

Prologue

Near White Sands, New Mexico, 1 February 1896

A buckboard drawn by a black horse and a white horse rattles down a deep-rutted road nothing more than two parallel white scars snaking through scattered desert bushes toward a long line of steep, rough-cut mountains in the far distance. A man in his late fifties, a rifle across his knees, his face grim, his eyes scanning the roadsides, is driving. By his side, a little boy hunches down in his coat, hat pulled down as far as it will go on his head, collar pulled to his ears. The man speaks to the child, who nods as they huddle close together in the freezing, moaning wind rolling off the mountains.

The afternoon shadows are long in the weeds, mesquites, creosotes, and yuccas. The mournful gray sky is breaking into white lumps of scudding clouds, and patches of blue are beginning to appear. Three riders, two on one side of the ruts, one on the other, as though leading the man and boy toward the mountains, are a half-mile ahead of the buckboard. In the distance, by the side of the road, a big green bush trembles in the wind. A man on his knees hides behind it, his neck stretched out of his coat to stare through a hole in the fluttering leaves. He holds a lever-action rifle, hammer pulled back, paused, ready to fall on a waiting bullet. Down in a shallow gully a few hundred yards behind him, another man waits on a horse.

The buckboard begins descending into a long swooping swale, the driver momentarily losing sight of the men ahead. As the buckboard passes out of sight, the riders suddenly turn back toward the buckboard, cantering out of sight from the road.

A quarter mile after the buckboard starts off the top of the swale and not more than fifty or sixty yards away, the shooter aims and fires twice. His shots, fast, deadly accurate, hit the driver's chest. Slumping backwards, as though struck by a mighty club, the driver's hands let the reins slide free. Stunned, the child stares in horror at the blood pumping out of the wounds covering the man's shirt. Suddenly alert, as if awaking from a dream, the boy leans forward to grab at the reins. The team, startled by the unexpected gunfire, springs into a pounding run, driving the buckboard wheels against the sides of the ruts, causing the buckboard to sway crazily back and forth, almost turning over.

The boy and the man are thrown out of the careening vehicle; the man lands by the side of the road, blood from his wounds pooling in the sand. The tumbling child, a rag doll thrown into the wind, strikes his head on a churning wheel. He lays unmoving, eyes staring at the spreading deep blue sky, seeing nothing.

1. The Assignment

San Francisco, 21 May 1899

“Peach!”

My desk editor has the lungs of a bull moose. You can hear him for miles, even in the *San Francisco Examiner* newsroom full of Blick electric typewriters rattling off Mr. Hearst’s *All the News That’s Fit to Print*. I hear him yelling for and at reporters every day, all day long and into the night. Still, when he bellows, I jump. Grabbing a pencil and pad, I take long strides toward his office with the big, partially open door belching blue-white cigar smoke like a stack at one of Carnegie’s steel mills.

A bulldog chewing on his half-smoked Havana cigar, he growls, “Close the door. Take a seat.” I sit on the edge of a chair in front of his desk covered over in white copy sheets reminding me of a big mahogany-colored pot of boiling milk. He keeps a window wide open, even though the breeze off the bay is cold. Sweat drops off my hair and runs down my neck. My jaw is clenched to keep my teeth from chattering. Maybe this is a new assignment. For all I know it might be a tail chewing or even my being fired. Biting my lower lip, my pulse races as Chief finishes his markup.

The old man bellows, “Copy!” Even with the door closed, a copy boy comes running. Groaning with fatigue, he slumps back in his chair, throws his feet up on his desk, and contemplates his Havana creeping back and forth between his fingers and thumb. He puffs his cheeks and stares at the ceiling before he stuffs the cigar in the corner of his mouth. Making a tent with his hands, he stares at me across the top of his Franklin glasses while touching the tips of his fingers together in a rhythm that reminds me of a slow drum roll. “Peach, are you a Republican or a Democrat?”

I wonder where this is going. “Roosevelt Republican. Mark my words. After San Juan Hill, old Teddy’s going to be . . .”

“Yeah, yeah. Mr. Hearst’s boy, Crane, covered the war. Remember? Ever been to the southwest?”

I raise my brows. He’s confused and must mean southeast of San Francisco. Southwest of San Francisco puts you in the Pacific. “Sure. Visited my uncle down in Fresno just a couple of months ago, and . . .”

Twisting his face into his you-idiot frown, his voice approaches his best bull moose bellow at my naïveté. “Damn, Peach! The Southwest, man, the Southwest. You know Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Geronimo, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holiday, Tombstone, Santa Fe, El Paso. That Southwest.”

Wanting to hide, I shake my head. . . “Uh . . . no sir, I took a ship around the horn from New York to get here. South, I’ve never been east of Fresno.”

He sighs and nods. “I don’t suppose you’ve heard of the Fountain murder trial that’s about to start?”

The Fountain murders? The name has a familiar ring. Staring at him blankly for a moment, my mind scrambles to find the scrap of information needed to keep me from looking like an uninformed moron. I raise my right index finger.

“Hah... yes. The Fountain murders... Uh, New Mexico Republican... territorial legislator... attorney... disappeared near White Sands with his eight-year old kid in ‘96 or ‘97... believed murdered by one of his Democratic rivals. It was some rancher he was set to prosecute for stealing cattle. I can’t remember the sheriff’s name... the guy who killed Billy the Kid. Pat Garrett. He was hired to catch the killer. So there’s going to be a trial? Garrett caught him, huh? When’s the hanging?”

He nods slowly, again staring at his Havana rolling between his thumb and fingers.

“That’s right, except you got about half the facts wrong, which is about par for a kid learning the trade. Here’s the deal. Fountain and his son have never been found. All the evidence on the men accused is circumstantial. The lead prosecutor is a bigshot Republican named Tom Catron. Catron’s so anxious to get a conviction, he’s said he’d be willing to act as lead prosecutor at no charge to the government.”

He takes a long draw on the Havana and blows the smoke toward the ceiling. “My spies tell me the defendants will be tried for the murder of the little boy. If that’s true, it’s a smart move. Catron has to be calculating he’ll get a lot of sympathy from the jury that way. Besides, if there’s not a conviction for the child, the territory can try the accused again for the murder of Fountain. It’s a damned clever way around double indemnity don’t you think? The lead defense attorney is a prominent Democrat named Albert Fall, who regularly kicks Republican tail in territorial politics. The defendants have helped out Fall whenever he needed a little political muscle. He owes them big time.”

Chief has my full attention as this tale gets curiozier and curiozier. “When did Garrett catch what’s-his-name?”

Chief’s voice drips with sarcasm. “Garrett never caught What’s-his-name. What’s-his-name, are Oliver Lee and James Gililand. After being on the run for about a year, they turned themselves into Judge Franklin Parker in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Garrett claims he has a witness that’ll prove Lee and Gililand did it. Rumor has it the witness is afraid to testify and has gone into hiding.

“It’s the biggest trial in the Southwest, maybe even the entire country. Some claim it’s the trial of the century. Hell, who knows what it might become.

“The facts are it’s being held in Hillsboro, a little mining town about 120 miles north of El Paso. Reporters from all over are running to cover it. A new telegraph line has even been run up there from the main wire and there are two operators on duty so reporters can do same-day stories on what’s happening.”

Enthusiasm creeps into my voice. A big trial and it sounds like I might be asked to go. “What do you want me to do, Chief?”

“If Lee and Gililand are convicted and hanged on circumstantial evidence, there’ll be a real blood feud between Republicans and Democrats, not just an occasional murder. McKinley will have to call out the Army to stop the fighting. New Mexico statehood will be set-back for years. This story might sell lots of papers for a long, long time.”

He pauses, staring at my eager face for a second or two. It feels like an eternity. “Mr. Hearst’s interest in politics is increasing every day. With its political implications and possibilities, he thinks this trial deserves special attention. We already have Seymour headed that way. His instructions are to send me a story summarizing the trial proceedings everyday.”

I know disappointment shows on my face. This will be just another flunky job to support one of our big time reporters.

If the old man sees my frustration, he ignores it and keeps talking. “Now you know Hearst papers have a reputation for taking the bull by the horns. Remember how we sold papers like there was no tomorrow after our reporters freed that woman in Cuba? It’d please Mr. Hearst and sell a lot of papers if we had a man at the trial find out where the bones of Fountain and his kid are hidden, and, if Lee and Gililand aren’t guilty, who is.

“Peach, you’re a bright boy. That memory of yours amazes me. You don’t rub people the wrong way; in fact, you’re about the only reporter I know with whom people actually want to interview. Pack your bags. I want you in Hillsboro as soon as you can get there, and I want you to sniff around and try to get to the bottom of this foolishness. Let Seymour report the day-to-day story. You focus on the big picture, the real scoop, and the personalities involved. Follow all the leads you can. If you need detective support, let me know. Send your wires directly to me and keep Seymour out of it. Son, this is your big chance. Don’t blow it. Got it?”

“Yes, sir!” Leaping out of the chair, my mind roils with things that have to be done before leaving. Nearly out the door before remembering to thank him, I look back. He’s already hunched over his desk, paying no attention to me, focused on a new sheet of copy.

Grabbing my Panama boater straw hat and coat, I run for the train station. Winded and puffing, it takes a minute to tell the perky old man behind the ticket window my destination. He grins and shakes his head. He’s already sold tickets to other reporters for that destination. “Sorry, son. To get to Hillsboro, New Mexico, you have to get off the train at Lake Valley and then ride a stagecoach for eighteen miles. Still want a ticket?”