# **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.”