



A COLD, DARK TRAIL

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PRINT!

He had a bloody score
to settle—in spilled guts,
bullets, and a heap
of dead men.

RANK WATSON

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FAWCETT
GOLD MEDAL



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Prologue

**St. Louis, Missouri
March 1866**

Every step brought new agony. Sean O'Fallon clenched his fists and tried not to think about the pain in his leg.

Sean's pace was now little more than a jog. His wounded leg hit the semifrozen ground heavily with a slow, rhythmic thud that each time sent a new jolt through his body. He would never again be able to run for miles through the mountains as he had before the war, but at least he could cover considerable ground at a steady pace. Ten months before, the doctors had said he would never walk again, but Sean had known better. His stubbornness had proven them wrong.

Today, for the first time, he had made it past the downtown business district to the river bluffs and back. Though it was only a small victory, and his leg was still weak, Sean had met the goal he had set for himself. He could wait no longer. Tomorrow, he would start the long journey home, pain or no pain.

The chilly breeze carried the distant, muddy scent of the Mississippi and the sharper smell of burning coal from the factories. It made the young man ache even more for the clean forest smells of his home in the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee and the warmth of a wife he had not seen in over two years.

Sean slowed his pace as he entered the woods. He walked steadily, firmly, as long shadows fell on the rapidly freezing ground. He turned, taking a side path through the trees and

beyond. Suddenly the Malcolm Home appeared before him, reflecting an orange tint from the setting sun. Some of the residents were still walking carefully under the bare trees.

The W. F. Malcolm Home had been a temporary hospital during the war and was now serving as a convalescent home under the direction of a volunteer group, Friends of the Union Veterans. A walk led from the side street to the door. Porches sat on the first and second stories.

Sean noticed Diane Blair and Dr. Jenkins on the first-floor porch where he had to pass. The young man continued his steady pace, though his leg was already becoming stiff. He had made up his mind, and he did not want a scene on the final night of his stay at the Malcolm House. Diane had been good to him. She had been good company and Sean owed much of his recovery to her tender caring. He would miss her, but he missed his wife in Tennessee more, and now it was time to go home.

"You've been gone a long time," Diane said, almost before Sean had gotten within hearing distance. "We were getting worried about you."

She had a pretty smile, and there was concern in her eyes.

"I started early, before the sun was up," Sean answered. "I wanted to cover a lot of ground today. I made it to the river, around the edge of the city, and back."

"I wish you wouldn't push yourself so hard. You're not ready for those hills."

"She's right, you know," Jenkins added. He was now sitting on the porch bannister. "You push that leg too far and you might hurt it beyond repair. I recommend rest."

"And you know so much. You were one of the doctors that said I would never walk again. You said I would be a cripple for the rest of my life. You recommended bed rest and fought me every step of the way when I started my own walking program. Had I listened to you, I would have remained a cripple."

"Miracles do happen," Jenkins said. "That is why I've followed your case so closely. There is still much we don't

understand about medical science. You're an interesting case."

Sean stepped onto the wooden porch. Diane reached out, touched his arm, and said, "Please, Sean, take better care of yourself."

Jenkins crossed his arms, watching the man and woman with interest, but said nothing.

Sean waited patiently, looking out to the green yard, but Jenkins made no effort to move from his seat. Sean finally said, "Diane, could I talk to you for a few minutes? Alone?"

She followed the young man into the front room, which was filled with resting veterans, up the stairs, and into his room. For once, the room was empty in spite of the cots lined up along the walls.

"What is it?"

"I wanted you to know. I'm leaving tomorrow."

She sat down heavily on Sean's cot.

"But you can't. You're not well enough. You heard what the doctor said. . . ."

"I can't wait any longer. I've been gone from home too long. It's been almost three years without any word, without any answers to my letters. I'm going home."

"Sean—"

"Wait, before you say anything else. I'm grateful for what you've done for me, and I don't know any other way to say it. If not for your care, I might very well now be dead, or a cripple. You're a very special woman. I wish you happiness. I wish I could show you my appreciation in some way. . . ."

"You know what I would like."

"And you know that is the one thing I can't give you. You've always known I was married, and that I would eventually be going home."

Diane wet her lips, and stood. She said, "But you were married less than a week when you went to war. Your wife hasn't answered your letters in all the years you've been away. How can you know—"

Sean's look was hard, and her comment was stopped in

midsentence. She thought for a second, then continued, "How do you plan to get home?"

"Walk. That's what I've been working for these past months."

"What will you do for money?"

He reached into his pocket, pulled out three silver coins.

"It's not much, but it will do."

Diane didn't want to give up. She said, "Even if you can make the journey, how do you expect to survive? The country is still filled with bushwhackers. The papers are filled with stories about Quantrill, Bloody Bill Anderson, Winston Culver. They've robbed banks, shot sheriffs' deputies, attacked farmhouses, killing entire families. You're just one man. You won't be safe against those murdering gangs. Stay with me. You'll be safe here."

Sean painfully crouched down, reached under the bed, and pulled out a cardboard box. He lifted the lid, removed a Remington .44 caliber New Model revolver and a box of cartridges.

"Another legacy of the war," he said. "I was a good hand with a gun before the war and during the war. Back home, I used an old Kentucky rifle, but I learned to do fairly well with the Remington. A bum leg may slow me down, but it doesn't make me helpless. I'll be fine."

Diane watched Sean place the revolver on the bed.

"Nothing I can do or say will change your mind."

"No."

She suddenly reached out and hugged Sean. For the first time, he responded. He placed his arms around the woman and let her rest her head on his shoulder.

"Your wife is a very lucky woman," she whispered. Then, as if nothing had happened, she stepped back. "I won't be here tomorrow when you leave. I hope you understand."

"Yes. I understand."

Diane turned and walked from the room. For long minutes, the silence in the pale room was broken only by the sounds of cartridges being placed in the chambers of the revolver.

Chapter 1

On the Indian Territory Border September 1869

The explosion shattered the quiet afternoon air. A shower of dirt, rocks, and wood chips floated through the sunlight and settled on Sean O'Fallon and Norman Grady, who were kneeling safely behind a small rock outcropping.

When the smoke and dust drifted away on the autumn breeze, the two men stood and walked to the shallow depression in the field. Pieces of root in the ground and larger chunks of wood around the edge were all that remained of the stump. Grady bent over the hole as if to examine it closer and said, "Fine job. Excellent job. It's a wonder how you know exactly how much powder to use and where to place it. Where'd you pick up that skill without getting yourself blown up first?"

O'Fallon removed his Stetson and knocked off the wood chips. "In the army," he said. "During the war. I knew pretty much about powder and such before I went in, and they kind of built on it. Sometimes what I learned comes in handy."

Grady kicked at the dirt and chips with his foot and answered absently, "Yeah, I suppose some good things came out of the war."

"Mighty few."

"Yeah, I guess so." Grady was slightly overweight with a red face beneath his narrow-brimmed hat. He mopped his face with a handkerchief and walked to the next stump, which

had roots growing into the ground beneath a protruding rock. "At this rate, we'll have most of the field cleared in another day, which is perfect. We're expecting the first families to arrive within the next few weeks. I don't guess you came across any wagons headed in this direction? You'd have made better time since all you're leading is a packhorse."

O'Fallon thought Grady tended to talk before he had much to say, but that suited O'Fallon well enough. O'Fallon answered politely, "No, I came up from the southwest, so our paths wouldn't cross."

"Well, they'll be here soon, and when they arrive, their land will be ready for them and they can start building."

"Kind of late in the year to start, isn't it?"

"Well, maybe. But rumor has it that the railroad may build through here, and the Eastern investor financing this project wants us to be ready for it."

"It seems like everybody these days are looking for the railroads to build through their backyards and make their fortunes. A lot of would-be cities have been left out in the cold when the railroad passed them by."

"That's true in some cases. But even if the railroad doesn't build exactly through this point, we'll still be sitting pretty. And do you know why?" Grady pointed toward the west. "Look over there."

O'Fallon saw only tree-covered hills stretching toward the horizon.

"That's Indian Territory," Grady said. "Right now, that part of the country is still off-limits to the white man. That will change. There's a lot of good land in there. Good cattle country. Good farm country. Right now the Cherokees are keeping the land to themselves. But mark my words: that whole area will be opened up within the next few years. Even if it is not *legally* opened during that time, a steady stream of people will still be crossing the border. And when the crowds start coming, I'll be ready for them, me and my family. Even though they may have equipped themselves back in St. Louis or St. Joseph or wherever, they'll still have to buy supplies from somebody, and I'll be waiting for them."

Oh, this doesn't look like much now—just my store, my house, and a few outbuildings—but the town will grow fast. Think I'll call it Grady's Crossing."

O'Fallon had to admit that the location was good. O'Fallon had been following one of the trails toward Indian Territory when he came upon Grady's store and the partially cleared land. He had been surprised when he rode up the day before, hitched his horse and packhorse to the post in front of the store, and walked into the building to be greeted by Grady like an old friend. He was a talker, and any stranger would have suited Grady just fine.

As they talked, Grady explained his dilemma. He was a businessman, not a workingman, and had trouble enough cutting down trees, much less removing the stumps. Yet, the Eastern capitalist financing the project expected quick results, including clearing the land and getting much of the construction completed by the first snow. O'Fallon noted the kegs of blasting powder in the store and offered his services. Grady jumped at the chance. O'Fallon was looking for information more than work, but he figured that Grady might help him obtain what he really wanted.

"Yes, sir, there are fortunes to be made," Grady said. "Just across the border are acres and acres of land. Thousands of acres of land. And that's what people want. That's what people need. It's our destiny to expand to the West, to build up the empty land, to bring civilization. And you know what else?" Grady lowered his voice. "There are plenty of men back East with vision and with the capital to spend—like the one that's staked me. If you can hitch up to a man like that, your fortune is made."

"What about the Indians? I thought that by law the land is theirs."

"What about them? They're just Indians, and when the people start pushing across the border, the Indians will just have to go elsewhere." Grady walked over and kicked the stump near the rock. "This one looks kind of tricky."

"No problem." O'Fallon glanced up at the sun. A dark gray cloud was moving rapidly and cast a brief shadow on

the ground. "It may take a little more powder, but we'll have this patch cleared by evening, before the thunderstorm hits."

O'Fallon lifted one of the powder kegs to his shoulder and walked over to the stump. He took the shovel and quickly dug another hole, this one a little deeper. He pulled the cork from the keg and poured the gray-black powder into the depression. Grady watched, mopping his face, as O'Fallon prepared the powder, then measured and inserted the proper length of fuse.

"This should give us plenty of time to get out of the way," O'Fallon said. "And even if we didn't, I doubt if we would be hurt. The explosion should blow the stump and rocks away from us, if I figure right."

"If you figure right?"

O'Fallon grinned slightly.

"Oh, don't worry. I haven't blown up very many of my employers. So why start now?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"Hell with that. Why not blow up the bastard when you have the chance. While you're at it, blow up that damned store, as well." The new voice was coarse and slurred. It came from behind O'Fallon and to his left.

Grady said harshly, "Turk, what are you doing here? I told you we didn't want you around."

"So you say, but you sell your whiskey fast enough. Besides, I wanted to experience the so-called 'pleasures of civilization' that you are always carrying on about."

Turk had obviously been drinking, even though it was still early afternoon. O'Fallon had spotted Turk earlier, and had watched the man skulk around the clearing for the greater part of an hour, drinking his whiskey from a jug, building up the courage to make his presence known.

"I don't want you around me or my family," Grady said. "Get out of here."

O'Fallon watched as Grady's hands moved nervously and Turk's eyes remained hard. O'Fallon stood, walked to the rock outcropping that had served as protection from the explosions, and pulled out his pipe and tobacco. He noted

Turk's faded checkered shirt, the old revolver in a holster around his hips, and the jug in his left hand.

"You go to hell," Turk said, taking a step toward Grady. "You think I give a damn about what you want? It was just fine before you came along, but now a man doesn't even have room to piss. Nobody needs you. Nobody wants you. *You* just get out of here." Turk glanced at O'Fallon, who was now calmly smoking his pipe. "And take your damned greenhorn friend with you. I want *everybody* out."

Grady nervously looked around him. He stepped back as Turk moved closer.

"Last time you hit me from the rear, and I should have killed you then," Turk said. "I don't like cowards, but now I'm facing you, and I'm going to teach you and this greenie a thing or two."

Turk reached for his gun, but he suddenly found himself staring at a rifle in O'Fallon's hands.

"Don't try it, Turk," O'Fallon said.

Turk blinked a few times in disbelief.

"Where'd that come from?"

"Just because I'm not wearing a gun doesn't mean I'm green. I'm a fairly good shot, and at this distance I couldn't miss. I don't want to hurt you. Just remove your hand from the gun, take your whiskey, and go home."

The other man hesitated, but when O'Fallon refused to move the aim of the gun from his stomach, Turk growled, spit, and stomped back toward the store. Only after Turk had turned the corner and was out of sight did O'Fallon again place his rifle behind the rock outcropping.

O'Fallon puffed on his pipe and suggested, "Maybe you should go after him to make sure he leaves?"

"Maybe." But instead, Grady sat down on the rock next to O'Fallon and said, "Turk talks big, but most of the time he keeps to himself, except when he's drinking. He lives up in the hills, somewhere, in the territory. He knows these hills, lives off some trapping and trading with the Indians. I almost feel sorry for old Turk. He and the Indians had these hills to themselves for a long time, and that's all changing.

But that's his problem, not mine. He did try to buffalo me once, but I managed to handle him. I don't trust him, and I don't want him around my family. Maybe he won't come back."

O'Fallon calmly smoked his pipe, but all the while scanned the woods around the clearing to make sure Turk did not return. In spite of all his talk, Grady still had not voluntarily provided the information that most interested O'Fallon. He decided to use this break to prime the pump a little more.

"This is a pretty good location, at that," O'Fallon said, stretching out his long legs. "I guess most of those going into the territory pass through here, which means you pretty well know everybody who has entered the territory recently or who operates in the territory. Maybe you could tell me about a man I'm looking for?"

"Could be. What's the name?"

"Winston Culver." Grady frowned. O'Fallon continued in a neutral voice, "During the war he led a group of bushwhackers that were active in Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri. They covered a lot of ground. I've been looking for him for several years now, without any luck. I still hear a lot of talk. I follow the rumors, but I can never quite catch up to him. Now I hear he's active in Indian Territory."

"I've heard the name," Grady said. "But it was from back East, mainly during the war. I don't know of him being anywhere in these parts." He brushed some dust off the rock. "How do you tie in to Culver?"

"Let's just say I owe him a long-standing debt."

"Hmph."

"Maybe he's using a different name. He's about six feet tall, gray eyes, gray hair, even though he's not too old."

"He hasn't passed through here that I know about. I haven't heard of him coming through. And I don't remember seeing anybody of that description."

So he had been following another false lead. O'Fallon tapped his pipe lightly on the rock to shake out the ashes.

"Time to get back to work," he said. "You wait here."

O'Fallon lit the fuse and moved quickly back to safety.

The two men sat with backs against the rock as the fuse sparked and hissed. Suddenly, a high-pitched yell cut through the afternoon air.

“Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!”

O’Fallon pushed himself up, looked over the rock. Grady’s four-year-old son was running, stumbling. His path was taking him right to the stump where the fuse was burning rapidly toward the powder.

Grady said, “Joe! What the hell is he doing—”

O’Fallon jumped to his feet and leaped over the rock, but he landed slightly crooked, bending his leg. Ignoring the pain that suddenly shot through him, he started across the clearing. Behind him, he could hear Grady yelling at his son. O’Fallon saw that Joe was half crying, half yelling, and was on the wrong side of the blast—the direction in which most of the force would hit.

O’Fallon’s leg felt like it was on fire, but he did not slow down. He had no family, and would probably never have a family, and it somehow made getting Joe to safety seem all the more important. He glanced at the fuse, but it was now too short to see.

A half-dozen yards remained between Joe and O’Fallon, who was quickly closing the distance.

The boy stumbled only a few feet from the stump. O’Fallon made a flying leap. He scooped up the boy in his arms, fell, and tumbled. O’Fallon stood, set his good leg solidly to the ground, then dived behind one of the remaining stumps in the field.

The explosion sent rock chips in all directions. O’Fallon used his body to shield the boy, but the main force of the blast missed them.

O’Fallon placed the boy against the stump and started to examine him. He was crying and coughing when Grady made it through the smoke and dust. Joe was trying not to cry. He reached out to Grady and said, “Daddy!”

“Joe, I told you not to come out here when we’re working. I should whip you for disobeying me.”

“But Daddy! The nasty man hit Mommy! That dirty man

you sold the jugs to came back and took Mr. O'Fallon's horse and packs. Mommy took your shotgun to him, but he pushed her down and locked me in the back room. I climbed out the window!"

Grady grabbed his son and started to run across the field. O'Fallon retrieved his rifle and followed Grady back to the store. They met Mrs. Grady near the building.

"You all right?" Grady's voice was concerned, scared. "What the hell happened? Are you hurt?"

O'Fallon noted the small bruise on the woman's face, but decided she was not seriously hurt. He left the family to handle his own business. His sorrel remained in the pole corral behind the store, but the packhorse was gone. The packs he had stacked in the stables were gone, but his saddle remained untouched. He continued his search of the area.

Turk had made no attempt to cover his tracks around the building. He apparently thought he had the superior woodsman's skills and could lose himself in the trees. Or maybe he thought that O'Fallon would not even try to follow? O'Fallon knew Turk would probably make a halfhearted attempt to cover his trail once he hit the woods.

O'Fallon walked around the building, then entered through the front door, placing the saddle on the front step. Grady was tending to his wife.

"You're right, Mr. O'Fallon. I should have followed and made sure he left."

"Then he might have pulled a gun and you'd be dead."

After a few moments of awkward silence, Grady's wife said, "I understand you saved our son. I want to thank you."

"I'm sorry about your things being stolen," Grady said. "I mean, you were good enough to help me out, and now this had to happen. Maybe there is something I can do? I can't replace your entire stock, but maybe I could—"

"What do you plan to do about your wife?"

The question seemed to puzzle Grady.

"I mean, are you going after Turk?"

"What would be the use? Nobody knows where he lives. He knows this part of the country, and will already have

vanished. Even if we could find him, he would ambush us easily. It'd be suicide to go after him. No, I'm leaving well enough alone."

"Yes, I guess you were lucky at that. He could have killed your wife and son." O'Fallon paused, then continued, "I'm going to quit on you early. I know I promised to clear the whole field, but under the circumstances I think I had better move on."

Grady pulled out some money and placed it on the table.

"Go ahead and take your full wages. You earned it."

O'Fallon set his saddlebags by the bills.

"I need a couple of boxes of shells, some coffee, flour, and tobacco. Take what I owe you out of my pay."

Joe was looking up at O'Fallon with wide eyes.

"Joe, would you and your mother go get my horse and bring it around so I can saddle it up?"

The boy ran out, followed by Mrs. Grady.

"What about next time?" O'Fallon asked.

Grady was pulling supplies from the shelves and placing them on the table near the saddlebags. He said, "What do you mean?"

"Think about what you're doing," O'Fallon continued. "You're a good man, I think, trying to do the best you can for your family. But this is not like the East, where you have laws and police to enforce them. Out here, you stand on your own or die. You underestimated Turk. He's a dangerous man, but there are many out here who are far worse. I've known men who would have raped your wife, then shot her and the boy, and not give any of it a second thought. You think about what you have—a wife and a family. And think about if you want to risk it all for a fortune that may or may not ever materialize."

"Where will you be going next?" Grady asked, strangely quiet.

"To get back my horse and goods. I'm going after Turk."

"You won't stand a chance. How can you expect to find anybody in the wilderness of the Indian Territory?"

"I'll find him."

Chapter 2

Jack Hansen at first thought the rifle shot was thunder from the dark, low-hanging clouds that had been following him since he entered the Indian Territory. His big, black stallion jumped at the sound and Hansen's breath whistled sharply through his teeth.

Hansen was afraid of no man, but lightning and fire were different matters. He had seen one man, who had not taken shelter soon enough, in an instant burned beyond recognition by a lightning bolt. He knew all too well how quickly death could come to a man without protection from the elements, and he had no plans to die this night.

What he needed now was some shelter.

The late summer storm had been building for most of the afternoon. Hansen was now on relatively high ground, as he had been for the past several miles, but still no shelter was in sight.

Hansen anxiously scanned the horizon while the big stallion pawed the ground.

The smell of rain was in the air. The clouds grew darker by the minute. He was no woodsman, but he knew the storm would hit soon and hard. He couldn't face a night of thunder and lightning without protection, but where could he go? All he had seen for miles were thickets, fields, gullies, and creeks. None of them provided any real safety. This stretch of the territory was thinly populated, and Hansen was new