



Fool's Gold

Stephen Bly

The Skinners of Goldfield Series
Book 1

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*For my 1950s friends and neighbors
in Ivanhoe, California,
who taught me the
strength of ordinary people*

"For ye see your calling, brethren,
how that not many wise men after the flesh,
not many mighty, not many noble, are called:
But God hath chosen the foolish things
of the world to confound the wise."

1 Corinthians 1:26,27a KJV

Foreword

Dear Readers,

Last Sunday evening, like millions of people all over America and the world, I watched Mr. Armstrong take the first step on the moon. I didn't know whether to shout for joy or break down and bawl.

I ended up doing both.

What a victory for mankind's ingenuity, tenacity, and bravery. In some sense I stepped on the moon's surface with those two intrepid astronauts.

But progress, even glorious progress in space exploration, comes with a cost. The past must be set aside. Old ideas get discarded, old ways reformed. And old memories are swept away to make room for the marvelous new ones.

For me it wasn't the first time I gazed at men who possessed an uncommon spirit of adventure. I was only ten years old when I arrived in Goldfield, Nevada in 1905. We were on our way from Oklahoma to California. Daddy took a shortcut, and we decided to stay a day or two.

I stayed there eleven years.

Few people in the late 1960s can imagine what life was like in a boomtown. For most it would be as foreign as walking on the moon. Not many mothers today have crushed a stink bug and lived with the stench for days. Or glanced down at the baby on the living room rug in horror as a scorpion crawled up his arm.

They've never had the pleasure of tearing up newspapers into tiny scraps and wetting them to sweep the floor. That was the only way to pick up alkali dust.

They've probably never sliced tomatoes for lunch and seen them curl and dry up at the edges within seconds in the dry, desert wind.

Some now praise the solitude and the stillness of the desert as they drive through in air-conditioned automobiles. They never experienced the terror when the desert takes

on an identity of its own and chases you back into the house like an animal stalking its prey.

Goldfield was the last gold rush in the United States. It attracted not only every prospector and want-to-be prospector in America, but also every gunman and outlaw that lamented the Old West's passing. Also, every crib girl who wanted one last chance to marry a rich mine owner. Every gambler who slaved away at dying little Western towns. Every speculator and huckster who dreamed up get-rich-quick schemes. And every college graduate who could find enough gasoline to fuel his Thomas motorcar across the roadless wastes of places like Weepah Hills, the Montezuma Range, and the Ralston Desert.

For a brief few years, it was the finale of the Old West. And nearly every character of that era still alive made the pilgrimage to Goldfield.

According to many, the strike was the richest concentration of gold ever found in the world. Whether or not this is fact, I can tell you the people on the street corners of Goldfield in 1905 thought it was true.

I know.

I was there.

Daddy (Mr. Orion Tower Skinner, called O.T. by everyone but Mama) at forty-one years old drove our old farm wagon pulled by Ida and Ada, our mules, down the hill at Tonopah and across the desert to Goldfield. Mama, the former Dola Mae Davis, sat next to me. She was eleven years Daddy's junior.

Rita Ann was twelve. Tommy-Blue was nine. Silas Paul ("Punky") was two. He and I are the only two left of the Skinners of Goldfield.

The world has changed almost beyond belief since that hot, dusty June day in 1905. Without a doubt, the future will captivate our imaginations, time, and hearts. But we must never forget the spirit of exploration and survival against all odds is an old instinct.

We rush through the years of this century as if they were pocketbook change, best if quickly spent. Not many left can tell the story of America's last gold boomtown.

Some will complain an old woman has a faulty memory, at best. But I tell you, some images never fade. Like watching daring men walk the moon's surface.

And I can never forget the moment we rounded Columbia Mountain and stared at the mysterious, bleak, dusty place called Goldfield.

Corrie Lou (Skinner) Merced

August 4, 1969

Dinuba, California

Chapter One

Gonopah, Nevada, June 11, 1905

Mama told them not to look, but Corrie Lou Skinner peeked between her fingers. She knew her sister Rita Ann was spying too, but would never admit it.

The fight poured out of the freight office into the street. O.T. yanked their team of mules right and parked the wagon at the edge of the rutted dirt in front of Edwards & Cutting's Building and Mining Hardware Store. A tall, thin man wearing a bowler took a roundhouse swing at a dirty-faced man with thick eyebrows and mustache. The sound of knuckles hitting chin caused Corrie to flinch. Her bangs bounced over her fingers.

Both men tumbled into the hard packed ground.

Fine gray dust fogged about them as they rolled to their knees. The dirty-faced man slammed his hand into a pile of dried horse manure and wiped it off on the sleeve of his suit coat. Then two more men, in worn three-piece suits and scuffed boots, began a shouting and shoving match on the wooden sidewalk a few yards away from the Skinner wagon. At least a dozen men crowded around to watch.

Nine-year-old Tommy-Blue Skinner, denim coveralls patched with used brown ducking at the knees, climbed up on the canvas covered steamer trunk strapped to the back of the farm wagon and peered over his father's shoulder. "What are they fightin' about?"

Mr. Skinner pulled a wooden toothpick from the gap between his two front teeth. His chapped lips tasted of alkali dust and breakfast bacon. "Don't reckon I know, son. Some men don't need much excuse to throw punches."

"Are you going to make them stop it?"

"Nope. They're too big to scold and too foolish to protect."

The man with thick eyebrows kicked the tall, thin man. The tall man caught his foot, and both tumbled onto the street in front of a freight wagon pulled by six pair of oxen. The wagon squeaked to a halt as the bullwhacker joined the audience to watch the fight.

As the two men in three-piece suits stumbled along the wooden sidewalk, the shoving turned into a wrestling match. They took turns throwing one another against the front of the freight office, until someone's elbow shattered one of the small panes of window glass. Both men staggered into the street and wrestled each other to the ground.

Corrie chewed her tongue as she leaned against her father's arm. Her gray cotton dress hung straight off her shoulders to her ankles, sprinkled with cherry jam stains from breakfast. "Are they going to use pistols?"

Dola smoothed her hair down from its part in the middle to the soft coil under her black straw hat with its faded red silk poppy. She gave her youngest daughter a hug. "Are you peeking?"

"No, Mama."

"She is too." Rita Ann's purple gingham bow rode up and down her Adam's apple as she clutched a thick, ragged book.

Corrie rubbed her nose with the back of her sticky hand and tried to hide a grin. "I was sort of looking."

The fight expanded. A black man leaped onto the back of a round-bellied man with full black beard. They crashed into the porch roof post and the entire hardware store vibrated.

Mr. Skinner rubbed the back of his neck below his neatly trimmed gray hair. "I reckon them gun totin' days are over. When I promised Mama this southern route would be easier on the mules, I didn't figure the town was still this rough. I can't tell if they are even carryin' guns."

"Maybe one of them is Wyatt Earp," Corrie said. "I heard he's in Nevada. Maybe he'll make some more history. I'd surely like to see it."

"I doubt if he's here." Mr. Skinner continued to pick his teeth. "'Course, I don't reckon any of us know when we're makin' history." He fingered Corrie's bangs out of her eyes. "Besides, Earp's an old man. These men look young."

"Daddy, are you an old man or a young one?" Tommy-Blue asked.

"Daddy is only forty-one," Rita Ann informed him. "There are many men older than that."

O.T. pulled out a blue bandanna and wiped sweat off his forehead and neck. Desert dirt streaked the bandanna. "This heat makes a man feel old—that I know."

"Well," Rita Ann continued, "you haven't reached the point where Shakespeare said 'every part about you is blasted with antiquity.'"

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." She shot a triumphant look at Corrie.

"I wish we could see a gunfight. We've been travelin' for months, and we haven't seen one gunfight."

"Corrie Lou, we will not sit here and watch a gunfight. Besides, those days are over." Her mother's long, strong, callused hands rocked the sleeping toddler.

Tommy-Blue made no attempt to hide his eyes. "How many are fighting?"

"Only six so far," Rita Ann replied. "That is, I think there are six. If I had my eyes open, I could see better."

Corrie peeked at her sister huddled behind their mother. Gold wire-framed glasses accented Rita Ann's pinched, shut eyes. "You can see six of them with your eyes closed?"

"I can hear them," Rita Ann snapped back. "I have very good ears."

Dola pulled off her straw hat and fanned her face and the toddler's. "Orion, I told you we should cross the mountains at Carson City. We have no business exposing the children to such a town as Tonopah."

"Darlin', we're on our way out of town. We'll park here until these fellas are done. I don't reckon five minutes will cause the children any permanent damage."

From out of the crowd a large object hurled at the tall, thin man. Wood shattered as it hit the back of his head. He crumpled to the street.

"That would cause permanent damage." Tommy-Blue held his hands on top his hat.

"All depends on whether the wooden bucket was filled with nails or old newspapers," Mr. Skinner commented.

"Orion," Dola scolded, "I want you to turn the wagon around right now and get us out of here."

"That dark-skinned man has a bloody nose," Tommy-Blue said.

"He does? Let me see." Corrie Lou climbed on the trunk next to Tommy-Blue.

Over fifty people filled the street. Shouts and bets hailed from every side. The more the crowd closed in on the combatants, the less those in the farm wagon could witness.

"Hey, that big guy hit the other man with a chair." Tommy-Blue leaned forward and clutched his father's arm. "That ain't fair."

Dola rubbed dust-filled creases near her eyes. "That isn't fair," she corrected.

A thundering noise behind them caused the crowd to part for an approaching stagecoach. The Skinner family turned to watch its arrival. The six men involved in the fight continued to slug away with fists, chairs, and buckets.

The stage driver was a huge man with mustache drooped past his chin. When he stood up, tobacco stains showed on the front of his rattlesnake skin vest. He shouted at the crowd, but no one understood him. He raised a short-barreled shotgun above his head and fired it in the air.

Thick, white gun smoke drifted up, like halfhearted prayers. The stagecoach horses danced forward.

Ada and Ida, the Skinner mules, lurched sideways, their front hooves perched on the wooden sidewalk.

Corrie threw her hands over her ears. Tommy-Blue ducked behind her. Rita Ann clutched the thick book to her chest. Red-faced and sweating, the toddler stirred and bawled.

"Boys," the driver roared, "we're loadin' up this stage. If you fightin' men have settled up who gets them last three tickets, I'll take—"

Rocking the toddler on her hip, Dola stood, shoved her hat on her head, and waved a finger at the driver. "Mister, don't you ever do that again."

Shotgun still in hand, the driver stared down at the Skinner wagon as if inspecting a basket of eggs for a cracked one. "What did you say?"

Dola's small mouth narrowed, her eyes danced. "The reckless discharge of a firearm within city limits endangers the lives of innocent people, let alone disturbing the peace of infants."

O.T. continued to pick his teeth and lean back in the wagon seat. He muttered, "You have incurred the wrath of Dola Mae Davis Skinner. The host of heaven would be a less dangerous foe."

"There was a riot in the street, lady," the driver called down.

"Yes, but it was your gunshot that woke little Punky. I'm sure you were taught better than that. You should be ashamed."

"Oh, shame, where is thy blush?" Rita Ann said and ducked behind her mother.

"Isaac, you cain't ever beat a mother and child, especially them that's quotin' Shakespeare. You might as well just give up now," a man shouted from the crowd in front of Butler's Saloon.

An outbreak of laughter followed. The Skinner wagon became the center of attention.

The driver of the battered Concord stagecoach doffed his hat. Bushy, wild gray hair sprayed out as he bowed to Mrs. Skinner. "My sincere apologies, ma'am, for disturbing you and your little one. My mother, bless her soul, did teach me better than that."

Mrs. Skinner balanced the wide-eyed but now silent youngster on her left hip and shaded her eyes with her right hand. "Thank you, sir. Your apology is accepted. And, if I might suggest, your appearance would be much more comely if you would get a haircut." She sat down as the crowd hooted and roared.

Her face flushed, Rita Ann stayed behind her mother. But Corrie watched the man's reaction.

The tall, thin man with khaki britches and collarless cotton shirt, whose head had encountered the wooden bucket, shuffled to the rig and guided the mules off the sidewalk.

The stagecoach driver held up his shotgun to quiet the crowd. Corrie clamped her hands over her ears. Tommy-Blue held his breath and pinched his nose shut.

"Settle down, boys." The driver jammed his wide-brimmed felt hat back on his head. "Or I'll be forced to disturb that youngster again. I'm heading to Goldfield in three minutes. I'll take the eleven men who have today's tickets. The twelfth man who tries to board will be shot. Is that clear enough?" He glanced toward Mrs. Skinner. "I'll shoot him in a dignified and discreet manner, ma'am."

A near riot erupted as eleven men in suits and ties tossed duffel bags atop the stage and shoved toward the open door of the coach. Seven men crammed inside. Four crawled on top, crowding the driver and the baggage for a place to hold on. The stage lurched for-ward, heading south out of Tonopah, leaving a flock of men on the street to mill around and mumble.

The tall, blond man attempted to brush off his shirt. "Ma'am, I'm sorry about fighting in front of your children. It wasn't a very good example."

Punky squirmed out of her arms and back to the canvas covered trunk with Corrie and Tommy-Blue.

Dimples appeared in Dola's tanned face. "I appreciate your apology. I trust your outrage was for a noble cause."

"Yes, ma'am." He stepped closer to the wagon. A scar ran from the side of his mouth to his ear. "Me and Wasco and Charlie Fred won today's stage tickets in a knife throwin' contest, and then they wouldn't settle up. They said we cheated."

Rita Ann crawled on the front seat between her parents. She wrinkled her nose, forcing her glasses higher. "A knife throwing contest?"

"Yep. I'm Lucky Jack."

"I think I've heard that name before," O.T. replied.

"Are you thinking of the Gottleys in Fort Smith?" Dola probed.

"Could be."

Lucky Jack continued, "I used to have a knife throwing act for Buffalo Bill Cody's Congress of Rough Riders. These old boys here claimed I was a professional and tricked them into a contest they couldn't win."

Rita Ann studied the man. "Did you?"

"Of course I did."

"I wish I could've seen that knife throwin' contest," Tommy-Blue put in. "Mama don't let me throw my Barlow knife."

Lucky Jack ambled near Mr. Skinner, surveying the wagon's contents as he went. "You folks headed down to Goldfield to see the elephant?"

Corrie's blue eyes widened, her full, round mouth dropped open. "We saw a camel in Bisbee, Arizona, but we haven't ever seen an elephant."

O.T. rubbed the back of his neck, as brown as his dust-covered felt hat. "I surmise this man is talkin' about the town of Goldfield itself, not a real elephant."

"Do they have elephants in Goldfield?" Tommy-Blue asked.

"Of course not," Rita Ann declared. "That's an expression for those rushing to the mining location to see the gold supposedly discovered."

Lucky Jack tugged off his bowler and brushed rocks and bucket splinters out of his hair. "That's a precocious little girl."

Rita Ann sat straighter. "I'm twelve years old, not a little girl. I'm the eldest child."

Lucky Jack studied Corrie. "You look a lot like your brother."

"We ain't twins," Tommy-Blue protested. "Corrie likes carrots, but I don't."

Lucky Jack grinned. "Well, you certainly aren't twins then."

"And I have adorable dimples when I smile," Corrie bragged. "Just like Mama."

Gately leaned on the faded gray wood of the farm wagon. "Mr. Skinner, I'd like to ask you an imposing question, that I have no right to ask."

"Are we supposed to cover our ears again?" Rita Ann asked.

Mr. Skinner slipped his strong arm around his daughter and hugged her. "I reckon you can listen."

Gately's voice lowered as if relaying directions to a lost mine. "Would it be possible for me to hitch a ride with your family down to Goldfield?"

Dried sweat left a dusty film on the buttoned collar of O.T.'s long-sleeved white shirt. "It wouldn't be Christian to turn you down." He gave a quick glance at his wife's affirming nod.

Lucky Jack pointed toward the freight office. "I have one small carpetbag."

"Go get it. We aren't in any hurry. It's only thirty miles, and we were told we could make Goldfield in about seven, eight hours. We're goin' to camp overnight and head out in the morning."

Gately spun around. "You aren't stayin' in Goldfield?"

"No, sir." Skinner plucked Punky from his mother's arm. "We're on our way to California." He bounced the toddler on his right knee.

"Well, now I feel like old Abraham bartering with the angel of the Lord over Sodom." Gately pulled off his bowler. "Can I ask you another favor? Would you have room for my two partners too? Three of us and three bags."

Mr. Skinner surveyed the goods piled on the wagon. "Of course they can come. It isn't a very comfortable wagon, but the children can scoot over. We'll make room."

"You're an answer to prayer, folks. The wait for stage tickets is over a week, and you can't buy a horse or mule to save your soul."

"I trust you will rely on prayer more than on your fists in the future," Mrs. Skinner said.

"Yes, ma'am." He shoved the bowler on his head. "Now, I have one last favor ..."

"O! How wretched is that poor man that hangs on a prince's favors," Rita Ann recited.

Lucky Jack grinned. "And when he falls, he falls like Lucifer, never to hope again." *Henry the VIII.*"

"Act 3, scene 2," Rita Ann replied.

"Nevertheless, I will ask the favor. Could you swing west of town to pick us up? Me and my friends will load up behind the headworks of the old Athens mine."

O.T. stared down the alley at the distant twelve-by-twelve-inch bleached beams that marked the top of the mine shaft. "Why is that?"

"Cause if some of these men find out you're goin' to Goldfield, there'll be a stampede to your wagon until the axle breaks."

Charlie Fred wore a flat-crowned, gray felt California hat and black eye. Wasco Delmar nursed a bleeding nose with a bandanna. His bruised face managed a wide, white-toothed smile as he crawled into the Skinners' wagon. The family's belongings had been restacked to allow two men to perch at the back and another on the tattered green trunk behind the driver's seat. When the wagon finally rolled down the slopes of Siebert Mountain, Lucky Jack sat up front with the family.

Rita Ann scooted next to him with her tattered, burgundy *Complete Works of Shakespeare* in her small, dainty hands. Tommy-Blue stared at the backs of the two other men, his thumbs looped in the pockets of his bibbed coveralls while Corrie played peekaboo with Punky.

Lucky Jack wiped his scratched and bruised face with a red bandanna. "Can't thank you folks enough for this ride."

O.T. stared over the mule's ears at miles of empty desert. "It's on our way."

Lucky Jack picked up the Shakespeare book. "I had a book identical to this one."

Rita Ann pulled at her tightly drawn pigtails. "Just like mine?"

"Yep, only I had Billy Shakespeare autograph it for me one time when Buffalo Bill took the show to England."

"Really?" Rita Ann pulled the book back. "William Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, in Stratfordon Avon."

Lucky Jack winked at Tommy-Blue. "I was just funnin' your sis."

"Well, I have Stuart Brannon's autograph," Tommy-Blue boasted. "Don't I, Mama?"

"We all have Stuart Brannon's autograph," Rita Ann said.

"You folks know Pop Brannon?" Lucky Jack pressed.

Dola peered into his gray eyes. "My uncle, Everett Davis, was a very good friend of Mr. Brannon's. We met him in Gallup, New Mexico."

"I am impressed. The only famous autograph I ever got, besides Buffalo Bill Cody's, was Annie Oakley's. She gave me a photograph of her and Sitting Bull and signed it: 'To my friend, Lucky Jack, the worst shot, male or female, that I've ever seen.'"

"Are you telling us the truth?" Rita Ann said.

"Mostly. I might be stretchin' it a little, but me and Frank Butler—that's Annie's husband—were partners in an act for a while."

"You think there are any famous people in Goldfield, Mr. Gately?" Corrie asked.

"I believe there are some that's goin' to be famous someday. But we don't know which ones yet." Lucky Jack tried to brush caked dust off his khaki trousers. "You folks really aren't going to stay in Goldfield?"

"Nope," O.T. declared. "I hear it's a barren place without any redeeming value except the gold." He slapped the lead lines and sped the mules down the gradual slope.

Those in the back grabbed the side rail for balance. When the wagon leveled off, Lucky Jack tried to stretch out his long legs but gave up. He tucked his knees nearly under his chin. "The gold is the reason ever'one wants to get there."

O.T. reached across Punky and patted his wife's knee. "We already have our riches, don't we, Mama?"

Dola adjusted the straw hat with its faded red ribbon hatband. She dabbed her forehead with a tattered tea towel with butterfly embroidered on the corner. "Yes, indeed, Mr. Gately. O.T. and I consider ourselves very wealthy."

"I heard the children mention Bisbee. Did you make a fortune in them Arizona mines?"

"Oh no," O.T. said. "We weren't talking mines. Look around this wagon. The Lord has given us four beautiful, wonderful, and intelligent children. Do you think there is anything in all of Goldfield worth more than that?"

A smile eased across the man's battered face. "No, sir, I don't reckon there is. But if the Lord wanted to provide you some extra funds so you could lavish it on these handsome children, that would be all right, wouldn't it?"

"Why would the Lord want to complicate our life with riches?" Dola stared at her rough hands. "They won't buy me back soft, delicate hands."

O.T. reached out and grabbed one.

Lucky Jack gingerly scratched his head. "I guess that's right."

The mules hooves clomped and the wagon's drying hubs squeaked as they sat in silence for a mile or two.

"I surmise you men are going to try your luck at finding gold?" O.T. finally ventured.

"Yes, sir, that's the plan. Wasco's our gold expert. He spent time in the Yukon. He's the one with the black eye. Charlie Fred is black all over."

"Is the Yukon in Alaska?" Corrie asked.

"No," Rita Ann lectured. "It's one of the northern provinces in the Dominion of Canada."

Lucky Jack stared at her. "You surely know a lot about geography."

"We have a map of the entire world in Daddy's fishing pole case. Some evenings we pull it out. Rita Ann reads all the names of places." Tommy-Blue eyed the big knife sheathed on Lucky Jack's belt. "Is that your throwing knife?"

He unfastened the sheath. "Yes. You want to look at it?"

Tommy-Blue forced a glance at his mother's flashing blue eyes. "No, sir. But thank you anyway."

The man nudged Tommy-Blue's elbow. "You're a smart man to mind your mama. I know a lot of men whose lives would be much improved if they had been wise enough to listen to their mamas."

"Thank you for that support, Mr. Gately," Dola said.

"Where did that black man come from?" Corrie asked. "He's the first one we've seen in Nevada."

"The black race traces its ancestry to the continent of Africa," Rita Ann announced.

Lucky Jack snorted. "What college did you say you attended?"

"Mama's been our teacher ever since we left Guthrie, Oklahoma."

"When was that?"

"The day after my birthday," Corrie chimed in. "My birthday is February 14th."

"Valentine's Day? I bet it's nice being born on a holiday and having ever'one celebrate with you," Lucky Jack remarked.

"I was born on New Year's Day," Rita explained. "Tommy-Blue on Christmas, and Punky the Fourth of July."

"That's amazing. I don't believe I've ever heard of a family who has every birthday on a holiday."

"Mrs. Skinner is a very determined woman," O.T. replied. "She don't take 'no' for an answer."

"Mama's birthday is on November 1. That's All Saint's Day, you know," Rita Ann said.

"But Papa's is on December 7, and there ain't nothin' important ever happened on that day," Tommy-Blue added.

Lucky Jack pulled off his suit coat and folded it across his knee. "You've been on the road since February?"

"We're workin' our way west. It's kind of slow, but it fits our budget," O.T. explained. "Oklahoma can be a tough land to farm, especially if the weather don't treat you right."

The man turned sideways and dropped his legs over the wagon's sideboard. "You're headed to California?"

"Yes, sir."

"California is a big place. You got kin out there?"

O.T. tucked his worn boots under the seat. "My brother Pegasus got himself a twenty-acre vineyard and plenty of ditch water in the San Joaquin Valley. Said he'd help us buy the twenty next to him, if we'd farm it and give him some company."

"So you just packed up and headed west?"

"Yes, sir, we did. A tornado leveled our house last May, and we lost the place to the bank. So we figured it was a sign that the Lord was leadin' us to move."

"I never considered that the Lord would use a tornado on good people. But I got to admit, you folks have the right attitude."

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Gately?" Dola asked.

"Well, you have your family, your plans, and you know where you're headed."

"We're going to Dinuba," Corrie blurted out.

"See there? Any money you earn along the way just helps you fulfill the plan you already have. I would guess most of the men in Goldfield are just runnin' around lookin' for money first off. Then if they happen to find it, they decide what to do with it."

Dola brushed two flies off Punky's red face. "Seems backwards, don't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. I believe you're right. A man ought to find his place and purpose first and then worry about riches."

"Do you want to go to California with us?" Tommy-Blue queried. "I bet they don't have any knife throwers in Dinuba."

"If I had a family like yours, I'd go farm grapes too. But I don't have anyone but me."

"You got Wasco and Charlie Fred." Corrie nodded at the sleeping men at the back.

"Yep. Ain't that a pair to draw to? A sourdough prospector and a black Nebraska cowboy. But you're right. We got ourselves a good prospect of a lease, so if we work hard, we could make a little money. I'm just anxious to get there."

"Ada and Ida aren't very fast, but they've pulled us all the way from Oklahoma," Tommy-Blue responded.

The children began singing "Four Leaf Clover" and then moved into "Little Boy Blue." "Sweet Marie" followed, but then the wind picked up and dust swirled. Their voices muted.

The men at the back of the wagon woke and talked of rich stringers, picture rock, colored float, pay shoots, and \$300 ore. But the desert dust soon silenced even these enthusiastic prospectors. The wagon creaked along the rutted desert trail.

Tommy-Blue tied a bandanna under his wide felt hat to keep the sun off his neck and ears. Corrie and Rita Ann pulled on two of their mother's faded gingham bonnets. Mrs. Skinner held a dusty brown canvas umbrella over her and Punky, a damp tea towel also over his head.

The three passengers pulled hats across their faces and tried to find a position to sleep. The gradual descent to the desert provided no scenery except the occasional spike-leafed Joshua tree. Finally, a cluster of three Joshuas provided a patch of shade.

Mr. Skinner stopped the rig and slipped down. "The wind's died down. Everyone out and stretch. Time to let the mules rest."

Every inch of the traveling party was coated with fine gray dust. Each head of hair was caked, much as ice encases a telegraph wire during a spell of frozen winter fog. Their eyes peered out from dirt-laden lashes. Wasco's black left eye was swollen shut.

Dola attempted a laugh. "If it weren't for the discomfort and misery, this would be a humorous sight. Can't imagine a dirtier band of people on the face of the earth. I would like to have a photograph of this moment, but not look at it until fifty years from now. I trust the Lord's smiling."

"Can we eat now?" Tommy-Blue asked.

"Yes, but we'll have a cold lunch. We don't need a fire today." Dola was a foot shorter than Lucky Jack. "I trust you and the others will join us."

He stretched his long legs and tipped his bowler. "Thank you, but we aren't going to eat up your larder. We can wait until Goldfield."

"Nonsense. We might not have a lot, but we would be selfish not to share it with you."

On a tattered multicolored quilt with orange backing, she spread out a tin plate filled with limp carrots, a long loaf of very hard sourdough bread, and a dozen pieces of rabbit jerky.

O.T. motioned. "We have water in the barrels. I reckon we can refill them at Goldfield."

"Don't be too sure of that." Charlie Fred's white silk shirt faded a dingy gray and wore to the skin in places. "I hear they have to haul water for most of the town. Rabbit Springs, at the base of Malpais Mesa, can't hardly keep up with the increased population. You might have to buy the water. One ol' boy told me in some of them saloons water's more expensive than whiskey."

"I reckon the Lord made enough water for everyone," O.T. replied.

"Only He didn't put much of it around gold mines," Charlie Fred added. "Did you ever notice that?"

"Well, boys, before we all dig in, let's have a blessin'." O.T. bowed his head. "Lord, we thank You for these new friends—Lucky Jack, Wasco, and Charlie Fred. I ask You to turn this meager offering into nourishment for our bones. In Jesus' name, amen."

"You men help yourself," Dola said. "Guests always go first at the Skinner house."

"We ain't got no house," Tommy-Blue reminded her.

"Tommy-Blue, don't you correct your mama," O.T. scolded. "They all knew what she meant."

Lucky Jack pushed his hat back. "You kids go ahead and eat."

"Proper hospitality is not limited to adults," Rita Ann asserted. "You are our guests, and we will wait."

"Would you all hurry up? I'm hungry," Corrie whined.

"You kin eat all the carrots you want," Tommy-Blue offered.

Wasco scooped several pieces of jerky.

Lucky Jack cleared his throat. Wasco put some of the jerky back. Soon everyone had something on a plate.

Dola waved her hand. "Orion, get me grandmother's case, please."

Mr. Skinner set a two-foot-square, battered blue trunk on the dirt next to the farm wagon's rear wheel. Dola opened the lid and pulled out crystal glasses one at a time, wiping them on the back side of her apron.

"We going to use Grandma's glasses for water?" Corrie asked.

"We always use them when we have company," Rita Ann explained.

"Ma'am, there ain't no need to—" Wasco began.

"Now don't you tell me what I can and can't do," Dola said. "These are to remind my children civility and good etiquette know no geographical limits."

"Even in the middle of the godforsaken desert?" Charlie Fred said.

"I assure you, God has not forsaken this desert nor you."

"Are you sure my mama didn't send you here to hound me?" Charlie Fred replied.

The smile was tight, even smug. "Perhaps she did. Do you think it will do any good?"

"It just might, ma'am. I ain't seen Mama since '98. I reckon I ought to go back to North Platte someday."

"After you strike it rich in Goldfield?" Dola probed.

"That's the plan."

Rita Ann handed a carrot to Punky. He swatted it to the quilt, then kicked at it with chubby, round toes.

O.T. made a sandwich with rabbit jerky and bread crusts tossed aside by Corrie and Tommy-Blue. "How do you boys expect to cash in once you get to Goldfield? You can tell us 'cause we ain't interested in the gold. We're just passin' through."

Lucky Jack swallowed a bite of rubbery carrot with a gulp of water from a crystal glass. "Me and Wasco and Charlie Fred bought us a 175-foot lease on the Juniper Mine. We'll push it as far as it goes and see what we have."

"I don't understand mining leases," Dola admitted. "What does that mean?"

Lucky Jack played tug-of-war with a bit of rabbit jerky. "The man who discovered the gold doesn't want to do the diggin'. So he leased out a certain portion of his claim for others to work."

"What does it cost you to buy a lease?" Corrie asked.

"Darlin', it ain't proper to ask a man what somethin' costs,"

O.T. cautioned.

"We put some money up front and promised to give the man 20 percent of the gold we find," Lucky Jack explained.

"But we do have one problem." Wasco tried to keep bread from sticking to the roof of his mouth. "Leases need a name and we can't decide on ours. We sat up half the night discussin' the matter. The Lucky JackWascoCharlieFred Lease seems a mite too long."

"What is the length of time for your lease?" Mr. Skinner asked.

Charlie Fred patted his tender nose with the blue bandanna. "It lasts until January 1st."

"That's my birthday," Rita Ann exclaimed.

Lucky Jack peered at his partners. "Maybe we ought to call it The Rita Ann Lease."

She gasped. "Really?"

"Sounds good to me." Charlie Fred plucked a carrot into his wide mouth.

Wasco tore off a hunk of bread with his teeth. "Shoot, ever'body knows having a purdy lady's name on your mine or lease brings you good luck."

"Then we'll call it The Rita Ann," Lucky Jack announced.

"I've never had a gold mine named after me," Rita Ann squealed.

"Not the whole mine, just the lease," Mr. Skinner corrected.

"I've never had anything named after me," Corrie grumbled.

"That ain't true. I named a vigaroon after you," Tommy-Blue reminded her.

"Vigaroons don't count."

"Well, I thought it was a real scorpion when I named it," Tommy-Blue countered.

Lucky Jack gazed out on the desert. "Looks like we got company."

O.T. tugged the brim of his gray felt hat down low and squinted as three men rode burros toward them, their feet dragging the dirt. Heat rising off the pale gray desert floor made the men look like images in a fading dream.

"I should dig out some more food," Dola offered.

Lucky Jack stalked toward the men. "You definitely don't want to feed them. Wasco, grab your carbine and find a position behind these trees. Charlie Fred, put another bean in your pistol. Mr. Skinner, you and your family stay back at the wagon. This is our score to settle."

"You know these men?" O.T. asked.

"You ever heard of the Wilkins brothers?" Lucky Jack spun the cylinder of his revolver.

"No, sir, I reckon not. What are they famous for?"

"Packin' six-guns."

Dola pulled three more crystal glasses from the tattered trunk. "Whoever they are, they can use a drink of water. Besides, I have found that most men have a few virtues."

Rita Ann hunkered next to her father. "Shakespeare said, 'Men's evil manner lives in brass; their virtues we write in water.'"

Lucky Jack popped his knuckles. "I don't know if they got any virtues, but these three ought to have their vices written in lead."

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