings to see Jaspeth was at the door. He had his vest on in the heat and he was sweating from hauling all of the new supplies this morning.

“You got someone here to see ya,” Jaspeth nodded, stepping aside.

It was Anna Turner. She had ridden all the way up here, and was now wearing a shirt, jerkin, and heavy trousers. It made a change from the light shift she had worn yesterday, Wade thought.

“Mrs. Turner,” Wade tipped his hat. He felt his heart lift just a little at the sight of her. As difficult as their first meeting had been, he had to admit that he admired her. She was as fierce as a coyote and probably about as stubborn as a wolf. He liked that honesty, and that anger.

“Wade,” Anna waited long enough for Jaspeth to throw them both another wary look and move off before she started talking.

“I’ve got someone for you to speak to. Ezekiel Hartman. He’s the blacksmith. He knows about as much as anyone can in a small town like Cheyenne,” she said.

“Great news,” Wade said, already reaching for his things. When he came back out, he saw that Anna had waited for him, and was clearly expecting to do the interrogation with him.

*I’m not sure that was exactly what I had in mind,* Wade thought. But he had agreed to work with Anna on this. It seemed that she took that very literally indeed.

Anna waited for Wade to mount up, before they turned their heads to Cheyenne and set off. She set a good speed, Wade noticed. She held her back straight and rode with her knees. In that way that good riders had, he couldn’t tell if she followed the horse or whether the horse followed her. Both of them seemed to reach at the same time.

“You lived in Cheyenne all your life?” Wade asked when they finally slowed down to let their horses walk. Anna cast him a wary look, before nodding over the hill behind them.

“My parents had a place just over that hill, but...”

A shadow crossed her face. Wade guessed it was a painful memory.

“I lost my parents to illness,” Anna’s voice was brittle. “They passed a long time ago now, when me and Josiah were young.”

Wade made noise in agreement.

“It’s a hard thing losing your parents young,” Wade said. “My mother passed early. My father did his best to raise me, his son, on his own, but he was never the same without her.”

Wade glanced at Anna, to see her eyes lost in the distance. “Fever?” He asked softly.

Anna froze for a moment, but drew herself a little straighter on the saddle. “Small pox for my mother. Heart attack for my father. You?”

Wade felt a rush of guilt. He had wanted to reach out to this fierce woman, but he felt ashamed that he didn’t want to dwell on his own family.

*No, I found my pa and fiancée shot through the heart.* Wade was silent for a long moment.

“Smallpox got my mother too,” Wade said. He paused. “My pa... he was a lawman…He lived by the gun and he died by it, a little over ten years ago now.”

“Ah,” Anna’s voice was soft. “I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago too,” Wade gave a rough smile that felt sickly on his mouth.He glanced at Anna to see the same pain echoed in her eyes. A hurt that deep and that big had a way of marring a person.

Anna flickered him a ghost of sad smile. “Well. I lost the family ranch after my parents died. Ever since then, I’ve been looking after my new ranch, trying to stop it getting sold, and keeping an eye on my fool of a brother.”

Anna quickly changed the subject, for which Wade found himself thankful. She glanced over at him, and Wade knew that it was his turn to share something.

“I traveled. Worked just about everywhere, east to west, north to south.” Wade cracked his neck. He felt suddenly heavy and oafish in front of her. What did he have to celebrate in front of this fierce woman trying to save her ranch in Cheyenne, Wyoming?

*All I’ve ever done is drifted, all my life.*

If there was a problem before him, Wade would deal with it. But as soon as it seemed the problem was too big, then Wade had always hit the trails. There was always work for a capable man after all, and…

*And staying anywhere for long gets you hurt.*

He shook his head. What a ridiculous thing to think of, now.

“Hmm.” Anna was looking at him. “You sound like a man who likes having few responsibilities, Wade Nash. No ranch, no children, no wife.”

*Almost had a wife,* Wade corrected. He

felt a kick to his gut. He wasn’t sure if it was anger or sadness. In truth, it had been a long time since he had felt anything so keenly.

“And yet you are clearly very *good* at taking responsibility. Sheriff Cain seems to like you. Your workers seem to like you,” Anna said.

“They do?” Wade muttered. He thought the rail workers could barely stand him, in truth. But something had eased over the last few days, that much was clear — ever since the fire, and the round of drinks at the Cheyenne Star. The men appeared to respect him a bit more now. They were probably more used to guards and supervisors who disappeared at the end of every shift to a rich saloon room and entertainment—not one who camped out with them who was willing to take the bandits’ bullets if they came.

“Ezekiel said a good word about you too. Says he saw you break up a fight the other day.” Anna said.

*Ezekiel. The man we’re going to meet?*

“He did?” Wade asked. He still had no idea who this Ezekiel was, but apparently he had already made an impression on the man.

A few hours later, and Wade recognized exactly who Ezekiel Hartman was.

“You’re the guy who warned me off the job.” Wade felt a grin cross his face as he followed Anna into Cheyenne’s busy foundry.

Ezekiel Hartman was a mountain of a man, with a shaved head but a striking black beard. He was a few years older than Wade was, but clearly was fitter than most men half his age.

“Hartman Foundry, Metal works and Smithy,” Ezekiel strode across the space, his heavy leather apron across his chest scored and burnt by a generation of work. Wade’s hand disappeared into Ezekiel’s own, and for a moment, Wade thought the man was going to crush his fingers.

“Ha. You’ll do,” Ezekiel laughed. Whatever he had found in Wade’s grip, it seemed to have passed his test.

“So this is him. I remember him. Didn’t take my advice, did you?” Hartman said. He appeared to be a man of good humor, although Wade could detect a simmering intensity underneath it all.

“No, I guess I didn’t. But I’m here to work out what is going wrong on the railway, and that’s what I intend to do,” Wade said casually. He glanced around the foundry, seeing a dark, smoky atmosphere where different forges surrounded by apprentices glowed a dim cherry red. There were so many constant clanks, thumps and hammering in the room, that Wade had no fear that they might be overheard.

“Well, what’s going wrong is that people are dying,” Ezekiel said at once. He nodded respectfully to Anna.

“Mr. Turner—Jacob—was a friend of mine. I’ve known him since he was child, and he was a good man. More than that, he was a careful man. I knew something was up when I heard this talk of Jacob doing something wrong or getting himself killed,” Ezekiel scowled.

He was a man who wore his emotions plainly, and threw them out just as easily. As he talked, he grabbed a trolley of cooling metal components and carried it across the room, setting it on a table by the window.

“Anna said you might have heard something…” Wade suggested, earning another scowl from Ezekiel, who threw a quick glance at Anna, as if confirming that it was safe to talk.

“It’s okay, ‘Zeke. He gets it,” Anna said.

*Gets what?* Wade wondered.

“Well. I’m sure you wouldn’t be here if you weren’t thinking about a particular man,” Ezekiel said.

“Silas Laramie,” Wade nodded.

“Hm.” Ezekiel continued to work as he talked. “There we are. All on the same page. I can tell you I’ve known Silas almost as long as I knew Jacob, and it’s not the first time I’ve heard of him benefiting from other people’s misfortune, if you get my meaning.”

“In what way?” Wade asked.

“Well, there was the Van Huyts mine, over by Pine Bluff. It was a little, barely running, thing in honesty, but Silas took an interest in it. Daniel Van Huyts told me all about it. No sooner had he got an offer from Silas, before there was a mine collapse. Two people died, and the rest of the workers fled. The Van Huyts couldn’t work it anymore, and sold it at a reduced rate to Silas.” Ezekiel said.

“Could be bad luck,” Wade pointed out. *I need more. I need proof!*

“Then there were the Campbells. They had a stretch of improved land off to the west of Cheyenne. Over about three winters their fences got cut, and cut, and cut, and every year they lost cattle. Silas brought their ‘trouble’ land off them and what do you know? The fences stayed up after that,” the blacksmith said.

“So you think Silas has got a record? A *propensity* for this kind of thing?” Wade asked. It was he had feared. There were too many attacks happening to simply be brushed off as accidents.

“All I’m saying is that if you want to know more, you should find Tommy Blake,” Ezekiel said.

*Tommy Blake…* Wade had heard that name before. *The ledger!*

“He got injured? On the railroad?” Wade said.

Ezekiel fixed hi with a sharp eye. “Yep. That’s right. Tommy can barely work and heaven knows what’s going to happen when his family can’t look after him anymore. It was the railway’s fault.”

“What’s that got to do with Silas Laramie?” Wade asked.

Ezekiel lowered his head, his mouth disappearing into his beard. “Now I can’t say what the truth of any of it is, but you need to talk to Tommy. All I am willing to say is that for a while Silas was more involved up there at the rail works when it started. Tommy saw a lot. Then he had his accident, and now he’s scared to leave his house!”

*Tommy Blake.* Wade nodded. “Thank you Ezekiel. I’m not sure the stranglehold that Silas has on this town, but it’s brave of you to come forward.”

“Oh, I’m not scared of anyone. I own my foundry outright and there’s no way I’d sell it!” Ezekiel laughed before his face fell. “It’s just the other folks I care for. People like Tommy and Anna. They’re being treated like cattle, you see?”

Wade did see. Ezekiel’s eyes bored into him, expecting something from him. Wade extended his hand.

“I’ll get to the bottom of this, I swear it.”

This time, the blacksmith’s handshake when it came was just as crushing, but it had less anger in it.

# **Chapter 12**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“It’s too late to ride out to the Blake ranch now,” Anna said, her eyes flickered to the gathering crimson of the setting sun.

*It was also late to be getting back to the railway,* Wade cursed silently. By the time he rode back out there it would be full night, and he was likely to get shot at by Abe if he rode in out of the darkness.

Wade and Anna paused at the end of Main Street, with the sound of Cheyenne’s nightlife starting up behind them. The distant shouts and laughs sounded raucous and harsh in Wade’s ears. Maybe his ears had gotten used to camping out under the stars this last month, or maybe his recent discussion with Ezekiel had put him on edge. Whatever it was, the sounds of the night made him feel anxious.

*The Red Devils were out there somewhere.* Wade guessed that they were probably in town, too. Outlaws had a habit of frequenting the very towns they terrorized, or at least that was what his pa had always said.

“I’ll ride with you,” Wade offered, nodding up the road that led to the Turner ranch. Anna scowled at that, and looked as if she were about to protest, but she held her tongue. Wade wondered if she felt the same anxiety that he did.

The pair rode through Cheyenne at a gentle clip, passing through grids of streets with what seemed to be a saloon on every corner.

“She’s a wild town,” Anna offered, after the pair heard another loud shout from a few streets away.

“I can see,” Wade thought. He wasn’t sure if it was living up to its name of ‘Magic City of the Plains’ unless a part of that magic was avoiding getting into a fight on any given night.

“My brother, Josiah, says she’s an end-of-the-tracks town, but that the business owners here are trying to turn that around,” Anna said, pointing to where their journey had taken them to the long cut of the railway that ran along Cheyenne’s southern boundary.

Wade nodded silently. He knew what she meant. The railways were as much a blessing as a curse to many towns. Cheyenne had got the Union Pacific early it seemed, with several large station buildings at the foot of the town, and large stock yards accompanying them. Now the railway was being pushed north and west, towards the mountains, and towards the promise of the distant Pacific Ocean.

*But what happens to a place like Cheyenne when all the graders and track layers leave?*

Wade could see the dilemma. An end-of-the-tracks town usually meant a place for grifters and last-chancers; a place where people followed the train tracks to their end and got stuck. There could be a lot of trouble in such places.

But then again, if the tracks continued on past the town, then the town itself could be forgotten. The youth of the city could take the iron rails to far-flung places instead of staying to build something new.

*What was Silas going to do when he made his money?* Wade considered.

Anna took them out of Cheyenne, past the cattle markets and the mill house, and both of them seemed happy to fall into the quiet rhythm of the trail rather than talk.

*It’s easy, being around her,* Wade realized. He wasn’t used to being around anyone who didn’t expect a constant flow of conversation. After a while, when the words did come, they were soft and carried easily in the dark.

“I don’t know how I’m going to make it, in truth,” Anna said. The darkening skies brought an honesty to their conversation.

“The town has changed so much. We small ranchers are being priced out by the big herds and the cattle bosses,” she said. Wade heard her shift in her saddle. “And then there’s all the people trying to buy my farm.”

Wade listened with increasing anger as Anna explained the parade of uninvited buyers who had turned up to her ranch, stating that they had heard the Turner ranch was up for sale even when it wasn’t.

“I’m sure Silas is behind it. He was the first to try and buy us out, you see. Jacob always told him to clear off…”

*And now he’s dead,* Wade thought. That was mighty convenient for Laramie, wasn’t it?

“He sounded like a good man,” Wade kept his tone respectful.

To his surprise, Anna hissed in exasperation. She didn’t say anything for a moment.

“He was,” she cleared her throat. “But he was a gentle man, in truth. I think he took me on more out of pity than love. It was hard for him when I never gave him children.”

Wade blinked. He had not expected Anna to be so honest about her dead husband. It sounded like there was real affection there—but had there been *love*?

“Here we are,” Anna said quickly, as soon as they crested the rise to see the dark silhouette of her house ahead of them. Wade pulled Charger to a stop, and there was a moment of awkward silence between them.

“Thank you. For riding with me—” Anna began.

“Don’t mention it,” Wade said just as quickly.

*Why had he decided to come with her?*

Because it was dangerous. Silas was clearly a man capable of nastiness, and there were questions over what had happened to those who defied him.

Wade felt awkward. He felt that there were things he was supposed to say. Perhaps there were things expected of him. But it had been so long since he had been friends with *anyone*, let alone a woman, that he had forgotten what the etiquette was.

“You uh, you should get a dog if you’re out here all alone,” he said suddenly.

Anna sighed. “You’re not the first person to tell me that, Wade Nash. Goodnight!”

*What did I say wrong?*

Wade shook his head, confused by the strangely uptight tone in Anna’s voice. He turned Charger around and headed back to town. In truth, he relished the quiet ride through the night, and the chance to gather his thoughts.

*Franklin doesn’t want to upset Silas.*

Silas was clearly the main figure that the Union Pacific were dealing with here in Cheyenne. He was the one set to gain the most out of the railroad, wasn’t he?

*Just what was this Cheyenne Civic Improvement Fund?* *How did it operate? What did it do? Who else was on its board?*

Wade had no clearer answers to his questions by the time he got back to Gilmour’s Saloon. He decided a night in a real bed and some fresh food would do him the world of good. Then tomorrow, he would see about finding this Tommy Blake.

Gilmour’s was fairly quiet by the time that Wade got back, Tobias Cain was finishing up a drink in the corner of the bar, and promised to send out two more deputies to inspect the tracks the next day. Wade wondered whether to ask the sheriff about Tommy Blake, but decided against it.

*I need to talk to Tommy on my own first. When we’ve got enough evidence, we’ll bring in the sheriff.*

Finally, Wade bid the sheriff good night and took his plate of hot food up to his room. He wolfed down the mushrooms and strips of marinated beef before collapsing into bed. He was so tired that he threw his clothes onto the chair before collapsing into the soft cotton sheets.

\* \* \*

*“Wade! What are you? The only man who’s in the business of collecting holes!”*

Anna looked up and laughed from the front porch. She stood up, clutching his shirt to wave at him as evidence.

Wade laughed. It had been a long day and he had just come off the top meadows, where he had been training the latest studs. Anna was there, waiting for him with a look of happy exasperation on her face.

*Wait. No. I never had this conversation with her.*

Something was wrong with the scene, Wade knew. He’d had this exact same conversation with Sarah, hadn’t he? Not Anna Turner.

But there in front of him was the house he shared with Pa and... *Anna*.

Pa was out front, chopping wood, and Anna was already laughing and shaking her head as she hopped down from the porch, reaching up to graze his stubble with her lips, before she walked around to the front of the house.

*Wait—Anna, don’t!*

Wade wanted to warn her. He had to warn her. There was something bad for them waiting at the front of the house. He turned to run after her, but his fiancée was quick. He turned the corner just in time to see Anna’s golden, curling locks disappear around the front of the house.

Wade ran as fast as he could, but his limbs were slow, like he was moving through treacle. He still pushed himself forwards, skidding around the front porch even though he knew it was already too late.

His pa sat propped up against the well, with blood seeping down his chest. There, sitting beside him, was Anna…

\* \* \*

“No!”

Wade fought off the cloying blankets that had been trapping him, and rolled himself out of bed. He cracked his knee painfully on the floor boards.

*I was only dreaming. It was only a dream, wasn’t it?*

He gathered himself into a seat, still breathing hard. He was confused. Why had he been dreaming of Anna Turner, when it was his fiancée Sarah that he had lost?

*I don’t even think of her in that way; she’s not that important to me!* Wade’s heard hammered.

“Nash!” A sudden staccato rhythm hammered itself against the door. It was Tobias Cain’s voice on the other side.

“Nash! Wake up—it’s important!” the sheriff hollered.

Wade gathered the sheets around him and limped to the door, throwing it open to see the sheriff standing there in riding leathers with his guns at his belt. A stern look was on the man’s face.

“There’s been another fire. This time it’s the Union Pacific stockyard. Right on the edge of town!” Cain said, already turning to run back down the hallway.

Wade snarled, racing to drag on his clothes and boots, before flinging himself after the sheriff.

“It was lucky I saw you last night, or else I would have ridden out to the camp. One of my deputies saw the flames, and came to get me,” Cain said, who had already mounted his horse outside Gilmour’s. It was sometime just before morning, which Wade knew would be the quietest part of the day. Perfect for a sabotage.

Wade took Charger from the stables and together he rode with the sheriff through the quiet streets of Cheyenne to where a red glow was dominating the eastern skies. It wasn’t long before he could taste ash in the back of his throat, and smell the char and smoke.

The Union Pacific stockyard was just one of several yards that ran next to the train stations, right at the bottom of town. Large warehouses stood by the side of the road, and some yards had tall fences to hold in the terrified cattle, about to be shipped back to Chicago.

The Union Pacific yard, however, wasn’t built for animal stock. It was built for railway supplies like old engines, flatbed carts, and spare track. Supplies would be offloaded here before they were sent on to the new build tracks the next day. As such, it had a wide, low gate, to make the passage of carriages and freight easier...it was also easy to hop over, if you were an arsonist.

One of the warehouses was entirely ablaze, with flames shooting out of its top windows.

“That’s the stock warehouse. Not the office,” Wade said at once. He wasn’t sure what was worse. The office would hold important documents and writs of sale, while the warehouse would hold important supplies.

*And so soon after the other fire—the company will make a huge loss!* Wade knew that Franklin had only just ordered in the restock to cover the fire at the work site. How often could they do this?

“She’ll burn down for sure, there’s no saving her,” Cain pulled his horse into a worried stop in front of the gates. Wade couldn’t believe that this happened right here, right on the edge of town.

“The Red Devils,” Wade glowered at the flames. “They’re getting bolder.”

Beside him, the sheriff nodded. The man looked worried, and well he might, Wade thought.

*Because if the Red Devils were getting this brave, then there was nothing stopping them from attacking Cheyenne itself.*

# **Chapter 13**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

Anna saw the great pyre of black smoke rising from Cheyenne as soon as she went out to feed her animals.

*What’s happened? Has there been an accident at the rail yard?*

It took all of her willpower to stay and power through her essential tasks, before she took her best horse, a sable mare named Ellie, and rode into town to find out what was going on.

“Someone set fire to the rail yard. The union buildings,” she was told by Gustavo, the aging proprietor of Cheyenne General Stores. He looked as old as Methuselah but also knew everything there was to know about the goings on in town.

“The rail yard!” Anna gasped.

*Wade.*

What if he had been hurt? What if something had happened last night? Wade had, after all, been staying in town. Had he uncovered the attackers? She almost forgot her supplies as she ran to the door, but was halfway through it when she suddenly remembered.

“Gustavo—the Blakes? They moved, didn’t they? After Tommy had his accident?”

The older man, whose thin, wrinkled neck and small head made him look a little like a tortoise, frowned, scratching at a growth on the side of his chin.

“Oh yeah. They couldn’t maintain their ranch any more could they? Not with Tommy out of work. They sold the ranch and bought a little shack on Mayfield Row. Can’t miss it; it’s the one with the Chestnut tree outside.” Gustavo took a wavering breath, about to launch into another story—but Anna didn’t have time.

“Thanks, Gustavo! I owe you one!” Anna called out, running to Ellie. She wheeled her horse around and they leapt towards the train tracks.

All of Cheyenne appeared alive with the news of the fire last night. Anna could see the black smoke still lifting into the skies above, and the air smelled acrid and bitter. There were crowds in the streets nearest the disaster, and a log jam of carts and wagons as the day’s bakeries and butchers and general stores still had to deliver their goods through the throng.

“Clear out! Get, the lot of you ghouls!” Sheriff Cain was shouting at the front of the crowd. Anna watched as he clapped his hands and tried to spur people back.

She could see the cause of his annoyance too, as the *pumper*—the small firefighting engine was trying to turn around, with deputies pulling the mules attached to its end.

Anna hopped up onto a nearby porch and craned over the heads of those around her. She couldn’t see any active flames, which was why the pumper was probably being towed away to get more water from the city cisterns. She could see a stream of deputies and rail workers in the yard, pulling at blackened timbers and trying to clear the worst of the debris they could still reach.

“Sheriff! *Tobias!”* Anna jumped, waving with her kerchief until he caught sight of her and waved her over.

“Damn crowds. As if they’d never seen a fire before!” Tobias grumbled, coughing into his own kerchief as Anna fought her way through the throng.

“Was it an attack?” Anna asked.

Tobias just threw her a dark look. “You know I can’t answer that. For all I know the rail company had some faulty TNT stored in there!”

The sheriff was clearly not happy. Anna peered around his shoulder to see if she could see any bodies on the floor or morgue carts.

“Everyone alright? I mean. No one’s—?” she asked. Panic leapt into her throat.

*Wade would have thrown himself right into the middle of it, wouldn’t he?* That was the kind of man that he was. She couldn’t imagine him injured; he had seemed so alive last night…

“Dead? No. Thankfully. Not one person injured. Wade and I kept people from the fire for the worst part of it, letting it burn itself out. Of course, now they’ve lost a lot of stock, but I don’t suppose that is any worry of ours.” Tobias said gruffly.

Anna wasn’t prepared for the sense of relief that passed through her at that. She felt herself smiling despite herself.

*Why? Why are you so happy Mr. Nash wasn’t hurt when you barely know him?*

Still, she caught sight of the man himself, stalking over piles of smoking debris with a rake in hand. Every now and again he stopped to pull some of the steaming ruins apart, allowing the air to cool them.

“Wade!” Anna reeled past the sheriff to run up to the open gate. A younger deputy stationed there held his hand up protectively.

“Ma’am, no one gets past this point. It’s dangerous, ma’am,” he said.

“It’s alright, she’s with me,” Wade called out, stomping forward as the deputy stepped back.

Anna took in the man that Wade had become since last night. He was filthy; soot smeared over his head and arms. His jacket was missing and he wore his shirt rolled up to his elbows. He tugged down a red and black kerchief from his mouth to reveal a lighter lower half of his face, and the bright intensity of his eyes amid the dust.

“Wade, are you alright? Did you see who it was?” Anna found herself searching his body for signs of injury. She could see none.

“No. We arrived too late, but the worst part of the fire is by the tracks, all along the back of the barn,” he turned and pointed to what was now a broken open, blackened shell of a building.

“It means that whoever did it knew it would be secluded by the tracks. It wasn’t some drunkard wandering down from the Cheyenne Star.” Wade shook his head, turning to survey the people behind him. Some of them looked to be railway workers, others appeared to be deputies from Cain’s team.

“Look, Anna—I’m sorry, I haven’t got time to talk to talk to Tommy today. It’s going to have to wait. I need to send a telegram to the company, and I want to ride out to the work camp and see if anything has happened up there…”

“It’s alright. I know where Tommy Blake lives.” Anna said quickly. “I’ll talk to him.”

“You will?” Wade paused, looking steadily at her for a moment, before he nodded quickly. “Just as well, probably. And thank you…”

“I need justice too,” Anna looked around at the destruction around them. “Something as bad as this isn’t just an attack on Union Pacific. It’s an attack against us all.”

“I know. But…” Wade hesitated. He struggled to say something. “But I think we need to be careful from here on in.”

Anna smiled. His slightly stiff, gentlemanly ways were almost charming, or they would be if he wasn’t covered in soot and dirt.

“I’ll be careful. Meet me at Gilmour’s tonight. I’ll tell you what I find out.”

Anna turned, leaving the man to his work as she hurried back to the crowd, and to where she had tied Ellie up at the end of the street. The crowds were thankfully thinning by now, and she moved quickly through the streets, her head down.

*I don’t feel safe in Cheyenne anymore,* she realized. There was an air of violence that had spread over everything.

She kept her hat low as she rode through the town, getting lost once as she struggled to remember where Mayfair Row was. The problem was, that new streets were being added every year and the city limits constantly being extended as Cheyenne’s population grew and grew.

This north-eastern part of the town was not a place where she had ever spent time. The houses here were smaller and closer together, most of them not even double-story wooden houses, not even built on raised porches.

“There you are,” Anna turned down a small dirt street to eventually find her destination. A large chestnut tree sat in front of a simple wooden shack that was built longways, with a chimney at both ends.

“Mrs. Blake? Hello?” Anna called when she hitched Ellie to the railing outside, and walked towards the front door.

“Who’s that?” There was a shout, as the door to the side shed opened and out stepped an older woman with pristine white hair holding a shovel.

Mrs. Blake, Tommy’s mother, looked to be in her eighties, but age had only strengthened her power. Although her frame was small and thin, she seemed surprisingly sprightly as she came over to squint at Anna.

“Oh. You’re the Thompson girl, aren’t you?” Mrs. Blake said, still scowling before her face suddenly softened. A look of shame crossed her features. “That’s right. You lost your husband to those devils too, didn’t you? Come in. I’ve been wondering how long it would be before someone came,” she said, turning to usher Anna into the main house.

*And what do you think I’m doing?*

Anna stepped inside to see one large open-plan house, cordoned off into rooms by simple stretches of heavy blankets. The first area was clearly the kitchen and living space, with a stove providing heat and heating a large cast iron pot at the same time. Past a table were a set of chairs, and then another stretch of cloth.

“Ma? Who’s that?” said a quavering male voice.

*Tommy.*

“I’ve got the Thompson girl here come to see you. You remember her, don’t you? Always fidgeted in Sunday School!” Mrs. Blake called out, much to Anna’s embarrassment.

It was only when Anna pulled aside the curtain to see the man in his bed to realize that she dimly remembered Tommy Blake. The young man was just a couple years younger that she was, and had been the chubby, smiling kid at Sunday School at the time she ready to move up to church. She remembered helping him with his letters once, as Sunday School doubled as classes, too.

Tommy Blake’s excess weight was gone. What lay before her on the bed was a frail skeleton of a man, whose skin was far too pale and sweaty looking. There was a smell of stale linens and mold in the air.

“Tommy? I remember you.” Anna did her best to smile warmly. It was hard when the man seemed so ill—although from what she couldn’t quite tell. There was a yellowing around his eyes and to his lips.

“Oh, I’m sure you don’t. But everyone remembers you, Anna Thompson,” Tommy said. The way he said it made it sound like a celebration, as if Anna was royalty.

*Oh, I knew I developed into my looks early.*

Anna looked away, blushing. In truth it was more of a hindrance than it was a blessing, as men were more inclined to pull her hair and joke about her than they were to be nice to her face.

“Tommy, it’s good to see you. I’ve come here to ask some questions…” she said.

“Ah. The ‘accident’, right?” Tommy’s face twisted.

“Accident?” Anna asked.

Tommy looked over Anna’s shoulder, and his mother cleared her throat loudly. Whatever signal had passed between them, it was clear that his mother had given her blessing.

“Silas Laramie rolled a cart on top of me. *That* accident,” Tommy said. At the same time, he suddenly pulled back the sheets covering his lower body. He was fully clothed, but Anna could see his mangled legs, twisted horribly out of shape like he was a children’s rag doll.

Anna breathed hard through her nose. She couldn’t believe the evil of the man they were dealing with.

“Tommy? I need you to tell me everything that happened. Everything, you hear?” she said, pulling a chair to sit down beside him, and taking hold of the man’s hand.

# **Chapter 14**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“At least you didn’t tell us there’s nothing to worry about,” Abe looked reproachfully at Wade, which was probably fair, Wade thought, given everything that had been going on.

*Two fires. A downed bridge. And the explosion that killed Anna’s husband.*

“There’s always plenty to worry about. The important part is working out what you can *do* about it,” Wade said, nodding at his foreman and the few other selected workers he had taken off shift for this chat.

They stood in the new barn, and looked nervous as they heard the news of the fire at the Union Pacific yard. Wade could see they were trying to figure out what this meant for them. Each one of the men must be wondering if it was easier to cut their losses and leave; maybe there was work on the trails, or further out west in the mines?

But rail work was steady work, and the promise of work on the other side of the mountains was never as good as work that was right in front of you. Wade knew all of this, and he still knew he wouldn’t blame any of them for quitting. They’d already lost three men, who had simply packed their things and left, grumbling that ‘*they weren’t going to die for no company!’*

“So I want you all to find one extra man from your teams to join the guard shift. They’ll be in rotas, two on one night, two the next, and so on,” Wade said to the small group. “We’re also going to stop bringing equipment right up to where we’re working when its delivered. I want it all stored here, and then you foremen will take it in turns to check it, okay?”

“Sounds like more work, ”Jaspeth rolled his eyes. “Will there be more pay?”

“Yes.” Wade said. He had already sent a telegram to Franklin that they needed to up their wages, and had received word that a few extra cents on the hour was agreeable.

“We’ll see it done, Boss,” Abe nodded, and the meeting was over. In truth, Wade thought that the men were probably enjoying the slower rate of work now that they had to wait for yet *more* supplies to come through.

Wade bid them good day, before heaving a sigh and turning back to the things he could control—like the stores and stock around him. He was just about to start packing pallets when he heard the jangle of a harness outside.

*I’m not expecting anyone,* Wade thought. He wiped his hands on his kerchief, and strode out under the blazing hot sun. He expected to see Sheriff Cain, Anna, or maybe even one of the deputies com out to update him what was going on. To his surprise there was a portly stranger sitting on horseback by the side of their yard.

“Er, hullo?” Wade called out. He didn’t wave. Not yet.

It was instantly clear that the man came from wealth. His horse was fine, and his tack and saddle gleamed. What spoke volumes was his clean, cream and white suit and hat, edged with gold or brass buttons.

*He doesn’t ride much in that,* Wade thought. Otherwise the suit would be stained with trail dust.

Wade saw a movement to his left, and spun around to see that there was another rider—a burly man with flame-red hair and a scarf over his lower face. The man’s gear was much more well-worn, and when Wade looked over to him, he only half turned his head.

This second man had two gun belts on, Wade registered at once. There was something in the easy readiness of the man that Wade knew meant he had served; this was a man used to violence.

“You got lost, fella?” Wade decided to take the bull by the horns. He walked straight to the well-dressed man, ignoring the shooter on his left. He knew he was making himself vulnerable, but he also knew the value of confidence.

“Excuse me? What? No. Of course I am not lost!” the man coughed, looking flustered and annoyed.

*He hadn’t expected anyone to be back here,* Wade realized. These riders must have seen the foremen walking back up the track and thought that the barn was empty.

Wade turned to keep the red-haired rider in eyesight as he talked.

“Wade Nash. Head guard here. You are?” he said.

The red-haired man was still slowly walking his horse steadily behind the barns. He moved at a gentle pace, but Wade got the impression he was checking for something. To see if there were any other people about?

*Witnesses?*

“Whitaker,” the plump man said in a loud voice. He didn’t offer his hand, and for a moment Wade didn’t know if he was announcing himself or talking to his hired guard.

“*Senator* Horace Whitaker,” the man intoned, turning his horse around abruptly so that Wade had to step back.

*Oh*. Wade kept his face carefully impassive. This was the friend of Silas Laramie, wasn’t it?

“How can I help you today, Senator? Is there something you need from the railroad?” Wade said.

Whitaker blinked, his small blue eyes disappearing in the middle of his larger, moon-like face. He seemed insulted that someone would actually deign to question him.

“Oh. I’m here to keep an eye on things. Got to make sure everything is going smoothly, of course!” Whitaker said in an annoyed fashion, wheeling his horse back the way he had come.

He didn’t have to call his hired gun who rode quickly up to his side, without saying a word. Their eyes locked, and although Wade couldn’t see the lower part of the man’s face, he was sure that he was grinning.

Wade stood and watched as the senator and his red-haired gunman rode quickly back down the length of the track, heading towards the town.

“I’m not buying it,” Wade muttered. Whatever that senator had been here to ‘keep an eye on’ it had nothing to do with ‘things going smoothly’.

“He never even asked about the work,” Wade said.

Then just what exactly did the powerful friend of Silas Laramie want by coming up here?

Wade looked up to see the position of the sun.

# **Chapter 15**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

Anna wasn’t waiting for him at Gilmour’s, Wade realized.

He had ridden in at the earliest opportunity, but only after he had made sure that there were two good guards on duty for the night, and that they would be relieved by two more at first light.

Wade didn’t like leaving his men out there. It made him bristle, thinking that people under his care could be in danger.

*But what I’m doing right now is finding a way to keep them safe,* he told himself as he rode up the street to the bright lights of Gilmour’s Saloon. Piano music spilled out of the open doors and into the street, and well-dressed people were making their way towards a night of entertainment or back home.

“Wade!”

Anna wasn’t waiting in Gilmour’s. She hissed at him from the alley beside the saloon, where she was still astride her horse, Ellie.

“Anna? Why didn’t you go in?” Wade asked, crossing to meet her.

Her face was illuminated by the light of Gilmour’s windows, and her jaw was set in determination.

“It’s what I heard from Tommy. He’s a broken man, Wade. The entire lower half of his body was crushed when a carriage ran him over. It’s a miracle he’s not dead!” she said. A shadow crossed her face. “Although, in truth, maybe it would be a kindness if he was,” she added softly.

“Where did it happen? On the tracks?” Wade asked.

“No,” Anna shook her head, suddenly falling silent when she saw people walking past the head of the alley. One walked with a cane, and they were hit with the waft of expensive perfume and a scatter of giggles.

“It was here in Cheyenne. At the Union Pacific yard. Tommy was kind of working for Silas. Only he wasn’t. He was working for Union Pacific, but before they started expanding the railroad, it sounds like Union Pacific used Silas as their go-to man on the ground, supplying reports and what have you.”

“Keeping an eye on things, huh?” Wade frowned. “I’m hearing that a lot recently.” He told her quickly about the meeting—or non-meeting—with Senator Horace Whitaker. That man had also claimed to be overseeing things.

“They’re in it together, I bet you. Silas is always hanging off Whitaker’s coat tails!” Anna hissed.

Wade couldn’t work out if Anna was fiercer in the night than she was in the day. He was sure he would rather share an alley with an angered bobcat!

“Anyway. Silas kept asking Tommy to do things for him. ‘Be his man’ you know, spy on the other workers for him, tell him exactly what was going on. Then, it progressed to Tommy helping Silas out of work too, moving boxes for him, accepting deliveries. He said he moved boxes out of Union Pacific and into Silas’s office…”

“That’s theft!” Wade burst out.

“Only if we can prove it. It’ll be his word against ours, unless we find what it was,” Anna pointed out hurriedly. She stepped a little closer, leaning in to whisper into Wade’s ear.

“But that’s not the worst of it,” she said. Wade was suddenly very aware of her presence, how breathy her voice was.

“When Tommy questioned him about what was going on, Silas laughed it off. But then, a few days later, Silas told Tommy to take a look at a rusted gear under one of the engines...and then the engine’s breaks slipped. It ran him over,” Anna said in horror.

Wade shivered in revulsion. “That’s horrible. He was run over?”

“His legs got caught under the engine and he got dragged. It mangled them so bad he’ll never walk or ride again.”

“Man *injoored*,” Wade whispered.

“What was that?” Anna asked.

Wade shook his head. “Nothing. Just what was written in the ledger that day. No one mentioned Silas had anything to do with it.”

“Probably because Tommy couldn’t prove it. But Tommy was always saying that Silas was doing everything in his power to slow down work on the track. He would forget to order new carriages for the trains, or he would lose the order slips for that month’s supplies. It was like Silas *didn’t* want the railway to succeed!” Anna said.

“Is that so?” Wade looked up, his mind racing. Why would Silas be working to undermine the railway at every turn? This made no sense, especially as he was making a lot of money from it.

“Did Tommy mention anything about the Cheyenne Civic Improvement Fund?” Wade asked.

He couldn’t see her head shake in the dark. “He didn’t mention it. Tommy just knows that Silas was up to no good, and is just sad that he was ever fooled by him.

“Well, you tell him that he has given us our first solid clue. If we can prove Silas stole from the company, then I can go to Sheriff Cain,” Wade said.

“We can go there tonight. Tommy told me where Silas’s office is. It’s not far,” Anna said.

“Now. Tonight?” Wade knew exactly what Anna was suggesting.

*That we break in.*

Wade hadn’t planned on breaking any laws, but he knew that if he got the sheriff involved, it would just be a case of Tommy’s word against Silas’s. And no one was going to believe a pauper over a powerful, influential businessman, were they?

*What would Pa do?*

He was supposed to be the son of one of the best lawmen in the West and yet, here he was, seriously considering breaking the law. Wade grinned in the night. The thing was, he knew exactly what his father would say at a time like this.

That had been the thing about Pa. There were two Samuel Nashes; Samuel Nash: the Lawman— who was feared and respected throughout Missouri and beyond—and then there was Sam Nash: the man who got things done.

*“Here’s the funny thing, son,’* Wade could hear his father’s crackly baritone even now. *‘There’s justice, and there’s the law. And those are two different things. What we do in my work is try to make one as much like the other as we can, but sometimes it can’t be fixed. That’s because of the sorry state of the world we live in, and the sorry hearts of men, do you understand?”*

Wade had said he did, although he hadn’t really. Not like he did now. It had been one of those sticking points between them when Wade had wanted to discuss one of his cases with his lawman father, hoping for a bit of insight.

*“All I’m saying, is that if you ever get the choice between doing the right thing and following the law—then I hope any son of mine will do the right thing, every time,”*Sam Nash had said.

Wade remembered being appalled by that logic. He had seen it as a failing of the man and of the lawman if justice couldn’t be served by doing your job.

But that was a long time ago. Wade had felt like that before he had gone to war and seen every sort of horror imaginable. There had been no justice then—that had just been the brute charnel house of factory slaughter. That was also before Wade had found both his fiancée and his pa dead, lying side by side and killed by bandits for only a pocket full of coins.

*Yeah. Justice wasn’t written down in ledgers and state books,* Wade thought.

Justice was what you did.

“Let’s go,” he said.

\* \* \*

Silas’s office was at the back of a larger, grand building that housed several businesses, set back from the main drag. There was a hand-painted sign standing outside the land, with *Gregors, Land Agent; Faber and Mills, Valuations;* and last of all, *Laramie.*

There was no description of the business he undertook there, Wade noticed. Just his name.

“I guess if you’re rich enough then you don’t need to have a trade,” Wade murmured. He nodded to the side of the building, where trees overhung the windows.

There wasn’t a night guard, Wade was pleased to see, so he took the lead in ghosting down the edge of the property, running from tree to tree.

“How do we know which one it is?” Anna said, running up to join him at the tree.

Wade crouched, surveying the dark windows in front of him—and the door at the back of the premises.

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to take a look and see,” Wade grinned in the dark. He ran across the lawn, and bounded up onto the back porch to wait by the door.

His heart hammered in his chest. He paused, and waited for a count of ten. Still no shouts of alarm or whistles from deputies or guards.

*How am I going to explain this to Tobias if he catches us?*

The thought flashed across Wade’s mind. He shrugged in the darkness.

*Guess I’ll just have to make sure they don’t catch me.*

“Wade? Do we smash a window?” Anna said, stepping cautiously up the steps and onto the porch. She gasped when one of the floorboards creaked.

“Not yet,” Wade knelt by the door, taking out his knife and pulling a metal gouge he kept in his belt. It was useful for taking mud and pebbles out of Charger’s horse shoes, but now he put it to a different purpose.

“You know how to break a lock?” Anna whispered behind him. He couldn’t tell if she was impressed or suspicious.

“Ah, it’s one of the skills my pa taught me,” Wade said, getting to work on the lock with the gouge, gently prodding until he found the mechanism, before slipping the knife through the door jamb.

His father was a complicated man, Wade admitted. He was a fearsome lawman, but his career had also given him access to a wide range of skills he said every lawman should know... like picking locks, basic engineering skills, and knowing how to charge and defuse dynamite.

*‘You’re on your own out there on the trail, son,’* his pa had told him. *‘When you’re hunting someone down, you might end up on the high plains or in some strange town, down a mine or on a train. And there’s no way back for you without the body you came to collect. Dead or alive.’*

Pa’s tutoring proved its worth, as Wade slid the knife up and lifted the small lever inside the door. The door popped open, and he hoped he hadn’t blunted his knife too much.

“Let’s go,” Wade said.

They hadn’t brought lanterns, and Wade didn’t want to strike a flint or light any of the gas lamps he saw inside the house. Any sign of light would only draw attention. Instead, they found themselves moving through a plush parlor room, with leather-bound chairs seated around a coffee table where clients obviously waited. A door opened out onto a small kitchenette, and another led into a hallway.

They passed oil paintings and surveyors’ sketches of the town of Cheyenne, depicting its progression from a railway siding to the building of Fort Russell, and the plans for the elaborate Eagle Hotel. It was clear that whoever worked here wanted to impress on their visitors the potential of the ‘Magic City of the Plains’.

The first suite of rooms downstairs had a plaque that read: *Gregors – Free Advice! Land Lot Registration and Sales!* They ignored these rooms, and instead took the creaking stairs to the second floor, where a corridor led to rooms on the right and left.

“Here,” Anna said, pointing to the plaque on the left. *Laramie.*

Wade’s skills once again opened the door for them, and they found themselves stepping into an office with a grand table under the window, a United States flag on the wall, and a doorway leading to a smaller room, stacked with filing cabinets.

“Good grief,” Anna whispered. “This is going to take forever to work through.”

“We’ve got all night,” Wade said, moving to the second room, but casting an eye over the main desk as he did.

The desk was laid out with enough pomp as to be the desk of a governor or politician. Wade curled his lip. The chair behind it looked expensive, with studded leather upholstery and gold gilt around the edges. There were signed photos of Silas Laramie shaking the hands of people in suits, and standing over plots with silver shovels sat to one side. A bottle of very fine French brandy and a set of tumbler glasses sat on the left, alongside an ink well and a pen that looked to be inlaid with gold. Next to this was a Chinese box made of lacquered wood, open to reveal rows of cigars.

*He uses this place to impress people,* Wade thought. No man needed that much opulence just for himself, did he? Wade realized it was probably this room and this shout of wealth that had won him the power he had with Union Pacific.

*He wants to be seen as a man in charge,* Wade thought. The photos of him breaking ground on new land plots or standing at the groundwork of city construction sites showed that.

And what happened when a man like that didn’t get what he wanted? When he was made to feel powerless? Wade had seen firsthand how dismissive and scornful he could get, and Tommy had proved how he didn’t only get cruel—he got murderous.

“This was where Tommy brought the Union Pacific crates?” Wade said.

“I believe so,” Anna said. She had already moved ahead of him into the filing room, and started opening cabinets and doors. Inside, there were ledgers and folders fat with sheaths of paper, tied up with string.

“At least he keeps records of everything,” Anna grumbled, taking the first stack and undoing them, to leaf through what appeared to be lots for sale.

“But it’s going to be the things that he doesn’t write down though, isn’t it?” Wade scowled at the sheaths of paper. He didn’t like this. It was easy to hide behind words, and it was much harder to hide behind practice.

“They’re land he’s bought. Ranches, farms, homesteads, unimproved plots,” Anna said, leafing through this sheath, and then the next, and the next. “He resells a lot of them.”

She suddenly gasped.

“What is it?” Wade asked, looking up from his own collection.

“That’s the Randolph place. I knew he’d bought it, but look here… it says there had been a fire at the place almost three months before. It got sold for a pittance in the end!”

Anna then turned back to the cabinet, leafing through the folders quickly before opening the next drawer, and then the next after that.

“B...B...Ah, here is it! Blake,” she said.

“Tommy Blake?” Wade asked.

Anna nodded. “Yes. Ezekiel said that the Blakes lost their land after Tommy’s accident, as they couldn’t afford it. And would you look at that...guess who bought it?”

“Silas,” Wade said. This was starting to paint a damning picture, as if there wasn’t enough of one already.

*We’ve got strange accidents and fires happening, right before Silas rushes in and snaps up the ‘unlucky’ lots.* If only he could prove it was Silas who was causing the accidents…

“But there has to be enough coincidences here for Tobias to do something, right? I mean, there’s hardly a sale here where the ranch or land didn’t have something terrible happening to it beforehand!” Anna said.

“Take a copy,” Wade said. He didn’t know whether it would be enough to prosecute, but it would certainly get the sheriff interested, if nothing else.

But it still wasn’t enough. It wasn’t a smoking gun…

He turned around the room. He couldn’t see any crates stamped with the Union Pacific brand. Of course not. Why would Silas keep incriminating evidence lying around?

There was a wooden chest at the back of the room, however, that looked out of place among the cabinets. It had stacks of ledgers and books piled high on top of it.

*Good place to look. Hard to get to,* Wade thought. He moved to books, glancing briefly through them to see expense reports before reaching the wooden chest and heaving it open.

More books. Wade snarled in frustration, but fished them out to see expense reports and sales certificates, going back years.

“Maybe this is the best we can do,” he sighed, when he had finally emptied the chest. It would take weeks to go through all of these documents, and a malingering certainty told him that the railway didn’t have weeks. The attacks were only increasing. They were getting worse. How long before someone else died?

Wade threw the first ledger back into the chest, where it thumped with a hollow echo.

*Huh?*

“Did you hear that?” he whispered, turning back to the chest and pulling the book back out to knock on the wooden panel bottom.

It echoed once again. “There’s a space underneath here,” he said, using his knife to lever at the edges of the chest flooring; it came up in one smooth section.

The chest had a false bottom. Underneath, it was packed with stacks of letters.

“Hello! What is so important that you need to hide it?” Wade murmured.

Anna was intrigued too, she already had a stack of sales receipts from farms and businesses that’d had terrible accidents before Silas brought them. “He owns so much, Wade. Almost all of the land around Cheyenne. It won’t be long until he’s got everything!”

Wade lifted the papers to the thin slivers of moonlight through the curtains, and started to read.

“Well. What do you know?” Wade’s voice was low. His eyebrows lowered into a glower. He moved to the next page, and then the next.

“What is it? Wade? What is it?” Anna was beside him, her voice eager for incriminating evidence.

“Silas isn’t the only one in on it. These are letters between him and Senator Whitaker, a man named Johns…”

“That’s the owner of Cheyenne First Bank. William Johns,” Anna said.

“Brown, Gregors, Faber and Mills, Constable…” Wade read the letterheads.

“That’s nearly all of the most important people in Cheyenne. We’re talking businessmen, landowners…” Anna said.

“They’re pushing Silas to get more money out of Union Pacific. Whitaker, right here, says Union Pacific has got to be forced out of Cheyenne. Whatever it takes.” Wade brandished the papers.

“This is it. This is conspiracy.”

Wade felt a flood of relief. He felt like he might finally have enough to take to the sheriff. There was only one tantalizing piece left.

“Here, in this letter, Silas is saying the *Improvement Fund* is working out of his warehouse. Broad Street Industrial?” Wade looked up, for Anna to nod.

“Broad Street Industrial is on the other side of the rail tracks. A lot of warehouses and more stock yards for the railway. Silas must own a property there too,” Anna said.

“Then that is where we go next,” Wade said. “This is the only mention I’ve seen of this Cheyenne Civic Improvement Fund at all. The one that Union Pacific are paying into, and Silas is in charge of. If it was that important and that respectable, then I wonder why he hasn’t got papers of it all over?”

“Because maybe the Improvement Fund isn’t something he wants people to know about?” Anna said.

“Exactly.” Wade gave a wolfish grin. “We’ve got him, Anna. Just a little more, and we have the whole lot of them.”

At that moment, there was a thump and a muted voice from somewhere else in the building. Anna flinched, and Wade froze. They looked at each other with wide eyes, as they heard the sound of muttering from outside the window.

Wade looked around the office. It was in a state. There were cabinets open, stacks of papers all around the place, books piled on top of other books. They didn’t have time to put everything back the way they had found it.

“They’re at the front door!” Anna whispered. Wade gestured her to crouch down beside him. His hand moved instinctively to his hip, where his gun was.

*What are you doing?* Wade heard the voice of his conscience shouting at him. He had broken in and now what? Was he planning to shoot his way out?

*Not unless I have to.* Wade pulled his kerchief over the lower half of his face, and raised a finger to shush Anna.

There was a fumbling at the front door downstairs, and then the sound of an angry mutter, before heavy steps stamped across the boards.

*If it’s Silas, we’ll have to confront him. Right here and now,* Wade tensed.

The footsteps were heavy on the stairs. The man sounded large, or tired.

*The door!* Wade realized he had left the door to Silas’s offices ajar. He didn’t have the key to lock it from the inside. He moved, crossing to the archway that led into Silas’s office, and slowly pulled his revolver from its holster.

*“Damn shtupid...Who leavesh that behind?”*

The voice was heavy and slurred as the footsteps reached the top of the stairs. Wade relaxed his shoulders. You had to be relaxed to shoot straight.

Their interloper reached the top hallway and turned. They didn’t even notice the door open to the Laramie office, and instead, there was a jangling of keys at the other suite of rooms, and the creak of a door opening.

Anna ghosted to his side, and Wade felt her body heat right against his. Suddenly, in the middle of all of this, he remembered his dream last night. What if this man was armed? Of course he would be! He couldn’t let Anna be hurt, not like—

*Sarah was.*

There was a series of bangs, and then a short, drunken slur of laughter.

*“Aha! Five years old! I knew I still had a bottle here somewhere!’* The man, presumably either Faber or Mills, given that he had a key to that office, stamped back out. He now hummed a cheery little tune as he turned, locked the door, and then made his way back down the stairs.

Wade didn’t move. He waited to hear the sound of the door thumping closed, and the key in the lock. At the same time, all he could think of was the smell of Anna’s hair (a hint of lavender and wildflowers) and the light touch of her shoulder against his.

*Not now, Wade!* He demanded of himself.

“Wade? I think they’ve gone.” Anna murmured.

How long had he been sitting here, not moving? Wade shook his head. “Right. Good. Let’s clear this up and get out of here then. No sense in begging for more trouble, is there?”

Anna made an agreeable noise, briefly leaning her hand on him as she pushed herself to standing. Wade felt that firm, reassuring weight of her hand against his shoulder for a long time after she had moved.

“Tomorrow night.” Wade said, rising himself and eager to fill the silence between them. “We go to Silas’s warehouse tomorrow night.”

# **Chapter 16**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

*“Anna?”*

Anna woke up with a start, to the sun streaming pats the bedroom curtains.

*Oh no.* She had slept in. Last night’s adventures meant she hadn’t got back much before dawn, and had collapsed on her bed in her underclothes.

“Hello, Anna? It’s me!”

Abigail’s voice rose up from the hall below, followed by a creak on the floorboards as her friend walked into the house.

Anna had completely forgotten her friend was due to visit today, what with everything happening in town.

“Coming, Abi!” Anna yelled, rolling out of bed and groaning as she seized a new shift and dressed from her clothing chest, and hurriedly threw them on.

*I’m late for the chickens. And feeding the horses, goats, sheep…* She was annoyed at herself as she hurried down the hallway, to see dark-haired Abigail Rowe halfway up her stairs and looking concerned.

“This isn’t like you, Anna. Are you feeling alright? You look as though you haven’t slept in a week,” Abigail said.

“I feel like it,” Anna agreed, smoothing her shirt and offering a nervous smile. “I’m terribly late. Do you mind putting the coffee pot on while I work?”

“Oh, I’ll lend a hand. You know I barely have time to help with the animals these days,” Abigail said. Her friends eyes stayed on her own.

“Stop that. You’re looking at me like a doctor again,” Anna said, reaching the bottom of the stairs and pausing briefly to grab some apples from the kitchen. She threw one to Abigail, who caught it one handed.

“Well, I wouldn’t be doing that if I didn’t think I needed to,” Abigail returned. She smiled as she said it, but put on what Anna had always thought of as her ‘fake serious doctor voice’.

“Okay, actually…” Anna paused at the door.

*What do I say? Do I tell my best friend that I committed burglary last night?*

Abigail was looking at her with such understanding that it was hard for Anna to look directly at her. Didn’t she deserve to know the truth of what was going on in Cheyenne, too?

She couldn’t do it. Anna knew she couldn’t lie to her. Abigail had been there for her all through her life, and especially after Jacob died. She knew as much as anyone about what Anna’s suspicions were.

“Talk while we work. Don’t let me get too mad,” Anna half laughed, but she put no real effort into it. Even to herself, her laugh sounded sad.

Anna led her friend out into the yard to find another bright day, with a strong breeze coming off the distant mountains. It was probably going to get hotter later, and already she felt like she had missed the best part of the day in sleeping in.

“I’ve been doing some digging. Some *investigating.*” Anna began.

As they let the frustrated chickens out and proceeded to clear their runs, scatter feed, and check the fences, Anna began to tell her friend everything that had happened over the last few days.

She explained how Wade had ridden over here to apologize after a particularly nasty fire, and how he agreed that he had been thinking along the same lines as her.

“Silas,” Abigail intoned. Her voice was deadpan. Anna couldn’t work out if that meant she was agreeing or merely being cautious.

They moved on to the horses, pausing only to grab some water, wash their hands and eat their apples, as this was going to be a bigger job. Anna was sure that the mares picked up on her mood a little, as they were jittery when she brought them out.

*I know how you feel…*

“There’s something else isn’t there?” Abigail was astute. She wasn’t known as the best doctor in Wyoming for nothing.

Anna hesitated, and then it all came out in a rush. The fire. Her talk with Tommy Blake, and their break-in to Silas’s offices.

“He’s been attacking ranches and farms, forcing the people to sell,” Anna said. “And it’s not just him. It’s the whole lot of them. Senator Whitaker, the bank manager; a half dozen others. They’ve been stitching up the town, buying everything, trying to make it harder for the railway.”

“I see.” Abigail was quiet for a moment. “Now, don’t take this the wrong way—but isn’t the railway *your* problem too? You said that the Union Pacific was terrible. That they caused…”

Her voice trailed off, but Anna knew what she meant.

*Jacob’s death.*

“Yes and no. It’s complicated,” Anna said. “The rail company is paying Silas a lot of money, but it was Silas who was ordering the parts and the equipment that was faulty. I think *he’s* the one responsible for Jacob’s death. I already have a statement from Tommy saying that Silas tried to kill him!”

“Oh, Anna,” Abigail breathed softly. She looked up, across the meadows and out to the hills. “I’m scared for you, Anna. I’ve known that Silas is a nasty piece of work for a long time, but I never dreamed he would ever stoop this low.” Her face twisted with anger. “it’s worse than low. It’s *murder.*”

Anna was pleased to see her friend as outraged as she was. Her job was to look after the people of Cheyenne. How many had Abigail already treated thanks to Silas’s cruelty and violence?

“But, if Silas is this dangerous...then what about when he finds out what you and Wade are doing? He’s a powerful man, Anna. Probably the most powerful man in Cheyenne—maybe even in Wyoming! At least Senator Whitaker has to pretend to be following the rule of law.”

Abigail looked at her, and her eyes were full of worry. Anna could see how much she cared.

“I’m not asking for anything from you, I just need to tell you—” Anna began.

“Oh, ask away. If half of what you’re saying is true, then anything I can to bring that man down. But you have to be smart, Anna. You’re a single woman, living on your own. You need to be careful.” Abigail said seriously.

Somehow, her friends sensibility only made Anna more annoyed. Couldn’t she see that this was more important than her safety? It wasn’t just about justice for Jacob, it was about the damage Silas was doing to all of Cheyenne.

*But she’s only saying that because she cares about me,* Anna reminded herself.

“Look, I’m going to tell Josiah too… and Sheriff Cain when we have evidence. We’re not going to do anything stupid. Does that make you feel better?” Anna said.

“Not really, but I know you, Anna. There isn’t anything I can say that will make a blind bit of difference when you’ve got your head fixed on something,” Abigail said. She smiled sadly.

*No. No there isn’t,* Anna agreed.

\* \* \*

By the time that Abigail left—and they had finally had that coffee that she was promised—Abigail had promised to let her know if she heard anything else about Silas from, her patients. Anna thanked her, but knew that Abigail didn’t approve of what they were doing. Not totally.

*Well, this has gone beyond approval.*

Anna finished up around the farm, and took Ellie out of the stables to ride the short distance to the Hampton’s place. It felt like she was riding to another world, or another time when she approached the smart collection of large farm buildings.

The Hamptons were stretched, and probably just as overworked as Anna was; but they were happy. The news of the fire in town had bothered them, but out here they appeared insulated from Silas’s tentacles. Anna greeted the elderly couple and she searched for signs of fear or anxiety at everything that was going on, but was surprised when she could find none.

When she casually brought the topic around to Silas Laramie owning half (and more) of Cheyenne, old Mr. Hampton winced, but then nodded.

“It is what it is. It’s always been like that. Hopefully he’ll bring more work to people,” the older gaffer responded.

*Either they just don’t see it, or they’re too scared to talk about it,* Anna thought. She waited for a moment when her brother was free from his chores, and then signaled she would like a talk.

“You did *what?”* Josiah almost exploded where they leaned over their top paddock fence.

“It wasn’t really burglary. It’s investigation,” Anna corrected. “It’s law work, really.”

“Anna... what you’re talking about is illegal!” Josiah hissed, loud enough for the cows to lift up their heads. Luckily the gaffer, Mr. Hampton, was down by the main barn and was as deaf as a post.

“It’s not just that... it’s dangerous. Silas... he’s a bad man, Anna. You know that.”

“That is precisely why we have to stop him,” Anna said. Why could no one see this? You don’t lie down in front of bullies, and let them walk all over you. You sock them good and hard in the jaw.

“But, Anna…” Josiah said. Anna could see that he didn’t have the heart for this argument. She always knew when her younger brother had given in, he slumped his shoulders and kicked his foot at the floor. Just like he was doing now.

“I guess it’s that Wade Nash guy, that’s doing this, right?” Josiah said.

*Huh?*

“What is that supposed to mean?” Anna said angrily. Why couldn’t her brother at least be proud of her?

“Everyone knows you two are seeing each other. They were talking about it in the Cheyenne Star the other day. How the new railway boss has a sweetheart, and that sweetheart is you,” he sounded resentful.

“What on earth is this nonsense? I’m not sweet on anybody, Josiah!” Anna burst out.

She felt heat rise to her cheeks. *This was preposterous. I’ve never even thought about him like that!*

Then why, in the very next instance, did she remember the nearness of his body last night? Why was she suddenly thinking about how steady and solid he had seemed; how confident, and self-assured.

*It’s been a long time since I have been around a man like that,* the treacherous thought slipped through her mind. In truth, she realized she had never been around a man like that, at all.

“Wade is helping me get to the bottom of what happened to Jacob. We’re working together, that’s all. He’s my friend,” she surprised herself by saying this. Is that what they were? Friends?

“Oh. I see.” Josiah said. He wouldn’t be pulled into saying anything else on the matter.

# **Chapter 17**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

Full night came late to Cheyenne this late in the year. Wade made sure to show his face at the Cheyenne Star first, hearing the reports from the rail workers who had worked the night shift and buying them a round from the company coffers.

After this, he made a show of enjoying a meal at Gilmour’s, before claiming that he had to go check on the rail encampment as it was ‘his turn’ to patrol the lines.

Wade took the slow route north out of town, whistling as he passed through the streets until he was sure that no one was following him. Only when the town was a cluster of lights on the horizon behind him did he decide to turn back and head south. He skirted the town entirely, heading for the old well as the last of the sun’s rays fell.

“Wade…”

Anna’s voice was a breath on the wind ahead of him. She stepped out from the tree by the old well, walking Ellie behind her.

*Well, here we go…*

Wade felt a shimmer of anxiety run through him. What if things went wrong? Surely Silas would have posted guards at his warehouse, wouldn’t he? Was Wade prepared to fight them, if it came to it? Was Anna?

At least she was dressed sensibly, in heavy leathers and dark clothes. She even had a dark kerchief up over her face and a large hat to hide her telltale curls.

“You know, you don’t have to do this,” Wade said, letting Charger drink from the feed trough beside the well before they moved off.

“I’ve hunted plenty of men in my time. Spent nights in culverts and in abandoned barns. This shouldn’t be a problem…” he added a mote of brashness into his voice. Usually it had the effect of helping others believe in him. It seemed to be having the opposite effect on Anna Turner.

“Oh. And your capacity to freeze yourself in the cold all night will help us how?” Anna said tartly.

*She doesn’t miss a thing, does she?* Wade grinned to himself in the gathering dark.

“All I’m saying, is that if it gets dangerous…”

“Then I will do my bit to protect the people of Cheyenne, my horse, and you,” Anna said firmly. It was clear she wasn’t about to go anywhere.

“And in that order, too?” Wade offered. He heard her breath hitch, and thought it was a muted snigger. At least he could make her laugh. Humor was important when you were on the hunt.

“Well then. No sense in waiting around,” Wade wheeled his horse towards the train tracks, and Anna joined him a second later. They slipped silently over them, before turning west towards Broad Street and the collection of warehouses on this side of the .

Almost all of Cheyenne existed to the north of the line, with only larger buildings sitting to the south. Wade signaled they would leave their horses tied to a stand of trees a little further out, and then continue the rest of the way on foot.

*No lanterns. No torches.* Wade waited for his eyes to adjust. Hunting in the dark was better like this, he knew. The light would only draw attention to their presence.

The trouble would be finding which warehouse it was, as the address hadn’t been exact, and Silas, it seemed, had a habit of not advertising his business interests.

“Probably because most of them are crooked!” Anna hissed under her breath when Wade explained the problem to her.

“But I know most of these units. The wagons are the Cartwright family’s. Those three big barns are Faber’s Feeds.” Anna took the lead, and they crept through the bush past the tall buildings. Every now and again, a lonely coyote howl lifted up over the wilderness to the south, and it was matched by the small bursts of noise that drifted from Cheyenne town over the tracks.

The town was busy tonight, with people in and out of the saloons and play houses. That business would be their cover, Wade knew.

The warehouses on this side of the tracks were much larger than any Wade had seen in town, and on the ranches. They edged right up to the railway itself, with several of them having platforms and lifts built onto their sides, to make access to the rail carriages easier.

Broad Street was well named, being a wide avenue lined with these great halls of commerce. Wade led Anna between the tracks and the platforms, eager to stay off the main stretch.

“I don’t know this one,” Anna paused, waiting at a fence next to a smaller warehouse sitting inside its own yard. A couple of wagons were parked alongside it.

“Down,” Wade gestured, hunkering by the fence as he kept his eyes on the gate and the building.

*What if Silas had figured out that something was wrong with his office?* Wade thought. He had spent the day worrying about this, and half expecting to see Tobias Cain and a posse of deputies riding up to the encampment to question him.

*If Silas knew we were onto him, he would have posted guards.* Wade waited, but didn’t see anyone.

Perhaps Silas hadn’t even noticed his office door was unlocked when he came to work that morning, or maybe he thought he had just forgotten to lock it the night before. Either way, Wade saw no sign of security.

“Wait here. I’ll give you a sign when it’s clear,” Wade hopped the fence, and ran for the first wagon.

He skidded on the dirt, ducking behind the wheels before waiting. Every sense strained, waiting for a shout, or worse—gunshot.

But still, nothing came. Wade rose slowly, pulled his hat a little lower to hide his face, and darted to the front of the warehouse.

There, on the wooden board over the main doors was the name he had been looking for.

*Laramie.*

Wade paused, looking around once more, and then whistled for Anna. She appeared a few minutes later, walking around the corner for all the world as if nothing was wrong.

“Right. Let’s get to work, shall we?” she smiled at him in the dark.

\* \* \*

“Uh, Wade?” Anna’s voice rose as soon as he had unlocked the door and they had stepped inside.

Silas’s warehouse wasn’t large compared to the industrial ones that neighbored it, but it was still substantial.

It also housed two rail engines, and four flatbed carriages. They were parked near the far opening.

“Why has Silas Laramie got his own trains?” Anna asked.

“Good question,” Wade murmured. On the other side of the barn were stacks of crates and sacks and all manner of goods from spare track to aggregate materials, to timber.

“Maybe these are stored for Union Pacific?” Anna asked.

“Maybe. But if they are—is this the good quality or the faulty stock?” Wade asked. He nodded to where a part of the warehouse was sectioned off at the back, creating a smaller office.

The pair found the office to be similar to what Silas had kept in the town house, with filing cabinets and shelves of ledger books. This time, however, there was much less order to everything.

“Welcome to the home of Cheyenne Civic Improvements,” Wade sighed, picking up first one book, and then another, to take to a small table in the center of the room. He was forced to light a candle, as the darkness was near total inside here.

It didn’t take long for Anna to stumble on something.

“Laramie *Rail?”* She held up one of the books, flipped through it to show payments going in and out.

“Silas owns a rail company. It was incorporated in North Platte last year!” Anna burst out.

“Is it running carriages? Does it have track?” Wade asked, leaning over her shoulder to page through the book.

“No. Not as far as I can see. It’s been buying supplies, but it hasn’t actually hired any workers to lay down new tracks, or applied for any licenses to open new lines. It’s just...sitting there.”

“Or sitting here,” Wade nodded to the office windows, looking out onto the engines outside.

*Why would Silas need a rail company? Unless…*

An electric spark ran up Wade’s spine. He could see it now. The reason why Silas seemed to be doing everything to delay and disturb the Union Pacific..

“I mean, Union Pacific is huge, isn’t it?” Wade murmured to himself. Anna looked at him in confusion.

“The company basically set up Cheyenne, didn’t it? And half of the town’s in Wyoming. If we’re honest, then it’s been *their* company that has been building Wyoming,” Wade said.

“Well. I wouldn’t go that far. There are about ten thousand settlers in the state who might have something to do with it,” Anna pointed out.

It was a fair point. Wade nodded. “Of course, but Union Pacific have brought all the change. Have done for ten years now. So Silas couldn’t just outbid them, or buy them out.”

“What are you suggesting, Wade?” Anna whispered.

“The railway is the key to owning Cheyenne. And not just Cheyenne, but probably most of Wyoming Territory. But Silas can’t just go head to head against them, can he? So he puts himself in as one of their trusted contacts. A fixer. And then he works to make sure he drives the Union Pacific name into the dirt…”

He saw Anna get it.

“He means to drive them out of business?”

“Maybe. Or get their contract taken off them. He’s already friends with Senator Whitaker, isn’t he? Silas has already got his own rail company, Laramie Rail, ready to stand in and take over the track and everything,” Wade pointed out.

It was ingenious, and also entirely corrupt.

*And it had also cost lives,* Wade glowered.He turned back to the books, keen to uncover more.

“Wade?” Anna sounded concerned as she pulled up a letter. “It’s from Faber and Mills. The Land Agents? It’s a deed-in-promise, for the last west of the railway.”

“A deed-in-promise?” Wade frowned.

Anna pulled a face. “Believe me, I’d rather not know all this stuff, but I’ve had realtor’s hounding me ever since Jacob died. It’s a gentleman’s agreement for a land price,, for a small down payment. The land isn’t even sold yet, and it might even be occupied.”

“So...Silas has the railway land stitched up with Faber and Mills?” Wade clarified.

“And Gregors, Humphrey Woods—the bank manager. There’s letters here not just for deeds, but promises of contracts. Advice on where to get money. There’s even a letter from someone in Union City about where to get cheap rail equipment…” Anna leafed through the letters. Her face hardened into a dark snarl. “You were right. They’re all in on it. All the great and good of Cheyenne.”

Wade was silent for a moment, nodding to himself. “I guess this is it. Welcome to the Cheyenne Civic Improvement Fund, I guess.”

They were close. They could prove that Silas would profit from the railway’s vast string of accidents. Wade started gathering the documents together as dull anger surged through him. “We still need proof about the Red Devils. Just some solid piece of evidence that ties Laramie to them. Then we really have him.”

“I don’t think that’s the sort of thing we’re going to find in here,” Anna said doubtfully.

“Payments. If I’m right, and Silas has hired the Red Devils, then he has to be paying them. Are there any payments to individuals we don’t know?” Wade asked. He moved the small lantern closer to the papers, as Anna shuffled through them.

“Hundreds. I don’t know half of these people. Some say they’re contractors, but others?” Anna ran her finger down the list of names.

*Jeremiah Bull, $300…*

*Franklin Castle, $80…*

Wade scanned the names, and there were none that he recognized from his career as a Sheriff, either. Maybe Cain would. Maybe they were entirely fake names.

“Whoever they are, that is a lot of money-” Wade was saying, when a sound rattled through the air.

“The front door!” Anna whispered.

The door they had locked behind them was rattling. Anna and Wade dropped to a crouch by the table, hearing a snarl of muttered voices.

“The lamp!” Wade grabbed it, blowing it out in a heartbeat and stuffing it inside his large cloak pocket. “We need to get these together!” He whispered, grabbing the books and papers and stuffing them haphazardly back into some semblance of order.

They were turning, thumping the ledgers back roughly where they had found them when they heard the creak of the door, and a grunt of effort.

Wade froze, putting a restraining hand on Anna’s shoulder. If it was Silas himself, then he would have every right to call Sheriff Cain, and have them arrested. Wade could reveal their evidence and what they were doing, but it would be hard to get a conviction if they were held in a sheriff’s cell.

“*stay low,”* Wade mouthed the words into Anna’s ear, before creeping to the edge of the office door, and peered out.

Light flared into the warehouse, as the shapes of three figures in cloaks stepped inside, raising lanterns over their heads.

“*I tol’ you, I saw a light! There’s people in here!”* a gruff snarl of a voice said.

Wade ducked back as the light moved in their direction. It hit the open office door and his breath stopped...but then it moved on again, fracturing over the strange instruments and machines of the warehouse.

*“You want to get your eyes fixed, Seamus. There’s nothing here-”* another voice laughed.

*“Best to be certain! We’d be paid handsomely if we caught someone!”* the first man laughed.

There was the thump of feet as the figures stepped fully into the warehouse, and Wade dared to look at them. He saw the glint of metal in their hands. Revolvers.

A coldness spread through Wade. His mind cleared, and he felt the same electric readiness that he used to feel on the mornings before battle. Moving as quiet as a shadow, he drew one of his own revolvers smoothly from its holster.

“*Wade?”* Anna murmured, at his side.

He looked at her. There was fear in her eyes, but also a fierce determination. She wouldn’t break, he knew that at once.

Wade put his hands on his lips, and pointed up the line of rail carriages that led back to the warehouse door. The three guards were moving down the other side. They hadn’t even decided to sweep the warehouse in a line.

Wade pointed at Anna, and then at himself. He hoped she understood what he was telling her.

*On me. You stay on me.*

Wade waited for the three to move behind the main bulk of an engine, then he moved, crab-walking to the other side.

*“Get moving! I don’t want to spend all night in here!”* One of the men growled, his voice heavy with a lisp.

Wade reached the edge of the rail engine and turned back*.*

Anna was right behind him, half running, half crawling to his position. Wade pointed ahead of them, to the next carriage. He waited until he heard the heavy footsteps of the guards, and then moved, this time with Anna right behind him.

*“Hey. Did you hear that?”* One of the guards suddenly said. There was a scrape of a foot on the dust.

Wade hunkered down, and Anna pressed herself against the heavy carriage as light flared in their direction.

*If the come for us, I’ll shoot. I don’t care who they are, I’m not letting Anna be hurt*. Wade slowly raised his gun in their direction.

*“It’s rats, probably! You’re mind is playing tricks on you, Ralph!”* the second guard laughed. There was a thump, and then a snarl of annoyance.

*“Don’t touch me! I saved your life just a few days ago, remember? That big guy at the tracks was going to shoot you!”*

Wade’s eyes narrowed. He meant his rail tracks, didn’t he? When were these guys there, and why hadn’t he heard of a fight?

*“Only because you were so slow with the oil! How long does it take to set a fuse?”* the guard with the lisp and a heavy southern accent laughed.

Wade blinked, and clenched his jaw. *They’re the Red Devils.* His trigger finger itched. These men were responsible for some of the attacks on the railway. They were probably the ones that had set the fire. He could take three of them out right now—but he knew that he shouldn’t. He had Anna with him, who had no weapon of her own on her. Any cross bullet could kill her.

He heard an angry intake of breath next to him, and felt Anna twist against him. Her body was pressed against his shoulder, firm and lithe. He could feel the anger thrumming through her.

*It’s going to be alright. Just breathe,* Wade willed the words into her, wishing that he could take her hand. All they could do was wait for whatever came next.

He flickered his eyes to hers, saw them glaring hard in the dark. *I won’t let them hurt you,* he tried to tell her with hist a look. He didn’t know if Anna understood, but she shifted a little in her crouch.

And this was only a part of the gang, wasn’t it? If Wade wanted to end the attacks, then he needed to get all of them. All at once, and make them talk.

*“See? Nothing but your imagination!”* There was another shove and another harsh, guttural laugh, and the light flared away, moving to the back of the warehouse. The three guards (or Red Devils) were nearly at the end of the carriages, opposite the office, they would turn around the far end and then be able to see the two intruders as clear as rabbits caught in lamplight.

“Now!” Wade whispered, pointing ahead to the open doors.

Anna broke into a run, with Wade right behind. Time seemed to slow as he heard the (to him) deafening crunch of sand and grit with every footstep.

But just as suddenly, Anna had darted through the open doors, and a moment later Wade did the same. The brisk, chill night air hit him like a blessing, driving away his anxiety.

“The horses!” Wade hissed, as he and Anna ran through the yard to the fence, hopping it with ease, and out into the night.

# **Chapter 18**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“It was them, isn’t it?” Anna squinted her eyes and stared back the way they had come, glaring at the distant warehouses and buildings of Broad Street Industrial.

She stood by the stand of withered, desiccated trees where they had left Charger and Elsie. The night sky hung heavy and dark over them, with clouds obscuring the stars, and the horses wickered eagerly at their arrival.

*They had been so close.* Anna’s heart thumped in her chest. She could smell the tobacco on their clothes and the stench of stale sweat.

Were these the men who had sabotaged the bridge? Were they the ones responsible for killing Jacob?

Anna felt light-headed. She had been carrying her grief for so long; the utter, suddenness of her loss, and the incomprehensibility of it. Now, she realized she did not feel sad. She felt angry. Not just at losing a sweet man who did not deserve to die—but at the sheer cruelty of it. Of *all* of it. Of how Silas was willing to kill people to get what he wanted.

“How many ranches have had their fences cut? Animals scared off? Or barns fired?” She muttered darkly. Her form shook with rage.

*Why am I standing out here in the dark, when I could be going right over there and facing them? I could be marching right up to Silas’s house and-*

And what? Anna was struck by the sheer audacity of her wishes. What did she think she was going to do? March right up to Silas Laramie and shoot him in the chest? Become a vigilante herself?

Anna wrestled with the impossibility of her feelings. She would never do that (as much as she wanted to). She was no killer. But she wanted bad people to be punished. If someone didn’t do something…

A sob wracked through her body.

“Anna!” She felt Wade’s presence as he moved quickly to her side. There was a brief touch of his hand on her hand.

The pressure of warm flesh against her own was like cool summer rain after a heatwave. Anna felt returned to her senses, gasping after the wave of anger that had ripped through her.

“I...I’m sorry, it’s just – it’s been so long. I feel like I’ve been carrying all of this horrible stuff inside of me for so long-” she stared, and knew she couldn’t stop. The words came out in a flood.

“There was Jacob’s death, and the railway saying it was his fault and denying any knowledge of it when I knew that they were lying to me. I thought I was going mad! People started avoiding me, seeing me as the angry widow, half-crazed with grief. I don’t know, maybe I was for a time...but then there were Silas’s minions, pestering me about my farm, urging me to sell, and even though I said no the awful truth is that *I’m* not managing at the farm! *My* farm. I’ve got everything I dreamed of, everything my parents would have been proud of – and I’m still messing it all up!”

She spoke in a rush, and heard Wade small, reassuring noises and words every now and again. *‘I hear you...I see...You’re strong.’*

When had ever a man been like this with her before? Not even Jacob was this understanding. Wade didn’t jump in with advice or accusations. He wasn’t getting tired of her ranting, his strong, close presence was listening to her.

*Oh, if I had met you ten years ago,* she thought, and then instantly blushed, turning away. How could she ever think something like that, at a time like this? She felt vaguely disloyal, although knew that was ridiculous. Jacob was dead. He would want her to be happy.

There was a moment of silence between them, and Anna realized that his hand not only touched hers, but held hers. She felt it squeeze tightly for a moment, before Wade cleared his throat. He took a step away from her, and her hands ached with the breaking of that human, animal contact.

“You know, I blamed myself when I lost Sarah and Pa,” Wade said gruffly.

*Sarah?*

Wade spoke haltingly, and Anna raised her head to follow his eyes as he spoke. They shone in the dark, although there were no stars to catch them.

Sarah was his fiancee. She stayed with his only remaining parent, his father, when he went off to fight in the war. It sounded like they loved each other, very much – until the unthinkable happened.

“I think that, for years, I couldn’t answer *why* it had happened. Not really,” he said softly, speaking into the night.

“I still don’t understand it, to be honest with you. I don’t think a part of me ever will—how someone can die, so suddenly, and so painfully. Maybe some things we’re not meant to figure out until we meet our Maker,” he said.

She could feel the pain in his voice. She had never known he was capable of such depths of feeling.

“And then for years afterwards, it felt like I was carrying something. A dead weight on my back. A shadow I could never really lift. I blamed myself, I think, because I couldn’t find any other answer to it. I had to be the best at what I did. I had to work harder than everyone else, do more, be better. Maybe I was trying to prove myself that I didn’t deserve the pain, but-” a sad, wry smile flashed across his features.

“I don’t think pain works like that. It doesn’t care what you deserve or don’t. *We’re* the ones who get to make that choice with what we got.”

He was speaking philosophy, poetry, and Anna had never heard anyone speak so beautifully about this terrible, tortured condition of theirs. He understood.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” she whispered, reaching her hand towards him.

But he couldn’t see her in the dark. He coughed and moved to the horses before her hand could touch his, and once again Anna was left with that aching loss of touch.

“It was a long time ago,” he said, his back towards her. She saw him pull himself together, fiddling with the tack on his horse for a moment before he turned back.

This time his eyes were on her, and they were bright and intense with feeling. Anna felt her body wanted to step towards him, to throw her arms around him and feel his strong form against hers. She wanted to be held by him.

“We’re still breathing. And we’re close to what we want. We get to decide what comes next,” Wade’s voice was firm.

And Anna realized she believed him.

# **Chapter 19**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“*Nash! Wade Nash?”*

Someone was pounding on his door at Gilmour’s Saloon, and Wade woke with a start. Instinctively, his hand grabbed the revolver that was sitting under his pillow, raising it towards the door.

“Wade—you in there?” the voice shouted. It was Franklin, Wade realized, feeling a little foolish as he set the gun down on the side table and rushed to the door.

“What is it?” He threw the door open, to see the Union Pacific Agent Franklin standing in the door with Henrietta, one of the girls who worked at Gilmour’s. Henrietta immediately blushed and looked away, even though Wade was wearing his long johns.

*Has he heard about the break in?* Wade left the door open as he turned back to his room, grabbing his shirt and trousers. *Did someone see me and Anna last night?*

“Hurry. It’s bad,” Franklin was breathless, he barely stopped as he popped into the room, fidgeting and looking back at the hallway outside. “One of the supply trains has been attacked this morning. There whole trains gone over, we’ve got injured men, Sheriff Tobias is riding out there with the doctor right now. But the workers have heard about it. They’ve abandoned the tracks and ridden out to the crash too.”

“They’re angry.” Wade growled. Of course they were. The work team had suffered set back after set back, accident after accident. The Red Devils had even set fire to their storehouse!

“But they’re good people. They’re trying to protect their own,” Wade said, hurrying with his clothes and clipping on his gun belt before he grabbed his heavy jacket from behind the door.

“Well. Those good people of yours might just lynch a Union Agent if we don’t hurry!” Franklin said. The man was dusty and disheveled from riding, and Wade guessed he had galloped straight to find him as soon as the work teams had ridden for the crash site.

*They might.* Wade thought, and ran down the saloon corridor.

\* \* \*

A cloud of smoke met Wade’s eyes long before he actually arrived at the crash site. The entire engine cab and the goods carriage that it hauled had crashed, tipped over onto their side on the plains. A fire had consumed the engine cab, which was now out but still steamed ugly, coal-black smoke from the doors and windows.

“Jehoshaphat!” Wade swore as he eased Charger to a gentler trot. They had almost caught up with Sheriff Tobias and his posse, but now Wade saw that they were engaging with the rowdy crowd of workers, some of whom were still seated on their horses.

The train had derailed just a few miles outside of the town, with the buildings of their destination clearly visible. At once, Wade heard angry shouts rising from the crowd.

*“You’re meant to stop this!”*

*“What good are ya!”*

He cast a look at Franklin, to see that the Agent had slowed just behind him, taking in the scene with a cooler sensibility. The Union Pacific Agent had one hand on his holster.

*That won’t do anyone any good!* Wade knew. These men ahead of him were tired, angry, and probably scared. He could see to one side where there was a sheet laid over the form of one man—probably the driver—and there was a small gathering of others, smeared with coal smoke and dust seated on the floor, with haphazard bandages on their heads and arms.

“She was carrying supplies for the rail road. This is going to set us back weeks,” Franklin said starkly.

In a flash, intense anger threatened to rush out of Wade. Was that all that the Agent cared about? The progress of the railway? A man had lost his life!

Wade spurred his horse forward, purely for the sake of saying something he might regret to Franklin. Ahead of him he saw Tobias Cain mounted in a line, with his deputies beside him, shouting at the crowd of workers as they gathered near the crash.

“I’m going to need you to clear the area. Now! Let my deputies through!” Tobias hollered at them. He hadn’t drawn his pistol yet, but Wade reckoned he would.

A lot of the workers who had marched or ridden here weren’t from Cheyenne itself, Wade recognized the faces of migrant workers. They didn’t care what some local lawman said, only that he did his job.

“He was one of ours! He died while you’ve been sitting on your ass!” Wade recognized Jaspeth shouting up at Tobias.

“Hey, hey!” Wade jumped off his horse, and pushed his way through the crowd to the center of the action. This was half the trouble, that the deputies were threatening this knot of people with their horses, not at the same level.

“Boss!” Jaspeth turned to glare at him. “You tell them! You tell them that they should’ve stopped this! This was the Red Devils, I swear it!”

“Easy now, big guy,” Wade clapped his hands on Jaspeth’s shoulders, forcing the man to look at him, not the Sheriff.

“We’re going to put a stop to it, don’t you worry. I’m working on it,” Wade said. He wished he could tell them what, or who, was really behind their troubles, but that would be impossible.

“Working on it?” Jaspeth shrugged his hands off, shaking his head. “People are *dying*, Boss!”

“I know!” Wade said, standing between the deputies and the workers. He waved at Tobias, gesturing for him to move back.

“I was there at both fires, remember? I’ve seen it with my own eyes, and I’m going to be helping to haul this here engine with the rest of you!” Wade shouted. He earned a few appreciative claps for that.

“But there’s no sense being angry at this lot,” Wade put a bit of scorn in his voice. He knew he had to act, at least, that he was more on the workers side than the authorities.

“They’re just trying to do their jobs, the same as you. Maybe if we can get the Sheriff to agree to doubling that patrol we’ll be getting somewhere!” Wade shouted loudly. He turned, pointedly, towards Tobias.

The Sheriff squinted at him, with an expression that said it knew exactly what Wade was doing. But Tobias nodded, directing half the deputies here to ride off, following the tracks.

“You see? He’s going to up the patrols, and we’re going to get double pay—isn’t that right, Franklin?” Wade turned to his other side, finding the Union Pacific Agent and asking pointedly. Franklin gave him the same pointed stare that Sheriff Cain just had, but he nodded, taking off his hat and waving it in the air.

“Right. That’s a start. Now we need a work team to help haul the engine…” Wade was saying. He spoke loudly and brashly, not giving the workers time to grumble. He walked through the front of the crowd, tapping them on the chest as he picked out the fittest and strongest to get to work straight away.

“We need rope – a lot of it, and probably shovels, too. We’ll use the foundation beams to heave the engine back on, rocking her onto the last good bit of track,” Wade announced.

The workers appeared to be happier now that there was something to occupy them. One of the suggested a clean up crew for the crater, while another suggested riding up to Cheyenne to bring one of the reserve engines down to help. Wade let Jaspeth and the other senior workers take the lead, nodding and congratulating their ideas until it seemed that the danger had passed.

*That was close,* Wade sighed, spotting where Tobias was still standing at the back of the crowd with just a couple of the deputies, and walked over to him.

“You don’t cease to surprise me, Nash,” Tobias greeted him. His frown was heavy.

“They lost one of their own, with more wounded,” Wade nodded to where the Cheyenne town doctor, Abigail something-or-other, was already moving between the wounded, checking their vision and senses.

“In truth, I’m not sure I can contain them when it happens again,” Wade said. He kept his tone light, but he saw Tobias’s eyes widen a little.

“What are you suggesting, Nash? That I have to have *more* deputies the next time I ride up to your work camp?” Tobias said firmly.

Wade winced. “I don’t think that would be a good idea, Sheriff. What I’m saying is that these attacks aren’t slowing down, they’re speeding up…” Wade hesitated. How much could he share with the Sheriff? Was the man going to do the right thing when the time came?

“You’re hiding something. I might not come from a lawman family, but I’ve put enough years in to know when someone’s holding something back,” Tobias said.

Wade flickered his eyes to the last remaining deputies. Tobias dismissed them with a nod. “See if you can help the workers. Put your back into it, that’ll smooth things over,” Tobias said, and clipped his horse to where Wade stood. The pair walked slowly back up the tracks, past the still smoking engine and the spilled carriage behind it. Wade saw mounds of gravel and iron track lying that had been flung from the carriage when it tipped, and the crushed woodwork of it’s sides.

“It’s going to be a while before the railroad is cleared,” Tobias said lightly. He nodded ahead, to where they could see the disruption to the lines.

A series of large, darkened craters had completely torn up a section of the tracks. The iron bars were twisted in wild, exaggerated directions, and the wooden beams underneath were completely splintered.

“That was dynamite,” Wade said, stopping with Tobias beside the largest crater. “You said it happened this morning?”

“Uh-huh,” the Sheriff agreed. “One of your workers who had been on the train ran into town. That was when I got the word, and I guess when you did too.”

*Through Franklin, but yes,* Wade agreed. He crouched down to look at the crater. He couldn’t see any evidence of wires, but then the place was a mess, and any fuse would have burnt up in the blast.

“They must have waited for the train to be so close it couldn’t brake,” Wade’s voice was a heavy growl. What kind of men did that? Surely they knew that people would die.

“And they didn’t even steal anything, from the looks of it,” Tobias looked back up the track. “And this close to the city?”

*Exactly.* Wade’s anger kept burning at a short fuse. *The Red Devils don’t want to steal, because they’re not bandits, not really. They’re hired thugs.*

And Wade was pretty sure he knew who had hired them, as well.

Wade looked up at the Sheriff of Cheyenne. He had a good feeling for him. Tobias had been the one to admit that Silas Laramie was not to be trusted, after all. Cain was a man who appeared to keep his own counsel, and Wade respected that.

*But I didn’t exactly get this information by the most legal of means,* Wade studied the man’s eyes for a moment, and found them unreadable. He wondered what kind of lawman was Tobias Cain. Was he like his Pa had been, who knew when to bend a law to make sure that someone else didn’t break one? Or was he like any of the other lawmen, who hid behind their bits of paper?

Wade got the sense that Tobias was the latter rather than the former. But there was only one way to find out.

*And I’m going to have to start trusting people sooner or later,* Wade licked his lips.

“I need to talk to you. But not here. Maybe tonight? There’s things we need to discuss about what is really going on here,” he said.

Tobias’s eyes widened. “You have evidence?” The Sheriff seemed to guess exactly what Wade was talking about.

Wade nodded. “I think so. I need you to tell me if it holds up. If it’s enough. We both know that justice and the courts are two very different things.”

“Do I want to know how you got this evidence?” Tobias was sharp.

“You want to stop something like this happening again?” Wade nodded at the wreckage behind him.

That seemed good enough for the Sheriff, who nodded, and turned his horse around. “Tonight. I’ll be wanting to hear it, Nash.”

Wade felt a cool tremor of excitement run through him. This was it. If Cain gave the go-ahead, then they could put a stop to all of this suffering and mayhem.

They could bring Silas in.

He watched Tobias ride over to the doctor, to help one of the injured onto the back of his horse.

Yes, he was going to take Silas down. But first he needed to know one thing. He needed to know just how deep this conspiracy went in Cheyenne.

# **Chapter 20**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“Woah there boy,” Wade whispered, bringing Charger to a halt outside the newly built Cheyenne Town Theater.

It was a tall building, but not as large as he was expecting. The most extravagant thing about it were the fresh wooden beams and planks of its walls, plus the gold and green painted facade that proudly announced it’s *Culture & Entertainments!*

Wade eyed the large front doors skeptically. It was already early evening, and soot and dirt smeared his clothes. His hair smelled of coal smoke, and his bandanna was filthy from the work he had spent the afternoon doing at the crash site. His muscles ached, but it was a good ache. He appreciated the honest labor, and the company.

Even though the work had been born of tragedy, Wade would rather he were doing that then having to spend ten minutes with the people he was about to.

The barkeep at Gilmour’s had told him where Senator Horace Whitaker spent most of his free evenings. Given that there was a troop of chorus girls in Cheyenne at the moment (paid for by Union Pacific, as a goodwill gesture to the town) then it seemed a fairly good bet where the Senator would be.

Wade eased off his horse and lit his pipe. He waited as the tide of well-dressed people paraded into the theater for the evening’s entertainment. He only wanted to speak to just one.

It didn’t take long for the finest black carriage that Wade had ever seen to pull up outside the building. It had brass ornamentation that seemed more fitting for royalty. One of the riders jumped down, rushing to the door to open it for the small and rather rotund form of Senator Horace Whitaker himself.

Wade moved. “Senator!” He called, his boots hitting the boardwalk as he shouldered past the great and good of Cheyenne City.

*“Augh, dear heavens!”* He heard the disgruntled snarls of merchants and bankers and officers as he pushed through them, to find himself standing suddenly before the Senator himself.

“Senator Whittaker? A quick word.” Wade intoned.

“What? What is the meaning of this?” the Senator blinked in confusion, before Wade saw him recognize him.

*Good.* Wade wanted to surprise him. He wanted to see the man’s reaction.

Surprise crossed Whittaker’s face, and then revulsion. “You. The work boss. Nash, isn’t it?”

“You’ve heard about the attack on the railway this morning, sir?” Wade said quickly as the chauffeur, a not inconsiderable man himself, stepped forwards with one hand holding his riding crop.

“What? Of course. Terrible shame. Terrible,” Whittaker said.

They were starting to draw a crowd. *Even better*, Wade wanted to see the man squirm. He studied the Senator’s reactions with eagle-like intensity as he talked.

“The railway is being attacked by a group called the Red Devils. Well known further east of here, sir,” Wade said. “They’ve just killed one of my men. And they’ve attacked the railway. The *only* railway leading into Cheyenne. You worried about that, Senator?”

Wade studied the man’s eyes. He blinked, but it wasn’t in alarm or surprise—it was in disgust.

*‘Watch like a hawk, Wade. That’s the difference between a lawman and a great Sheriff.’* He remembered the words his Pa had told him, so many years ago. A Sheriff was many things; strong, self-reliant, firm, capable – but above all things, his Pa had said that they were smart. They noticed the things that others missed; whether it was tracks on the ground, or what someone *wasn’t* saying to what they *did.*

Right now, Senator Whitaker’s mouth had crinkled with disgust, not fear or alarm.

“There is a Sheriff in town for these sorts of matters, young man!” Horace blurted out. “If you have concerns, then go to him!”

Horace barged past Wade, and although Wade knew he could easily have stood firm and forced him to back down, Wade let the man past.

*I knew it.*

The hubbub of people surged around him, casting him dirty looks as they made their way into the theater. The driver hovered threateningly nearby, and Wade guessed he had been told to give Wade a sound beating as soon as the eyes of the great and good had left the sidewalk.

*Yeah, good luck with that,* Wade turned square to the driver, and stared him in the eyes until the man looked away.

*That’s right. I’m not some lilly-livered sop you can push around.*

Wade touched the brim of his hat at the man, before slowly sauntering back to his horse. A dark, terrible satisfaction melded with hatred in his chest.

He was certain that Horace Whitaker was involved in this conspiracy, too.

\* \* \*

“So you’ve got evidence of what, a rail company and a couple of personal testimonies,” Tobias half sat on his oak desk, and crossed his arms over his chest.

Wade resisted the urge to tell him to open his darn eyes. *You’re a good man, Tobias, I can see that. You know what is going on.*

Wade stood in the Sheriff’s personal office in the Cheyene Sheriff’s Station. The building was built of solid stone, and housed a small stables to the rear for the deputies’ horses, as well as compact, airless cells down the hall. He had come straight from the theater so it was late, but Tobias and one of the other deputies were still here, going through their paperwork.

Wade flickered an eye to the door of the office. It was closed, but he didn’t like the fact there was someone he didn’t know in the building. *Just how many in Cheyenne were in on this too?*

“And, I don’t want to know where you got half this information,” Tobias jammed a finger on the stack of letters and papers that Wade had spilled over his desk.

Wade sucked his teeth. “A good lawman knows when and how to do the right thing, especially when everyone else doesn’t.” Another quote from his late Pa. He had been thinking a lot about his father recently. He missed his steady certainty, even if he could be overbearing at times.

*Would he be proud of what I’m doing?* The thought flitted through Wade’s mind, and the answer came back immediately.

*Yes.*

“That as may be,” Tobias said softly. His eyes were shadowed. “But we’ll nerd to get this evidence before a judge, too. And I’ve a mind to take it to Judge Jeffries at Union City. Someone with a clear eye.”

*Someone who Silas might not have paid off, you mean?* Wade wondered. He didn’t ask the question, but it hung in the air between them.

“Look, Tommy said that Silas tried to kill him. Laramie crushed the guys legs! That was after Tommy helped him steal a load of Union Pacific papers—the sort of papers that allowed Silas to out-think Franklin,” Wade pointed at the testimony and then at the papers.

“Silas is the self-nominated business enforcer, he buys the worst, out of date equipment for the Union Pacific railroad. He’s also working with the Land Agents and the bank manager; Gregors, Woods, Faber and Mills – all of them, to buy up all the ranches around the railroad at slashed prices. I don’t have to tell you how many of those ranches had accidents right before selling!” Wade said heavily. “And then, even worse, Silas, Constable, these same guys are behind this thing called the Cheyenne Civic Fund, which to me doesn’t look like anything but a way to siphon money out of Union Pacific, and use it to pay...somebody.”

“What are you suggesting, Wade?” Tobias asked darkly.

Wade hesitated. This was his evidence that he knew would put Silas behind bars.

“When I broke into his barn-” the Sheriff groaned and rubbed a hand over his eyes at that, “-I *heard* one of Silas’s guards admitting to the arson against the work camp. He was a Red Devil, and I am willing to bet good money that Silas had been paying them off to sabotage the railway so he can take it over. I’m sure of it.” It seemed so obvious to Wade. Franklin had already started to seem jittery. How long before Union Pacific pulled out, or some corrupt judge decided to hand Laramie Rail the contract?

“You got eyes on this Red Devil? You saw him at the attack as well?” Tobias asked pointedly.

Wade gritted his teeth. It would so easy to lie right now, but he couldn’t. There were some things that were too far even for him, in the pursuit of justice.

*All of this relies on my word, and that means I cant lie.*

“I didn’t get a good look at him the first time. They were riding away in the night,” Wade admitted.

“*Pfagh!”* Tobias grunted, slapping his thigh before standing up, and pacing the room. “Look, Wade, it’s not that I don’t believe you. I do. I’ve had my eye on Laramie for a good while now, after I started hearing reports of the cut fences and land sales. It’s clear that the attacks are escalating. Cheyenne is without a working rail line right now, for heaven’s sake!”

The Sheriff turned around, glaring out the window to the dark streets of Cheyenne beyond.

“But when it comes to court, I’ll be putting you up before a judge on your word versus Silas’s. You’ve got good standing thanks to your family name, but if Silas has half as many friends as we think he does, then they’re going to start asking why we should be listening to a man who abandoned his post as Sheriff, who is being paid by the rail company,” Tobias spat.

“What?” Wade’s fists clenched at his side. Was the sheriff saying his character was in question? He had a history of good, hard work. Any of his bosses over the last ten years would stand up and say that.

“You *were* a Sheriff, and then you ran out on your home town,” Tobias turned. His voice was calmer now, but Wade could hear the frustration seething underneath it.

*How dare you.* Images of Sarah and Pa flooded Wade’s mind. What did Tobias know why he gave up his badge? What did any of them know?

“And now Union Pacific hired *you* to get the job done, and you’re blaming one of Cheyenne’s richest men why that isn’t happening,” Tobias said.

Anger bristled through Wade. He felt his chest swell.

“I’m only saying what the jury or judge or lawyer will. That’s my job, Wade. I’m not saying we haven’t got a strong case, but it’s personal testimonies. Not hard evidence. Not yet.” Tobias pointed out.

“Cheyenne doesn’t have time to wait for hard evidence,” Wade’s voice was grim.

There was a moment of silence between the men, before Tobias broke it with a heavy sigh. The anger ebbed out of the Sheriff as he leaned forward, placing both hands on the desk and looking at the pile of stolen papers before him.

“I get it, Wade, I really do. These people here-” he waved a hand across the pages. “They’re not good people. I’ve known that for a long time, too. They’re greedy, manipulative, and cruel. If Cheyenne wasn’t set to make so much money as the rail way opens up, then they wouldn’t be here, I’m sure of it. What’s worse is that I know you’re right. Silas is close to his goal, and we need to think of a way of scaring him off.”

“Scaring?” Wade said. Why didn’t Tobias just ride up to his office and throw him in chains?

“Yes. That’s how it works in a town like Cheyenne. We show him that we know what they’re up to, and that if he puts a foot wrong, then we’ll be onto him. It’s the only way,” Tobias said.

Wade blinked. Tobias couldn’t be serious, could he?

“Silas has killed people, Sheriff. What does he care about a few threats?” Wade pointed out.

Tobias looked up at him, his eyes hard and his voice full of thunder. “He’ll care when I ride up to his office with half a dozen deputies. This is how the game is played out here, Wade, you should know that. If Silas’s precious reputation is damaged, then his backers – Senator Whitaker if you’re right, Woods the bank manager – they might back off. Silas will see we mean business.”

Wade’s jaw clenched. There was no use arguing with the Sheriff, and Wade could see that Tobias wasn’t going to back down from this plan.

*But I think the only business that Silas is going to respect, is when it comes from the barrel of a gun.*

# **Chapter 21**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

*‘Honey, you’re burning the porridge again!’* Jacob called up to Anna from the kitchen. His voice was angry, as he sometimes got when he was tired and exasperated.

Anna groaned, turned over in her bed. Jacob was a good man, a kind man, but he had no idea what it took to keep this ranch running, with all of the chores that needed doing all the time.

*‘Anna! The porridge!’* Her dead husband called up again.

*‘It’s BURNING!’*

Anna woke with a sudden cough, to find herself alone in her bed, and with the smell of smoke in the air.

“Smoke?” Anna shot up from her bed, her mind still reeling with the tatters of last nights dream. Her husband was long dead, and this was no burning porridge.

A red glow was peeking under the curtains of her window, and she threw herself off the bed to tear the curtain aside. A billow of smoke hit her in the face, as she saw the conflagration outside.

*The small barn!* Sheets of flames were running up the far wall of her small barn, the one with much of her equipment in. It sat right next to the large barn with its stores of winter feeds.

“No!” Anna grabbed her clothes in a rush, flinging herself down the stairs at the same time as she dragged them on. There was no one to call, and ho help that would make it in time. She grabbed blankets from the linen cupboard and ran straight for the well.

*What had happened? How could this have happened?* Her mind raced as she threw the buckets of water over the blankets until they were sodden and five times as heavy. She didn’t remember taking a lantern or a torch out to the small barn last night. In fact, she knew that she had finished up early when it was still light!

“All of the butter and cheese making equipment!” She shouted. The screams of Elsie and the other horses came from the far side of the ranch. Thankfully an entire yard and paddock separated them, but the horses could still smell the smoke.

Working quickly, she pulled her shirt up over the lower part of her face, before throwing the blankets at the fire. They slapped against the dark wood and feel away, with only one of them actually slapping out the fires.

“Darn it!” She yelled. She wished she wasn’t here alone. She wished that her brother was here—anyone!

“You’re going to need to be smart, Anna. Think!” She demanded of herself. This outer wall was already blackened and charred, but that didn’t mean the fire had to spread, did it?

Grabbing two of the blankets, and a bucket from the large barn she repeated the process, but this time on the corners of the walls so that the fire wouldn’t spread.

Then, Anna saw the steam that was escaping the doors of the little barn. She knew that she would have to face it sooner or later. If the flames had gotten inside the building, then it was gone...and that would mean that the big barn would go, too.

Anna threw the wooden latch, for a billow of pale white smoke to plume into the air. Thankfully, there was no crimson light behind it. She saw through the flickering, dancing light of the fire outside that the inside wall was steaming.

*That’s it!* Anna grabbed the bucket, and threw it against the inside wall. It hissed as soon as it hit, leaving a dark patch of wet running.

“Now move!” She demanded of herself, running to the big barn as fast as her legs could take her. She grabbed every bucket, milk pail and butter barrel that she could grab, pumping water into them. She couldn’t wait to fill them to the top, but splashed water over them, over her, and over the ground too, before seizing the first to run back to the wall.

By the time she had got there, the flames were already smoldering the damp blankets, and she threw the water to the pile.

*Always aim for the base of the fire,* she remembered something her father had said. That was where it was hottest. If you can reduce the fire there, then you can reduce it’s speed.

Anna fell into a blur of aching limbs and choke-laden lungs. She ran back and forth, grabbing pails or pumping water, and alternated between throwing it on the flames outside and on the inside wall. Still, she was sure that she was going to lose the entire structure when half of the back wall collapsed with a shower of sparks.

*No.* This couldn’t happen to her farm. Not hers. She had poured everything into this place. *I gave this my all after losing the family ranch,* tears sprung to her eyes. She couldn’t lose this as well.

Her night was a torment of soot, smoke, and water. At some point, Anna switched to grabbing the rake and shovel, using them to pull the smoldering embers aside and the burnt timbers that had fallen. By the time that dawn’s pale light arrived, she had managed to save the big barn—but the small one was a wreck.

It stood half open to the elements, with one entire side still smoking and damp. Her butter and milk equipment were ruined, as were the feed bags and the small cart that she had kept to one side. Steam still rose from the pile of blackened timbers she had dragged to one side, even though she had doused it several times with water.

“How much was that going to cost?” she whispered to herself. Too much. The ranch made nowhere near the sort of money where she could pay for the labor and materials to rebuild the barn, and that was without even thinking about the cost of replacing everything inside of it.

*Was this it? Was this the end?* Anna wavered before the sight, her eyes focusing on where the fire had started.

“It was arson,” she breathed, her despair turning to anger. She knew that there was nothing that could have lit that fire out here, and that it had started on the outside wall – the one closest to the acres of grazing land, and the track.

All it would take would be for a rider to leave their horse down by the copse by the track, and then sneak up here with a can of oil, wouldn’t it?

It was then that Anna realized the depravity of their plan. They hadn’t even set fire to the animal sheds or the main house. Obviously, that would have been a much more final attack, but it would also lose good stock and a good building in the process.

“No, but getting the small barn, you’re sending a message, aren’t you?” Anna spat at the image of the person she saw in her mind.

There was, after all, only one person who could be behind this all.

“Silas Laramie.”

Her anger propelled her to continue. Angrily, she stalked back to the house, ignoring breakfast in order to strip her clothes and scrub the worst of the soot off herself. Even after the wash, the horses were still skittish when they smelled her as she let them out.

Anna threw herself into her work. She put out the feed in the center of the paddocks, and refilled their troughs before coming to check on the ruins again.

*I’m going to need to patrol the ranch. Make sure there’s no one else out there, skulking around…*

She was busy getting her rifle from the yard when she saw dust rising from the trail, and saw two shapes cantering up her driveway.

*Wade?*

Her heart lifted for a moment. Perhaps, somehow, he had decided to ride out here this morning. Or perhaps some early shepherd or tracker had seen the smoke and told him-

But then the figures resolved into one small, rounded man on a thoroughbred horse, and the burly, stark form of his fixer.

It wasn’t Wade at all.

“Constable!” Anna stepped out to where the track met her yard, and planted her feet in the middle of the path, her rifle in hand. If they wanted her farm, then they were going to have to go through her.

“I wouldn’t take a step closer, if I were you!” Anna scowled.

*It’s you, isn’t it?* She glared at them. The rifle in her hand felt heavy with promise. *You set fire to my barn and then came to gloat?*

“Ah, Mrs Turner. I see that you have had a spot of bother in the night,” the fleshy faced Constable said. His brows were exaggerated and alarmed, as if this were an appalling tragedy and he had only just discovered it.

Anna resisted the urge to shoot her rifle into the air. There were two of them, after all. Constable didn’t look to be much of a threat, but the heavy set fixer he always brought with him did. Anna kept her eyes on him, seeing him sit straight-backed, his hands low on the pommel.

“Given the circumstances, perhaps it is time you reconsider my offer? Of course, I will have to knock off some money for the loss of your structure… I would have to rebuild that myself, you know-”

“*Get!”* Anna suddenly yelled, roaring as she lifted her rifle.

She saw the second man flinch, wheel his horse to one side-

But Anna had her rifle not pointed at them, but raised up into the air.

“Was this you, Constable? You running around setting fire to people’s property now? Who are you working for? Who put you up to this, huh?” Anna shouted.

She saw the larger man flush in alarm, and quickly shake his head at his second.

“No – not like this!” the wealthy Constable garbled, pulling hard on his reigns. His horse wheeled around twice, showing how badly trained it was and how poor a rider Constable himself was.

“You are crazed, Mrs Turner! Crazed! If you wont sell, maybe the Courts will put you in a sanitarium anyway!” he shouted over his shoulder.

Anna screeched in fury, and fired her rifle into the air. At the sound, both of the horses skittered forwards, and then they were fleeing, galloping down the road as Anna screamed obscenities at their backs.

*Silas wasn’t going to stop, was he?*  Anna realized. He was willing to set fire to her ranch, and perhaps even kill her in the process.

“This has to end. Now.” Anna gasped for air, staring at the road, the disappearing clouds of dust, and at the distant gloom of Cheyenne City.

# **Chapter 22**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“You ready?”

Wade looked up from where he was seated on Charger, to where Tobias had just mounted his own horse. They were outside the Cheyenne City Sheriff Station, with five deputies leading their own horses out of the stables around them.

It was a clear, bright day, with a touch of a cool breeze. Wade felt more than ready. He felt energized.

“Not for this. I mean for what comes after,” Tobias eased into his saddle, and fixed his deputies with a look. Wade got the sense they had been hand picked, none of them were younger than twenty-five, and had the hardened, quiet airs of men who knew what they were doing.

“You expecting trouble?” Wade said. His hand eased a little, tugging at his gun belt.

“No, not today, anyway,” Tobias’s voice was stern. “But you and me, we’re about to kick the hornet’s nest.”

*Well, we could just walk in and march Silas Laramie out at gunpoint instead?* Wade thought that would be a far better option than the little ‘chat’ they were preparing to have.

But the Sheriff knew his town, after all. Maybe this was the better way to fix this problem. Wade doubted it, but he would give Tobias the leeway.

*For now, at least.*

The posse rode out in the early morning through the town, and the few people who were already up and about – the baker’s boys, the delivery men, the saloon workers and store owners sweeping their porches – looked up and hurriedly looked away.

The Sheriff had formed a posse. He was riding out for something, Wade could almost hear their thoughts. They would be wondering what. The word would spread that they hadn’t ridden out of town at all, but only across a few streets to where the town bank was.

And the offices of Laramie, Faber, and Mills.

They crossed onto the plush street to see carriages hurriedly pulling aside as they streamed past. Tobias kept them at a steady trot, portraying purpose and strength.

“Alright!” The Sheriff called as soon as they reached the building. He directed the deputies to stay outside in the street, while he and Wade dismounted.

Shutters banged as, across the street the upper windows of the theater opened. Chorus line girls were at the windows, dressed in silk gowns and with their hair up, watching the commotion below.

“Straight up the stairs, and to the right,” Wade whispered as he kept a pace behind the Sheriff. The front door was open already at this time in the morning, and Tobias set a quick march as he entered the lobby, and went straight for the stairs.

“What-what is the meaning of this!” A door opened from one of the downstairs rooms, and a thin man with half moon spectacles strode out into the lobby, peering up at them.

“Sheriff’s business, Mills!” Tobias called over his shoulder. Wade saw the older gentlemen, who had straggly hair falling from his temples, blush and look horrified.

“Right,” Wade reminded at the top of the stairs, as they hit the first floor landing, and turned as one. The door to Laramie’s offices was ajar, and Wade could see a patch of sunlight beyond. He half hoped that he would catch Silas in the act of something – perhaps in the middle of a negotiation with Horace Whitaker, but Wad saw there was no such luck.

Tobias marched straight up to the door, knocked on it once with enough force to swing the door open.

“Excuse me-!” Silas’s imperious voice sounded from inside.

Silas wasn’t in the main office, but the smaller document room out back. Wade marched right up behind Tobias, and slammed the door shut behind them.

“I’m going to have to ask you to put that done, Silas,” Tobias said heavily.

Silas was holding a sheath of folders in his hands, which it looked like he had been about to file or...*Or maybe get rid of?* Wade thought, taking a step around the desk so that he would be able to look at the cover as soon as Silas stepped back in the room.

There was the slightest hiss of annoyance from the man, as he calmly set the sheath of papers on top of one of the cabinets inside, and walked back into his main office. It looked just the same as before, with its sturdy desk and small brass and gold ornaments on display. If Silas had any inclination that this room had been broken into recently, then it didn’t look as though he had changed anything.

“Always a pleasure to see you, Sheriff, although usually, I require my clients to make an appointment,” Silas gathered himself together, glancing imperiously at Wade with the slightest twist of his lip.

“Oh, I see that you have brought the lawman with you as well – oh, he’s *not* a lawman any more, is he? Wade Nash is the Union Pacific bully-boy.”

Wade curled his lips back in a silent snarl, earning another small grin from Silas. It seemed that the gloves were indeed off.

“Say that again, Laramie,” Wade promised. Sheriff Cain coughed abruptly, cutting through the anger Wade could feel rising between him and Silas.

Laramie looked just the same as he had done the last time that Wade had seen him, and the time before that. He was a good-looking, fine-boned man in his early forties, but to Wade’s eyes he could do with a few seasons out on the trails to fill him out. It was clear from his frame that he was a man who was more used to boardrooms and theaters than he was to hard work. His short blonde hair was slick back and oiled in tight weaves over his head, giving his sharp face a strained, pulled sort of look. His eyes were bright and darting, and he wore gold and rubies on the broach of his white tailored jacket.

“Silas. You’ve got some explaining to do,” Tobias said heavily, nodding for Wade to swing the satchel he had brought with him, and bring out the contents.

The first were union Pacific ledgers, with Wade opened to the pages detailing the payments to the ‘Cheyenne Civic Fund’. Next came bits of paper, some of them taken from this very office, detailing Laramie Rail, and the expenses accounts of the Civic Fund itself.

“It seems to be paperwork. *Stolen* paperwork, if I am not very much mistaken,” Silas glanced at the letter headings and stamps, before calmly taking his jacket off and settling into the upholstered leather chair behind the desk.

“I really do not have the time for this, gentlemen, I am a very busy man. However, if you would like a basic understanding of how accountancy works, then I might be able to spare five minutes,” Silas grinned coldly.

“*Enough!”* Tobias surprised Wade by slamming his fist on Silas’s desk. “That’s enough of that back talk, Laramie. We’re here because we see you, and we know what you are up to. I have five deputies sitting outside these very offices right now, and I am more than happy to bring you down the station for a proper chat. *This* is a courtesy call.”

“Not very courteous-” Silas murmured.

Wade wanted to slap him. He wanted to grab him by the shoulders and wipe that cruel grin from his shoulders.

“People have *died,* Laramie!” Wade burst out. “Don’t you care about that? These aren’t just migrant workers who have died. These are people from Cheyenne. *Your* town. The more you play with fire, the more chance there is that a whole lot of people are going to get burnt.”

“Burnt?” Silas said quickly, with the smallest intake of breath.

*I’ve rattled him.* Wade was pleased to see.

“Your friends. The Red Devils,” Wade pointed out.

At that, Silas blinked. His face, which had been poised in outraged amusement, now went deathly serious.

“That is a very strange accusation, Mr. Nash,” Silas said heavily.

Wade opened his mouth, but before he could speak, the Sheriff cut in.

“We can see that there’s only one person who is profiting from the railway, and from all these disasters – and that is you, Silas. It doesn’t take much to put two and two together. I’m warning you that I have my eyes on you, and I am going to be paying very close attention to everything that you do in the near future…” Tobias informed him.

Silas flickered his eyes to Tobias, but then they came back to Wade. A calculating, appraising look spread over Laramie’s face then.

“I see,” Silas whispered under his breath. He puffed out his chest, and drew a deeper breath. “I think you two gentlemen had better leave my offices. Now. It seems that you have got yourselves some half-crazed opinions and conspiracies, based on the fantasies of an *outsider*,” Silas threw the word at Wade.

*I can take that. I’ve been called far worse,* Wade gave him an angry grin.

“I think that the pair of you are misunderstanding what is happening here,” Silas said heavily. He spread his hands over the ledgers and papers. “All of this is very well. It paints a pretty picture. But you have no idea what it represents.”

“What are you talking about, Laramie,” Tobias growled.

Anger sparked in Silas’s eyes, and he leaned forward on the table. “That is the problem with people like you. Great ‘men of action’ and the like. You think that running around shouting is what makes this country great. It doesn’t. It just makes you feel better about your poor, pathetic lives. It’s people like *me,* and what *I* am achieving, that is going to make this country great – and is going to make Cheyenne great, and Wyoming.”

Silas was on a roll. Wade could see the fervor in his eyes. “*I* am the face of progress, gentlemen. Me and what I represent. All the rest of you are just standing in the way. Take one piece of advice from me, before it is too late: It is people like me who are going to remake Cheyenne, either with you or without you. If you dare to stand in my way, then you are bound to be crushed!”

“Is that a threat, Silas?” Tobias said firmly.

Silas merely smiled. He shrugged, and leaned back in his chair. “You know where the door is gentlemen.”

Tobias made a point of picking up the ledgers and the papers from the desk, not offering to return them as he nodded to the door. Wade turned on his heel, even though every fiber of his being was calling out for him to turn back around and throw Silas through the wall.

“Keep walking, Nash,” Tobias hissed under his breath when they hit the landing. Wade could feel the rage radiating from the Sheriff. He wondered if Tobias had ever been talked to like that.

*Silas has finally shown his hand,* Wade thought as he followed Tobias down the stairs.

Silas thought of himself as untouchable. He thought he was in charge of Cheyenne in all but principle. He wasn’t afraid of the Sheriff or his deputies, and that made him dangerous.

*“He’s up there now, is he-?”*

Wade heard a croak of a voice from the lower rooms, and turned to see Mills hurriedly pulling the door to his office, but not before he saw the figure of the man still inside.

The second, younger man wore riding leathers and a rough, teamster’s shirt. He had a shock of red hair and a scar running from his cheekbone to his top lip, creating the slightly slurred lisp he spoke with.

*I know that voice!* Wade thought. He saw Tobias shift a little in his step. The Sheriff had recognized him, and the mere sight of him meant something to the man.

*But where did I hear it?*  Wade wracked his brain. He wasn’t a face from the work team, and he couldn’t remember if he had seen the rougher man at Gilmour’s or the Cheyenne Star. But the southern, guttural lisp was unmistakable.

Wade had followed the Sheriff out onto the porch of the building when he suddenly remembered. *The warehouse!*

“That’s him,” Wade said in a low murmur. Tobias didn’t say anything, but whistled to the deputies to wheel their horses around, and head back for the Sheriff’s Station. The Sheriff didn’t say a word on the journey back, and Wade could see the way Tobias clenched his jaw and clutched at his reins. He was fuming.

Tobias waited until the deputies had taken the horses to the stables out back, before he finally turned to Wade.

“Danziel Marks. He’s probably been Cheyenne’s most dangerous export,” the Sheriff announced, leading the way into the building and straight to his office at the back of the room.

“He’s one of the Red Devils. I remember his voice from the warehouse. He admitted his attack on the work camp to his buddies,” Wade said. “That cinches it. The Red Devils are working with the conspiracy.”

Tobias did something that Wade did not expect then, he walked to the small cabinet at the back of his room, and pulled a bottle of bourbon and two shot glasses. He was silent as he poured himself a double measure, and then did the same for Wade.

“Danziel isn’t that much younger than me, and I grew up hearing the stories about him, right here, in Cheyenne. How he shot animals for fun, and then robbed people’s houses. By the time I was a deputy, we were pretty sure he had progressed to sticking people up on the Cheyenne – North Platte trail,” Tobias said.

“You never sent him away?” Wade asked.

Tobias laughed darkly. “Plenty of times. I did it myself once, and the sheriff I deputied to did it twice. But every time, Danziel just seemed to finally get out meaner and more cunning. Last I heard, he was involved in a shoot out north east of here, Minnesota way. I figured he’s end up dead on the road...I never expected to see him back.”

“With his own gang this time,” Wade said. He’d seen the type before, and knew the trouble that Tobias faced.

The truth was, just as there were men like Wade and Tobias around; men who had managed to do well in their professions through skill and determination, men who turned every failure into a reason to be better – there were also men like that *on the other side,* too. Hardened, career criminals, who turned every failed heist or jail attempt into an opportunity to become better at what they do.

They traveled from place to place, job to job. *Just like I do,* Wade realized. Where he looked for employment that would test his abilities, so did people like Danziel Marks.

“So, if this Danziel is a Cheyenne boy, and you knew him, it’s not a stretch to think that Silas Laramie knew him too?” Wade asked.

“Exactly,” Tobias finished his drink with a swig. “That’ll be why the Red Devils have been so successful, too. He know this place and the land around here like the back of his hand. Only this time around, Danziel has some very wealthy backing and he’s got friends.”

“Call in extra deputies,” Wade said immediately (although he also felt a flash of annoyance as to why Tobias hadn’t done that before). “Telegram North Platte, Fort Collins,” Wade said. “If you put the call out, they’ll come.”

Tobias nodded. “Aye, but will it be soon enough? We need a plan to deal with them here, ourselves. Silas has said as much that he’s not stopping. And Danziel? He’s a sly one. He’ll as soon stab us in our beds as look at us. And do the same to everyone we love, too.”

*Anna.* Wade thought of the tough, strong woman who lived all on her own, not far from here. He thought of how she had looked in the night when she had told him about her dead husband. Her eyes had been shining, but she had still been fierce, and strong.

Wade felt a chill run down his spine, but it wasn’t fear. He felt a strange sensation, like seeing his life in perspective for the first time.

*I can do this.*

It felt like all of his life he had been preparing for this moment. He was not interested in drifting any more. He was not going to run. These were the people that he had come to trust and respect. This was more than just a job, and right now he didn’t so much care if the Union Pacific paid him at all.

“I’ve got an idea,” he said.

# **Chapter 23**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

Everything had gone too far. The fires. The train crash. Now Silas was sending people to directly attack her home, too.

Anna’s thoughts were dark with worry as she rode for the rail encampment. It was a short way across the plains, and she chose to travel the harder, difficult terrain than pick the easy trails.

It wasn’t that she was scared of Silas’s lackeys finding her—although she knew that was a distinct possibility—it was the fact that she had to survive to get the job done.

Silas had gone too far. In truth, Anna felt guilty that he hadn’t been stopped a long time ago.

*But what if the Sheriff didn’t agree with our evidence?* Anna fretted as she rode. She saw the dust on the horizon, kicked up by the work camp. She allowed herself a moment of thanks that she wasn’t looking at thick plumes of smoke instead.

*What if they were on their own against Silas and the Red Devils?*

Anna didn’t know what she would do. But she knew she would do something. She felt a tension twisting inside of her, made up of fear and anger. Silas couldn’t just get away with everything that he had done. How many more people would die before he was done? Was she safe? What about her brother?

*What about Wade?*

Anna thought of the strong, taciturn man that she had met. She didn’t think she had ever met someone like him in all of her life. Wade Nash was stern, with something of the wilds about him that reminded her of a hunting wolf.

But he also had a tender side as well, didn’t he? Anna’s heart hitched when she thought of their whispered, soft conversation under the dark skies. He was a man who felt deeply, and who saw truly. Maybe that was why he always seemed so prickly.

*But what if…*

No. She wouldn’t allow herself to think of the worst. She knew that Wade had set himself on a collision course with Silas Laramie, and it was like watching two unstoppable bulls charging at each other. Neither men would feint. There was going to be a collision.

*I have to warn him Silas is coming for us.*

Anna set her knees a little tighter, urging Elsie faster as she rode the last mile down towards the rail encampment. It was late afternoon, as she had spent the whole rest of the day cleaning up her farm from the fire. She had considered sending word to Josiah, to ask him to come and watch the animals—but in the end she decided against it.

*I wont put anyone else in danger,* she swore once again.

She slowed Elsie when she reached the outskirts of the encampment, and saw three men rise from where they were resting by the new barn, with rifles in their hands. They wore simple vests and heavy work trousers, and she dimly recognized them from her other visits here.

“It’s okay! It’s her, Mrs Turner!” One of the men shouted, waving his hat to call the others off.

Anna pulled Elsie into a stamping halt, and saw that the rail team guards all had edgy, haunted looks on their faces. Not one of them looked as though they had more than a few hours sleep.

“You men alright?” She breathed.

“Can’t say so, ma’am,” the first one, who had an impressive beard but short shorn hair on top. “You know about the train attack? The Devils derailed an entire engine just yesterday.”

“What?” Anna blinked. She waited for the men to fill her in on the details. The tracks leading into Cheyenne had been attacked. Now there was no way in to Cheyenne, not until their work team could fix it. The man—Jaspeth—said that they had already split their numbers across both sites to try and speed the work.

*But that leaves you vulnerable here,* Anna saw the man’s worry at once. The threat of no new supplies, or Union Pacific hired guards coming their way was setting everyone’s teeth on edge.

It meant that they were alone.

“Is Wade here, or at the other crash?” Anna asked.

“He’s with the workers, sorting out the rotas. Everyone’s splitting their times between guard duty and track duty now, until the Sheriff pulls his finger out,” Jaspeth announced.

It was clear that relations were strained between the workers and the city. *Which is exactly what Silas wants,* Anna realized. If enough of these workers walk out of the job, then that will make his case for being given the contract that much easier, wouldn’t it?

“Hang in there, Mr. Nash is a strong man. I trust him,” Anna promised.

“Oh, I know that, ma’am. From the look I’ve seen in his eyes, I just wish someone would give him license to clean up this mess himself, if you know what I mean!” Jaspeth said.

Anna did know what he meant. Sometimes, she felt exactly the same. She turned Elsie and rode the short way to where there was a big gathering of men outside the barn. The engines were stilled, and it didn’t look as though there were any work teams out on the tracks today. Wade had pulled everyone in close.

*He’s keeping them safe,* Anna realized. If Wade had been foreman six months ago, then she was sure that none of the accidents would have happened.

*But then, I would probably never had met him, either…* She surprised herself when her heart lurched at that.

*I care about him, don’t I?* She thought, as she reached the edge of the crowd, and Wade raised his head in her direction. It was like some sixth sense had told him to search for her.

“And that’s all I got for now! But we’ll get through this, if we stick together and you listen to your foremen. Abe will fill you in on the rest,” Wade called to his teams, before walking through the crowd. To his evident surprise there was a cheer, and hands clapped him on the back.

“Anna,” he breathed, smiling self consciously as he saw her.

*Heavens, but he is a beautiful man, isn’t he?*

She couldn’t help but grin herself at the site of him. Even though he must be under the most exquisite stress at the moment, he still managed to thrum with vitality. Just the sight of him lifted her spirits.

But they had much to talk about, Anna’s thoughts darkened. He needs to know about the fire. He needs to know that Silas is coming for them...

“Wade-” Anna began. They had walked away from the gathering, out past the barn to where the long, gold and green prairie rolled like God’s own blanket ahead of them.

She turned to face him – just as there was the slightest whisper of air between them.

Anna heard the crack a second later, and Wade’s sudden huff of out breath.

*What?*

Everything fell into slow motion. Her mind registered what the sound was, gunshot, in the same moment that Wade was spilling to the floor, a look of pain crossing his features.

“*Wade!”* She screamed.

“Down, down!” Wade managed to gasp, waving one arm towards her, urging her to the floor, before he suddenly snarled in pain.

Blood was soaking his shirt, and spilling into the dusty ground behind him.

# **Chapter 24**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

*“Down-stay down!”*

Wade reached for Anna as the world turned red with pain, but he couldn’t reach her. She was still standing over him, a look of horror crossing her face.

*You have to get down! The shooter-*

Wade tried to shout out, but the pain had knocked all the breath from his body. Anna wasn’t moving. She was in danger-

“Mr. Nash? Wade? You’re okay. Listen to me, you’re going to be okay…” a woman’s voice said. It wasn’t anyone that Wade recognized.

“Just so long as I can stop this bleeding, that is…” the voice muttered under her breath.

His vision resolved, seeing the shake of tarpaulin over him. He heard the creak of wheels, and he jostled on the thin blanket he lay on. Every movement brought with it a new stab of pain from his left shoulder.

He was on a cart, and they were moving, not too slowly or gracefully. A woman with blonde hair was hunched over him, dressed in regular shirt and trousers, and when her arms moved he felt a sudden pressure against his shoulder and neck.

“*Ach!”* He hissed as a wave of torment shot down his arm, like an electric pulse. He gritted his teeth, biting down on the pain to catch it.

*I’m breathing. I’m breathing and I’m in pain. That means I’m halfway to living,* Wade thought. Even in this state, he knew the difference from being hurt and really being in trouble. The times when he had been near death—wen he had exposure in the Rocky Mountains, or when a the flux had hit him hard one winter in Nebraska, he had slipped in and out of consciousness. His body had felt far away, and his thoughts had none of the sharp-edged awareness he now had.

*And I’m not going to give Silas the satisfaction of killing me!* He pushed his arms down, trying to push himself up, but as soon as he put pressure on his left, another blossom of crimson anguish thumped him back down on the floor.

“Mr. Nash, you need to stop that. My name is Abigail Thorn, I’m a Doctor and I don’t need to be holding you down while I work!” the woman said sharply.

“But, Anna…” Wade hissed. She had been right there, standing beside him when the shot had fired. Had there just been one? Or had the shooting continued? Had she been hit? Where was she-

“I’m right here, Wade,” Anna’s voice said, and he felt a warm hand slip over his clenched fist. A second later, her face, her beautiful, troubled face, hovered into view. Her eyes were wide with worry, but she tried to smile weakly at him. She had a streak of dried blood over her forehead.

“You’re hurt,” Wade gasped. Every time he breathed it hurt.

Anna blinked at him in confusion for a moment, and then shook her head. “Oh no, that’s your blood, Wade. I helped put you in the wagon. We’re heading for the doctor’s surgery, in Cheyenne. Just hang on.”

“What – how bad is it?” Wade asked, or meant to ask, before Abigail presented a new thump of pressure on his shoulder, eliciting a new wave of pain. He felt lightheaded.

“Hand me that leather box,” Abigail said, as Anna moved away, but kept holding Wade’s hand. She felt him squeeze it tightly as she presented somwthing to the doctor.

The wagon jumped again, and Wade growled.

“Did you get him? The shooter?” he gasped.

“No, don’t think about that now…” Anna was saying, as Abigail turned back to him, holding a small, brown glass bottle.

“Right. Open up, Mr. Nash. This laudanum will probably knock you out – but at least I’ll be able to dig out that bullet without you moving every ten seconds!” Abigail said.

*Laudanum?* Wade had never liked painkillers. Laudanum, which was a lighter version of pure opium and the even stronger morphine, was especially something he had stayed away from. How many people had he seen get hooked on that stuff.

“Just give me some rye, I’ll be fine-” he said, as Abigail pressed the compresses down on his wound, and his vision doubled. He gasped for air, and in that moment, the doctor tipped a good measure of the sweet-tasting alcohol down his gullet.

“There. All my patients have to take their medicine, Mr. Nash!” the doctor was fierce, it seemed. Wade was about to complain and ask for a measure of rye instead, but then a woozy feeling washed over him, and he fell downwards into a deep, black sleep.

\* \* \*

The next time Wade woke up, he did so with a wave of exhaustion that was somehow more tiring than if he had been asleep. He was lying on his back, in a white room that smelled of disinfectant. There were murmuring voices nearby, and one he recognized as Sheriff Cain.

Wade shifted in his bed, expecting a stab of pain but he felt nothing but a dull ache through his left arm and shoulder. He tried to lift it, but found that his arm was firmly strapped in a sling.

“Oh, you’re awake! Good.” Anna’s voice breathed beside of him, as she appeared in his vision.

He was on a simple bed, while Anna was seated beside him, she had dark circles under eyes, and yet somehow she still managed to loo radiantly beautiful.

“Have you slept at all?” Wade asked. He pushed himself up in his bed, and felt only a slight twinge of pain this time. It was the laudanum. Wade could feel it’s woozy effects on the edge of his consciousness.

“Oh, yes, of course,” Anna looked away, and Wade was surprised when he saw her blush. “I u, I grabbed a few minutes here on the chair. I couldn’t leave you wounded.”

“But…” Wade was about to argue that she had a farm to run, but shook his head. He had no business telling her what she already knew. “How long have I been out?” He asked instead.

“Just a night. We got you back to Cheyenne, and Abigail – Doctor Thorn, that is – took a bullet out of your shoulder, and stitched up your wound. She says that with a bit of luck, you should heal fine.”

“Right,” Wade nodded. That explained why his arm was in a sling, and why it hurt every time he tried to move it. A moment of worry surged through him.

His shoulder. Did that mean it had hit anything important.

He flexed his shoulder a little, and although it hurt and the muscles felt tight, he was grateful to feel it respond. Next he waggled his fingers in the sling, to find them all working.

“Oh!” Anna said. A pleased look crossed her face when she saw him move his hand. Instinctively, she reached out to grab his wounded hand. Her hand felt warm and calming.

“I’m so glad there’s no permanent damage-” she said hurriedly, when Wade glanced up at her.

*What was this amazing woman doing here, looking after me?* Wade thought in awe.

Anna had been through so much. She had told him about losing her husband to Silas, but not only that, on the ride back from the warehouse (which seemed like years ago now, Wade admitted) she had explained how she had lost her parents to sickness too. It was just her looking after her baby brother Josiah, and she had lost the family ranch.

But she was also the woman who had not stopped in her pursuit for justice, Wade marveled. At every step of the way, she had been by his side of conducting her own research into the Silas Laramie conspiracy; putting her own life and land on the line.

And what would she get at the end of it? Nothing, as far as Wade could see. She was doing it merely because it was the right thing to do.

*If I had met you before…* Wade thought wistfully. He had never allowed himself much thought of women, in truth, not after Sarah died. He had thought he was a lost soul, doomed never to find companionship or someone he could trust and respect ever again.

*But Anna…?* She was remarkable. She was unstoppable.

“I, uh, I really appreciate everything you’ve done,” Wade said heavily. His words felt thick in his mouth, and it wasn’t just the after effects of the drug. He felt clumsy and exposed. How were you supposed to talk to a woman, anyway? And why did it feel so difficult now?

“Oh!” Anna repeated, looking away as she blushed furiously once again.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid!* Wade cursed himself. He sounded like a drugged up fool. She must think he is raving-

Anna cleared her throat. “Uh yes, thank you. I...I mean, your arrival has had quite the effect on me,” she said softly, and squeezed his hand.

Before Wade could work out what exactly that meant, there was a loud cough from the door as Tobias Cain marched in, with Abigail following behind him. The Doctor was smirking as she walked in, and Wade saw her wink at Anna, who hurriedly grabbed her hand back from Wade’s own.

*What?*

“Wade. Good to see you awake. You had us scared there for a moment,” Tobias said. The Sheriff looked more haggard than usual, too. He had a day’s fresh stubble on him, and his mouth was a grim line.

“He’s a strong man. There was no danger to him pulling through,” Abigail said firmly, standing beside Tobias. She held up her hand, revealing the dark shape of a bullet slug in her hand. “I pulled this out of your shoulder. If your man had been even a marginally better shot, it could have cut an artery in your neck, or gone straight to the heart. You should count yourself lucky you must have moved at the last minute. And that Anna was here to staunch the bleeding as soon as she did.”

“I am lucky,” Wade said. He glanced at Anna, to see her hurriedly look away.

*What did I do to deserve this loyalty from her?* Wade wondered.

“Wade, you were shot at the work encampment, and a rider was seen high-tailing it across the plains on horseback. We haven’t got a solid lead on who they are, but from the general descriptions, the build and the method of attack, it sounds like Danziel.” Tobias said.

“The threat,” Wade said, he winced a little, nodding to the doctor.

“Don’t you worry about Abigail. She knows pretty much everything that’s been happening to me,” Anna said.

“I’m no friend of Silas Laramie, if that is what you’re referring to,” Abigail said with a grimace.

The Sheriff cleared his throat. “Good. We can speak clearly then. Yes, it sounds like Silas’s threat came good. If we add that to the attack on Anna’s farm the night before last…”

“What?” Wade said, turning so fast to ask Anna that his shoulder hurt.

“Careful! Don’t burst my stitches!” Abigail said quickly.

But Wade could only focus on Anna, sitting beside him. “It’s true. It’s what I came to the encampment to tell you about, actually. Someone tried to set fire to my ranch. I managed to catch it, but the very next day, Constable-” she pulled a sour face, “-happened to show up, offering me an even lower sum to sell out. It seemed pretty obvious what was going on to me,” Anna ended on a grimace. Her voice shook in anger.

“Yes. Silas is trying to scare you off. He knows you’re after him,” Wade whispered. *Not just scare her off – get rid of her completely.*

“That’s what we figured, too. But now, with the fire and the shooting and Danziel Mark back in town, it’s clear that Silas has upped his game. It’s not safe for you here, Wade, and that is why we’re going to move you.” Tobias said heavily, taking a step back and nodding for Abigail to continue.

“Not safe?” Wade repeated. He quickly reordered his opinions of Cheyenne, and of how much power the Sheriff thought he himself had.

Tobias was worried. If Danziel can shoot a man in broad daylight and get away with it, then what would it take for him to sneak into the doctor’s surgery?

*And Danziel had his gang of Red Devils with him, too.* Tobias probably didn’t want a shoot out right in the middle of Cheyenne streets, where innocents were bound to get hurt.

“Okay, Mr. Nash. Anna has very kindly agreed for you to stay at hers, which is very nice of her, isn’t it?” Abigail said pointedly, with a wicked smile on her face.

*Just what are you getting at?* Wade wanted to ask, but now wasn’t the time.

The Doctor had already collected his things on the small side table beside the bed, and she progressed to checking his wound and running through some simple checks.

“Yep. He’s good to go. Apart from blood loss and weakness, I dare say he’ll be fit for anything before too long,” Abigail announced, making Wade feel like he was a prize hieffer and not a human being at all.

“I’m sorry, Wade, but it looks like you have to be ready. We have no idea what Silas will do next,” Tobias said, as Wade swung his legs over the side of the bed, and Abigail helped him to his feet.

“We strike first,” Wade said firmly, his eyes catching Tobias’s own. “We strike Silas, and we strike hard.”

# **Chapter 25**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“Coffee’s up!”

Wade heard Anna’s voice ring from the stairwell before a creak of floorboards announced her arrival to his room.

“Wade?” There was a gentle knock, before she pushed open the door.

“Lucky I was dressed,” Wade observed wryly, from where he was standing by the wardrobe, watching his reflection in the mirror as he did the buttons up on his jerkin.

“Oh, I mean-” Anna said, before blushing furiously. “I mean, you should really keep your door closed in that case!” She returned tartly.

*It was supposed to be a joke,* Wade started to grin, but he could see Anna was annoyed.

“And just what are you doing up, anyway? Abigail told you to rest at least for a week!” she said.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” Wade said. He finished his buttons and rolled his shoulders experimentally. There was a twinge of pain, and the strange hot tightness of fresh wound.

“See!” Anna had seen his pained expression. “If you keep messing with it, it won’t heal right! Come, let me take a look!” She demanded.

“I’m fine, honestly,” Wade lied.

But Anna had already stalked up to him, reaching up to grip his upper arm hard. Wade managed to suppress a grunt.

“Let me see. If you’re bleeding again!” she said with a glare.

*Hey! What have I done wrong?* Wade felt confused. He wasn’t expecting Anna to be so uptight. If anything, he had thought she would be happy to see him up and around.

“On the bed. And don’t be arguing with me, Mr. Nash.” Anna said, patting him on the chest. Wade felt like he really had no choice, as he had seen in the last week of recovery that when Anna got an idea into her head, then there was no shifting it.

Ever since Wade had arrived here, he had seen how Anna lived and how hard she worked. Her ranch was not large, but it was also not inconsiderable, either. Most of it was given over to grazing land that she rented out to the drovers and teamsters of nearby Cheyenne. She had scaled back her actual holdings just to concentrate on the horses and her small collection of goats and chickens for the kitchen.

Still, it was a lot of work all on one person’s shoulders. Her brother Josiah came around as often as he could, and Abigail the doctor popped in, but in truth, Wade could see that Anna really didn’t have the resources to fully develop the ranch.

The small barn was still a ruin, as Anna was worked off her feet with the rest of the ranch to properly fix it up. Wade could see it from his window, and she had been lucky that the fire hadn’t jumped to the big farm, as well.

*But she has help, if she would accept it,* Wade considered, as he carefully undid his top buttons and allowed Anna to peel back his shirt and jerkin.

The Hamptons – the older couple that her brother Josiah worked for – had come over with a cart of feed and some spare tools for her, and one time Abigail had arrived with a couple of Cheyenne ranchers who seemed to be friends of the family.

*Everyone likes her. They respect her,* Wade considered the woman who was right now pursing her lips and looking disapprovingly at his shoulder.

“It’s bleeding. Wait a minute,” she said, stalking away from him to where Wade knew she kept a medical box in the pantry. He heard muttered voices downstairs, which were presumably Josiah and Tobias, who had ridden over this morning for their first proper meeting since the shooting.

The thing with Anna, was that she didn’t want to accept help, Wade saw. She was determined to do all of this herself.

*She’s proving something to the world,* Wade considered, hearing a lighter chuckle of laughter, before Anna’s steps creaked on the floorboards once more.

*She doesn’t want to be seen as weak.* Wade could recognize that. He remembered a time when he had felt utterly broken by the loss of his father and fiance. He had thought that was all he was, and he hated even more if anyone had seen him as such.

*So I pushed myself harder. Turned myself into someone who no one would ever question—or ever help.*

“Right. Here we go. Abigail’s not here yet, but she’s shown me what to do,” Anna said in a matter of fact way, leaning over him where he sat on the bed, and carefully peeled back the bandaging.

Wade breathed in sharply.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she said, her voice softer than before. She came into her own when she was looking after people, Wade saw.

But it wasn’t (just) the pain, was it? It had been a long time since Wade had breathed in a woman like this. He could smell the faint lavender soap she used in the morning, and the wild, fresh ozone of the prairie air in her hair. He heard her breathing hitch just a little as she leaned against him.

“I-” Wade startled himself by saying. He was about to apologize again for startling her this morning, but that felt a silly thing to say.

*Why do I feel so suddenly tongue-tied around her?*

But then she dabbed at his wound with something astringent and antiseptic. Wade felt his muscles tighten, and he involuntarily pressed a little deeper into her.

He heard Anna take a deeper breath, before she pulled back. “The uh, a new bandage…” she said distractedly, hurriedly pressing a new wad of clean cotton to his shoulder wound, and then winding the longer holding bandage around his arm.

“There,” she said when she was finally done. She stepped back, and looked flushed. She looked so vulnerable sometimes, and yet at others could be so powerful and strong. Anna Turner was a mystery, a marvelous paradox of beauty and softness and courage, all wrapped up into one.

“Thank you,” Wade said softly. He looked up at her, to see that her eyes were full and shining as they looked at him.

“I was scared, you know. Of course I was,” Anna said softly. “When you were hurt, I was scared…”

“I know,” Wade said suddenly. There was no need for her to say it out loud. He could feel the tension in the air. He felt a tightness in his chest, and it was nothing to do with the bandage.

“I was scared too,” he admitted. “I thought you had been hurt. I didn’t, I wouldn’t ever want you-” he began, for a loud call to sound up the stairs underneath them.

“Anna! What are you doing up there!” It was Josiah, her brother.

“Right. Yes. We’d better…” Anna said, turning to the door quickly.

Wade felt something shift in his heart, like a weight he had been carrying for years had finally moved, if only a few inches. He couldn’t take his eyes off her, the way she moved. He felt a lightness he hadn’t felt for a long, long time.

*I would do anything to protect her,* he vowed, buttoning his shirt and standing up to follow her down the stairs.

“Here he is!” Josiah laughed from the kitchen as soon as Wade reached the end of the stairs. Anna had already gone on ahead, joining her brother and Tobias as she brought out the coffee pot, and took out an apple pie that had been cooling by the window.

“Josiah,” Wade greeted him, reaching to shake his hand. Anna’s brother was younger than his sister by five years or so, but he was much larger. Hard work had swelled his shoulders and thickened his neck. He had the same gold-auburn hair as his sister, and clear gray eyes. Wade liked him. He was open, and honest, and fiercely protective of Anna.

“Good to see you on your feet, Wade. You think you’re going to be up for this?” Tobias cleared his throat, grabbing a mug of coffee as he set down. He had brought with him a map of Cheyenne, along with the stolen ledgers and letters that detailed Silas’s corruption.

“I’ll be ready,” Wade promised. Whatever his protesting body thought—or Anna, apparently. She was looking at him in alarm, but said nothing.

Wade took a chair, and did his best not to show the stiffness he had down one side. It usually came on in the later afternoon, when his still healing shoulder tired.

“You’ve been thinking about my suggestion?” Wade asked Tobias, who nodded. Wade turned to explain it for Tobias’s sake.

“Silas isn’t going to stop. Not on his own. But the problem isn’t *him*, it’s Danziel Marks and the Red Devils. They’re the ones who are setting the explosives…”

“And taking pot shots at railway workers,” Anna said lightly as she took a seat beside Josiah.

Wade grimaced a little. He didn’t want attention to be drawn to his wound. “So. We can spend forever combing the prairie for their hide out and perhaps never find it. The Red Devils are masked, so they might just disappear into Cheyenne when they know we’re hunting them,” Wade pointed out.

He had thought of this plan just a couple of days into his convalescence, and had asked Anna to send for Tobias. The two had discussed it, and now it seemed that the Sheriff had given him his blessing.

*It’s simple,* Wade thought. *What do you do when you are being hunted by wolves?*

The plan had come to Wade in a flash, one night as he lay in bed and listening to the lonely howls of wolves outside the Turner ranch. He remembered being hunted by a particularly stubborn pack of them two winters ago. The wolves must have been starving, as they didn’t scare when he fired his gun.

Every night they would return, and every night he would have to stay awake by his fire in the freezing ice and snow, firing pot shots to scare them off. Then it would happen the next night, and the next…

*Until I figured out a way to deal with it.*

Wade had set a trap, catching a fine young deer. He had killed the animal, and instead of eating it, he had left it skinned by his fire.

“The Red Devils are working to halt all work on the railway, at Silas’s blessing,” Wade said. He leaned over the map, and pointed to the crosshatched line that led towards them.

“As we know, the railway had been out of use as they’re repairing the tracks after the crash. That means the Red Devils have the upper hand at the moment. It also means that they’ll be expecting us to fix it,” Wade said. He had already sent, through Tobias and then through one of his deputies, word to ask Abe and Jaspeth to slow their work teams right down. He knew it would annoy Franklin, but Union Pacific would thank him when his plan worked out.

“We bring up an essential wagon to the crash site. We let it be known that it’s stuffed full of equipment, and more importantly; the extra salary I’ve been arguing the company give the workers,” Wade said.

“But...the Red Devils will go straight for it!” Josiah said.

“Exactly,” Wade grinned. He knew that they couldn’t resist it. Once they had stolen the wages of the workers, then it was almost certain that a large portion of the work camp would walk off site. The project would be on it’s last legs.

Wade pointed to a point on the map, almost a mile from the crashed engine site. “The road crosses past a bluff here. That is where we’ll let it be known the wagon is being delivered to me, and me alone. Tobias will have the escort leave the wagon before it passes, leaving the wagon wide open, Meanwhile, the rest of Cheyenne’s deputies will be behind this bluff. Then the escort doubles back, surrounding them.”

“That’s genius!” Josiah said loudly, slapping his hat on the table. He wore a savage grin. Wade saw how much a win would mean to the people of Cheyenne. How long had they been under threat of Silas and his cronies?

*Too long.*

“And me. I’m going to be there,” Anna’s voice was quiet, but it cut through her brothers’ excitement.

*What?* Wade felt like he had been slapped. A chill ran down his spine. “No, Anna. This is dangerous. If you got hurt-” he started to say.

Anna cut him off cleanly, clearing her throat and staring hard at him. She had that look that he had seen her have when she wasn’t going to be budged by anything.

“Wade. The man behind this killed people. Not only people I knew in this town, but Jacob, too. Silas attacked Tommy. He sent people to attack my home. I’m not sitting this one out. I couldn’t even if I wanted to,” Anna said sternly. Wade could see the passion and bravery shining through her, as she lifted her chin and declared.

“I’ve got everything in this fight, and I’m seeing good people get hurt around me. I can’t sit this one out. I need to be there, or else I will spend the rest of my life regretting it,” she said, before glancing hard at Wade.

“Besides which, you can’t wait there with the wagon all on your own. That would be madness. Danziel has already shot you once, he won’t stop when he see’s you again.” Anna said.

“I don’t need…” Wade started to shake his head.

“Enough of that, Wade. And yes, you do. Not just because you’re injured, but because I want this plan to work. I’m going to meet that decoy wagon with you. Understood?” Anna said.

A wry smile crossed Tobias’s face then, as it seemed he knew quite well enough not to argue with Anna Turner.

“Me too,” Josiah said firmly. Strangely, Wade felt more worried about Josiah being there.

“You can shoot?” Wade turned to ask him immediately, for Josiah to nod.

“Even did a year as a deputy, didn’t I, Tobias?” Josiah said.

The Sheriff nodded. “He knows his way around a gun.”

Wade looked between the brother and sister, but realized that one wasn’t about to go without the other. He wanted to tell Anna to stay back, for her own safety if nothing else, but knew she would never agree to that.

*And we could do with the people,* Wade sighed. There was no clear idea on how many Red Devils there were. Some reports said a dozen, other said two dozen. The Sheriff would have to raise a substantial number of deputies to overpower them, and do it all quietly in the week that followed.

“Then that’s it. If you know someone you can trust, who won’t back down from pulling the trigger when they have to, then forward them to the Sheriff, here,” Wade said. He leaned back in his chair.

*There.* The plan was in motion now. Everyone in this room was behind it. Now all Wade had to do was to wait.

“And *you’re* going to be fit enough?” Tobias asked seriously. “Your shoulder, I mean.”

Wade nodded at once. “I’ll be ready.”

He felt a twinge run through his arm, and prayed that it would be true.

# **Chapter 26**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“Easy boy,” Wade said softly to Charger, as the wagon rattled to a stop, with the rise of the bluff at it’s back. It was almost midday, and the high sun caught the sage bushes on the bluff, showing off their purple and blue.

*It really was beautiful out here,* Wade thought as he sat in his saddle. He knew this was not the time to be thinking about this. He should be keeping his eyes on the prairie for signs of movement, but he couldn’t help marveling at the myriad colors he could see. The West was rugged and harsh, but it was also breathtaking. Wade saw the purples and blues of sage bushes, but also the vivid greens and lighter yellows of prairie grasses; delicate brush of white and pink prairie flowers; the deep reds, oranges, or yellows of the rocks.

*It’s something worth protecting,* he thought, when Anna shifted in her seat nearby him. She wore a thick, heavy cloak just as her brother Josiah did, sitting beside her on the drivers bench of the wagon. Tobias had done what he could to make them look like deputies, with rifles stashed at their feet, and heavy, dusty work wear on their legs.

Tobias rode up slowly towards them, raising a hand as he did so, for all the world as if he were greeting them for a hand-over.

His eyes locked on Anna, and he nodded.

*Get off the wagon!* He urged her. That was the plan. Both she and Tobias would be a little safer underneath it.

But Anna didn’t budge from her seat. Instead, her brother Tobias was the one to stand up, jumping down and casually sauntering to the back of the wagon, as if he were about to show the boss the goods.

*Where are they?* Tobias scanned the horizon ahead of him. He had chosen this spot because he should have a clear view for miles ahead.

But there was no dust on the horizon. There was no sign of riders approaching at speed.

Tobias slowed Charger, throwing his leg over the saddle and landing on the floor. A pain darted up his left arm and he did his best to hide his flinch.

*I can’t let them see I’m injured,* Wade thought. He meant the Red Devils, but knew he could just as well be talking about Anna and Josiah, too.

“Jump underneath at the first sign,” Wade whispered to Josiah, as the man made a show of reaching for the canvas flap at the back of the wagon.

Just as a crack of rifle fire burst from the bluff above them.

\* \* \*

*They were on the bluff!*

Wade hadn’t thought they would take the hill, as it was steep on the side that faced them, but it was clear that the Red Devils must have been watching them for a long time, maybe even all morning.

“Down!” Wade said quickly, as Josiah jumped for the ground underneath the wagon. Wade spun, grabbing his rifle from Charger before slapping the horses rump. As bullets hit the ground at their feet, the horse jumped off, eager to be away from the mayhem.

Wade hit the side of the wagon, dropping into a crouch as he aimed back up the bluff.

It was going to be difficult if they were going to hold the bluff. They had a clear line of sight, and could pick them off.

But Wade could only see a few people up there on the rise of rock. Where was Danziel? Where were the rest?

With the thunder of hooves, his questions were answered. Horses poured out from the city-end of the bluff, their charge a storm of sound and dust as they surged down onto the track.

“Anna!” Wade shouted. He ran up the far side of the wagon, to see Anna had already dropped to the floor by the wheel, sighting with her rifle.

“Hold! Hold your fire!” A slurred voice echoed against the hill.

The riders were still moving forward, but one of them had pulled out in front. Wade recognized the shock of red hair and the red bandanna around his neck.

It was him. Danziel Marks.

“You’re surrounded! There’s only three of you! Throw your weapons and come out!” Danziel shouted, as he fired his pistol in the air. The Red Devils had slowed to a trot, and Wade quickly counted fourteen of them.

They were going to overwhelm them in minutes.

“Wade!” Anna whispered from where she crouched in front of him. Anger caught through her voice.

*Tobias and the deputies were late.* Wade suddenly saw how they had got it do wrong. Tobias must have seen the Devils making for the bluff, and chosen to circle around the other way.

“We just have to hold them for a little while,” Wade whispered, before suddenly shouting.

“We know who you are, Danziel! This is your last chance to give yourself up!” Wade shouted.

Danziel slowed his horse to a walk, and Wade heard his barking laugh.

“Do you think I care if you know my name, lawman?” Danziel shouted.

Of course the bandit didn’t. He hadn’t even bothered to mask his face, had he?

“Oh, you’re not a lawman anymore though, are ya?” Danziel called out. He rode his horse back and forth in front of his slowly encroaching men.

“If they get closer than that last sage bush, you shoot,” Wade whispered to Anna, and then dove back, around the rear of the wagon and to the other side.

*I’ll not draw fire to Anna and Josiah.*

“You’re a wannabe lawman, aren’t you Wade Nash!” Danziel crowed. “You see, I know your name, too. How’s that bullet of mine? You caught it good, did you?”

*Just need to keep them busy,* Wade reminded himself. He stepped out from the far side of the wagon, his rifle up and tracking Danziel’s movements.

“We got you, Danziel. We know all about the deal with Silas. It’s all over for you now, just a matter of time!” Wade shouted.

He knew he was leaving himself exposed to the shooters on the bluff. But he reckoned that they wouldn’t take him out without Danziel’s say-so. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have stopped shooting.

“Ha! That’s what’s wrong with you law types,” Danziel threw his words back at him. He continued moving, presenting a harder target. “You think you’re God’s gift. But the West isn’t like that. It’s down to what you can take. Silas understands that, and so do I!”

Danziel raised his hand towards the bluff, and Wade swung himself back behind the wagon as shots fired from the bluff above him. They tore through the wagon’s canvas, and hit the floor.

*But they’re not the best of shots,* Wade saw. These bandits hadn’t been sharpshooters. He doubted they had even served in the army.

He slid half his body out from the back of the wagon, taking a rapid shot at Danziel. His first one missed, but his repeater rifle offered him a second. His hands flickered to one side, and he shot again…the bullet must have been close, because this time the horse suddenly reared, prancing to one side – and spilling Danziel in the dirt.

Wade twisted back behind the wagon, as the bluff shooters concentrated their fire on him. He could hear gun fire bursting through the air, and knew that I wasn’t just from the hill above.

“Reload!” He heard Anna shout through the thunder of hooves – just as horses appeared around the side of the wagon.

The first of the Red Devils charged past, firing wildly at them. Wade jumped to one side, dropping his rifle and pulling one of his pistols as he rolled in the dirt.

*“Ach!”* Pain flared down his left shoulder as he skidded out of his roll. He shoved that pain down, and took aim.

His first shot took one of the Red Devils clear off his horse. His next sent another slumping in his saddle.

But there were too many of them. They were everywhere. Gun shots burst from underneath the wagon as Anna and Josiah fired back.

Even with their cover, there was simply too many attackers.

*Josiah was going to die. Anna was going to die.* Wade grabbed his second pistol in hand, running to the end of the wagon as he fired at the charging Devils. He took another one from their horse, and continued sprinting, providing a moving target, and drawing fire away from the wagon.

Before Wade took his forth step, there was a loud blare of a bugle. He jumped, rolling on the floor as bullets hit the deck around him—and then suddenly no one was shooting at him.

Riders were streaming around the same edge of the bluff that the Red Devils had come in. There were *a lot* of them, and Wade saw the blue of army uniforms.

“Soldiers! Soldiers from Fort Collins!” Wade shouted in joy. Tobias had come through, and not only did he have his deputies, but a squad of trained army shooters, quickly spreading out to surround the Red Devils.

It was mayhem as the two groups clashed. The ground shook with the thunder of horses hooves, and Wade was temporarily forgotten. Wade saw Red Devils being shot from their steeds at every turn, and it didn’t take them long for the group to decide to flee. They scattered, streaming past him as the soldiers from Fort Collins charged.

But not all of them.

There was one figure running past the charging horses, and limping.

“Danziel!” Wade shouted at him, pointing his gun at him.

He was making for the bluff, clearly trying to hide himself in the sage bushes until the chaos had died down.

Danziel snarled, spun on his heel. In a moment, Wade saw the bandit raising his gun in his direction.

Wade fired. It was a fast hip shot, and it hit the bandit square in the chest.

“He’s down!” Wade shouted, running forwards to kick Danziel’s gun away as Tobias’s deputies cantered around him.

“The ones on the bluff have run. But we’ll track them,” Tobias gasped for air. They could hear the thunder of hooves in the distance as the soldiers chased the last of the Red Devils.

“Anna,” Wade said, turning back to sprint towards the wagon, just as Anna herself crawled out from under the wagon, with Josiah behind her.

She ran to him, and he caught her.

“You’re safe. Thank God you’re safe,” she said, over and over, into his ear.

# **Chapter 27**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1878**

“It’s over.”

Wade murmured as he stood next to Anna, outside the Cheyenne theater. They watched the activities unfolding in front of them, as the Sheriff’s deputies had formed a circle around the offices of Laramie, Faber and Mills. Quite a crowd had gathered when they saw the troop of deputies riding through town, and now Wade and Anna stood alongside Josiah and Ezekiel the blacksmith, along with a dozen others.

The front door banged, and out marched another deputy, with Faber, Mills, Gregor, and finally Silas himself, whose cuffed hands were being held by the Sheriff himself.

There was a murmur from the crowd, and then a ripple of laughter as the conspirators were led into the wagon. Wade hadn’t been expecting that, but it turned out that quite a few townsfolk of Cheyenne had bad feelings towards the businessmen of Cheyenne.

There was a scuffle, as Silas resisted. He suddenly wrenched himself out of Tobias’s hands, and shouted imperiously into the crowd.

“You ungrateful wretches! I did everything for you, everything!” He pouted.

He sounded like a child, Wade thought.

Tobias darted forward, seizing Silas in his stronger arms and shoved him, forcefully, into the back of the wagon. There was an outbreak of laughter, and then applause.

“And good riddance!” Ezekial shouted, his booming voice rising over the crowd to sounds of more cheers. At the wagon, Wade saw Tobias’s eyes lift and scan the crowd as he mounted his horse. Wade lifted his hat and the Sheriff saw him, and nodded firmly.

It was done. Cheyenne was safe.

Wade felt Anna shift next to him, and a deep sigh run through her. Her face looked five years younger in an instant, as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

“I can’t believe it, not really,” Anna whispered. She turned to look up at him as the crowd started to disperse.

“You, uh, you can stay at the house you know,” her voice was soft, like summer rain. “You’re still healing,” she added quickly.

Wade actually felt pretty good, but he had to admit that his shoulder did still hurt.

“I’d be delighted to,” he murmured.

\* \* \*

The cart rattled down the track that led to the Turner ranch, after just delivering the store of wooden timbers, nails, and tar that Wade needed for the barn rebuild.

“You really think we can get it done this summer?” Anna asked at his side.

She wore her work clothes, which for her meant sensible trousers and a heavy work shirt, with her hair tied back under her hat. Even in this manly wear, she still managed to look elegant, Wade thought.

“If we can get Josiah to help out, that is,” Wade agreed. He picked up three of the planks and only felt a small twinge from his shoulder as he carried them over to the small barn.

“He might. He said the Hampton’s are considering selling half their ranch to him, seeing as he’s put so much work in. He’s saying he’d start small, maybe come in with me on some more horse studs,” Anna said.

Wade nodded, and tried not to show how stiff his shoulder felt. He felt glad for Josiah. The young man worked hard. And a partnership with his sister would only be in everyone’s benefit.

Suddenly, his shoulder twinged, and his grip slipped. The planks spilled out onto the ground.

“Darn it!” He swore.

“Wade!” Anna was at his side in moments. “You’re shoulder. It’s still hurting!” She sounded shocked.

“No, not so much, just a little when I overdo it-” Wade began – but then Anna walked up to him, and put a hand on his chest, stilling him.

“I won’t hear it, Wade. Stop. Right now. Do you know how worried I’ve been for you?” she said, her voice breaking a little as she stared hard at him.

“Worried?” Wade said. He wanted to grin, to laugh it off, but he couldn’t with her eyes looking up at him, so clear and so close.

“Of course I’m worried,” Anna said. Her words faltered, and then when her voice came back it was softer.

“You’ve done so much for me, for us, for this town. And it’s cost you. I see that. I-”

She was flustered, and Wade knew what she was going to say as her eyes searched for his.

“I couldn’t have done any of this without you,” Wade said firmly. His hand reached for hers, and felt the electric touch as their fingers wound around each others. “I’ve come to care about you an awful lot, Anna Turner,” he said. “And I hope you feel the same, too.”

He saw her face transform, the worry falling from her, and her eyes brightening. “I thought you were going to make me say it,” she whispered, as Wade drew her to his body, and kissed her deeply.

For the first time in years, Wade felt at peace.

# **Epilogue**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1879**

“Well, it took you long enough!” Josiah called through the open door as Wade hurriedly finished buttoned his waistcoat. It was a brocade waistcoat that Tobias had loaned him, as both men had a similar build. The cloth was a fine ivory, with pale gold swirls picked out in shining ribbon.

“It’s far too fancy for me,” Wade grumbled, finishing the buttons and hearing a laugh at the door.

Josiah Turner stood there, dressed in a suit that looked as though it had been taken in several times, and was several decades out of date. The tall man even toyed with a full stove pipe hat in his hands.

They stood in the upstairs of the Turner residence, with Wade finally turning around and raising his arms. His shoulder only twinged every now and again when it was deeply cold, or when he was deeply tired.

“Okay, how do I look?” He asked.

Josiah squinted at him. “I don’t think it’s me you want to be asking that of, is it?” He said, as there was a sudden bang of the door downstairs.

“You two! Everyone’s waiting! What’s taking you so long!” Anna’s voice rang up the stairs, followed by the sound of thumping feet.

“No, Anna, wait-!” Josiah turned around, but it was too late. Wade heard her clump to the top landing, and he could almost feel her waves of anger.

“So help me, Josiah Turner, if you don’t get your butt out there and start holding a bouquet I will clobber you!” Anna said.

Josiah threw a look over his shoulder at Wade. He looked petrified.

Wade couldn’t help it. He started to laugh as Josiah hurriedly jumped away.

“Oh, you think this is funny, do you?” Anna appeared at the door.

“I just never thought I’d be bullied on my wedding day,” Wade said, dabbing at his eyes with his handkerchief and looking up-

To feel his draw dropping.

Anna Turner stood in the doorway in front of him, and she looked *radiant.*

Her auburn hair had been mounded up onto the top of her head, and teased into curls that fell around her face. She wore a bone ivory dress with gold embellishments that matched the waistcoat that he wore. The dress hugged her form perfectly, and she held it up with one hand, to stop it trailing on the floorboards. This did have the effect of revealing the sturdy work boots that she still wore underneath.

“Anna,” Wade gasped. She wasn’t just beautiful. She was a *goddess*

“I, yes, well, Stop that.” Anna said abruptly, blushing, and then breaking into a grin. “You seem to scrub up fairly okay too.”

she grinned at him in that mischievous way she had, and all thoughts of the imminent wedding went straight out of Wade’s mind. If they didn’t have half of Cheyenne standing around in their lower paddock, then Wade would have told her they should just run away right then and there.

“I mean, can they wait?” Wade said.

Anna blushed deeper still, and then cackled with laughter. She raised her hand. “It would a shame to waste the wine though. Care to take my hand, Mr. Nash?”

It felt like his heart was growing bigger and bigger in his body, as if it was about to burst, only it didn’t. It just kept on growing with a feeling of contentment and joy.

Wade took her hand, folding it under his elbow as he walked down the stairs with Anna Turner on his arm, soon to be Anna Nash.

Everything felt like a dream. How had his life come to this? Who would have thought he would ever find love again? Or ever feel so at peace?

He opened the door to a bright, summer day with a fresh breeze off the western mountains. The crowds were already gathered, and had been arriving all morning. A tent had been set up the lower paddock, but Wade was escorting her to the bower of twined willow branches and flowers that Josiah and Abigail had woven, that stood beside it.

Wade saw all of Cheyenne’s great and good standing up there, dressed in a range of suits and dresses that ranged from the pristine to the second hand.

Sheriff Tobias Cain stood with his wife and several deputies with his black dress jacket and his Sheriff’s badge shining brightly in the sun. The blacksmith, Ezekiel Hartman, stood looking surprisingly tapper and high trousers and matching tweed long coat. Abigail Rowe stood with her husband, who was a giant of a man, but very softly spoken. She laughed as soon as she saw Anna, and winked.

There were people here that Wade had only met a few times, including the tailor, the carter, the Hamptons, and half a dozen other people that Anna had known all her life. Wade thought he would feel out of place, but surprisingly, he felt utterly at home. He felt these people beaming at him, supporting them, and pleased for them.

*So this is what it feels like to have a community. To have a home,* Wade thought as he slowly walked up to the arbor, where a dour-faced priest with long, white hair stood eyeing them over his spectacles.

“You’re not going to run away on me now, are you, Mr. Nash?” Anna paused before she got there, whispering into his ear.

“Never,” Wade promised. He turned to her as she offered up her mouth, and her lips tasted like apples.

# **Aftermath**

**Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 1886**

Anna looked up as the train roared it’s whistle, announcing its departure outwards, on it’s long journey East.

*Where is he?* She wondered, stepping back as the crowd of people surged across the platform and streamed through into the ticket office beyond.

The train station was larger now, stretching a long way ahead of her and with room for hundreds of people to embark or flood into Cheyenne. They even had brass fittings on the inside, and painted signs that Wade had been particularly proud of. Further down the line, there was a stock yard where a separate track ran straight into the large cattle yards, picking up and dropping off entire herds every week.

The rail engine started to chug, billowing steam out into the air over the station, and the last few passengers disappeared inside. Anna could hear several young men in sharp suits wondering with each other which would be the best saloon to try, and whether they were going to make it to the theater tonight.

*Yeah, it sure is busy alright,* Anna thought. The completed rail had brought with it commerce and trade and above all—people. Now that it ran clear across the United States of America, there were prospectors and traders and even just tourists making the journey to spend a few days in the far flung City of the Plains, and beyond.

Wade had promised to take her out to California one of these summers, and show her the coast, but in truth Anna didn’t mind if they never went. Especially not now. Cheyenne was her home, and the hills around it where her ranch was, especially so.

Anxiety clutched at her belly as the last passenger disappeared off the platform. Had Wade stayed on the train? Had there been a problem at North Platte? She turned, intending to make for the Station Master’s Office when a final whistle from the train blew, and a figure jumped of the very last carriage, hopping onto the station as lightly as if he were twenty years the younger.

“My love! Sorry, I had to check the couplings…” Wade, her husband, jogged up the station towards her. He was older now, with a few light highlights of gleaming silver at his temples, but he was still lithe and strong.

“Haven’t you got a foreman to be doing that? Or an engineer?” Anna asked him as he approached.

“Oh, I do, but…” Wade shrugged, laughing. “I like to keep my hands on the operation.”

*I know you do,* Anna laughed. It was one of the many wonderful, infuriating things about Wade Nash. Ever since he had been given the role to manage Cheyenne’s railway he had made sure he knew everything there was to know about rail engines, track, and weight, loads, speeds, and running times. Anna had never seen anyone so committed.

They grinned at each other, with Wade wrapping her in his arms and then surprising her by wheeling her around suddenly, and kissing her.

“Ha!” Anna laughed. She loved how he still surprised her. Even though he had to go away every so often, takign trips on the trains to see Union Pacific agents, or to advise other stations, he always managed to be full of life when he was at home, as well.

In truth, it was a good life. A very good life, Anna had to admit. Cheyenne was booming, and with it came benefits for all. Anna herself was getting known as providing a very steady, reliable, well-trained breed of horse, and thanks to the railway she was not just getting known in Cheyenne, but outside of Wyoming and Nebraska entirely.

The money coming in was enough that they had brought a second and a then a third little place, renting them to tenant ranchers. All of Silas Laramie’s holdings had been split up after he had been thrown in prison, and those that couldn’t be returned to their original owners went for peppercorn prices. Anna was known as a compassionate and fair landlord, everything that Silas would never have been.

Still, there was something she had to tell him.

“You might want to do less of the throwing about, mister,” Anna said, still grinning. Wade had his arms around her and she had her arms on his shoulders, his good one and the left which he pretended didn’t hurt when it did. She would coax him into a hot bath later, and then run some oil into his muscles.

“Why, are you hurt?” Wade suddenly froze, his face a look of concern.

“Not at all,” Anna said. She grinned wider, waiting for the penny to drop.

“Then, what is it…” she saw Wade look at her, her neck, her arms, and then down – suddenly blinking as he stopped, staring at her belly.

“No. Really?” A look of surprise was eclipsed by a beatific grin.

“Really,” Anna whispered. “You’re going to be a father, Wade.”

Wade whooped for joy, folding his arms around her and hugging her tight, before suddenly releasing. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean-”

“I think a squeeze or two is okay,” Anna laughed. “In fact, I positively demand it.”

She hugged him back, hard, and it wasn’t long before his lips found hers, as the train rattled into the distant West.

THE END