Westward RiRectanglesing Sons

By

Tom Page

**Currency Values**

| 1875 | 2024 |
| --- | --- |
| $1.00 | $42.73 |
| $5.00 | $213.65 |
| $10.00 | $427.30 |
| $20.00 | $854.60 |
| $50.00 | $2,135.50 |
| $100.00 | $4,273 |
| $1,000.00 | $42,730 |
| $5,000.00 | $213,650.00 |
| $10,000.00 | $427,300.00 |
| $25,000.00 | $1,068,250.00 |
| $50,000.00 | $2,136,500.00 |
| $75,000.00 | $3,204.750.00 |
| $100,000.00 | $4,273,000.00 |
| $150,000.00 | $6,409,500.00 |
| $250,000.00 | $10,682,500.00 |
| $500,000.00 | $21,365,000.00 |
| $750,000.00 | $32,047,500.00 |
| $1,000,000.00 | $42,730,000.00 |

**Part One**

# Chapter One

Friday, July 1, 1864

There was a war going on, a brutal division that daily split the nation and sent reports west of horrific battles and an unspeakable loss of life on both sides of the conflict. John Mackay read the reports in the *Territorial Enterprise* like everyone else in Virginia City, only he could find no trace of the war’s hardship or slaughter anywhere on the Comstock Lode. As he walked up C Street in the early morning chill, he marveled at the luxuries apparent in a city that had been little more than a collection of tents just four short years before. Saloons numbered in the dozens now, teaming and boisterous at any hour of the day or night. The mines of the Comstock Lode employed three daily shifts of workers, which meant that a place like Virginia City was never completely silent or at rest. Even though the Comstock was in one of her worst depressions in her all too narrow history, the hillside town kicked with more vitality than New York or London on their best New Year’s Eve.

The front doors were open at the Delta Dance Hall, and even though it was barely seven o’clock on a Friday morning, music and laughter spilled out onto the street like flood waters from a ruptured damn. Mackay glanced inside and saw off-duty miners dancing with young Hurdy Gurdy girls, their flowing hoop skirts and layered petticoats billowing around their ankles as men whisked them around the dance floor. Walking farther along C Street, he let the constant sounds and smells of Virginia City overtake his senses. There was the drunken hoots and laughter from the saloons, frequent arguments and the occasional tack tack tack of gunfire. There was the smell of beer and whiskey, horse manure and sweat. There was the dance halls and restaurants, every doorway spilling forth with the sounds of mostly men at play. Immense mule teams pulled ore wagons between the mines and the stamp mills, creating mammoth traffic jams that persisted both day and night. There was the prairie schooners filled with merchandise, adding to the gridlock of an out of control, upstart city. Over the party din of C Street came the steady chug of a hundred steam engines thundering across Mount Davidson, each one dedicated to a single hoisting gallows or a water pump perched atop more mine shafts than a man could count. Virginia City embodied endless amounts of industry, a ballet of ceaseless motion and purpose on a scale that Mackay had never experienced before in his thirty-two years of life. Fortunes were in the making or already made, although in his case he had yet to taste the success that had originally set him on a brutal cross-country journey for the gold fields of California.

Mackay entered the hoisting works of the *Mexican Mine* and joined the queue of dayshift miners and timbermen mustering for work before the barred Pay Master’s window. He turned to watch a double-decker cage surface into the hoisting works from the mouth of Shaft Three. Five miners rode the cage to the surface, bare-chested and drenched in sweat, their muscled bodies glistening with quartz dust. Mackay knew all five men, and he could tell by their collapsed expressions that the temperatures in the *Mexican* were now permanently stuck on bad. Every mine on the Comstock suffered the same unbearable conditions. Some felt the heat beginning at the five hundred foot level, but no mine enjoyed less than one hundred degrees Fahrenheit by the time the six hundred foot mark had successfully been plumbed. A man descended into the heat and worked in fifteen-minute shifts, until his body could stand it no more and he was forced to retreat to a cooling station well above the bore. He would slug down water and chew on ice chips and shiver in the relative coolness for the next fifteen minutes, while his co-workers descended to the bore to take their turn in the near pass out conditions. And always the same stale, foul air, thought Mackay—that endless sense of suffocation, as if a man had been locked permanently in some festering outhouse during the worst dog days of summer.

As was always the case when George Hearst entered a room, the men in line arrested their conversations and focused entirely on his movements and words. Tall and imposing—a thick beard that even Moses would be proud of—Hearst approached the end-of-shift miners who were disembarking the cage at Shaft Three. Considered by most to be the first Gold Rush millionaire in California, Hearst had crossed the Sierras almost the moment the call went out that silver in abundance had been discovered on the Comstock Lode. A common cliché amongst miners was that it took a gold mine to run a silver mine, and in Hearst’s case, he had come to the Comstock with enough capital resources to do just that.

Mackay walked up to Hearst and shook the man’s hand. “Night shift records twelve tons of paying ore, Mister Foreman,” said Hearst. “Reckon your shift can top that?”

Mackay tipped his slouch hat, and said, “Consider it a challenge taken, Sir.”

Hearst nodded as he looked upon his shift foreman, feeling the strength of the Irishman’s grip, that overwhelming sense of competence that seemed to exude from the man like a hidden source of light. Mackay had come up through the ranks of four-dollar-a-day muckers, only his work ethic and solid judgment had singled him out from the start.

Without warning, a deep rumbling from the earth raised every man into an instant state of attention. Mackay and Hearst glanced at one another for a wary moment of assessment. Both men turned to look up at the hoisting engineers perched high up in their gallows. Each engineer manned a hoisting station set before a colossal steam engine, each engine providing power to four separate two-story flywheels supported inside the heavy timber gallows, which in turn raised and lowered their respective cages into the four shafts of the *Mexican Mine*. Engineers comprised the most competent men the mining industry could muster, since their performance or lack of it could cost a man his life with even the slightest of miscalculations. By unwritten rule of mining law, no man was to attempt a conversation with an engineer during the engineer’s shift, but in the case of this new and troubling rumbling, each engineer glanced down at Hearst with a ‘what just happened’ look of disquietude and fear.

As if pulled by a common hand, each shaft’s communication bell began to clamor with a desperation that no man failed to understand.

“Up now, up now!” Hearst yelled above the roar of the engines and the violent earthquake rumbling that continued from below.

Mackay moved quickly to the mouth of Shaft Two. He wanted to grab hold of the woven steel cable as if he could single-handedly raise the cage with his bare hands. The cable in front of him bobbed for a moment like a fishing line being played upon by something big, until the leviathan took the hook and ran for the bottom with all its might. The cable started to drag and complain loudly against the mammoth flywheel, emitting a deafening screeching noise as the engineer engaged the flywheel in an attempt to raise the cage.

“Power off!” Mackay tried to yell above the din.

The ribbon cable at Shaft Two broke with such force that it shot the ruptured end of the steel cable toward the rooftop of the hoisting works, some forty feet above Mackay’s head. Like a giant slingshot the cable whirled past his head, forcing him to dive backwards and away from the decapitating force. Once on the ground, Mackay opened his eyes and looked up, just as the runaway cable made contact with the roof of the hoisting works. The cable cracked against the roofing timbers, opening a ten-foot proscenium of daylight overhead, like a detonation of unsecured giant powder against a sheer wall of exposed quartz. Mackay looked left and glanced at the communication bell on Shaft One. He could no longer hear the clang of the bell over the wail of the steam engines, but he could see that the miners below were still working the bell with frantic intensity. Bring us up, was the plea. Bring us up or we die!

Mackay turned and gave the “fastest rise” signal to the engineer at Shaft One, until roofing timbers began to rain down upon him from the shattered rooftop above. He drew his legs up into a fetal hug, cupping his arms around his head, riding out the worst of the falling debris as best he could. A piece of timber struck him painfully on his exposed left hip, then another on his leg—one more to his left shoulder, just below his neck. When the raining had ended he began to push his way clear of the boards, his thoughts focused solely on the mounting disaster and the trapped men below. A second explosion shook the earth with a violent new concussion, forcing him to duck back down between the fallen disarray of roofing boards.

“How many men in the hole last night?” Hearst frantically asked the Pay Master.

“Fifty-three,” answered the Pay Master. “Five up safe, forty-eight unaccounted for.”

Hearst looked to the faces of the five escaped miners. “What can you tell us?” he said.

“We were working below Gallery Two,” said Scotsman Kevin McConnell, “sometime around two this morning.”

“That’s when we heard it,” said John Stubbins, recently arrived from the Missouri Territory. “Like a small earthquake, somewhere above our heads.”

“Did you send a man for a look?” said Mackay.

“I checked it myself,” said McConnell.

James Fair walked up to the group with a look of focused urgency. “We could hear it all the way from the *Ophir*,” said the competing mine superintendent. Fair and Hearst clasped each other’s forearm. “We’re here to lend a hand, George, all my boys at your immediate disposal.”

Hearst pointed to Mackay and said, “My day foreman, John Mackay.”

Mackay shook Fair’s hand. He had heard of the *Ophir’s* superintendent, a fellow Dubliner, only this was the first time he had met the man face-to-face. “My men were just filling us in on a loud settle above Gallery Two,” Hearst went on, “a good five hours ago. We’ll need a rescue party to pull out the survivors.”

Mackay looked over Fair’s shoulder and saw the group of women and children, weeping as they hugged each other for comfort. Father Manague from St. Mary’s Church was among them, consoling the group as best he could. The wives and families of the few survivors they had managed to free from the earth moved away from the main body of mourners, Mackay noted, as if their good fortune might somehow offend the others who still had loved ones trapped underground. The fortunate ones clung to their husbands and fathers with looks of open relief, not wanting to let go of their recently resurrected men.

“We’ve rested long enough,” Mackay said to Fair. “It’s time we go down there and find the rest of them.”

Mackay led the way, followed by Fair and twelve miners who carried an assortment of pickaxes, ropes and lanterns. During a normal eight-hour shift a miner was allotted one small candle to work by. If burned without pause, a candle would last a man two hours before it ran out of wick and tallow, leaving the miner to complete his shift with all the blindness of a bat. The mine owners provided dim and infrequent staging lanterns along the main arteries of the mine, which meant that a miner’s candle was lit only when delicate work was required, such as driving a jack or charging a hole with giant powder. During a rescue, however, every man was issued a kerosene lantern, under the belief that full visibility would allow the rescue party to move through the mine with expediency and agility.

As the men worked their way along the primary drift leading down into Gallery One, a steady stream of rats scurried past them, racing up and away from the worst of the disaster.

Mackay and Fair paused for a moment to examine the rodent’s retreat. “They’re running from something,” said Mackay.

“Probably just spooked,” answered Fair. “Just in case, let’s move the canary up front.”

Rats were common in every mine on the Lode. Many a brown rodent had been given names and were treated like pets by individual miners, sometimes feeding them scraps of food from their dining pails when the men broke for meals. Caged canaries were routinely used in Washoe mines to detect the presence of poisonous gas. Rats were less sensitive in this regard, but if a rat was seen fleeing an area of the mine, it was safe to assume that a miner should go no farther without first observing the reactions of a canary. If the canary grew agitated and flapped his wings, then a man could rightly suspect the presence of a deadly gas. If the canary fell to the floor of the cage and died, then an immediate retreat was the only safe course of action.

Once the canary had been passed up to the front of the rescue party, Mackay and Fair watched the bird for a full minute before pushing deeper into the drift. The bird seemed content on its perch, prompting the team to make their way into the cavernous rotunda of Gallery One.

“Anyone here?” Mackay called out too the room.

When no one answered the rescue party pushed onward, crossing the gallery and descending into an incline that led down to Gallery Two. The rat panic appeared to be over, Mackay assessed, since many rats were now following the group deeper into the mine. He raised the canary and saw that the bird was free from agitation—the air down in the *Mexican* was stale but clean. They worked their way down into Gallery Two, finding the same cavernous emptiness, the same lack of miners, timbermen, powdermen or blacksmiths. Mackay felt a shiver run down his spine. It was eerie, such an abrupt lack of activity, for a mine of this magnitude was usually bustling with life.

Approaching the three hundred foot level through another incline, the rescue party came upon an empty giraffe loader braked on the narrow gauge track. The men loaded their gear into the cart, released the hand brake and slowly walked it down the grade. Fifty feet later the cart came to an abrupt stop when its front wheels came in contact with a pile of loose rubble on the tracks. The men raised their lanterns to illuminate the problem, and it was then that the group saw the first of the cave-in—a complete occlusion of the tunnel. Tons of fallen rock mixed with the shattered remains of square set timber, everything piled helter skelter from floor to ceiling.

“To your picks, Lads,” said Fair. “Let’s find a way through this mess as quickly as we can.”

The men set to work with a focused synchronization of effort. Two men at a time would approach the cave-in wall, manhandling boulders of quartz and timber beams weighing as much as two hundred pounds each. A man would pick up a boulder and duck-walk his burden to the giraffe, where two other men would help him hoist the debris into the ore cart. While the first two labored under their burden, another two would approach the cave-in wall and tackle the next obstacle in their path. Miners and timbermen were frequently required to move objects of incredible weight—like powerful ants, Mackay always felt—and the outcome of so much routine hard labor kept every man sculpted and toned like Roman gladiators or the mythical image of Adonis. When the giraffe was filled, four men would push it up the incline and into Gallery Two, dumping the load and then returning the cart to the work site.

They worked like this in tireless rotation for the next two hours, pushing deeper into the cave-in at roughly five feet every fifteen minutes. The temperatures hovered around ninety degrees at this depth, but the miners refused to let the conditions slow their progress. Interval breaks comprised a luxury none of them would allow themselves, since the lives of forty-two still missing men rested completely upon their efforts. Despite the robotic focus of the workers, Mackay noted when their progress began to slacken. Anxiety-driven energy was one thing, he thought, only no amount of motivation could sustain a man for long in such adverse and strenuous conditions. “We’ll soon need a replacement crew,” he said to Fair as they stood together by an empty giraffe.

Fair nodded. “Let’s get a man topside,” he said. “A dozen fresh recruits to work the site.”

Mackay was about to call out the order when he heard the distant tapping sound of rock upon rock. The rescue team paused in unison, glancing at one another in an effort to confirm what they had heard. One of the timbermen picked up a crowbar and banged it against some cave-in rock, repeating the same cadence as the message that had been sent. The silence that followed seemed like an eternity. Mackay could hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears, and then there it was again—distant and muffled, a repeat call from the other side of the cave-in.

The rescue party erupted in a communal roar of approval. They set to work again at a faster pace than before, buoyed by a new confidence that they were no longer working blindly or in vain. “We still need replacements,” said Fair.

Mackay tapped a miner on the shoulder, and said, “Bring down as many volunteers as you can muster.”

Six hours after disaster had struck in the *Mexican Mine*, Mackay leaned against a square set along the incline, feeling the depths of his exhaustion as he watched more than forty men labor ceaselessly in an effort to save their brethren. They had cleared an incredible volume of rock and debris from the cave-in site—an almost superhuman effort by any man’s standard—yet still no further sign of the missing men. Both sides had sent periodic messages back and forth to verify that the rescuers were still at it and that the trapped miners were still alive and breathing. Only how much farther, thought Mackay. We’ve cleared over a hundred feet and still no sign of the prize.

Mackay un-wedged a quartz boulder from the top of the pile, feeling a sudden blast of air rush past his face. He dropped the boulder to the ground—damn it, they were through! He retrieved his lantern and held it up to where the boulder had been removed, noting a small passageway along the roof of the caved-in adit. Other rescuers had felt the blast as well, and they joined Mackay to stare into the passageway. “It’s a pocket,” one of them said as he peered into the hole.

“How far?” said another.

“Farther than our light can penetrate,” said Mackay, handing his lantern to one of the miners. Mackay removed the coil of rope from his chest, tying one end to his right ankle. He picked up the coil and handed it to the nearest miner. “Let’s have a look, shall we?” he said.

Mackay climbed up into the passageway. He lay on his stomach for a moment, taking in the darkness and the silence and the rancid smell of trapped and chalky air. He inched forward using his elbows and knees, deeper into the tunnel until the light was nearly gone. He guessed he had traveled some fifteen feet when his right hand struck what appeared to be a wall of cannonball-sized rocks. The rocks felt loose, so he started pulling them down and shunting them along either side of his body. His hands tested the outline of a rather large cannonball near the top of the stack, and he dug both hands around the stone and pulled with all his might. As he pulled it free, another long gush of air swept past him. He lowered his head and closed his eyes, shielding himself from a small sand storm of dust. The rush was shorter than before, and when he raised up on his elbows again a giant rat scurried through the opening, over his left forearm on a bee line path for freedom. His spirits soared in response—it was an opening, a passageway through to the trapped men! “Hail, can you hear me?” he yelled into the small opening.

Mackay lowered his face into his arm when the enormous eruption of cheers followed his words. His strength seemed to collapse at the sound of the men—so much prolonged stress and worry and pitch black anxiety. He raised his head again, sensing the smile upon his face. “Are you safe?” he called into the hole.

“Four of us have passed.” Mackay recognized the voice—Peter Allen from Scranton Pennsylvania.

“Can you dig me through from your side?” said Mackay.

“Consider it done,” said Allen. “Oh and by the way. God be damned if we’re not awfully glad to hear your voice.”

# Chapter Two

Thursday, June 16, 1864

As was always the case when Lizzy went off like this, Ralston found himself vexed by the aversion she felt for the city he so deeply loved. “We’ve a grand party tonight,” she said as they stood together in their massive ballroom, “one of your Lavish Nights, as the papers so aptly refer to them now. And yet nowhere in this wretched excuse for a town can I find even the most basic of needs. Castile’s has no caviar. Landrigan’s is completely out of lobster.”

“The Dungeness crab harvest is in full swing,” said Ralston. “Why not focus on what’s local and abundant?”

“Were I a Lady in Boston...”

“But you’re not a Lady in Boston.”

“But I could be, Toppie,” she said, turning to implore him with her eyes. “You’re a wealthy man. We could live anywhere we want.”

“This city has flourished by my efforts.”

“Boston as well would flourish by your efforts. Anywhere, Toppie, anywhere you choose to hang your hat.”

Ralston leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. “Why not let the caterers worry about things like caviar and lobster? It’s their job.”

Ralston walked out the side entrance of his Pine Street mansion, feeling the sun on his face as he contemplated what made women so frequently hard to get along with. While he had long ago acknowledged his own love for the finer things in life, their absence was never something that threw him into a firestorm of indignation or angst. Men adapted largely without complaint, he considered, while women—particularly spoiled society women like Lizzy—felt the need to inflict their displeasure on everyone around them in quite limitless application.

“Do not bachelors have the best of all worlds?”

“I have long thought that to be true,” said Jeffries, seated atop his carriage perch as he awaited Ralston at the servant’s entrance. “Good morning to you, Sir.”

“And yet we’re married, you and I,” said Ralston, climbing up onto the carriage bed before Jeffries could step down to offer aid.

“Precisely,” said Jeffries.

“Ah, so that’s it!” said Ralston. “A man must first marry so that he can then appreciate how good his life was before he committed the act.”

“It’s a wretched truth, Sir, very wretched indeed.”

“You know, Jeffries,” said Ralston, “I do believe you’re an exceedingly smart man.”

“Not in the least, Sir,” said Jeffries, flashing the reins and commanding his team into motion. “The fact that I’m married suggests quite the contrary.”

While Jeffries eased the carriage into the traffic along Pine Street, Ralston glanced to his left to notice two finely-adorned young women whispering amongst themselves as they watched him pass. “That’s him!” he imagined their words. “Billy Ralston, The Magician of San Francisco!”

At least that’s what the papers were calling him now—on account of his myriad construction projects, his factories, his newly-formed Bank of California, his open charitable benevolence, his ability to loan money to ordinary people based on nothing more than a man’s good word. Only listen to this pridefulness of yours, he admonished himself. Quite suddenly the voice of his long dead father sounded clearly in his mind.

*‘Graveyards, Son, are teeming with men who thought they could not be replaced.’*

Ralston leaned back on his carriage seat and gazed up at the cloudless sky. There was a crispness in the air, an Autumn chill that somehow reminded him of his boyhood in Ohio. As they drove toward the Bank of California, he closed his eyes and focused on the memories of his long forgotten youth. Everyone called him ‘Chap’ back then, and he wondered for a moment why the nickname had fallen out of favor. Ralston had been sixteen when he had left home, remembering with great clarity how his mother had cried with such emotion that a lump had formed in his throat. “This is your home, Chap,” she had pleaded against his decision.

“My future’s to the south.” he had answered her. “I’m to be a great riverboat captain on the Mississippi.”

“There’s plenty of good living, right here in Wellsville,” she had said. “You should stay where you belong, Chap, before the world has a chance to damage you.”

Even then Ralston knew that part of his decision to leave had been due to his father’s sudden collapse in wealth and social status. For three generations the family’s livelihood had been tied to a string of keel boats that ran grain and merchandise along the Ohio River. Over the years the family business had taught him to be philosophic, to accept whatever life had to offer without bitterness or complaint. Boilers would explode, snags would rip open hulls. Fire could strip a boat clear to the waterline, but never could the majestic Ohio implant total dismay in Ralston’s soul, nor dampen his ardor nor douse his ambitions. The river gave him confidence. The river taught him the meaning of harnessing God’s powerful forces for his own profit and good use. It prepared him for a manly existence, to be hopeful and constant. Even in the face of overwhelming disaster, a man was required to maintain his sense of purpose, his sense of magnificence over all things human and physical and meant to be tamed by man.

But then one night at Keokuk his father’s keel boat, the *Dominion*, was seized by a combination of adverse tides and a hideous eruption of crosswind. The keel boat had lost control despite their best efforts to hold her true, until she had smashed her midships against a submerged rock, sending all of the Ralston family assets to the bottom of a murky stretch of desolate riverbed. From wealth to ruin in the blink of an eye, and it was then that Ralston had figured out that a man should be protected from such calamity of fortune through diversification of one’s assets and business interests.

“You watch yourself,” his father had cautioned him before they had parted ways for the last time in their lives. “There’s plenty of bad men out there, and many ride the Mississippi, just waiting for young innocents like you.”

“I’m not so innocent,” Ralston had answered defiantly.

“A man’s life is like a mountain,” his father had said. “At the bottom is innocence, at the top lies understanding. Because of your youthful inexperience, you perceive wrongly that you’re higher up the mountain than you actually are.”

After the *Dominion* went down, Ralston had left home to become the clerk on a Mississippi riverboat known as the *Constitution*, which by contrast was a floating palace compared to the roughly hewn beams of a working keel boat. The *Constitution* introduced him to the wider life of Natchez and Memphis, Vicksburg, Nashville and Louisville. When the *Constitution* caught fire and sank near Memphis, Ralston accredited landing his second clerkship to his budding reputation for hard work and a can-do attitude. The *Convoy* was another floating palace like the *Constitution*, only she plied goods and passengers between St. Louis, Memphis and New Orleans. His new riverboat was skippered by Captain Cornelius Garrison, and as Ralston thought back over their early years together, he knew that much of his world view and concepts of manhood had come from this one quite extraordinary man. Garrison was bold and aggressive, always the image of courage under fire, and always equal to any emergency the river might throw his way. Not for a moment did he fear bandits, nor the bullies or pirates that lurked in the cane brakes. It was Garrison, he considered, who had taught him to be firm yet genial, sober yet positive, and always a leader among men.

Ralston thought back on his youth on the river and marveled at how doors seemed to open up for him, primarily because of the fact that Captain Garrison had taken him on as his understudy. In New Orleans, Ralston experienced the pillared and stately houses of the wealthy, set well back behind rich, labyrinthine gardens. He found an appreciation for luxurious carriages, blooded horses, homes presided over by beautiful women and gallant men. In these houses he saw cut glass and crystal and silver, French tapestries and heavy silk hangings, of which he rapidly came to admire. New Orleans was a community that enjoyed opera and theater, music and balls and frappé d coffee drinks and torrents of alcohol. New Orleans was a melting pot of blended cultures, of men who had inherited the traits of their French and Spanish mothers, of high strung Creoles who loved pomp and pageantry. Here were men who enjoyed any game that stirred their senses, men who danced with abandon and who protected their honor with an ardently held pistol or a sword.

Ralston closed his eyes again, remembering his time in Panama—his first transit to San Francisco back in 1851. The 1100 ton steamer *New Orleans* had limped into Panama with engine troubles and a captain in the final throws of terminal syphilis. Garrison and Fretz were in a predicament, since the *New Orleans* had a full passenger roster of 200 scheduled fares. They appealed to Ralston to take the *New Orleans* back to San Francisco, and despite his lack of experience as a seagoing boat captain, Ralston had felt equal to the task. After all, he had studied the sea for years and understood its moods. And despite his lack of experience at the helm, Ralston had figured out early his own thirst for taking desperate chances in exchange for magnificent rewards.

Ralston remembered the trip like it was yesterday. He had guided the *New Orleans* up the treacherous and fog bound California Coast, past Point Conception and Point Arguello—the graveyards of many California Argosies—only Ralston had prevailed due to the fact that he had memorized the coastal charts until they were apart of his breathing consciousness. During the passage he had rarely left the wheelhouse, never relaxing his vigilance or attention to navigational detail. And of course the weather—always an eye on the weather, and what she could do to a captain unprepared for swift reaction.

At last he had sailed into San Francisco Bay for his first glimpse of his now beloved city. A canon rang out from its purchase atop Telegraph Hill, announcing his arrival to the city at large.

*You saw her first through a curtain of mist and fog. A chaotic, enticing vision, like a canvas-covered city, tossed hit-or-miss up and down seven sloping hillsides. Love at first sight. New Orleans had been a palatial grandeur amidst a swamp. Panama had been sheer madness on* *the banks of the Caribbean. San Francisco at first and every subsequent glance had been pure and instant music to your soul.*

As he approached the Golden Gate, Ralston had marveled at the strength of the sea’s enmity. What other power than angry ocean could tear such a breach through the low Marin hills to the sea? Ralston remembered his instant pleasure and relief as his passengers were safely delivered ashore. Upon his return to Panama, Garrison and Fretz had made him an equal partner, and due to cutthroat business tactics in Panama, the company soon expanded into more profitable trade routes between New Orleans and New York. On occasion they would team up with other shipping merchants, and in so doing Ralston became acquainted with the likes of Cornelius Vanderbilt and the high society strata of New York. And it was in New York where he had first met his future wife, Miss Louisa Thorne.

*We met instantly, as you were always so fond to say. My sweet Louisa, taken from me by an unforeseen illness, by the unfair and wrathful hand of God.*

Ralston thought back on the troubled years that followed. After Garrison accepted a lucrative job with Vanderbilt’s shipping line, Ralston soon joined the firm and established their San Francisco headquarters on Sacramento Street, next to the Chinese Salesroom. There Ralston had become agent to a fleet of magnificent ships, including the *Yankee Blade*, which was to become his early undoing. The *Blade* was touted as the newest and fastest sailing ship on the Coast, and with increasing competition from all quarters, speed in the age of Clipper Ships had become of paramount importance for any passage to and from the Coast.

Ralston was at the Jackson Street pier the morning of the *Blade’s* departure, and he remembered his demands on Captain Henry Randall that her maiden voyage be a record speed run to establish her supremacy and reputation within the Clipper Ship trade. She was loaded with eight hundred passengers and $153,000.00 in gold bullion, only Ralston failed to take her precious cargo into consideration when he pushed his captain beyond the limits of rational and prudent navigation. Because of this youthful omission, the *Blade* had piled up on a hidden reef off Point Arguello, costing the lives of three hundred men, women and children, as well as a fortune in sunken bullion. In retrospect he realized that lesser men would have been permanently crushed by the event, only he had fought his way back, despite the tragedy’s early impact on his reputation and career.

*You were roundly and appropriately censured by your peers—by an outraged San Francisco public—for these things you will always be humbled and held to account.*

Ralston opened his eyes again and let the tragic past fade from his mind. What was it that Garrison had been so fond of saying?

*‘A man can only live in but one direction at a time.’*

Ralston surveyed his crowded ballroom and marveled at the sheer number of beautiful women in attendance. Not only did great wealth allow a man to possess material objects of a highly coveted nature, he considered, but it also gave men the ability to attract women of high breeding and extraordinary female aesthetics. Not a woman present seemed to lack the desired elements of a voluptuous carriage, while the gowns further highlighted a sea of eye-catching hips and firm, elevated breasts. Expertly applied makeup accentuated smoky, alluring eyes, while flush cheekbones and cherry red lips of such ripeness seemed to stir in Ralston the forbidden desire to taste each woman like his favorite foods or a sip of perfectly-aged brandy. The ballroom positively bristled with expensive haute couture created by the sought-after English designer, Charles Frederick Worth. Fanchon bonnets and snoods adorned nearly every styled head of hair, made up of chenilles dyed of richly-colored Mauveine and magenta, replete with intricate bead work, lace trimmings and ribbon ties.

Ralston clasped Lizzy in Waltz Stance as the ten piece orchestra began playing the *Grand March Medley*. “Jane Stanford thinks Leland’s having an affair,” she whispered in his ear.

Ralston and Lizzy began waltzing in time as the room full of dancers moved clockwise in an ever-swirling circle of hoop skirts and tuxedo tails. “Does she suspect any woman in particular?”

“I’ll give you three clues,” said Lizzy, offering a wily, tight-lipped smile.

“I’d rather not,” said Ralston.

“She’s French, she’s twenty-four years old and she’s an actress of some renown.”

Ralston raised an eyebrow as he continued to lead his wife around the ballroom. “Sarah Burnhardt?” he said. “Why that sly devil, I didn’t think he had it in him.”

Ralston felt Lizzy bristle in his arms. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Ralston continued to smile for the benefit of his guests, trying to cover for Lizzy’s suddenly glaring expression. “It simply means that Leland Stanford is an otherwise cold fish personality,” he said. “Up until this moment I thought he was made solely for the act of business and nothing else.”

“You make his indiscretions sound like a sporting thing.”

“Forgive me, Darling, I meant no such offense.”

Lizzy relaxed in his arms, although Ralston noted a lingering heat coloring her cheeks. “How would I know if you were having an affair?” she said.

“I’m much too public a man.”

“Leland’s a public man…”

“Lizzy, I could never pull off such a thing without it getting back to you.”

“Is that the only thing that holds you back?”

Ralston felt relieved when it was time to rotate dance partners. He released his wife and glided into the arms of Cindy Sunderland. “Thomas tells me your solicitations on behalf of the Bank of California have brought in an enormous client base in almost no time at all,” she said.

“Surely he exaggerates.”

“You are what the papers say, aren’t you, Toppie Ralston? The Magician of San Francisco.”

“I only want what’s best for the city, and, of course, the financial health of the bank,” said Ralston.

“Thomas is proud to sit on your board. We’re all proud, Toppie. Your bank gives people confidence, mainly that we’re no longer at the mercy of East Coast financiers. Thomas says it’s a sign to ourselves and to the world that San Francisco is finally a force to be reckoned with.”

Ralston let Cindy glide out of his arms, holding still for a moment until Leeza Bonner waltzed into his space. Their hands and arms came together with practiced élan, as Ralston swept her along to the music, precise to every rhythmic tempo and beat. “You look as dashing as a Greek God,” she said, her face appearing flushed by all the dancing.

The *Grand March Medley* was the longest of popular waltzes by far, clocking in at well over nine minutes in duration. Even the fit would get winded by such a piece, and as it neared the seven minute mark, Ralston could tell that many of the partygoers were feeling ready for a break. “And you the absolute portrait of feminine grace,” he said. “How’s that new house coming along?”

“Perhaps another six months before its completed,” she said. “I hear you’ve bought a property down on the peninsula.”

“At Belmont, yes,” said Ralston. “Two years from now we shall host the most lavish christening party ever imagined.”

“You have far more patience than I,” said Leeza. “We’ve been building for nine months and I’m already sick of the whole affair.”

Ralston changed partners again, this time joining up with Mary Hopkins. “Virginia City stocks have taken a tumble,” she said without preamble. “Are you still advising folks to invest in the Comstock Lode?”

Mark Hopkins’ wife was just about the most direct woman Ralston had ever encountered; except for Lizzy, he amended the thought. “Comstock investments remain fundamentally sound,” he said, waltzing her toward the north end of the ballroom.

“Mark says the flooding in the minds has brought production to a crawl.”

“It’s a problem right now in every mine on the Lode, that’s correct,” said Ralston.

“Perhaps Sutro’s crazy tunnel isn’t as crazy as it sounds.”

“Perhaps not,” said Ralston. “In the meantime we’ll just have to build larger pumps to clear the water.”

“And that will put the mines back on a paying basis?”

“One can only hope.”

“Hope, Toppie? I should think that a banker would trust in facts more than hope.”

Ralston waltzed out of Mary Hopkins’ arms and into those of Hannah Jones, who was without close rival the most beautiful woman he had ever held in his arms. She seemed to possess an extra firmness and accentuation about every part of her body. Her flawless face was set off by piercing blue eyes and naturally blonde hair, which she wore in ringlet trestles that cascaded down her back. To smell her essence was to breathe the air at the base of a waterfall. “Are you enjoying yourself?” he said, struggling to hide his overwhelming sense of seduction.

“Your parties are always the event of the season,” said Hannah. “Lizzy has a gift.”

“I strongly suspect that Lizzy could manage the most challenging of factories. On second thought, Lizzy quite well could be the first female American President.”

Even Hannah’s laugh had an element of erotic intoxication, and Ralston felt a tinge of jealously that JP Jones, the ugly curd, had managed to land such an alluring creature as this. “JP says you’re to build a theater like no other,” she said.

“For the people of San Francisco,” he said.“For the celebration of acting and all things as beguiling as you.”

# Chapter Three

Wednesday, March 15, 1865

Sharon sat in the far back corner of Sam Willart’s Restaurant off the lobby of the International Hotel, and from his secluded vantage point in the high-backed booth, he listened in on a conversation that he was clearly not meant to hear. The sun had barely risen over Mount Davidson, and Sharon sat alone with his second cup of coffee and a nearly-consumed plate of scrambled eggs, bacon and buttered toast; his usual morning fare before descending into the mines in search of information and his daily pulse check into the Comstock Lode.

“I’ve a meeting in Sharon’s sweat room in less than two hours time.” Sharon recognized the voice of Eugene Pritchard, current owner of the *California*, who was officially behind on his payments to the Bank of California.

“Let me guess,” said Finn Lonagan. “He’s about to foreclose on your ownership rights.”

“How can I make a payment with so much water in my drifts?” said Pritchard. “I haven’t managed to haul but ten tons of low grade ore over the past two weeks!”

“When he and his partner, Billy Ralston, first opened their bank, we were all giddy over their cheap money,” said Lonagan. “Since then, we’ve been out-smarted by the worst sort of human cancer. You’re the last of the holdouts, Pritchard, you should take some manner of pride in that fact. Once he takes possession of the *California*, that makes seven mines and ten mills, all in the bank’s grubby little hands.”

“I have no intention of losing my property to the likes of William Sharon,” said Pritchard. “By golly I’ll defend her with my own life if I have to.”

“Trouble is,” said Lonagan, “Sharon’s completely within his legal rights of foreclosure. If you can’t make a payment today I suspect he’ll demand further collateral.”

“I have no more collateral to give,” said Pritchard.

“And that, my friend, is why I’ll be buying your breakfast this morning.”

“It ain’t right,” said Pritchard.

“No it’s not,” said Lonagan. “We’re dealing with unscrupulous men, the sort who have no problem cheating honest men out of what’s rightfully theirs. On the other hand Sharon and Ralston have invested heavily in the Lode, which may give both of us the last laugh on the matter. Twelve months of steady borrasca. How much longer can the bank throw good money after bad?”

Sharon placed a silver dollar coin next to his plate and stood up to go. He reached for his black preacher’s hat and duster, turning to walk toward Pritchard and Lonagan as he planted the hat firmly upon his head. As he did so he glanced up at the seated men, who both wore expressions of severe discomfort now that they understood that Sharon had overheard their conversation.

“Mister… Sharon,” Lonagan managed, stumbling over his words.

“Neither of you felt cheated when you came to me for money,” said Sharon. “As for you, Lonagan, I’ll be waiting for you, in my sweat room.”

Sharon walked out of the International Hotel into the bright sunshine of a crisp Virginia City morning. The air smelled of burning pine and sagebrush, while the rumble of industry seemed to warm his heart with its all too familiar cadence. As he walked, he thought back on his early days on the Comstock Lode—how that very same thunder had invaded his sleep and made him a distressed and frazzled man. Yet now it was apart of his daily routine. Like breathing or washing one’s face. His wife, Maria, hated the Lode for its ceaseless noise and unchristian-like behaviors, which made Sharon one of the many Washoe Widowers whose families stayed safely below in San Francisco. Sharon thought back on his visit last night to the *Bow Windows* parlor house. His date for the evening had been all of twenty years old, and Sharon realized that if his wife had remained with him in Virginia City, his sexual escapades would be seriously curtailed, if not altogether disrupted.

On Union Street, Sharon climbed aboard his waiting carriage, looking down as he opened the telegraph wire that the bellman had delivered to him as he walked through the lobby:

Form No. 168

The Western Union Telegraph Company

-----Incorporated-----

23,000 Offices in America Cable Service To All The World

**Received** at:

87 B Street - Paid

Virginia City - Sept 11

Delayed crossing Sierras, arrived Carson City late last night. Should arrive VC this afternoon. Mills and Ralston would like a meeting regarding future investments in Comstock.

William Ralston, Cashier

Sharon collected the reins and commanded his horse to set out at a gentle walk. He steered the animal in a tight half circle next to Piper’s Opera House, joining the early morning flow of traffic along C Street. He headed south over the Divide, dropping down into Gold Hill past the hotel and the gambling house on South Main Street. He thought about the telegram, and felt a raw stab of instinct roil in his stomach. Bank President Mills had been pushing Ralston to back away from their Comstock investments for more than a year now, thought Sharon, which meant their impromptu arrival in Virginia City meant only one thing. They were coming to close out their investment, and with it his own position and livelihood. He steered his carriage east around the Gold Hill Hotel, reining in his gelding at one of the hitching posts positioned near the hoisting works of the *Crown Point*. Dismounting his carriage, Sharon removed a short lead line from the storage box underneath his foot board, snapping it onto the animal’s bit collar before tying the free end to the hitching post with a half-hitch knot.

Sharon entered the hoisting works through a side door that led into the guest bath and changing rooms, stripping off his suit until he could arm his way into one of the freshly-laundered, ill-fitting jumpsuits that had become standard issue in every mine on the Lode. Appropriately attired, he entered the main hoisting works and nodded to the four shaft engineers perched high up in their gallows frames. Superintendent Sam Witherspoon held open a cage door at the mouth of Shaft Three, looking on as five miners filed into the cage. He closed the door behind them and checked the safety latch, signaling the shaft engineer by raising his outstretched thumb above his head. As the cage descended, Sharon approached Witherspoon and patted him on the shoulder.

“Have you time to take me below?” Sharon yelled above the noise.

“Absolutely,” Witherspoon yelled back. “Shaft Two cage should be up any minute now.”

After ten end-of-shift miners had disembarked the cage at Shaft Two, Sharon and Witherspoon boarded the upper cage and closed the safety door. Witherspoon signaled the engineer, and the cage sprang into its descent with a violent jolt, prompting both men to entwine their fingers onto the steel mesh that made up the non-supportive skin of the cage. The mesh was a recent protective addition in the *Crown Point*, since too many men had been maimed by falling objects that bounced into a cage as they rode up and down the main shafts. In the less proactive and safety conscious mines, thought Sharon, the simple act of losing one’s balance could cost a man the loss of life or limb should an arm or a leg breach the exterior of the cage.

“What’s the status of the flooding?” Sharon asked now that the noise of the hoisting works was rapidly fading away.

“Just barely keeping on top of it,” said Witherspoon. “A gallon in, a gallon out. Two of my men drilled into a gusher last night. Barely escaped the drift before being boiled alive.”

“We’ve an order for three Cornish pumps, each one ten times our current capacity,” said Sharon.

“They can’t come soon enough,” said Witherspoon.

“Anything promising?” said Sharon.

Witherspoon shook his head. “I had breakfast this morning with Walt Fisk over at the *Yellow Jacket*. Nothing on their side either.”

Sharon thought about the two adjoining mines. The bank had spent over a year prospecting both claims without a single hint of a widening vein. No wonder Mills and Ralston were on their way into town. “What’s your progress on our drift towards the *Kentuck*?” he said.

The cage stopped at Station Three, prompting Witherspoon to open up the safety gate and step out of the cage for the landing. “Last night the men hit a widening pocket of limestone,” he said.

Sharon felt his spirits buoy on the news. Historically, limestone pockets frequently surrounded some of the richest bonanzas ever unearthed on the Comstock Lode. He followed Witherspoon across the dimly-lit Gallery, watching shift foreman Paul Stubbins exit the mouth of the *Kentuck* drift with his face covered in limestone dust and rivulets of sweat. “What’s the word?” Witherspoon said as they approached the foreman.

“Two hundred and twenty feet,” said Stubbins. “Twice last night we picked up a quarter inch vein. I had my men chase it east toward the *Yellow Jacket*, only so far we haven’t picked her up again.”

“Go back toward the *Kentuck*,” said Sharon. “Humor my hunch, will you boys?”

“Of course, Mister Sharon,” said Witherspoon. “After all, she’s your mine.”

“She’s the bank’s mine, Mister Witherspoon,” said Sharon. “On the other hand she’s also our common destiny. Dig toward the *Kentuck*, Gentlemen. If my hunch is wrong, then we’ll all be looking for work, smack dab in the dog days of summer.”

“Short and sweet, Bill, we’ve come to liquidate the bank’s interests in the Comstock Lode.” Mills leaned back in his chair and held his gaze firmly on Sharon. “The bottom line is you’re out of a job by no fault of your own.”

“A case of bad timing,” said Ralston.

“Our foremost responsibility is to the bank’s long-term fiscal health,” said Mills. “We simply cannot continue to risk our limited resources on a losing proposition.”

After such a long stretch of borrasca, Sharon had rightly anticipated the bank’s move, which meant that what lay ahead would be the fight of his life. What he said over the next few minutes, what data and facts and strategies that he employed would be critical to every aspect of his future. Like a sporting event, his performance would determine whether he won or lost in the biggest game he would ever likely play. “I encourage you to at least hear me out before your final word is given,” he said.

“Our final word has been given,” said Mills. “The bank is out.”

“In that case, Gentlemen, history will prove that your decision will cost the Bank of California, and yourselves, mind you, the largest profit windfall in the history of American finance,” said Sharon. “Not only that, but your decision to withdraw from the Comstock Lode has the very real danger of crippling San Francisco’s growth on a level that may very well prove fatal to her long-term prosperity.”

Mills and Ralston sat quietly at the conference table, while Sharon stood in silence at the front of the room, letting his words sink in with as much dramatic impact as he could bring to the moment. Sharon knew that the growth of San Francisco was Ralston’s number one passion in life, and he was certain that he had read in Ralston’s response a moment of hesitation regarding Sharon’s prophesy for the city he so deeply loved.

“Any man who professes that the Comstock Lode is washed out is simply ignorant of the facts,” said Sharon. “I have conferred with every respected mining engineer on the Lode, and not a few of the finest experts from Europe and South America. To a man they believe that the Comstock Lode comprises the largest fissure vein ever discovered. To a man they agree that the big money still lays beneath our current depths. To date the Comstock has produced over eighty million dollars in silver and gold. Most engineers agree that we’ve extracted less than five to ten percent of what lays beneath.”

“These are old arguments,” said Mills. “The same arguments that got us here in the first place.”

“How do you propose we get past the water issue?” said Ralston.

“Most engineers think the water is only temporary,” said Sharon. “Granted, there’s a lot of geothermal activity everywhere inside Mount Davidson, only it’s most likely stratified and isolated, trapped within specific shelves surrounding individual shale beds.”

“That doesn’t get us past the current flooding in every one of our properties,” said Ralston.

“No it doesn’t,” Sharon agreed. “On the other hand, two of your companies are focused on building larger steam engines to run pumps of enormous capacity, nearly ten times the volumes we’re dealing with today. When these pumps finally come on line, their impact will be profound.”

Again Sharon let his words follow with silence, prompting his audience to fidget nervously in thought. Mills removed his eyeglasses and began to polish them with his handkerchief, while Ralston picked up a blank piece of paper and started tearing small pieces from the upper edge.

“In the past, the Comstock Lode has been profitable despite it’s gross inefficiencies,” Sharon went on. “Much has been squandered on legal disputes over property rights. Now that the bank has taken possession of seventeen properties by legal foreclosure, courtroom antics can no longer be brought to bear. With lawyers and petty squabbles out of the way, what remains in terms of maximizing profits is nothing more complicated than focused vertical integration. Until we control every aspect of the mining process, the bank will continue to give up an enormous share of the profit pie. In fact, I have gone so far as to devise a way to bypass even the impact of shareholder dividends against our bottom line.”

“Vertical integration will take an enormous amount of cash,” said Mills. “We’re here to liquidate our investments, not increase them three-fold in the process!”

“Is it not your duty, your fiduciary responsibility,” said Sharon, “to maximize the bank’s return on investment? The only way to achieve this is through full monopolization of our interests on the Comstock Lode.”

“Assuming we were to reverse our decision,” said Ralston.

“You can’t be serious, Toppie!” said Mills.

“Just assume for the sake of argument,” said Ralston. “What steps would you take toward vertical integration?”

“The first step is to prove that major bonanzas lay beneath the flooding,” said Sharon. “Once the profit faucets have been turned on, we reinvest part of these winnings towards our ultimate goals for integration. I would first propose that we incorporate the Carson and Tahoe Lumber and Fluming Company. Why pay teamsters and lumbermen for a resource we can easily harvest and transport on our own? The Tahoe Basin, Gentlemen, lays right before our feet. A twenty mile long flume will bring this vast resource of timber directly to our doorstep.

Sharon watched as Mills leaned forward with interest. “You can do this?”

“Easily,” said Sharon. “With so many modern engineering marvels at our beck and call, pretty much anything we dream of we can do.”

“So the flume drives down our timber costs,” said Ralston. “Then what?”

“The Union Mill and Mining Company will combine all the mills under our control into one large entity,” said Sharon. “Any mine not controlled by the bank will be obliged to send their ore for processing to a sole provider at a set price.”

“And if they refuse?” said Mills.

“Then the Bank of California will cut them off from future loans,” said Sharon.

“Tell us how you intend to bypass shareholder’s dividends?” said Mills.

“Speculators buy shares in mines, not mills,” said Sharon.

“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” said Ralston.

“It’s a common saying on the Comstock Lode,” said Sharon, “that it takes a mine to run a mine. Why not run mines to feed a mill? For every ton of high grade ore our mines deliver to the mill, we shall also send along five or six tons of waste rock for processing. Mines pay mills by the ton, not by the amount of bullion extracted. The increased charge backs to the mines will erase their profitability, while the profit to the Union Mill and Mining Company will climb through the roof. Naturally the only shareholders in this newly-forming company will be William Ralston, William Sharon, Darius Mills and the Bank of California.”

Mills leaned back in his chair and replaced his eyeglasses to his face. “You’ve thought this through rather thoroughly,” he said, studying Sharon with a rising sense of respect.

“I do believe you’ve hit upon a rather brilliant strategy,” said Ralston, shredding the last of his third piece of paper before reaching for a fourth. He looked to Mills, and said, “He’s right, Darius, the bank would be foolish to walk from such an enormous potential profit.”

“Nevertheless it remains an enormous risk,” said Mills.

“Is risk not the nature of West Coast investing?” said Ralston. “If you haven’t noticed, Darius, you’re hell and gone from the stable financial worlds of New York or Boston. We’re investing in an untamed wilderness, something the East has not had to contend with in over a hundred odd years. Because of this fact, we must think with a fresh perspective. The higher the risk, the greater the reward.”

“The bank will insist that you personally cover our losses if Mister Sharon here is incorrect in his assumptions,” said Mills.

“For the love of Christ, Darius,” said Ralston, “we are the bank!”

“And we must still report to our depositors,” said Mills. “Are they not at the core of our fiduciary responsibility?”

“You’ve made me sign such agreements in the past,” said Ralston, “and I can tell you, Darius, each one has left a foul taste in my mouth.”

“The bank must be protected,” Mills proclaimed.

“And like the times before,” said Ralston, “Darius Mills and the other board members will gladly partake in the profits, even though they divest themselves of the risk.”

Mills paused for a moment and studied the agitation on his friend’s face. “Nonetheless,” he said, “the bank must be protected.”

Ralston sat back in his chair and pounded his fist once upon the table in frustration. He stabbed his index finger to Sharon, and said, “You best not be wrong.”

“I am not wrong,” said Sharon. “Not one assumption, not one strategy, not one estimation of profitability. In our present control stands a vast fortune. Each of us must put aside our fears and make our common destiny something the world will soon look upon with accolades and envy.”

Ralston looked over at Mills again, continuing his slow, methodical shredding of his fourth piece of paper. His hands stopped halfway through a tear, pausing for a moment’s thought before balling up the paper and hurling it into a waste can positioned against the wall. “Let’s draft the necessary agreements, shall we, Darius?” he said at length. “I know we came to shoot the horse, only this particular thoroughbred might very well win the biggest race of our lives.”

# Chapter Four

Monday, April 10, 1865

Often in your career, you’ve been asked if your position as a reporter to all things Comstock and mining related has granted you certain insider knowledge that might otherwise give you an edge in terms of mining stocks and the speculative nature of trading them for financial gain. After all, every curbstone broker and dream dabbler in Comstock equities would likely kill for information regarding the underlying future health of a given mine. Leaks of this nature do occur from time to time—generally when a miner is in his cups, and he spills out to his drink mates that his employer has just hit an enormous vein of silver. Such knowledge allows the leaked upon friends to buy up shares of said mine at deceptively low prices, long before the general public gets wind of the strike. But more often than not, as you’ve learned from countless personal examples that have left you nearly destitute and wholly demoralized, this game of mining stock speculation is riddled with an uncanny amount of treachery, deceitfulness and greed.

San Franciscans and Nevadans alike have long blamed mine owners, unscrupulous bankers and roving capitalist as the primary source of these speculatory disasters, but in truth it’s the betting-crazed nature of the common citizen that is uniquely to blame for such massive swings in the financial health of the entire West Coast. After all, you consider, for a person to win or lose money on a horse race, they must first willingly place a bet before the betting window is closed.

A San Francisco maid obtains a rumor that the *Gould & Curry* has stumbled upon a widening vein of silver, potentially worth millions. *Gould & Curry* has been in a protracted state of borrasca for the last eight months, which has forced the stock price to plummet from a high of $275.00 a share to its current low of $11.00. Quietly she takes her life savings of $1,400.00 and rides the trolley to the San Francisco Mining Exchange. With this money she buys 172 shares of *Gould & Curry*, then pockets an additional 200 shares on a margin call offered by one of the exchange brokers. Two weeks later, word hits the streets of an enormous new bonanza in the *Gould & Curry*, and in response, nearly every chamber maid and bartender and wharf rat along the Coast scurries to the Exchange and tries to cash in on the erupting bonanza. Once *Gould & Curry* stock reaches its zenith of $700 per share, the lucky maid sells her shares for a profit of $227,500.00. At the same time, an untold army of less fortunate speculators continue to fuel the fire as the stock approaches values well beyond absurd. And then the truth hits the street—the run was a manufactured lie. The mine owner forced his workers to stay below ground for three day’s straight, which led to rumors and speculation that the mine had unearthed something of great financial value. Down plummets the stock price of the *Gould & Curry*. $600, $580, $525, $430 and then the bottom falls away and an untold army of speculators get trapped on a bad margin call. The brokers call in the mud, as bad margins are known on the street, and the would-be rich find themselves new members in the growing ranks on Pauper’s Alley.

Meanwhile the lucky winner has relinquished her job as a chamber maid and purchased a handsome new mansion on Polk Street or Sansome or Geary, and due to her new-found wealth, she employs several of her old friends from her struggling days of yore. She hires a driver to steer her new carriage through the streets of San Francisco, several maids to keep her mansion free from dust, and a cook to prepare sumptuous feasts for her fair-weather friends of the nouveau riche. Until one day our lucky heiress gets another insider tip, prompting her into a false sense of confidence that her luck is pure and that surely her good fortune will never change. Go for broke, is the instinct, and she bets nearly everything on the *Chollar* or the *Kentuck* or the *Searcy* or the *Savage*. Prices soar on the news of a new bonanza—from $32 a share up to $80, then $115 and then $200. She margins more buys at $200, knowing in her gut that the stock is destined for $300, and then down goes the price on a sudden market panic—another case of false information has taken the position by storm. The broker calls the mud, the woman loses everything, and her once proud friends from Pauper’s Alley happily rub her face in the humiliation of her sudden reversal.

‘*Well will you look who it is, Miss high and mighty with her nose in the clouds. What say thee now, Miss Moneybags, now that you’re back scrubbing chamber pots like the rest of us peons?’*

Now that water fills the drifts of nearly every mine on the Comstock Lode, stock speculation, and ore production, for that matter, has fallen into a state of winter-like dormancy. For years now you’ve considered human events to be little more than a stage play without direction or a convincing plot, and you wonder what is to become of the Comstock and your own future now that borrasca rules the Lode with a nagging sense of permanence. As you walk up the steep grade of Six Mile Canyon—your morning constitutional and daily airing out ritual—you look to Cemetery Hill and think back on the many friends who lay dead in their various fraternal burial plots, each of them losers in the unscripted plot line of Virginia City history.

Even more profound is the manner in which many of your departed friends came to meet their end. Many from violence, a few from recurring epidemics, but the majority due to the temptations of this teeming, industrial city that literary quakes the earth as you reapproach her from below. Nowhere in your life have you met a place so antithesis to the Victorian principles of the day. A Sodom and Gomorrah of the Industrial Age, you think, with few comparables save for San Francisco’s Barbary Coast or New York’s Five Points District. Virginia City has drawn you to her lusty bosom like an addict to the pipe, and despite the recurrent guilt you feel for the abandonment of your family back East, at your deepest core, you can imagine no other life but here.

You enter the Enterprise Building and see your colleagues in various scribing postures, each to their own desk. Chief Editor, Joe Goodman, leans on his elbows, his fingers combing back his hair as he studies some copy laid out on his desk. Lying Jim Townsend looks to be blocked or searching for a missing word. He’s leaned back as far as his swivel chair will gimbal, staring up at the ceiling as if the word he seeks might be floating in the rafters. Alf Doten scribbles away per usual, glancing up at you as he dips his pen back in his inkwell.

All at once the telegraph key begins to chatter with incoming dit dits and dot dots. The four of you react in unison, only Goodman is closest, and he sits down on the stool at the telegraph station before the rest of us can cross the room. Goodman answers the caller in Morse Code.

--. --- --- -.. -- .- -. / .... . .-. . .-. . .- -.. -.-- / - --- / -.-. --- .--. -.--

*Goodman here*, you translate his words in your head, *ready to copy*. Goodman dips his pen in a waiting inkwell, poising his hand nervously over a fresh piece of paper, ready to copy code the moment it arrives.

Stop/

Associated Press

Appomattox Courthouse, VA

April 9, 1865.

After four years of bloodshed, which has taken the lives of 630,000 men and over one million casualties, General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia to Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, at the home of Wilmer and Virginia McLean. General Lee arrived at the McLean home shortly after 1:00 p.m., followed a half an hour later by General Grant. The meeting lasted one and a half hours, at which point the war between the States was proclaimed over and done.

Stop/

You four newsmen look at each other in a moment of stunned silence. “Over?” you say, as if trying out a new concept.

Goodman stands up with the copy and appears to be rising toward some sort of a massive detonation point. “I’ll be God damned, the war is over!” he booms, and the four of you start up dancing and hooting in a tight circle, like school boys after a winning game of *Annie Over*.

As nightfall approaches, the over-all revelry that has burned like a hot torch throughout the day shows little sign of letup or fatigue. By mid afternoon, the Provost Guard had hauled two of their finest pieces to the upper reaches of A Street, lobbing canon balls over the city for the better part of the afternoon. Within three hours after Joe Goodman’s announcement from the balcony of the International Hotel, men had become wildly drunk and ribald, and while no fighting had been witnessed or in appearance, the noise level left a ringing in your ears that still resonates hours after the high water mark has come and gone. Whatever instrument a man can draft into the service of making noise has been heartily embraced and utilized with reckless abandon. Anvils are banged upon by metal pipes, shotguns and pistols fired with revel abandonment, not to mention every manner of legitimate percussion instrumentation employed by the six Fife & Drum corps that make Virginia City and Gold Hill their adopted Celtic home.

Despite the fact that the Comstock has lost nearly half her population during her ongoing economic depression, every saloon and eating house in town appears to be overflowing with patrons in various stages of drunkenness. The fact that every mine on the Comstock Lode has shut down for the celebration plays no small part in the excessive crowding on C Street, for not once in the brief history of the city has so many of her residents been made idle at the same moment in time. Even the Boston Saloon, known affectionately as the Bucket of Blood, exhibits an almost uncanny degree of good spirit and brotherly love, for the Bucket has a colored reputation for some of the worst drunken bar fights the Lode has ever known. Only not tonight, you think as you settle your bill for your steak dinner and three shots of whiskey in this very same establishment. For tonight you all share a common brotherhood—a people united by a shared moment in American history. If there’s one thing that unites Virginia City as a people, you consider, it’s the liberal application of both patriotism and booze.

Back out on C Street, you find that the street party has escalated now that the sun has gone down. You think back on a Mardi Gras you once experienced in New Orleans a decade past, and until tonight, never have you witnessed anything comparable to that long ago insanity put forth on Bourbon Street. Back in New Orleans, the madness had been heightened by the application of costumes and Mardi Gras masks, only Virginia City somehow matches that Creole madness with a circus-like cast of street performers and odd fellows at play. Some of the more enterprising have set up tables displaying all manner of nostrums for sale. You see street shows, drunk beggars seeking beer money, singers, men with newfangled electrical machines, including one crazy apparatus for testing the strength of a man’s lungs. Like a carnival or a country fair, your mind is dizzied by the sheer number of torch-bearing showmen and quack doctors that have crawled from the woodwork of this hyper-worldly town.

Feeling emboldened by the celebratory crowds and a full head of whiskey, you walk south along C Street for the seediest part of town known as the Barbary Coast. Along the way you nearly bump into a grasshopper sufferer who looks about as gaunt and malnourished as a man can be. He carries a rucksack slung over one shoulder, his clothes looking well past their useful working life. “What’s the reason for all this celebrating?” he says as you make eye contact on the street.

“Haven’t you heard the news?”

“I’ve only just arrived,” says the man.

“From the looks of things you’ve had a difficult time.”

The immigrant nods, and says,“Lost my wife in Kansas Territory, my horse in Utah.”

“Wars over,” you say. “And I’m sorry for your losses.”

“Who won?” says the immigrant.

“We did,” you say.

“I’m from Georgia,” says the man.

“In that case, once again, I’m sorry for your losses. Lee surrendered to Grant yesterday afternoon.”

Given the over-all look of starvation in the man’s bearing, combined with the rising look of confusion in his eyes, you reach into your pants pockets and withdraw a silver dollar coin. You hand it to the grasshopper sufferer, and say, “Here, get yourself a nice meal and settle in.”

The immigrant takes the coin and tips his hat. “That’s right neighborly,” he says, “for a Yankee.”

The Barbary Coast is little more than a collection of cribs, brothels and tough saloons situated on South C Street, and as you approach the heart of the neighborhood, you wonder what bit of bad judgement has prompted you to come this way in the first place. The Barbary Coast has a long-standing reputation for danger and intrigue, and other than transient and foolish sojourners such as yourself, the neighborhood attracts only the hardiest, most adventurous souls. From time to time, the respectable citizens of Virginia City have attempted to fight back against the growth of this second Red Light District, only for the most part, the do-gooders have lost ground to the more corrupt elements of the town’s rather robust underbelly society. You remember not six months ago, when the do-gooders tried to force Nellie Sayers’s operation out of business, only the stalwart madam had resisted gallantly until a police raid uncovered a thirteen year old prostitute who revealed stories of drugs and forced sex. Nellie Sayers had been obliged to relocate her operations back to the Red Light District on D Street, and since then, the police have raided her establishment with the frequency of Sunday Mass at Saint Mary’s Church.

Near Hickey Street, the sound of gunfire erupts from the Parisienne Saloon—a single shot, followed shortly thereafter by two rapid fire pistol rounds, back-to-back. As the stream of patrons begins to flush out onto the street, you feel sufficiently compelled to change course for D Street and the return walk north toward Cad Thompson’s place. You pass by Jenny Tyler’s *Bow Windows,* and see that the establishment appears to be conducting a rather brisk trade for this early hour of the night. Even one armed Jessie Lester’s place, *The Point*, appears swamped by early and inebriated customers, and you wonder what sort of mayhem awaits you at the *Brick*? How you came to be so closely allied with a cathouse madam remains a point of mystery to you, but in truth the two of you share an unspoken respect for one another, due to your mutual qualities of tenacity and wit. Not to mention a shared and tested ability to muddle through all sorts of adversities, which God or random bad luck sees fit to inflict upon the human condition and the two of you in specific. Cad lost her parents early to an Indian attack, prompting her to marry an abusive man at the age fifteen, for the mere privilege of survival. You as well lost your parents at a frightfully young age, forcing you to live by ingenuity and courage from your thirteenth birthday on.

As you enter the front parlor room of the *Brick,* you see your boss engaged in conversation with George Hearst. The two men sit to one side at the table you reserve almost daily for your morning breakfast with Cad, and they appear to be in deep discussion as they sip from glasses half-filled with whiskey.

“You look to be turning a brisk trade,” you say to Cad as she delivers a tender peck upon your cheek.

“Dan DeQuille,” she says to you. “It appears that the average Virginian is made quite randy by the prospects of peace.”

“What a rarity to find Joe Goodman at play in the *Brick*.”

“He’s rather in his cups,” says Cad. “I’m still not certain if he’s here for booze or sex.”

“Shall I query his intentions on your behalf?”

“You’re a dear,” says Cad, kissing you once again on your cheek.“A signal of some sort would be grand.”

“May I join you gentlemen?” you says as you approach Goodman and Hearst.

“Pull up a chair, Dan,” says Hearst, pushing the whiskey bottle your way across the table top.

“Quite a night for Virginia City,” Goodman says in welcome.

“Hard to write a story when our entire readership is living it firsthand,” you say.

“I suspect we won’t be publishing anything for the next couple of days,” says Goodman, sipping rather unsteadily from his whiskey glass. “Drunks don’t read papers. Even worse, drunk editors fail to write them.”

“Good thinking,” you say, just as Cad delivers a clean whiskey glass for your personal use.

“The same principle applies to my silver mines,” says Hearst. “Flooding or not, production for the next few days will be at an absolute standstill.”

You pour two fingers from the whiskey bottle before holding up your glass for a toast. “To drunken non-productivity and slothful celebration.”

Your table mates toast your glass, and as you study their faces above your sip, you realize that both men are in a state of glowing, robust intoxication. “I imagine every Union State is right this moment celebrating in the same manner as Virginia City,” you say.

“And every Southern State in mourning,” says Goodman. “The industrialized North has finally bested the agrarian South, as yours truly predicted from the onset. The Rebels lasted as long as they did by sheer willpower and might, not to mention a vast expenditure of this nation’s finest young men.”

“You sound almost sympathetic to the Confederate cause,” says Hearst.

“I am sympathetic,” says Goodman. “They’re human beings like the rest of us, and they’re Americans. A young nation has just concluded a divisive and quite mortal disagreement. Now we must each of us lay down our differences and heal for the benefit of a united future.”

“Somehow I can’t foresee many Confederates easily letting go of the past,” you say.

“How the dickens did Bill Sharon weasel onto the balcony today?” says Hearst.

“I have no idea,” says Goodman. “One minute we were talking in the lobby, the next he’s followed me up to address the good people of Virginia City.”

Goodman pours two more fingers of booze into his glass, sloshing a goodly amount onto the table as he does so. “I decided this afternoon that Sharon is the devil amongst us,” he says. “There’s something about his coal black eyes that lack compassion. He’s a shark and he’s come to feed on the good folk of Virginia City and Gold Hill.”

“Sounds as though the *Enterprise* is fast modeling its opinion about Sharon and the Bank of California,” says Hearst.

“It’s a newsman’s duty to expose corruption wherever it resides.” Goodman downs the contents of his glass and returns it to the table. He leans his head back in his chair and drops his hat down over his eyes.

“Nappy time?” you say to your boss.

“It’s been a long day,” says Goodman. “A moment, if you will, to recharge my focus.”

When it’s clear that Goodman has quite suddenly checked out from our company, you and Hearst stand up at the same time and fish some coins out of your pockets sufficient to settle the bottle fee. “A day to remember,” says Hearst. “If I was a betting man, I’d say that this town will stay drunk for days.”

“Goodman came here to drink,” you say to Cad as you prepare to depart the *Brick*.

“My goodness but your observational skills are like that of an eagle,” says Cad. “Aren’t you going to help me sweep him out?”

“Your professor can handle that little chore,” you say, kissing Cad on the cheek as you don your slouch hat for your re-entry into the night. “Let the poor man sleep it off,” you say as an afterthought. “It’ll be the first real rest he’s had in years.”

# Chapter Five

Saturday, April 15, 1865

Dressed in his finest woolen suit, Sutro crossed the Divide on foot, pausing at the crest of the mountain to look down upon Gold Hill. The town was smaller and less sprawling than Virginia City, with a far more precarious purchase on the southern slopes of Mount Davidson. But what struck Sutro most was the massive crowds of people, and the sheer volume of black fabric that had been draped upon every conceivable surface of Virginia City’s sister mining town. The hoisting works of the *Yellow Jacket* and the *Crown Point* and the *Best & Belcher* looked like giant widows in mourning, while the Gold Hill Saloon looked haunted and solemn, her mourning fabric flapping gently in the waning light of day.

Sutro saw David Belasco, the current owner of the *Best & Belcher*, smoking a cigar on the front porch of the Gold Hill Hotel. Sutro paused for a moment before deciding whether to approach the man, since so many of his friends had turned their backs on him since his announcement to build a tunnel into the Comstock Lode. Ever since his announcement, Sutro was well aware that he had been made the laughing stock of the Lode. Women pointed at him when he walked on the street. Children ridiculed him in that taunting way that only children can. Sutro’s tunnel was deemed preposterous, and because of the irrationality of majority rule, he considered, the entire community had boxed him into the same corner as Chinatown drug addicts, prostitutes or the clinically insane.

Like so many times before, Sutro let his current persona non grata roll off his back as best he could, for at least now he had Ralston’s letter of support—the Magician of San Francisco’s absolution, stating that Sutro’s tunnel was conceivable and necessary in light of the chronic flooding that plagued every mine on the Comstock Lode.

Bank of California

414 California Street

San Francisco, CA

April 11, 1865

To whom it may concern:

There is a very important enterprise known as the Sutro

Tunnel in the State of Nevada. This tunnel is designed to cut the great Comstock Lode or Ledge, upon which our richest silver mines are located, at a depth of sixteen hundred feet from the surface, to drain it of water, render it easily accessible at that point, and thus increase the facilities and diminish the expenses of the progressive development of these mines.

Too much cannot be said of the great importance of this work, if practicable upon any remunerative basis. We learn that the scheme has been very carefully examined by scientific men, and that they unhesitatingly pronounced in its favor on all points, practicability, profit and great public utility.

Respectfully submitted,

William C. Ralston

Cashier

As the various civic groups and ethnic fraternities began to form up into marching groups, a disturbance arose near President Lincoln’s symbolic casket. Sutro had worked his way to the rear of the forming processional for a closer look at the horse-drawn caisson, and as he made his approach, he heard a newcomer named Posey proclaim words that the youth would instantly come to regret. “I’m damned glad of it,” Posey had said, not five feet from Sutro’s position. “It’s a pity Lincoln wasn’t assassinated years ago.”

The surrounding crowd bristled with hostility as soon as Posey’s words landed, prompting Sutro to move away from the caisson for his own safety and well-being. A sense of riot was suddenly in the air, and he had no desire to be anywhere close to the raging bull equivalent of an angry mob. Once he was clear of the disturbance, Sutro turned back to watch a tall Polish miner grab Posey by the lapels of his overcoat and lift him cleanly off the ground.

“Where’s John Walton!” a woman yelled above the rising clamor of discontent.

The call for justice seemed to pass from voice-to-voice, from man-to-man, until John Walton and his witch hunt party had forced Posey up against one of the giant caisson wheels. “What’d he say?” Walton asked the crowd as he glared into Posey’s now terrified eyes.

“He said he wished Lincoln’d been shot a long time ago!” said Martha Johns.

“The man’s a Confederate sympathizer!” said Ben Crawley.

“He’s stupid is what he is!” yelled a teenaged boy to the left of the fray.

“Show him what it feels like to lose a few teeth,” said Jacob Alberts, the new pastor at the Gold Hill Baptist Church.

“Is that what you said?” Walton hissed into Posey’s face.

“If that’s what they say I said, then I said it,” said Posey.

Walton looked perplexed by Posey’s brazen comeback. “Jesus, Boy, you is stupid, ain’t you now?”

“Go on, Walton,” said Ben Crawley, “pass judgement so we can get on with Lincoln’s funeral.”

“I hereby sentence this man to thirty lashes with a bullwhip,” said Walton.

Sutro looked on as Posey was stripped of his overcoat, slouch hat and buckskin shirt. Despite his struggles to free himself, Walton’s vigilantes held his flailing arms, binding his wrists with calving ropes and then tying him chest first to the caisson wheel. Walton freed his bullwhip from his gun belt and prepared to deliver the man’s punishment. He snapped the business end of his whip against the wagon wheel next to Posey’s head, testing his aim and precision, then recoiled the whip and delivered his first strike onto Posey’s back. Posey winced at the searing pain, dropping his head upon the wagon wheel in an effort to conceal the look of fear spreading across his face.

“What’d you say about Mister Lincoln being dead?” said Walton.

“I said someone should a kilt him years ago!”

Walton landed five rapid strikes to Posey’s back, enough to make Martha Johns and Pastor Alberts grimace at the thought of so much condensed application of pain.

As Walton landed his seventh shot, Gold Hill Sheriff, Tom Staunton, muscled his way through the crowd, until he could approach the clearing that had formed near the right side of the caisson. “What’s going on here, Walton?” he said.

“The people have spoken,” said Walton, firing two more shots at Posey’s back.

“Who makes you the people?” said Staunton.

“The people make me the people,” said Walton, drawing back his bullwhip for the next flurry of shots.

Staunton drew his sidearm and planted it firmly against Walton’s left temple. “You have no right to punish this man without due process.”

“He has twenty-one more lashes a coming,” said Walton.

“You have no authority whatsoever,” said Staunton.

“He said wrong things about the President,” said Walton.

“Stand down, Walton,” said Staunton, “otherwise I shoot you dead, right where you stand.”

“Man’s a Rebel sympathizer,” Walton protested less confidently this time.

“And that’s your business how?” said Staunton.

“We’re here to honor the President,” said Martha Johns.

“Then carry on about your business,” said Staunton.

Staunton tugged on Posey’s restraints until the men holding them acquiesced and released their calving ropes.

“It ain’t right that a man should say such things about a dead President,” said Walton.

“This man can say what he wants when he wants,” said Staunton, collecting Posey’s clothing and guiding the man toward safety. “Don’t you fellers remember what country you’re from?”

Sutro looked on as the Sheriff guided Posey toward the Gold Hill jail. The young miner appeared to stagger some as he walked, and his eyes seemed a world away as he reckoned with his pain and public disgrace. Legendary teamster, Hank Monk, rode back to the end of the processional on his massive eighteen hand Appaloosa pony, removing his hat in honor of the President’s make-believe casket. “You boys ready back here?”

“We is now,” said Walton.

“We march on my signal,” said Monk. He turned his mount toward Virginia City, spurring the animal to a canter as he rode back toward the head of the line. Once in position, Monk angled his pistol toward the empty hillside to his left, firing the weapon once to announce the start of the parade.

The Metropolitan Brass Band began to march behind Monk’s now prancing pony, working through a shaky rendition of *Amazing Grace.* A massive brigade of volunteer firemen marched behind the band in precise formation, followed by a contingent of Mexicans waving a bright display of Mexican and American flags. A mounted contingent of Provost Guard and Emmet Guard rode behind the Mexicans, followed by the National Guard. Behind the Guard rode three carriages filled with local clergy, followed by representatives of the bar, elected officials and the Freemasons, the Odd Fellows and members of the Washoe Typographical Association. The Sons of Temperance came next, followed by the Jewish Order of B’nai B’rith, the Eureka Benevolent Society, the Irish Fenian Brotherhood, the German Singing Society and the Turnverein Society, the Swiss Association and the Virginia Board of Brokers. Last marched a cluster of superintendents and miners from the *Gould and Curry*, *Savage*, *Petosi* and *Chollar* Mines.

Lincoln’s caisson rolled behind the miners, prompting Sutro to take up next to it when at long last it began to move forward. Behind the caisson was a tight assembly of freed slaves, who bore a beautiful banner hastily stitched together in the manner of a quilt.

He was our friend, faithful and just.

Though dead, he liveth.

Hail and Farewell!

Sutro joined the remaining spectators as they filled in behind the freed slaves, beginning the slow march over the Divide toward Virginia City. The sun had set behind Mount Davidson, increasing the somber mood of the trudging processional. Sutro could barely make out the Metropolitan Brass Band at the head of the parade, as they performed a hack job of *Shall We Gather At The River*. The German Singing Society was in competition a short ways behind, belting out Schubert’s classic lied, *Die Schöne Müllerin*. The mines had closed for a second time in a week, and without the constant rumble of stamp mills and steam engines, the Comstock Lode possessed an eerie silence that filled Sutro with an introspective sense of calm.

At Taylor Street the procession marched past Father Manague, who stood with his back to the parade, facing east down the mountain toward the St. Mary’s Church. As the caisson rode past, Father Manague turned around to face the processional, stepping forward to knock three times on the flag-draped coffin lid. The three knocks of death, Sutro surmised—one of the oldest rituals that simply refused to die out despite the changing light of modern times. Only when the caisson had passed by would Father Manague face the casket and walk beside it, his hands and bible concealed within the billowing sleeves of his vestment. Ancient superstition taught that it was bad luck to meet a funeral procession head on, and as Sutro witnessed Manague’s adherence to this bit of superstitious mythology, Sutro was struck by the duplicity of the town’s preeminent Christian leader condoning folklore that had at first manifested itself in the darkest roots of pagan Europe.

If the deceased lived a good life, flowers will grow on the grave.

If the deceased lived an evil life, only weeds will grow instead.

Never wear anything new to a funeral, especially shoes.

Cover your mouth when yawning, or the devil will enter your body.

If it rains on a funeral procession, the deceased will surely go to heaven.

A dead body must be removed from a house feet first and upside down, so that the corpse cannot look back into the house or into the eyes of his loved ones.

*All our advances, yet we cling to such antiquated notions.*

The German Singing Society set into a rousing version of *Macht Hoch die Tur,* while the Metropolitan Brass Band butchered a rendition of *Rock of Ages*. “How come that band sounds so awful?” asked a little girl to Sutro’s left.

Sutro looked at the girl and saw that she was struggling to keep up with her mother. “They’ve always sounded that way,” said the mother. “That’s part of their charm.”

“What’s charm?” said the little girl.

The mother smiled down upon her daughter, gently resting her hand upon the back of the girl’s head. “Something God gave you in absolute abundance,” said the mother.

Sutro smiled at the exchange, looking ahead in the sunset light to see Hank Monk guide his Appaloosa east onto Mill Street and the cross cut for St. Mary’s Cemetery. “Father Manague,” Sutro called out to the clergyman. “How come we’re burying Mister Lincoln in a Catholic cemetery?”

“What sort of a question is that?” said Manague.

“Lincoln was a devote Baptist.”

“We’re all God’s children in the end, Mister Sutro,” said Manague. “By now, the President has seen that truth well enough on his own.”

Sutro nodded to the Father and gave him a wistful smile.

By the time the caisson reached the burial site, the cemetery was overflowing with a vast crush of humanity. Sutro stopped outside the gates to view the proceedings from a nearby hillside, since trying to encroach upon the graveyard seemed like a daunting, fear-provoking task. Father Manague and the funeral caisson moved slowly through the parting crowd, until the driver halted his team on the left side of a freshly-dug gravesite. Hank Monk and three volunteer firemen acted as pallbearers, lifting the flag-draped coffin off the caisson, then turning it around so that the head of the casket faced to the west. More folklore and superstition, thought Sutro, this one dating back to pagan sun worshippers.

As Father Manague approached the burial site, Sutro was struck by the fact that a crowd of thousands could quiet down to the point that a gentle wind all but drowned out their presence on the hillside. Complete silence on the Comstock Lode was such a unique novelty to anyone who called Virginia City home, prompting Sutro to comprehend that this all-consuming silence would most likely be part of everyone’s collective memory for a good many years to come. Like a trip over the high Sierras in the most austere depths of winter.

Father Manague laid his bible on the casket, placing both his hands atop the holy book before looking up towards the closing night sky. “Mister President,” he began. “Thousands upon thousands of words have been written by intelligent men since the day you first took office. Untold men and women have read your words, and been rightly inspired by your infinite wisdom. Much has been written about your grace as a human being, about your humility despite the lofty calling of your office. In the end, Mister President, none of these words have done you justice. No human thought has adequately described your impact upon a nation. No words of mine, Mister Lincoln, can console this nation in light of your senseless demise.

“Because of the tragedy of your death, we the people, remain in a vacuum of disbelief, for at present we lack any true understanding of the permanence of it all. That our vigorous and moral leader has been swept from the living will take time to fully comprehend, which means that for the present, we must console ourselves of a gnawing emptiness, this gut wrenching despair that brings us to our spiritual knees. A nation has lost its commander-in-chief. A stalwart beacon of strength and courage has disappeared from our field of vision. Until last night, you discharged your duties with dash and resolve, despite the suffocating weight of a conflict that has divided this nation like no nation before her. You were grace and strength, Mister President, gone from us forever more.

“So let us most humbly beseech you, oh Lord, to look after the loved ones of Abraham, in this their darkest hour of need. We ask you, Lord, to succor and comfort Mary and her children, Robert, Tad, William and Edward, for their pain is great, and far beyond the light of our reason. We ask you to bless and comfort the people of these United States. We ask you now to reunite us under a common spirit. We ask you to revitalize our sense of brotherhood and accord, to weld us yet again into one nation under God. Instill within us a new beginning, a new sense of hope and promise and understanding amongst men of a commonly shared destiny. Tonight we bury our fallen leader, Abraham, and with his body, we bury our swords and our muskets and the very rancor of our discontents. Raise us up, Lord. Reveal your vision for your people. Reveal to us all the blessings and bounty you have in store for this your most abundant nation on earth. For like Prometheus creating men from clay, Lord, we ask that you steel us for battle, with all the strength and courage and victory your hand can bestow upon a wounded, supplicated people.”

The hillside remained shrouded in silence as Dan DeQuille and National Guard commander, General Jacob Van Bokkelin, stepped forward to remove the American flag from the casket. They each took up the flag by its corners and folded it lengthwise three times. “In honor of our fallen hero,” Bokkelin began, “we fold this flag with the stars to the sky, symbolizing rebirth and the resurrection of the soul.”

Bokkelin folded the flag from the striped end, forming neat triangles as he worked ever closer toward DeQuille, who held the opposite end steady between his hands. “The first fold is to symbolize life,” said DeQuille. “The second symbolizes our belief in an eternal afterlife, while the third fold honors our veterans who gave their life in defense of our freedoms. The fourth fold represents our trust in God, while the fifth pays homage to this great land of ours. With the sixth fold, we pledge our hearts to the United States of America, while the seventh pays tribute to our military, who protect us against all enemies, both foreign and domestic. The eighth fold is to honor our mothers as the givers of life, and the ninth fold is to honor womanhood, for without your love and devotion and nurture, the character of all men could not be molded true. The tenth fold is a tribute to our fathers, for without their guidance, the character of men could not be molded true. The eleventh fold, in the eyes of the Hebrews, represents the lower portion of the seal of King David and King Solomon, and in their eyes gives glory to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The final fold, in the eyes of Christians, represents the emblems of eternity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.”

When the flag was fully folded, DeQuille offered it to Father Manague, who blessed it three times with the crucifix that hung from his neck by a rosary chain. “May the promise of the Trinity be with you now and forever,” said Manague.

Monk and the firemen lifted the casket by two ropes slung underneath the head and foot of the simple pine box. They walked it to the grave—two men on either side—then lowered the ropes until the coffin rested on the bottom of the freshly dug crypt.

“To Lincoln!” a man called out from the crowd.

“Huzzah!” the crowded responded in unison.

“To life!” yelled another man.

“Huzzah!” the crowd yelled with rising vigor.

“To the living!” a woman called out, and the crowd chanted their response.

“Huzzah, Huzzah, Huzzah!”

“It’s time we stand up as one!” yelled Monk, prompting the crowd to issue their reply like the crack of cannon fire.

“Huzzah!”

“To new hope!” yelled a man.

“Huzzah, Huzzah!”

“To the rebirth of the Comstock Lode!” yelled a miner next to Sutro.

“Huzzah!”

“To the mines!” yelled George Hearst.

“Huzzah, Huzzah, Huzzah!”

# Chapter Six

Friday, April 14, 1865

The celebration had gone on wide open for two straight days—a period of intense national pride and not a little bit of ribald, disorderly amusement. When the news had arrived that the war was over, seemingly in unison, San Franciscans set aside their problems and released themselves to the pursuit of unbridled celebration. Until the hammer fell and the mood turned rancorous with the news of Lincoln’s assassination. The bipolar shift had thrust Ralston into a period of deep reflection, for like the passing of a New Year, the end of the War and the death of the President forced him to reflect both on his achievements, and the passing of his youth in exchange for those achievements. More specifically, his reminiscence centered upon his city’s ascension from chaos and obscurity, and how his own hand had led her up from those early days of sinful disarray. San Francisco had been a wild, red-blooded, unconstituted village when he had first witnessed her, and it was during these early days that he had first conceived of his plans to help guide her growth. In a heartbeat, the young, hot-blooded argonauts had found themselves inhabiting a commonwealth possessed of incredible riches, yet devoid of anything resembling an infrastructure. The village had developed into a city without a plan or a pattern, until Ralston began to grab hold of the reins and steer its course for the good of all those who refused to steer anything but their own intangible dreams of an immense and instantaneous wealth.

As Jeffries steered their way along Pine Street, Ralston leaned his head back on the seat and let the past once again fill his mind with her lingering and sweetly-savored memories. The inhabitants of San Francisco in the early days were mainly volatile and mercurial in temperament, and many had fallen into all kinds of excesses that tainted the over-all image of the city. The Forty-Niners were prone to melodrama, pageantry, fiesta and fights. They liked to earn large sums of money and spend it riotously on wine, women and song. Ralston, on the other hand, had known from his early days on the Coast that he was made of different stuff. He was fearless like the rest, yet at the same time, he felt inspired to build up a virgin land into something he and his peers would be proud to pass on to their children. Ralston had seen his vision for the future almost from his first footfall on San Francisco soil, and he had decided with the same alacrity that he would help his city rise up from nothingness into something that matched the stately grace of his beloved New Orleans.

“Should I plan to saddle one of your mounts for your afternoon swim?” Jeffries asked as they made their way toward the Bank of California.

“Thank you, Jeffries, I believe I would,” said Ralston. “I’ve got a heavy calendar today, which means a swim will be a welcome decompression.”

“Any mount in particular?”

“Perhaps the new two-year-old, I should think,” said Ralston. “He’s got a spirit that thrills me to no end.”

“A beautiful bit of horse flesh, Sir,” said Jeffries, guiding the carriage to a stop before the bank building at Sansome and California Streets. “A trained eye can see her famous parents just as clear as day.”

Ralston entered the bank lobby and felt an instant energy shift in his many clerks and employees. His arrival had this effect all over town—a magnetic sense of impending action and good tidings—only the effect was amplified within the ranks of his bank staff, given their near constant exposure to Ralston and his boundless sense of purpose.

“Good morning, Edney,” Ralston addressed his lead clerk, Edney Tibbey, who greeted him by the front door.

“Good morning, Sir,” said Tibbey. “Mister Stanford is already awaiting your arrival in your office.”

Ralston gave Tibbey an amused look as his assistant helped him out of his topcoat. “Leland certainly is anxious about something,” he said, just barely above a whisper.

Ralston stepped into his glass-enclosed office and shook hands with Leland Stanford. “The war is over and the President is dead,” he said by way of a greeting.

“A nation reunited yet divided,” said Stanford.

“Will the war’s end affect congressional appropriations for your Transcontinental Railroad?” said Ralston.

“I’m assured by Senator Conness that the Pacific Railroad Acts of Sixty-two and Sixty-four will not be altered in any way,” said Stanford. “Which brings me to my conundrum.”

“Leland Stanford has a conundrum?” said Ralston. “That’s like a cumberbun, is it not?”

“You’re not funny, Toppie, not in the least,” said Stanford.

“But it’s such a funny word.”

“Alright, then, I’m in a pickle.”

“Your partner Mark Hopkins brought your conundrum to my attention almost four days ago,” said Ralston. “He thought you’d be too proud to approach me, because of our friendship and all.”

“Hopkins is a good man,” said Stanford. “Then you know of our predicament.”

“You’ve sixty more miles of track to lay before you’re entitled to your next round of government subsidy,” said Ralston, “only you’re shy on ready cash to keep the progress moving without an interruption that could cost the four of you a fortune and change. You’re seeking one hundred thousand dollars from the Bank of California, which will more than infuse you with the necessary capital to take you to your rather massive government payday.”

“That’s about the look of it,” said Stanford. “We lose money laying rail in the mountains, which means the sooner we hit flat land again, the government’s per mile reimbursement turns hugely in our favor.”

“Which of you wizards convinced congress to overlook such an obvious cost advantage once you’re clear of the Sierras?”

“I believe that would be my doing,” said Stanford, struggling to force down a smile. “Any chance the bank can come through for us? I give you my word that such an action will merit you substantial reductions in freight charges and protective tariffs once the rail line is complete. Any goods by any Ralston enterprise will ride for one third the going rate per pound.”

“That’s exceedingly generous, Leland,” said Ralston, “but I’m afraid the board has already taken up your loan proposal and given their mandate that the loan should not be given.”

Ralston watched with no small amusement as Stanford’s face flushed with color. His eyes darted about for a nearly imperceptible second, yet long enough for Ralston to see that his sucker punch had at the very least left the man momentarily disoriented. “The only conditions for which the board would agree to loan you the money is if I personally agree to make good on any loss of capital should your railroad fail to make repayment.”

“Good heavens, Toppie, you know I would never do anything like that,” said Stanford.

“Nevertheless, this is the promise I had to make to the board.”

“As your friend, Toppie, it seems to me that your precious board has made this stipulation on far too frequent occasion,” said Stanford. “Do they not benefit enormously from all your investments? It appears to me that Darius Mills and his like are a bunch of two-face, ungrateful rascals.”

Ralston sat down on his desk chair and picked up a fresh piece of paper to tear. Stanford knew of his friend’s thinking habit, and as usual he overlooked Ralston’s eccentricity out of respect. On a day when Ralston had much on his mind, it was not unusual for the night maid to sweep up an entire ream of torn paper, stacked like snow flakes to the right side of Ralston’s desk. “I’ve thought so myself on far too many occasions,” said Ralston. “It’s just that they lack any real stomach for risky capital investments, which in my mind is the only way to expand a man’s empire and prosperity.”

“Then you’ll make the loan?” said Stanford.

“Consider it done, my friend,” said Ralston, aiming his finger at Stanford in the shape of a pistol and dropping his thumb down like a hammer strike. “So long as Kimball Manufacturing is guaranteed the exclusive right to build all the engines and passenger cars.”

“You have my word,” said Stanford, leaning over Ralston’s desk until the men could shake hands. “You’re a true friend, Toppie Ralston, a true friend when a man needs a friend most of all.”

At four o’clock that afternoon, Tibbey rapped his knuckles on Ralston’s glass door, then opened it and stuck his head into the office. “Your steed awaits,” he said.

Ralston raised his pen up from the document he was re-reading. “Splendid,” he said. “Tell Jeffries I’ll be there in two minutes.”

Ralston’s day had sped by like a freight train, he considered. It was the carriage ride with Harpending—the trip had cut into his office hours and knocked him off his routine. He signed his name to the document he and Harpending had drafted together, forming the Montgomery Real Estate Company as an equal partnership in all respects. Each man would equally match the other with capital contributions, and each man would equally share in the profits and losses. Elegant in its simplicity, Ralston thought; the way all agreements should be.

Ralston placed his pen back in his ink well, blowing air on his signature before closing the file folder and leaving it centered on his desk blotter. He stood up from his chair and walked to his coat rack, retrieving his overcoat and top hat before exiting his office for the bank lobby. The bank had been closed for business for just over an hour now, yet the clerks remained at the stations, closing out their books after a brisk day of steady transactions. “Gentlemen,” Ralston said from the center of the lobby. “We all earned our keep today, and as usual my team brought their best game to the challenge. The best of evenings to each of you, Gents, and three cheers for a relaxing weekend.”

Cries of ‘hear hear’ barked from every clerk’s window, and in response, Ralston donned his top hat and headed resolutely towards the front door, arming into his overcoat as he went. Tibbey held the door for him, and when Ralston reached Sansome Street he climbed atop his young stallion without breaking momentum or stride. The young thoroughbred skittered some as Ralston took to the saddle, prompting Jeffries to snap the reins downward until the horse calmed its nervous dancing. “Thank you, Jeffries,” said Ralston, feeling his skin prickle with anticipation for the ride. Horses comprised one of his fondest passions, and it was magnificent specimens such as this latest acquisition to his stables that fired his soul with all the vigor and optimism of his long forgotten youth. “I’ll see you home after my swim.”

“Very well, Sir,” said Jeffries, handing the reins up and over the animals arching head. “He looks ready to explode like thunder.”

“And well he shall,” said Ralston, gathering the reins and giving Jeffries a devilish wink. “Hee-yah!” he yelled out, driving the heels of his boots into the thoroughbred’s flank.

The animal took off like a shot, galloping north along Sansome Street toward Telegraph Hill and the Levi Strauss Company. “There’s Ralston!” pedestrians would call out as Ralston and his steed made their way.

“Tally ho, Mister Ralston!”

“Off for a swim, are ye, Sir?”

“God’s speed, Mister Ralston, God’s speed for you and our fair city!”

Ralston waved as he rode. It was always this way—carriage riders and pedestrians alike, calling out to him as he made his admittedly dramatic daily passage to the Neptune Beach Swim Club. But was this not life at its fullest? He was in command of a pedigreed animal, its muscles taught and firing like a heavy charge of gun powder, more powerful than an entire battery of canon or a phalanx of steam engines working in unison. And he was headed for a swim, which to Ralston embodied more primal joy than any other aspect of his life.

Nearing Vallejo Street, Ralston gathered the reins and slowed his mount to a canter and then a trot. The animal’s breath came heavy from its recent exertion, only Ralston could tell that the stallion had enjoyed their ride through town just as much as Ralston had. Some horses simply endured a ride to avoid punishment and discomfort, he considered, while others ran out of pure spirit, and an even deeper, more innate sense of competitive yearning.

Ralston steered the animal west along Vallejo Street, looking up to the Semaphore tower atop Telegraph Hill. The arms of the tower were raised in a configuration that indicated that a steamer loaded with tobacco and dry goods had just entered through the Golden Gate. Ralston knew from experience that the merchants and wholesalers would soon be busy adjusting their pricing structures based on the commodities aboard the arriving ship, which meant that every savvy businessman in San Francisco knew the precise meaning of each of the semaphore’s arm signals.

Ralston rode past the ship’s ballast quarry and then the Non-Catholic Mariner’s Cemetery, thinking back on a humorous event at the San Francisco Theater Company not three months gone by. The famous stage actor and now renegade assassin, John Wilkes Booth, had been performing a series of Shakespearean tragedies with a traveling road troupe, and when he called out to a spellbound audience, ‘Oh God, what doeth this mean?,’ a rogue in the gallery shouted back ‘Side wheel steamer!’ in reference to the semaphore signal arms. Ralston had been in attendance that night, and he smiled with the memory of an audience struck down by paralyzing laughter for a good two minutes after the comment had landed.

Ralston halted his pony at the crest of Telegraph Hill, tipping his hat to several well-dressed couples who were taking in the commanding view of the city. A Navy sailor manned a spyglass aimed at the Golden Gate, keeping watch for the next vessel to appear through the shroud of fog that always seemed to block the entrance to San Francisco Bay. Ralston looked inland over his picturesque city. Several church spires were rising up within their scaffolding wrappers—his city at last gaining a spiritual base where none had existed before. He looked south toward Folsom Street, and saw the massive construction site for his new three block long building that would house his Pacific and Mission Woolen Mills of San Francisco. Once it was fully operational, his latest factory would enable over eight hundred men to earn a fair day’s wage.

He looked north to the Golden Gate, and saw the tides plunging through the funnel of land masses, listening to the sound of Neptune’s horses as the waves crashed against the shoreline. The sound always thrilled him, for soon he would join with the tempest of ocean water and engage in violent exercise, which made him feel more alive and vital than anything other than riding atop a pedigreed steed.

“Mister Ralston,” said one of the promenading men.

Ralston snapped out of his musing and focused on the younger man. Ralston’s ability to remember everyone he met was one of his strongest assets as a businessman, which meant he had a high confidence level that he had never met this man before. He was tall and handsome, fully bearded with masculine, angular facial features. “Good afternoon to you,” he addressed the man cheerfully.

“We haven’t met, Sir,” said the Scotsman, “but I believe I recognize you from the papers. My name’s John Muir.” Muir separated from his party and walked up to stand beside Ralston and his mount. “I’ve just arrived this morning from the East, aboard the clipper ship *Miranda Mae*.”

“Well then, welcome to the fairest city in the land, Mister Muir. What sort of work are you engaged in?”

“Mainly botany,” said Muir. “I’ve come to have a look at the Yosemite Valley.”

Ralston perked up at the sound of his favorite bit of natural wonder. “You’ve not been before?” he said.

“Never, Sir,” said Muir. “I’ve only read about it. Have you been?”

“Many times,” Ralston answered with enthusiasm. “In fact, every chance I can get. Yosemite’s a life changing experience.”

“Everything that I’ve read leads me to believe the same.”

“I plan to be up there a couple of weeks from now,” said Ralston. “Perhaps we can meet in the valley, say two Saturdays hence, at the base of Bridal Veil Falls. Let’s plan to meet at high noon for a picnic lunch.”

Muir reached up his right hand enthusiastically, prompting Ralston to answer with his own. “It’s a plan,” said Muir. “By then I should have the basic lay of the land, enough to find my way to this, Bridal Veil Falls.”

“You’ll know it when you see it,” said Ralston, tipping his hat to the others in Muir’s party, then booting his horse into motion. “She’s the tallest most beautiful woman you’ll ever lay eyes upon.”

Ralston set his mount to a canter again on Columbus Avenue, gaiting back to a trot after they turned northward onto Larkin Street. As he approached the Neptune Beach Swim Club, he felt his usual boyish elation, for within minutes his nearly naked body would feel the jolt of the Bay’s icy water, and he would swim like the dickens just to stay on top of the brutal shock that always seemed to rake his body for the first quarter mile or so into his swim.

Ralston dismounted at the foot of Larkin Street, tethering his mount to the hitching post in front of the swim club. “Mister Ralston,” said the towel boy as Ralston entered the club.

“Jimmy Doolan,” said Ralston, receiving two towels from the teenaged boy. “Have you warmed things up for my swim?”

“Fifty-four degrees, Sir,” said Doolan. “Just what you ordered.”

“And to think that in three months, the water temperature will be at its hottest point of the year,” said Ralston. “Sixty glorious degrees.”

“A heat wave, Sir,” said Doolan. “Even old ladies will set a course for Alcatraz Island.”

Ralston stripped off his clothes in the men’s changing room, donning a pair of loose-fitting swim trunks that hung in his assigned floor-standing locker. He left one towel in the cabinet for his post-swim bath, then grabbed the second one and sprinted out the rear door for the beach. In the waning sunlight he draped his towel over a wooden beach lounger, then jogged across the sandy strand for the water. Ralston high-stepped his way into the surf, and when he was deep enough he dove headlong into the light shoreline chop. The chill of the water hit him with its usual punch. He swam with powerful strokes at first, over-exerting himself until his muscles and violent rhythm began to warm his body and focus his mind. His daily swim always started like this, for San Francisco Bay water was never a comfortable thing. The waves were rolling west to east, pumping in through the Golden Gate, prompting him to steer his course just a few degrees west of Alcatraz in an effort to compensate for the drift.

Ralston’s lean and powerful body knifed through the water with all the grace of a swordfish. He delighted in this violent exercise; it kept his muscles taut and it calmed the tensions in his mind. He prided himself in the smoothness of his stroke and his ability to adapt to the ice cold conditions when lesser men would flee for land.

Ralston stopped swimming long enough to raise his head up from the water to gauge his distance from land. He was halfway to Alcatraz Island—his usual turning point—only Ralston lowered his head again and continued his progress away from shore.

*Swim harder—like a man, you wretched lout!*

*Swim harder—until your boyhood dreams regain their clarity!*

*Swim harder—until your petty cares are excised for good!*

*Swim harder—and be one with the icy chill.*

*Swim harder—for you’re the Magician of San Francisco!*

# Chapter Seven

Friday, April 12, 1867

“I must forewarn you, John,” said Theresa Fair, “but I’ve invited a young woman to join us for dinner tonight. She’s divorced and her beauty and grace are, well, quite compelling to behold.”

“No matchmaking permitted, Mrs. Fair,” said Mackay. “Can’t you see I’m in no position to take on a wife.”

Mackay sat beside Theresa on the porch swing of the Fair’s A Street bungalow, pushing the swing gently with his right foot while they gazed out over the bustle and industry of greater Virginia City. “Who said anything about marriage?” said Theresa.

James Fair kicked open the screen door, steadying his tray of lemonade for Theresa, bottled beer for he and his friend Mackay. “You told me not three days ago how lonely you are as a bachelor,” said Fair, leaning down in front of Mackay and Theresa while they each retrieved their drinks from the tray. “I think an introduction to Miss Marie Hungerford is a capital idea.”

“At present I haven’t the capital to woo so much as a street walker,” said Mackay.

“Is that what women are to you?” Theresa asked with an amused look on her face.

“You and Walker are about to strike it rich in the *Kentuck*,” said Fair. “My prediction is that both of you will be rolling in high cotton before another month has passed us by.”

“Tell me how Miss Marie Hungerford came to be divorced,” said Mackay.

“She married Doctor Edmund Bryant of New York,” said Fair. “They moved to Downieville and had a child together. He was quite the prominent physician until alcohol and his own drug tinctures brought him to his knees. Cheers, by the way,” said Fair, toasting his beer bottle lightly against Mackay’s.

“Miss Marie lives across the street with her young daughter,” said Theresa. “She does fancy work for Gibson’s Dry Goods Store over on C Street. She’s barely twenty-three, only I dare say, she’s had the experiences of a woman twice her age.”

Mackay elbowed Theresa as he raised his eyebrows in mock alarm. “Experiences?” he said.

“Not those kind of experiences, you filthy man,” said Theresa. “The good kind, naturally.”

“Speak of the devil,” said Fair, looking out across A Street.

Mackay followed Fair’s point of focus and saw a petite woman step out onto the front porch of a small cottage across the street. She was, he considered instantly, perhaps the most breathtakingly beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes upon in his life.

*And right here, in godforsaken Virginia City no less! How on earth have you missed noticing her all this time?*

“My goodness,” Mackay managed despite himself. “She is rather, astonishing.”

Theresa stood up and walked to the porch railing. “Didn’t I tell you?” she said for Mackay’s benefit, then raised her right hand and waved. “Miss Marie, we were just talking about you.”

“Then I must come at once to defend myself,” said Marie.

Mackay felt momentarily disarmed as Marie crossed A Street in a flowing burgundy dress of visionary form and elegance. Her eyes reminded him of Robin’s eggs; that or a harvest moon. The flush of her skin, the glow of her smile, the curves of her waist, the lustrous flow of her hair—almost too much for a simple man to take in all at once.

“Marie Hungerford Bryant,” said Fair, “please allow me to introduce my friend John Mackay.”

Mackay stood before Marie and loosely pawed her right hand, bowing formally while Marie followed with the slightest of curtsies. “Miss Bryant,” he said.

“Marie, please,” she said.

“John, then,” said Mackay. “There, then, we’re onto first names, then.”

Theresa looked at Mackay with a quirky expression—wow, John, that was a real stinker. She looped her right arm under Marie’s left, and started to lead the younger woman into the house. “Come, Dear,” she said. “Keep me company while I prepare for our dinner.”

Mackay and Fair watched the women enter the house, both women chattering away like school girls now. “Wow,” Mackay said at a whisper.

“That’s what most men have to say after meeting Miss Hungerford,” Fair whispered back.

“Somehow a woman that beautiful seems, illegal,” said Mackay. “How could a man look at such a woman day and night and manage to get anything done?”

Fair seemed to hold his breath for a moment while he studied the look of bewilderment on Mackay’s face. He then sat down on the porch swing and began to shudder with unrestrained laughter that boomed out onto the street.

“I’m serious!” said Mackay.

“What’s so funny?” Theresa called from inside the house.

“Nothing, Dear,” Fair replied through his still unconsolable laughter.

“Something must be funny,” said Theresa.

“The world is funny,” said Fair. “Oh good lord, but the world is a funny place indeed.”

Mackay pushed his chair back slightly from the dining room table, turning enough to cross his legs. “That was perfection,” he said. “Every meal at the Fair home is like a wee bit of Ireland.”

“Do you hear that, James?” said Theresa.

“He’s not wrong by a word,” said Fair. “Your cooking has always been a thing of culinary delight.”

“Keep up the praises and you’re both guaranteed a regular place at my table.”

“James tells me you’re part owner in the *Kentuck*,” said Marie.

“This is true,” answered Mackay. “Fifty-fifty with Jimmy Walker, and a handful of investors who grow more skittish by the day.”

“How deep have you gone?” asked Marie.

“One thousand forty feet,” said Mackay. “She gave up five million in silver at the six hundred foot level, all to the previous owners, mind you. Since our watch began, we’ve managed to haul up nothing but quartz, clay and limestone. We’re saving everything in the hopes that one day people will learn to covet these now worthless commodities the same way they covet silver and gold.”

“Have you heeded my suggestion and drifted toward the *Crown Point*?” said Fair.

“We have,” said Mackay. “Thirty feet so far.”

“Keep going,” said Fair. “If there’s any truth that the Lode is a fissure vein, then the boys at the *Crown Point* stumbled upon her uppermost quadrant more than a year ago. If you drift toward the *Point*, my gut says you’re bound to hit pay dirt somewhere east of the *Point’s* last big find.”

“And if your gut is wrong, James?” said Theresa.

“Then we blow through the last of our borrowed funds, and I rejoin the ranks of a four dollar a day mucker.”

“Mister Mackay humbles himself,” said Fair. “Despite his gamble on the *Kentuck,* he’s a respected foreman on the Lode. If he strikes out, I’d be proud to have him join my management team at the *Ophir*.”

“I’d consider it an honor,” said Mackay, toasting his water glass toward Fair.

“I understand the both of you were instrumental in rescuing the trapped miners after the *Mexican* disaster,” said Marie.

“That’s how we met,” said Fair. “Mackay was far more instrumental than I was.”

“We miners have an unwritten code,” said Mackay. “What happens to one man happens to us all. I did nothing that any other miner would not have done for me if the roles had been reversed.”

“This man Sutro,” said Theresa, “this tunnel project of his. If such a thing existed, might it have saved the lives of the lost miners in the *Mexican* cave-in?”

“Quite possibly,” said Mackay.

“Only quite the impossible task,” said Fair. “The likelihood that a team of men can burrow four miles into a mountain is absurd.”

“Has not the engineering world dazzled us with incredible feats for the past decade now?” said Theresa.

“How many times have we thought something impossible, only to have the engineers prove us wrong?” said Mackay.

“Agreed,” said Fair, “only all things in the physical world have their limitations. At some point, even engineering will reach an inevitable ceiling.”

“Like moving heaven and earth,” said Marie.

“Exactly,” said Fair. “Man can move bits of earth, just not the whole of it all at once.”

“I read in the *Enterprise* that John McCullough will be performing at Piper’s Opera House,” said Theresa.

“I saw him perform three years ago in San Francisco,” said Marie. “He’s really quite amazing, in a manly Shakespearean sort of a way.”

“What other sort of manliness is there for a Shakespearean actor?” Mackay offered with a bemused expression.

Marie’s face wrinkled with a sudden humor. “Tragically, none,” she said, which set Fair into his second fit of laughter for the evening. The others erupted in similar fashion, until the moment at last played itself out with a series of final chuckles. “You are a fan of the theater, Mister Mackay?”

“I am,” said Mackay. “I go as frequently as my purse will allow.”

“Will you be going to see John McCullough?” said Marie.

“Only if you’ll accompany me as my date.”

“How perfect!” said Theresa.

“Theresa...” cautioned Fair.

“We’ll look after little Sarah while you two go to the theater,” said Theresa.

“Theresa...”

“Why, yes of course,” said Marie, “I’d love to be your date.”

“You see!” said Theresa.

Mackay looked caught off guard by Marie’s answer. “You will?” he managed.

“Yes of course,” said Marie. “The play will be outstanding, and the two of us will quickly become the talk of the town.”

“Very well then,” said Mackay.

“Very well then indeed,” said Marie. “And thank you for asking me. Living here as a single woman can really be isolating.”

Fair placed his napkin on the table and pushed his chair back to stand. “And there you have it,” he said. “As I’ve said since the day I was born, the world is a funny place indeed.”

Mackay skipped rope by the idle speed bag, while Charlie Simmons and newcomer Frank Womack sparred in the ring. Womack was a bit on the slow side and lacked any real fundamental nose for the sport, only he was aggressive and agile, and he stayed in the round despite a series of early-round uppercuts by Simmons that could have dropped a lesser man. That told a lot about a man’s character, Mackay always thought. Boxing tested a man’s coolness under fire, his ability to think critically despite the withering impact of pain. Boxing allowed a man to overcome a certain native instinct to flee from conflict, to prove to himself and to others that he could take the punishment, no matter what the final outcome.

Mackay sped up his cadence as he took in the late night scene at Bill Davis’ Gymnasium on lower C Street. He was one of the faithful who gathered here almost nightly for exercise and a few rounds in the ring with a worthy opponent. Davis’ Gymnasium was like a second home to Mackay, for of all the various forms of exercise a man could undertake, boxing was his favorite. Mackay knew that he wasn’t the best of boxers—much like this newcomer in the ring. Mackay was a slow but tenacious fighter, who made up in aggressiveness what he lacked in skill. The sport developed his sense of coordination between his hands and his eyes, and it gave him needed practice in controlling his never stable temperament.

Mackay dropped one side of the rope and rolled it up into a coil. He was winded and thirsty, so he walked up to the water table and dipped the drinking ladle into the bucket. After he had consumed two full ladles of water, he dipped it back into the bucket and splashed the contents onto his bare chest. He glanced to his left and saw Bill Davis in his tiny office, looking over at him while he lazily scratched his forehead with a pencil. “You boxing tonight, Mackay?”

“Hadn’t planned to,” said Mackay.

“In that case, you’re up next in the ring.”

Mackay smiled at the short gymnasium manager, his chest still heaving from his recent exertion. “You’re a pushy man, Bill Davis,” he said. “One of these days you’re going to push me so hard I might just have a go at you.”

“Oh come now, Mackay,” said Davis. “You’re telling me you’d actually hit a man half your size with glasses and a permanent limp?”

Mackay danced in the middle of the ring, while Davis checked the knotted leather straps that secured Mackay’s boxing gloves. Boris Brodsky climbed into the ring, prompting Mackay to dance away from Davis, ready to take on the six foot Romanian. “Three rounds, Gentlemen,” said Davis, checking the ties on Brodsky’s gloves as well. “I want a clean fight. Nothing below the belt. No teeth, no feet. Are we clear?”

Both Mackay and Brodsky nodded their understanding. “Clean fight, dah,” said Brodsky. “I clean the clock a dis Irishman.”

Mackay was used to taunts from men like Brodsky. It was part of their attempts to wear down a man’s confidence before the first punch was thrown. Both men danced in a tight circle at the middle of the ring, their boxing gloves poised at their chest as they eyed one another menacingly.

“Corners, Gentlemen,” said Davis, and the two men danced backwards toward their respective ring corners. When Paul Utley tapped the bell, Mackay danced back to the center of the ring, focused on Brodsky’s eyes with a hardened intensity. As was his usual manner at the start of a fight, Mackay tried to size up the way his opponent’s arms would spring and pump with each dance step. It told a lot about a boxer’s fire power, his recoil, his rhythm pauses, and as a secondary consequence, his defensive vulnerabilities. When he had a sense of Brodsky’s rhythm, Mackay stepped in and fired a right jab, which landed hard above Brodsky’s left eye. The blow penetrated effectively, and Brodsky leaned backwards to dodge Mackay’s follow-up left hook.

Most opponents would counter on a missed left hook, since the follow through momentum left a boxer’s entire left side momentarily exposed to a well timed upper cut. When Brodsky failed to strike, Mackay tightened up his stance, touching his gloves to his face as he realized his right jab must have caught the Romanian deeply off guard. Brodsky’s eyes appeared cloudy for only a moment, until the focus came back and he stepped in with a series of punishing blows—a right to the head, a left to the stomach, then a series of rapid fire shots to the belly. Mackay blocked the first punch, while four belly shots forced him to dance backward toward the ropes. Brodsky followed Mackay’s retreat, firing a left hook, then a right.

*Pain, left cheek. Pain, right eye. Belly numb and cramping. Arms tired, only stop his damage. Fire back! Fire now or he’ll drop you!*

Mackay dug deep for his resolve and focus. He leaned forward to change his posture from defense to offense. Brodsky landed another stinger to Mackay’s right eye, only Mackay worked through the pain, unleashing a series of jabs and hooks to Brodsky’s face that staggered the man backwards toward the center of the ring.

“Close on him, Mackay,” said Charlie Simmons, watching from his position near the water table.

“Focus,” said Davis. “You’re both sloppy and scattered.”

Mackay and Brodsky danced for a full twenty seconds, circling one another near the center of the ring. Mackay felt spent by the rigors of the round, which meant the dancing break gave him time to catch his breath and let the worst of the pain dampen in his face and belly. It also gave Brodsky time to recover, prompting Mackay to focus on Brodsky’s rhythm again before setting up his next offensive. When he sensed Brodsky’s pause, Mackay faked with a left jab, then stepped in to land three powerful shots to his opponent’s head. The Romanian staggered backward, his hands held loosely at his waist, while Davis stepped in to grab Mackay by his right wrist, arresting any further offensive challenge on Mackay’s part. Brodsky’s eyes glazed over, moments before his knees buckled from under him.

Davis let go of Mackay’s wrist and dropped down beside Brodsky’s unconscious body. He pointed his right index finger at the boxer’s chest, chopping his arm like an tomahawk as he gave the count. “One, two, three, Mackay wins by knockout.”

Paul Utley climbed into the ring with a towel and a small vial of smelling salts. He knelt down next to Brodsky and folded the towel behind the boxer’s head, then opened the salts vial and waved it three times under Brodsky’s nose. The Romanian came too with a sudden start, recoiling from the bitter, ammonia punch of the salts.

Mackay knelt down next to Brodsky as the boxer came too. “There you go,” he offered gently, placing a gloved hand behind Brodsky’s head and slowly raising him up to a seated position. “A lucky shot is all, Lad. You were in it to the end.”

Mackay kept his hand on Brodsky’s back, giving him a point of balance until his full senses could come back to him. Brodsky shook his head several times, then touched his gloves to his face. “What hit me?” he managed.

Davis and Utley stood up on cue and dug their hands into Brodsky’s armpits. “John Mackay hit you,” said Utley.

“Up you go now,” said Davis. “A fair fight and a clean knockout.”

As Utley escorted a still wobbly Brodsky from the ring, Davis turned to Mackay and punched him on the shoulder. “As for you, Mister Mackay, you were particularly distracted tonight. Lucky it wasn’t you being swept off the mat.”

“‘Aye, Sam, I was thinking that myself,” said Mackay.

“Problems at the *Kentuck*?”

“No more than usual.”

“Well then what the devil’s eating at your concentration?”

“To be honest,” said Mackay, “I believe it’s a woman.”

“Oh sweet Jesus,” said Davis. “Don’t you know they’re nothing but trouble?”

“‘Aye, Sam,” said Mackay. “My head knows you’re right, only my heart seems to be on a course all it’s own.”

# Chapter Eight

Monday, September 11, 1865

Despite the fact that Ralston had indirectly relieved many members of the Washoe Millionaire’s Club of their most productive assets, nearly every man present felt a certain prideful elevation knowing that the Magician of San Francisco was solidly entrenched within their midsts. Ralston possessed an infectious vacuum of attraction, a magnetism of can-do spirit that prompted even his most ardent opponents to put down their differences and draw near to his boundless pluck and good natured sense of brotherhood. Should a man be fortunate enough to spend an evening with Billy Ralston, thought Sharon, many would come to the occasion with myriad preconceived notions about the man’s character and legend, largely placed there by the stories that newspapermen had written on his behalf. Stories about his fabled socialite parties, his growing infrastructure of West Coast manufacturing companies, his Bank of California and his personal impact upon the growth of San Francisco and the West Coast at large. No one, it seemed, even the most jaded detractors, failed to respond to Ralston as anything but the Pied Piper of men.

“I read in the papers that you’ve broken ground on a theater that makes my opera house look like a puppet show,” said John Piper.

Ralston wiped his mouth with his napkin before setting it on the table, standing up to shake Piper’s hand. “No no, sit,” Piper insisted.

“If only I can draw an equal lineup of talent, my friend, I’d be grateful beyond compare.”

Sharon smiled up at Piper as he finished the last of his steak. The three bankers had dined together at the Washoe Millionaire’s Club, despite the steady parade of intrusions that had disrupted the pleasure of their meal. Such was always the case when dining with Ralston, Sharon considered, for the man was always at the center of attention. Placing his knife and fork in proper order on the right side of his plate, Sharon thought back on his many months of lonesome solo meals at the Washoe Millionaire’s Club, ever since he had begun foreclosing on loans held by so many leading citizens of Virginia City and Gold Hill. Sharon had become the town pariah, while Ralston seemed to rise above the mounting fusillade of scorn. How was it possible that Ralston smelled like a rose to these people, while he felt nothing but the full weight of their enmity?

“Come join us in the lounge when you’re through,” said Piper. “Cigars and brandies on me.”

“How much more can a man eat?” said Ralston, looking over at Sharon and Mills to see that his colleagues had given up as well.

Sharon and Mills set their napkins on the table and stood up on cue. “I’m off to an early bed,” said Mills. “I’m afraid the long journey has combined with the thin mountain air to make me useless for anything but slumber.”

“Our coach departs first thing tomorrow morning for the trip back to the Coast,” Ralston said for Mills benefit. “No doubt you’re the smarter of the two of us.”

“In truth I was looking forward to the diversions of Virginia City,” said Mills. “Instead, I must admit my defeat to the advancing drum beat of old age.”

In the lounge, Sharon felt more like a tag-along than any real contributor to the evening. While Ralston fell into a conversation with the poet politician, John Kaye, Sharon moved off to the far end of the bar where John Mackay stood in conversation with Andrew Hallidie. Neither man had borrowed money from or been squeezed by the Bank of California, which meant that neither man had reason to hold a grudge against his presence in the lounge.

“Mister Sharon,” said Mackay, extending his hand in welcome.

Sharon took Mackay’s hand and felt raw power in the man’s grip. “Call me Bill, please,” he said, releasing Mackay’s hand and reaching for Hallidie’s. “Good to see you, Andrew.”

“And you,” said Hallidie. “Isn’t that one of your superintendents at the door?”

Sharon followed Hallidie’s point of focus, turning to see Sam Witherspoon standing at the door with his hat in his hand. When Witherspoon saw Sharon, he gave a humble wave of his hat, indicating that he needed a word with his boss. “You’ll excuse me, then,” said Sharon, crossing the room to intercept the superintendent of the *Crown Point*.

“That man can’t be in here,” said Chet Jackson from his lean against the bar. “This here’s a members only club, Mister Sharon, he’ll have to leave at once.”

Sharon raised his hand for Jackson without looking back. “He’ll be leaving,” he said as he escorted Witherspoon from the doorway back out into the hall.

“I’m sorry to have to bother you, Sir,” said Witherspoon.

“Tell me some good news, Sam,” said Sharon.

“I believe we’re onto something, Sir. We found a sliver vein not three hours ago. We’ve been following it ever since.”

“How big is it now?” said Sharon, feeling his heart leap up into his throat.

“We’ve dug two more feet and, well, she’s growing rather nicely now.”

“Wait for us in the hoisting works,” said Sharon. “I’ll get Ralston and meet you there in twenty minutes.”

Ralston and Sharon stripped off their clothing in the changing room of the *Crown Point* hoisting works, stepping into clean gray over-alls for their journey into the mine. “This had better be good,” said Ralston. “We’re missing a virtuoso performance at Piper’s Opera House.”

Witherspoon stepped into the changing room and smiled at his bosses. “You two ready?”

Sharon and Ralston followed Witherspoon out onto the main hoisting works floor, both men working the final snaps on their over-all bibs. The hoisting works was fairly quiet due to the fact that the bankers were arriving in the middle of the night shift. Besides the shaft engineers manning their posts on the gallows frames, Sharon counted three blacksmiths and two timbermen hauling replacement tools and square set timbers for their descent into the mine. Despite the absence of miners, the hoisting works rumbled with its usual steam engine thunder and groaning cables and flywheels, prompting Witherspoon to signal the men toward the Shaft Two cage, which waited at the surface for their boarding and descent. When they were all aboard, Witherspoon locked the safety door and gave a thumbs up for the benefit of the engineer, who acknowledged the signal and then worked the lever that started the cage on its descent down the shaft.

As the darkness enveloped the cage, Sharon felt the heat and humidity rise in direct correlation to the increasing depth of their descent. The lights of Station One flashed by in a instant, and as usual Sharon felt an uneasiness in his stomach, given the precarious speed of their downward drop. Gallery Two flashed by, then three and four and five, until Sharon felt the elastic bend of the ribbon cable as the engineer began to slow the cage for the final station of the *Crown Point Mine*.

The heat was nearly unbearable as the men stepped out of the cage onto the earthen floor of Station Six. Sharon felt his body begin to sweat, wicking onto the fabric of his over-alls as he crossed the station behind Witherspoon and Ralston. He looked to his left and saw a group of overheated miners attempting to cool themselves by chewing on ice chips in between long slugs of chilled water. Their bodies appeared chiseled with muscle, for the combination of intense heat and strenuous labor gave Comstock miners the local endearment of ‘Greek Gods of the West.’

At the mouth of the *Kentuck* drift, shift foreman Danny Thompson crouch-walked out of the tunnel and stood up straight to face off with Witherspoon and the mine owners. “Anything new to report?” Witherspoon asked his subordinate.

“We’re through the last of the limestone,” said Thompson, “back into hard rock again.”

“And the vein?” said Witherspoon.

Thompson wiped the sweat from his face with a dirty handkerchief, then smiled at the men with a look of pure glee. “You’ll need to see this one for yourselves.”

Sharon crouch-walked into the drift behind Thompson, followed by Witherspoon and Ralston at the rear. The drift was no more than four and a half feet tall, and for big men like Witherspoon and Ralston, the passage was made particularly challenging by the overhead timbers that dropped down a foot into the passageway. About every twenty feet or so, Sharon heard Ralston issue a swear word as he failed to mind his head in the relative darkness. “Finally a place where my small body is at an advantage,” he called back to try to bolster Ralston’s clearly failing sense of humor.

“If I get out of this place alive,” said Ralston, “my forehead will forever resemble a flatiron.”

At the end of the drift, Witherspoon lit a kerosene lantern with a friction match, illuminating the dirty faces of four miners hard at work at the bore. Sharon noticed that the miners looked exhausted yet oddly exhilarated, which instantly captivated his interest in the rock wall that stood behind them. “Let’s see this thing,” he said, almost pushing the miners out of his way.

Ralston kneeled down on the other side of Witherspoon, who held the lantern up to the bore and ran his fingers along a three foot swatch of telltale blue rock that told each man that they were looking at high grade silver of an incredibly pure nature. “First real silver I’ve seen in nearly a year,” said one of the sweating miners.

“In the last four feet she’s gone from a sliver to three foot wide vein,” said Thompson. “I’ve been doing this business a fair long bit, Gentlemen, and this here’s the real deal. All the markings of a big bonanza.”

Sharon slapped the back of his hand against Ralston’s right forearm, then leaned backwards until he could sit down on the rock floor. “What’d I tell you,” he said, smiling with so much vigor that his cheeks began to hurt.

Ralston put his hand to the blue rock and ran his fingers over the surface. “This is just the edge of it,” he said.

“That’s what I reckon as well,” said Witherspoon. “We’re almost drifted into *Kentuck* territory.”

Ralston sat down as well, giving a return swat to Sharon’s arm. “You son-of-a-bitch,” he said. “I’ll be damned if your instinct wasn’t spot on!”

“Once you get back to San Francisco, you’ll need to buy up as much *Kentuck* stock as you can,” said Sharon, “as quietly as you can.”

Ralston looked at Witherspoon, and said, “It’s important that you have a meeting with each of your shifts. Any miner or timbermen or engineer—anyone whispers one word about this to anyone not associated with the *Crown Point*, I’ll fire every last man in retribution. That means you too, Mister Witherspoon. One man blows our little secret, he blows it for every man employed in the *Crown Point*. We clear on that?”

“Clear as day,” said Witherspoon.

“Good,” said Ralston, giving the superintendent a firm slap on his forearm. “None of us wants an outcome like that, so the rest is up to your personal execution and the solemn promise of your men.”

“The Comstock Lode’s been in borrasca for a good long while” said Witherspoon. “None of my men wish to see their families starve because they couldn’t hold their tongue on the surface.”

Ralston rolled over onto his knees so that he could run his fingers over the blue seam of silver ore one last time, smiling with an intensity matched only by Sharon. “Perhaps the Lode’s depression is about to come to an end,” he said.

“A savior in blue,” said Sharon, “just when San Francisco needs her the most.”

# Chapter Nine

Sunday, January 20, 1867

As you recross the Divide, hunkered against the biting cold, once again you hear the strange resonance of silence as it begins to envelope both Virginia City and Gold Hill. First comes the toll of church bells, interspersed with the clamor of mine alarm bells, echoing over the slopes of Mount Davidson—*Julia Bulette is dead*. Then comes the mass evacuation of workers, spilling forth from hoisting works, mills and blacksmith foundries, as the two towns begin to shut down in mourning. Re-taking C Street, you hear the sound of steam engines and mine pumps being shut down like falling dominoes across the Comstock Lode—the *Chollar*, the *Petosi*, the *Hale & Norcross*, the *Savage* and the *Best and Belcher*. Not since the news of Lincoln’s death, almost four years ago to this very day, has Virginia City experienced a state of mourning and abrupt cessation of industry.

Unlike Lincoln’s assassination, the saloons, at least this early on in the grieving process, appear to be holding in the open position, for the saloons, you quickly surmise, have become the primary and early dissemination points for the rapid exchange of information regarding Julia’s murder. Entering the Bucket of Blood, you see retired miner, Gabby McClanahan, holding court at the center of the bar, in what appears to be a rare display of abject sobriety for this late hour of the morning. It’s the weight of the news, you consider; enough to sober even a hard core drunk like McClanahan.

“Surely Gabby McClanahan has already gathered all the facts,” you say to the man with as little cynicism in your voice as you can muster.

“Well fancy me,” says Gabby. “Virginia’s foremost journalist, asking ole’ Gabby McClanahan for an update on the news.”

“I’m at your mercy,” you say with only the slightest of bows.

Gabby seems to like this response, so he prepares himself by slurping some foam from atop his freshly-drawn glass of beer. “Sheriff says she was found by her Chinaman manservant, partially nude, strangled and bludgeoned to death,” he says. “All her jewelry and valuables are missing and assumed stolen.”

“Sheriff have any leads about who might have murdered her?”

“If he does, he’s not talking,” says McClanahan.

“Probably just as well he keeps quiet on the matter,” says Jake Obermeyer. “Maybe that way the killer’ll get sloppy. Expose himself on accident.”

“I heard that hermit fella Haggerty’s on the suspect list,” says Paul Linley.

“Who’d you hear that from?” says John Ruppert from behind the bar.

“Organ grinder in front of the Delta,” says Linley. “Seems like a reliable enough fellow. Says he heard the Sheriff mention him by name.”

“Tell you who might a done it is that Hooper fella camped out near Six Mile Canyon,” says Walt Simpson from the poker table.

“This your personal speculation?” you say, “or did you hear something from the organ grinder?”

“Man’s obsessed with Miss Bulette,” says Simpson, tamping the ash on his Colorado Claro. “Saves up all his money for a month a Sundays, just to spend one night with her.”

“That could be half the men on the Comstock Lode,” you say in an off-handed way.

“Hooper’s different,” says Simpson, checking his freshly dealt hand as he stokes his cigar back to life. “I’ve heard the man go on near twenty minutes about Miss Bulette, like she was his make believe girlfriend and they was seriously in love.”

“I’m sure the Sheriff will question every suspect in due course,” you say, finding yourself thinking quite suddenly about the Salem witch trials of 1692.

“Shoot,” says Petey Gibbons, seated at one of the dining tables near the kitchen. “We could point fingers all day long. Truth’ll come out when the Sheriff sifts through all the clues.”

“That or when the killer tries to sell off Julia’s stuff,” says Kent Frazier.

“He’d be a damn fool trying to sell it ‘round these parts,” says McClanahan. “If it was me, I’d be halfway to San Francisco by now.”

Several of the men give McClanahan suspicious looks after that, prompting McClanahan to throw up his hands like a man in full surrender. “Now just a minute, Boys,” he says. “I was home in bed last night, sleeping off a bad case of the brown bottle flu.”

Cliff Henderson, the owner of the Bucket of Blood, enters the saloon from C Street, looking bone chilled and flush in the cheeks. “Drink up, Boys, we’re closing in half an hour,” he says, flipping his window sign so that ‘Closed’ faces outward to the street.

“Cliff?” you call out in a questioning tone of voice.

“Town Counsel just broke from their emergency session,” says Henderson. “All business enterprise is to cease by noon today, out of respect for Miss Bulette’s passing. Her funeral’s planned for two this afternoon.”

“Ain’t that a bit fast?” says Frazier.

“What’s the difference between fast or slow?” says Henderson. “Miss Bulette’s been strangled dead. Dead’s dead, Mister Frazier. When a person wakes up dead like that, time no longer matters for the rest of their god-given days.”

For the first time in nearly ten years of professional journalism, your grief for a fallen friend has come into direct polarity with your chosen livelihood and means of support. A vast part of your being wishes to fall into step with everyone else so painfully mourning—to pause for a time to remember all the good things that made up Julia Bulette—only the newsman side of your nature requires the application of a deeper level of grit and mental fortitude. The story must be told. The essence of a life so wrongly taken must be sketched out into the fullness of taste and word. The truth must be revealed. Public outrage must be stoked like a smithy’s fire, for without the enragement of public sentiment, justice all too often fails in its pursuit of the guilty.

As you make your way down Mount Davidson toward D Street and the Red Light District, you accommodate your grief by thinking back on your fondest memories of Julia. Julia the nurse comes foremost to your mind. How many times in her tenure on the Comstock Lode had she turned her cottage into a makeshift hospital for so many sick and injured townsfolk? The smallpox outbreak of ’63, the cholera epidemic of ’65 and the influenza outbreak of ’66. After the *Mexican Mine* disaster, Julia had nursed the injured for weeks without pause, her small cottage overflowing with cots and bandages and constant acts of servitude. Virginia City’s very own angel of mercy, you think, all in the guise of a kind-hearted cottage girl. Circumstance may have forced Julia into a compromising line of work, only at her core, she remained as chaste as newly-fallen snow, like the sweet, unpolluted breath of a newborn baby.

Approaching D Street, you recall Julia’s many acts of philanthropy. She gave generously to the Daughter’s of Mercy, the Miner’s Orphanage Fund, the Volunteer Firemen’s Retirement Assistance League and the Disabled Miner’s Relief Association. The degree and magnitude of her charity came partly due to her unique approach to her chosen career. Only one customer per night was her published rule, only her limited yet lucky customers paid a higher-than-customary price for the privilege of Julia’s serially doled out monogamy. Julia’s staunch adherence to this practice afforded her an income level that allowed for generous giving to others, only the true source of her charity came from a heart filled with a deep and lustrous compassion, something you always felt outweighed what little consideration she afforded for herself. Her acts of charity represented selflessness at its purest, a public gesture that helped her justify her downward pitch into the depraved and ridiculed life of a soiled dove.

But most of all you remember Julia the florist and gardener, the Demeter and Chrysothemis of an otherwise barren, unforgiving countryside. When Julia was not otherwise occupied in her professional pursuits, how often did you see her kneeling down in one of the many garden beds that surrounded her cottage, working with her plants, which seemed to thrive under her tutelage in a way that surpassed even the most ardent female gardeners of Virginia City. Roses of enormous size, satin in their luster and vibrancy. Her geraniums the envy of nearly every righteous churchgoing woman in town. You remember one summer morning in particular, nearly two years prior, when a half-dozen society ladies ventured down onto D Street, interrupting your almost daily chat with Miss Bulette.

“What do you use to amend your soil?” one of the ladies had asked, and then Julia had answered them as though they were old friends from a commonly-shared garden club.

“How do you get your hydrangea so luscious and blue?” said another.

“They like acidity,” Julia had answered without pause. “Sometimes the most beautiful flowers come from exposure to bitter things.”

In front of the *Bow Windows* parlor house, you see Sheriff Darby and several of his deputies surrounded by no less than thirty of the Red Light District’s ablest female laborers. As you approach what you assume to be a spontaneous and impromptu gathering, you begin to make out the sound of angry voices, ringing with a feminine mix of insistence and fear.

“What if he’s still out there?” says Robin Troyer.

“What if he’s got an axe to grind against us working girls?” says Lisa Bonner.

“Jesus, Lisa,” says Lauren Simms. “Could you not pick more gruesome imagery?”

“Now ladies...” says Sheriff Darby, motioning for calm with the slow pump of his hands.

“We need protection!” says Margaret Steadman.

“Now girls,” says Sheriff Darby. “You know I can’t do...”

“Whomever murdered Julia is most likely halfway to San Francisco by now,” you offer meekly from the edge of the gathering.

“Have ‘ya proof, Mister high and mighty newsman?” says Lauren.

“I have but common sense,” you say. “If I had done such a thing as to murder Miss Bulette, I’d be halfway to New York by now.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” says Margaret. “No one’s trying to kill you in the middle of the night.”

“Now Margaret, you have no proof that someone out there is actively murdering prostitutes,” says Darby.

“What about Julia?” says Robin. “Is that not proof enough?”

“Miss Bulette is a lone incident so far,” says Deputy Walton.

“Oh now that’s comforting,” says Lauren. “What will you say tomorrow when another one of us lies strangled to death in our bed?”

“You have my word we will remain vigilant for any and all perpetrators,” says Darby.

Nearly as one the women seemed to realize the futility of any additional argument on the matter, and as you stand beside Sheriff Darby and his deputies, you watch as the women disband like points on a compass, back to their respective parlor houses and cribs.

“Come on, Ladies,” says a group of three headed for Carly Sand’s place. “Let’s get ready for the funeral.”

“We’ll march in unity,” says a group headed back to the Mattie Silks’ *Hell On Heels*.

“A job such as yours requires the tempered hand of a diplomat,” you say for Darby’s benefit.

“Just my luck,” says Darby. “The one day I need a drink, every saloon in town’s closed up for a dead prostitute.”

“Could such a thing take place anywhere but here?” you say.

“Reckon not,” says Darby. “Reckon Virginia City’s just about the craziest place there ever was.”

“Any leads on the killer?”

“May a been plural,” says Jake Antry, the oldest deputy in the group.

“We found three sets of horse tracks leading from the back of Julia’s cottage,” says Sam Walton.

“A premeditated robbery?” you ask.

“Might be,” says Darby.

“Any talk of a posse?”

“Can’t see what use it’d be,” says Darby. “We don’t know who they are, and like you say, morn’ likely they’re halfway to Colorado by now.”

The procession along C Street looked to be a mirror repeat of Lincoln’s funeral four years prior, this time presided over by the very Reverend William Martin of the First Presbyterian Church of Virginia City. Unlike Lincoln’s funeral, however, Julia’s black-plumed, glass-walled Hearse rode at the head of the processional, followed by a phalanx of firemen from the Virginia City Number One Fire Company, uniformed militiamen of a half-dozen fraternal societies, the ever-present and consistently bad Metropolitan Brass Band and sixteen carriages brimming with Julia’s fellow sisters dressed in black. Following the formal processional marched what you eyeball to be several thousand Comstockers, each man, woman and child dressed in their absolute Sunday-go-to-meeting finest.

Walking to one side of Julia’s horse-drawn Hearse, you look ahead to the corner of Washington Street, noting a group of elegantly-clad church women rounding the corner onto C Street like a lynch mob phalanx of bad attitude and righteous indignation. “Oh Reverend,” you call across to Martin, who walks just behind Julia’s Hearse on the opposite side of the street.

“Mister DeQuille,” he says with a solemn nod of his preacher’s hat.

“Looks like the Women’s Temperance League is forming up for a standoff,” you say.

You both look ahead to the phalanx of mad women, who have now spread out across C Street like an army awaiting the call for battle. Their postures are rigid, their jaws set like sea captains to a raging storm. “Oh Jesus Lord,” you hear the good Reverend mutter under his breath.

The processional continues north along C Street, until the Hearse driver raises his hand and stops the parade less than twenty feet from the road block. Mary Ellis stands a few feet in front of the line of statuary females, and you rightly assume that Ellis has been chosen or self-appointed to lead the charge, as it were. Reverend Martin walks up to her once the processional has come to a rather elastic stop, for it is no small feat for a parade of thousands to stop on a dime, unless, of course, those thousands are attached to some sort of an infantry honor guard accustomed and trained for synchronized formation.

“Mary?” Martin offers with a questioning tone.

“Word has it you intend to bury Miss Bulette down at the Presbyterian Cemetery.”

“That’s correct,” says Martin.

“It’s not right you buryin’ a prostitute alongside our god-fearing Christian dead,” says Ellis. “In fact, it’s not right that you honor this woman with so much fanfare, like she was a saint or a slain President.”

“Miss Bulette has done a fair bit of good for this community,” says Martin.

“By fair bit?” says Ellis. “Might you refer to Miss Bulette having sex with every last one of our good-for-nothing husbands?”

Ellis’ comment brings quite a stir to those in earshot of the standoff, and you listen as a wave of murmuring travels through the crowd, mainly localized in the ranks of the Virginia City Number One Fire Company. You think back on last summer’s Fourth of July parade, and how these very same ladies had so vociferously protested the fact that the fire company had for a second straight year chosen Julia Bulette as their honored queen. *‘It’s just not right,’* they had yapped in protest, and here they were again, yapping once more now that Julia was dead and gone.

“Your remarks are inappropriate, Mrs. Ellis,” says Martin. “Miss Bulette was a human being like any other, a mixture of right and wrong, both good and bad. Just like you, Mrs. Ellis, just like all of us mortal sinners.”

“We ladies have never sold ourselves for money,” Ellis offers proudly.

“Perhaps we shall let the Lord be the judge of that,” says Martin, which brings another wave of mumbles and muted laughter from the Number One Fire Company.

“This woman shall not be buried in a Christian cemetery with anything approaching Christian dignity!”

You look at Mrs. Ellis, and marvel at just how rigidly erect the woman can stand, both in her posture and in her dogma.

“What makes you ladies the moral lodestar of this community?” says Martin.

“We’ve been forced into it ever since our local clergy failed to lead the way,” says Ellis, and again the mumble wave sweeps its way through the group of assembled firemen.

“Stand aside and let us pass!” says Dave Barton from atop his Hearse.

“We will not!” says Ellis. “If you will not yield to our demands, then you must run us through!”

Ellis’ words illicit no small concern on the faces of her fellow sisters, only as a group they remain united and motionless, supported by their common belief in their own indignant righteousness.

“What shall you have us do?” says a faltering Reverend Martin.

“Turn around and take her to Flower Hill,” says Ellis.

“Miss Bulette was not a pauper nor an indigent,” says Martin. “In fact, she was one of our town’s most ardent philanthropists.”

“Miss Bulette was a prostitute,” says Ellis. “Such moral corruption has no other final resting place than Flower Hill.”

Reverend Martin appears fluxed by indecision, and he looks across at you with an expression that begs your response. “Julia’s gone,” you say. “Her body is merely what she left behind. I’ve a sense she cares not one bit about her final resting place.”

Reverend Martin holds for a further moment of indecision. He shrugs and puts his back to the phalanx of women, raising his right hand and circling his pointed index finger towards the sky. “Let’s spin it,” he says to Barton atop the Hearse.

Barton stands up on cue and looks back upon the Number One Fire Company. “Spread the word!” he yells. “About face for Flower Hill!”

I’m sorry, Julia, you think to yourself as the processional slowly changes course, for people can be small and mean-spirited, dogmatic and petty in their endless preoccupation with their own choking fearfulness. Like a daunting mountain in the way of a westward wagon train, you consider, sometimes it’s best to steer around the thing and put it as quickly to your flank as the detour requires.

# Chapter Ten

Thursday, June 27, 1867

“They’re here, Sir,” said Tibbey, standing just outside Ralston’s open office door.

Ralston looked up from the letter he was drafting, snapping out of his working focus to gaze upon his assistant. “Already?” he said, glancing at his wall clock to see that it was ten minutes past five. “Has everyone been assembled?”

“Yes Sir,” said Tibbey. “Jeffries has managed to collect your guests in record time.”

Ralston felt his mood and energy rise in anticipation. “In that case, let us race for the record books,” he said, standing up from his desk to fetch his top hat and coat from the stand set beside the fireplace.

“Yes Sir,” said Tibbey. “And might I add that your guests appear fully prepared for the challenge.”

Ralston departed the bank through the Sansome Street exit, studying the occupants of his carriage with an instant sense of amusement. Tibbey had been right, he thought. The veiled and masked faces of his guests looked more like an assembly of desert Bedouins than a collection of some of the richest members of San Francisco society. “You look like a caravan of gypsies,” he said.

“By now the entire city has heard about this Belmont Dash of yours,” said Jane Stanford.

“Let the sand storm begin!” Alvinza Hayward said with mock enthusiasm.

“Try not to get us all killed, will you Toppie?” said Thomas Sunderland.

Ralston smiled with open delight, climbing up onto the perch to take the reins from Jeffries. “Anyone like to ride up top with Jeffries and I?”

“Not a chance,” said Jane Mills.

“I’d rather not see my death coming in advance,” said Leland Stanford. “For the love of Christ, Toppie, why do you feel the need to race a bloody train?”

Ralston turned around on the perch and snaked his head outwards until he could peer inside the enclosed carriage. “That’s rather funny coming from a man whose entire world revolves around trains.”

“Oh leave him alone, you ole’ bully,” said Jane Stanford.

“Tally ho!” yelled Ralston, flashing the reins across the backs of his team. Immediately the four blacks pricked up their ears—they knew Ralston’s touch and voice and because of it, they grew instantly hungry for the run. Ralston steered the team onto California Street, then south onto the Mission Plank Road. He held the team in for a time, feeling the power of their muscles, his complete control over their immense capacity for speed. Of Ralston’s stable of nearly one hundred horses, only his finest animals had been hand selected for the twenty-two mile race for Belmont, and the christening weekend of his new palatial country estate. He would change teams twice during the run, he reviewed his strategy—first at Uncle Tom’s Station, then again near San Mateo, before the wide open flats that led to the finish line. He would lose time switching out teams, he considered, only the fresh mounts would make up for the delay much faster an an otherwise exhausted team pushed well beyond their limits.

*You gamble by strategy, and it is strategy that will win the day.*

Approaching the Valencia Street Station, Ralston reined in his team to a slow walk, just as the train slowed on arrival into its final city stop before heading south toward San Jose. Portions of the San Francisco and San Jose Railroad had first come into service in 1863, with full completion of the 49.5 mile route in full operation by the close of 1864. Fourteen stops stood between Valencia Street and Blossom Hill Station in Belmont, and Ralston took a moment to visualize the full embodiment of his impending race between old world conveyance and new world technology. The train would beat him soundly on the straightaways, he considered, so it was up to his skill as a driver to push his team for maximum performance through the turns and chicanes along the way.

The train sat idle in the station for what felt like an eternity. Ralston—indeed every man and woman on the coach—appeared anxious and ready for the contest. The anticipation of breathtaking speed, the fear, the danger, the unknown variables that could befall them along the way left each passenger with a strong sense of suspense. Bursts of white smoke issued from the steam engine while passengers embarked and debarked the carriage cars of the train. Ralston glanced at the engineer, just as the stoker looked up from his work and together the train crew admired the waiting team of equine and human opponents. The engineer touched the brim of his hat with a two finger salute, then aimed the two fingers directly at Ralston.

“We’ll see, won’t we, Ruppert?” Ralston called out above the noise of the steam engine.

The engineer pulled the whistle cord, issuing a long shrill blast that echoed off nearby buildings like high canyon walls. In response Ralston flashed the reins, while Jeffries put the whip to the backs of the blacks. The carriage lurched forward—from a standstill to a full on gallop—jumping ahead of the engine as the locomotive strained to pull away from the station. “Whip them up, Jeffries!” yelled Ralston, only both men knew that pedigreed horseflesh needed little prompting for the animals to give it their all.

As they reached the countryside, the loose gravel roadway began to kick up a blinding screen of dust and sand, pelting the passengers as the coach-and-four raced along the roadway at breakneck speed. The train was now in front of them as it accelerated along the tracks, continuing to build speed the longer she ran at full stoke. Ralston loosened the reins and let his team own their bits, feeling the raw power of the animals as he braced his feet against the constant pounding both carriage and passengers were experiencing over the dry but badly-rutted roadway. Ralston had paid good money to have the roadway south of San Mateo graded with freshly pulverized rock, but until they reached the final stretch, his guests would be forced to endure their present pounding.

With each successive straightaway the train would take the lead, and with each successive station or turn, Ralston would win it back. Bernal Heights, Visitacion Valley, Larkspur Landing—the race so far was a head-to-head tie. By Uncle Tom’s Station, Ralston estimated that they had managed a good half mile lead, only he knew that the bulk of his advantage would be lost during the time it took to change out to a fresh team. While the hostlers unharnessed the exhausted and frothing first leg team, Ralston climbed down from the perch and opened the rear carriage door to see that his guests were breathless with excitement and covered in dust. “Having fun?” he said with a smile on his face.

“It’s simply ghastly the way you treat your weekend guests,” said Cindy Sunderland.

“Yes, but are you having fun?”

Cindy Sunderland leaned forward and lifted up her veil, her face flush with excitement, glowing with the thrill of the race. “Can’t you tell?” she said.

“Keep at it,” said Darius Mills.

“Heaven forbid Billy Ralston should lose to a train,” said Mark Hopkins. “Let’s hope your next team can actually run.”

Ralston pounded his open hand upon the carriage door, shaking his head with rueful delight. “With cynical friends like mine,” he said, “a man need not worry about the slings of enemies or the barbs of local newsmen.”

When the hostlers had the fresh team harnessed and ready to go, Ralston climbed back up on his perch and gave Jeffries an elbow in the side. “You with me, Jeffries?”

“Just barely, Sir.”

Ralston set the reins to his fresh team, glancing at Jeffries as the liveryman gave encouragement with his buggy whip. “Everyone’s a funny man today,” he said.

“Like that new fellow Twain,” said Jeffries.

“You know I’ve met him,” said Ralston.

“On the contrary, Sir. It is he who has met you.”

After the team change at Uncle Tom’s Station, Ralston felt his chances of beating the train were in his favor, until one of his blacks pulled up with a muscle cramp less than half a mile from the final hostlier station. The animal had been pumping like a cylinder alongside his peers, stretching deep into his gallop when his right rear leg had hitched up with an odd half step, which threw off the rhythm of the entire team. The stallion seemed to be favoring at the knee—his Gaskin or his Hock, Ralston assessed—only the half step had forced him to back the team from a gallop to a trot. Ralston watched helplessly as the train continued to add to its lead. He could sense that his ailing stallion was fighting to stay in the race—working through the pain—only the animal continued to favor his right flank with every third or fourth step.

At the San Mateo Hostler’s Station, Ralston watched the departure of the train around a distant bend, yet despite his repeated encouragements to the groomsmen, the change-out seemed to take far longer than customary. “For the love of god!” he finally yelled at the hostlers. “Can you move no slower?”

No one in the carriage dared to make a comment, serious or otherwise, when Ralston was so heavily involved in one of his self-driven, self-conceived competitions. “You’re ready!” the lead groomsmen at last called out, prompting Jeffries to snap the carriage whip repeatedly as the team shot forth with a stunning display of dust and acceleration.

“Hah!” Ralston cried out. “Be to it, Lads—hah!”

Palo Alto, Mountain View, Morgan Hill; with each passing station, Ralston worked his anchor team with every ounce of driving skill he could manage. At the first two stations, he had barely caught up with the caboose, before the train would begin to accelerate and pull away. Jeffries timed each station stop with his pocket watch. The engineer was holding each stop to under a minute, rushing the passengers and his crew in the name of competition. By Morgan Hill, Ralston managed a narrow lead, only to lose it again at Hayward Park. Back and forth the race went on until Burlingame, when Ralston was handed the break he was looking for. Jeffries had turned sideways on the perch to time the train’s station stop behind them, and when the stop went on for well over a minute, Ralston began to glow with a rising sense of victory. “One minute forty,” Jeffries called out as he swung forward again on the perch. “Too many dawdling passengers.”

Ralston knew that at this point the whip was unnecessary, for his team was doing what their high breeding naturally commanded them to do—to run for the sheer joy of running. He looked back over his shoulder and saw that the train was gaining speed, noting at the same glance that every man in his carriage had his head craned out of the windows, looking back in an effort to gauge their chances. Thomas Sunderland turned his head to look up at Ralston, eyes squinting, his face covered in dust. “Go, man, go!” he yelled above the noise.

“Yah-hah!” Ralston yelled to his team, snapping the reins across their backs. “Make, Boys, make!”

The anchor team seemed to comprehend the challenge at their instinctual core. The coach bucked slightly as they pulled harder, increasing their stride as they ran with each their all. Ralston gave them their bits again and the team charged ahead, while the coach itself began to chatter dangerously side-to-side due to the unnaturally high rate of speed. Ralston guided his team through a slow lefthand turn, until Belmont Station came into view some quarter mile in front of them. He glanced over his shoulder again and checked the train’s progress—it was closing way too fast, he realized.

“The stoker must have charged his engine with an extra cord of wood!” he yelled for Jeffries behalf.

The coach hit a small mogul in the road, lifting all four wheels off the ground before reuniting with the roadway amidst a flurry of female screams from Ralston’s passengers. The train engineer blew his whistle as he closed the gap—an attempt to unnerve Ralston and his team. Instead the animals pulled harder, running desperately now from the mechanical predator that chased after them from their blinded flank. Ralston looked forward to the fast approaching station, then glanced over his shoulder to assess their chances one last time. At this point, with some three hundred yards to go, Ralston felt certain he could win by a nose. He looked forward again and saw the crossover less than a hundred yards ahead. He gathered in the reins again—two per hand—making certain not to apply pressure that might falsely signal his team that they could let up on their effort. He applied slight pressure on the righthand reins, easing the carriage closer to the tracks. “Yah!” he yelled to reaffirm the need for speed.

“We’ve no room!” Jeffries yelled nervously from the perch.

“We’re going for it!” Ralston yelled back.

“We’ve too little room!” Jeffries repeated himself.

Only Ralston went for it. He applied more pressure on his righthand reins and the team followed perfectly, racing across the tracks with less than fifty yards separating coach and train. The engineer stood on his whistle, admonishing Ralston for his risky maneuver, and in response Ralston lifted up his top hat and waved it victoriously above his head.

Ralston pulled in the reins evenly this time, working his blacks down from a gallop to a trot to a much-deserved walk. Each animal was frothing from the nostrils and mouth, their breaths pounding after their unflinching display of teamwork. “There’s my boys!” he called out to them, glancing left to see the train slowing for the station. The engineer had his right arm propped outside the cab window as he gave Ralston a casual thumb’s up.

“That was close,” said Jeffries.

Ralston looked at his liveryman and noted the lack of color in the man’s face. He gave Jeffries a gentle nudgd with his elbow, and said, “Chip up, Man, we had him by thirty yards.”

“I now understand what makes you so successful in business,” said Jeffries. “Nerves of steel, Sir, nerves of bloody steel.”

Ralston steered his carriage under the low tree branches that overhung his winding driveway. As he entered the clearing that led to Belmont Hall, an explosion of exclamations issued from his Bedouin passengers, as they took in their first glimpse of the immense white house set off against a back drop of hazy mountains, the pale orange tint of a sunset sky. Surrounding the house was a sea of planted camellia, heliotrope, oleander, crape-myrtle, laurel and lilac. On the brick coping of the front stairs, Chinese pottery stood like centurions topped with brilliantly hued geranium. As the carriage drew near the front of the house, Ralston made out the faces of his friends, awaiting their arrival on the expansive veranda which wrapped around the entirety of the three story mansion. He saw his wife, Lizzy, standing with William and Maria Sharon. There was San Francisco Mayor Alvord and Charles Howard, Senator Newlands and Colonel Jackson of the *Evening Post*. Tonight he would host forty of his closest friends—a dry run christening for his new staff and infrastructure, before hosting the first of what he could only hope would be a legendary string of Ralston Nights.

Four groomsmen descended upon the carriage when it came to a stop before the wide stairs leading up to the covered veranda. Two groomsmen held the team steady, while another set the step box before the righthand carriage door, which was then opened to reveal the dust-covered occupants within. As they exited the carriage one-by-one, the guests on the veranda began to chuckle at first and then laugh outright at the sight of the passengers, who in turn looked at one another and began to laugh along with the others.

“You’re all a terrible sight!” said Lizzy.

“Warm baths await each of you in your personal suite rooms,” said Mrs. Farley, the house superintendent.

“You look like Billy Van and his troupe of blackface minstrels,” said Sharon.

On cue, the group of dusty passengers locked arms in a slow motion, impromptu can-can line—right kick, left kick, right kick, left.

“The price for riding with Billy Ralston!” said Darius Mills.

Ralston climbed down from the perch and joined his friends in the can-can line. “Nonsense!” he said with the biggest smile he could manage. “Dust and bruised bone is of little consequence when a man can say that he bested a train with horse flesh and daring.”

After a sumptuous dinner of Dungeness crab followed by an entrée of tender chateaubriand of beef in a mushroom demi-glace, Ralston’s weekend guests broke off into small groups—brandy snifters in hand—ambling through the mansion in an effort to fully appreciate the magnitude of Ralston’s creation. On the ground floor was the monstrous ballroom, paneled with huge plate-glass mirrors and lighted by chandeliers dripping with crystals—a chamber to vie with the original at Versailles. Adjacent to the ballroom was the billiards room, replete with two ornate tables crafted from the rarest of California woods. The music room housed a concert grand piano incased in carved California laurel. The library bore shelf after shelf of handsomely tooled sets of Scott, Byron, Milton, Plutarch and Shakespeare. Beneath it stood a wine cellar of immense proportion, brimming with burgundies, clarets, sauternes and champagnes.

While Ralston wished to showcase works of California production and origin, when it came to furnishings, he was inclined to incorporate products from nearly every corner of the globe. For the past two years while Belmont was under construction, nearly every foreign ship that sailed through the Golden Gate had arrived with consignments for Ralston’s enormous summer estate. Choice Aubusson carpets, oriental rugs, Venetian and Bohemian glass, handsomely monogrammed Dresden and Sèvres china. Paintings, bronze and marble statuary, cloisonné, ebony and teak. But perhaps the most alluring draw to the mansion was the overwhelming sense of openness and free-flowing interior space, every wing leading back to the grand atrium foyer that master architect John Gaynor had made into reality.

When the ten-piece orchestra began their first set with Frank Wilder’s popular war ballad, *Bury Me at Sunset*, Ralston pulled aside his current bank board members, Mills, Sharon, Sunderland and Hayward, and asked them to join him in the billiards room.

“But we haven’t danced!” Maria Sharon complained as Ralston tapped out her husband.

“I’ll have him back to you before the band can catch their breath,” said Ralston, winking at Maria with his hand upon her shoulder.

Hayward set up a nine ball rack on one of billiards tables, lifting the rack cleanly off the felt, while Sharon lined up the cue ball and fired it into the formation. Billiards balls rocketed about the table—a perfect off-center strike—dropping the solid five into the corner right pocket. “What’s this about, Toppie?” he said, straightening up as he studied the table for his next shot.

“It’s about Adolph Sutro and his blasted tunnel,” said Ralston, idly chalking a pool cue tip. “It’s about waking up before it’s too late. It’s about making sure the fox can never find its way into our very private henhouse.”

“I was wondering when you’d arrive at this conclusion,” said Mills, smoking a cigar as he observed the game from a high-backed leather chair.

“Word out of Washington D.C. is that Sutro is very close to procuring a three million dollar commitment from the federal government,” said Hayward.

“Precisely why we must act and act decisively,” said Ralston.

“But we’ve given him our endorsement,” said Sunderland. “At our behest, twelve Comstock mines have committed six hundred thousand dollars.”

“All the more reason to reverse ourselves and shut him down while we still can,” said Ralston. “If Sutro is allowed to succeed with this tunnel of his, at our expense and bidding he will become hands down the richest man on the Coast.”

“Oh come now, Toppie, surely you’re over-reacting,” said Sunderland.

“Two years ago we supported Sutro’s project out of desperation,” said Ralston. “Something had to be done about the flooding. Only now, thanks to my Union Ironworks, the Comstock Lode has been provisioned with pumps of sufficient magnitude to eradicate the problem on a permanent basis. If water is no longer an issue, why should we continue to condone his intrusion upon our monopoly?”

“Toppie’s right,” said Sharon, lining up his second shot and then firing the cue ball at the solid four. The ball ricochetted off the bumper, racing across the table for a clean middle pocket drop from the felt. “Even without the water issue, mine owners will be obliged to remove their ore and waste rock through his tunnel, for no better reason than a reduction in their operating cost. A four shaft mine can eliminate three shaft engineers at the very least, since ore will no longer be required to exit through a given hoisting works. Not only will Sutro line his pockets with massive profits from his levy, but the land congress appropriated him around his tunnel entrance, this Sutro City, as he calls it, this place will very quickly turn Virginia City into a ghost town, just as his pamphlet proclaimed. Every stamp mill, smithy shop and small business in town will relocate to Sutro City, each of them paying an exorbitant rent to Adolph Sutro and his very crafty stab at wresting our control.”

“Could we not dig a tunnel of our own?” said Hayward.

“Could we not eliminate his threat by adding a railroad line between Carson City and the Comstock?” said Mills.

Ralston and the others paused to consider Mills’ suggestion, his face slowly lightening into a broad and beamy smile. “That’s brilliant!” he managed.

“How will we pay for it?” said Sunderland.

“The taxpayers will pay for it,” said Sharon. “The state of Nevada will pay for it.”

“Can you manage that?” said Mills.

“Of course I can manage that,” said Sharon, feeling suddenly irritated by Mills’ skepticism.

Mills walked up to Sharon and laid his right hand upon the smaller man’s shoulder, puffing his cigar as he looked intently into Sharon’s eyes. “I apologize,” he said. “At first I must admit that I lacked confidence in your abilities as a businessman,” he said. “I was wrong, Bill. Now that I have seen you work your magic in Virginia City, I have only the highest regard for your visionary skill.”

“Then it’s decided,” said Ralston. “The bank shall change its position in regards to Adolph Sutro.”

“How will we block his progress in Washington?” said Sunderland.

“We’ll send our best men to lobby against him,” said Sharon. “We must impress upon Senators Stewart and Nye that in no way can Sutro’s Tunnel receive federal funding.”

“Without Comstock silver, Nevada is nothing but a dry patch of desert gulch,” said Hayward. “Surely the good senators will be quick to understand how integrally their political fortunes are tied to our personal needs and desires.”

“Sutro is a menace to our power, Gentlemen,” said Ralston, “and for that reason alone, he and his lofty intentions must be thoroughly crushed beneath our feet.”

# Chapter Eleven

Friday, July 26, 1867

Sutro reread his telegraph as his cabbie drove the hot summer streets of New York’s financial district.

Form No. 168

The Western Union Telegraph Company

-----Incorporated-----

23,000 Offices in America Cable Service To All The World

**Received** at:

176 45th Street - Paid

New York, NY - July 16

It is with deep regret that I must step down as president of the Sutro Tunnel Company, effective immediately.

Sen. William M. Stewart

When the single horse Hansom stopped before the Leese & Waller Bank Building, Sutro climbed down from the carriage and removed a fifty cent coin from his pocket, handing it up to the hack with a smile. “They’re calling for a hot one today,” said the hack, accepting the coin with an ever-so-slight bow.

Sutro entered the bank lobby and saw the usual assortment of clerks and customers. His eyes went immediately to the back of the cavernous room, to the vaults and the glass-enclosed offices along the left wall. Harold Leese was at his desk—head down and focused on work—and in response Sutro felt a buoyancy cut through the numbing haze of his anxiety. As he walked deeper into the lobby, he saw Martin Stephens glance up from his desk, noting the man’s immediate change of expression when he recognized the newcomer. A physical flinch, Sutro assessed; a sudden coloring in the man’s cheeks.

Stephens stood up from his desk and fastidiously pulled at the tails of his suit coat. When Stephens glanced nervously back at Waller’s office, Sutro knew in an instant that his worst suspicions were about to be realized.

*Something has shifted.*

*A negative edict has been issued, only by whom and for what earthly reason?*

*Ralston and Sharon? Not a chance, for they have given you their strongest endorsement.*

*Thaddeus Stevens? No way, the man has been solidly in your camp.*

“Mister Sutro,” said Stephens, approaching him quickly with a nervously extended hand. “We thought you’d left town yesterday.”

“It’s important that I speak with Mister Leese.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible without an appointment,” said Stephens. “He’s a frightfully busy man.”

“Something’s happened to my tunnel project and I must know the truth!”

“I’m sorry, Sir, but you’ll have to leave now.”

“Yesterday Mister Leese and Mister Waller said that they would draw up the necessary documents in order to execute my loan,” said Sutro.

“I have instructions to send you a telegraph,” said Stephens. “I’m sorry, Sir, but the bank has reversed its decision on the matter of funding the Sutro Tunnel Company.”

Sutro felt the flush rise in his cheeks. “That’s impossible!” he said, skirting Stephens and walking with determined steps towards Leese’s office.

“Mister Sutro!” said Stephens, scurrying to catch up with his errant customer. “This is entirely out of line!”

“I will speak with Mister Leese!” Sutro’s voice boomed off the lobby ceiling, halting conversation and interactions within the enormous vaulted chamber. As Sutro continued across the lobby, Harold Leese glanced up and looked directly into Sutro’s eyes. Stephens was now tugging on Sutro’s coat sleeve, only Sutro pulled himself free from the smaller man’s grasp, continuing his way toward Leese’s office.

Leese stood up from his desk and walked across his office, opening the door just as Sutro reached it. “I’m terribly sorry, Sir,” said Stephens. “He just barged right in!”

“I must speak with you,” Sutro addressed the banker. “I must know why my loan has been overturned.”

Leese stood to one side of the door and gestured for Sutro to enter his office. He looked at his clerk and made a calming gesture with his right arm—it’s okay, Martin, I’ll handle it from here. “Please have a seat, Mister Sutro,” he said, closing the door after Sutro had entered the room.

Sutro sat down on one of the chairs set before Leese’s massive desk, while the banker returned to his seat on the opposite side. “I’m afraid, Mister Sutro, that circumstances have forced us to reconsider our participation in your tunnel project.”

“This morning I received a telegraph from Senator Stewart,” said Sutro, “indicating that he was abdicating his position as president of the Sutro Tunnel Company. Obviously something has shifted, some pressure applied to encourage his resignation and your retraction of a loan.”

Harold Leese lifted a telegraph copy from his leather desk blotter, floating it across the desk until he landed in front of Sutro. “I’m fairly certain I shouldn’t be showing you this,” he said. “On the other hand you’re an inspiring man, Mister Sutro, something I admire quite immensely despite these rather sordid turn of events.”

Sutro picked up the telegraph copy and hungrily read the contents.

Form No. 168

The Western Union Telegraph Company

-----Incorporated-----

23,000 Offices in America Cable Service To All The World

**Received** at:

116 Broadway - Paid

New York, NY - July 16

William Ralston and William Sharon, Officers on behalf of the Bank Of California, hereby inform all parties of interest that the BOC no longer garners support for Adolph Sutro and his tunnel project. Sutro’s tunnel is deemed superfluous and unwarranted, and the bank feels strongly that Mr. Sutro’s project should be banished financially.

William Ralston, Cashier

“This is completely unfair,” Sutro managed.

“It is indeed,” said Leese.

“Ralston intends to dig my tunnel on his own, doesn’t he?”

“Such a thing would strengthen his monopoly on the Comstock Lode.”

“I intend to fight this injustice tooth and nail,” said Sutro.

“Then be prepared to fight an octopus,” said Leese. “A very cunning and manipulative one at that. This morning I was made aware that the Orient Bank in London, our investment partner in your tunnel deal, was also handed the same telegraph. Copies were also delivered to Vanderbilt, Morgan and Belmont, in fact every major capitalists who even for a moment looked favorably upon your project. I have no direct knowledge of this, but I’d wager that a quite different sort of telegraph has been received by Senators Nye and Stewart in Washington, encouraging them to vote down federal appropriations for your tunnel. You see, Mister Sutro, a man like Ralston, he’s a machine of the most powerful order. I’ve met him personally, as have you, so we both know how charming and self-effacing he can be. Nonetheless he’s a machine, Sir, a man who gets his way without question or contest. He subsidizes newspapers to insure that point. He buys off politicians and labor bosses, anything to maintain his power over the Comstock Lode. For without Nevada silver, Mister Sutro, his business interests in San Francisco would wither and die like a crop without water. You, Sir, represent a threat to everything he has worked for.”

“And yet knowing all this you have decided to side with him,” said Sutro, “to deny my loan out of what, fear of Billy Ralston?”

“Business is a game, Mister Sutro, pure and simple, and sometimes as dumb as a cage full of monkeys,” said Leese. “As such, a certain amount of herd mentality is necessary for each monkey’s solitary survival. And when a leading monkey like Ralston decides to force complicity on a matter, the rest of us lesser primates must comply without question or face vast enmity somewhere down the line. It’s survival, Mister Sutro. It’s exactly how the game of business is played by those of us who wish to stay in the game.”

When the train came to a stop at Washington D.C.’s Union Station, Sutro stood up from his seat and retrieved his suitcase from the overhead luggage rack. He placed his bowler hat on his head and folded his overcoat neatly over his left arm, exiting the Pullman car with his suitcase clutched in his right hand. On the platform he followed the flow of disembarking passengers toward the main lobby, crossing the massive room until he had reached the doors leading out onto Columbus Circle. A lineup of horse-drawn hacks waited to one side of the station entrance, and Sutro walked up to the rear of a short queue of passengers waiting in line. When his turn arrived, he let a colored porter place his suitcase in the Jockey Box, while Sutro climbed into the four-man cabriolet with a tip of his hat to the driver. “First Street entrance to the Capitol,” he said to the man.

When the porter closed the carriage door behind him, Sutro tipped the man with a two bit silver coin before leaning back on his seat. “Much obliged,” said the negro. “In case you haven’t heard, Sir, congress has adjourned.”

Sutro leaned forward on his seat in response, studying the man’s face for any signs of humor or a poorly-turned joke. “What did you say?”

“Thirty-ninth congress adjourned yesterday,” said the porter.

“That’s impossible,” said Sutro. “They’re not scheduled to adjourn for another three weeks!”

“Seems they had a tussle with President Johnson,” said the hack from atop his perch. “The Radical Republicans are calling for his impeachment.”

“Adjourned,” Sutro managed. He leaned back in his seat again, appearing confused by the news.

“You still want to go to the Capitol?” asked the hack.

Sutro snapped back to the moment, blinking his eyes as he steadied his resolve. His hopes and dreams—his very world—had gone from the soaring heights of impending victory to the implosive abyss of abject failure, all within two day’s time, he considered. The senate’s premature adjournment was just one more obstacle he would have to contend with; one more delay in what had clearly been a monumental task from the very beginning.

“Yes,” he stammered. “By all means, the Capitol.”

Sutro leaned back again as the carriage began to move. The heat was beginning to dissipate in the late afternoon sun, yet he still fanned himself with what remained of his sodden *New York Times,* picturing himself floating for a moment in a river of cool springtime snow melt. As his carriage moved west along Columbus Circle, he steadied his mind by focusing on the passing sights of the nation’s capital. Off in the distance he spotted the half-completed stump of the Washington Monument, still the city’s number one eyesore since construction was halted back in 1858. Heading southwest on Louisiana Avenue, he noted well-dressed men walking leisurely in tandem—lobbyists and political brokers, he imagined. Beneath a thicket of dense trees along Louisiana Avenue, he saw women in the flowing fashions of the day, breezing themselves with ornately-painted hand fans. Some of the women walked in groups, while others walked solo beside handsome men done out in finely-tailored suits, replete with walking canes and stove top hats.

The hack made another left onto First Street, heading due south until the Capitol came into view on Sutro’s left side. The last time he had seen the building, the dome was still wrapped in scaffolding, while craftsmen completed the final touches for the building’s new and enlarged centerpiece. The enlargement had been approved by congress after the additions to the East and West Wings of the Capitol had made the original dome appear inappropriately small. Sutro admired the soaring elegance of the new dome; like an enormous wedding cake, he considered, topped off by the colossal bronze Goddess of Freedom that had been cast by a freed slave artisan by the name of Phillip Reid.

At Peace Circle and Pennsylvania Avenue, the hack stopped the carriage in front of the tree-lined footpath that led up to the Capitol Building. Sutro helped himself out of the cabriolet, while the hack climbed down from his perch and removed Sutro’s suitcase from the Jockey Box. Sutro handed the man a one dollar bill and pointed to the suitcase. “An extra fifty cents for your efforts if you will deliver my case to the Williard Hotel.”

“Certainly, Sir, I know it well,” said the hack, accepting the note and then returning the suitcase to the Jockey Box. “Shall I give them a time for your arrival?”

“Around dinnertime, I should think.”

Sutro walked east on the diagonal extension of Pennsylvania Avenue, which led to the terraced steps of the Capitol Building. He walked up the steps slowly so as not to over-perspire, entering the coolness of the rotunda and admiring it’s stunning grandeur for the first time since the construction project had closed this part of the Capitol. He looked up to the fresco painted on the oculus of the rotunda; the *Apotheosis of Washington*, painted by the Italian master Constantino Brumidi, depicting George Washington exalted amongst the heavens. Sutro had read an article in the *Territorial Enterprise* about the artist and his ongoing commission to adorn the rotunda with his art. The *Apotheosis of Washington* was an enormous achievement for any painter, yet Brumidi had further plans to create a Frieze of American History; nineteen paintings depicting four hundred years of American history, that would grace the walls of the Rotunda, just beneath the ledge of thirty-six windows that spilled light into the enormous dome.

Looking back down to eye level, Sutro took in the paintings that had hung in the original dome room. Artist John Trumbull’s depiction of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the surrender of General Burgoyne, the surrender of Lord Cornwallis. Vanderlyn’s *Landing of Columbus*, Powell’s *Discovery of the Mississippi*, Chapman’s *Baptism of Pocahontas*. Together these great works of art stirred in Sutro a sense of patriotism for his adopted homeland, a sense of unity and common resolve with the founders of this most unique experiment in democratic government.

Sutro took the North Wing stairs to the third floor, walking past the Senate Gallery to the corridor that led to the Senate Offices. Entering the reception room for Senator Thayer’s office, Sutro was greeted by an attractive young woman who sat behind the reception desk. “May I help you?” she said, standing up with a smile.

“I’m here to see the senator,” said Sutro, stepping forward to hand the woman his business card.

“Is he expecting you?”

“No Ma’am, he’s not,” said Sutro.

The young woman knocked on the closed door to the senator’s office, entering without a response from within. When she had entered the office and closed the door behind her, Sutro listened to the unintelligible mumble of conversation coming from the office. The woman returned with a polite smile on her face, and after she had closed the office door she crossed back to her desk and handed back Sutro’s business card. “I’m afraid the senator is busy just now,” she said. “He has an engagement on his calendar which does not permit him the time to meet with you.”

After receiving similar responses from Senators Conness, McDougal and Foster, Sutro crossed over to the South Wing with no greater success amongst his advocates in the House.

“I’m afraid Representative McRuer is indisposed at the present.”

“Congressmen Buckland sees constituents and lobbyist by appointment only.”

“House Member Laflin has no time to meet with you, Mister Sutro. Perhaps you could try back at another time by appointment.”

“Congressman Stevens would be happy to meet with you, Mister Sutro. He asks for five minutes of your patience while he finishes up a bit of correspondence.”

Sutro was momentarily taken aback when Steven’s male secretary handed back his business card with a positive response. “Why yes of course,” he said, pocketing his card with only a slight hesitation in his motion.

Ten minutes later, Thaddeus Stevens opened his office door and gave Sutro a welcoming smile. “My friend,” said the aging yet still commanding figure of a man. Sutro had heard rumors that the great orator’s health was going fast, yet Sutro failed to notice any signs of infirmity in the man’s austere presence. The seventy-five year old legend of American politics still sported a full head of hair—a thick black shock of hair, Sutro always noted. Stevens’ eyes radiated focus and power, his angular chin and pursed-lipped smile befitting the likes of a Greek god or at the very least, a Roman warrior of epic definition. “Thank you for seeing me on such short notice,” said Sutro, accepting the congressman’s firm handshake.

“You’re welcome in my office any time you’re in town,” said Stevens. “Come in and make yourself comfortable.”

Sutro followed Stevens back into the congressman’s office, taking a seat in one of his red leather chairs set before the desk. “I take it you’re here because of Ralston’s telegraph,” said Stevens, easing himself into his office chair with a slow wince of pain.

“Congressman?” said Sutro, showing concern for the man’s obvious discomfort.

Stevens settled into his seat and waved away Sutro’s concern. “There’s very little that’s good about growing old,” he said. “On the other hand, there’s very little good about not growing old.”

“The papers say you’re suffering from a life-threatening illness.”

“The papers say I’m single-handedly trying to bring down the President,” said Stevens. “The illness part is an attempt to throw them off my radical agenda.”

“I’d heard that part as well,” said Sutro.

Stevens focused his hawk-like gaze on Sutro and offered up a wry smile. “You know, Adolph, I do believe that’s why I like you so. Like me, you keep at your work despite the mounting acrimony of, well, very nearly everyone around you.”

“It’s to be expected,” said Sutro. “When a man attempts something monumental and untried, he must anticipate no small army of naysayers, libelers and detractors. Tell me, Thaddeus, why has congress adjourned earlier than planned?”

“Primarily in protest to the actions or inactions of our buffoon of a President,” said Stevens. “He threatens to fire Edwin Stanton from his role as Secretary of War. He drags his feet on all reconstruction mandates placed upon the South, particularly when it comes to extending African Americans their rights as American citizens. He vetoed the Third Reconstruction Act. We signed it despite his veto and then adjourned for the year with our collective middle fingers held high in the air.”

“For the year?” said Sutro. “Congress has adjourned...”

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Stevens, looking sympathetically upon Sutro’s sudden deflation in posture. “You were hoping your appeal for a loan would be heard by the House, and now you must wait an interminably long period of time.”

Sutro looked back up again and nodded his head slowly. “I fear that Ralston’s letter will stymy my chances with both the House and Senate.”

“It may,” said Stevens. “On the other hand, your worst enemy at presence is the distraction of a possible Presidential impeachment, an event which has never even remotely appeared on the American political landscape before.”

“Ralston and his Bank of California have powerful clout on the West Coast,” said Sutro. “No doubt his telegraph denouncing my project will turn Senators Nye and Stewart against me.”

“I should expect nothing less,” said Stevens. “Only keep in mind that two lone senators do not make up a majority. When the fortieth congress convenes in January, I promise I will whip up enough support in the House to see your project reach full funding. You see, Adolph, I have granted far more political favors than I have asked for in return for a good many years, which means I have enough of a surplus to make your project flow through both the House and the Senate, Nye and Stewart be damned.”

“That’s most generous of you, Thaddeus. Should you achieve such a feat, no words could thank you enough for your efforts.”

“Nonsense,” said Stevens, waving away the point. “We Americans face a new reality, a new vision for our future than the one we harbored before the war. Bold undertakings such as your tunnel project must be nurtured by the federal government. It’s the only way we can assure our ascendancy as an economic superpower.”

“Now I see why they call you the Great Orator,” said Sutro.

Stevens laughed in reply, leaning back in his chair until he could set it to a gentle back and forth rocking motion. “Will you stay in Washington until congress reconvenes?”

“I think not,” said Sutro.

“Back to Virginia City?” said Stevens.

“Back to New York,” said Sutro. “The British and North American Packet Company has a ship sailing for London in two days time. I intend to meet with every great mining engineer alive today on the European continent.”

“To what purpose?” said Stevens.

“For the purpose of arming myself with as much industry knowledge as I can cram into this fool head of mine,” said Sutro. “And when my turn comes to plead my case before congress, Thaddeus, suffice it to say that no man alive will stand the chance to rightfully argue me down.”

**Part Two**

# Chapter Twelve

Tuesday, February 2, 1869

“I find it ironic,” said Henry Yerington. “All these teamsters, working like the dickens towards their own extinction.”

“How’s that, Mister Yerington?” said Sharon, standing beside Ralston and their project manager in the rising light of a crisp Nevada morning. The three men had tied their mounts to a hitching post, and now stood gazing out over a virtual army of Chinese laborers, mule wagons and teamster drivers.

“Once this railroad is built,” said Yerington, “there will be little use for mule trains anywhere on the Comstock Lode.”

“The same can be said for the Chinese,” said Ralston.

“I’m amazed at how little they want,” said Sharon. “Would we have made the same decisions about a rail line into the Comstock Lode if we had to pay them a white man’s wage?”

“A man rarely asks for more than he expects,” said Ralston.

“If what you say is true,” said Yerington, “then the two of you must have expectations well beyond the average man. What drives you to stay in the game now that your table overflows with such an enormous bounty?”

“More,” said Sharon.

“San Francisco,” said Ralston.

Yerington unrolled his project schematics on a roughly-crafted surveyor’s table, securing the corners onto the wooden tabletop with the assistance of pushpins. “At present we have seven hundred and fifty Chinese working in thirty-eight encampments,” said Yerington. “As more get laid off by the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific, the increased labor pool should help drive down our per capita wage cost. Right now these men earn fifty cents a day. Add another thousand Chinese looking for work, my guess is they’ll jump at the chance at thirty cents a day.”

For Ralston’s benefit, Sharon pointed to the location of Carson City on Yerington’s schematic. “Carson City to the Lode is a distance of twenty-one miles,” he said. “Laying track in the valley will be easygoing until we reach Mount Davidson.”

“We’ll need to blast out six tunnels for a total through-rock distance of twenty-four hundred feet,” said Yerington. “Mount Davidson presents an impossibly steep ascent, which will require an equally impossible number of switchbacks. The best a fully loaded engine can manage is a three percent grade, which means we’ll need a total of six thousand degrees of turns to make the ascent a reality. Almost seventeen complete circles in the last thirteen miles of track.”

Sharon pointed to the side view drawing of a massive wooden railway trestle. “We’re calling this the Crown Point Bridge,” he said. “One hundred feet long, eighty-five feet high, straight across the top of Gold Canyon.”

“Is such a thing possible?” said Ralston.

“Every bit of this project will push the boundaries of existing know-how,” said Yerington. “But when she’s done, Gentlemen, we will have birthed the greatest feat in railway engineering the world has ever known.”

“And with its advent,” said Sharon, “we will crush the life out of Adolph Sutro and the encroachment of his tunnel.”

“The first two locomotives are under construction in my San Francisco ironworks,” said Ralston. “I’ve ordered thirty-three miles of track from the Reece and Hungerford Foundry in Southampton England, to be floated across the pond in three separate ships.”

“Why so much extra rail?” asked Yerington.

“In case one of the ships goes down at sea,” said Ralston. “By hell or high water, this railroad must be operational by the end of April.”

The color flushed from Yerington’s face as he registered the timeline. “Sixty days?” he said. “Why that’s impossible.”

“Nothing’s impossible,” said Ralston. “You must simply put your mind to it.”

“In that case we’ll need twice the labor force by yesterday,” said Yerington.

“Then get to it,” said Sharon. “Every last coolie you can hire.”

When Yerington unhitched his mount and rode off, Ralston clasped Sharon by the shoulder and jostled the man playfully. “I must say, William, your performance up here has been nothing short of extraordinary. Only tell me something. Your telegraph indicated that the Virginia and Truckee Railroad will have zero impact upon the bank’s ledgers. How have you managed such a wonder of accounting?”

“On behalf of the bank, I employed a dozen professional solicitors to gather voter signatures in favor of the train. Citizens were told that the Virginia and Truckee Railroad would reduce the price of goods by two thirds compared to the current drayage fees charged by the teamsters. They were told that their property values would increase, as is the general rule when a community is sufficiently linked by rail to the outside world. Lastly, they were told that the railroad would annually contribute over a million dollars in tax revenue to help fund future infrastructure developments throughout Storey and Ormsby Counties.”

“Are all these points true?” said Ralston.

“In theory,” said Sharon. “How things work out in practice one can only speculate. I then went to both counties and convinced their aldermen to put up nearly six hundred thousand dollars in bond money, all of it a gift to the railroad in exchange for future tax revenues and the ability to drive down the cost of goods. I then went to each mine owner who had subscribed to Sutro’s tunnel project, encouraging them to change their allegiance to the railroad in exchange for the promise of uninterrupted loans by the Bank of California. Since the bank has a majority stake in most of the subscribing mines, once the true costs settle out we’ll vote that the shareholders absorb any remaining construction costs by subtracting the amounts from future dividend payments.”

“One point three million dollars and not a single dime in payback.”

“Precisely,” said Sharon, offering his partner only the slightest hint of a smile. “Even better, my calculations indicate that the bank will profit a million dollars per annum by the successful operation of the railroad.”

“Well done, William,” said Ralston.

“There is one final economy I haven’t mentioned,” said Sharon. “For years now, because of the high drayage fees charged by the teamsters, each of our mines has abandoned low grade ore as waste rock, simply because the transportation costs have been prohibitively high. Once the railroad is in place, it now becomes financially viable to process this ore with a substantial add-on contribution to our bottom line.”

“Yerington’s right,” said Ralston, looking out over the massive build. “Our timeline is aggressive as all hell.”

“The fortieth congress has just convened in Washington,” said Sharon. “They’re faced with an overload of serious issues, including the possible impeachment of Andrew Johnson. The weightiness of these matters insures that the question of a federal loan for Sutro’s Tunnel will at best reach the floor of the House as adjournment draws near, most likely initiated by Thaddeus Stevens or Representative Buckland from Ohio. We can’t let that happen. Our railroad must be operational by the end of April, so that any last ditch justification for Sutro’s tunnel can be thoroughly negated.”

“We can’t lose another piece of our control the way we lost it on the *Kentuck*,” said Ralston.

Sharon thought about the enormous embarrassment caused by his own failure to see what Mackay and Walker had been up to—the silent takeover of *Kentuck* shares—all because Sharon had deemed the *Kentuck* extinct after their own heady run in the property back in Sixty-seven. “Three and a half million in profits that should rightfully have been ours,” he said.

“That they should,” said Ralston.

“We’ve since bought out Walker’s shares for six hundred thousand,” said Sharon, “but the rest is in Mackay’s purse. Seed money for his attempts at the *Bullion Mine*.”

“The *Bullion’s* dead,” said Ralston. “My guess is he’ll squander his winnings and be back in one of our hoisting works by the end of the year.”

Sharon leaned against the bar at the Washoe Millionaire’s Club, realizing that he had reached his limit in terms of alcohol. He would have to wean off for awhile, he cautioned himself. Sharon always felt deflated whenever he had to share the stage with the likes of Billy Ralston. He looked over at his business partner, seated amidst a sea of convivial men, for to be in Ralston’s company was to be filled with a blind sense of manly optimism. Ralston exuded raw power and confidence, while Sharon exuded cold fish analysis and a stiff business-like demeanor. Ralston possessed an intangible magnetism, a seduction of team-spiritedness that caused ordinary men to seek out his company like a drink or a hungry man to a meal.

Sharon snapped out of his rumination when he heard Ralston mention his name amidst the sea of drinkers. “If you’re looking for a poker player,” said Ralston, “then William Sharon’s the best I know.”

Sharon smiled at Ralston, walking towards the group until he could take an available seat at one of the three tables the men had grouped together for their leisure. “What’s this about poker?” he asked.

“We’re planning a game,” said George Hearst. “Will you be joining us, William?”

“My most favorite pastime,” said Sharon. “Where and when?”

“One of my parlor houses,” said John Piper. “Now, I should think.”

Sharon glanced at Ralston, and said, “You okay with this?”

“I’m a happily married man,” said Ralston. “Why should I visit a whorehouse when I have a woman like Lizzy back home?”

“For the poker, you old fart,” said Piper. “The girls are just for amusement. Come on, Toppie, you’re in on your own accord or we’ll forcibly drag you there against your will.”

Ralston gave a good-natured laugh, pushing back in his chair as he looked across the table at Piper. “Will you now, John?”

“The whole lot of us, then,” said Hearst.

“In that case, consider me in,” said Ralston.

“That-a-boy,” said Police Chief Strauss. “Finally, a chance to get our hands on some of that cloistered San Francisco money.”

As the group walked towards Piper’s Alley, Sharon marveled at the carnival atmosphere of Virginia City at night. Hawkers manned every available street corner, selling tonics and modern gadgets of undetermined utility. An organ grinder and his monkey worked the sidewalk between Taylor and Union Streets. Across the roadway, an itinerant preacher stood on a peach box, assailing a bible in his right hand as he informed the sinners of Virginia City regarding their future lives in an unforgiving hell. Sharon looked farther north up C Street, and saw more men selling all manner of nostrums, street shows, beggars, singers, peddlers and quack doctors of every stripe and persuasion. Spring, thought Sharon, was clearly in the offing.

Approaching the turn for Piper’s Alley, young Richard José stood upon his well worn soapbox, singing an aria from Verdi’s *Stiffelio*—perhaps the most stunning rendition Sharon had ever heard before. José had been performing on C Street for as long as Sharon could remember, singing for tips in an effort to help his widowed mother make ends meet. Despite his prepubescent youth, José’s voice had become an instrument of such complexity and strength that Sharon was convinced the boy was destined to become the next great virtuoso of the American stage. The men stopped in front of José’s soapbox to admire the boy’s voice, marveling at his depth and understanding of such a highly involved piece. Only when José had finished did the crowd that had formed around him begin to applaud with open appreciation.

“For the love of god, Piper,” said Sharon, removing a five dollar bill from his wallet and dropping it into José’s tip jar. “Don’t you have enough pull in the show business world to give this kid a break?”

Piper led the way into the main parlor room of Jewel Stapleton’s *Pink Garter*, just as Stapleton tamped out her cigar in an ashtray near the back hall. “Well if it isn’t my favorite customer,” said the madam.

Sharon entered the main parlor room behind Piper, instantly bombarded by the smell of cheap perfumes in random conflict. Like the perfume, he breathed in the sight of so many beautiful, voluptuous women, each one vying for his attention. He felt his heart race with anticipation, for it was places like the *Pink Garter* that pumped fire into his veins and chased away all the mundane aspects of his otherwise regimented, partnerless life.

*My lust* *is your fault, Maria, for refusing to share my life where I’m required to make a living.*

“We’re here for a game of cards,” Piper addressed the madam. Jewel stood before Piper and Sharon, while Ralston and the others slowly filed into the room. She propped her hands upon her hips, letting her lips form into an impish little pout. “You boys can’t spare some company from my girls?”

Sharon looked at her and saw a spirited, attractive woman who had once, he imaged, been quite the young beauty. He guessed her age as nearing forty, which meant her heyday as a working girl had already come and gone. “Nothing wrong with a little company, I suppose,” said Piper.

Jewel led the men deeper into the parlor house, past working girls and customers, as they engaged each other in muted conversations and varying degrees of flirtatious interaction. Passing into the billiards room, Sharon saw that Dan DeQuille was engaged in deep conversation with a stunning young beauty who barely looked over the age of sixteen. “Mister DeQuille,” he addressed the man out of politeness, despite the fact that DeQuille and his employer, Joe Goodman, rarely wrote anything nice about Sharon or the Bank of California.

DeQuille leaned up on the sofa when he registered the group of men. “Mister Sharon,” he said, a tinge of slurred drunkenness in his speech. “And Mister Ralston, why I do declare… What an honor and a privilege to have such conniving hoodwinkers, right here in our midsts.”

“Watch yourself, DeQuille,” said Strauss.

“Why, you gonna throw me in jail, Mister Chief of Police?” DeQuille leaned back on the sofa and pulled the young woman closer to his side. “Perhaps that might not look so good when I write about your presence as a customer right here in the *Pink Garter*, say in tomorrow’s rendition of the *Territorial Enterprise*.”

“Why so much animosity, Mister DeQuille?” said Sharon.

“Animosity,” said DeQuille. “My goodness but that’s a big word…”

“Keep this up, DeQuille,” said Piper, “I’ll have you permanently removed from this establishment.”

“Permanently?” said DeQuille. “Aren’t you running for mayor, Mister Piper? I wonder what the voters might think if they learned about your financial involvement in an enterprise such as the *Pink Garter*…”

“What did you mean by hoodwinkers?” said Ralston.

“Well now let me see. Hoodwink. I believe Webster’s defines hoodwinked as follows,” said DeQuille. “To deceive or to trick. To dupe, outwit, fool, delude, cheat, hoax, mislead, defraud, swindle or to double-cross. Is that not what you did when you hoodwinked the taxpayers of Storey County into funding the construction of your little choo choo train?”

Ralston leaned down and grabbed DeQuille by the lapels of his duster, lifting him cleanly off the sofa while toppling the young prostitute to the floor. “Who the hell do you think you are!”

“Why, Dan DeQuille the newspaperman, Mister Hoodwinker, you know that. And while you’re at it, you should know that the pen is mightier than all of your corruptions combined, for I alone have the power to sway public opinion either toward a man’s favor or against it.”

The *Pink Garter’s* professor entered the room, standing just inside the door. “Is there a problem, Mister Piper?” he offered quietly.

Before Piper or the professor could intervene, Ralston balled up his right fist and landed a crushing blow to the bridge of DeQuille’s nose. DeQuille cried out in pain as the blow landed, careening onto the floor when Ralston released him after the punishing shot.

DeQuille rolled on the ground for a moment, clutching his nose as blood spilled from between his fingers. He stood up and reached for his handkerchief, applying it to his nose as he glared angrily first at Ralston, then at Sharon. “Mark my words, Gentlemen,” he said. “You will both regret this moment for the rest of your hoodwinking lives.”

“Girlie men such as you have no place in the west,” said Ralston. “Go back east, DeQuille, where all you pansy men belong.”

“Get him out of here!” said Piper.

DeQuille yanked his arm free when the professor tried to escort him from the billiards room. “I’m perfectly capable of leaving a whorehouse on my own accord,” said DeQuille.

“Then do so,” said Piper. “From this point forward, the *Pink Garter* is off limits to the likes of you.”

When DeQuille had left the room, Jewel approached the men with a look of pure embarrassment. “I’m terribly sorry, Gentlemen,” she said.

“I think it’s best if we move along,” said Strauss. “As it stands right now, DeQuille has ample fodder for tomorrow’s paper. No need to give him more.”

“Perhaps we should return to the Washoe Millionaire’s Club for a nightcap,” said Piper, “a chance to cool off a bit before retiring.”

As the men filed out of the billiards room, Sharon looked back to see the young woman who had been cast to the ground slowly raise herself back up to the sofa. He returned to her side and offered his hand, which she accepted gingerly as she sat back down on the love seat. “Are you quite alright?” he said.

“I’m always quite alright,” said the woman. “Thank you kindly, Mister Sharon.”

“You know my name…”

“Everyone knows your name. After all, we working girls do talk from time to time.”

“Do you now? Is the skinny on me good or bad?”

“Oh it’s all good, Mister Sharon, quite good indeed.”

“Perhaps I should stay and chat for awhile.”

“Perhaps you should.”

Sharon held her hand for a moment longer, feeling his need and his hunger rise up in his chest, in his loins, in his throat. “Give me a moment, Miss?...”

“Carly,” said the girl. “Carly Coltrane.”

“Tell me, Carly,” said Sharon. “How old might you be?”

“Old enough, Mister Sharon.”

“Yes, aren’t you now?” said Sharon. “Old enough is exactly the age I’m looking for.”

# Chapter Thirteen

Saturday, February 20, 1869

The male half of the wedding party sat around a poker table in one of the grandest suites the International Hotel had to offer, each man shielding a fistful of cards as they puffed contentedly on cigars of great pungency and aroma. Mackay studied his hand for a moment longer, then lifted two fifty dollar chips from his betting pile and tossed them onto the stack. “I’ll see your fifty and raise you fifty more,” he said, giving a wink to James Fair, who sat across the table looking rigid and very un-poker-like. The man was a good sport to come to the table with so much ready coin, thought Mackay, only he lacked the necessary acting skills to bluff his way out of a bad hand.

“I’ll be folding,” said James Flood, closing up his hand and setting the cards face down on the table.

Fair tossed another fifty dollar chip on the ante pile and fanned his cards face up on the felt. “Three of a kind,” he said.

William O’Brien fanned his cards onto the table, so that everyone could see his two pairs of Queens and Jacks. “There’s an interesting thing that happens when four Irishmen set themselves to a poker match,” he said. “When the blarney goes silent, you can bet your last male child there’s a bluff going on.”

Mackay laid his cards down on the table, slowly fanning them out across the felt—a Straight Flush. “Damn it, O’Brien, you’ve just exposed my only strategy for beating the pants off you good-for-nothing barkeeps.”

“We’re letting you win because it’s your wedding day,” said Flood.

Mackay smiled at the jab, sweeping the ante pile his way before stacking his winnings onto his betting pile. “If I was a rich man this game would quickly lose its appeal,” he said. “The risk of losing everything in a single hand would no longer hold my attention.”

“I should think I could well manage the loss of cheap poker thrills in exchange for great wealth,” said O’Brien.

Flood began shuffling the deck of cards, giving his cigar a series of pursed-lipped stokes. “What exactly is too rich for poker?” he said. “Mackay, you’ve done yourself quite grand with the *Kentuck*. As for me and O’Brien, we’ve gone mutts nuts in the sport of stock speculation. That leaves James here as the only real poor man left at the table. Do you still like poker, James?”

“Leave it to your best mates to make a man feel worthless and small,” said Fair.

“Oh cheer up,” said Mackay, tossing a fifty dollar chip across the table as a joke. “It’s a good thing for a poor man to have wealthy friends.”

Flood did the same, followed by O’Brien, each man pelting Fair with a short burst of charity chips. “A little something for the less fortunate, I always say,” said O’Brien.

“So how much money would it take for a man to lose interest in gambling?” said Fair.

Flood started to deal out a fresh hand of cards. “I should think five million would do the trick.”

“Five million’s a bloody fortune!” said O’Brien.

“Exactly my point,” said Flood. “Enough to overcome the vagaries of a man’s bad investment decisions. Tell us, Mackay. If you could name one thing, what would you attribute to your success in the *Kentuck*?”

“I stayed silent about my hand,” said Mackay. “When people think you’re up to something, they raise their heads up like prairie dogs, everyone trying to figure out if they’re missing out on something big.”

“Which in your case they were,” said Flood.

“Best of all,” said O’Brien, “you seriously ruffled the petticoats of Ralston and his Bank Ring.”

“I quote straight from the *San Francisco Chronicle*,” said Flood. “Flatfooted and asleep at the helm.”

“Which gets me to thinking,” said O’Brien. “If the Bank Ring can be fooled once, by hook or by crook can we not fool them again?”

“I’ll take two,” said Fair, discarding his unwanted cards and then retrieving two fresh ones dealt by Flood. “What exactly do you boys have in mind?”

“We were thinking that the four of us should partner up,” said O’Brien. “We were thinking that the four of us can be just as stealth and crafty as Mackay was on his *Kentuck* deal.”

“I’ll take three,” said Mackay, stoking up his cigar as he considered the proposition. “What do two bar ownerrs know about silver mining?”

“Not a bloody damn thing,” said O’Brien. “That part’s for you and Fair to manage.”

“Our part is to buy up majority positions in undervalued properties,” said Flood, “all without the slightest bit of attention by the gambling-crazed public.”

“By pure luck we opened the Auction Lunch right next door to what would become the San Francisco Mining Exchange,” said O’Brien. “Over time we’ve managed to pick up stock tips that have made us quite a lot of money. What if we combine our winnings and strike out together? What if we quietly buy up the majority shares of a promising mine, all based on Mister Fair’s ability to read the next great strike?”

“An equal partnership,” said Mackay.

“Twenty-five percent to each of us,” said O’Brien. “No more no less for any given man, no matter what he brings to the table in the way of cash or knowledge or both.”

“If you were to pick a property, James,” said Flood, “which one presently comes to mind?”

Fair stoked his cigar for a moment, then threw a fifty dollar chip onto the ante pile. “Raise and call,” he said.

Mackay tossed in two fifty dollar chips, and said, “Back to you.”

O’Brien turned his hand upside down and folded.

“I’ll see your bet,” said Flood, “and then I’ll raise you one hundred more for the call.”

“Straight,” said Mackay, laying down his hand.

“Bloody hell but you’re the luckiest bung I know!” said Flood.

Fair smiled as he laid down his cards. “Four of a kind,” he said. “Sorry, Mackay. Wedding or not, I’ll be meaning to take your *Kentuck* winnings before your honeymoon has a chance to ripen.”

“We just gave you that money to gamble with,” Mackay said with mock indignation.

“So what’ll it be,” said O’Brien. “Have you a property if we’ve a mind for a partnership?”

“The *Consolidated Virginia and California*,” said Fair. “A close second would be the *Hale and Norcross*.”

“The *Con Virginia*,” said O’Brien. “What makes her so prime?”

“I’ve had my nose in every property on the Comstock Lode,” said Fair, “stayed close friends with every mining engineer of merit. No one refutes the fact that the Lode’s one big fissure vein, only so far no mine has found its heart.”

“And the *Con Virginia*?” said Flood. “Is that where we’ll find her heart?”

“I believe it to be the biggest bonanza the Lode will ever know,” said Fair.

Mackay looked at his groomsmen and saw himself in their reflection, each of them strapping men who shared a common heritage and a common sense of life as a grand adventure.

*In business you should partner with men of like desire.*

“How quietly can you two operate in San Francisco?” he said.

“Have you ever heard a Nun having sex before?” said O’Brien.

“Not yet,” said Mackay.

“Well then we’re much more quiet than that,” said Flood. “The trick is to buy up shares in small blocks, everything purchased slowly over time. Nothing so fast or too large that might set off a speculatory binge.”

Marie’s father, Colonel Hungerford, entered the suite with his usual bull-in-a-china-shop bluster. He wore his Army dress uniform and full regalia of medals, despite the fact that his last engagement was well over twenty years ago during the Mexican-American War. “Ee gads, Gents,” he said, stopping so abruptly that his sword jangled violently against his side. “We’ve a wedding to be had and not a one of you looks ready in the least!”

“Morning, Colonel,” said Mackay.

“Care to join us in a quick hand or two?” said Flood.

“The wedding’s not for another hour,” said Fair.

The Colonel relaxed a bit as he reached for his pocket watch, flipping open the lid and checking the time. “I suppose you’re right,” he said, grabbing a side chair while the other men made room for him at the poker table. “Perhaps a hand or two will steady up my nerves.”

“I thought I was supposed to be the nervous one,” said Mackay.

“And you’re not?” said the Colonel.

“In truth?” said Mackay. “If I was a baby right now, me dear old Mum would be changing me nappy for the ninth time since breakfast.”

“You’ll think about our proposal?” said Flood, looking coolly at Mackay from across the table.

“I will,” said Mackay, dealing out a fresh round of cards. “I promise to give it as much consideration as I’ve given to my impending marriage to Miss Hungerford.”

Mackay felt the butterflies pick up in his stomach the moment he understood that so much of the town had come out for his wedding to Marie Hungerford. Invitations to the actual wedding and reception had been limited to one hundred guests, only the streets leading from the International Hotel to St. Mary’s Church were packed with well-wishers and curiosity seekers alike.

“She’s a beauty,” a woman called out as the Groomsmen rode past in a stunning new Brougham-Landaulet carriage.

“Run, Mackay, run!” a drunk man called out as he staggered forth from the Red Garter Saloon. “There’s still time, Lad, run like the wind!”

“So many people,” Mackay said in amazement.

“You’re a well-loved man,” said Fair. “They’re happy for you, John. They wish you nothing but good tidings.”

“Not to mention the fact that you’re about to marry the prettiest woman on all the Comstock Lode,” said Hank Monk from atop his perch.

“I made her right well, that one,” said the Colonel, waving to the crowds as though he was Grand Marshall in a parade.

More townsfolk called out to Mackay as he rode past.

“Such a dashing couple!”

“Soon to be yours, Mackay, good for you!”

Mackay leaned back on the carriage seat and felt warmed by so much good-natured cheer. How often does a man experience so much love, he considered, so much affirmation that he belongs to a place—to his moment in time?

Monk steered the carriage onto Taylor Street, and as they made the turn, Mackay could see townsfolk lining both sides of the street, many rows deep, all the way down to the steps of the church. A cheer rose up from the crowd as the carriage came into view, loud enough to temporarily drown out the steady rumble of the surrounding silver mines and stamp mills. “On the other hand,” said Fair, “maybe these people are simply bored out of their minds.”

“Any excuse for a party,” said Flood.

“Just when I was beginning to feel good about myself,” said Mackay.

“It’s our role to keep you humble,” said O’Brien.

Monk brought the carriage to a stop in front of the church, just as Father Manague walked out from the Narthex to greet them. “Hurry now, Mackay,” said the clergyman. “By now your bride is on her way.”

Mackay climbed out of the carriage and shook the priest’s hand. Manague was a towering giant of a man, powerfully built in every way and possessed by a keen intellect. Manague had the physical bearing of a lumberjack, combined with the intellectual curiosity of a philosopher-poet, so how does a man like this choose the cloth as his livelihood? “You really should come box with us over at Bill Davis’ Gymnasium,” he said.

“Impossible,” said the Priest. “I have enough trouble boxing with the Lord. Come now, let’s get you to the altar before he figures out what’s about to happen.”

Mackay and his groomsmen followed Manague into the church, all of them suddenly enveloped by the sound of droning organ music—Handel’s *Organ Concerto Number 4*. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Mackay saw the faces of his many friends and colleagues, everyone smiling up at him as he walked toward the altar. He saw William Sharon on the far left side, and he wondered yet again how he had allowed Marie to convince him that the banker should be included among the wedding guests. Mackay nodded to the man when they made eye contact.

*Lion to lion, warrior to warrior.*

*Everything within my grasp,*

*I shall topple your kingdom.*

*Your crown shall shatter to pieces,*

*as I knock it from your thrown.*

Barely had Mackay and his groomsmen turned around at the altar to face the crowd than the organist ended Handel’s *Concerto* and struck up a staccato rendition of Wagner’s *Wedding March*. The congregation stood up in response, everyone turning to face the entrance at the back of the church. Mackay looked to the Narthex, feeling his heart leap up into his throat at the sight of Marie Hungerford in a flowing white gown. Her left hand rested lightly upon her father’s upheld right forearm. Through her thin veil, Mackay could make out her gorgeous smile, her perfect skin, her breathtaking blue eyes, radiating a warmth and a hopefulness that instantly filled him with a sense of continuity and promise.

*You were a fool, Dr. Bryant, to give up such a thing as lovely as this.*

When the Colonel had escorted Marie to the front of the chapel, the organ went silent after a long held final note. The church remained deathly still for a moment, until Father Manague took a full step forward, and said, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

“I do,” said the Colonel. “Her loving father and friend.”

The Colonel escorted Marie up the stairs to the altar, positioning her opposite Mackay with Father Manague standing between them. The Colonel raised Marie’s veil and draped it down the back of her head, kissing her on the forehead before retreating into the congregation and his assigned seat along the front row.

“Dearly beloved,” Father Manague began, “we are gathered here today in the presence of god, to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony, commended to be honorable among us all and therefore not to be entered into lightly, but reverently, passionately, lovingly and with absolute solemnity. To this end these two people present themselves now to be joined in holy matrimony. If any person can show just cause why these two should not be joined together, then let them speak now or forever hold their peace.”

The chapel remained silent, save for the outside rumble of Virginia City.

“Marie, I beseech thee to repeat after me,” said Manague. “I, Marie...”

“I, Marie...”

Mackay heard her voice as he stared into her eyes. It was lilting yet confident, filled with a warmth and a sincerity that staggered him by its wholesomeness and purity.

“Take you, John Mackay, to be my lawfully wedded husband,” said Manague.

“Take you, John Mackay, to be my lawfully wedded husband,” said Marie.

“I promise to be true to you in good times and bad...”

“I promise to be true to you in good times and bad...”

“...in sickness and in health.”

“...in sickness and in health.”

“And will you, Marie, love and honor this man for all the remaining days of your life?”

“I will,” said Marie.

Father Manague now looked to Mackay, and said. “Repeat after me. I, John Mackay, take Marie to be my lawfully wedded wife.”

“I, John Mackay, take Marie to be my lawfully wedded wife.”

“I promise to be true to her in good times and bad...”

“I promise to be true to her in good times and bad...”

“...in sickness and in health.”

“...in sickness and in health.”

“And do you, John, promise to love and honor this woman for all the days of your life?”

“I do,” said Mackay.

“Then by the power vested in me by our common faith in god,” said Manague, “I pronounce you man and wife, forever and for all eternity. And now you may kiss the bride.”

As Mackay leaned forward to embrace his wife, a small boy called out from his perch at one of the side windows of the church. “They’re hitched!” he yelled, and in response, the crowd surrounding the church erupted in a common wave of jubilation.

“We’re hitched,” Mackay whispered to his new bride.

“That we are,” said Marie, standing up on her tiptoes to kiss him deeply on the lips. “Until death do us part. Until my very last breath has been driven from my heart.”

Mackay stood next to Marie in the main ballroom of the International Hotel, pushing aside his feelings of dread that always accompanied him when he was forced into a dance. He was too clumsy for dancing—particularly group dancing—too hulking and heavy on his feet. “Next,” said the Dance Master, “we will perform the Caledonian Quadrille in five figures.”

“I’m incapable of dancing,” Mackay whispered to his wife.

“That’s nonsense,” she whispered back. “I’ve seen you box, John. I’ve seen you dance about the ring like a pixie sprite.”

“That’s an entirely different thing.”

“Just imagine you’re boxing,” said Marie, “only don’t hit anyone in the process.”

The orchestra struck up a rendition of *Le Pantalon*, prompting Mackay to clasp hands with Marie on his right, Kate Summerfield on his left. He looked across to the opposing line of twenty well-dressed dancers, everyone smiling yet rigidly formal. “Four times forward for a meet and greet,” instructed the Dance Master.

Mackay moved forward with the others, stepping to the beat of the music until both lines stood face-to-face a yard apart. He bowed his head to the woman across from him, wondering how this form of group madness had reached such a level of manic popularity both here and abroad.

“Four times forward and locked to your partner,” said the Dance Master.

Mackay locked arms with Marie and stepped forward again to the music. “You see,” said Marie. “You’re an absolute natural.”

“You won’t think so when I step on your toes.”

“Is that what you do in the boxing ring?” said Marie. “Trip up your opponents by stepping on their toes?”

“Couples step forward on the cross,” said the Dance Master.

“Maybe you should be my boxing coach,” said Mackay.

“Only your partner,” said Marie. “I want no other job than that.”

The opposing lines of dancers moved forward and back, the men bowing to each other when the lines were at their closest.

“Touch hands high and circle to your partner,” said the Dance Master, prompting both lines to pair off in twos as they circled the dance floor. Mackay raised his right hand and touched palms with Marie’s, following the music as they danced in a tight circle. Mackay looked at Marie and noted the flush in her cheeks, the happiness radiating from her entire countenance. “You really are enjoying this,” he said.

“Gentlemen steal a partner, if you please,” said the Dance Master.

“How often does a person get to experience complete happiness?” she said. “Life should be filled with more dancing and less worry.”

Mackay guided her toward the opposing line, releasing her hand as Lisa Carlton slipped up against his side. “Congratulations,” Lisa offered in welcome.

“Thank you for being apart of the celebration,” said Mackay.

“She’s a lucky woman,” said Lisa.

Mackay guided Lisa back to the center of the dance formation, releasing her hand as Marie stepped back into his.

“How was she?” said Marie.

“Not half as spectacular as you,” said Mackay, bowing in front of Marie as the orchestra stretched the final notes of the song.

“And now, Ladies and Gentlemen,” said the Dance Master. “Colonel Hungerford has requested the next dance with his daughter, the new Mrs. Marie Hungerford Mackay.”

Mackay joined his groomsmen at the punch bowl, collecting a fresh crystal of rum punch from the waiter stationed behind the table.

“Despite my underlying incredulity, yes, I bloody well think you’re right,” said Flood.

“What’s the discussion?” said Mackay.

“Mainly how a ruffian such as yourself lands the most beautiful woman in the state of Nevada,” said Fair.

“It’s bloody not fair!” said Flood.

Mackay smiled at the jabs, toasting his punch glass with the others. He looked back to the dance floor and watched his wife glide about the ballroom, swept about weightlessly in her father’s arms. “We share a kindred spirit, that one,” he said. “The beauty part is an unexpected bonus.”

“To a lasting partnership, then,” said O’Brien, raising his glass for another toast.

Mackay turned back to face his groomsmen. “And to our new partnership as well,” he said.

Fair raised an eyebrow in question. “Is that your decision?”

“I’ve been superintendent at the *Bullion* for as long as you’ve been pulling waste rock out of the *Savage*,” said Mackay. “Don’t you think it’s time we mixed it up? If the four of us join forces, our combined capital should be sufficient for a shot at the *Con Virginia*.”

“You’re willing to risk everything you’ve gained?” said Fair.

“The four of us came west with not a penny between us,” said Mackay. “That speaks volumes about the sort of men we are.”

“Go big or go bust,” said Flood.

“Go big or go bust,” said Mackay, raising his glass for one final toast. “To success, Gentlemen. To the *Con Virginia*. To finding what we came for.”

# Chapter Fourteen

Wednesday, March 10, 1869

Ralston felt the pain rise up in his chest again as Jeffries steered the carriage south along Kearny Street. The heaviness seemed more frequent these past few days—a burning sensation on his left side chest—a radiating numbness, downward into his left arm. The result of his overbearing string of bad luck, he thought to console himself, for his recent business travails had gone so far astray as to bedevil his otherwise ironclad sleep.

Ralston pounded his fist vigorously against the left side of his chest before leaning back on the carriage seat for a review of all that was eating away at his calm. The Sacramento River had overtopped her levies at Sherman Island, drowning his tobacco crop and idling his profit hopes for the Culp Consolidated Tobacco Company, Gilroy California.

*An act of Force Majeure, Toppie, not an act of bad business. Keep that straight in your mind.*

A fire had taken out a second tobacco crop near Hollister, wiping out over two thousand acres of rich Cavendish leaf, just days away from harvest.

*Simple misfortune. No way could you have foreseen such run-of-the-mill bad luck.*

Ralston had relocated The Cornell Watch Company from Cornell Illinois to Berkeley California, only to discover that the persistent dust in the East Bay proved catastrophic to every last escapement gear and winding wheel passing through his assembly line. And now the flooding was back in his Comstock mines, staunching the flow of much needed cash into his fledgling enterprises all over California.

*Be careful how high you fly, for you can fall an equal distance.*

“It’s just that you’ve way over-extended yourself and the bank along with it,” said Thomas Sunderland. “See here, Toppie, if you won’t listen to your closest friends, then by god you’re a man on a raft left to perish in open ocean!”

Ralston leaned back in his seat and pressed two fingers onto the bridge of his nose. The morning alone had taken much out of his step—the earthquake, the steady reassurances necessary to calm more than three dozen nervous bank depositors, not to mention his own staff of high-strung men. And now his board was at him again, just as he had suspected when Mills had called for another impromptu meeting. His board was comprised of his closest allies, that much was certain, only none of them had anything near his fortitude and vision for San Francisco’s over-all development. Western speculation required the unflinching nerve of a high stakes gambler, and these men were simply Easterners at heart.

Ralston opened his eyes again and took in the faces staring at him from around the conference table. “You lily white gentlemen embody all the risk and daring of a Friday night sewing circle,” he said in a disgusted tone of voice.

“If not for the repeated salvations provided by the Comstock Lode,” said Hayward, “all of your enterprises would have long since perished due to their unrealistic sustainability.”

“Leland Stanford and Mark Hopkins are within months of connecting the Transcontinental Railroad,” said Charles Bonner. “Have you considered what will happen when cheaper goods start flooding your markets from factories as far afield as Saint Louis or Chicago? They’ll crush you, Toppie, like a meaningless bug, they’ll ring you out to dry.”

“Leland has promised certain tariffs applied to any products that compete against our bank-owned industries,” said Ralston. “He gave me his word in exchange for a crucially-timed loan that saved his railroad from default.”

“Stanford won’t think twice about reneging on a promise like that,” said Mills. “I know the man far too well to expect anything less.”

“We’ve put together some figures for review,” said JP Jones, leaning forward to reach for his copy of a ledger set before his place at the mammoth conference table. “A snap shot, if you will.”

“A State of The Union,” said William Barron.

“The bank has invested nine hundred and sixty-seven thousand dollars in the Pacific Woolen Mills Company,” said Jones.

“Against annual sales of nearly eighty-five thousand dollars,” Ralston said in his defense.

“Is that not a rather anemic return for an investment of this magnitude?” said Sunderland. “Eight point eight percent per annum?”

“It also provides three hundred and fifty jobs to the good people of San Francisco,” said Ralston.

“Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars invested in the Union Pacific Silk Manufacturing Company,” said Barron, reading from his copy of the ledger report.

“With sales of six thousand dollars a week in ribbon alone,” said Ralston. “Is there a man present who does not find this amount to be a handsome return on investment?”

“None of us would argue that,” said Mills. “Score stands at one and one.”

“One million nine hundred and seventy-one thousand invested in the New Montgomery Real Estate Company.”

“And as the city grows,” said Ralston, “that money stands to grow ten fold at the very least.”

“If the city grows,” said Hayward.

“The city has grown steadily without pause since Eighteen Fifty,” said Ralston.

“Five hundred and seventy-eight thousand invested in the Kimball Manufacturing Company,” said Sunderland.

“Wherein one hundred men manufacture roughly one hundred vehicles per month,” said Ralston. “Kimball’s gross sales last year surpassed three million dollars, providing all the railway cars for the the city of Los Angeles, the San Pedro Railway System, the San Francisco Trolley Company and now the Virginia and Truckee Railroad.”

“An unquestionable profit-maker for the bank,” said Barron.

“Our concern is for the future,” said Mills. “How many more railway cars can the West Coast possibly require?”

“Let’s discuss the Culp Consolidated Tobacco Company,” said Sunderland. “Two million cigars last year and now a great big goose egg.”

“No one can predict the loss of two tobacco crops,” said Ralston.

“No one’s blaming you, Toppie,” said Barron. “It’s just that the combined losses have a withering effect on the bank’s over-all health.”

“The Cornell Watch Company,” said Mills.

Ralston picked up a fresh piece of writing paper, tearing off a small corner of paper and then dropping it to the floor. “I failed to consider the dust,” he said, tearing off a second small triangle before drifting it toward the ground. “For that I take full responsibility.”

“To make matters worse,” said Sunderland, “the Lode suffers from yet another stubborn round of borrasca. The *Empire* and the *Imperial* have failed to produce a dividend since Sixty-seven. The *Mexican*, the *Ophir*, the *Gould & Curry*—each one of these historic moneymakers appears to have breathed their last drop of profit.”

“The *Yellow Jacket* produced two point seven million dollars in Eighteen Sixty-seven,” said Thomas Bell, “dropping to six hundred eighty-two thousand last year and only one hundred thousand for the first quarter of Sixty-nine.”

“What about the *Hale and Norcross*?” said Mills. “How on earth did two bartenders and two Washoe muckers manage to wrest control without you or Sharon catching wind of it?”

“Trust me, Gentlemen,” said Ralston, “not a single broker on the exchange caught wind of it either.”

“Two hundred grand for half the outstanding shares,” said Hayward. “How much did it cost us to acquire the remaining four hundred shares?”

“Nearly a million,” said Sunderland.

“The Bank Ring,” said Hayward, “as the papers have so lovingly come to refer to us now, has been beaten soundly by a bunch of uneducated Micks.”

Tibbey knocked on the glass door to the conference room, opening it just enough to stick his head inside the room. “We’re in a meeting!” Mills snapped at the man.

“It’s important,” said Tibbey.

“What is it, Edney?” said Ralston.

“I have word that Congressmen Greene and Hoag have just checked into the Baldwin Hotel,” said Tibbey. “They’re here on behalf of the House Ways and Means Committee, sent specifically to investigate the merits of Sutro’s Tunnel. There’s a third member in their party—Governor Blair of Michigan.”

“The highest-ranking member of the House Ways and Means Committee,” said Barron.

Ralston leaned forward in his chair, planting his forearms onto the mahogany tabletop before ripping his sheet of paper in half. “God damn-it!” he said, his face reddening with displeasure. “We’re paying two lobbyist to insure that an action like this sort would never come to pass!”

“It appears that Thaddeus Stevens called in a small battalion of favors,” said Tibbey, “right before the House adjourned for a one month recess.”

“Get word to Sharon immediately,” said Ralston.

“I’ve already arranged for a telegraph to be sent by five this afternoon,” said Tibbey.

“Send a rider out to Belmont,” said Ralston. “Alert my staff that they have mere hours to prepare for an extempore dinner party.”

“A reception for the visiting senators?” said Bell.

“Precisely,” said Ralston. “We’re going to show them how we men of the West like to play, and in the process, we’re going to block their access to Adolph Sutro at every possible turn.”

XXXXX

After his party of fifty San Francisco socialites had been served cocktails and hor d’oeuvre in the reception hall at Belmont, Ralston guided his homely yet competent overseer by the arm until he could talk to her in private on the veranda. He pressed a hundred dollar bill into her instantly-protesting hand, and said, “Three hours to pull together a Ralston Night worthy of the record books. Mrs. Farley, you are nothing short of a miracle worker.”

“Only my best efforts for the Magician of San Francisco,” said Farley.

Ralston kissed her on the forehead. “It is you who delivers the magic, my dear.”

Ralston reentered the reception hall and noted the steady increase in conversational buzz as his guests loosened up under the rising influence of alcohol. A four-piece chamber group played Bach’s *Minuet in D Minor* from the far end of the reception hall, and he smiled again at his staff’s ability to respond at a moment’s notice. He accepted a champagne cocktail from one of his tuxedoed waiters, working his way deeper into the room with his usual confidence and charm.

*Smile, Toppie,* d*espite the day you’ve had—the mounting failures, the very real threats to your empire. What did Captain Garrison use to say all those years ago on the river? ‘No one wants to hear about a man’s problems, so keep yours to youself, at all times and in every conceivable circumstance.’*

As he approached the large cluster of men and women surrounding Congressmen Greene and Hoag, Darius Mills took Ralston by the arm and guided him into the circle. “As usual, Toppie,” said Mills, “your parties are the stuff of legendary excess.”

“In honor of our visiting dignitaries from Washington,” said Ralston, raising up his cocktail glass.

“My prior accounts of life on the West Coast have been filled with stories of privation and hardship,” said Truman Hoag. “After touring San Francisco and now this splendid country retreat… You boys have been lying to us, haven’t you now?”

Ralston straightened his left index finger and placed it against his lips in a gesture of secrecy. “Whatever you do, Congressmen, please refrain from telling a soul about the true nature of our hardships. We’ve too many grasshopper sufferers as it is.”

The circle of men and women laughed as one, prompting Hoag to mimic Ralston’s antics by placing his hand upon his chest as a make-believe pledge. “Nothing out here but desperadoes and wretched poverty,” he said with a smile.

“Whereabouts in Ohio do you hail from, Sir?” said Ralston.

“The great city of Toledo,” said Hoag. “And you’re from Wellsville, of the great riverboat Chapman family. Your mother’s father and I were famous friends until his death.”

“President Grant’s inauguration was just over a week ago,” said Mills, “and yet here you are, safely ensconced in California.”

“This great nation of ours has been tamed by a railroad,” said Greene. “We took the Central Pacific from Council Bluffs to it’s present terminus in Wyoming. A brief half-day stage ride and we picked up the Western Pacific Line, all the way to San Francisco.”

“In Fifty-one my family crossed the continent in one hundred and twenty-four days,” said Leeza Bonner. “My goodness, but the world has gone and shrunk itself in a great big hurry.”

“Tell us about Grant’s inauguration,” said JP Jones.

“More importantly,” said Hanah Jones, “tell us about the inaugural ball.”

“Clearly the man seeks a break from conservative tradition,” said Hoag. “In his address he proposes a fifteenth amendment to the constitution, conferring the right to vote regardless of race, color or creed.”

“What about a woman’s right to vote?” said Cindy Sunderland.

“I beg your pardon, Ma’am,” said Greene, “but I’m afraid women shall never obtain such a dispensation.”

Thomas Sunderland put his hand on his wife’s forearm when he saw her bristle in response to the congressman’s words. “Oh, and why is that, Congressman?” she said as calmly as she could manage.

“Because a woman’s place is in the home,” said Greene. “There are certain exceptions, Madame, but for the majority of women, they simply lack the necessary traits of reason and accountability for their voice to be heard in American politics. Running a nation has been and always shall be a man’s domain.”

“Did not Elizabeth Cady Stanton address the U.S. Congress this past January?” said Hanah Jones.

“She did,” said Hoag. “The first woman ever to do so.”

“Little snowballs, when rolled slow and steady,” said Cindy Sunderland, “have a tendency to become rather large and unyielding. Mark my words, Congressman. Before you know it, your little Potomac Boys Club will quake beneath the rustle of petticoats and lace.”

One of Ralston’s tuxedoed staff rang a dinner bell as the servant stood by a small service door, followed by an eruption of guffaws as one entire wall of the reception hall opened up to reveal a splendidly-appointed dining table in the most magnificent of banquet halls. “Saved by the bell,” Ralston said as he took Greene by the arm and escorted him toward the dining room.”

“What a truly magnificent bit of technology,” said Greene, studying the retractable wall with open fascination.

“I understand you’re here on official congressional business,” said Ralston.

“Your hearing is most excellent,” said Greene. “We’re to investigate the need and merit for a proposed supply tunnel into the heart of the Comstock Lode.”

“Sutro’s Tunnel,” said Ralston.

“The very same,” said Greene. “An interesting man with an intrepid plan.”

“I’ll agree that Mister Sutro presents a bold plan, even an achievable plan,” said Ralston, “but as a major mine owner on the Comstock Lode, I can tell you firsthand that such a tunnel constitutes an unnecessary expense of both time and money.”  
 “My understanding is that the mines are once again plagued by flooding,” said Greene.

“Larger pumps will solve the problem, at far less expense and risk.”

“What about an escape route for trapped miners?”

“There is no single man or concept on earth that can eliminate all the dangers associated with hard rock mining,” said Ralston. “It’s a savage business, Congressman. If pulling gold and silver from the earth were easy, we’d all be doing it and we’d all be rich.”

“Nonetheless, our charter is to fully examine the merits of Mister Sutro’s tunnel, before making our report to the House Ways and Means Committee.”

“There’s a man in Virginia City who can tell you everything you need to know,” said Ralston.

“Last I heard, Mister Sutro was in Europe,” said Greene, “obtaining additional knowledge from every great mining engineer across the European continent.”

“I refer to William Sharon,” said Ralston. “Very few men on earth possess his intimate knowledge of hard rock mining. If you’d like, I can summons him to San Francisco.”

“I promise you that won’t be necessary,” said Greene. “Together with Governor Blair, Congressman Hoag and I will depart for Virginia City first thing tomorrow morning.”

“In that case, Congressman,” said Ralston, “I’ve a mind to go with you, if that won’t be too much of an imposition.”

“Forgive me, Mister Ralston, but I get the feeling you’re trying to babysit our visit to the Comstock Lode.”

“On the contrary,” said Ralston. “The bank has an abundance of interests in Virginia City, each requiring my periodic oversight and inspection. Most of all, I have a railroad in the throws of final construction. No, Congressman, any need to babysit you is quite out of the question, for like any man of hearty appetite, no man need experience the Comstock Lode through anyone’s eyes but his own.”

# Chapter Fifteen

Friday, March 12, 1869

A Washoe Zephyr of an extreme intensity blew through Virginia City like a relentless typhoon, prompting Sutro to lower the brim of his slouch hat toward the ground in an effort to shield his eyes from the wind-driven dust. And how befitting, he thought as he walked along C Street. A bitter wind to welcome his less than triumphant return to the Comstock Lode. Only now he had new reasons to be hopeful in the face of so much failure and bad luck—something solidly optimistic to boost his spirits and put some renewed vigor into his step. Thaddeus Stevens had believed in Sutro’s tunnel project—all the way to the great man’s final breath of life—and now Sutro would stand his case before the highest ranking members of the House Ways and Means Committee.

Sutro entered the Bucket of Blood Saloon and felt the stares of men follow his progress as he walked towards the bar.

“Well if it ain’t Adolph Sutro,” he heard his name called out from a table of diners.

“Damn fool’s still at it,” said a man from the poker table.

“Adolph!” welcomed Sam Loman the bartender.

“Good to see you, Sam,” said Sutro, removing his hat and setting it next to him on the bar. “Perhaps a beer to cut the dust.”

Loman nodded at Sutro, lifting a glass from the bar and filling it slowly at the tap. “Back home to stay this time?”

“A loaded question with too many answers,” said Sutro. “My fortune seems to be changing as fast as the wind these days.”

“Perhaps our visitors from Washington will help turn things in your favor,” said Loman.

“Perhaps so,” said Sutro, sipping the foam off the top of his beer. “I tried to meet up with them at the International Hotel, only they’d already set out for the day.”

“They’re with Ralston and Sharon,” said Loman.

Sutro stopped mid drink to stare at Loman above the rim of his beer glass. “Billy Ralston’s in town?”

Loman nodded his head. “Came over the Sierras with the congressmen. Wined and dined them real good last night at the Washoe Millionaire’s Club.”

Sutro took a long pull from his beer glass, understanding in an instant what Ralston was up to. He and Sharon intended to shadow the congressmen, feeding them only the Bank Ring’s opinion on the tunnel matter, while blocking Sutro from any access to the men from the House Ways and Means Committee. “Any idea where they are now?” he said, setting his half-consumed beer back on the bar before digging two bits from his pocket.

“Touring the *Justice Mine*,” said Loman. “Only mind yourself, Adolph. Ralston came over the hill with two Italian bodyguards the size of large bulldozers.”

“Bodyguards, you say,” said Sutro, picking up his hat and wedging it down upon his head.

Loman winked at Sutro before walking a freshly-poured beer down the bar to a new customer. “Man must be nervous about something.”

Sutro re-entered the wind storm, walking south along C Street with his head bent against the pelting dust. As he walked, he thought about Loman’s comment, realizing that the great William Ralston, the Magician of San Francisco, was indeed made nervous by the threat of Sutro’s fledgling tunnel company. In five short years, the Bank Crowd had taken control over most of the Comstock mines and mills, and in so doing they had created an extremely efficient monopoly that had crushed every threat of competition except his own. Since their takeover, the Ring had pushed even deeper toward vertical integration and maximized profit-taking—their water company, their mill consolidations, their logging flume and their timber company. And coming soon, thought Sutro, their railroad would let them profit from every last bit of inbound freight or outbound bullion that the Lode either consumed or produced.

Sutro crossed over the Divide and walked down Main Street toward the *Justice Mine*. The wind was worse on the Gold Hill side, prompting him to tie his bandana over his nose and mouth to help protect his lungs from the wind-driven debris. His eyes and face stung from the continuous pelting of quartz dust, encouraging him to step up his pace on the downhill side in order to escape the punishment as quickly as he could.

Approaching the hoisting works of the *Justice Mine,* he saw the two men that Loman had talked about. They stood guard at either side of the entry doors; two meaty Italian giants, he assessed, each man standing at least six feet tall with chests the size of rain barrels. For a moment, something deep within his countenance told him to turn on his heels and retreat back up the Divide, only he steadied his nerve and continued toward the entry doors, bolstering himself with the knowledge that he had as much right as any man to move freely about the Comstock Lode.

“Go away,” said the goon on his right when Sutro was ten feet from the door.

“Excuse me?” he said.

“You’re not wanted here,” said the hulk to his left. “Go away, Mister Sutro, before you hurt yourself.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“We are,” said the one on his left. “Now go away.”

“How do you know my name?”

“We’re paid to know your name,” said the giant on his right.

“I’m here to see the congressmen.”

“No you’re not,” said said the one on his left.

“But you can’t stop me.”

“Yes we can,” the same man answered him.

Cresting the Divide, Sutro glanced back over his shoulder to see that the Italian giants were following him less than four hundred yards behind. His heart leapt in his throat, his mind racing with the impossible brashness of it all. Men did not behave this way in civilized society, and yet these two draft horses were in the direct employment of William Chapman Ralston.

Returning to the bustle of C Street, Sutro turned again to see that the Italians were still an equal distance behind him. He walked up the eastern side of C Street, his boots echoing off the wooden sidewalk despite the tempestuous howling of the wind. He glanced across the street and saw that the thugs were shadowing him from the western side of the street, crossing the busy intersection of C Street and Union only after Sutro darted into the lobby of the International Hotel. Sutro walked up to the reception desk and positioned himself in front of Alfred Collins, the general manager of the hotel. Collins was focused on the hotel’s guest registry, and when he sensed Sutro’s presence, he looked up and offered a welcoming smile. “Mister Sutro, so good to see you again.”

“And you, Alfred.”

“Will you be staying with us, then?”

“As fate would have it, I can no longer afford such a luxury,” said Sutro. “I was hoping to have a chat with the congressmen from Washington.”

“They left almost two hours ago with Billy Ralston and William Sharon,” said Collins. “Would you care to leave them a note?”

Sutro looked back to the lobby doors when a sudden gust of wind blew through the room. The Italians stood just inside the entrance, and when Sutro caught sight of them, he felt his heart leap back up into his throat. “Do you see these men?” he said to Collins.

“They’re with Mister Ralston’s party. His bodyguards.”

“They denied me access to the *Justice Mine*.”

Collins glanced at Sutro with a look of wary uncertainty, then back to the giant Italians standing by the entrance. “Why, they can’t do that,” he said.

“And now, as you see, they have followed me back to the International.”

The Italians walked up to Sutro and lifted him up by his arms, ushering him swiftly toward the main lobby doors.

“What are you doing?” said Collins.

“You can’t do this!” said Sutro.

Once outside, the Italians flung Sutro onto the street as though tossing aside a pail of dirty mop water. Sutro skidded painfully onto his left side, picking himself off the ground just as rapidly, until he could glare at his assailants with a look of pure, unadulterated rage. “You can’t do this!” he yelled a second time.

One of the Italians reached his right hand into his open duster and withdrew a Scofield revolver from a concealed holster, aiming the weapon directly at Sutro’s head. “Come back here again and you’re a dead man, Mister Sutro.”

Six minutes before midnight, Sutro re-entered the International Hotel from the service entrance at the rear of the building. Slipping into the receiving area, he lingered in the darkness for a moment, his back pressed up against the wall, listening for the presence of any employees or deliverymen. The room was quiet, prompting him to move swiftly toward a small workshop positioned to the right side of the delivery bay. Once inside he donned a pair of Levi Strauss overalls that had been left hanging from a coat rack, then picked up a metal toolbox before walking boldly back out into the receiving bay and then out into the public areas of the hotel. He took the service elevator up to the third floor, re-reading the slip of paper that the teenaged boy had given him after Sutro had paid the young scrapper for his reconnoissance efforts.

Standing before Room 28, Sutro set down the toolbox and then rapped his knuckles loudly upon the door. He heard a male rustling inside, followed by a whispered yet distinctively female voice. “Who is it?” said Congressman Hoag.

“Adolph Sutro, Sir.”

“For god’s sakes, Man, it’s after midnight!”

“I know, Sir, and I’m sorry.”

A moment later the hotel room door opened, and Sutro looked upon the congressman as he continued to tighten the sash to his bathrobe. Sutro had met with the man on several occasions back in Washington, which meant that he had no trouble reading the congressman’s current state of irritation. “Why are you dressed like a workman?” Hoag offered gruffly.

“On account of the fact that Ralston’s bodyguards threatened to kill me if I tried to come near the International Hotel.”

Hoag stopped fiddling with his sash when Sutro’s words had registered. “Come in,” he offered in a low voice, stepping aside to allow Sutro entry into the sitting room.

When the door was closed behind them, Hoag lit one of the gas lamps in the sitting room and then returned his attention to Sutro. “Where did they threaten you?” he said.

“In the lobby of the hotel,” said Sutro, “in front of Albert Collins the general manager.That was after they chased me away from the *Justice* when you gentlemen were touring the mine. They followed me back to the International and then physically removed me from the lobby.”

“This is an outrage!” said Hoag.

“I won’t argue you there.”

“Governor Blair told me a conversation he had with Sharon this afternoon, which had soured his stomach almost on contact. Now that I hear of your treatment by Ralston’s bodyguards, I’ve a mind to agree with him.”

“Can you tell me what he said?”

“ After our tour of the *Justice*, Blair told Sharon that he thought your tunnel was an absolute necessity for the mines, if for no other reason than to relieve the miners of such intolerably high heat.”

“And?” said Sutro.

“Sharon said that the bank had already made its decision. He said that the bank had proclaimed you and your tunnel persona non grata and that was the end of it.”

“Perhaps now you see the true nature of their deceit.”

“Very clearly,” said Hoag. “And now I intend to see to it that this sort of conduct comes to an abrupt end. Tomorrow morning, I would ask that you meet us in the hotel lobby at ten AM sharp.”

“And the bodyguards?” said Sutro.

“Do you really think they will try and oust you a second time, in front of a United States congressman?”

Sutro left his room at the Nevada Hotel, walking along Taylor Street on a crisp Saturday morning, just five minutes before his appointed meeting time. He raked the brim of his slouch hat down upon his forehead, using it to shield his face from public view. The Washoe Zephyr that had plagued Virginia City for the past two days had finally ended sometime during the night, replaced now by a brilliant burst of sunshine that warmed the hillside town all the way down to D Street. Despite the warming temperatures, Sutro wore his duster as he climbed up Mount Davidson, for the long tails of the coat were useful in concealing his holstered Colt revolver.

*Just in case the good congressman was wrong.*

Sutro stopped in front of the Enterprise Building to casually read the notices on the bulletin board. He checked his pocket watch with his back to the street—two minutes after ten. He would linger here another minute or so, he decided; long enough to insure that Ralston and Sharon made their appearance in the hotel lobby before he did. Better to be late for this one, he thought, so that the Italians are stripped of the chance to accost him outside of Ralston’s point of witness.

At four minutes after ten, Sutro heard Sharon’s voice behind him as the banker conversed with the hotel liverymen stationed at the entrance to the International Hotel. He turned sideways enough to glance at Sharon and Ralston as they dismounted from Sharon’s Buckeye carriage, while the liverymen steadied the horses. The Italians climbed off the rear bench of the carriage and followed their employers into the lobby of the hotel.

Sutro waited another two minutes before crossing C Street for the hotel entrance. When he entered the lobby, he found the two bodyguards stationed near the front door, causing no small degree of uneasiness in the eyes of the nearby porters and doormen. “Good to see you fellas,” Sutro said to the bodyguards as he walked into the lobby.

Congressmen Hoag stood in the center of the lobby with Greene, Ralston, Sharon and Blair, and when Sutro entered the room, he gave the man a hearty wave. “Ah there you are, Adolph!” he said.

Sutro savored the look of absolute appall on the faces of Ralston and Sharon when the bankers turned to acknowledge his approach. He smiled and waved casually, walking up to them as if no bad blood or gamesmanship had ever stood between them. “Toppie Ralston,” he said with perhaps a bit too much cynicism in his voice.

“What are you doing here?” said Sharon.

“Mister Sutro is why this committee has come west in the first place, is it not, Mister Sharon?” said Blair.

“Mister Sutro informs us that your bodyguards have treated him with a high degree of disrespect,” said Hoag.

“That’s impossible,” said Ralston. “My men are here for our mutual protection—nothing more, nothing less.”

“Were you aware that your boys chased Mister Sutro from the *Justice* hoisting works while we were taking our tour?” said Greene.

“What proof do you have of such an outrage?” said Ralston.

“They then followed him back over the Divide,” said Hoag, “only to physically remove him from this very establishment.”

Ralston signaled for his bodyguards to approach the group. “Enzo,” Ralston addressed one of the hulks. “Mister Sutro claims that you and Biaggio threatened him with physical violence yesterday. Is this true?”

Enzo shrugged his massive shoulders as he looked at the group of men with a deadpan look on his face. “I don’t know nobody name a Sutro?” he said.

“You knew my name well enough yesterday,” said Sutro.

“Mister Sutro claims you chased him from the *Justice* and followed him back here.”

“No Sir,” said Biaggio. “We no seen this man before today.”

Sutro raised his hand toward the reception desk, summoning Alfred Collins to join in the conversation, and as Collins approached, Sutro watched the expressions of the bodyguards erode from stoic confidence to faltering discomfort. “I take it you tree trunks remember this man from yesterday?” said Sutro.

Enzo and Biaggio looked down to the floor—two little boys, caught in a lie.

“What’s this about?” said Ralston.

“Mister Collins,” said Sutro. “Did you or did you not witness these men physically remove me from your hotel yesterday?”

“I did,” said Collins, “against my strongest protests.”

Ralston looked to his bodyguards with an expression of deep betrayal. “You did these things?” he said. “Behind my back?”

Biaggio nodded his head despite his hang dog posture. “Mi dispiace! Vi prego di scusarmi.”

“Are you trying to suggest that their actions were not by your command?” said Sutro.

“Mister Sutro,” said Ralston, appearing more than a little impugned by Sutro’s comment. “You and I may have our differences in business, but I assure you, I would never condone any sort of physical violence or untoward intimidation. Such brutishness would stand as an insult to the very essence of civilized behavior.”

“Excellent,” said Hoag. “Now that we’ve cleared the air on this little matter, perhaps we can convene on the rooftop of this fine establishment, so that Mister Sutro can give us a bird’s eye view of his proposed tunnel route.”

“Have we not shown you everything you need to know for your report to congress?” Sharon protested.

“No, Mister Sharon,” said Blair, “what you’ve shown us is your take on the matter and nothing more. Now we intend to hear it from a man who has invested his very soul into something that you two gentlemen have opposed lo these many years, out of nothing more noble than your all-encompassing greed.”

# Chapter Sixteen

Sunday, April 4, 1869

One of your favorite weekly rituals that has developed over your now many years on the Comstock Lode is Sunday breakfast with the girls who spend their days and nights toiling under the guardianship of Cad Thompson. Like many service-related industries that a man or a woman might find themselves employed in, the sex trade reaches its weekly zenith on Saturday nights, which by Sunday morning leaves Cad and her played-out stable of women in a state of exhausted torpor and most welcome inactivity. The fact that you have taken it upon yourself to rise up early on Sunday mornings and prepare these weekly feasts for a handful of overworked soiled doves is a charity that you provide freely in response to your heart-felt empathy for their once unintended career paths. You’ve a daughter of your own, you consider from time-to-time, and given the fact that you haven’t seen little Annie in over nine and a half years, you sometimes feel a certain contrition regarding the misfortunes that oftentimes befall women of incomplete foundation and means.

They come into the kitchen slowly at first, drawn in by the smell of freshly-brewed coffee and rashers of bacon on the fry. They drift in, actually, some scratching their bodies lazily beneath their night clothes, others simply shuffling along in a manner befitting any Sunday morning after a long week’s toil.

“Good morning, Paulette,” you say.

“Hot coffee,” says the twenty-year-old from Westport, Connecticut.

You put the whisk to two dozen freshly-cracked eggs as Ruby Simms saunters in, brushing her hair as she shuffles across the floor in the same manner as Paulette. “Thank god for the hired help,” she says, kissing you lightly on your left cheek.

“Busy night?” you ask.

“Men are pigs.”

“Yes we are.”

“Well not all men.”

“No,” you say, pouring the whipped bucket of eggs into a piping hot skillet. “I’m quite certain your first assessment is correct.”

Cindy Petersen walks into the kitchen looking perky and in her usual upbeat state of mind. “Morning!” she offers cheerfully to no one in particular.

“The sun has officially risen,” you say, giving your batch of eggs their first scrap with the metal spatula.

Cad Thompson walks into the kitchen and goes straight for the cups and coffee pot set upon the long breakfast table. Linda Craten does the same, followed by Susie Limon, Janice Collier and Ann MacPherson from Galway Ireland. Then comes Shawn Darnling—sweet Jesus she’s a fine and natural specimen—followed by Suzanne Rosemont, Lorna Stewart and Fleurette Marcelle from Aurillac France. You stir your eggs vigorously now as they come to the end of their scramble, smelling the rising presence of perfume and femaleness as it overtakes the deeper notes of bacon fat and that one damnable slice of bread you turned into a burned piece of carbon. Have you ever pulled off a Sunday breakfast without at least one or two mishaps along the way?

As you distribute the scrambled eggs onto a row of laid out copper plates, Cad wordlessly scoops a mound of breakfast potatoes besides your eggs, while Ruby Simms distributes three rashers of bacon and a slice of buttered toast to each of the plates. “Where’s the parsley?” Ruby questions playfully.

“Nobody eats parsley,” you say.

Turning from the stove you see that most of the girls have taken their seats along the table and commenced the second ceremonial custom of reading through the Sunday edition of the *Territorial Enterprise*. Despite their preoccupation with the *Enterprise*, no one fails to offer a ‘thank you’ as you distribute your chef work in front of each of the girls. “I like this piece you did about the railroad,” says Paulette. “And thank you for breakfast.”

“Will we be going to the opening ceremony today?” says Ann.

“The Very Crooked and Terribly Rough Railroad,” says Paulette.

“Joe Goodman insisted I call it that,” you say. “Not so much because of its many switchbacks and turns, but because of the crooked manner in which William Sharon and Billy Ralston bamboozled the money out of every last taxpayer over a two county area.”

“Joe Goodman doesn’t seem to like Sharon all that much,” says Suzanne.

“Neither do I,” you say.

“But you’re still friends with Mister Sharon,” says Susie. “I saw you talking with him just yesterday.”

“I’m also friends with a good many Democrats,” you say. “Not all things about a man’s politics or business makes him one hundred percent detestable.”

“Given the amount of time and money Mister Sharon spends in this establishment,” says Cad, “we should consider setting a place for him at our Sunday morning table.”

After you shovel a load of piping hot eggs into your mouth you aim the tines of your fork at Cad, and say, “Wary funny.”

“I’m just sayin’,” says Cad, crunching down on a fresh bite of toast.

“This piece that Goodman wrote about the miners beating up on the coolies,” says Janice. “He thinks Sharon was wrong to have Governor Stewart call in the militia.”

“Sharon thinks Goodman is anti-business,” you say, “particularly when it comes to the Comstock Lode.”

“If they had gone further and hanged some of the men who were trying to introduce servile labor into Nevada,” Janice reads from Goodman’s article, “they would have been entirely justified and in their right to do so. Yikes, that’s rather to the point.”

“Sharon is demanding a retraction on that one,” you say.

“Don’t you think the miners have a right to protect their wages from competition?” says Ann.

“How many miners did you entertain here at the *Brick* last night?”

“Miners can’t afford this place,” says Ann.

“Beside, they are dirty, filthy animals, zees miners,” says Fleurette.

“I rest my case,” you say.

The sound of canon fire rattles the windows in the *Brick*, prompting each of you to raise up your heads for a follow-up listen. “The General Grant,” you say.

“What is zees General Grant?” says Fleurette.

“The largest gun atop Fort Homestead,” you say, “announcing the start of the railroad celebration, I suspect.”

“Your paper says the train isn’t due until noon,” says Ann.

“The gun’s are just a reminder for folks to attend,” says Cad.

“You think folks’ll have trouble remembering something when there’s free food and drink involved?” says Ruby.

“Will we be going?” Ann repeats herself.

“I’m headed that way as soon as I clean up the kitchen,” you say.

“Naturally it will take us women a full hour to ready ourselves,” says Cad.

“And the results will be absolutely stunning,” you say.

Your comment seems to hitch up in the minds of each of your female diners, and for a moment they look at you as if you were the Pope on Christmas morning. “Tell me something, Dan,” says Ruby. “How is it that you treat us girls like royalty all the time?”

“Because you’re good people,” you say, “just like everyone else.”

Like most events involving humans and the offer of free food and drink, by high noon it is decided between you and Alf Doten that nearly every man, woman and child in the state of Nevada has descended upon Gold Hill for the first run and grand opening of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad. A small army of chefs from nearby restaurants and saloons roast huge slabs of meat over enormous troughs of hotly burning embers, while no less than two dozen local bartenders pour mugs of beer at a fevered pitch that just barely keeps up with their thirsty, freeloading customers. Still more chefs slave over giant boiling vats of shucked corn on the cob, stirring the contents with wooden paddles before retrieving the cooked ears with long handled colanders for service at the long banquet table where still more chefs plate food for a continuous line of hungry diners.

“Even the Paiutes know a good thing when they see one,” says Doten, and when you look towards his point of attention, you see thirty or so ragged Indians descending the Divide behind the Metropolitan Brass Band. In the distance you hear the lonesome drone of a train whistle, signaling its inaugural run from Carson City into the newly constructed Gold Hill Station.

“Is it possible for a band to sound worse with age and practice?” you say, watching the members of the band march in wobbly formation as they half stumble down the grade. “I suspect they drink,” you add.

“They’re miners,” says Doten. “Of course they drink.”

The band picks up on a rendition of *Billy Barlow* as they stumble ever closer, only as the music grows louder, it becomes increasingly clear that a screeching train brake makes for a far more soothing brand of music.

“At least they try,” adds Doten, rotating his outstretched index finger inside his ear canal as though working out a festering secretion of wax.

“Are you suggesting that my attempts at playing the mouth harp are anything less than sincere?”

“On the contrary,” says Doten. “I’m sure the band would welcome your membership as a virtuoso mouth harp performer.”

“And what instruments do you play, Mister My Stuff Don’t Stink?”

“Occasionally the comb,” says Doten, “and frequently the beer mug. Perhaps we should listen in on some of the speeches. Work a few notables for material.”

As the two of you walk towards the podium set up before the post office, you look up at the imposing sight of the wooden train trestle that seems to dissect Gold Hill into two separate villages. One hundred feet long and eighty-five feet tall at it’s highest point, even during the construction phase, newsmen such as yourself began to refer to this giant monolith as one of the true engineering wonders of the West. On the flip side, this very same engineering marvel has also inspired a fair bit of scrutiny regarding the trestle’s ability to hold the weight of a fully-loaded ore train. Which naturally lends today’s ceremonies a certain degree of suspense regarding what will happen when the first train attempts to cross what appears to be little more than a flimsy spiderweb of matchstick scaffolding.

Adding to the general aura of apprehension is an article you published not three days ago, following your interview with the famous railroad entrepreneur, George Pullman. After escorting the man over the Divide for his first glimpse at the Gold Hill Trestle, Pullman proclaimed rather vociferously on behalf of the Central Pacific Railroad, that none of his Silver Palace Sleeper Cars would ever set foot, as it were, upon such a perilous stack of rickety timber as this. Another example, you consider, of man’s ongoing inability to fully embrace the work of engineers and their magical little slide rules.

As the sound of the train grows ever closer, chugging its way up the treacherous grade, William Sharon and Billy Ralston take to the podium following a rousing civic speech by Dan Lamont, Gold Hills very corpulent reigning Mayor. The business partners look almost comical in their physical polarity—Sharon a mere dwarf compared to Ralston’s impressive six feet of stocky, muscular build. Sharon wears his usual black preacher outfit and drooping cravat, while Ralston adds a snug-fitting vest beneath his top coat, along with an arrow straight bow tie—the current fashion rage in London, Paris and New York. “Today we gather here to celebrate the birth of our very own railroad into the Comstock Lode,” Sharon begins.

“Listen to him,” you whisper to Doten. “Our railroad, he says.”

“How dare you bite the hand that feeds you free victuals and beer,” Doten snarls at you.

“While the Virginia and Truckee Railroad has drawn a steady fusillade of criticism from the likes of Joe Goodman and Dan DeQuille…” Sharon goes on.

“You’re famous,” Doten whispers, ribbing you with his elbow.

“…I can assure you with complete honesty, that the Virginia and Truckee Railroad will not only drive down the cost of goods here on the Comstock Lode, but also insure the general appreciation of property values and of course the general economic prosperity of this entire community. We will no longer be isolated and cut off from the rest of the world, and because of this new reality the world will beat a path to our doorstep like never before in the history of this great mining district!”

The crowd of thousands cheers at Sharon’s sermonesque proclamations, and you realize as you survey the citizenry, that most of them have been made rather intoxicated by Sharon’s liberal sampling of pro bono beer. Free booze, you consider, is an excellent way to make a people feel good-natured about the person providing the charity, even when dispensed by an overt and villainous guttersnipe like William Sharon.

A hush falls over the crowd as the locomotive rounds the bend on the southern side of the train trestle, pausing for a moment like a bull before a charge. The name ‘Lyon’ has been painted on the front of the cylindrical boiler, and you make a mental note to learn the back story behind the name. The engineer sticks his head out of the cab window and eyeballs the trestle with a good bit of hesitancy and trepidation. As he looks down at the many thousands of us eager and perhaps not a little bloodthirsty bystanders, you think you can read his look of growing resolve with a reasonable degree of interpretive accuracy. All these people have come out to see if this toothpick trestle can hold the weight of a train, says the look, and since you have no desire to disappoint or appear in anyway cowardly in front of this many people, well then tally ho and god’s speed, you poor, witless sap.

The engineer gives a quick salut to the crowd before bearing down on the train whistle, which echoes off the surrounding canyon walls like the banshie cry of a thousand warring Indians. He releases the brake and the locomotive inches forward, creeping out onto the high wire with five empty ore cars in tow. He keeps his whistle pegged on wide open, until it is clear to everyone that the trestle intends to hold. The train chugs forward—whoosh, whoosh, whoosh—amidst an eruption of huzzahs of such impressive volume and bark that this reporter has yet been privy to anything comparable lo these four decades of slowly-plodding observation.

Just as soon as the tank engine begins to pick up a reasonable head of steam, the engineer throttles back the Reverser and begins to slow the train for its arrival into Gold Hill Station, which in truth is little more than an elevated wooden ramp and platform on one side of the tracks, with a crane and a water station on the opposite. As the train makes its final pull toward the platform, the entire western edge of the crowd begins to move en masse towards the station, everyone eager for a close-up look at this latest bit of engineering preeminence to make its way onto the Comstock Lode. The sight of this gleaming new machine gives you pause for a moment as you reflect upon your now ten long years in Virginia City. When you first made your way onto the Comstock Lode, Virginia City was little more than a half-frozen tent city embraced by prospectors replete with big dreams, poor hygiene and almost zero preparation for the harsh winter conditions of the Lode. Flash forward a decade and now she sports several luxury hotels, forty saloons and the Virginia and Truckee Railroad—the city’s giant cherry atop a booming, industrial sundae of a place. Without your knowing it, you have witnessed the birth of something monumental and permanent, you consider; the rising up of a new western star the likes of which the world has never seen.

Doten seems just as caught up in the moment as you are, and he gives you a tap on the arm to bring you back to the moment. “This is something,” he says, eyeing first the mammoth trestle before focusing on the stationery yet still pulsing locomotive. “Perhaps we should partake in the moment with our fellow man,” he adds.

“Perhaps we should find our way to the river of free Bank Ring beer,” you suggest. “On second thought, free taxpayer beer.”

“To the little people,” says Doten, performing an about face before worming his way upstream through the dense thicket of humanity.

As you follow along in the parted seas behind Doten, you glance up at the Divide and see a steady procession of teamster drivers as they pilot their wagons and mule trains over the southern end of Mount Davidson and down into Gold Hill proper. They’ve come to join the celebration out of loneliness or curiosity or perhaps a desire to take fellowship with their neighbors and friends, for you note with no small irony that the advent of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad will no doubt spell the end for the nearly four hundred souls employed in the business of animal drayage onto and off of the Silver Lode. In their place will arise less than one hundred or so jobs created by the railroad, employing engineers, brakemen, porters, timekeepers, stationmasters, yardmasters, foremen, clerks, baggage masters and switchmen to boot. The arrival of the railroad marks the arrival of a new future for the Comstock Lode, and as with all things relating to newness and change, you consider, history appears littered with the endless debris of winners and losers, of increase and decrease, of new opportunities as they clamor and extinguish the prosperities and livelihoods of yore.

As you sip the first of your free beer, you hear the Metropolitan Brass Band attempt a rather hideous rendition of *The One That Got Away*, only to hear the Gold Hill Brass Band drown them out as they lay into a much more polished interpretation of the wildly popular *Dance Me to The End of Love*. “This could get ugly,” you say for Doten’s benefit.

“The trombone makes for a vicious weapon in the event of hand-to-hand combat,” says Doten.

“Not to mention the sousaphone,” you say, toasting your beer glass against that of Doten’s.

To your left and despite the competition of band play, Abraham Curry, the construction supervisor of the new Carson City Mint, takes to the podium and immediately sets forth in an oration about the long and troubled birth of the latest offspring of the federal minting system. “Plans for the Carson City Mint were begun in Eighteen Sixty-three,” his voice booms above the music, “only as many of us know all too well, construction did not begin until after the war’s conclusion. Now that the Virginia and Truckee Railroad has successfully linked the Comstock to Carson City, I am proud to announce that the Carson City Mint is open for business, and in proud possession of the first steam-powered coining press ever manufactured by Morgan and Orr, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Accordingly, the minting of the first Morgan Dollar shall emerge from our state-of-the-art facility within a matter of months, if not weeks.”

As Curry drones on amidst a smattering of applause, you watch the teamsters begin to work their way toward the beer taps where you and Doten now stand your ground. Hank Monk is among the new arrivals, and he walks up to the two of you with his usual lumbering swagger and gregarious, tight-lipped smile.

“Where you in from, Hank?” says Doten

“Carson,” says Monk. “Train passed us by like we was standing still.”

“Faster and cheaper, that’s what Sharon’s been saying,” you reply.

“Makes me feel old,” says Monk.

“Hell, Hank, you are old,” says Doten.

The two of you join Monk in line, and as you stand there, you notice that the girls from D Street have chosen to descend upon the party in a single unified phalanx of carriages that sets the righteous townswomen into an instant state of twitter and cluck. You look on as a wave of agitation spreads to all quadrants of this enormous street party, as the good women of the Comstock Lode continue to get their undergarments balled up into righteously tight little wads. Receiving a fresh beer from Hank Monk, you watch as Mattie Silks and her girls from *Hell On Heels* step down from three pristine carriages, instantly surrounded by a wall of admiring, half-inebriated men. Mattie immediately takes up with one of the most tall and handsome of the lot, dancing a Virginia Reel while the Gold Hill Brass Band burns up a version of *Goober Peas* as though the song was of their very own making. You look to the opposite end of the enormous body of celebrants, and witness the motley crew of the Metropolitan Brass Band. They appear incredibly dour and humiliated as they hold their assorted instruments in various postures of dejection, looking across the sea of people to eyeball the dancing that has struck up in front of their arch rivals. In short measure, the band members begin to break away from the group, lugging their instruments in tow as they work their way closer to the heart of the party. They may not play well together as a band, you consider, only they sure do love to play as individual men.

Cad Thompson and the girls of the *Brick* dismount their carriages and join the fray, followed by Jewel Stapleton and the *Alhambra* girls. Sally Jessup and her entire contingent from the *Rose* comes next, followed by most of the stables from the lesser cribs on *Piper’s Row*. Adeleine Quimby and her girls show up arm-and-arm with the ladies who make up the full roster from Maddy Langren’s place. This stunning display of détente catches your attention almost immediately, since the row that has developed between these two competing houses has become the stuff of recent legend, not to mention a goodly number of hardy barroom laughs.

As best you can figure it, the war kicked off when one of the girls over at Adeleine’s nailed the door shut on one of Maddy’s girls as she visited the outhouse, but not before tossing in a live hornet’s nest to keep the ole’ girl in proper company. The hapless victim, one Sarah Covington from Baton Rouge, suffered the bites and welts of so many angry insects that she was rendered incapable of working in her chosen profession for nearly a week and a half. To further widen the chasm between these two rival sporting houses, the next morning, Adeleine and her stable again managed to sneak into Maddy’s backyard, this time dusting liberal amounts of itching powder onto the freshly-laundered bedsheets line drying in the early morning sun. By the afternoon of that very same day, the ruckus emitting from inside Maddy’s place sounded more like a torture chamber than a house of ill repute. Two days later, when Adeleine and her girls began to wonder why no customers had set foot in their establishment since the itching powder episode, they at long last took the time to open their front door to discover that—Lordy goodness me—some rascal had tacked a half-dozen measles quarantine signs onto the front facing of their parlor house.

As the D Street girls begin to mix deeper into the crowd, you notice an escalating departure of the righteous Christian women of the Comstock Lode. Many of them are made stiff postured and agitated by the arrival of the D Street girls, and in proactive response, they now usher away reluctant children and husbands from the increasingly ribald celebration. The presence of the working girls seems to spark something in Monk and Doten as well, and after surveying the energy pumping through the crowd, they both down their beers in one long swallow. Feeling obliged to keep pace with your mates, you fall back into the beer line as you consume the remaining contents of your glass, feeling the fresh bolus of liquid hops slosh bloatedly down into your stomach. As you continue to read the changing mood of the crowd, you sense that a certain ignition has occurred amongst the remaining celebrants—a sparked and spontaneous blaze not unlike the one that struck this place upon hearing the news that the Civil War had ended. A welcome shift in the wind, you consider, after so many monotonous days of nose down enterprise and mining.

As is oftentimes the case when things go wonderfully awry under the influence of alcohol, the good cheer and volume of the celebration seems to double with each ensuing beer, until you notice Sheriff Tom Staunton and William Sharon surveying the increasingly unruly crowd from their stand upon the podium. For awhile after the train’s arrival into Gold Hill Station, several small fish politicians—Rupert Paul and Stanford Remington—have attempted to sermonize from the podium, only both attempts fall on deaf ears as the hardier sorts of men continue to drink and carouse with a rising sense of abandon. You estimate that the crowd has diminished to roughly four hundred hardcore louts and prostitutes, which is why, you consider, Sheriff Staunton and Sharon now eyeball the crowd with a rising look of wariness.

You continue to watch Sheriff Staunton as he leans towards Sharon in conversation, both men looking up with foreboding at something up the Divide and behind your back. You turn around swiftly and follow their line of focus, catching sight of roughly a hundred or so Chinamen walking down the Divide in their customary silk pajamas, slippers and Mandarin hats. In a flash you realize that, like any group in possession of the basic human instincts of curiosity, this newly arriving contingent has ventured forth to join in with what’s left of the railroad celebration. After-all, you consider, it was the Chinese who made the railroad possible in the first place, only before you can share this view with Monk or Doten, a bristling wave of contempt seems to take hold of the remaining body of men, like a fever in times of plague.

“God damned chinks!” you hear one of the revelers proclaim.

“They got no damned place here on the Lode,” says another.

You think for a brief moment that you might make some sort of a defensive comment in favor of the Chinese, only tarred and feathered is not something you much aspire to in life, so you keep your yap shut tight and simply observe the proceeding as any good journalist would.

“Party’s over, Gentlemen,” Sheriff Staunton calls out from the podium. “Last keg’s blown and that’s all we’ve got.”

While you question the wisdom of cutting off the beer supply at precisely the moment the crowd turns surly and mean, Staunton’s proclamation seems to be taken without malice now that the focus has switched from prostitutes and beer to the menacing presence of Chinamen standing on the Divide. “What say we take this party over to C Street?” Cad Thompson yells from the center of the crowd. “The Delta Queen, so my girls can have a proper Sunday outing. And besides,” she adds. “If we march up the Divide all as once, we’ll scare the bejesus out a each a them there chinks.”

Leave it to Cad—the Lode’s very own Pied Pipetress—to diffuse even the worst of scuffles that men so primitively succumb to, and when the crowd offers up something between a laugh and a cheer, the entire group starts off up the Divide like an invading army of Visigoths plunging headlong into battle. The Chinese hold their ground for a moment as a unanimous and uncharacteristic look of concern begins to rise up in the redness of their faces. As the advancing Visigoths issue an assortment of war cries and vexations, the Chinese turn on their heels and run up the Divide like sandpipers fleeing before an inbound wave. You can’t be sure on account of all the noise erupting from the Visigoths, but you’re almost certain you hear the panicked wail of barking hyenas as the Chinese disappear over the crest of the Divide.

After what you’ve instantly coined as the Great Chinese Migration of 1869, the crowd of half drunk miners halts their charge and falls apart with great fits of laughter, back slaps and the occasional waistline fold-over as they work out the comedy of all that has transpired. “You see!” Cad calls out above the laughter, for when Cad puts her back into her lungs, so to speak, the resulting volume can break loose an avalanche of snow half a world away. “Who needs Piper’s Opera House when we can make our own entertainment with the goddamned Chinese!”

# Chapter Seventeen

Wednesday, April 7, 1869

Mackay was about to descend into the *Hale and Norcross* when the first alarm bell clamored above the steady hum of Virginia City industry. He looked at the miners who shared his cage, every face etched with heightened and immediate concern.

“Somewhere over in Gold Hill,” said Phil Swanson.

Mackay disengaged the safety latch and swung open the cage door, jogging across the wood-planked floor of the hoisting works with his fellow miners close in pursuit. Outside in the crisp morning sunlight, Mackay looked over the Divide to witness a dense column of smoke rising far up into the air.

“The *Kentuck*,” said Carl Roberts.

“The *Crown Point*,” said Walter Fusco.

“I’ve worked both and it’s neither,” said Mackay. “That’s from the *Yellow Jacket*. Billy Ralston’s prized cash cow.”

“Change of shift,” said Fusco. “Good Lord how many men?”

Mackay joined the flow of humanity packed onto lower C Street, everyone intent on crossing the Divide and offering whatever aid they could. Every face the same, Mackay noted—etched in solemn worry—all eyes glancing woefully at the column of thick black smoke billowing high up into the atmosphere.

Cresting the Divide, Mackay could see that his original assessment was correct. A dense black stovepipe of smoke arose from every window and door of the *Yellow Jacket* hoisting works, while lesser plumes erupted from the *Crown Point* and the *Kentuck*. Because of his years as principal owner of the *Kentuck,* he could visualize every smoke-filled drift, adit and cross-cut within the mine. He could imagine the choking smoke that was right now suffocating men in the tunnels below—men of his old crew—who scrambled up like desperate rats from her insidious and unforgiving bowels. Chased by fiery death they were right now clawing their way through the darkness, succumbing to the effects of flames and gas and smoke as they struggled to survive. They were passing out like flies, he considered, drawing their last, asphyxiated breaths before plunging down shafts, crashing into the volcano fire that brewed somewhere down below.

At the *Yellow Jacket,* the fear-stricken wives and children of the missing pushed their way inside the smoke-filled hoisting works with a desperate and panicked urgency. “Go back, this is no place for any of you!” Mackay yelled at them as he held his handkerchief before his nose and mouth.

*They can’t hear you, on account of their fear.*

“Where’s Pappy?” asked a small girl.

“Patrick god no, Patrick!” yelled a distraught and tearful wife.

Mackay pushed his way into the hoisting works, feeling the smoke bite at his eyes as he searched for his friend, JP Jones. The fact that Mackay and the superintendent of the *Yellow Jacket* had struck up such a deep friendship and bond surprised most everyone on the Comstock Lode, for Jones was English and Jones worked for the Bank Ring, while Mackay and Fair were seen by many as the new renegade blood of biblical David, come to unseat Goliath from his death grip stranglehold over the mining district.

*Yours is a* *friendship forged by mutual respect—two equally gifted mining men, both unashamed to get your hands bloodied by hard rock.*

Mackay saw the outlines of men toiling beneath the gallows, prompting him to bend at the waist and crouch-walk towards them beneath the worst of the smoke. Nearing the gallows, he saw a triple decker cage race up and out of Shaft Four, slamming headlong into the overhead sheaves before the engineer could realize his blind miscalculation. The miners inside the cage appeared lifeless even before the impact, Mackay noted; asphyxiated into listless unconsciousness or worse.

“Pull them out, one at a time!” Jones yelled above the fiery din.

Mackay fell in besides Jones, working beside two other men in an effort to pull one of the unconscious victims from the cage before carrying his body toward the main entrance of the hoisting works. Women and children clogged the doorway, spilling into the building despite the horrific conditions of smoke and noxious gas. “This man needs air!” Jones yelled to the anxious bystanders. “Can’t you see you’re harming his chances for survival!”

“Put him down!” Mackay yelled, looking over at Jones’s grime-covered face. “We’ve a good chance of firedamp. Only necessary men should remain in the works.”

Jones stood up and raised his hands against the inflow of women and children. “This place could explode, god damn-it, everybody back!” he yelled.

One of the women pushed through the crowd and ran up to the unconscious miner on the floor. “Jimmy!” she yelled. “Jesus god, my Jimmy!”

Jones grabbed his two miners by their shoulders, drawing them close in for a conversation. “Establish a cordon line, well back from the works. I’ll have no civilian casualties, is that understood?”

Mackay and Jones returned to the gallows in time to see the three Bichel brothers lifted up in an otherwise empty double decker at Shaft One. On the floor of the cage lay the eldest brother, Rufus, his neck snapped backwards in a gruesome and unnatural way. Younger brother, Paul, appeared unconscious as he clung by one hand to the uprights of the cage. In his other hand he gripped the torso of his younger brother, Steve, his upper body decapitated in the lift’s sudden up-rush from the bottom.

“Clear the cage!” Jones ordered his men.

Without warning the outbound smoke column at Shaft One reversed direction with such suddenness and force that Mackay felt a rush of wind whirl past his face. “Firedamp!” he yelled when he understood, only the miners were already in motion, every man well aware of what was about to transpire if they failed to distance themselves from the mouth of the shaft. The spreading conflagration had found its way to a trapped pocket of methane gas, causing a backdraft explosion that would soon release its energy on the surface with violent, incendiary consequence. Mackay and Jones draped Paul Bichel’s arms over their shoulders and carried his lifeless body from the hoisting works, Bichel’s legs and feet dragging behind them as they made their way back into daylight.

“Getback!” Jones yelled to the bystanders, just as the explosion knocked him from his feet.

Mackay dropped to the ground like a boxer felled by a punishing right hook. He shielded his head with his arms, feeling the painful bites of timber and rock as debris pelted his body with projectile force. The roar of the explosion seemed deafening and everlasting, yet through it all his mind remained focused on the tragic loss of life that had just befallen countless innocent men in the mine below. What lives had been spared the fire and choking smoke had now been extinguished by an episode of highly-explosive methane gas.

When the worst of the explosion had passed, Mackay lifted up his head to witness the bloodied faces and arms of the upended bystanders. Children began crying, as mothers rocked them hungrily in their arms. Mackay rolled over and saw that the roof of the hoisting works had been largely removed from the building, while the dense column of smoke now funneled unimpeded through the open rooftop. He looked to the *Crown Point* and noted that the smoke chimney there had doubled its output, while the *Kentuck* had reduced its output to barely a trickle.

“There’s a knock through between the *Kentuck* and the *Yellow Jacket*!” he yelled to Jones.

“Are you willing?” said Jones.

“If there’s a chance they’re alive it’s our obligation,” said Mackay.

Mackay picked himself up slowly off the ground, noting that Paul Bichel was beginning to stir beside him. “Back with the living, are we?” he offered, kneeling back down to roll Bichel gently onto his back.

“My brothers!” said Bichel.

“Gone, Lad,” said Mackay, “taken by fire.”

“I made a promise to me Mum.”

“I’m sorry, Son, it’s not your fault,” said Jones. “What happened down there? It’s important we know for the sake of the others.”

“Night shift smelled smoke around three this morning,” said Bichel, “only no one could find the source until the dayshift come on.”

“Where’d it start?” said Jones.

“Eight hundred foot level,” said Bichel.

“Above the knock through from the *Kentuck*,” Mackay said for Jones’ benefit.

“We should send down a note,” said Jones. “Anyone strong enough to make it to the knock through, we can recover them through the *Kentuck Mine*.”

“How many on shift?” said Mackay.

“Forty-eight, counting me and my brothers,” said Bichel.

“Well then let’s get to saving those we can,” said Mackay.

“You won’t find anybody alive,” said Bichel. “The gas and the heat, Sir, it’s awful bad down there.”

Mackay and Jones re-entered the hoisting works as the first firemen began to arrive with their horse-drawn pump wagons. Fire Chief Handling climbed down from the lead pumper before jogging up to Mackay and Jones. “Can you fill us in on the situation?” he said.

“Fire at the eight hundred foot level,” said Mackay. “As you can see, we’ve just lived through our first round of firedamp.”

“Any survivors?”

“Not many,” said Jones. “We’re planning a rescue through the *Kentuck* knock through.”

“We’re talking about hundreds of thousands of board feet of timber down there,” said Handling. “The only way to snuff out that much accelerant is to starve off its air supply.”

“First we save the miners,” said Mackay, “then we snuff the fire.”

Jones retrieved a pencil and paper from the small hoisting works office, along with a cigar box freshly dispatched of its contents. He flattened the paper onto the lid of the cigar box and proceeded to compose his message.

*We are fast subduing the fire. It is death to attempt to come up from where you are. The gas in the shaft produces sure and speedy death. We are attempting a rescue through the Kentuck knock through. Write a word to us and send it up on the cage. Let us know if you are alive.*

Jones and Mackay crossed the hoisting works with one of the shaft engineers, dodging piles of roofing board and rock that littered much of the wooden floor. Jones dropped the pencil and his note into the cigar box and closed the lid, setting the box on the lower deck of the Shaft Three cage. “Get her down to eight hundred feet!” Jones yelled to the engineer.

“I’ll try!” said the engineer, climbing up the ladder to the gallows deck in an attempt to lower the cage. The Shaft Three steam engine sounded weak and sporadic, prompting Mackay to open the furnace door and heave in a half-dozen fresh logs onto the dwindling fire.

When the engineer had sufficient pressure in his boiler, he released the main valve rod, letting the steam engine power up to the required RPM. He held up two crossed fingers for Jones and Mackay, then released the clutch on the giant fly wheel hoist, sending the cage on its return journey into the smoke-filled shaft. Twenty seconds later he arrested the descent at the eight hundred foot level, setting both brakes before standing up from the helm. “Hook’s in the water!” he yelled down to the others.

Chief Handling and a number of firemen pulled a pump wagon through the entrance of the demolished hoisting works, positioning the apparatus in the middle of the main floor before uncoiling a bulky line of six inch diameter fire hose. A second team uncoiled and connected multiple links of fire hose, until they could run their syphon line to a nearby holding pond.

“All those years of pumping water from the mines,” said Jones, “now we plan to flood the damned thing worse than she could ever do on her own.”

“Silent bells,” said the engineer.

Mackay and Jones looked at one another with rising understanding, their lips pursed and bloodless as they took stock in the situation. Jones pointed an outstretched index finger toward the absent roof of the hoisting works, prompting the engineer to raise the cage back to the surface. When it arrived, the cigar box remained exactly where Jones had placed it.

From the tenth gallery of the *Kentuck Mine,* Mackay led the rescue party up the Key West Crosscut, aptly named by the miners for its oppressive heat, high humidity and suffocating lack of ventilation. Every member of the twelve man team wore the latest adaptation of the Nelly Smoke Excluding Mask, invented by Anthony Lacour for the New York City Fire Department. The canvas mask and mouthpiece made the Key West Crosscut feel that much more stifling, only without the equipment, thought Mackay, no man could survive more than twenty minutes in the hellishly choking smoke.

The men worked their way up along the Denver Drift, their handheld lanterns casting ominous shadows off the smoke-hazed darkness of the tunnel. In the distance Mackay heard the steady flow of water from an underground river known as the Mighty Miss, a geothermal obstacle that had proven to be a continuous tormentor during his two years working the mine. The fire had knocked out the pumps which otherwise shunted the waters of the Mighty Miss, and he wondered how much of a challenge the river would pose to the rescuers now that she was allowed to run unimpeded and free.

Climbing up into Donnelley’s Bend, the team came face-to-face with three dead miners, huddled as a group with their backs against an outcropping of square set timber. The skin on their faces appeared parboiled and distended. Their mouths and eyes were wide open—a reflection of their last, gasping attempt to find oxygen amidst the poisonous air of the tunnel. Before the other men could round the bend, Mackay used his fingertips to close out each man’s horrid expression as best he could.

Mackay sat down next to the victims and spit out the mouthpiece of his breathing tube. “These men are from the *Yellow Jacket*.”

“I know each of them well,” said Jones, his face etched with compassion and loss.

“They cleared the knock through,” said Mackay.

“I need six men to take these boys top side,” said Jones, nodding his head when all twelve volunteers raised their hands. He waved a hand at the right half of his men, and said, “Wrap them in the canvas bags we left at the cage. No wife or child or friend should be made to see this.”

“We need help,” came a raspy voice, somewhere in the darkness in front of the rescuers.

Mackay turned his head to follow the sound of the voice, raising up his lantern to throw light farther up the adit. Mackay and Jones crawled on their hands and knees around the last of Donnelley’s Bend, their lanterns spilling light upon Peter Willowby and Alex Brown. Mackay knew both men from his years working the *Kentuck*—two committed hard rock miners of good standing and impeccable work ethic—only the men he looked upon now had been brutalized by what Mackay surmised to be the result of the firedamp explosion. The last time Mackay had seen these men, both had sported full beards and healthy shocks of hair. Now they appeared hairless and singed, their shirts mere remnants of charred cloth that clung like blown out sails against the sunburned red of their hairless chests.

Jones spit out his mouthpiece and smiled at the men. “Damned if you boys aren’t a welcome sight!” he said.

“I’m going home,” said Willowby.

“Can you walk?” asked Mackay.

“Pottsville, Pennsylvania,” said Willowby. “My parents have a farm there. Waist high wheat, as far as a man can see.”

“Something happened to his mind,” said Brown. “He’s been rattling like this ever since the blast.”

“Any time I want,” said Willowby. “My parents kept my room exactly the way it was ‘fore I came west.”

“Well then let’s go see them,” said Mackay, standing up into a low crouch before attempting to lift Willowby to his feet by cradling his hand beneath the injured man’s arm.

“You’ll take me?” said Willowby, wincing in pain as he struggled to his feet.

When the rest of the volunteers had rounded Donnelley’s Bend, Jones signaled toward the two survivors. “These men go first,” he said. “It’ll help morale topside.”

“As for the rest of us,” said Mackay, “I say we keep on for more survivors. The dead are in no hurry anymore.”

Mackay led the way up the remaining turns of Donnelley’s Bend, feeling the heat of the Mighty Miss as they neared the underground geyser. The sound of rushing water hissed from the active vent, and as Mackay climbed up into the crosscut, he felt the instant drench of sauna-like moisture as it pressed upon his face and neck. Holding his lantern in front of him, Mackay noted that the stream of escaping water was flowing cleanly down the Van de Camp Drift, which meant they could make their way up the northern face of the gallery, bypassing any threat from the scalding hot water.

“Let’s be quick through the gallery,” said Jones, “before the heat takes our strength.”

Mackay walked across the dry side of the gallery, climbing up into the Copernicus Adit, which had made him a rich man less than twelve months prior.

*The heat of the Mighty Miss nearly steered you away from three and a half million in bullion. Always trust your instincts, John, for they never fail you when you listen with all your heart.*

Approaching the knock through, Mackay felt the steady blast of wind as it rushed past his face. “Fueling up for another firedamp!” he yelled to Jones above the roar.

Clearing the Copernicus for the eighth gallery, Mackay stood up straight in an effort to work out the stiffness in his back. The remaining rescue party did the same, and when their combined lantern light illuminated the otherwise pitch black gallery, the men were able to make out the bloated corpses of a dozen deceased miners. Mackay walked closer, until he could witness the true horror of their condition, for the flesh on each man’s face appeared melted and putrified, despite the short passage of times since the fire had broken out. The dead men were huddled around a disconnected air pipe, and Mackay had little trouble imagining their final efforts to find a source for life-sustaining oxygen.

“I’ve seen enough,” said Jones, standing beside Mackay as he looked down upon the victims. “A man’s instinct is to climb up and out of danger, not farther down the hole. From here on out, we’ll find no man alive.”

“Mark my words, Gentlemen,” said Mackay. “Adolph Sutro will make great hay with what has transpired on this most despicable day in Comstock history. He will rile up the miners over the need for his tunnel. He will insist that the deceased men would still be alive if his tunnel had been been in place as an escape route.”

“Would he be wrong?” asked Jones.

“Not in the least,” answered Mackay. “Let’s see if Ralston and Sharon can keep Sutro down now that the *Yellow Jacket* has taken so many fine men.”

# Chapter Eighteen

Friday, June 14, 1872

Tucked into his favorite smoking jacket and fur-lined slippers, Sharon eased himself onto a leather chair in his parlor room above the bank, feeling warmed by the prospect of a night completely absent of the outside world. He sipped brandy from a snifter set upon a small side table, staring mindlessly at the nearby fire as he thought back over the harried last three days since he’d thrown his name into the race for Nevada’s lone senate seat. Despite his desire to be residing in his opulent new home in San Francisco, Virginia City, by appearance and necessity, would be his sole place of residence until his election to the senate was officially conferred.

Sharon unfolded his copy of the *Territorial Enterprise* and reread Joe Goodman’s scathing piece about his return to the Comstock Lode.

**The Veteran Returns—William Tecumseh Sharon**

You are probably aware that you have returned to a community where you are feared, hated and despised. Your career in Nevada for the past nine years has been one of merciless rapacity. You fastened yourself upon the vitals of the State like a hyena, and woe to him who disputes with you a single coveted morsel of your prey. You cast honor, honesty and the commonest civilities of life aside. You broke faith with men whenever you could subserve your purpose by so doing. You robbed stockholders with an unscrupulousness that would have shamed a common highwayman. As Agent of the Bank of California, you converted an institution that should have been a public aid and blessing into an instrument of tyranny and usurpation. Though indignant, the people propose no bodily harm. Your punishment shall be to walk our thoroughfares and feel that you are despised by every honest man. To know that every individual who is prompted by interest to clasp your hand shall feel himself contaminated by its touch, and hasten home to wash away the stain. To such honors and hospitalities, Mr. Sharon, we cordially welcome you on behalf of the people. If your unlawfully acquired millions can compensate you for such universal contempt and execration, your sojourn may possibly prove pleasant to you. If not, may it happily be mutually unendurable and brief.

Goodman and his underling, Dan DeQuille, had mounted a nearly seamless and nonstop smear campaign of a most ruthless nature, publishing article upon article lambasting his character and business ethics, painting him out as the right hand man to the Devil himself. The attacks were the result of envy and jealousy, he reassured himself—that age old struggle between the haves and the have nots. The losers in life always take pot shots at the winners, summoning social conscience and a twisted sense of moral condemnation in an attempt to justify their personal failures against the reflections of the self-made rich.

Sharon’s Chinese manservant, Ah Ki, entered the parlor room, laboring under a tray of food that he had prepared for Sharon’s dinner. Dressed in his usual Chinese slippers, silk pajamas and Mandarin hat, he shuffled across the carpeted floor with small, rapid footsteps, setting the tray gently upon a modest dining table at the opposite end of the room. “For you dinner, Mistah Sharon,” he said, bowing deeply at the waist.

Sharon refolded his copy of the *Enterprise* and stood up to walk across the room. Approaching the table, he examined Ki’s culinary handiwork of roasted quail, au gratin potatoes and sautéed haricot vert. “You’re a constant wonderment, Ah,” he said, letting Ki seat him in one of the high-backed dining chairs. “Where on earth did you learn to cook like this?”

“My mother big big chef in China,” said Ki. “Cook for French Ambassador. She teach me everything I know.”

“That she did,” said Sharon, unfolding his napkin onto his lap before picking up his silverware for a first taste.

Ki removed an envelope from the left sleeve of his pajamas, setting in on the table next to Sharon before making a hasty retreat from the room. Sharon looked at the envelop and halted his first taste of quail mere inches from his mouth. “What’s this?” he said.

“Came for you five minute ago,” said Ki.

Sharon fed himself his first bite of quail—perfectly cooked, with a rich and subtle blend of rosemary, thyme, lemon and garlic. He picked up the envelope and saw that the return address was from the International Hotel. He dug his thumb under the flap and ripped open the top, removing a small, folded piece of paper. When he opened up the letter he recognized Ralston’s handwriting before he had the chance to read any of the words:

To our friend and colleague, William Sharon:

Sorry for the late notice, Bill, but Darius and I have just arrived in Virginia City. We would very much like a meeting with you regarding official bank business. Tonight if possible.

Respectfully,

W.C. Ralston

Sharon set down the letter and fed himself a bite of au gratin potatoes, letting the request from his business partners filter into his thoughts. He had seen them not four days ago in San Francisco—five productive days of meetings at the Bank of California—and they had made no mention of a scheduled trip to the Comstock Lode. In fact, their meetings had been so productive that he had left town with no pressing demands left on the table without at least some level of scheduled resolution. So why the need for an impromptu meeting, he thought? Why the sudden compulsion to follow him over the Sierras, just three days after his own departure from San Francisco? Was it not part of their tacit understanding that matters relating to the Comstock were the responsibility and authority of William Sharon and William Sharon alone?

Sharon plated his knife and fork, resting his napkin on the right side of his place setting. His appetite was suddenly gone, and he stood up to walk into his bedroom to change back into his street clothes. Stepping into his pants, he felt Ki’s presence in the room, and he turned enough to see his manservant standing rigidly in the doorway. “I’m sorry, Ah,” he offered.

“Why Mistah Sharon no eat?”

“Mister Sharon must leave for a meeting with Monsieurs Ralston and Mills.”

“I spend three hour make you dinner!”

“I’m sorry, Ah,” Sharon offered again. “Please, sit down at the table and enjoy your own handiwork.”

Sharon flipped up the collar of his duster, shielding his face and neck from the biting cold of a Washoe summer night. C Street was teeming with nightlife—drunken, staggering miners, barkers and snake oil salesmen pitching miracle cures, and of course the usual cadre of street musicians and random performers on nearly every conceivable stretch of wooden sidewalk. Virginia City in summer resembled more of a carnival than an industrial mining town, only there it was, he thought as he walked—that underlying industrial pulse that permeated the city at any hour of the day or night. Behind all the gaiety of C Street stood the constant base note of hoisting works and stamp mills in full thundering production. After nine years of living and sleeping amidst the constant rumble of the Lode, Sharon was more than a little relieved to know that his time here would soon be at end.

Sharon entered the lobby of the International Hotel, crossing the plush sitting lounge to stand before the Concierge positioned near the Lobby Bar. “Mister Sharon!” welcomed Sam Dasher from behind the desk. “So good of you to join us this evening.”

“Would you be kind enough to send a man up to Mister Ralston’s room? He’s asked that I join him for a meeting.”

Dasher signaled one of his bellboys, who set off immediately for the stairs with his instructions, prompting Sharon to remove a silver dollar coin from his pocket before sliding it across the desk toward Dasher. “For the lad when he returns,” he said.

“Most generous of you, Sir,” said Dasher. “You’ll spoil him with such a liberal tip.”

“I feel certain you’ll find a way to reduce some of its liberalness, so as not to spoil the boy too thoroughly.”

Sharon sat down in the sitting lounge and took note of the many faces glancing casually in his direction. Since his bid for the senate, his name and reputation had been dragged through the papers so frequently that by now he had no trouble comprehending that he was open fodder for any number of wagging tongues and whispered conversations. Before Sharon could be made to feel uncomfortable by the attention, the young bellboy returned with a polite bow at Sharon’s side. “Mister Ralston requests your company in his suite room, Sir,” said the boy, prompting Sharon to stand up and follow the bellboy across the lobby and into a waiting moving room.

Sharon walked to the back of the tiny room and turned to watch the bellboy draw closed the grated metal door before working the small lever that controlled the ascent and descent of the four foot square lift. The International Hotel’s moving room was the first of its kind on the West Coast, and despite the safety assurances of the hotel manager, Sharon felt a certain degree of discomfort in the fact that his life now relied entirely on the merits of modern technology. Riding in the moving room never failed to trigger remembrances of snapped cables and plunging shaft cages—living memories from the early days of the Comstock Lode, thought Sharon, when a man’s life could be snuffed out in one last heartbeat of sheer, plunging terror.

The bellboy opened the door at the fourth floor landing, stepping aside for Sharon to exit the lift. “The Franklin Suite, Sir,” said the bellboy, “three doors down on your right.”

Sharon knocked on the door to the Franklin Suite, waiting only moments before Ralston opened it and smiled in his usual welcoming manner. “And you thought you’d seen the last of us!” he offered, stepping aside to let Sharon enter the suite.

“I’ll admit your note took me by surprise,” said Sharon, shaking hands with Darius Mills before removing his duster and draping it over a nearby love seat. “What’s this about, Gentlemen?”

“Can we offer you a cognac?” said Ralston.

“You can offer me answers to my question,” said Sharon. “I feel quite put upon by your arrival in Virginia City, so quickly after what I thought were quite successful meetings down in San Francisco.”

“We have concerns about the pummeling we’re receiving in the papers,” said Mills, “ever since you announced your candidacy for the U.S. Senate.”

“Not so much the personal attacks on Darius or myself,” said Ralston, “but the ones about the bank, William. It’s being made out to be something insidious and sinister. European capitalists have liquidated their Comstock holdings because they’ve lost confidence in the bank’s ability to manage its public relations affairs.”

“Have you ever known a political campaign free from mud slinging?” said Sharon.

“Your decision to run should not adversely affect the rest of us,” said Mills.

“Why didn’t you bring up these concerns four days ago when I told you of my plans?” said Sharon.

“Because four days ago these latest accusations had yet to see the light of day,” said Ralston.

“What accusations do you speak of?” said Sharon.

Mills lifted a copy of the *Silver City Gazette* from the coffee table, which was laid open atop a small stack of similar West Coast newspapers. “This publisher, Samuel Bowles,” said Mills. “Through interviews with sundry mine superintendents under the bank’s employ, he managed to hash out the fact that you have accused your senatorial opponent of deliberately setting the *Yellow Jacket* fire.”

Sharon thought about the planted story against his opponent, JP Jones, who had been nicknamed by the *Territorial Enterprise* ‘the Commoner’ as a means of juxtaposing Jones’ modest fortune against the enormous personal estate of his opponent. At the same time, Sharon felt his bitter acrimony regarding the stock collusion concocted by Alvinza Hayward and JP Jones, which had driven the price of *Savage* stock from $62 a share to $725—a conspiracy that had cost the bank serious financial loss, and Ralston the loss of two of his closest personal friends. “After what happened with the *Savage*,” he said to Ralston, “I should think that any attack on Jones would be a welcome occurrence.”

“Nonetheless,” said Ralston, “the bank has a reputation to uphold.”

“Bowles goes on to cite your disagreement with area ranchers over local water rights,” said Mills, pacing the spacious suite as he read further from the *Silver City Gazette*. “A San Francisco court upheld the rancher’s right to share in the water used by the mills, only through bribery and underhanded deals with local officials, Mister Sharon managed to tear out two dams along the Carson River, thereby depriving ranchers of much needed water. Mister Sharon then hired John D. Ludwig to police water rights in favor of the Union Mill and Mining Company, with what can only be deemed a complete and iron hand.”

“He goes on to describe how our logging operations have devastated Sierra timberlands for a hundred mile radius,” said Ralston, “depriving citizens of both California and Nevada of one of their most prized resources and natural wonders.”

“All true points,” said Sharon. “Whether you wish to acknowledge your participation in these facts is entirely up to you. Nonetheless they do exist, and you have been party to their creation from the very start.”

“As a budding politician,” said Mills, “you must surely comprehend the need for subtlety and evasiveness when it comes to concealing truths from the general public.”

“How on earth could you let your man Alf Doten suggest that you were a Civil War hero?” said Ralston.

“I had nothing to do with that,” said Sharon. “This war business was a fabrication entirely of his own making.”

Ralston read from a back copy of the *Territorial Enterprise*. “Instead of charging the enemy at Vicksburg, writes our friend Goodman, Sharon was charging usurious interest rates on call loans. Instead of bleeding for his country at Fair Oaks or Fredericksburg or Chattanooga he bled the Comstock Lode, not to mention the fair and honest people of Nevada. He then goes on to publish a letter from a disgruntled San Francisco investor, indicating that you should be assassinated in the name of fair play, of which Goodman responds that Sharon belongs to Virginia City, and that our individual right to put an end to his life must not be trespassed upon by outsiders.”

“Goodman’s an ass,” said Sharon.

“Goodman’s an influential ass,” said Mills. “That alone makes him dangerous. He goes on to call Alf Doten your ‘Chief Organ Grinder.’ You should have bought off Goodman rather than Doten. That way none of this would be happening.”

“Then there’s this gem of a piece by Dan DeQuille.” Ralston began reading from yet another edition of the *Territorial Enterprise*. “Again he asserts that the people of Nevada paid for the construction of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad, while Mister Sharon pockets a mere twelve thousand dollars a day from its most profitable operation. He goes on to claim that the *Yellow Jacket* has yielded thirteen million in profits, with only two point one million finding its way into any form of a dividend payment to shareholders. He claims that the profits were absorbed into the Union Mill and Mining Company.”

“Another true point of fact duly concocted by the three of us,” said Sharon. “See here, Gentlemen, what would you have me do about all this public calamity?”

“Withdraw from the race,” said Ralston.

Sharon gave Ralston a blank stare in response, finally looking to Mills to read the same deadpan expression on the faces of both business partners. “You can’t be serious!”

“On top of all this mounting bad press,” said Ralston, “Jones has now threatened to build a competitive rail line onto the Comstock Lode. Our business interests simply cannot be messed with, William, you of anyone must see this as a glaring threat to our authority.”

“We’re asking that you set up a meeting with Jones to discuss this matter man-to-man,” said Mills. “In exchange for your withdrawal from the race for Nevada’s senate seat, he must promise to put his endorsement behind the Virginia and Truckee Railroad.”

“You’re, serious,” Sharon said with complete understanding now.

“Yes, very serious,” said Ralston.

“It’s imperative that you put your business interests ahead of your political aspirations,” said Mills.

“It’s also imperative for your political future that you drop out now in an effort to shore up your image for a bid two year’s hence,” said Ralston.

“You’re suggesting that I step down and then run again in Seventy-four?” said Sharon.

“We are,” said Mills. “After, that is, you purchase the *Territorial Enterprise* and make that rabid bunch of swine write nice about the bank and your contributions to local society.”

“Because of our assistance in making you one of the wealthiest men on the Coast,” said Ralston, “is it not your responsibility to bend to the needs of our common business interests?”

“What you’re asking is immensely difficult,” said Sharon.

“What we’re asking is comparatively small in light of the opportunities we have provided you,” said Mills.

“I have been and always will be a self-made man,” said Sharon.

“Self-made is a gross misunderstanding of the truth, my friend,” said Ralston. “If you wish to test your statement, William, then defy our requests and see how rapidly your happiness and well-being can disintegrate from a man’s good fortune.”

# Chapter Nineteen

Monday, September 9, 1872

“I’ve heard the talk,” said Fair. “People think I’ve lost my instinct for mining.”

“Perhaps we both have,” said Mackay. “Nearly all our money gone, and not a single pebble worth sending to the mills.”

Mackay and Fair sat in the Washoe Millionaire’s Club, sipping their whiskeys alongside Pat Cooper, superintendent of the *Gould and Curry*. “Why not go to the bottom of my mine, then drift south into the *Con Virginia*?” said Cooper. “We’re at twelve hundred feet as of yesterday. From there you can drift under the deepest part of the *Best & Belcher*, straight into the *Con Virginia* at a depth never before tried.”

“Sharon would never allow that,” said Fair.

“Sharon’s been enjoying your borrasca quite enthusiastically,” said Cooper. “Watching you two burn through all your winnings from the *Hale and Norcross* gives him immense satisfaction that he’s still the residing king of the Comstock.”

“Do I detect that perhaps you’re not all that fond of the man?” said Mackay.

“He’s a hard man for fondness,” said Cooper.

“Why, then, would he let us drift from his property?” said Fair.

“Because that way he can take some of your money,” said Cooper, “a fee to remove your tailings through his shaft.”

Mackay looked across the barroom to the poker tables set up near the front windows, eyeing Sharon as the rail thin stick of a man puffed on a cigar and contemplated a freshly dealt hand of cards. “Perhaps we should ask him,” he said.

“I have need to speak with him about a business matter,” said Cooper. “If you’d like, I can ask on your behalf.”

“Perhaps he’s on to something,” Fair said when Cooper had departed the table. “Every geologist on the Lode keeps telling us the main fissure lies deeper than any man has gone?”

“Have you a report from Flood and O’Brien?” said Mackay.

“Just this morning,” said Fair. “So far they’ve managed to buy up seventy-five percent of all outstanding shares of *Con Virginia* stock. They’re holding off on additional buys until we give them some sort of a nod.”

Mackay looked on as Cooper bent down beside Sharon and began talking beside Sharon’s left ear. “We’re down to twenty-five thousand in cash,” said Mackay. “If we’re wrong about drifting under the *Best & Belcher,* then we’ll be officially out of chances by the end of the month.”

Mackay raised his rock glass towards Sharon when the banker glanced his way. Sharon nodded slightly in reply, and Mackay had no problem understanding that the discussion between Sharon and his superintendent now centered on Mackay’s request to drift into the *Con Virginia* through the floor of the *Gould and Curry*. And there is was, thought Mackay—a twinkling little gleam, firing like a spark in Sharon’s eyes.

Because he can’t resist a profit, thought Mackay, particularly at the expense of his rivals.

Cooper returned to the table and sat back down in his seat, lifting his whiskey glass with a wink toward Mackay. “You’re in,” he said.

“What’s his fee?” said Mackay.

“Three dollars a ton,” said Cooper.

Sensing that Sharon was watching him, Mackay did his best not to show surprise at the exorbitant fee. “Why the greedy little bastard,” he managed with a smile.

“It’s what he does best,” said Cooper, smiling in reply.

“Tell him we’ll take his offer,” said Fair. “Three dollars a ton is a far cry cheaper than digging five hundred feet in the *Con Virginia*.”

“And if we find nothing?” said Mackay.

“If we find nothing,” said Fair, “then I, for one, am done with this business of hard rock mining for the rest of my bloody life.”

Wednesday, September 18, 1872

Mackay raised his lantern to the bore, using his free hand to run his fingers across the paper thin shard of pure silver ore. They had lost this sliver no less than seven times over the past nine days of drifting, only here it was again, no larger than before, yet still pointing them to a space directly beneath the existing shafts of the *Con Virginia*. “It’s like she’s leading us,” he said for Fair’s benefit.

“The suspense could very well call me to an early grave,” said Fair.

Mackay rechecked the dozen charges of Nobel’s Blasting Powder that had been drilled into the rock face surrounding the sliver vein, insuring that the fuses were properly braided for an even detonation. He looked to his shift foreman, Sam Yelton, and gave the man a slap on the back. Let’s ring the bell,” he said with a smile.

“Clear for detonation!” Yelton called out to his men.

Mackay and Fair followed their crew back along the drift that led into the base of the *Gould and Curry Mine*—a gentle dog leg left followed by two hard turns to the right. Two hundred feet from the blast site, the men knelt down around the magneto plunger, while Yelton threaded the electrical cable to the terminal screw-downs. “Fire in the hole!” Yelton yelled out before raising up the t-handle and driving it down into the wooden plunger box.

Mackay tucked his arms around his head as the detonation shook the earth beneath his body, setting off a series of groaning complaints from the long row of square set timbers that supported the walls and ceiling of the drift. Several seconds after the blast, Mackay felt the quartz dust begin to rain down upon his exposed neck. Keeping his nose and mouth shielded from the dust until the worst of it was over, he felt his pulse quicken with the ongoing thrill of the hunt.

*Five thousand dollars spent in nine frantic days of chasing down a sliver vein.* *Damn you hard rock! Will you take the last of my money without even a penny in reply?*

When the worst of the quartz dust had settled, Mackay and Fair raised up their bandanas to shield their nose and mouth from the lingering choke of the dust, following Yelton and the mining crew back toward the freshly detonated bore. Mackay felt gritty with quartz dust and sweat, only his focus on chasing the sliver vein drove away any real sense of discomfort. “Look at this!” Fair called out when he was kneeling atop the fresh rubble pile at the leading edge of the drift. “She’s widened significantly.”

Mackay knelt down next to Fair and held his lantern up to help illuminate the bore. The sliver was no longer a sliver, he concluded, for the vein of blue rock was now a good inch and a half wide, running the full vertical length of the leading edge of the drift. “Where’s our assay man?” he said.

“Behind you, Sir,” said Johann Schultz.

Schultz joined Mackay, Fair and Yelton at the bore, running his hand over the thickest part of the vein. “She’s quite pure, ya?” said the Prussian. “Perhaps the purest I’ve seen.

“What’s your gut?” said Mackay.

“Five hundred dollars a ton,” said Schultz.

“Those are rare numbers,” said Fair.

“Ya,” said Schultz. “Only twice in thirteen years of digging have I seen such a thing.”

Thursday, September 19, 1872

Mackay sat down on the fresh rock pile next to his business partner, shaking his head as his mind reviewed all the failed bonanzas and spent fortunes that his years of hard rock mining had handed him. Somehow what was happening beneath the main shafts of the *Con Virginia* was out of sorts with his track record of bad luck and protracted borrasca. Only now it appeared as though his luck had changed with a strike that had all the makings of a record breaker. They had chased the sliver vein until it reached a width of an inch and a half, then a foot, and now this wonder of all wonders—nothing but blue rock from one side of the drift to the other, top to bottom, above and below, and well out to both sides no matter how far they explored in any given direction. “Have you ever heard of something this big?” he said to Fair.

“Years ago I read an account from the Planchas de Plata region in Mexico,” said Fair. “Back in the seventeen hundreds, a place known as the *Corona Mine* hit a vein almost five feet wide.”

“This looks to be four times that,” said Yelton. “Hell, maybe more.”

“We need absolute silence above ground,” said Mackay. “Not a word to the press or we’ll find ourselves smack dab in a stock run.”

“I’ve already cautioned the lads,” said Yelton. “The whole lot will lose their jobs if so much as word one leaks out.”

“Let’s give them a stake in the matter,” said Mackay. “If we can make it to Thanksgiving without a word on the street, each man will receive a twenty dollar bonus, just in time for the holidays.”

“In the meantime,” said Fair, “one of us must get word to Flood and O’Brien. For obvious reasons, no word of this can be allowed to travel by telegraph.”

“You’re the superintendent,” said Mackay. “Communicating with Flood and O’Brien will fall to me.”

“We must resume digging from the *Con Virginia*,” said Fair. “As soon as Sharon finds out we’re in bonanza, he’ll triple his transport fee through the *Gould and Curry*.”

“We must quietly put crews to working in the *Con Virginia*,” said Mackay, “all the while keeping up steady withdrawals through the *Gould and Curry*. Nothing must seem out of sorts, nothing that might alert Sharon or San Francisco about the presence of a strike.”

“I’ll tend to matters here,” said Fair. “You make sure Flood and O’Brien know what’s at stake if they fail to buy up every last share of *Con Virginia* stock. And steady now, all of us, Gentlemen, for this freak of a vein could peter out just as quickly as she arrived.”

Monday, September 23, 1872

Mackay sat at the bar at the Auction Lunch, listening to the steady gripes from the brokers who ambled in sporadically from the neighboring San Francisco Mining and Exchange. Their lunchtime mood was one of depression and gloom, which made his secret knowledge of what was happening beneath the *Con Virginia* just that much more intoxicating.

“This time the Lode has washed out for good,” said a man three stools down. “The *Ophir*, the *Mexican*, not a single mine on the Lode is trading for more than twenty dollars a share.”

“A lot of fortunes have been wiped out in the process,” said another, “including my own.”

“You’re in good stead,” said a broker to Mackay’s right. “I bought *Savage* at two hundred a share. As of ten minutes ago, she was trading for nine measly dollars.”

Flood delivered a beer to the *Savage* loser, glancing at Mackay long enough to give his partner one of the briefest, most innocuous of winks. “How many times has the Comstock looked like doom and gloom,” said the barman, “only to rocket back on the next great find.”

“This time she’s finished,” said the broker. “Dried up like an old spent whore.”

“And what about you, Mister Flood,” said a man to Mackay’s right. “How much have you and your partners spent on that borrasca-eating *Con Virginia*?”

Flood smiled as he polished his bar with a terrycloth rag. “All the more reason to keep my day job,” he said. “Mining may be an uncertain mistress, but never so for food and drink.”

“Despite all this borrasca mess,” said a broker to Mackay’s immediate left, “we boys at the Exchange think you Irish are up to something crafty down in the *Con Virginia*.”

“That we are,” said Mackay. “Crafty enough to blow my *Hale and Norcross* winnings on a worthless pile of limestone and quartz.”

“No one’s buying that,” said another man to Mackay’s right. “You boys have been way too quiet for way too long. Worst part is your miners. Our snitches on the Lode can’t seem to make any of them talk, no matter how much free booze we pour down their gullets.”

“You’re welcome to try that approach on me,” Mackay offered with a smile. “O’Brien, do you suppose you can draw me a beer on account?”

O’Brien set down a fresh plate of food in front of Mackay’s place at the bar—tender braised pork roast, boiled potatoes and a steaming serving of corned beef and cabbage. “Not a devil’s chance in hell,” he said, flashing Mackay one of his trademark smiles. “Any man can see that you’re a bad credit risk, what with that money-sucking quartz mine of yours.”

After the lunch rush was over, Flood and O’Brien left the Auction Lunch in the capable hands of their two junior partners, setting off with Mackay for a stroll around the city and a chance to talk in private. “For the life of me, I’ve never heard of a vein this large,” said O’Brien, continuing to work his walking cane with an almost gleeful extra parry to his step. “For the life of me, I can’t stop the smile from rising up on me face.”

“Fair has rightly urged each of us to remain sober about the find,” said Mackay. “This widening could be a fluke, an anomaly or a bubble. She could continue to widen into the greatest bonanzas the world has ever known, or she could narrow back down a to sliver of little consequence. We must temper our enthusiasm until the full scope of the find can be properly assessed.”

“When will that be?” said O’Brien.

“We’ve two teams pulling high grade ore from the *Gould and Curry*, another three teams in the *Con Virginia* trying to reach the strike field. As for the teams in the *Gould and Curry*, so far they haven’t been able to find the edge of the vein, no matter which way they dig.”

“How wide have you explored?” said Flood.

“Twenty feet in every direction,” said Mackay.

“Good Lord,” said O’Brien. “That’s impossibly large.”

“I must admit,” said Mackay, “the whole thing is straight out of a dream.”

“How is it that no stock snitch or mine reporter has helped himself to a look at the rock coming out of the *Gould and Curry*?” said Flood.

“Because we’ve tarped every load as she exits the hoisting works,” said Mackay. “All our rock has been sent down to Reese’s Mill in Carson City, so that no one on the Lode can have a look at the assay reports.”

“Such a secret can’t last forever,” said O’Brien.

“Exactly why you two must finish your business without the slightest indication of what you’re up to.”

“And just exactly what shall we use for money?” said Flood.

“The ore we’re pulling from the *Gould and Curry* assays at six hundred a ton,” said Mackay. “That’s enough to make payroll and purchase stock, provided we can keep the speculators from catching wind of what we’re up to. I’m also in discussions with Sharon about a bridge loan.”

“He’ll require something held in collateral,” said Flood, “of which we have none.”

“What we have is the *Con Virginia*,” said Mackay. “Sharon and Ralston feel bested by our takeover, which means we’ve a great chance to rub salt in their already wounded pride. I personally will take great pleasure in using the Bank of California’s money to tide us through until we own one hundred percent of the stock.”

“Forgive me if I repeat myself,” said O’Brien, “but when will we know with any certainty about the true size of our find?”

“At the pace we’re moving,” said Mackay, “somewhere near the first of the year would be my safest estimate.”

“Investors are inclined to unload their bad positions before the start of a new year,” said Flood. “Such a timeline should play nicely into our hands in terms of purchasing the remaining shares at below market value.”

“Between you and me, Gentlemen,” said Mackay, “I’ve seen this chamber with my own eyes. Some years back I swore that if I ever made twenty-five thousand dollars in a metals strike, then I would retire to the life of a gentleman farmer. From all that I’ve seen in the belly of the *Con Virginia*, my guess now is that each of us will retire with a thousand times that amount.”

# Chapter Twenty

Friday, October 4, 1872

Sipping bitter coffee in the main press room of the *Territorial Enterprise*, you put your feet up on your desk and consider the Trial of Socrates in the year 399 BC. Socrates, one of the greatest philosopher thinkers of his day, was accused by his student body of corrupting the youth of ancient Greece, as well as the sin of not sufficiently kowtowing to the likes of God, or Gods, as was the polytheistic bent of the day. Rather than concede to political persecution on the matter, Socrates chose to take his life in the form of a lethal dose of hemlock. Likewise, Giordano Bruno, the famous Italian philosopher and astronomer was burned at the stake during the Roman Inquisition, for his beliefs in heliocentrism and an infinite universe, all in a time when the prevailing religious conviction maintained that the earth was without question the center of the universe.

Next you think of Sir Walter Raleigh, the soldier and explorer who engineered the ill-fated English colony at Roanoke, Virginia. One of Queen Elizabeth’s most favored courtiers, our man Raleigh was knighted in the year 1585, only to find himself imprisoned in the Tower of London for thirteen long years, accused by the Queen’s successor of plotting insurrection against King James the First. Raleigh spent his prison years devoted to the study of science and the universe, all the while writing his great work, *The History of the World,* while biding his time until the King got over his paranoid delusions and set the man free.

And it is the example of these great men, you consider, that will carry you through the coming years of imprisonment and capitulation to your new owner and potentate, William Sharon, for by assuming possession of the *Territorial Enterprise,* the man has forced you to acknowledge your own willingness to sell your soul for the security of a lasting and recurrent paycheck.

“You’ll be fired if he finds out you wrote this thing,” says Charlie Parker, one of the other sellouts who remains on staff now that Sharon decides what seasoned journalists should write about. Parker tosses the handwritten copy of your article back atop your desk, and says, “It’s damn good, by the way.”

“William Wright became Dan DeQuille when he moved west in search of journalistic freedom,” you say. “Now Dan DeQuille becomes Linus St. Clair. A clean break from the past.”

“I wish I had your courage,” says Parker.

“If I had courage, I would have walked from this place the moment Sharon took control.”

When Parker moves off to his writing desk, you pick up the article he has recently returned to you, giving the piece one final read before committing it to the U.S. Mail.

**Sutro’s Tunnel Reaches Milestone**

**9,000 feet into Mt. Davidson, 17,000 feet to go!**

By Linus St. Clair

Sutro City, Nevada

Not many reporters can boast that they have witnessed the rise of a phoenix from its humble first steps into a state of full-on flight. I speak of Virginia City, Nevada, in concert with Gold Hill, Dayton and the remaining outlier districts of the Comstock Silver Lode, where for twelve straight years now, men of stout character have pulled no less than $210,000,000.00 dollars from one of the most unforgiving landscapes on earth.

Hard rock mining is a business not for the faint of heart nor those lacking in stamina, courage and a gambler’s eyes for possessing just the right hand at exactly the right moment in time. Great fortunes have been made by men possessing such pokeresque qualities, including the likes of George Hearst, James Haggin and Lloyd Tervis. At the same time, men of greed and self-interest have profited equally, albeit unfairly, from the Comstock Lode, including ignoble men like William Sharon, Billy Ralston and the remaining profit-driven rascals at the Bank of California. However, this particular examination focuses exclusively on the Herculean efforts of Adolph Sutro, a man who has persevered despite the near constant harpoons chucked at him by William Ralston and his nefarious companions known as the Bank Ring.

Prior to spending an afternoon with Mr. Sutro and his hands-on style of tunnel construction management, I took the time to dust off my recollection of Sutro’s long struggle to find legitimacy and support from the investment communities in New York, London and San Francisco. Mr. Sutro first voiced his enthusiasm for a rescue and support tunnel into the Comstock Lode in the year of our Lord 1864. While initially favoring the tunnel project with both their endorsement and monetary promissory, Ralston’s Bank Ring, which has long monopolized the lions share of profits from Comstock mining, ultimately reversed their support when they determined that Sutro’s tunnel would erode their authority over the district.

The Bank Ring’s opposition propelled Sutro into a seven year struggle to gain acceptance and funding for his project, nearly bankrupting the man as he repeatedly lobbied congress for a federally-back loan. Mr. Ralston employed no less than three full-time solicitors in Washington to counteract any and all attempts by Sutro to bring his tunnel project to the floor of the House, and despite the untimely death of his staunch advocate, Thaddeus Stevens, Sutro finally gained his coveted home endorsement from the Virginia City Miners’ Union after the tragic fire in the *Yellow Jacket Mine* that took the lives of 45 innocent men. After a $50,000.00 investment by the Miners’ Union, congress awarded Sutro $2,000,000.00 to complete his tunnel, which then inspired financial participation by the banking houses of McCalmont and Seligman. The two banks, plus private investors such as Lewis Richard Price, advanced Sutro all the money he now requires to complete his massive dig.

Earlier this year, however, a congressional House Ways and Means report suddenly reversed its prior assessments about Sutro’s tunnel, deeming the project wholly unnecessary for the extraction of ore from the Comstock Lode. Knowing that the true architects of this reversal was none other than the Bank Ring, and acting as his own attorney on the matter, Sutro cross-examined the three commissioners who wrote the report, revealing to every member of congress that the commissioner’s visits to the mining district had been orchestrated and paid for by none other than Billy Ralston and the Bank of California, and that their information reflected that which had been fed to them by agents of the bank. Sutro’s evidence against the Bank Ring was so deeply offensive to the House Committee on Mines and Mining, that the Committee unanimously agreed to uphold their original endorsement, plus the extension of a bonus line of credit should Sutro run into unforeseen difficulties along the way.

The following paragraphs have been copied verbatim from my diary relating to the events of October 19, 1869, witnessing the first axe fall of Sutro’s tunnel and the birth of Sutro City, some three miles northeast of Dayton Nevada:

“Awake! Arm! Arm!” read the hand bills which Adolph Sutro has plastered on nearly every billboard and signpost around Virginia City and Gold Hill. The hand bills invite us all to a free ‘Chamuk’ as the Paiutes call free food and drink. Twenty kegs of beer, roast pig and beef and a fandango worth the attention and merriment of the entire Comstock Lode. The day is overcast with near endless sheets of ice driven rain. Sutro appears in his carriage before the Cross Hotel in Dayton, sporting a white beaver hat and a brand new Prince Albert. The Metropolitan Brass Band mutilates a rendition of *Star Spangled Banner*. A canon salut is fired and the thin processional of Paiute Indians and miners sets off for a three mile hike to the future site of Sutro City. The challenge that lies ahead is one of formidable proportion, only you see nothing but elation shine from every lineament of Sutro’s face. His chin juts with pride as he leads the meager group, eyes burning with such intensity that any man soon realizes he’s gazing into the face of a fanatic and that nothing short of completion shall appease Sutro’s boundless desire.

At the mouth of the proposed tunnel Sutro removes his hat and Prince Albert and shoulders a pickaxe. He delivers a neat little speech about the tunnel’s importance, and how the significance of his first blow will be heard not just in San Francisco, but in London and Paris and Berlin. He tells the crowd that he has struggled against implausible odds for the last four years, and how this first symbolic pick fall will drive a spike into the very heart of Ralston’s greed-inspired monopoly. Numerous branches of his drain-way will one day sprout from the main tunnel, he goes on to say. Hundreds of miles of conduits running in every direction through the mountain; an underground world of staggering proportion and scope. He mentions the assaults he has taken from Ralston’s press writers. ‘A pygmy trying to bore a hole through Mount Olympus. A mouse nibbling at the base of Ararat. A humbug, a wild cat swindler, a played-out carpetbagger.’ But barking dogs have never stopped a procession’s passing, he says, and with that line he smites the earth and the celebrants cheer. Anvils ring out. Giant Powder is set off in gleeful celebration, yet nary a whistle replies from the distant Virginia City. Sutro smiles despite the lack of fanfare, triumphant as Wellington at Waterloo or Nelson at Trafalgar. Just at that moment the sun bursts through a black cloud and a radiant rainbow appears in the heavens to the north. Due to the storm the barbecue turns into a fizzle. The beeves were so rare done that not even the Paiutes could make use of them, and the twenty kegs filled the miners with chilly misgivings.

With his tunnel project now nearly three years underway, you agree to meet with Mr. Sutro to gauge the progress of his dig. As you arrive into Sutro City you marvel at how the once undeveloped swatch of desert has blossomed into a town. Sutro’s mansion stands as a centerpiece, a colossal white Victorian structure lashed to Mount Davidson’s hard rock by iron cables. Grouped about the mansion are smithies, foundries, numerous machine shops, a church, a hotel, cheerful barrooms, a newspaper, a dance hall and every accommodation necessary to support the driving of a four mile tunnel. Work progresses night and day. Four hundred men divide themselves into eight hour shifts as they ply their way ever deeper into the hostile interior of the mountain.

You meet up with Mr. Sutro in his small office set beside the mouth of his tunnel. He is a tall stocky man of immeasurable energy and drive, all packaged beneath a cutting sense of humor and an eloquence of speech that instantly makes one conscious of the fact that you are in the company of a great and focused powerhouse of a man. “My tunnel project has been cursed by the same elements that plague each and every hard rock mine on the Comstock Lode,” he tells you from behind his desk. “Earth, water, heat, fire, darkness and death.”

When asked about transportation within his tunnel project, Sutro indicates that since steam power is always fatal in an underground environment, they were required to look elsewhere for a working solution to the problem of hauling waste rock from the dig site. “At first we tried horses, only when their ears touched the ceiling rock, up went their heads and crack went their necks and skulls. Mules became our only answer, for when a mule is thrust into a dark and oppressive environment, the conditions seem to remove all aspects of mulishness from their otherwise belligerent hides. In no time they become docile pets. As my men break for meals, it is frequently common to see them proffer up a piece of bread to a passing mule, a slab of pie or the dregs of their coffee cup. When a signal is given for ‘fire in the hole,’ the mules seem to understand faster than the men do that it’s time to clear out of the way. So accustomed do they become to the darkness that we are obliged to cover one eye with a blinder on the rare occasion when they are allowed to linger in broad daylight.”

Sutro is a man who believes that his direct participation in his tunnel dig is a vital element relating to the project’s overall success, and because of that fact he spends the bulk of his time sweating alongside his dollar a day muckers. Inside the tunnel you are quick to note the respect for Sutro that is evident in every face, for Sutro is a man unafraid to hold a jack or swing a pickax or push an ore cart from the face of a bore. “So far we consume about one thousand board feet of timber for every five feet of progress,” Sutro informs you as you follow him into the stifling heat of the tunnel. “You’ll notice a slight incline as we go deeper into the main corridor, designed to facilitate drainage when we accidentally hit one of many underground geothermal reservoir pockets. And of course one day soon this incline will help drain water from every mine on the Comstock Lode.”

When asked the nature of his biggest obstacle thus far, Sutro is quick and unequivocal in answering that pockets of clay are the true demon child of his entire underground experience. “It’s by far the most obstreperous element we have encountered, this endlessly swelling clay,” he explains. “When we enter a pocket of this oozing, ever-expanding stuff, our progress is reduced from one hundred and fifty feet a month to a mere fifty. The moment picks find this cursed substance, out like so much blood it will ooze, a devilishly soft and white, swelling kaolin. And once it oozes, then like blood it thickens and clots and makes progress nearly impossible. No matter what size posts and caps we add to try and contain it, the swelling clay exerts so much counter pressure that it drives its way through everything we employ to hold it back. Our only means of halting this ooze is to post miners with long sharp knives in the worst of the ooze. The moment the swelling clay begins to poke its way through the square sets, the miner is obliged to cut loose the hunks so that we can cart it out atop an ore cart.”

Some twenty-five hundred feet into the mountain the heat and foul air begins to overwhelm your sense of balance, filling your mind with a cloudiness that borders on panicked suffocation. But before you keel over from the stifling conditions you feel a sudden drop in the surrounding temperature, not to mention a freshness about the air as you approach the first drop shaft which dissects the tunnel from the surface some five hundred feet above. “As you can see,” Sutro explains as the two of you stare up into the darkened shaft, “these drop shafts become most vital to a man’s survival down here, another little problem we failed to predict before we broke ground three years ago. We’re nearing completion of a third shaft at a drop of nine thousand feet, so before we reach the mines on the Lode, I’m guessing we’ll need another two or three drops before we’re there.”

After slugging down some fresh air at Drop #2, roughly six thousand feet into the mountain, Sutro leads you into an environment almost completely devoid of oxygen and other such bare essentials responsible for supporting human life. Sweat pours from your body like the steady course of a river, and you find yourself breathing twice as fast despite the relative ease of your transit toward the bore of this monumental dig. “When miners and mules start to faint on a regular basis,” Sutro continues from in front of you, “when a candle won’t stay lit for more than a minute or two, that’s when we know it’s time to sink another drop.”

Sweating and panting alongside a group of engineers, you hear the sound of jacks and hammers, somewhere in the rock above your head. The engineers are in agreement that this latest drop is descending exactly on target and somewhere within a blast or two from punching through to the main tunnel, which elicits a secondary consensus that without a fresh supply of oxygen, additional progress on the main bore will remain improbable at best.

As your small group suffocates and pickles itself in the dank tunnel interior, you ask Sutro whether Mark Twain’s recently published article about mining stock manipulation has had any deleterious impact on Sutro’s attempts to gain full funding of his project, prompting him to answer as follows:

“Right at a time when the San Francisco papers were making this great outcry about the iniquity of the Daney Solver Mining Company, whose directors had declared a ‘cooked’ or false dividend for the purpose of increasing the value of their stock, once this story hit the light of day there was a big call to avoid investing in silver stocks and instead invest in safe and tangible San Francisco companies such as Ralston’s Spring Valley Water Company. Only lo and behold if the Spring Valley Water Company doesn’t cook off a false dividend report of its own, which prompts one poor man to murder his entire family before riding into Carson City and planting a bullet in his very penniless head. Without question such colorful stories have slowed my ability to fund my tunnel project, forcing me to repeatedly prove the validity of my project, not to mention the goodness of my character and the purity of my intent.”

Feeling your skin prickle with heat rash, you ask the question that has been on the minds of most Comstock residents for the past many months—just what the dickens is going on in the *Consolidated Virginia Mine* that has kept Irishmen John Mackay and James Fair in such a unified state of silence? You yourself have asked the mine owners on a persistent basis if you cannot gain a tour of their mine, only Superintendent Fair continues to maintain that the deeper levels of the mine are simply too hot and dangerous for the likes of lowly reporters and unseasoned laymen. “They’re up to something,” one of Sutro’s engineers proclaims. “Sharon has agreed to let them haul waste rock out of the *Gould and Curry* from the twelve hundred foot level of the *Con Virginia*. The miners are simply too quiet right now, which leads me to believe they’ve hit some sort of major bonanza.”

The hammering above your head has stopped during the above discourse, and after a time the engineers suggest that we all move away from our current position in the tunnel in case the next blast drops many tons of rock down upon our heads. Sweating in place at our new location roughly fifty feet away from the bore, we hear the relayed calls of “Fire in the hole!” After an unnervingly long silence, the earth beneath your sweat-filled boots rumbles violently as if afflicted by an earthquake. As predicted, a large amount of quartz and waste rock collapses into the tunnel, but what this writer failed to anticipate was the great rushing of air and cooling of temperatures which follows the connection of the drop. In an instant we are treated to the most refreshing wave of oxygen, and with this awakening breeze, Sutro comes alive with an uncanny display of exuberance and enthusiasm. “This will happen all over the Lode when my tunnel is complete,” he says to no one in particular. “Fresh air for countless of our brothers in every festering mine on the Comstock Lode. Seventeen thousand feet to go, Meine Herren, now dig like there’s no tomorrow!”

# Chapter Twenty-one

Tuesday, February 4, 1873

“Something enormous has happened,” said Mackay, keeping his tight hold on his wife as they cuddled together in the first light of dawn.

“I feel like I’m in a dream,” said Marie, her breath warm against his naked chest. “You tell me these things, only I can’t fully process the reality. Are you certain, John?”

“James and I have kept silent for nearly five straight months,” said Mackay, “mainly to prove to ourselves that what we’ve unearthed is real.”

“If ever a people have been driven mad by silence,” said Marie, “you and James have surely done so to the good folks of Virginia City.”

“We’re to be rich, Marie,” said Mackay. “As of yesterday, it’s an absolute certainty beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

“Does that mean we can now be away from this horrid mistake of a town?” said Marie. “Here we are in bed together, a moment to ourselves, only the noise of this place is constant and everywhere. It’s not healthy for the human mind, John, not at all healthy for the children.”

“I’ve a job to do,” said Mackay, “only I’ve no misgivings if you and the children remove yourselves to San Francisco.”

“If we’re to be as rich as you say,” said Marie, “then my choice would be Paris. For the children's education, mind you.”

“Of course,” said Mackay. “For their education.”

“If we’re to be as rich as you say,” said Marie, “why would you not be inclined to join us in Paris?”

“Because I’m a simple hard rock miner,” said Mackay. “What would a man like me do amidst the pomp of gay Paris?”

“You’ll come and visit us, then?” said Marie.

“Listen to you,” said Mackay, “already turning me into a Washoe Widower.”

“Are you sure, John? Are we really to be as rich as you say?”

Mackay raised up his wife’s head between his hands, kissing her on the lips before resting her head next to his on the soft down pillow. “As sure as anything I’ve known.”

“Can I see it for myself?” said Marie.

“You and Theresa both,” said Mackay. “The wives of the next richest men on the Comstock Lode should witness King Solomon’s Mine with their very own eyes.”

Mackay and Marie knocked on the Fair’s front door with a sense of mischievous, almost childlike misbehavior, and when Fair opened the front door, they raised up their hands with a look of celebrants to a surprise party. “We know it’s early, but surprise!” said Marie.

“Not to mention completely unannounced,” said Mackay.

“You both look as though you’re about to play a prank,” said Fair.

“Who is it?” Theresa called from inside the house.

“Just some school kids come to make trouble,” said Fair.

A moment later Theresa appeared at the front door, drying her hands on a blue kitchen towel slung from her apron tie. She studied the impish faces of her friends, smiling as she took in the nature of their open serendipity. “What’s gotten into you two?”

“John tells me we’re to be rich,” said Marie.

“James has been telling me the same thing,” said Theresa.

“And you believe him?” said Marie, “without so much as a challenge regarding the validity of his claim? After-all, such a statement could have considerable bearing on the future course of our lives.”

“Perhaps I’ve been remiss in my due diligence,” said Theresa.

“Men are so easily prone to exaggeration and fish tales.”

“Unreliable creatures, even on a good day,” said Theresa. “You’re absolutely right, Marie. These men should be made to account for their statements.”

“First we shall treat you lovely naysayers to breakfast at the International Hotel,” said Mackay.

“Time enough to alert DeQuille,” said Fair.

“And Wells Drury,” said Mackay. “This way the world will have two independent sources for verification, both at the same time.”

Mackay settled the breakfast bill to his personal account, looking across the table at the newspapermen with an expectant look upon his face. “Shall we show you gentlemen what our excitement is all about?”

“The good folks of Virginia City have long known you two were on to something,” said Drury. “Many thanks for letting Dan and I stand in as your confirming messengers.”

“The Comstock could use a bit of good news,” said DeQuille.

“Once you see what we’ve unearthed,” said Fair, “you’ll soon realize that this particular bonanza is much more than just a simple bit of good news.”

Outside on C Street, the party set out on foot for the *Con Virginia*, drawing instant attention from a wide assortment of townsfolk along the street. “I knew it!” said Paul Duncan from atop his dairy wagon.

“If anyone deserves a strike it’s the two of you!” said Marlena Johns.

Mackay tipped his hats toward Mrs. Johns, trying his darnedest not to smile, yet failing miserably from the start. The fact that it had taken five full months of exploration to convince even himself about the nature of their find meant that today’s public notice marked the first time he had allowed himself a moment to bask in the reality of their approaching good fortune.

“It’s like a dream,” said Colleen Stapleton.

“I believe my wife has said the same,” said Mackay.

“You see,” said Paul Sedgewick, “sometimes a gamble does pay off.”

“Come redistribute the wealth,” said Paddy Murphy from the doorway of the Bucket of Blood.

“At nine in the morning?” said Mackay.

As they walked the wooden sidewalk in front of the Bank of California, Sharon came out onto the street to confront the passing group. “Well if it isn’t the two craftiest men in all Virginia City,” he said in welcome.

“I believe that title is rightly yours, Mister Sharon,” said Fair, his lips almost quivering as he bit back on his rising sense of victory.

“Touché to the lucky Irishmen,” said Sharon. “I see you’ve solicited my newsmen to bear witness to your find.”

“Are they not employed to report about all things mining?” said Fair.

“Mister Mackay,” said Sharon. “You used my money with a fair bit of deceitfulness in your intent.”

“I borrowed it straight up and down at two percent per month,” said Mackay. “How is that deceitful compared to, say, denying loans to mine owners who refuse to send their ore through your Union Mill and Mining Company?”

“Should this bonanza make you the reigning kings of the Comstock,” said Sharon, “do you suppose the two of you will behave any differently?”

“My father used to say that a man should make a living, not a killing,” said Mackay. “When we’re kings of the Comstock, Mister Sharon, we shall strive to conduct ourselves fairly and with great personal integrity.”

“Would you mind terribly if I tagged along?” said Sharon. “This way I can better report to the bank the true nature of our defeat.”

“Come now, Gentlemen,” said Theresa, tucking her arms around those of Mackay and Sharon before leading them across the street. “Let us not behave like schoolboys at a sporting contest, shall we now?”

“Yes mother,” said Mackay.

“Yes mother,” said Sharon.

At the hoisting works of the *Con Virginia*, Mackay held open the door while his party entered the relative darkness of the building. Shift foremen, Sam Yelton, was waiting for them by the gallows, and when he saw the party enter the hoisting works, he signaled the engineer at Shaft Three to raise up the cage in preparation for the touring dignitaries. “You ladies can change in the visitor’s room,” said Mackay. “We ask that you clad yourselves in the latest Parisian jumpsuit fashions and join us near the cages.”

When the group had reconvened from their separate changing rooms, Marie and Theresa curtsied in their matching gray overalls. “Perhaps I shall wear this to the next cotillion,” said Marie.

“These are really quite comfortable,” said Theresa.

“I doubt you’ll think so once we’re down in the heat,” said Fair.

When they were all loaded onto the double decker cage, Mackay closed the grated door and double-checked the safety latch. He gave a thumbs up to the engineer, who in turn lowered the group into the all-encompassing darkness of the mine. Mackay felt Marie tuck in close to his side, prompting him to wrap his arm around her shoulders and clutch her to his chest. “This is the only shaft so far that reaches down to the twelve hundred foot level,” he offered. “A month from now, all four shafts will be hauling up the purest ore ever to grace the Lode.”

“How pure is pure?” said Sharon.

“The last thirty loads have averaged six hundred and thirty-two dollars per ton,” said Fair.

“Whatever does that mean?” said Marie.

“How much gold and silver we’ve managed to extract for every ton of rock removed,” said Mackay.

“Is that quite a good number?” said Marie.

“It’s a king’s ransom, my dear,” said Sharon, “some of the highest assays ever reported on the Comstock Lode.”

The cage began to bounce on its elastic cabling as it slowed for the deepest gallery of the mine, causing both women to gasp audibly as the sensation rolled through their stomachs. “Goodness, but that’s unnerving,” said Theresa.

Mackay released the safety latch and opened the door, standing aside in the dim light of Gallery Eleven to let the group exit the cage one-by-one, and gather near a group of resting miners on the lowest Station of the *Con Virginia*. Assay Engineer Jim Kraigen sat among the miners, and when he saw the group, he stood up to shake hands with each of the arriving dignitaries. “Welcome to the big bonanza,” he said.

“It’s time we tell the world what we’ve managed to find down here,” said Mackay.

“Well then, let’s have at it,” said Kraigen, holding his lantern toward the darkest back reaches of the gallery.

The group followed Kraigen into the echoing vault of the station, passing into a descending cross-cut at the extreme southern end of the room. Marie gasped when a rat scurried over her boot, prompting Mackay to place a hand on her back as an assurance that such an event was normal. “They’re harmless,” he said at a whisper. “Nothing but Miners’ pets is all.”

Several minutes later they emerged at the leading edge of the dig site, straightening up from their crouched postures as they entered a towering excavation vault. “You’ve removed an enormous amount of rock already,” Sharon managed with a fair bit of reverence in his voice.

“We have,” said Fair. “It’s what has funded our operations.”

“And allowed us to make good on your loan,” said Mackay.

“Right now she’s twenty feet high by fifty feet wide by one forty long,” said Kraigen. “No matter which direction we choose to dig, all we find is ore rock of an impossibly high purity.”

“This is incredible,” Sharon managed.

“What it is, Mister Sharon,” said Kraigen, “is the very center of the Comstock’s illusive fissure vein. After so many years of geologic conjecture, we are at long last standing in the midst of its pure silver heart.”

“Any estimates as to its size?” said DeQuille.

“So far the entire Comstock Lode has produced some two hundred and thirty million dollars in gold and silver,” said Kraigen. “As for this find, Gentlemen, my most conservative guess is somewhere between two to three hundred million dollars.”

“Good heavens,” said Sharon.

“Good heavens indeed,” said Drury. “And with its excavation, we may very well witness the birth of the four richest men the world has ever known.”

# Chapter Twenty-two

Monday, May 26, 1873

“Why are you sitting in the dark?” said Lizzy, standing in the doorway to Ralston’s pitch black study.

“Because in the dark my failures don’t seem so bad,” said Ralston. “A lot has happened while you and the children were in Europe, Lizzy. I think maybe it’s time you knew the truth about just how bad things have gotten.”

Lizzy tightened the sash to her bathrobe before walking deeper into the study. “May I turn on some lights?”

“No, I prefer the darkness. That way I don’t have to bear the anguish on your face.”

Lizzy sat down in an overstuffed leather chair across from her husband, drawing her feet up into her chest, until she could wrap her arms protectively around her knees. “You’re scaring me, Toppie.”

“My father had a saying,” said Ralston. “Be careful how high you climb, for you can fall an equal distance. I’m afraid that fall has begun, Lizzy, and despite my best efforts to arrest its fall, I fear now that gravity has already applied its force.”

“How long has this been going on?” said Lizzy.

“Since Sixty-nine,” said Ralston, “since the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad and the arrival of cheaper goods from the midwest. Since that time I have suffered a series of setbacks in my Comstock investments, which have severely hampered my ability to infuse capital into my San Francisco factories and business interests. Tell me something, Lizzy, when you were in Europe, was there much talk about the big silver strike by the Irishmen?”

“Every paper made the subject front page news,” said Lizzy. “The Bismarck went so far as to demonetize silver in an attempt to insulate the German economy from such a massive injection of new silver onto world currency markets.”

“I blame Sharon for this enormous missed opportunity. He advised all of us badly on this regard. He was asleep at the helm, and because of this fact, we have let the greatest bonanza in Comstock history slip from our grasp, at a time when our bank needed cash flow to stay alive.”

“Can it really be as bad as you say?”

“It can and it is. The bonanza at the *Con Virginia* has eclipsed my financial resourcefulness in an immensely fundamental way. I attempted to regain my footing with an all-out bid for the *Ophir Mine*, only instead, that move and others have turned my empire into a collapsing house of cards.”

“And yet you remain the same confident man I’ve come to know. At tonight’s welcome home party you showed no signs of worry or distress. How is it you have fooled your wife and your friends in such a comprehensive way?”

“No one wants to hear the travails of a man’s misfortune,” said Ralston. “Accordingly I have kept my financial troubles completely to myself.”

“So why confess these things to me now?”

“Because sooner or later, Lizzy, these matters will directly impact you and the children. All of us will begin to feel the affects of my lingering financial hardship.”

“Tell me about the *Ophir*,” said Lizzy.

“At first I tried to induce Lucky Baldwin to join forces for a takeover bid, but Baldwin told me that he preferred to paddle his own canoe and go it alone. I then put Jim Keene to the task of purchasing up as many shares of the *Ophir,* no matter the price. He started buying up blocks at eighty dollars a share, even though the ninety day short was holding at sixty.”

“Good heavens, Toppie, but I know nothing about matters such as these.”

“Put simply,” said Ralston, “on behalf of William Sharon and Company, we were buying stock at about a twenty percent premium, just to control the majority paper in advance of a December shareholders meeting. Once word of our actions hit the street, prices began to rise to the point of absurdity. When *Ophir* reached three hundred and fifty dollars a share, the total valuation had risen to thirty-one million, or about forty percent over true value when compared to similar properties on the Comstock Lode. *Con Virginia* prices rose in sympathy from around two hundred and thirty to nearly eight hundred dollars.”

“That’s quite dizzying,” said Lizzy.

“San Francisco has been in a frenzy ever since,” said Ralston. “Even my closest friends joined the fray without my knowledge. Lucky Baldwin seized a handsome percentage of *Ophir* stock, selling it to me only when share prices were at their peak. Lacking the sufficient cash, I wrote him a promissory note for three point six million dollars.”

“That’s a terribly lot of money.”

“And then there was Sharon, that backstabbing little snipe.”

“I thought you were buying *Ophir* under your usual partnership agreement.”

“We were,” said Ralston, “only behind my back he was buying up *Ophir* shares for his personal account. When the price reached its peak, he sold everything for an enormous profit, then shorted the market for another small fortune in payout. Unaware that my own partner had collapsed the market for *Ophir* stock, I attempted to bolster prices from my own private purse. Then news hit the street that the *Ophir* bonanza had played itself out. Everything collapsed at once. The Exchange was demoralized. *Ophir* shares dropped to one hundred and eighty dollars, then promptly down to fifty. A lot of San Franciscans were ruined in the course of a week.”

“What were our losses?” said Lizzy.

“Our losses. I like the way you phrase that, Lizzy, thank you. Our losses were in excess of three million dollars.”

“I heard about the necklace you bought for that actress, Adelaide Neilson,” said Lizzy. “It was in all the Paris papers, Toppie, I should think you would have better discretion than that.”

“Forgive me, Lizzy,” said Ralston. “It’s just that I was so taken by her onstage…”

“One hundred thousand dollars for a necklace!” said Lizzy. “The French press called you a spoiled little rich kid with the ethics of a parlor house professor.”

“It was wrong of me.”

“Do you love her?”

“I love her acting,” said Ralston. “My heart belongs to you, Lizzy, you really must believe that.”

“And despite all these setbacks you’re still in operation,” said Lizzy, “still with your head held high and well above water. Did not your years on the river teach that you must take your losses in stride with your winnings?”

Ralston looked to his wife through the darkness, barely able to make out the outline of her balled up figure. “Yes, I suppose I must consider that,” he said.

“And you must also consider the good you have done for so many people, my love. Life is not entirely about turning a profit, now is it, Toppie? Your acts of philanthropy read like a laundry list in countless local newspapers. Morning, noon and night you are received on the streets of San Francisco with full public ovation. Everywhere you go you are greeted with a glad eye, a warm clasp of the hand, a lifted hat. Everyone sees this but you, Toppie, you and your humble, everyman way that makes you a complete charmer among men. No Grand Duke in his prime can attain a warmer acclaim from his people than you receive from yours. You are without match California’s first citizen. You are worshipped, my husband, in such a way that few men in history can dare equal.”

“Thank you,” said Ralston. “You always seem to help me find my center, even at my darkest times.”

“I read in the papers on our passage back that the Palace Hotel project is grossly over budget,” said Lizzy. “Is this also contributing to your anxiousness?”

“I’m afraid I’ve nearly put Sharon in his grave over this one,” said Ralston. “When we first broke ground, I assured Sharon the cost would not exceed one point seven five million. As it turns out, that amount was eaten up before even the foundation was complete.”

“Oh dear,” said Lizzy.

“Each of the subsequent seven floors has cost us over a million dollars each,” said Ralston. “Sharon has every right to complain about my lavish expenditures, and in hindsight I can only think that his complaints are fully justified. I bought a ranch out in Mill Valley, just to harvest the necessary oak planking for the Palace floors. I bought a foundry to forge nails and tools, the West Coast Furniture Company for the purpose of making furnishings for the rooms, a lock and key factory for the necessary hardware.”

“Could you not have contracted for these items from existing suppliers?” said Lizzy.

“For a fraction of the cost,” said Ralston. “You see, Lizzy, this grandiosity, this need to do things with full ownership, these have combined to become my Achilles’ heel, my albatross that damns the voyage of the ancient mariner.”

“Then you must release these tendencies for the safety of our future,” said Lizzy. “Is it not too late to revise your business practices and re-right the ship?”

“According to Darius Mills,” said Ralston, “that period of redirection has come and gone.”

“How do you mean?” said Lizzy.

“This morning he has resigned as president of the Bank of California,” said Ralston. “He feels that my business practices threaten to jeopardize the bank.”

“Do you feel that his actions are warranted?”

“His actions follow my confession to the board about the financial mess I’ve made of both my personal finances and those of the bank. Of our original five million dollar capitalization, two thirds of that money is tied up in frozen or dying assets. Nearly six hundred thousand in the George P. Kimball Carriage Builders, two million in the New Montgomery Street Real Estate Company, another million in the Pacific Woolen Mills Company. All of these businesses have been made profitless by the advent of the Transcontinental Railroad.”

“How did you leave it with Mills and the bank board?” said Lizzy.

“All parties concerned felt that the bad debts should be removed from the books,” said Ralston. “Do you remember when they made me write a personal promissory to assume any bad debt relating to our Comstock investments?”

“I’m still fuming over their selfishness,” said Lizzy, “profiting all these years while making you saddle all the risk.”

“Well they’ve done it again,” said Ralston. “I have been made to assume personal responsibility for each of these bad debts, reimbursing the bank from my personal accounts.”

Ralston heard Lizzy move off her seat in a rustle of bedclothes, tiptoeing across the room until she could raise up her bathrobe and nightgown and climb onto his lap. She put her arms around his head and pulled him onto her chest, stroking his hair as she rocked him gently back and forth. “Times like these require an extra dose of courage.”

“Yes they do,” said Ralston, feeling the sudden urge to cry the way he used to when he was a small boy in his mother’s arms.

“Remember that you and I rose up from modest and humble beginnings, Toppie. Remember that it is always possible for us to return from where we came.”

“Is it, Lizzy?” said Ralston. “Once a man has tasted the finer things in life, is it possible that he can be happy again with less?”

“These sorts of financial upheavals happen on a daily basis,” said Lizzy. “So long as we have each other and the children, what more can we possibly need?”

“What should a king do if he is stripped of his crown?” said Ralston. “His family may be intact and at his side, but what of his reputation, the respect of other men?”

“You make it sound as though failure is an insurmountable obstacle. Does not the cream always rise to the top?”

“Cream may very well rise to the top,” said Ralston, “but a man, Lizzy, he has but so many chances against a waning supply of energy.”

“Oh come now, Toppie, you can’t possibly believe that!”

“It’s just that I’m tired, Lizzy, tired in the deepest parts of my being. So much jolly outward appearance, so much good face to the world while my empire crumbles at my feet.”

“Perhaps you need a rest from it all,” said Lizzy. “Perhaps we should head off on a grand vacation that helps your aplomb find its way back into your step.”

“Is it that simple?” said Ralston. “A trip to wash away so many years of compounding failure?”

“Whether your rich or poor or dead or alive,” said Lizzy, “the world will go on about its way. Is that not reason enough to dance when a person can still move his feet?”

**Part Three**

# Chapter Twenty-three

Friday, May 28, 1875

Sharon sat on the bed next to the near skeletal remains of his wife, using his handkerchief to wipe the recurring beads of sweat from her fevered brow. Dr. Boyelson sat in a chair on the opposite side of the bed, listening to Maria’s labored breathing through a strange conical tube he referred to as a stethoscope. Her lips were red from her bleeding gums, and as he held her hand in his, he looked down to the enormous distension of her belly.

“She’s in liver failure now,” Boyelson had told him only moments ago. “The distension is a result of accumulating fluids.”

Sharon squeezed his wife’s hand in his, prompting Maria to turn her head and gaze up into his eyes with the same panicked look that had possessed her for the last five days of her spiraling decline. “Mother?” she said. “Mother, I can’t see you!”

Sharon closed his eyes as Dr. Boyelson introduced the trocar into her abdomen that would aspirate the fluid from her belly. Maria issued a brutal scream in response, forcing Sharon to stand up and pin her shoulders to the bed.

“Is such torture absolutely necessary!” Sharon yelled above Maria’s steady wailing.

“The fluid is impeding her ability to breathe,” said Boyelson. “If we leave it in her she’ll suffocate to death.”

“At this point,” said Sharon, “can that really be so bad?”

Boyelson looked up long enough to give Sharon a reprimanding glance across the bed. “My oath is to keep people alive, Senator.”

“And my oath is to let this poor woman die in peace.”

After Dr. Boyelson had removed the trocar from Maria’s belly and properly dressed the wound, Sharon released Maria’s shoulders, and let her curl up into a fetal hug on her left side. It was a painful thing watching his wife die like this—a once vital woman, slowly consumed and then taken by a withering disease, long before even a remote approximation of old age. Despite the accelerating guilt he felt for their years apart and his frequent indiscretions against their marital vows, Sharon maintained a deep love for Maria, which no other woman had ever come close to attaining in his life. There was sex, he considered, and then there was love; two acts, at least in his mind, that were non-interdependent, one to the other.

At Dr. Boyelson’s behest, Sharon stood up from Maria’s bedside and followed him out of the room. Following Boyelson into the hallway, he felt a heady fatigue as he thought back on his long night of tending to both his dying wife up at their Nob Hill mansion, followed by his own dear father, who lay dying in another sweat-soaked bed across town in Cow Hollow.

*Your wife and your father,*

*everything imploding around you,*

*like a building brought down in an earthquake.*

“I’ve arranged for my nurse to stay at her side the entire day,” Boyelson said when they were alone and out of earshot from Maria.

“She looks particularly bad this morning,” said Sharon.

“Perhaps its best if you say your goodbyes,” said Boyelson. “The end, I’m afraid, can come at any moment.”

“Is that not true for all of us?” said Sharon.

“Metaphysics aside, Senator,” said Boyelson, “I do believe your wife’s end is considerably more eminent than yours or mine.”

“Is there nothing more we can do for her?”

“Keep her comfortable on heavy doses of laudanum,” said Boyelson. “That and pray that she goes without too much more suffering.”

Seated within his luxurious town carriage, Sharon looked out upon the morning pedestrian and coach traffic plying along the dirt roadway and bricked sidewalks of Pine Street. His head felt fogged by lack of sleep and raw emotion, his stomach knotted and fouled by the increasingly pressured telegraphs from Washington that his presence was needed back in the senate chambers on Capitol Hill. How could he in good conscience return to Washington, he considered, while his wife and father clung so dangerously close to death?

He thought back on last year’s run for the U.S. Senate, feeling his stomach tighten even more as he considered the nearly eight hundred thousand dollars he had spent in a race that became known in the papers as ‘The Battle of The Moneybags.’ With senate incumbent JP Jones staunchly in opposition to the Bank of California, it had fallen upon Sharon to unseat Jones so that the bank’s varied interests remained under the favorable protection of the Washingtonian elite. Dollar for dollar, he and Jones had slung the mud and pumped the flesh, replete with lavish banquets and free barbecues that had dazzled the appetites and imaginations of nearly every man, woman and child resident in the state of Nevada.

At the Palace Hotel, his driver maneuvered the carriage onto the grand approach to the hotel’s vast lobby entrance. Along with the rest of San Francisco, Sharon had watched in awe as the white foundations of the palatial structure, like the fronds of an enormous budding lotus, had risen up from the sand dunes of Market Street, arising floor after floor into seven stories of regal splendor that would forever change the landscape of downtown San Francisco. Up rose the opulent marble walls—a combination of low arches with Doric columns and enormous bay windows.

Dismounting from his carriage, Sharon walked past groups of laborers as he entered the soaring lobby atrium which had been nicknamed by Ralston as ‘The Grand Colonnade.’ Within this colossal, lofty-pillared court, Sharon took in the matchless beauty and inspiring dimensions of the room. Colonnaded balconies arose seven stories up from the ground, one above the next, a honeycomb of elegance surrounding a massive courtyard some one hundred and fifty feet long by eighty-four feet wide by one hundred and twelve feet high. High above the courtyard stood an arched roof of glass, while on the ground floor stood a circular driveway, wide enough for a coach-and-four to turn on elaborate avenues of polished marble. Despite his constant complaints about cost overruns and construction delays, Sharon had to admit that the end result was a magnificent, ethereal sanctum of space and luxuriant good taste. Taken as a whole, the space embodied something dreamlike and surreal, he considered, and for a moment he wondered if his wife and father would soon grace a space of similar ethereal beauty?

Standing in the Grand Colonnade, Sharon envisioned how the court would look when the Palace Hotel opened her doors for business sometime later in the summer. Through the great entrance portals, carriages and horses would drive into the courtyard and discharge both guests and luggage. Separated from the driveway by carved screens as light and airy as any in the Taj Mahal, was the great Palm Court, paved with alternate blocks of white and black marble, heated all the while by gigantic braziers filled with glowing coals. Against the colonnades, orange, lime and lemon trees stood in brightly-colored Italian earthenware pots. Interspersed among them were tropical plants and palms of rich exotic beauty. In the afternoons and evenings, gypsy music would waft through the air, while an endless parade of beau monde and demimonde swished their silken trains over the marble floors. Women of immense beauty, he imagined these feminine parades, each one a potential sex partner in his endless lust to capture their intimacy like trophies in a hunter’s most cherished game room.

Looking to the ceiling, Sharon took in the court’s crowning glory—the Crystal Roof Garden. Here was a spectacle of glass, bronze and thick brocade carpets, flowering shrubs, hanging planter baskets and great chandeliers. On pedestals at the garden’s corners stood four white marble statues symbolizing spring, summer, autumn and winter—chaste Dianas in poses as rhythmic and flowing as Canova’s dancers. Over the lofty parapet they seemed to gaze down in marble-eyed serenity into the glowing hearts of the braziers, seven stories below. At night, when there would be beautiful women, music, dancing and the incense of many-hued flowers, Ralston’s court would be an unforgettable experience, even for the most taciturn among men.

“She’s coming along,” Ralston said as he approached Sharon from behind.

Sharon turned to address his ever-smiling partner. “In a place like this,” he said, “it becomes exceedingly difficult to imagine that the West Coast suffers from a prolonged recession.”

“If I could have predicted the undulations of our economy,” said Ralston, shaking hands with Sharon, “I would never have broken ground.”

“You asked for a private talk prior to the board meeting,” said Sharon.

“How’s Maria?” said Ralston. “How’s your Dad?”

“Very nearly gone on both counts.”

“I’m so terribly sorry,” said Ralston. “It’s impossible to imagine, a wife and a father, both at the same time. I need your help, Bill.”

Sharon had never heard Ralston ask for help before, and Ralston’s blurted confession left him momentarily unable to respond in a coherent manner. “Come again?” he managed.

“I’m in a bind,” said Ralston. “The bank’s in a bind. As you well know, Eastern banks have made heavy purchases of Western gold and silver over the past four months. Combine that with the high cost of transporting the last California wheat harvest into Midwestern markets, the whole affair has left the bank dangerously short on cash.”

“Have you any fears of a run?” said Sharon.

“So far no one knows but you and the board.”

“If the bank is short on cash, then so must be your other business interests. Am I correct in my assumption?”

Ralston lowered his head and nodded into his chest. “You are,” he offered rather weakly.

“See here, Toppie,” said Sharon. “How many times have I warned you to pull in your sails?”

“You have,” said Ralston. “Too many times to count.”

“What has Thomas Bell said of your business practices of late? Heedless, I believe he called them. He says that you’ve lost your head attempting to run city politics, city society, the bank’s affairs and your own troubled businesses.”

“And to make it all worse,” said Ralston, “I also lack the necessary cash resources to finish the Palace Hotel.”

“How much do you need?”

“Two million dollars.”

“On top of the six million we’ve already spent?”

“That’s correct.”

“It would appear that if I want to see my half of this investment bear profitable fruit, then I have no choice but to provide you with the loan.”

“You’re a savior,” said Ralston.

“Only no more wild expenditures,” said Sharon.

“Consider it a promise. Will you share my carriage to the board meeting?”

“I should send my driver back to the house,” said Sharon, “in case Doctor Boyelson or his nurse require additional transportation.”

Sharon followed Ralston out through the Market Street entrance of the hotel, giving instructions to his driver before walking over to Ralston’s carriage. “Morning, Jeffries,” he said, tipping his hat as he climbed up onto the carriage.

“Senator,” said Jeffries, bowing at the waist before returning the footstep to its locker under the carriage bed.

“Isn’t it interesting,” said Ralston, leaning back in his seat before reopening his morning copy of the *San Francisco Daily Chronicle*. “The papers are having a field day vilifying the new Silver Kings, as our Irish friends have now officially been crowned.”

“I read Pembrook's piece on the matter over breakfast,” said Sharon. “He has nicknamed their stock manipulations ‘Flood’s Milk Machine.’”

“He estimates they’ve made over twenty million dollars by issuing false reports of borrasca or bonanza in the *Con Virginia*, whichever suits their current needs for manipulation.”

“Have we not employed the same technique ad libitum?” said Sharon. “In truth, these new Silver Kings have proven to be far more than the fumbling band of amateurs we first mistook them for.”

Ralston looked up from his paper and nodded his head with a look of wincing melancholy. “They’ve taken your principles of vertical integration to an entirely new height, I’m afraid. Flumes and lumber companies, everything much more integrated for the purpose of maximizing profits. By comparison, we were much more cavalier and rudimentary.”

“And now they’re challenging the Bank of California with a bank of their own,” said Sharon. “After wounding our interests in Virginia City, now it seems they intend to deliver us a death blow, right here in San Francisco.”

“The young lions,” said Ralston, “come to snuff out the last of the old pride.”

“Precisely why I have divested the last of my interests in Virginia City,” said Sharon. “From now on, my investments will be entirely based on San Francisco real estate. Not a penny more shall I spend on the Washoe and her miserable litany of hardships and foolhardy risks.”

“Perhaps I must face the same reality,” said Ralston.

“Twice the Lode has rescued you,” said Sharon. “Now that our dominance has been broken, what will you do if there’s no more bonanzas to rescue you from your current crisis?”

“Take my troubles to the cemetery, I suppose.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Since when have I ever been serious about much?” said Ralston. “Life is a game, William. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, occasionally a man must go down with what remains of his tattered ship.”

Sharon sat at the far end of the conference table in the Bank of California Building, watching Ralston squirm in a way that he had never seen before. It was a painful thing to witness, Sharon concluded, watching his old friend writhe under the pressure of his collapsing empire. Sharon noted the presence of an ominous new expression that seemed to come in brief flashes as Ralston grappled with the desperate nature of his affairs—that and a tremor to the man’s otherwise finely cut lip. Ralston’s was a haunted look, he considered, like that of a noble animal now trapped and held at bay. His partner had already shred an entire ream of paper during the board meeting, and during the brief times when he had given that pastime a rest, he would pace the floor of the Director’s Room and jingle the emblems affixed to his watch chain.

“What’s required of you,” William Barron went on, “is that you honestly give us an accurate appraisal of your state of financial affairs. As I mentioned before, Toppie, you are now unequivocally spurned by every banker in London and New York, in large part due to newspaper accounts of your lavish over-expenditures on every one of your personal matters. Your Pine Street house was to cost twenty-five thousand dollars. Instead you spent fifteen times that amount.”

“Cannot a man’s personal life remain separate from the fray?” said Ralston.

“Your personal spending habits are a direct reflection upon your lack of conservative prudence as a businessman,” said Thomas Sunderland. “Any banker worth his salt will see these behaviors as joined at the hip.”

“Fifty thousand dollars to build your stables at Belmont,” said Barron. “Fifty thousand dollars! Another fifty thousand to dress up Belmont with overpriced artwork by Thomas Hill.”

“Building a ballroom for a solitary party,” said Charles Bonner, “only to tear it down to the ground the very next day.”

“Bygones, Gentlemen,” said Thomas Bell. “Rather than look to the past, let us focus now on how Toppie intends to raise cash and maintain his solvency.”

Edney Tibbey knocked on the glass door to the Director’s Room before twisting the nob and entering the room without preamble. “Pardon my intrusion, Gentlemen, but I have just received a note from George Upshur, lead clerk over at the Bank of Nevada.”

Ralston raised his right hand, prompting Tibbey to walk around the conference table to deliver him the note.

Sharon watched Ralston’s cheeks flush scarlet red as he read the note. “Is Upshur waiting for a reply?” asked Ralston.

“He is, Sir,” said Tibbey.

“Well then you have him tell Mister Flood that I’ll send him back selling rum over the Auction Lunch bar!” he boomed. “That wily bastard can’t put my bank out of business without a fight!”

Tibbey bowed his head before exiting the conference room, while Ralston reached for a fresh piece of paper, dismantling it tear by tear as he thought through the contents of the note.

“What is it, Toppie?” Sunderland said when Tibbey had left the room.

“How long have we accused the Silver Kings of holding silver in cash rather than placing it in circulation?” said Ralston. “Not only have they created a cash shortage for the entire West Coast, now Flood wants to withdraw four million dollars from the Bank of California in one single move.”

“The bank is in no position to cover a withdrawal of that magnitude,” said Barron.

“Whatever became of your request to the Treasury to free up additional gold and silver for the Western economy?” said Bell.

“They've refused all three of my overtures,” said Ralston.

“Perhaps the rest of us should make overtures of our own,” said Sunderland.

“Is it true that you sold your sixteen thousand acre Kern County estate to Colonel Fry for ninety thousand dollars?” said Barron.

“Over the past two weeks I have divested myself of the vast majority of my personal assets,” said Ralston, “all in an attempt to raise the necessary cash to keep myself afloat. As of this morning, Mister Sharon now owns my interest in the Palace Hotel, in exchange for a two million dollar loan to complete the project.”

“And Belmont?” said Barron.

“No one gets their hands on Belmont,” Ralston answered in his most resolute tone of voice.

“You’re in deep trouble, Toppie,” said Sunderland. “We’re your business partners and your closest friends. Please allow us to at least brainstorm on every possible way to save yourself from insolvency.”

Michel Reese has agreed to loan me four million dollars to accomplish our objectives for the Spring Valley Water Company,” said Ralston. The money is in our vaults, which means that in a pinch we can use the funds to cover Flood’s withdrawal.”

“At the expense of Spring Valley’s success,” said Barron.

“Perhaps a better strategy would be to meet with Flood and have him agree to a staggered withdrawal,” said Sunderland.

“Our relationship may already be too antagonistic for that,” said Ralston.

Tibbey re-entered the conference room, this time not bothering to knock. “Mister Upshur is back with his employer’s response.”

“And?” said Ralston

“Mister Flood says that in a very short while, he will be able to sell rum over the counters of the Bank of California.”

Ralston stood up abruptly from his chair, unleashing a small snow storm of white paper scraps as they fluttered off his pants. “This board meeting is temporarily adjourned,” he said. “Mister Sharon, would you mind accompanying me to the offices of the Bank of Nevada?”

Sharon stood up reluctantly and shrugged his shoulders. “What’d you have in mind, Toppie?”

“It’s time you and I had a chat with our opponents,” said Ralston, “before they do us even more harm than they already have.”

Sharon looked at the faces of the board after Ralston had stormed out of the room. “Stay with him,” prompted Bell. “At the moment he’s just unstable enough to cause himself irreparable harm.”

Sharon followed Ralston into the bank lobby, then out onto California Street for the one block walk to the yet opened Bank of Nevada branch office on Kearny Street. Ralston was a much taller man than he was, forcing Sharon to walk at twice his usual pace to keep up. “See here, Toppie,” he said. “Do you really think this is such a wise idea?”

“I’ve had enough of this losing business,” said Ralston. “These Irishmen have come to challenge our prosperity and I, for one, refuse to let them drag off my dead carcass without a fight!”

“I guess that means you’re not ready to take it to the cemetery.”

Ralston stopped abruptly and turned to face his business partner. “Not even close!” he snapped.

Sharon watched George Upshur’s expression drop like a stone the moment Ralston entered the lobby of the Bank of Nevada. The bank’s lead clerk stood up from his desk near the vaults, glancing nervously toward James Flood, who was seated in his private glass-enclosed office to his left. “Mister Ralston, Mister Sharon,” Upshur managed as the two men drew near.

“I’d like a word with Mister Flood, if I may,” said Ralston.

“I’ll ask if he’s available,” said Upshur.

“Don’t bother,” said Ralston, moving directly toward Flood’s office. “I’ll ask him myself.”

“You can’t do that!” said Upshur.

“Yes I believe he can,” said Sharon, setting out after his partner in due haste.

“What the devil does an uneducated Irishmen know about banking and high finance?” Ralston said when he had stormed into Flood’s office.

“What the devil do I know about silver mining?” Flood responded. “Even so, it appears that this uneducated Irishmen, as you so aptly call me, has bested the likes of Billy Ralston and his grand financial empire.”

“No western bank of merit can withstand the sudden withdrawal of one of its largest accounts,” said Ralston. “To do so would bring down the bank, and with it will fall the entire economy of the American West. That, Mister Flood, is what your ignorance will cost every man, woman and child in San Francisco and the West Coast at large. Are you cognizant to this fact, Mister Flood, or is it your prideful ignorance that makes you undertake such a rash, suicidal move?”

Flood leaned back in his swivel chair, steepling his entwined fingers under his chin while he studied the color and flush on Ralston’s face. “What would you have me do, Mister Ralston?”

Sharon looked on as Ralston seemed to calm himself to the question. The redness in his face dropped away, while his shoulders and rigid posture seemed to deflate by half. “You and I have known each other, we’ve been friends for a good long time,” said Ralston.

“Until we four uneducated Irishmen got too close to your purse,” said Flood.

“I need some time to cover your withdrawals,” said Ralston. “Can you see yourself through to allow for three equal withdrawals in four day intervals?”

“Is that everything?” said Flood.

“Please,” said Ralston. “All I ask is a modicum of decency on the matter.”

“Please,” said Flood. “A word I’m certain no man has ever heard issued from your lips. On the other hand, you’ve done this city and her people immeasurable good—much more than this simple, uneducated barkeep could ever think to imagine. You have my word, then—three equal withdrawals over twelve day’s time.”

“How very generous of you,” said Ralston.

“What, no additional gratitude?” said Flood. “Is that the best you can do?”

“You Silver Kings,” said Ralston. “Mackay and Fair have earned their newfound wealth, but the two of you barkeep stock traders have simply rode their coattails to success. Tell me, James, does your sudden wealth feel anything like ill-gotten gain?”

“No more than yours, Toppie Ralston,” said Flood. “No more than anything your hand has ever touched since your arrival onto the Coast.”

# Chapter Twenty-four

Friday, May 28, 1875

Mackay helped his stepdaughter up into the bed of the Studebaker carriage, then let his wife Marie take his arm as she climbed up behind her daughter. Last, he guided his twin sons as they scrambled up into the carriage—eager for movement, ready for adventure. “When will we see you again, Poppy?” said four-year-old Wiley.

Mackay climbed up into the carriage after his family, settling himself in the seat opposite his wife and next to his daughter. “Just as soon as business allows,” he said. “In the meantime, I expect each of you to help your mother settle in as best you can.”

“Will San Francisco be as noisy as Virginia City?” said nine-year-old Sarah.

“I suspect no place on earth is as noisy as here,” said Mackay, patting her gently on the back of her hand.

“Are we ready back there?” said the hack.

“As ready as we’ll be,” said Marie, suddenly overcome by emotion over their impending departure from the Comstock Lode. She eased herself off the forward facing carriage seat, and swung across to tuck into her husband’s side, prompting the twins to follow suit until the entire family was crowded onto the rear-facing seat.

“There now,” said Mackay, stroking his wife’s long trestles of hair as she hugged herself to his side. He looked aft and saw the Smithfield wagon following behind with his family’s belongings; a departing caravan, he considered, which would soon make him the newest Washoe Widower on the Comstock Lode.

“Quite suddenly I feel like I’m being led to my execution,” she said.

“Now now,” said Mackay, “let’s not forget why we’re doing this.”

“Yes of course,” said Marie. “For the children’s education.”

At the Virginia City train station, Mackay tipped two porters to load the trunks onto the train from the freight wagon, then escorted his family onto the small platform that stood next to the water stop. The train was braked in front of the platform, its enormous steam engine snorting like a half-angry bull a short ways up the track. Holding his sons by their hands, he felt their fingers tighten into his as they considered the mammoth locomotive, the fact that they would soon be riding aboard her enormous power and comfort. “Give us a hug,” he said, kneeling down until the twins could clasp their arms around his muscular neck. “John Junior, Wiley,” he said. “Best behavior now, are we straight on this?”

When the twins nodded dutifully, Mackay kissed them on the cheeks, one-by-one, then stood up to give Sarah a heartfelt hug goodbye. Despite the fact that she was not of his issue, like Marie, he had taken both of them into his heart with equal and pure intent. “I’ll miss you, Poppy,” she said, fighting back on her tears.

“I’ll come see you within the month,” he said with one final hug.

Mackay stood up and looked deeply into Marie’s eyes.

“All aboard!” yelled the conductor.

“Is that a promise?” she said.

“As soon as I can,” he said, kissing her tenderly on the lips.

The twins began to giggle in response, prompting Mackay and his wife to separate and press their fingertips together, as was their custom when they were about to part from one another for an extended period of time.

“All aboard!” yelled the conductor, and just like that, Mackay stood alone on the platform, waving as the train pulled out of the station and disappeared around the first bend of an absurdly winding rail line.

“Where can I take you, Mister Mackay?” said the hack.

Mackay handed the Springfield driver a five dollar bill before walking up to the Studebaker to do the same for the hack. “I’ll be walking from here, thank you, Kevin,” he said.

“And this from a man of your means, Mister Mackay,” said Kevin. “If you’re ever in need of a full-time driver, I’d love to be considered for the job.”

“Why on earth would I want the bother of a full-time driver?” said Mackay.

“Isn’t that what rich men do?” asked the hack.

“Freedom is the best richness a man can have,” said Mackay. “Besides, having a driver would make me feel like a slaveholder.”

Mackay walked back up Mount Davidson on Washington Street, turning right onto C Street through the bustle of late afternoon traffic. Ever since the teamsters had been replaced by the Virginia &Truckee Railroad, he thought, Virginia City traffic had become far more manageable, yet still thick in volume and intensity. The days of hour-long gridlocked streets were a thing of the past, and as he walked the sidewalk, he marveled at all the changes that had taken place in this once harsh and forbidden hillside town. And now, as of ten minutes ago, he considered, his life on the Comstock had just entered a new phase that would affect both himself and his adopted home in a very dramatic way. The *Con Virginia* was on its way to making he and his partners quite possibly the richest men in the world, yet at the same time, the departure of his family offered him the relative freedom of a bachelor. While he loved his family dearly, he also cherished his independence—his much needed bouts of solitude—which meant that now he could indulge himself in equal measures of both.

Mackay entered the lobby of the International Hotel—his new place of residence—noting his assistant, Dick Dey, seated in a high-back leather chair as he made notes in one of his many ever-present ledger books and calendars. Dey was a big strapping man like Mackay—they had first met boxing in Bill Davis’ Gymnasium—yet the man possessed such a high level of organizational skill that Mackay felt blessed to have stumbled upon someone of such immense talent and productivity. “Do you ever actually take a break from your labors?” Mackay said in welcome, taking a seat in a second leather chair opposite Dey’s.

“Only for boxing and poker,” Dey offered with a smile.

“I’m to meet with Fair in half an hour at the Washoe Millionaire’s Club,” said Mackay. “Any final business before we call it a day?”

“I took the liberty of placing three thousand dollars in your suite room,” said Dey. “That amount seems to be your customary nightly charity to the good people of Virginia City.”

“If there’s one thing I dislike about this being rich business,” said Mackay, “it’s the feeling that I’ve become the Santa Claus of the Comstock Lode. To a man, this city seems to have its hand out whenever I walk by.”

“Speaking of outstretched hands,” said Dey, “the Daughter’s of Charity dropped by this morning to petition for donations. It seems they’d like to build a new hospital, and you’re just the man to pay for it.”

“How much are they asking for?”

“Fifty thousand dollars.”

“My word,” said Mackay, “that’s quite a lot of money.”

“Yes it is,” said Dey. “They approached Sharon first, only the man is such a skinflint, he refused to take even a partial interest in the project.”

Mackay’s eyes sparkled mischievously as he considered Sharon’s now legendary misanthropic tendencies. “Perhaps its time we have some fun at Mister Sharon’s expense,” he said. “Tomorrow morning, I’d like you to make a donation to the Daughters of Charity, let’s say for the entire requested amount. Only make sure they understand that the gift is coming from William Sharon and the Bank of California.”

Dey smiled when he understood what Mackay had in mind. “How utterly embarrassing.”

“Perhaps we can shame him into a higher state of civic mindedness,” said Mackay.

“As ordered,” said Dey. “I’ll tend to this bit of mischief, first thing tomorrow morning.”

Mackay toasted his rock glass against Fair’s, followed by that of George Hearst, Sheriff Strauss, John Piper, Andrew Hallidie and Henry Ramsdell, the visiting reporter from the *New York Tribune*. It was the group’s fifth round of drinks in under two hours, and Mackay felt the warm glow of alcohol elevate his disposition and erase the fatigue that had dogged his mood when he had first climbed the stairs for the Washoe Millionaire’s Club. Mackay rarely drank to the point of inebriation, only something about his sudden renewal of bachelor freedoms compelled him to go drink-for-drink with his group of unusually spirited friends. “To good friends and reporters from back east,” Fair said when he had downed his shot of burning liquor.

“To the continued success of the *Con Virginia*,” said Ramsdell.

“In three years these two gentlemen have managed to pull over a hundred million dollars from her belly,” said Hearst. “That’s almost half the take of the entire Comstock for the preceding thirteen years of digging.”

Mackay leaned in towards his drinking companions, as if drawing them into a conspiracy. “Flood sent us a telegraph not two hours ago,” he said at barely a whisper. “It seems that Billy Ralston and the Bank of California have found themselves in a bit of a financial pickle.”

Every man at the table leaned forward to join in on the gossip. “The Magician of San Francisco?” said Strauss. “That’s impossible.”

“Flood tried to withdraw some of our money, only Ralston pleaded with him for a staggered withdrawal over twelve day’s time.”

“Not so cash flush as the bank lets on,” said Hearst. “Perhaps a sign for the prudent among us to withdraw our money from the Bank of California before there’s a run on said teetering institution.”

“You’re welcome to deposit your funds in the newly-forming Bank of Nevada,” Mackay offered with a wry smile.

“And put more money into your already bulging pockets?” said Hearst. “Not a fat chance in hell, you greedy Irish bastard.”

“James,” said Mackay, flashing his business partner a half-pained smile. “Remind me to look about for some better quality friends.”

“Is it true that men ride logs down these flumes I’ve been reading about?” said Ramsdell.

“No quite logs,” said Mackay. “Kill devils, they’re call. Hog troughs. Narrow little V-bottomed boats, sixteen feet in length.”

“I understand they can reach near unheard of speeds,” said Ramsdell.

“Faster than a train,” said Strauss.

“Why on earth do men do such things?”

“Come now, Mister Ramsdell,” Mackay offered with a smile. “You mean to tell me you men of the east don’t ride logging flumes for fun? What the dickens do you do for a bit of excitement in your life?”

“In the east we consider the loss of one’s life to be an unwanted side effect when it comes to the pursuit of a bit of excitement in our lives,” said Ramsdell.

“Don’t tell me you easterners lack the stones for high adventure,” said Fair.

“We most certainly do not,” said Ramsdell. “We easterners like the taste of high adventure just as much as our western counterparts. It’s just that…”

“You lack the stones,” said Mackay, looking up as the bartender arrived with a fresh round of whiskies. “Tell me something, Jimmy.”

“Mister Mackay?” said the bartender, removing the fresh glasses from his tray and setting them in the center of the circular table.

“Have you ever suspected that the average eastern male is born without stones?” said Mackay, looking with great amusement at Ramsdell's almost squirming discomfort.

“Not once have I thought such things,” said the bartender. “I like easterners. They’re refined and gentile.”

“And there you have it,” said Ramsdell. “Clearly this man comes from solid breeding and a foundation of impeccable diplomacy.”

“Tell me something, Jimmy,” said Mackay. “Would you have the stones to ride the Carson and Tahoe Flume from the high Sierras down to Carson City?”

“Not in a million years,” said the bartender, collecting the empty rock glasses before returning to his bar.

“I’m in!” said Ramsdell.

Everyone seemed to stop mid-drink when Ramsdell’s blurted proclamation had landed. “You’re in for what?” said Mackay.

“The flume,” said Ramsdell. “If men worth thirty million a piece are willing to risk their lives riding a logging flume, then why the hell can’t I?”

“You must be joking,” said Mackay, drunkenly sipping from his fresh whiskey glass. “I haven’t half the stones for a stunt like that.”

“No, John,” said Fair, “let’s show Mister Ramsdell the stuff we western men are made of.”

Mackay toasted his partner before downing the contents of his glass. “I’ve created a monster,” he said, wiping his lips on his upper sleeve. “I guarantee you gentlemen will think better of this foolish bit of larking come the morning.”

“It’s a long ride up into the Sierras,” Fair said for Ramsdell’s benefit. “We’ll have to leave tonight if we’re to ride the flume on the morrow.”

“This is nothing but whiskey talk,” said Mackay. “By morning you won’t remember any of this, suicidal nonsense.”

“Come now, Mackay,” said Fair. “Would you rather wither away in some stuffy, overheated mine shaft, or die like men in the broad daylight of a fast moving flume?”

“I’d rather just sit here drunk and enjoy myself,” said Mackay.

“Then it’s decided,” said Fair. “Come first light, we men of stones shall soar down the Sierras like Hermes and Isis, like Icarus to the sun.”

Mackay was jarred awake at sunrise when one of their carriage wheels rose and dropped violently over an outcropping of rock along the trail. Leaning up from the seat he looked out of the window to see that they were deep into the high Sierras—somewhere east of Mount Rose. Their logging flume was to his right, running parallel down the rugged mountain landscape, alongside their second engineering masterpiece, the Comstock Pipeline. His head felt cloudy and hungover from last night’s drunken rip, his eyes gritty like sandpaper. For a moment he failed to remember why he was riding in a carriage at dawn, until he looked across the compartment and saw the newspapermen, Henry Ramsdell, sleeping alongside Fair. Both men were dressed in their Sunday finest, and Mackay remembered how they had all gone to their individual residences to change for their ride down the flume.

‘*If we’re to die on the morrow,’—James Fair—‘then we shall do so like men about to meet the Queen.’*

Mackay opened the lid to the picnic basket that sat beside him, removing an apple that he quickly polished against his overcoat. The carriage was jarred by another patch of rough road, awakening both Fair and Ramsdell at virtually the same instant. Both men grimaced at first before shielding their eyes with their hands. “Note to self,” said Mackay. “Don’t drink so much alcohol the night before a flume ride.”

Ramsdell straightened up in his seat and peered out the window of the coach, taking in the majesty of the Central Sierras. “The east offers nothing quite so breathtaking as this,” he said.

“Agreed,” said Mackay. “Perhaps nowhere else in the world. Apple?”

When Ramsdell raised his hand, Mackay tossed his polished apple to journalist before extracting a second one from the picnic basket. “I see we’re riding parallel to your water works,” said Ramsdell. “I’ve heard it called the greatest engineering feat in history. The equivalent to the great pyramids of Egypt.”

“The pipeline uses differing thicknesses of steel tubing, depending on the perpendicular pressure needed to push water over hills and lateral curves,” said Fair, leaning up in his seat before peering hungrily at the picnic basket. “Have you any bread in your basket that can sop up my hangover?”

Mackay withdrew a loaf of bread wrapped in a linen cloth, handing it across to Fair before biting down on his freshly-polished apple. “We bought the original works from Sharon and the Bank of California,” he said for Ramsdell’s benefit. “After that, we spent an additional two millions dollars to increase its capacity to adequately serve the needs of the Comstock Lode. Sharon expressed in the *Territorial Enterprise* that he and the Bank of California were more than happy to unload their waterworks to a bunch of amateurs.”

“Amateurs,” said Fair. “That arrogant pile of senatorial crap has the gaul to call us amateurs.”

“Instead, we amateurs pushed Ralston and Sharon clear off the Lode,” Mackay added with no small lack of pride.

“Have you managed to make back your original investment?” said Ramsdell.

“Many times over,” said Fair, tearing off a large hunk of bread before biting down on its crusty goodness.

“Water became a scarce commodity back in Seventy-three,” said Mackay, “which meant we were able to set our own rates once we could supply the needs of the various Comstock communities.”

“I read that your water supply is dangerously high in arsenic,” said Ramsdell.

“A condition that can’t be helped,” said Fair. “Our water supply travels through mines and hills rich with minerals, including high densities of arsenic.”

“The ladies rather like the arsenic,” said Mackay. “They say it improves their complexion, makes them fair and rosy-cheeked. Almost young again, some of them say.”

“Nor do the miners object,” said Fair. “They claim that the arsenic makes them strong in the lungs, able to traverse mines like nimble mountain goats.”

“On the day the water supply hit Virginia City,” said Mackay, “the town broke down in a celebration not seen since the end of the Civil War. Cannons were fired, bands paraded the streets, rockets were sent up all over town.”

“Two million gallons a day,” Fair added. “From near-desert famine to incredible abundance, just like that.”

“A fifteen mile long logging flume must require an enormous amount of water in its own right,” said Ramsdell.

“That she does,” said Mackay. “The bulk of our logging activity takes place in the spring, when the Sierra snow melt provides us with an enormous amount of excess water for transportation. We own twelve thousand acres of heavy pine up in the Tahoe Forest. The land is estimated to contain half a million cord of firewood, one hundred million board feet of sawed timber and thirty million feet of hewn timber for sixteen-inch square sets.”

“The existing mines on the Lode consume over eighty million board feet of timber each and every year,” said Fair. “It’s a sum that still boggles my mind.”

“I’ve read many complaints from the environmentally-minded that the Comstock is consuming disproportionate amounts of forest and natural resources,” said Ramsdell.

“It is and it does,” said Mackay. “Fortunately for the West, timber is one of our most vigorously renewing resources.”

At the Hunter’s Creek flume head the men disembarked their carriage, walking stiffly at first after their long night of cramped transportation. “Good heavens, no one told me you were coming,” said Jim Haines, logging foreman and the original construction supervisor for the flume.

Mackay shook hands with his foreman, and said, “Our trip surprised even the likes of us.”

“We’re here to run a hog trough to the bottom,” said Fair, “all the way to Huffaker’s Station.”

“It’s no longer permitted,”said Haines. “I’m afraid we’ve lost too many good men pursuing the fast way down the mountain.”

“Nonsense,” said Fair. “Are we not the bloody owners of this death trap of a flume? On the contrary, Haines, we will do exactly as we please.”

Haines glanced first at Mackay and then at Fair, reaching for his slouch hat to scratch it up and down across his forehead. “You Gentlemen serious about this?”

“Deadly serious,” said Mackay. “At least until we sober up.”

“The water is running hard for this time of year,” said Haines, “almost a mile a minute. Perhaps you’re not appreciating what sort of speed that translates into.”

“Come now, Haines,” said Mackay. “Are you trying to scare us off?”

“Have you run the flume yourself?” said Fair.

“Twice,” said Haines. “If you choose to do this thing, you will be riding down trestles as high up off the ground as seventy feet. You cannot stop and you cannot lessen your speed. You have only to sit still and take all the water that comes, renting you like a plunge through heavy surf, while you wait for your turn at mishap and eternity.”

“Yes, but is it fun?” said Fair.

“Immensely,” Haines offered with a smile.

“Well then, since you already know the way,” said Mackay, “perhaps you should join our merry little band of fools.”

“I promised my wife I’d never do it again.”

“And she’s the boss of you, Jim?” said Fair.

Haines looked over at a group of Canadian lumbermen, raising his hand to gain their attention. “Attention, les garçons. Préparer deux diables de tuer pour le canal!”

Ten minutes later Mackay and Fair climbed into the front kill devil, which was suspended above the raging waters of the flume by a series of pulleys and ropes strung beneath a tripod gallows. The v-shaped dugout boat was barely wide enough to fit his hips, barely deep enough for a man to feel safe once the narrow boat was careening down its oneway track. Mackay looked back and saw Haines and Ramsdell seated in the kill devil behind them, and he flashed them a broad smile and an eager thumbs up. “This is crazy!” Haines yelled above the roar of the water.

“This is living!” Mackay yelled back.

On Fair’s signal, the flume engineer lowered the lead kill devil into the water, releasing the guy lines before the steady rush of water could flood the tiny boat. Mackay felt the kill devil lunge forward as they set off down the first gentle slope of the flume, grabbing hold of the gunwale handholds as the vessel began to carom violently off the v-shaped walls of the flume. About four hundred yards into their run, he looked back to see the second kill devil release from the gallows, beginning its chase down the Sierras. Mackay looked to the sky and howled like a wolf, prompting Fair to twist his head and upper body, enough to see what his partner was up to. “Alive, damn-it, alive like the wind!” Mackay yelled to him.

Fair’s eyes looked wild with panic. “Alive with stupidity!” he yelled ahead to the frightening descent.

Mackay looked ahead as they entered a much steeper grade of descent. He tried to scream, only his voice mixed up with his fear—a giant ball in his throat—prompting him to tighten his grip on the handholds and ride the bucking bronco for all she was worth.

‘*You cannot stop, and you cannot lessen your speed. You have only to sit still and take all the water that comes, renting you like a plunge through heavy surf, while you wait for your turn at mishap and eternity.’*

Within seconds of dropping into the steeper grade, Mackay was certain that he had never traveled this fast at any previous time in his life. No horse nor train had ever propelled him at speeds such as this, and for a moment he closed his eyes to make it all go away. Moments later, the kill devil struck something underwater, forcing him to open his eyes in time to see Fair’s body launch itself over the bow of the tiny boat. His partner was now completely in the water, holding on to the bow with a look of abject terror as his body was swept down the flume in front of the bow of the boat. Mackay stood up with difficulty and crab-walked to the bow, grabbing Fair by the back of his overcoat until he could drag the man back into the boat and onto his stomach. When Fair was landed safely back onboard, both men lay in the shallow hull and breathed as though they’d run a foot race. “From now on you should stay in the boat!” Mackay yelled through his labored breaths.

“I’ll remember that,” said Fair, breathing equally as hard.

Ten miles into their hell ride, the second kill devil overtook that of Mackay and Fair’s, colliding into their transom with violent consequence. Both boats were split in half at their v-bottomed seams, spilling men and planks of dismantled lumber down the flume at a terrifying rate of speed. Sliding helplessly now, Mackay took a blow to the head from one of the shattered planks of wood, prompting him to cradle his arms around his neck as he surfed down the raging caldron on his back. Pain erupted from his shoulders and hips with each successive impact against the static walls of the flume, struggling for air as water repeatedly cascaded over his nose and mouth. Fair was a short ways in front of him, struggling to keep his head above water, and Mackay could only assume that Haines and Ramsdell were suffering the same pounding somewhere behind his head.

Four miles later, their steep descent leveled off to a manageable three percent grade, allowing Mackay enough latitude to roll briefly onto his side until he could see the other men racing down the flume less than twenty yards behind him. Their faces were both bloody despite the ghostly white appearance of their skin. “No more rough stuff!” he called out to them. “Less than a mile to Huffaker’s Station!”

Floating down the last of the flume, Mackay tried to take stock in their sudden misadventure less than two thirds of the way down the course. His body hurt in more places than he could identify, but by the grace of God, all four men were alive to live another day. At the end of the flume, the men drifted out into the broad expanse of the Carson River. Some ways ahead of them the river was clogged with freshly hewn timbers, while lumbermen with spiked peaveys manipulated the floating logs into retrieval spillways so that each could be loaded onto flat cars for the train ride up Mount Davidson. Mackay and his battered peers began to swim for the shoreline, each man knowing in his gut that they wanted no more encounters with water and free-floating timber.

Dragging themselves up along the banks of the Carson River, Mackay hugged his arms onto solid land as he continued to hyperventilate from over-exertion. “Sweet Jesus!” he managed.

“Still feeling alive like the wind?” Fair asked in his best sarcastic tone of voice.

“Never again shall I place myself in equality with so much timber and water,” Mackay managed through his shock and fatigue.

“The four of us have just annihilated both time and space,” said Ramsdell, breathing hard like the others, yet managing a broad smile at the truth of their unbelievable survival.

“I’ve always thought that the meaning of time and space was so that everything in a man’s life didn’t happen all at once,” said Fair. “Now that I’ve seen it all pass before my eyes in course of a solitary flume ride, perhaps my understanding needs some serious reconsideration.”

# Chapter Twenty-five

Friday, June 4, 1875

Sutro tried to identify his feelings of uneasiness that commingled with his rising sense of triumph. His mission to reach the Comstock Lode had been plagued by setbacks that would have felled the spirits of less ambitious men. Yet here he was approaching the end—over four miles into the bowels of an unforgiving earth. For five years his teams had performed a steady ballet of detonation and muck-out, of boring and shoring and fighting back against the ever-expanding advance of a demon-possessed clay. Day after day, month upon month, season by season his young athletes had thrown countless tons of rock into a steady parade of ore carts, yet neither darkness nor heat nor foul air nor stubborn beast nor fainting men would slow his progress towards his goal to reach the Comstock Lode.

Sutro sat down on an ore cart and wiped his brow with his handkerchief, allowing his mind to run freely over his recollections of his monumental dig. Almost hourly, stripped to the waist, he had toiled alongside his men, displaying an energy and a resolve that had spread throughout his crews like a contagion. By strength, courage and example he had kept his men focused and in high morale. Nearly every foot of advance had been gained at the price of pain and danger, only onward he had urged his men, always with compassion and fatherly concern for their well-being and safety. Despite the repeated delays of adding root blowers and drop shafts into his tunnel, temperatures at the face of the bore steadily increased the deeper they went. The air that they breathed became suffocating and hideously foul. The aroma of perspiring mules grew to an unbearable stench, until the smell seemed to seep into the very crevices of the rock itself. As fast as the bore went forward and the heat grew stronger, just that much more overpowering became the smell of sweat, feces and urine.

*Someday you will stand upon a crisp and windswept vista, and breathe in nothing but pure ocean spray and honeysuckle sunshine.*

Once Sutro had figured out how to manage the oozing spread of clay in his tunnel, he had pushed his men to break record upon record in such a way that inspired them to labor with the upmost efficiency and speed. On average, they had progressed into the mountain at fourteen feet per twenty-four hours, only there were times when it seemed as though nothing could slow their progress but crippling injury or sudden disaster. Last July they had drilled 279 feet in seventeen days. Then came 417 feet in just 22 days, yet despite these records of endurance, they were always slowed when the heat rose above 100 degrees.

Two months ago, when the heat at the bore had become unendurable for the thirtieth time in as many months, Sutro had installed a powerful double compressor built by Kalk Branchen, near Duetz along the Rhine River. The blowers were run at their maximum capacity. The pipes that supplied compressed air to the drills were opened at several points to make for a manmade breeze, only all of his heroic measures were insufficient to contend with an assault of poisonous gases, animal emanations and of course the endless and insufferably rising heat. Two weeks ago, despite his best efforts at mitigation, the average temperatures in his tunnel rose from 98ºF to 109ºF, while temperatures at the bore climbed to 114ºF. Under such unsupportable conditions, it seemed impossible to complete the work—so close to the end, yet so stifling hot that his men were passing out like flies in a sealed mason jar. In spite of the conditions, Sutro kept his men focused on their task, as if his entire team were of a singular mind and purpose. Under the present conditions, two or three hours was all that the most hardened miner could withstand at the face, and even with this most abbreviated work schedule, endurance and morale grew strained as the men struggled to persevere. Man after man had dropped from heat stroke, and was carried from the tunnel in a babbling, incoherent state.

And thus these intolerable conditions had remained without abatement or remedy throughout the full course of his dig. The nearer Sutro came to his goal, the slower his efforts progressed. With every foot of advance, the swelling clay became more demonically treacherous. Often, after being cut through and exposed to the air, the clay would expand so rapidly that it would displace the railroad tracks and snap the square set timbers like reeds of brittle grass. Another unwanted result was a complete moratorium on blasting for the past month, since the timbers were made unstable by the constantly expanding pressures exerted by the clay.

Sutro reviewed their progress over the past six months, concluding that their present oppressive conditions had worsened when they had entered the Comstock mineral belt, roughly fifteen hundred feet behind their current position. The heat from the sulfuric springs that bubbled up through the rock had become so intolerable that two drill teams had to be taken off the bore in case the remaining two teams had to flee from a sudden expulsion of poisonous gas or scalding geothermal water. Progress from then on had remained at less than 250 feet per month, causing Sutro no amount of sleepless nights as he watched his dwindling cash reserves burn up in an escalating state of payroll overrides.

After the first of the mineral belt had been exposed, Sutro had to change shifts four times a day instead of three. Conditions became so oppressive that the toughest-fibered mules rebelled at every command. No longer could they willingly be forced to the head, for the rat tat tat of the drills had combined with the blackout heat to arise in their hearts a permanent fear of Sutro’s dark and oppressive tunnel. More than once a rationally obstinate mule had thrust his head into the end of the canvas air pipe, and had to be literally torn away by the strength of a small army of men. When brute muscle would fail them, the miners would tie the tail of the obstinate mule to the bodies of two other mules in the same train, and force them to haul back their companion, who would snort viciously and slip with stiff legs over the sulfur wet floor.

When Chief Engineer, Sam DeBartello, approached the bore with his ever-present lantern, Sutro stood up from the ore cart to greet the man with a smile. He tucked his handkerchief back in the pocket of his Levis, which by now were soaked through with sweat and covered in a slick veneer of brown clay and yellow sulfur. “Have you any reports from Sutro City?”

“I have rechecked my numbers so many times I’m in need of a new slide rule,” said DeBartello. “The *Savage Mine* lies less than ten feet in front of us, I’m absolutely sure of it.”

“We’ve been able to hear the men working in the *Savage*,” said Sutro.

“Which means we must be prepared for a good bit of violence,” said DeBartello.

Sutro gave DeBartello a questioning look. “How so?”

“We must be prepared for a potentially violent disequilibrium in barometric pressures,” said DeBartello. “We are about to connect two shafts of immense proportion, neither of which has ever had a common point of linkage. The pressure changes could potentially create a small hurricane of rushing wind.”

Sutro thought over the problem before nodding his understanding. “We must alert Stanley Gillette over at the *Savage*,” he said at length. “We must have some means of communication so that both our teams can retreat in advance of the final knock through.”

Sutro and DeBartello walked up to the team of miners working the bore, both men squinting their eyes against the deafening sound of two Burleigh drills pounding into the face of the rock. When the drillers had created a knee-high pile of loose rock on the tunnel floor, almost in tandem they shut down their drills and retreated from the bore so that the muckers could shovel the rock into waiting ore carts. Without warning, the tunnel was shaken by a violent blast, causing the last thirty yards of square set timbers to groan and shift precariously over the miner’s heads. “Retreat! Retreat now!” Sutro called out to his team.

Sutro dropped down to one knee while the miners beat a hasty retreat from the bore. Retreats such as this were a frequent occurrence in every mine on the Comstock Lode, since the chance encounter with a pocket of poisonous gas or scalding hot liquid made every man vigilant to the need for a hasty pull back at a moment’s notice. “Let’s go, everyone three hundred feet back!” Sutro yelled to his men, for as captain of his ship, Sutro made certain that he was always the last man out of a dangerous situation.

Once his men were safely clear of the bore, Sutro and DeBartello made their way back along the tunnel until they could sit down amongst the group of retreated miners. “What in tarn hell was that?” said Shift Foreman, Lou Cummings.

“If I was a betting man,” said DeBartello, “I’d say we just witnessed a blast from the bore of the *Savage*. Which means we’re almost to our goal.”

“Everyone back another two hundred feet,” said Sutro. “No more drilling until I have words with Stanley Gillette.”

Sutro and DeBartello rode a cable cart through the foul air of the tunnel, until they could stand in broad daylight, shielding their eyes from the sun while they slugged down welcome quantities of unfetid air. Feeling revived, both men climbed out of the cable cart and walked down the main street of Sutro City, entering a small office that comprised the sole headquarters and command center for the entire tunnel project. “Any word from the *Savage*?” Sutro asked as soon as they had entered.

Telegraph operator, Lester Wilcox, turned on his swivel stool and held up a piece of paper. “We received a message from Superintendent Gillette not half an hour ago,” said Wilcox.

“Read it aloud, will you, Lester?” said Sutro.

“My men can hear your progress.” Wilcox read the copy. “All hands made nervous by your approach. Upon knock through, we fear a damaging rush of wind that may prove injurious to our boys.”

“Copy the following,” said Sutro, prompting Wilcox to turn back to his telegraph table to dictate Sutro’s message. “We concur with your concerns. Sutro miners plan to drill a double charge into the bore. Upon completion, we will notify the *Savage* to retreat her men prior to detonation. Anticipate retreat notification in approximately five hours from receipt of this transmission.”

Sutro felt the tug of his exhaustion as he checked the charges drilled deep into the bore face. Sixteen fuses had been pigtailed together onto a detonation junction terminal, which trailed a single wire some three hundred feet back to the waiting plunger. Except for two brief departures to the surface, he had been a permanent fixture in his tunnel for almost twenty-two straight hours. And while his nervous anticipation remained heightened, he was also aware of the fact that his fatigue, from this point forward, would make him increasingly susceptible to misjudgments of a potentially fatal consequence.

*Safe mining practice and worker fatigue are by their very nature always at odds with one another—Principals of mining*, Baron Von Gengenau, Österreichische Geologische Gesellschaft, 1857.

Retreating to the group of miners huddled around the plunger, Sutro sent DeBartello back to the bore for a precautionary second look at the fusing, instructing Cummings to communicate with Wilcox at the telegraph station less than five hundred feet behind their present position. Within minutes, both his engineer and his shift foreman were back at his side, kneeling down beside Sutro so that three men could talk. “The *Savage* awaits our detonation,” said Cummings. “All her men are well clear of the knock through.”

Sutro looked to DeBartello, who nodded his head, indicating that the charges were properly set. “Time to make history,” Sutro offered with a tight-lipped smile.

Sutro raised himself up from the tunnel floor, knee-walking to the plunger, until he could raise up the T-bar with one steady motion. “Fire in the hole!” he yelled before dropping the T-bar down into the plunger box. Two seconds later, a thunderous concussion shook the tunnel, sending a howling shockwave of wind on a course for the tunnel entrance. Several seconds later, the wind changed directions with the rapidity of an immense vacuum, forcing Sutro and the others to shield their faces from the conveyance of dust and rock that began to rush past their bodies. “Can you believe it?” Sutro yelled to his engineer. “Sweet Jesus, we’re through to the *Savage*!”

Into the tunnel swept a stygian gale, followed by a blinding rush of smoke and a gust of noxious air so hot that Sutro was convinced he had blasted an opening into hell itself. One after the next, candles and lanterns were snuffed out by the inbound rush of air, leaving Sutro and his men in a world of total, windswept darkness. Sutro clasped his hands over his nose and mouth, instantly overpowered by the noisome stench of urine and perspiring mules. Miners began striking friction matches in an effort to relight their candles, only the continuing wind storm snuffed out each successive attempt. Sutro managed to put a lit friction match to his lantern wick during a brief letup in wind strength, holding it up to see a half dozen miners standing beneath one of the compressed air outlet pipes, gulping down the current of fresh air as eagerly as a parched swallow of water.

Sutro started crawling on his knees toward the knock through, despite protests by every man hunkered at the plunger station.

“There’s too much wind!” yelled Cummings.

“It’ll get worse the closer you get!” yelled DeBartello.

Ignoring the pleas of his men, Sutro stood up and walked toward the bore, feeling small rocks and pebbles continue to bite at his back, legs and neck. He walked on like a man possessed, smiling when he understood that his obsession over a tunnel into the Comstock Lode had at long last been achieved.

*Fourteen years, Adolph! For this long have you struggled against the conspiracies of Ralston and his bank, not to mention the political tomfooleries rampant in the halls of Washington. And the earth itself—always trying to expunge your predilection for clawing ever deeper toward the heart of Mount Davidson’s hidden riches.*

As DeBartello had predicted, the winds at the knock through matched that of a weak hurricane or a waning gale. Above an enormous pile of rubble that threatened to completely seal off the tunnel, through the tempest whirlwind he climbed to the top of the pile to peer into the darkness. Holding up his lantern, he saw a great square hole with jagged sides, which the blast had torn out of the rock partition separating his tunnel from the *Savage Mine*. Through the gap swept clouds of pulverized earth and hot sulfuric air. From the jagged edges fell a mist-like curtain of dust, but through it all glowed the throws of a distant light from the tunnel above. “Are you there?” he yelled up the passage.

A moment later, Sutro saw the reflective glow of a second lantern above his head, flickering in the wind storm of the knock through. “Who goes there?” came a voice from above.

Sutro smiled despite the pain that now racked his body. “No one but the wind!” he yelled up the knock through.

A ladder was dropped down the knock through, and once Sutro had double-checked the ladder’s footing, he began to climb up to the jagged and narrow passageway. Up the ladder he rose, like Mephisto with eyes ablaze. At the top of the ladder, safely past the worse of the jagged rock, a sudden burst of air lifted him—sucked him—completely through the knock through, until he was flung unceremoniously against the unforgiving wall of Gallery 16 in the *Savage Mine*.

Before anyone could come to his aid, Sutro leaned up on an elbow and examined his bloodied, naked upper body. Every inch of his chest, arms and face seemed to pulse with raw lacerations, only his excitement refused to hold him back. The silhouette of a man approached him through the driving wind storm, prompting Sutro to pick himself up off the ground and raise his flickering lantern toward the man. It was Stanley Gillette, and both men were smiling at one another like they were the last men alive.

“Is that you, Stanley?” was all Sutro could manage.

“Dr. Livingstone, I presume.”

# Chapter Twenty-six

Wednesday, August 25, 1875

Over your many years as a practicing newspaperman, you’ve developed—with no small dosing of pride over the matter—a rather strident nose for when a story is about to overtop its levy, so to speak, which makes it your task and charter to spill forth each of these emerging scandals for the consumption and mass titillation of the news consuming public at large. Such is the nature of your chosen career path, and although the public’s hunger for juicy gossip harkens back to man’s earliest scribblings on sundry cave walls and hillside boulders, you’re quite convinced that your skills as an investigative journalist have taken this beloved art form to new heights of craftsmanship and élan.

In the case of Billy Ralston and the nearly inaudible murmurs that his empire might at this very moment be teetering on the brink of ruin, the knowledge comes to you not by any hunch or gut instinct of your own, but rather by a telegraph received from an old newsman friend of yours, one Charles Nordhoff of *San Francisco Chronicle* fame. A newsman’s gut is a fine and necessary thing to the life of a journalist, you assure yourself as you ride the Southern Pacific into the outskirts of San Francisco. On the other hand, when gut instinct fails to present itself forthright and on its own, then a tip from an old friend is a welcome and much obliged replacement for an otherwise absent journalistic pulse.

Form No. 168

The Western Union Telegraph Company

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Something amiss with the Magician of San Francisco. Rumblings from the Bank of California. Willing to trade for insider scoop on the state of Con Virginia and the Silver Kings.

Charles Nordhoff

Your old friend Mark Twain sits across from you in the Pullman car, smoking his tenth or so cigar since your ride commenced from Virginia City. Having been roommates together during the early days of the Comstock Lode, you know from experience that when he’s writing hard like this, or bleeding out, as he likes to call the process, the man is oftentimes capable of consuming an entire hectare of tobacco in the course of his focused bouts of penmanship. Because of your insider knowledge of his writing habits, you have managed to remain silent throughout the four-hour train ride, only now that the train is coasting through San Bruno, Twain begins to resurface from his literary emersion, looking about the compartment like a man rudely awakened from a deep and satisfying dream.

“Good heavens, we’ve almost arrived,” he says.

“Care to share what you’re working on?”

Twain lifts up his enormous stack of manuscript pages that have been resting atop his lap. “The same book I was working on when you came to stay with us at Hartford,” he says. “The *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. True Williams has sketched some marvelous illustrations.”

“I just finished *The Gilded Age*, your book with Charlie Warner,” you say. “Has it sold well?”

“Not as well as I’d like,” says Twain. “Seems that the average American has little interest in political corruption or corporate greed. Speaking of your stay in Hartford, have you found a publisher for your big bonanza book?”

“I’m considering putting it before your publisher.”

“In that case I shall put in a good word with Paul Mitchum on your behalf,” says Twain.

“Any chance I can cajole you into writing a foreward? Your name would go a long way in convincing Mitchum to give the project a go.”

“Consider it done,” says Twain. “The story of the Comstock needs to be told, and you’re just the writer to tell it. Sixteen years in Virginia City makes you an undisputed authority.”

You both gaze out the train windows as the suburbs of San Francisco glide past—Visitacion Valley, Bernal Heights, the Mission District, Potrero Hill. “Compared to the rough-cut village I first saw twelve years ago,” Twain says after a time, “San Francisco has grown up to be a beautiful young lady.”

“Most of it the results of Billy Ralston and his Comstock millions,” you say.

“And now these rumors of financial collapse,” says Twain. “Since we both know the man on a first name basis, do we not just ask him straight up about his insolvency troubles?”

“Ralston’s the master of outward appearances,” you say. “Even if we asked him straight up, as you say, I’m willing to bet he won’t admit to a single bad debt in his hand.”

After your bags are dispatched with a porter for your stay at the Cosmopolitan Hotel, you and Twain hire a hack from the queue in front of the Embarcadero Rail Station*,* heading east on First Avenue for your scheduled appointment at Charles Nordhoff’s Rincon Hill town home. San Francisco is well into its finest weather of the year, and the two of you take in the sights as your hack plods his team along the broad avenue. You drive past the Woodward Gardens Amusement Park, noting that for a Wednesday afternoon the place is crawling with well-dressed adults and children at play. A family screams gleefully as their floating car rushes down The Chutes Flume Ride, reminding you of Mackay and Fair’s recent and now much written about passage down the Carson and Tahoe Flume. As the hack steers the carriage up Rincon Hill, you and Twain admire the pristine immensity of barrister Milton Latham’s new mansion, dwarfing the grandeur of the home of his wealthy neighbor, shipping magnate, John Parrott.

Driving north on Folsom Street, the hack stops the carriage before Nordhoff’s elegant town home on the corner of Folsom and Fremont Streets. “Stay put for a moment while I make sure he’s home,” you say, stepping down from the carriage to walk the short ways to Nordhoff’s lavishly appointed front door. Moments after you give the rather demonic-looking door knocker three rhythmic drops, a smartly-dressed and comely young maid opens the door and curtsies for your behalf. “Dan DeQuille and Mark Twain,” you answer her curtsy with a bow, “here to call on Mister Nordhoff, if we may.”

“I’ve instructions that you should meet him at the El Dorado Saloon,” says the maid. “He apologizes in advance, but he had some rather pressing business that forced him to alter his plans.”

Tipping your hat, you return to your seat on the open carriage, instructing the hack to deliver you and Twain to the El Dorado Saloon. “Off to consume some grossly overpriced cocktails, I see,” Twain says in response to the news.

“Watching the Professor perform mixology is a privilege well worth the price,” you say, referring Jerry Thomas, the now famous bartender of the El Dorado, who has singlehandedly raised the profession of bartending to an entirely new level of showmanship and alcoholic expression.

Recrossing Market Street, the hack drives north on Kearny to Portsmouth Square on the outskirts of San Francisco’s teeming Chinese District. Now that work on the Big Four’s Transcontinental Railroad has ended, the population of the city’s Chinese District has nearly doubled in size, as ethnic brothers segregate themselves en masse in an effort to recreate the culture of their faraway homeland. You find these shuffling, barking, spitting Chinese to be a particularly odd branch of humanity, only despite their overt foreignness, you’re certain that you have never witnessed a comparable ethnicity of such consistent work ethic, determination and spot on productivity.

Disembarking the carriage in front of the El Dorado, you hand the driver a silver dollar coin, tipping your hat before following Twain toward the entrance to the saloon. The El Dorado is nestled amidst a long row of similar establishments—the Bella Union to its left, the Bank Exchange to its right—and as you approach the upscale public house, you hear raucous laughter spilling from the Bella Union next door. Most of the laughter is of a distinctly male quality, although you pick up the high-pitched shrieks of more than a few female patrons as well. If there is a city on god’s earth that can match the sinful revelry of Virginia City, you think, then San Francisco stands as her outwardly highbrow yet secretly unrefined twin.

Entering the El Dorado, your eyes are drawn instantly to Jerry Thomas behind his long and elegantly appointed bar. Dressed in his customary plaid pants, white shirt and silk vest, both of his hands are adorned by flashy rings as he renders one of his signature concoctions, TheBlue Blazer, for a handful of mesmerized patrons. A Blue Blazer is nothing more than high-priced whiskey set afire, only the drink’s true magic comes in the Professor’s talent for pouring the burning liquor from one glass to another, back and forth until the flames slowly extinguish themselves. Both you and Twain stand just inside the door and watch the man perform his artistry while your eyes adjust to the darkness, and as you do so you marvel at the fact that Thomas, to date, anyway, has failed to ignite either himself or one of his wealthy patrons with an errant splash of his burning potion.

“I read somewhere that the Professor makes more money than the Vice President of the United States,” says Twain.

“As it should be,” you offer rather pointedly. “A vice president contributes little to a vigorous society when compared to the worth of a good bartender.”

As your eyes adjust, you see Charles Nordhoff seated amid a sea of tables and seated drinkers off to the left of the bar. With him are Otis Gibson and Daniel O’Connell, and although you know neither man well, these three men comprise the best that San Francisco journalism has to offer. Nordhoff raises his right hand and gives you a wave, prompting you to nudge Twain until he spots the group and sets off in front of you through the maze of convivial drinkers. Not quite halfway to Nordhoff’s table, the sea of drinkers begins to recognize your now famous friend, and in response to his passing, they begin to stand one-by-one to shake Twain’s hand and in general make themselves known to the literary talent from back east.

“Good Lord, your work is hilarious,” says a man with a Van Dyke beard and a grotesquely wandering eye.

“Innocents Abroad,” says another man with a gravy stain on his vest. “Loved it. Absolutely loved it!”

“In town for a lecture?” says a man with a cleanly shaven head. “I must procure tickets at once!”

“That jumping frog bit was most excellent,” says an extremely short man in a poorly-tailored suit.

“Thank you for reading it,” says Twain, shaking the small man’s hand. “It appears you’re one of a handful who actually made the effort.”

Nordhoff and the others stand up to shake Twain’s hand. “What an unexpected privilege,” says Nordhoff. “DeQuille, you made no mention Mister Twain would be joining us.”

“Mister Twain’s arrival onto the Lode was a surprise to me as well,” you say, feeling remarkably insignificant to the moment at hand.

“When I was born, my arrival was a surprise to my mother as well,” says Twain, smiling around a freshly-installed cigar.

“Can I give you a light?” says O’Connell, striking a friction match on the tabletop before cupping the flame in front of Twain’s cigar.

“I read somewhere that you’re quite the prodigious cigar smoker,” says Gibson.

“Not true,” says Twain, puffing like a bellows until a healthy red flame shoots from the lit end of his cigar. “I consider myself a man of moderation when it comes to cigars. In fact, I make it my habit never to smoke more than one at a time.”

Twain’s comments illicit a hearty round of laughter from the gathered journalists, prompting Nordhoff and O’Connell to pull two chairs back from the table as a welcoming gesture for the two of you to join the group. Once you take your seat beside the others, Gibson calls over one of the cocktail waitresses so that each of you can order one of the Professor’s famous beverages. “You really must try the Professor’s latest creation,” says Nordhoff. “He calls it the Tom Collins.”

“I’m in,” you say.

“Tom Collins it is,” says Twain.

“Not exactly the setting for a quiet talk about Billy Ralston,” you say for Nordhoff’s benefit.

“On the contrary,” says Nordhoff. “I’d say the three of us street rubs have already uncovered a good deal about Mister Ralston’s predicament in the short time we’ve been sequestered here. The clientele of the El Dorado represents the wealth of San Francisco. Most of these men have their ear to the rail when it comes to anything financial and potentially disadvantageous to their purse.”

“For instance?” you say.

“For instance, Ralston has sold all of his shares in the Virginia and Truckee Railroad to Darius Mills,” says Gibson.

“At fifty cents on the dollar,” says O’Connell.

“All this to cover his losses on his takeover bid for the *Ophir Mine*,” says Gibson.

“Adding insult to injury,” says O’Connell, “just this morning, the Mayor of San Francisco unequivocally blocked the city’s purchase of the Spring Valley Water Company, depriving Ralston of badly-needed funds.”

“He’s been selling off every asset he can,” says Nordhoff. “His liquidation spree has caused quiet talking amongst men of means.”

“A good number have withdrawn considerable sums of money from the Bank of California,” says Gibson.

“Any talk of a run on the bank?” says Twain.

“Plenty,” says Nordhoff.

“Such an event would rock the entire western economy,” says O’Connell.

“A changing of the guard,” you say more for yourself than for the newsmen around you.

“How’s that, Danny?” says Nordhoff.

“Billy Ralston was once the undisputed king of the Comstock,” you say, “along with his hired gun, William Sharon.”

“The later being your employer, if I’m not mistaken,” says O’Connell.

“Replaced by a band of Irishmen,” you say, opting to avoid O’Connell’s jab at your journalistic integrity or lack thereof.

Nordhoff waves his right hand toward the entrance to the El Dorado, and when you follow his point of interest, you see a boy of no more than ten years of age, as he waves back at Nordhoff before jockeying his way through the sea of seated drinkers.

“You still hiring street urchins to gather your news?” you offer with an amused expression.

“Paying my paper boys for valid scoop turns out to be one of the best investments I’ve ever made,” says Nordhoff. “They’re as hungry as their eyes and ears.”

“I’ve some two dollar news,” the boy addresses Nordhoff when he stands beside the table.

“I’ll be the judge of that, Lad,” says Nordhoff

“Ralston has sent his head clerk, Edney Tibbey, to the San Francisco Mint,” says the boy.

“And?” says Nordhoff.

“I’ve a friend who works there,” says the boy. “He’s been sworn to secrecy, only I made him talk for a quarter.”

“Out with it, Lad, out!” says Nordhoff.

“Mister Ralston has ordered his manager to transport two million in silver bullion over to the U.S. Mint, to be struck into twenty dollar coins for delivery to the Bank of California by sunrise.”

“The Mint’s closed at this hour,” says O’Connell.

“Mister Ralston has called in some favors,” says the boy. “The Mint will be stamping out coins for the better part of the night.”

“Does the silver belong to Ralston?” you say.

“No sir,” says the boy, “it’s the property of his bank customers.”

“Ralston’s done this before,” says O’Connell. “Back in Sixty-nine he thwarted a run by loading his bank counters with massive amounts of visible coin.”

“A showman’s reassurance that his bank is flush with cash,” says Gibson.

“Is that all?” Nordhoff asks the lad.

“There’s more, Sir,” says the boy, “a conversation I overheard at the Auction Lunch. It’s just talk, Sir, so I can’t be certain about how true it is.”

“Well will you listen to our little man craft his caveats!” says Nordhoff. “Don’t tell me our young scrapper has the makings of a newsman. Out with it then, Lad, let’s see what you’ve got.”

“Two brokers, Sir,” says the boy. “They were talking nervously about tomorrow, Sir, something about the eleven o’clock board.”

“What does that mean?” says Twain, puffing at full steam now.

“The start of trading on the Mining Exchange,” says Nordhoff, staring intently at the boy. “Did you hear what they were nervous about?”

“A sell order, Sir,” says the boy, “the biggest order they’d ever seen. One of them thought that the Silver Kings might be behind it. He called it a potential death blow to Billy Ralston and the Bank Ring.”

“Tomorrow should make for some interesting reading,” says Nordhoff, removing a five dollar coin from his vest pocket and pressing it into the boy’s waiting hand. “There now, Gentlemen, what say thee now of my methods for gathering the news?”

# Chapter Twenty-seven

Thursday, August 26, 1875

Sharon stirred his coffee with a silver demitasse spoon, looking out onto the main floor of the bank lobby through a wall of partitioned glass. Ralston’s army of tellers appeared nervous and pale as they stacked the last of the silver coin trays onto every available inch of marble countertop. Down to a man, every employee of the Bank of California understood what was at stake if their deception failed to come across as convincing to the general public. ‘*Today must be a choreography of business-as-usual.’* Sharon remembered Ralston’s morning pep talk to his team. ‘*A dog senses fear, so you must project only confidence and calm*.’

Sharon thought back upon the strange nightmare that had jolted him awake at the start of his day. In the dream he was shipwrecked in mid-ocean—barely clinging to life—his body bobbing listlessly on a flotsam raft in an endless ocean seascape. When the dream had first congealed in his mind, his friends and loved ones had been with him on the raft, only one-by-one they had succumbed to the withering effects of hypothermia and simply slipped beneath the surface into their cold and watery graves. His father was the first to go, loosing his grip on the raft’s jagged edge, his dying eyes locked fiercely—angrily—upon his son. ‘*You treat people like hogs to a butcher. If you weren’t my only son I would have disowned you years ago, for sooner or later, William, a man such as you will perish beneath a sea of heartless commerce, a friendless life of betrayal and ruinous self-obsession*.’

His wife was next to slip from the raft, and like his father, she held his eyes until she too had been swallowed up into the ink black darkness of the sea. ‘*You used me, William. All along you used me for personal gratification. For sexual convenience.’*

After Ralston had disappeared into the deep, Sharon came awake in his bed with a violent start, instantly aware that his nightclothes and bedsheets were soaked through with the sweat of his febrile dreams.

*Heartless commerce.*

*Friendless betrayal.*

*Ruinous self-obsession*.

“How much remains in the vaults?” said Mills, standing next to Sharon with a coffee cup of his own.

“One point four million,” said Sharon. “None of it belonging to the bank.”

“There’s to be a commotion at the Exchange,” said Mills, “the eleven o’clock board.”

“How do you know?” said Sharon.

Mills turned to give Sharon an odd look. “Are you suggesting that you do not employ the use of paid informants?”

“Evidently my sources are inadequate,” said Sharon.

*Heartless commerce.*

*Friendless betrayal.*

“I’ve been advised that we should investigate the matter at once,” said Mills.

Sharon studied the faces of the brokers congregated in front of the trading board. Each countenance bore its usual expression as they laughed and jostled and joked at one another before anxiously settling themselves into their seats. Only it was the anxious part that caught Sharon’s attention, for these men rarely acted with anything less than self-confidence and calculated precision.

The moment the caller rang the opening bell, brokers were on their feet and rushing toward the pit, each of them yelling a barrage of sales orders to the trading desk.

“One hundred shares of *Ophir* on the sell!”

“Six hundred *Ophir* on the sell!”

“*Ophir* for two-fifty short!”

Mills shuffled nervously in his seat, prompting Sharon to glance over at the bank’s ex-president. “Someone’s trying to make the market,” said Mills.

“Who do you suppose?”

“O’Brien or Flood, I should think. For days the market has been weakening, and now they mean to break it.”

“Why the *Ophir*?” said Sharon. “Prices have already bottomed out after Ralston’s botched takeover bid.”

“Ralston needs mining stocks to rise, not fall,” said Mills. “The Silver Kings must know he’s in trouble.”

“I think it’s safe to say the word is out on that regard.”

“Deprive him of his avenues for raising cash and he can no longer meet his obligations.”

“Three hundred *Best and Belcher* on the sell!” yelled a broker from the pit.

“Two hundred *Con Virginia* on the short!” yelled another.

Sharon watched his man Bradley Rorke of the trading firm Woods and Freeborn wave a handful of paper chits at the trading desk. “One thousand *Ophir* on the sell!” he yelled. “Six hundred *Gould and Curry* to sell!”

“That’s your man,” said Mills, his voice suddenly growling with acrimony. “This is your work, isn’t it, Sharon?”

“Yes it is,” said Sharon, keeping his eyes on the trading floor and refusing to look at Mills. “As of this moment it’s them or us, Darius. I intend to bring down the Silver Kings before they grow strong enough to cause us irreparable harm.”

“This is disastrous!” Mills said at barely a whisper. “This will ruin Ralston, his last chance to keep his head above water.”

“This man Darwin speaks about the survival of the fittest. Is it not time we let nature take its course?”

“How can you do this?” said Mills. “Ralston saved you from Pauper’s Alley, and this is how you reward him for his kindness, his loyalty?”

“Ralston’s only chance for survival is the elimination of the Silver Kings,” said Sharon. “As long as they dominate the markets he has no chance at all. Either the Silver Kings break or we break Ralston in the process. There’s no middle ground, I’m afraid.”

“This isn’t about Ralston at all,” said Mills, standing up with the most livid expression Sharon had ever seen from the man. “This is about William Sharon, isn’t it? This is about you winning at all cost, no matter who or what dares to stand in your way.”

When Sharon returned to the bank after lunch, he could sense in the very air that a run was officially underway. Lines of depositors had formed in front of the California Street entrance, waiting with ever decreasing patience for their turn to withdraw their funds at one of the many teller windows within. Quietly all morning Sharon had watched the storm begin to brew, but it was not until the afternoon that depositors came and went in successively anxious waves. Huge sums were being withdrawn at an unusually rapid rate, and as the run built momentum, Sharon watched an ever-expanding pile of torn bits of paper begin to pile up alongside Ralston’s cluttered desk. “We’ve a problem,” Sharon had said after sitting in silence for a time before Ralston and his finely-crafted desk.

“Nothing we can’t weather,” said Ralston.

Sharon looked at his copy of the morning’s withdrawal ledger. “Edward Hall and Company, two hundred and fifty thousand dollars,” he read. “Lucky Baldwin for a million.”

“He’s agreed to limit his withdrawal to a quarter million,” said Ralston, “same for Edward Hall. Proof that neither man has entirely lost confidence in the strength of the bank.”

“Maurice Schmitt was asked to return after lunch on a withdrawal of fourteen thousand.”

“An early attempt to slow the run,” said Ralston.

“Instead it appears to have fueled the fires of an all-out panic.”

Both men looked through the glass partition of Ralston’s office to see that a disturbance has arisen on the lobby floor—several riled individuals, pushing through the waiting line of customers, only to be forced back by a growing number of police officers as they struggled to maintain order in the increasingly restive crowd. Edney Tibbey entered the office, looking as ghost white as a bed sheet. “We’ve two calls just presented,” he said rather breathlessly. “Over three hundred thousand in withdrawals.”

“Honor the debt,” said Ralston. “We must stay the course until the faithful see that the bank remains viable.”

“Do you hear yourself, Toppie?” said Sharon. “What bit of this reality are you not comprehending?”

By two o’clock, the bank lobby was densely packed with anxious customers. Space had been officially exhausted, forcing customers to shuffle shoulder-to-shoulder in tight queues. Every face bore an index of the situation at hand. Standing alongside Ralston, Sharon could see that California Street was as wild and tumultuous now as the wind-tossed sea of his recent nightmare. Waves of humanity swept up the stairs of the bank and swirled about the doors. Like drowning men, people clung to balustrades and window frames. Inch by inch they fought for the right of way, hurling their bodies into any opening breech. Now and then, heavy fists, like great combers, bore down on plate glass windows as if they would smash their way into the interior by means of violence and force. At the doors, men threw each other ruthlessly aside and tried to trample one another under foot. Among the pale white faces, Sharon noted laborers, businessmen, women with children trailing at their skirts, everyone held back by policemen who vainly attempted order. In the crowds he recognized many personal friends, whose confidence in the bank had never been shaken for long these many years.

*Heartless commerce.*

*Friendless betrayal.*

*Ruinous self-obsession*.

Sharon withdrew his pocket watch from his vest, holding it by its gold chain to read the time as it spun gently in a slowing pirouette. “Two-thirty,” he said. “Can we withstand the final half hour?”

“We’ll have to,” said Ralston. “For the sake of San Francisco.”

Sharon looked back to the lobby floor and shook his head at the surreal nature of the scene. Every counter was lined with clients. Nervously they shoved their checks under the noses of the tellers. Swiftly the tellers glanced at the amounts written upon each one. In response to the checks, the tellers would shove along little heaps of gold or great piles of silver. Every teller had a white, scared look upon his face, along with the bookkeepers and the clerks at the more distant back tables. Their faces appeared as ghostly as white-capped waves seen in the moonlight. Only Ralston’s Chinese clerk had preserved his equanimity. He was sitting on a high stool, gazing through horn-rimmed spectacles as huge as watch-crystals. His look, thought Sharon, was one of sanguine haughtiness combined with a sullen, contemptuous resignation.

On the shelves just beyond the reach of those so vociferously demanding it, Sharon could see pile after pile of gold and silver as they glistened upon their trays. He watched in stark fascination as those stacks began to dwindle, as full trays were rushed up one after the next from the vaults. The run had now intensified into a tempest of public outrage. Men, women and children clamored for coin at every counter, door and window of the bank. As fast as possible the tellers kept shoving over money, only Sharon could easily see that it was like pouring teacups of water onto a raging fire. Tibbey re-entered Ralston’s office and stood silently—dutifully—to one side until Ralston turned to address him. “What is it, Edney?” Ralston asked him in a beaten down tone of voice.

“We have but forty thousand dollars remaining in the vaults,” said Tibbey.

“Thank you, Edney,” Ralston answered in a flat monotone.

“We’ll need to suspend,” said Tibbey.

“I’ll need a moment to consider my options,” said Ralston.

“Options, Sir,” said Tibbey. “What other options do we possess at the moment?”

Sharon turned back to the bank lobby to see Joe King’s clerk arrive with a heavily-laden attaché. Behind him was Schmiedell’s clerk with a similarly burdensome suitcase, followed by William Ives the stock dealer, every man laden with gold and silver for deposit. “Toppie,” said Sharon, touching his elbow against that of Ralston’s. “It appears some of your friends are attempting to bolster confidence with fresh deposits.”

Sharon watched as Ralston turned his defeated eyes to the bank lobby. “I won’t have it,” he said, withdrawing his handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow. “Close the doors and suspend. Telegraph New York, Boston and Chicago to stop payment at once. As of this moment, the Bank of California is no more.”

Sharon looked on as Ralston entered the locked teller counters adjacent to the lobby. His face was pale but resolute, like that of a hero conquered yet undismayed. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead, as he assisted Tibbey in spreading the suspend order to the tellers and clerks. One-by-one, pens dropped from a dozen played out fingers. One-by-one, tellers clanged shut their windows against the clamoring protests of the mob. From without came a sudden, vigorous effort to stop the outer doors from closing, only a small army of desperate clerks and nervous policemen managed to swing them shut against the fray. The lobby reverberated as the heavy bolts were shot home. Further ingress was at an end. Outside, protesters began to pound a drum beat upon the closed doors, only Ralston appeared as calm as Sharon had ever seen the man. A faint smile of satisfaction arose upon his face, and Sharon thought he understood the sense of relief that had finally overtaken the relentless stress of the past several months of Ralston’s slowly sinking dynasty.

Sharon entered the lobby as the policemen ushered the last of the bank customers back out onto the street. An eerie silence enveloped the cavernous bank, and as the room continued to clear, Sharon noted the small clutch of reporters who had gathered along the Sansome Street side of the lobby. DeQuille was in from Virginia City, as was Mark Twain from back east, his cigar issuing a small nimbus cloud of smoke above his head. Charles Nordhoff, Daniel O’Connell, Otis Gibson, Samuel Williams; every top newsman of San Francisco was standing as a group as they stood witness to the suspension of the bank. Other than Twain, thought Sharon, every one of these guttersnipes had at one point or another slung copious amounts of mud at both he and Toppie Ralston.

*Heartless commerce.*

*Friendless betrayal.*

*Ruinous self-obsession*.

“Mister Ralston,” said Gibson, pulling away from the cluster of newspapermen to be the first to approach the beleaguered cashier. “Now that your bank has suspended, will bills drawn on New York, London and Oriental banks be honored on presentation?”

Ralston stood in place and smiled at Gibson—that same look of bone-deep forbearance as before—then he turned slightly to address the other newsmen waiting along the wall. “Perhaps we should adjourn to the Director’s Room for a chat.”

Sharon followed Ralston and the newspapermen as they filed into the Director’s Room, feeling the events of the day fill him with a looming sense of depression. No matter how much legal wrangling he could employ in the aftermath of the bank’s suspension, he considered, he and Ralston were business partners in every sense of the word, which meant the news-consuming public would hold him equally responsible for whatever financial remedies they might demand. His attempts to corner the Exchange had always been ripe with the possibility of causing calamity to Ralston’s teetering empire, only never in his wildest calculations had he imagined the full suspension and collapse of the largest banking concern west of Chicago.

“In regard to what has taken place,” said Ralston, standing at the head of the conference table, each newsman ready with pen to notepad as they stood about the room. “It is impossible for now to make up a statement to present to the general public. Accordingly, a resolution will be proposed and adopted by the board forthwith, which will be given to you for publication in the morning. I will add on my behalf, however, as an officer of the bank, that there is no question whatsoever as to the ability of this bank to meet all of its obligations, with considerable surplus besides.”

A heavy silence followed the proclamation, and as Sharon studied the faces of the newsmen, he realized that none of them believed what Ralston had said. Instead, he noted the common look of sympathy as the journalist jotted down Ralston’s words.

*The Magician has fallen.*

*The Magician has lost his wand.*

*The Magician is a man of flesh and blood, just like the rest of us.*

“Shall you resume business tomorrow at the usual hour?” queried O’Connell.

“No,” said Ralston. “We shall not resume business on the morrow.”

“How soon do you propose to resume?” said O’Connell.

“We don’t expect to resume at all,” said Ralston.

“But you just indicated that the bank could meet it’s obligations.”

“It is I who cannot meet my obligations,” said Ralston.

“Can you tell us somewhere near the amount of money drawn from the bank today?” said DeQuille.

“Over one point four million in coin,” said Ralston, “with considerable other payments still required.”

When the newsmen had been driven from the bank and the policemen retired for the evening, Ralston stood near the center of the cavernous lobby and called together his spent crew of tellers, clerks and bookkeepers. Sharon stood to one side, observing grown men as they wiped fresh tears from their eyes. The day had been a harrowing experience for everyone involved, and now the sight of their great leader, his posture caved and beaten down, stirred in these men the common experience of a defeated army as they stood before their once unflinching commander.

“As all of you may well have gathered,” Ralston began, “the Bank of California will not resume its business. No doubt you will be subjected to some unpleasantness during the disagreeable ordeal that is bound to follow, but I know that each of you will deport yourselves as gentlemen under each and every circumstance. You know how I have been hounded by certain newspapers in this city, how every act of mine has been willfully misconstrued, and how I have been accused of political intriguing that I have never been truly guilty of. Even more so, the rumors that have been in circulation about Flood and O’Brien crowding the bank are utterly untrue, and I desire that each of you will flatly contradict these rumors wherever and whenever you hear them uttered. On the contrary, the most cordial of feelings exists between this bank and the Silver Kings, as they are now referred. As to each of you, you need have no misgivings about the future, for I this night enter into contract to provide each and every man with a first rate introduction to other opportunities of employment, so help me God.”

With these words, Sharon watched the fallen chieftain move slowly toward the front door of his once grand institution. Ralston’s forty or so bank men followed him toward the door with subdued sobs and tearful eyes, each man attempting to lay a hand on Ralston before the great man could exit the building and presumably their lives forever. And without warning or precedent, Sharon felt the quite foreign sensation of warm tears as they spilled down his cheeks. For although Ralston’s careless and over-extended business practices were at the heart of his undoing, Sharon knew in his heart that it was his own actions which had ultimately caused the man’s final collapse.

‘*This is about William Sharon, isn’t it? This is about you winning at all cost, no matter who or what stands in your way.’*

# Chapter Twenty-eight

Friday, August 27, 1875

Dressed in favorite dark blue suit, Ralston checked his appearance in the bathroom mirror before returning to the bedroom and Lizzy’s still sleeping form. He sat down on the bed next to her, rubbing her back slowly, tenderly, until she came awake with the slightest bit of a moan. The bedsheets were folded down to the foot of the bed on account of the temperature, Lizzy’s nightgown made damp by the ongoing heatwave that had ruled the city and distressed her occupants for over four straight days. Awake now, Lizzy rolled onto her back and swept the hair from her face, peering up into her husband’s eyes with a look of worried concern. “You’re going to work,” she said rather flatly.

“I am,” said Ralston.

“You said you’d take the day off, give the bank a long weekend to think things over.”

“Instead I’ve decided to face the consequences like a man,” said Ralston. “You must take whatever personal belongings you wish to keep and remove yourself and the children to your uncle’s house. This morning I shall sign all of my assets over to William Sharon, which will leave all of us quite penniless and broke. Exactly how we started in this fickled world of ours.”

Ralston saw the tears spill down her cheeks—just as they had the night before—and he wiped them away gently with the tips of his fingers. “Fear not, my lovely wife. We shall commence life anew, even if we must do so on a hundred dollars a month.”

Ralston walked out the front door of his Pine Street mansion, pausing when he saw Jeffries seated atop Ralston’s most cherished coach-and-four. “I let you go yesterday, Jeffries,” he said. “By nightfall I shall have no means of paying your wage.”

Jeffries bowed his head slightly, raising his top hat as a gesture of welcome. “I’m here not for the wage, Sir,” he said. “Only friendship and respect.”

Ralston walked up to the coach and raised his right hand for Jeffries to take. “Walk with me, then,” he said. “I want to get a jump on my new means of conveyance.”

Jeffries set the brake on the carriage, signaling one of the stable attendants to take over the team. “Very well then, Sir,” he said, climbing down from the perch. “Unlike you, I’m rather accustomed to walking.”

“Toppie,” said Ralston. “My friends call me Toppie.”

“Toppie, yes Sir,” said Jeffries. “You know, Sir, even us simple men gain certain epiphanies out of life, provided a man is allowed to survive into his sunset years.”

Ralston and Jeffries walked east along Pine Street, both men working their walking canes like gentry out for a leisurely stroll. “Tell me then, Jeffries, about these epiphanies of yours.”

“When it’s all said and done, Sir, everything about life is completely okay. Not enough money, too much money, either extreme is completely okay. We exist on this enormous anthill of industry and progress, Sir. Men and events, acts of God, our own cursed misdirections. All these things are allowed to reek havoc on the anthill, which in turn stirs up the status quo. The ants scurry about in high anxiety, to and fro with a pitched freneticism, desperate to find a way to put every misplaced grain of sand back exactly the way they were. But the outcome is always the same. Everything, every last detail in life will always be just completely okay.”

The men walked in silence until a sea of sweltering humanity overtook them as they rounded onto Montgomery Street. Here, women in faded finery were milling about, their rusty black silks flapping about their ankles in the hot August breeze. Gone were the diamonds from their ears, the sparkle from their eyes, the smile from their lips, for Ralston knew that his bank collapse and wild speculations had taken these things prematurely from their lives. Gone was their youth. Torn black veils were stretched taut across their toothless gums. Men, women and children looked at Ralston appraisingly—venomously—as he and Jeffries made their way through the throngs of overheated San Franciscans. The Comstock Lode, Ralston knew, had robbed them of everything that life could possibly hold dear. “These people,” he said for Jeffries’ benefit. “Will they be okay according to your anthill theory?”

“Every last one of them,” said Jeffries. “You may rest assured of that.”

Windows and balconies along California Street swarmed with spectators. On even the rooftops of surrounding buildings, crowds were perched and waiting for the continuation of yesterday’s drama at the Bank of California. Wherever Ralston looked he saw hordes of the curious, clinging to gables and chimney-tops like men clamoring for a glimpse of a prize fighter about to take to the ring. In the past, similar crowds had gathered along these corridors of San Francisco’s financial heart, just to catch a glimpse of Ralston and his life-sustaining bank. Back then he had been the hero of these very same people, who now glared at him because of the havoc he had wrought on their lives. Now there would be a run on the competing banks in which they had their deposits. When the hands of the clock tower on the Merchants’ Exchange pointed to the fatal hour, how many more financial concerns would topple before nightfall?

At the front steps to the Bank of California, Ralston turned to embrace Jeffries before the sea of eyes that watched in anxious curiosity. “Buck up, is that what you’re telling me?” he said, releasing the man and holding him by his shoulders.

“Buck up,” said Jeffries, turning to walk slowly back the way he came.

Edney Tibbey unlocked the front door to the bank when Ralston had pounded the massive Gargoyle knocker, stepping aside once he had opened the smaller inner door. “Top of the morning, Edney,” Ralston addressed his assistant as cheerfully as he knew how.

“Is it, Sir?” said Tibbey.

“It is and it shall be,” said Ralston. “Today we shall find a way to fix our badly broken bank.”

“If any man can, Mister Ralston, I’m confident you’re the one to make it happen. You don’t look well, Sir, you’re perspiring quite badly, you know.”

“It’s the day,” said Ralston.

Entering the lobby, Ralston saw Dan DeQuille and and Charles Nordhoff waiting in ambush near the check writing tables. “Mister Ralston,” said DeQuille, moving toward Ralston with Nordhoff close behind.

“Have you the statement you promised us?” said Nordhoff.

“I do not,” said Ralston. “Most likely not for three or four more days.”

“If I may say so, Sir,” said Nordhoff. “You look pale and anemic. Perhaps you should eat something to help restore your color.”

Ralston strode into Sharon’s office and closed the door as he entered. “Are the documents prepared?” he said, foregoing the usual morning pleasantries between the two partners.

Sharon pushed a stack of deeds across his desk toward Ralston, looking up at his partner to study the man’s apparent ill-health. “You don’t look well,” he said.

“Why does everyone say such things?” said Ralston. “For the love of God I feel fine!”

“By signing these documents, you will officially deed all your assets over to my name,” said Sharon. “Belmont Hall, your Pine Street residence, all your business concerns. Is your family prepared to vacate your homes?”

“As ready as any child and woman can be,” said Ralston, reaching for Sharon’s pen before dipping the nip tines into the inkwell and signing away everything he had worked so diligently for since his arrival into San Francisco. “I wonder, though, how my family will adjust to poverty.”

“As well as any man should,” said Sharon. “Look, Toppie, I’m heartbroken over…”

Ralston raised up his hands to demand that Sharon be silent. “My downfall is of my own making,” he said. “I accepted all the risks, now I must accept the consequence of my actions.”

“The board awaits us in the Director’s Room,” said Sharon, collecting the freshly-signed deeds and locking them in his safe.

Ralston followed Sharon into the Director’s Room, noting the grim expressions on the faces of his board members and friends of long-standing—Thomas Sunderland, Charles Bonner, Thomas Bell, William Barron—each of them wearing the look of a reluctant executioner, every face pale with shock and fear for what lay ahead. “Come join us, Toppie,” said Sunderland.

Ralston took his customary seat at the head of the long mahogany conference table, noting that someone had placed an entire ream of white paper in front of his place. Outside on the street, Ralston heard a paper boy call out the headline of the day.

“Bank of California suspends! Read all about it, big fail, big fail!”

Ralston removed a piece of paper from his breast pocket, unfolding it onto the conference table before looking up to the grim faces of his friends. “According to my best reckoning, I am in debt to this institution to the sum of four million dollars,” he began. “In addition to this debt, I owe William Sharon two million more, and to others another three point five million on top of that. I assumed these obligations to make San Francisco the greatest city in the west, to aid her growth in industry and to quicken her over-all commerce. Only like the paperboy says, my efforts have failed and I now stand before you, stripped of my wealth, for what remains has been deeded over to my friend and adopted brother, Senator Bill Sharon.

“I would ask that you give me the chance to right my ship,” said Ralston, “to drag it off the rocks, as it were, to get this bank back into solvency. I vow to you, Gentlemen, that I can pay every dollar to every depositor, plus fifty cents on the dollar to every stockholder if I am allowed to manage the ongoing affairs of the bank. I have never lied to you, and, if you will give me your aid and support to sell my Spring Valley Water Company and other stocks, I am sure that I can make good on the loss.”

“You can’t be serious,” said Sharon.

“Every one of you have profited by my success,” Ralston protested. “Now in failure you refuse to support my attempts to re-right my ship?”

“Is not your ship run aground due to your cavalier investing style?” said Bell.

“Lucky Baldwin has sworn to sue every last director for his loss of deposits,” said Barron.

“Baldwin is only the first,” said Sunderland. “By nightfall we shall have no less than a dozen similar filings.”

“Your financial indiscretions have been compounded upon our very heads,” said Bonner. “Because of this compounding, your actions now threaten each of our financial dynasties.”

Ralston leaned forward to study the faces around him, realizing that no man was willing to vote him the confidence to lead his bank back out of troubled waters. He stood up from the table and looked upon his fair-weather friends with open sympathy, his eyes moving slowly from face-to-face until he could nod his head in understanding. “So that’s the way it is,” he said, collecting the ream of paper from the tabletop before dropping it into a nearby garbage can. “Have you something for me to sign?”

Sharon slid the lone piece of paper across the conference table, until Ralston could reach for it and read its content:

San Francisco, Aug. 27, 1875

To the Board of Trustees of the Bank of California:

You will please accept my resignation as cashier of the bank, and also as a member of the board of trustees, to take effect immediately.

Most respectfully yours,

W.C. Ralston

Ralston removed a pen from a nearby inkwell and signed the brief decree in his most flourishing hand. He returned the pen to its ink stand, then withdrew his ring of keys to the bank’s vaults and doors. He offered a broad smile to the room, letting his eyes gaze upon each of his board members and friends. “Et tu, Brute?” he said, sliding the ring of keys across the length of the table, until they fell to the floor between Sharon and Sunderland.

Walking out into the suffocating heat, Ralston noted that the crowds of curious onlookers had nearly reached the proportions of yesterday’s run on the bank. Still others stood in long, fidgety queues that snaked into every other bank in the Financial Quarter—Wells Fargo, Lucas Turner & Company, Pioche et Bayerque—every one of them overrun by nervous depositors and more policemen than Ralston had ever seen in one place before. His entire body felt drenched in sweat, and as he stood on the street, he wiped his face with one of his silk handkerchiefs. He felt the pulling heaviness in his chest for the third time since breakfast, only he waved it off as usual now that he had learned to live with these undulating attacks since their first arrival into his life almost six years before.

And what a life it has been, he considered, walking now through the rapidly-parting sea of humanity packed along California Street. He thought back to his childhood in Ohio and felt instantly buoyed by the memories. He reviewed his years on the river, his first glimpse of New Orleans and San Francisco, his first glimpse of Louisa Thorne, gone lo these twenty-two years. He thought of Lizzy and his children and he positively beamed at all the rich blessings that comprised the marrow of his life. He felt buoyed not only by the memories, he considered, but by the vigorous gusto of his character and spirit, so rich with abundance and opportunity and adventure. The thought put a fresh spring in his step, and as he passed through the sea of gazing San Franciscans, he found himself smiling like a politician, shaking hands and offering steady words of encouragement to the distraught and the curious alike.

“This day will pass and prosperity will reign supreme!” he called out to one particularly forlorn and long-faced woman.

“That’s our Billy Ralston,” a well-wisher called after him, “come to bring back stability with his endless supply of magic!”

“Everything,” said Ralston to a nervous and pale man, “absolutely everything will be, just completely okay.”

“Three cheers for the Magician of San Francisco!” called out a man from a second floor balcony.

A woman stepped into Ralston’s path and glared at him in anger. “You’ve caused this town no end of poverty and wretchedness!”

“Never was that my intent,” said Ralston. “My only purpose was to grow this city into the fullness of her prime.”

“And you have, Mister Ralston, you have indeed!” called another.

“But at what cost?” said the frothing woman.

“Yes indeed,” said Ralston, appearing introspective and weary with doubt. “At what cost, you’re exactly right.”

The crowds thinned on Powell Street, and although Ralston felt deeply perplexed by the angry woman’s comments, he felt a growing lightness to his over-all bearing, which he equated instantly with an optimism not felt since his long removed childhood.

*How can you feel these things despite the lost confidence of men and the withering loss of your fortune? The Comstock has failed you. Spring Valley Water has failed you. Your bank has failed and your friends have proven false. And yet there it is within you—an energy like the steady strength of the sun.*

At Powell and Vallejo Streets, Ralston came face-to-face with his personal physician, Dr. John Pitman, and he cordially clasped hands with the thirty-year-old from Boston. “Toppie,” the doctor said with a look of evident surprise. “How on earth are you holding up?”

“I’ve just resigned my position at the bank,” said Ralston, “and quite contrary to how I ought to feel, Doctor, I feel like a schoolboy let out for summer holiday. I’m off for a swim at the Neptune Club. Come join me and we’ll swim like kingfish, all the way to Alcatraz.”

“Have you seen yourself in a mirror?” said Pitman. “You’re quite flushed and over-heated.”

“All the more reason for a swim,” said Ralston, giving the doctor a light box on the shoulder.

At the Neptune Beach Swim Club, Ralston stripped off his clothes in the men’s changing room, feeling temporarily relieved from the heat as he stood naked in the empty room. He donned his favorite swim trunks that hung in his assigned cabinet, then grabbed the letter he had written to his wife the night before. He reached for a freshly laundered towel from the stack near the door, then thought better of it and moved on toward the beach without one.

Jimmy Doolin sat in a chair beneath a beach umbrella, and when the attendant saw Ralston, he stood up with his usual enthusiasm for the man. “Mister Ralston!” he proclaimed. “Sir, you look beet red from the heat.”

“Nothing a good swim won’t cure, ‘ey Jimmy Boy?”

Ralston stood along the shoreline for a moment, tearing up his letter to Lizzy as he let the pieces cascade onto the beach like small bits of confetti. When the last scraps had slipped from his fingers he walked out into the water and dove headlong into the shockingly cold San Francisco Bay. Around Selby’s Smelting Works, he swam with strong and seasoned strokes, great combers with foam-tossed crests overtaking him with every third or fourth stroke. Two boys were swimming just off the smelting works, and Ralston tread water long enough to see that they were both okay.

“What time is it, Mister?” one of them called out.

“Half past three,” Ralston called back to them. “Cold?”

“No, not very,” said the boy. “Not after you get used to it.”

“Isn’t that the truth about everything?” said Ralston, setting off on a loose course for Alcatraz Island. The boy who had spoken to him tried to swim alongside Ralston, riding up and down the breakers that pushed them back toward the shore. So rapidly did Ralston’s lithe body skim through the water that the lad could hardly keep abreast. Up one wave and down another they swam, until the shore lay far behind and the boy was spent and panting in his wake. “You’re too fast for me,” said the boy, only Ralston continued on in silence, pulling through the water a the height of his performance.

Cleanly Ralston’s body punched through the waves, with every stroke rejoicing as he pitted his great strength against that of tide and gale. He felt the tightness again in his chest—the same aching numbness in his arms—only he pushed on despite his physical discomfort, onward, he thought, toward what could only be a better life than the one that stared him so boldly in the face back on land.

*Swim harder—like a man, you wretched lout!*

*Swim harder—until your boyhood dreams regain their clarity!*

*Swim harder—until your petty cares are excised for good!*

*Swim harder—and be one with the icy chill.*

*Swim harder—for you’re the Magician of San Francisco!*

*Swim harder, Toppie, for everything, every last detail will always be perfectly okay.*

# Chapter Twenty-nine

Saturday, August 28, 1875

Not since Lincoln’s assassination or Julia Bulette’s murder had Sutro seen Virginia City so overcome and staggered by the news out of San Francisco. Billy Ralston was dead—the Magician of San Francisco—and although Sutro had reason enough to hate the man for the next hundred lifetimes, his rational side allowed him to balance his enmity for Ralston against the man’s impressive list of achievements. Ralston’s methods may have been Machiavellian and crude, he considered, only Ralston’s litany of success made even Sutro’s productivity look inadequate and dull. The California Theater, the Valley Springs Water Company, innumerable factories and real estate concerns, the Bank of California and his final act of magnificence, the yet completed Palace Hotel. Only just like that the Magician had been taken—removed in the blink of an eye from the world of mortal men.

*A ring-a-round the rosie,*

*A pocket full of posies,*

*Ashes, ashes,*

*We all fall down.*

Sutro looked around the Washoe Millionaire’s Club, and noted the grim expressions of the town’s most notable elite. John Mackay was holding court with John Piper, James Fair and retired Governor James Nye. A vicious Washoe Zephyr continued to howl outside on C Street—Virginia City’s third straight day of gale force winds—making his head ache from a combination of incomprehensible news and mind-numbing wind.

“I’m having trouble digesting all of this,” he said, gazing across the table at Edward Adams, Senior Partner at the investment house of Winslow, Lanier & Company. “On the one hand there’s this horrific news out of San Francisco, on the other—Jesus god, Edward, you actually sold the lot of it?”

“Every last share,” said Adams. “Two-thirds went to the McCalmont Brothers, the rest to individual investors on the New York Stock Exchange Luncheon Club. As of yesterday morning, you no longer hold stake in the company of your own invention.”

“I should have thought investors would shy off to the fact that the Comstock mines have now dug beyond the depth of my tunnel,” said Sutro.

Adams sipped from his whiskey glass, giving Sutro a sly wink before answering. “Up until your mention of this quite overlooked fact, the firm of Winslow and Lanier had no prior knowledge of this point.”

“And my new net worth?” said Sutro.

“After my commissions, your take is seven hundred and nine thousand dollars. Oh and twelve dollars fifty cents,” said Adams. “I took the liberty of depositing the lot of it in your San Francisco bank account.”

“Good heavens,” Sutro exclaimed. “That makes me rather well off, doesn’t it now?”

“Congratulations, Adolph, no man deserves it more than you,” said Adams. “So tell me, now that you’re set for life, what does the future hold for Adolph Sutro and family?”

“I intend to leave this godforsaken place just as soon as I can close out the last of my business affairs.”

“And then?” said Adams.

“Down the mountain,” said Sutro. “Ralston’s death will leave San Francisco with a great vacuum of opportunity. Perhaps I’ll invest in real estate, maybe start a business or two. But what’s certain is that we shall now live the life of landed gentry. No more foul tunnels. No more chronic deprivations and crippling poverty. By way of protracted suffering, my family has earned the right to an opulent conclusion.”

Sutro heard footsteps pounding up the stairs to the Washoe Millionaire’s Club—panicked footfalls, he determined. The room full of male drinkers and diners seemed to share Sutro’s assessment of the footfalls, and by the time Sheriff’s Deputy Rick Walton reached the second floor landing, all eyes were focused on the man’s wound-up expression. “There’s a fire at Crazy Kate’s!” he said, badly out of breath. “Drunken trollop hurled a oil lamp at one of her lodgers, caught the place on fire real good!”

“Has it spread?” said Mackay, standing up to collect his duster and slouch hat from a nearby coat rack.

“Three buildings,” said Walton. “The Zephyr’s pushing flames like a torch.”

Staff and patrons alike filed down the stairs of the Washoe Millionaire’s Club, spilling out onto C Street until they could look up the mountain toward Howard Street and Kate Shea’s now engulfed lodging house. Sutro counted five structures in full conflagration, listening to the thunderous roar of dry timber set ablaze by wind-driven flames. He moved with the others toward the scene of the fire, passing a steady evacuation line of families in retreat, dragging with them as much personal property as their bodies could carry. Climbing up Mount Davidson for A Street, Sutro noted that the flames had arched their way across Howard Street, still one street above, setting ablaze several homes and a mortuary on the opposite side of the narrow lane. A good number of firemen and apparatus were already on scene, only Sutro was quick to note that the pressurized water from their hoses was already woefully inadequate to the task at hand.

“What’s wrong with your hoses?” Mackay yelled out to Fire Chief Handling.

“You tell me,” said Handling. “It’s your water works at the source, for god sakes!”

“We’ll need a bucket brigade!” Sutro yelled above the noise of the wind-driven fire. Standing on A Street, the men turned their backs to the wall of flame when a roof collapsed on Howard Street, sending a bomb blast of wallpaper, planking and roofing shingles cascading down the mountainside.

“She’s moving too fast for the likes of that!” Handling yelled when the worst of the shrapnel had past. “At this rate we could lose the entire town in a matter of hours!”

“What then?” said Mackay. “How can we arrest it before she reaches C Street?”

“If we dynamite the buildings on the west side of A Street,” said Handling, “we can create a break that might just hold her back!”

“Your decision, Chief,” said Fair. “You just tell us what to do!”

Handling paused for a moment, squinting at the heat of the blaze. “Move everyone down the mountain,” he said to the group. “Assemble as many explosives men as you can find. Let’s stop this thing on A Street before we lose the entire town!”

Before the men could break from their huddle and take action, a series of explosions tore the roof off of the The Washing Guard Armory Building, sending a second hailstorm of debris hurling down the mountain. Sutro followed Mackay and Fair down the hillside toward B Street, listening to the sound of ammunition popping off like firecrackers from within the doomed armory building.

Descending the hill, Sutro helped a young family as they struggled to carry a steamer trunk filled with their most prized possessions. “C Street should be safe enough,” Sutro yelled to the husband as together they hustled the trunk down the mountain.

When the family was safely embedded in the middle of C Street, Sutro thought about his own family for the first time since the fire began. He saw Mackay and Fair issuing orders to a group of men gathered near the Enterprise Building—staging for the destructive fire break on A Street, he surmised—prompting him to run back up the hill toward B Street and his family’s humble four-room cottage. Townsfolk were in full evacuation as he climbed the hill, finally spotting his wife and their three children as they fled B Street in front of the approaching firestorm.

“Esther!” he called out, and when she saw him her face seemed to collapse into an expression of wanton relief.

“Adolph!” she cried.

Sutro hugged his wife in his arms before relieving her of the two suitcases she carried. He looked to his children and saw pure fright etched upon their faces. “Quickly now,” he yelled above the noise. “We must make our way down the mountain to safety.”

With his family huddled among the growing masses on C Street, Sutro kissed his wife goodbye and made his way back up to A Street and the frenzied efforts of a dozen explosives experts as they set charges to the long row of homes and businesses along the western side of the street. Mackay and Fair stood with Chief Handling in the middle of the street, each of them glancing nervously to the fast approaching firestorm. “Now, men, now!” Handling called out to the blasting men. “We haven’t time!”

Sutro looked on as several of the engineers gave Handling a thumbs up, turning back to their crews to call them away from the buildings. “Everyone down the mountain!” Mackay called out. “Retreat to C Street and pray that she holds!”

Sutro rejoined his wife and children as they huddled together in the howling gale that threatened to blind them with tiny shards of wind-driven sand, burning embers and quartz dust. Before Sutro could offer words of encouragement, the homes and business along A Street erupted in a rhythmic choreographed line of well-timed explosions, which shattered the buildings one-by-one, right before their disbelieving eyes. “Oh dear gßod,” Esther managed through her tears. “Virginia City’s burning to the ground!”

For a time the break seemed to hold back the spread of the fire, until a strong gust of high wind drove the flames across the break and into the buildings on the east side of A Street. Within what seemed like mere seconds, the entire street was engulfed in flames, quickly spreading down Mount Davidson until it caught fire to the courthouse and then the lower structures along B Street. The winds moderated for a time, until another gust carried great sheets of blazing shingles and burning embers high into the air and far down the mountain. Men, women and children were forced from their suddenly burning homes, as house after house, a great human wave was pushed downwards toward the lower suburbs of the city. Hundreds moved their goods again and again, each time abandoning another cherished keepsake in their desperate attempts to retreat, until at last they found themselves driven far down on the open face of the mountain, empty-handed, panting for breath and parched by a burning thirst.

Within an hour, the entire face of Mount Davidson seemed a sea of fire, with great billowing flames tossing to and fro. From the armories of the various military companies, from the gunpowder shops and from many of the variety stores, there came a constant roar of exploding cartridges sounding like the steady discharge of small arms in a great and splintered battle. Above the din were heard the frequent and startling discharges of hercules powder and dynamite, as building after building exploded throughout the town. Following their retreat to Q Street, Sutro watched the Washoe Millionaire’s Club go up in flames, along with every building along C Street which had made up his home for the past fifteen years. The fact that less than two hours prior he had sipped coffee in the Washoe Millionaire’s Club made the burning nightmare seem all that much more surreal and undigestible.

Before the fire engulfed the hoisting works of some of the richest mines on the Lode, the flames took out most of Virginia City’s infrastructure, hopscotching down the mountain in a thorough display of block-by-block destruction. The fire swept away lodging houses, saloons, livery stables, markets, the union hall, furniture stores, the International Hotel, restaurants, drugstores, cigar stores, fire engine companies, three newspaper offices, two breweries, three lumberyards, Piper’s Opera House and more homes than Sutro could possibly count or fathom. Like his neighbors, he and his family were made destitute and homeless by the flames, and as the city burned, Sutro noted that his fellow townspeople appeared increasingly stupefied—almost drunk, he considered—over the suddenness of the city’s summary execution.

“Eilley Bowers said this would happen,” a woman yelled hoarsely as she stood within a huddle of destitute townspeople, “on account a Virginia City’s sin. Eilley said the wrath of god would burn this place to the ground!”

Sutro looked on as the group of refugees grumbled over the prognostications of the Bonanza queen turned pauper turned fortune-teller. He had read about her proclamation less than four days ago in the *Territorial Enterprise*, and despite his repulsion for all things superstitious, Sutro was certain he understood the nervousness and fear that the woman’s predictions now levied upon the crowd. Each of them was suddenly homeless and destitute, their city destroyed before their eyes like its biblical precursors of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“Mackay just set fire to the St. Mary’s church!” someone yelled above the tempest.

“Why would he do that?” said Sutro.

“Father Manague tried to stop him,” said the man, “only Mackay said damn the church, we can build a better one if we can stop the flames from reaching the *Con Virginia*.”

Responding to a sudden commotion up on C Street, Sutro retook the hill until he could witness a scene that would haunt his sleep for weeks to come. Patton Darrow, a miner who had worked on Sutro’s tunnel dig hurled toys and books from the now burning Ash Book and Toy Store. “Come now, Man!” Fair yelled to him from the middle of C Street, not daring to move any closer to the wall of flames that now engulfed the center of town. “Get out of there or you’ll burn for sure!”

“Distribute these to the children!” Darrow yelled from within the growing inferno. “Children need these things more than the rest of us do.”

“Now, Man!” Sutro yelled along with the other men assembled on the street, only Darrow kept to his business of rescuing the toys.

Without warning the hoisting works of the *Ophir Mine* exploded violently as the flames ignited its store of hercules powder. The concussion shook Mount Davidson like a violent earthquake, and as Sutro swung around to watch the roof of the hoisting works disintegrate into airborne shrapnel, he wondered what damage the explosion had caused to untold underground drifts and adits throughout the immediate mining region.

“Now, Man, Now!” Fair yelled to Darrow. “It’s far too unstable in there!”

“The man must be drunk,” said Piper, and as Sutro turned back to face Darrow and the burning toy store, a two story brick wall collapsed upon Darrow’s still active body, killing him instantly before an audience of horrified men.

Sutro huddled with his family in the Union Street School, one of a half-dozen public buildings left standing after the fire had swept away nearly every structure in the whole of Virginia City proper—homes, businesses, hoisting works and churches—erased from the earth without apparent reason, mercy or prejudice. Years of building and industry and engineering marvels, thought Sutro, now cooked off Mount Davidson in a matter of hours, alongside a commensurate human misery that he had never borne witness to since his childhood in Prussia. Sutro scanned the crowded room of refugees, hearing the collective sobs of children as they attempted to process the unimaginable events of the day. Mothers and fathers sat on the floor with their children, many hugging one another despite their soot covered clothes and ash stained faces. The entire room smelled of burned wood and acrid pine tar; a giant campfire run amuck on an innocent, helpless population.

Henry Yerington, superintendent of the Virginia & Truckee Railroad, entered the school room followed by Mackay, Fair, Sheriff Darby and James McCullough, the general manager of the Breed & Crosby Coal Company. They wore the same look of soot-covered exhaustion as everyone else in the room, and after they each refreshed themselves from a large bucket of water near the front door, they moved toward the teacher’s podium and looked out over the waiting sea of weary, displaced townspeople. “We can’t put the genie back in the bottle,” said Yerington, “which leaves us with the bitter truth of where we now stand. Virginia City has burned to the ground. Sheriff Darby and his men have just completed a rough count of the structures we’ve lost, and the numbers are staggering. Sheriff?”

“Over two thousand structures,” said Darby, lifting up his slouch hat to wipe his face with an already pitch black handkerchief. “Ninety percent of the city now lies in ruin. Some of the outlying areas were spared, but for the most part, we’ve lost it all.”

“Which leaves us with what to do until help arrives,” said Mackay, “until we can pull ourselves together again and start to rebuild.”

“We’ve over ten thousand people without shelter,” said Fair.

“Which makes relocation and basic needs our top priority,” said Mackay. “Folks in Gold Hill and Silver Canon have offered to open up their homes to those of us who have lost ours. Same for Dayton, Gold Hill and Carson City down below.”

“I’m authorizing free passage on the Virginia and Truckee Railroad,” said Yerington. “Anyone willing to relocate until we can sort through the details of how to rebuild our devastated city, we urge anyone willing to abandon this place, be it temporary or permanent. We urge you to make your way down to the train station as quickly as you can. Each run will accommodate two hundred passengers, so please be willing to exercise an appropriate degree of patience until we can safely move you off the Comstock Lode.”

“For those of you who decide to stay,” said McCullough, “a benefactor who wishes to remain anonymous has agreed to pay for all the coal and firewood you may need until you’re once again officially under beam. Simply make yourselves known at the offices of Breed & Crosby, and we will make sure your heating and cooking needs are taken care of.”

Sutro looked at his wife’s drawn and sunken features, her ash covered cheeks, lips and forehead. Her once youthful beauty was all but erased from her countenance, he considered, which was the fate of nearly every woman who chose to live in the brutal conditions inherent to the Comstock Lode. “Virginia City has taken our youth,” he said, touching her face tenderly with his outstretched fingertips.

“It’s taken my spirit as well,” said Esther. “I’m sorry, Adolph, but I’ve stood by your side through thick and thin, through poverty and now this sudden worst ill-fortune of all. Is it not time we say goodbye to the likes of Virginia City?”

“It is,” said Sutro, standing up before reaching down for his wife’s hand. “On the one hand, I feel badly that we’re leaving in her time of need. On the other, what little reason I have to stay here has most assuredly burned to the ground. So come, my family, let us make for the train station, so that we can put our backs to this place once and for all.”

# Chapter Thirty

Saturday, October 2, 1875

Sharon stood before his sink basin, lathering his face with shave cream before opening the mother-of-pearl box that housed his straight-edge razor set. He picked up one of the razors from its felt storage bed, opening up the blade before flashing it several times over his leather sharpening strop. He steadied the blade against his neck as he checked himself in the mirror, smiling inwardly—righteously triumphant, he thought—for his accomplishments over the past six weeks since Ralston’s death had been nothing short of formidable in his quest to right an otherwise completely sunken ship.

Angling the blade for its first run across his neck, Sharon thought back on those miserable early days after the Bank of California had suspended. From the start, Sharon had envisioned a syndicate of the city’s wealthiest men to help reinfuse the bank with necessary capital. Sharon had asked Mills to join him in subscribing one million dollars each in order to convince others to join in the rebuilding, only Mills had refused, indicating that he had stepped down as the bank’s president over two years earlier when he had recognized the extent of Ralston’s bad investment decisions. Sharon then went on to explain that for whatever reason Ralston had used to justify his wrongdoing on the matter, Mills’ name had remained on most of the overissued stock certificates put forth by the Bank of California: nearly 13,180 shares. This bit of underhandedness sent the retired bank president into repeated fits of apoplexy, only in the end Ralston’s malfeasance had forced Mills to participate in Sharon’s recovery strategy for the good of bank.

When his neck had been cleanly shaven, Sharon used his fingers to lift up the bushy ends of his mustache, shaving the whiskers on either side of his mouth and beneath his lower lip. Night after night for six long weeks, Sharon had met with his directors, ironing out a recovery plan as they debated alternatives well into the hours approaching midnight. In the end, Sharon had managed to collect pledges from sixty-three of the wealthiest San Francisco businessmen, raising a total committed capitalization of $7.58 million for the Bank of California’s resurrection from bankruptcy. To facilitate the need for the bank board to distance themselves from the lingering threat of Ralston’s debts, Sharon had assumed full responsibility for Ralston’s personal assets and liabilities in exchange for the sum paid to the bank of $2 million. Completing his last stroke of the razor, Sharon allowed for a tight-lipped smile as he reviewed the apparent shrewdness of his deal. As best he could calculate, Ralston’s estate possessed an asset base of nearly $30 million, which meant that once he could settle out the debts to Ralston’s creditors—all at fifty cents to the dollar—Sharon would realize a profit in the neighborhood of $10 million.

*And they called you the Magician of San Francisco, Toppie. Somehow I think I’ve just bested you in that regard.*

Sharon splashed cold water on his face before tamping himself dry with a soft cotton towel. He then dressed himself in one of his finest suits, checking his appearance one last time in the mirror before exiting his master suite for the common areas of his city mansion. In the kitchen his two children, Sarah and Will Jr., were at the breakfast table, waited upon by both Nanny Rose and Miss Lois, his loyal cook of five years. Ah Ki sat with the children as they ate, sipping tea from a handleless cup as he read a Chinese newspaper set before his place. “Mister Sharon have big big day!” the Chinaman offered in welcome.

“As big as they come, Ah, as big as any day can be,” said Sharon. “I trust everyone is ready for our move to Belmont Hall?”

“The children have selected what they want to go with them,” said Nanny Rose as she sat with her second cup of coffee.

“All of our friends are here in the city,” Sarah complained for the umpteenth time.

“I’ve no doubt you’ll meet new friends in the blink of an eye,” Sharon said to comfort her.

“In the country?” This from seven-year-old Will. “No one but farmer kids live out there.”

“What’s to become of Mrs. Ralston and the children?” said Sarah. “Was not Belmont their home?”

“It was their home, Sweetheart,” said Sharon, “only Mister Ralston could no longer afford to keep it up so the place belongs to me.”

“Did you buy it?” said Will.

“I acquired it, yes,” said Sharon.

“Have you always wanted to live there?” said Sarah.

Sharon felt momentarily disoriented by the maturity and apparent cogent subtext of his daughter’s question. “Why yes, as a matter of fact, I have rather fancied the place for quite some time,” he said. “In fact, on many visits to Belmont I’ve caught myself thinking, one day, William, by right of hard work and competent business practice, one day you will reside in a place as luxurious as this.”

“Could you not have built a place of your own?” said Will.

Sharon scruffed the boy’s hair before heading for the side kitchen door. “Why reinvent the wheel when the wheel is simply out there for the taking?” he said. “Jeffries will deliver you to the bank at closing time, then the lot of us will be off for the wilds of San Mateo.”

Outside in the livery port, Sharon tipped his hat to Jeffries as he climbed into his Stanhope Runabout carriage. “The Palace Hotel,” he said, spreading himself over the plush leather seat before looking outward on the day.

“Very well then, Sir,” said Jeffries. “Mister Ralston spent every morning overseeing construction. I should think that I could steer a carriage there blindfolded by now.”

“You speak entirely too much about Mister Ralston,” said Sharon. “I know he was your employer of long standing, but I would appreciate it if you would limit your discussions of the man to say, conversations with your beer swilling friends.”

“Of course, Sir,” said Jeffries, applying his crop to his team of geldings before steering them into the flow of traffic along Pine Street.

Approaching Market and New Montgomery, Sharon was quick to assess that the notables of San Francisco society had come out in force for the grand opening of his new eight hundred room hotel. The Palace’s final push to open on schedule had taken no small amount of his time and energy since Ralston’s death, and as he rode closer he could not help but marvel at its elegant craftsmanship and stunning detail. Such a property had no logical justification for a city whose population had just barely reached 150,000, which made the Palace Ralston’s final tribute to his consistent inability at sound financial stewardship.

Jeffries steered the carriage through a sea of well-dressed men and women, past the temporary grandstand and through the cordon line manned by a dense cadre of San Francisco policemen. Once inside the Grand Colonnade, Sharon saw his general manager, Carl Brunig, busily attending to the final touches of the impending grand opening. American flag banners had been strung across the enormous open space of the atrium lobby, its glass-domed roof casting bright sunlight into its seven story canyon of marble balconies. Atop the lobby floor, carriage paths and pedestrian walkways meandered through a dream-like terrarium landscape of plush garden beds accented by tall urns of exotic flower arrangements and potted palms, each plant groomed and cared for like a grand prize winner at a county fair.

“Today the people of San Francisco shall witness Ralston’s ultimate vision for his city,” Brunig offered in welcome, helping Sharon step down from his carriage with his hands upon Sharon’s right elbow.

“Impractical as many of his visions were,” said Sharon, “I must admit his results in this case are beyond compare. Everything at the ready, Carl?”

Brunig smiled like a showman, sweeping his right arm slowly across the expansiveness of the Grand Colonnade. “The Palace Hotel shall open upon your command.”

“Then let the command be given,” said Sharon. “After three years of steady cash drain, perhaps now we can begin to turn a profit.”

Sharon returned to the Market Street entrance and climbed the stairs to the makeshift podium as the Boys High School Marching Band kicked off a spritely rendition of Sam Lucas’ *Carve Dat Possum*. The well-mannered onlookers began to applaud as he stood before the lectern, prompting Sharon to smile broadly at the sea of flowing white dresses, of parasols and top hats and plumes of wafting cigar smoke. Raising his left hand to silence the band, Sharon allowed for a moment of silence to charge the air with an actor’s sense of timing.

“For those of us who knew Billy Ralston, we came to know his passion for the growth and prosperity of his beloved San Francisco,” he began. “If Billy Ralston had possessed the limitless wealth of a Sultan, then surely he would have put the whole of it into the growth of his favorite city on earth. What the Medici Family did for Florence over the course of centuries, Toppie Ralston did for his city over the course of a solitary lifetime.”

Sharon paused for a moment to let his words linger upon his audience. “As many of you know,” he continued, “not very long ago I lost my wife, my father and my business partner, all in the course of a horribly tragic month. And while none of these important people can be with us this fine day, my mind is at peace in the promise that my loved ones look down upon of us all, each of them smiling, nay, applauding, at Billy Ralston’s final testament to a people and a city that he loved so very dearly. Come with me, then, and together let us embrace the handiwork of a true titan among men.”

Sharon signaled the band, who in turn kicked off an upbeat rendition of *Good Sweet Ham*. On cue, Lucy Otis, wife of the ailing Mayor of San Francisco, used an oversized pair of scissors to cut the large gold ribbon that spanned the width of the Market Street entrance to the the hotel, setting off an eruption of applause that nearly drowned out the efforts of the band. Sharon led the crowd into the Grand Colonnade, feeling buoyant and alive under the glow of the limelight.

Sharon stood beside Brunig as the townspeople flocked into the lobby amidst a litany of admiration and praise.

“Oh good heavens, Charles, would you look at this!” said a woman to his left.

“Breathtaking, simply breathtaking!”

“Splendid! Bravissimo!” said a man from behind.

“And to think this is San Francisco…”

“Ralston has surely outdone himself!”

“Even in death, he brings pure joy…”

Sharon and Brunig stood in line and shook the hands of their inbound patrons as the city elite flowed into the Grand Colonnade, some strolling the gardens and pathways, while others took their seats in the lobby lounge for a coffee or a light repast. A string quartet played a gentle version of Franz Liszt’s *Liebestraum* from a raised gazebo in the middle of the lobby, while waiters delivered flutes of champagne to the growing body of openly gawking participants. Once the main body of onlookers had entered the lobby, Sharon rested his hand upon Brunig’s shoulders, and said, “Without your commitment and organization, this opening would never have happened. As a reward for your tireless efforts, you’ll find a check on your desk in the amount of one thousand dollars.”

Brunig’s eyes went wide as the number registered in his mind. “Nearly twice my annual wage, Sir, that’s far too generous a…”

“On the contrary, Carl,” said Sharon, “the amount reflects my exact confidence in your ability to manage this property in a highly profitable manner. I consider it money well spent.”

Exiting the Grand Colonnade for New Montgomery Street, Sharon rejoined Jeffries and his carriage for the short ride over to the Bank of California. Approaching the bank from Kearny Street, he saw that a second group of society notables and average citizens had amassed in front of the bank for its grand reopening, while the Silver King’s, in a competitive bid to steal Sharon’s thunder, hosted their own grand opening a short block away. Competing bands blared from either end of the block, alongside great smoking pits of beef, chicken, pork and boiling vats of Corn On The Cobb. Both banks had positioned stomach-high tables along each end of their adjoining sidewalks, manned on the street side by largely male drinkers, while crisply-dressed bartenders poured drafts of beer from a dozen taps set up before each bank facade. Sharon noted the Bank of California directors as they sat on folding chairs set up on yet another provisional stage, each man smiling contentedly as the crowds before them indulged in the bank’s gratis hospitality.

Dan DeQuille stepped forward from the crowd to intercept Sharon as he was about to climb the stairs for the stage. “Big day for you, Sir.”

“You certainly are persistent,” said Sharon, attempting to sidestep the newsman as best he could.

“One question,” said DeQuille.

“I haven’t the time nor the interest in answering your questions.”

“Is it true that on the day Billy Ralston died, you said that his killing himself was the best thing he could have done for everyone involved?”

Sharon stopped abruptly and turned to glare at the diminutive newsman. “Who told you that?”

“Call it an unnamed source.”

“Have you forgotten who you work for?”

“I’ve taken a job with the *Virginia City Daily*,” said DeQuille, “in an attempt to regain my self worth as a man and a journalist. Is it true that you kicked Lizzy Ralston and her children out of Belmont Hall?”

“The property belongs to me,” said Sharon. “I assumed the assets of Mister Ralston’s estate in an effort to make good on his debts and to close out his rather decrepit personal affairs. As heartless at it may seem to you nonproductive liberal types, the world of finance bares no pity on losers and their immediate heirs.”

“de Balzac once wrote that behind every great fortune lies a great crime,” said DeQuille. “Somehow I think he had you in mind when he wrote that small bit of wisdom.”

“Is it a crime to better oneself? Is it a crime to create financial opportunity for one’s fellow man?”

“Is that how you see it?”

“History is written by the winners, DeQuille, which means that my efforts will be remembered, while your worthless scribbling will be forgotten the moment your cold, whiskey-laden carcass hits the grave.”

Sharon took the stairs to the podium, shaking hands with his directors as they stood up one-by-one to welcome him to the stage. “You see, Gentlemen,” he said, smiling broadly at each of his allies. “From the jaws of death we wrest new life.”

Sharon walked up to the lectern and raised his left hand to silence the band into a rather discordant and premature wind down to Henry Clay’s wildly popular new song, *My Grandfather’s Clock*. The crowd began to quiet down in waves after that, as individual groups of onlookers took notice of Sharon standing patiently on stage. When the noise level had softened to no more than a handful of unresponsive revelers, Sharon raised both hands above his head and held them aloft with all the flair and drama of a Baptist preacher on Sunday morning. “The Bible speaks of redemption through Christ,” he began, “yet what we bear witness to this fine day is a redemption not of the human spirit, but of a cherished financial institution, which will no doubt instill new life into the commercial sails of our common western economy. I stand before you now to present to you the new Bank of California, freshly resurrected by the return of sound investment principles that I am duty bound to say had been woefully set aside by its predecessor. Combined with a healthy commitment of new capitalization by no less than sixty of this fair city’s most solvent and esteemed financial titans, please allow me to introduce to you an entirely new enterprise, which will serve all San Franciscans with fairness, respect and an ironclad commitment to financial security.”

“And a free beer with every deposit!” yelled one of the rowdies from the bar.

Sharon laughed heartedly as the crowd erupted in response. “Free beer aside,” Sharon went on when the crowd had settled down, “let me first and foremost impress upon this esteemed body of San Franciscans, that no amount of capital commitment matters one slim farthing if the confidence of the people fails to embrace this institution as a husband embraces his wife. An army moves on its stomach, but a good marriage thrives upon mutual trust and respect. The same must be applied to the Bank of California, good people, for without your trust in its financial viability, without your faith and your deposits of hard earned wages, no bank can expect to last as a solitary island. Give us your coin, you men and women of stout western resolve. Give us your deposits and then rest easy in the knowledge that tempered men will tend to your safety within the confines of our mutual self-interests. Fear not the storm tossed seas of financial uncertainty, for we are all of us argonauts in a uniquely American dream.”

# Postscript

Virginia City, February 2, 1898

FROM THE DESK OF

DAN DEQUILLE

A cold wind howls down the face of Mount Davidson, sending you into a renewed fit of coughing as you close the door to the Virginia City Daily News Building and lock it with your lone remaining key. Everything about this place is now dead and gone, and you wonder for the third time since rising into this bitterly cold morning, why you have chosen to stay on the Comstock Lode for so many years after her official demise. Gone are the international mix of adventurers, the fortune seekers, the nefarious con men, the hawkers, gamblers, miners and prostitutes. Everything that made this place such a unique haven has long since vanished, save for your own sorrowful being, which on this day will begin its train ride east for what is surely a deathbed awaiting you in Iowa. For thirty years you stayed away from your wife and your child—hiding out in the American West—which makes your daughter Annie’s invitation to provide you with final succor all the more beguiling in its unwarranted generosity and compassion.

In fact, your health has declined so precipitously these past few months that the short trip down to the train station nearly exhausts you in your attempt to make the morning departure for Carson City. No one awaits you on the platform to bid you farewell, for in truth you are the last man to leave the party; a withered-up, booze-soaked relic of yesteryear, well beyond any semblance of vigor or prime. Like the old spinster Miss Havisham in Dicken’s *Great Expectations*, you have stayed on in this dying place since being left at the altar, only in your case, you realize that your personal altar occurred the day that William Sharon bought the *Territorial* *Enterprise*. If you had your life to do over, you think as you board the train, perhaps next time around you will hold fast to your dignity and resign your post alongside your old boss, Joe Goodman.

Settling into your compartment within the worn-out Pullman car, you open your leather bound diary to review the final entries you’ve composed about the lives who shared with you the high water mark of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode. Why such a recap of history has become so transfixed in your mind evades your full understanding, only your compulsion to complete the task has been nonstop ever since Doc Sampson gave you the news that your recurrent bouts with tuberculosis will soon commit the final chapter of your own personal story. Who better to write these things, you consider, since by right of endurance and longevity, you are unequivocally the last man standing.

Respectfully submitted,

William Wright

a.k.a. Dan DeQuille

After the devastating fire of 1875, Virginia City proved remarkably adept at rebuilding herself from very little more than a smoldering pile of rubble. On the first night after the fire, thousands camped out in the cold, many having retreated to Cedar Hill, which overlooked the charred remains of Virginia City from the north. The following day, State Controller Hobart arrived with a railroad car brimming with boiled hams, small mountains of bread and all manner of welcome luxuries. The community set up soup kitchens at the first and third ward schools. Sam Wagner, an African American who served as town crier, called out the word that help had finally arrived. San Francisco and other towns and cities across California at once telegraphed money and started sending clothing, blankets, bedding and provisions over the Sierras by train and express coach. To protect what remained of local property, the National Guard assumed control of the town during those first few nights, patrolling the ruins to curtail any looters from having off with the possessions of others. In a community where all standards and laws, like property itself, seemed to have melted away in an instant, the National Guard imposed welcome order until the signs of civilization were allowed to flourish once again from the ashes.

And as was usually the case in the fat days of the Comstock Lode, John Mackay came to the aid of Virginia City with ready and open access to his more than generous purse. Mackay’s own residence at the International Hotel went up in the general holocaust and he moved into the upper story of the *Gould & Curry* office, just beyond the burn zone. A day or two later he encountered an old friend, James McCullough, and finding that he too was homeless, Mackay insisted that he share Mackay’s own cramped living quarters until both men could regain their footing.

The day following the fire, people began to focus on the task of rebuilding their ruined city from the ground up. Few could imagine an all-out conflagration as an opportunity to quit the Comstock Lode, since to a man they knew that many more fortunes lay hidden within the nearly 800 miles of tunnels that now existed beneath the town. Sixty days later, the town had been nearly rebuilt in its entirety—some two thousand new structures—creating a homogeneity of architecture which can only arise when conditions of absolute destruction combine with a unified community vision of complete and meteoric resurrection.

While Virginia City began its massive rebuild, San Francisco reeled under the weight of Billy Ralston’s death and the collapse of the Bank of California. Suits against Ralston’s estate would go on for years, many originated by Lizzy Ralston on behalf of her children. Sharon settled one such suit with Lizzie for approximately eighty-five thousand dollars, despite the fact that Ralston’s estate at the time of his death was worth well over thirty million. All told, Lizzy received approximately one hundred and thirty-eight thousand dollars from Sharon, plus ownership of the head caretakers residence behind Belmont Hall, the summer mansion which she had once lived. Those of us in the news business could see quite clearly that Sharon had stolen the lion’s share of what remained of Ralston’s fortune. Ralston’s Belmont estate had been identified along with Jay Cooke’s Philadelphia mansion and Charlie Crocker’s residence on Nob Hill as being among the three most magnificently hospitable mansions in the United States, and although Lizzy complained bitterly in the courts against Sharon’s thievery, no judge or jury could find the necessary legal remedy to reinstate any of the pilfered assets.

Instead, Lizzy took her children to France, intending to settle in Paris and be done with all things American. During their passage across the Atlantic, Lizzy met John Arthur Chandor, alias Count Chandor, alias Captain Chandor, alias Montagu Chandor, alias Captain Carlton, and even though Mr. Chandor had been recently married in New York City, he joined Lizzy in Paris a short time after their voyage had ended. No indication appears to exist that John Chandor and Lizzy Ralston ever married, but their friendship did result in the birth of a daughter, Louise A. Chandor, born in Paris on February 16, 1882.

The first of the Silver Kings to depart this great earthly stage was also the most genial and modest of the lot, which over time affixed upon him the moniker of “The Jolly Millionaire.” William “Billy” O’Brien freely confessed that he had neither taste nor talent for making money, prompting him to attribute his puzzling rise to affluence as an act of grasping onto rapidly ascending kites and simply holding on for dear life. A journalist friend who writes for the *Alta California* once wrote about O’Brien that ‘he had more friends in more walks of life, and fewer enemies than generally falls to the lot of most rich men.’ Soft-spoken and mild-mannered, in all aspects of his life, Billy O’Brien appeared to have no personal axes to grind, nor did he wish to become embroiled in any forms of pettiness. He regularly spent his afternoons in the back room of McGovern’s Saloon on Kearny Street, playing hand after hand of low stakes Pedro.

Family loyalty was another attribute that set O’Brien apart from his Silver King brethren, save for John Mackay’s apparent bottomless spending on his wife’s many notable exploits during her European years. As his prosperity began to rise, one by one O’Brien’s sisters and their husbands and children began to migrate westward from Brooklyn. First to arrive was sister Kate, who had recently married one Joseph McDonough. McDonough supported himself and his family by driving one of the city’s horse-drawn street cars, until O’Brien’s stock market speculations began to bear handsome fruit. O’Brien’s second sister, Abbie Coleman, also came to live with him at his Sutter Street mansion, and together the San Francisco press wrote volumes about the sister’s uncommon beauty as they moved about the city’s high society circles. With no wife of his own, O’Brien remained inordinately proud of this decorative pair, doting upon them with houses and jewels, lavish travel and elegant Parisienne gowns.

Nearing the end of his life, O’Brien commissioned the architectural firm of Laver & Curett to design a mausoleum for his final residency at Calvary Cemetery. The extraordinary edifice, long unrivaled despite stiff competition for its sheer abortionesque ugliness in the field of cemetery architecture, was still under construction when O’Brien passed away from advanced-stage kidney disease. He had moved to his nephew’s house in San Rafael in the spring of Seventy-eight, hoping that the milder climate there would benefit his failing health, and there he died on the afternoon of May the Second, 1878, with his partner James Flood at his bedside. O’Brien’s passing at age fifty-two was one of many San Francisco business notables that year who died in their fifth or sixth decade, inspiring one journalist to proclaim that ‘the constant, never-ceasing, never-relaxing business strain will destroy the strongest constitutions.’

When O’Brien’s will was published later that same year, and among the numerous nieces and nephews who received cash bequests was the unexpected name of one Mary Pauline O’Brien, age 18. Further inquiry revealed that Miss O’Brien was the daughter of one Patrick O’Brien, brother of the deceased, and while Patrick had been estranged from the family for untold years before, when word reached William that his brother had passed away, Billy O’Brien paid for his brother’s widow and daughter to travel west to live with them in his Sutter Street home. Reports of O’Brien’s passing made national news, and quite suddenly another long-lost brother appeared in San Francisco, very much alive and eager to receive his fair share of the estate. An out-of-court settlement was reached with the surviving heir, whereby the man was paid six hundred thousand dollars to relinquish further claims upon the estate. At the time of his death, O’Brien’s estate was worth twelve million dollars.

As for William Sharon, his chronic womanizing eventually caught up with him in a very big and public way. After his days on the Comstock Lode, he continued to accumulate wealth in large part because of his genius for knowing when to move in and out of investment opportunities. In Seventy-five, when Sharon liquidated his mining stocks onto the San Francisco market, the *Con Virginia* was producing the richest returns in Comstock history. Sharon, however, retired from mining speculation, while the above strike turned out to be the last the Comstock Lode would ever know. While millions were lost searching for the next big bonanza, Sharon expanded his fortune by investing in real estate, ultimately acquiring over four hundred properties in San Francisco alone.

And then, on September 89, 1883, as he was about to board a train to the east, Sharon was arrested on charges of adultery. The charges included references to Sharon’s relations over the past three years with nine women, including Gertie Dietz, who apparently bore a child fathered by Sharon. And while the charges were brought forth not by Dietz or the remaining eight women involved in the accusations, the suit was the work of one Sarah Althea Hill, whose company Sharon had kept during the years of 1880 and 1881. When Sharon proclaimed that the suit was nothing more than a fishing expedition, his cavalier brush-off prompted Hill to allow the *San Francisco Chronicle* to publish a document Sharon had written to her back on August 25, 1880, wherein he referred to her as ‘My Dear Wife.’

Hill was well known about San Francisco for her beauty, and for her rather hair trigger temper. She was something of an intriguer, reportedly engaged to three men at one time, yet over-all unscathed by any undue public scandal. What ultimately broke the case in favor of Sharon was Hill’s association and legal guidance with seventy-year-old Mary E. Pleasant, or Mammy, as she was referred to by her many friends. Delivered from slavery at the age of nine years old, Mammy had worked for years as an indentured servant in Nantucket, later moving to Boston where she married James W. Smith, a wealthy mixed-race merchant actively involved in the Underground Railroad. When Smith died of an apparent poisoning back in 1844, Mammy inherited his wealth and moved to San Francisco. On the Coast she ran boardinghouses for men, many with a reputation for offering more services than simply a fair day’s room and board. In the 1860s she became a millionaire due to her Comstock speculations, however, it was her rather checkered and suspect past which ultimately allowed Sharon’s defense team to eat away at her credibility.

By 1885 Sharon’s health began to deteriorate rapidly, and on his death bed he appeared to be at peace with himself and the world. He wrote before passing that ‘I’d like to live for my children’s sake, but it can’t be, and I cheerfully give up the battle of life. I face death without fear, and can look back on my life as a busy one, full of work and ambition, and not devoid of pleasure and satisfaction.’

As his fortunes grew from his stake in the *Con Virginia*, James Clair Flood increased his tastes with an equal acceleration of grandeur. Still living in the same house from his days at the Auction Lunch, he first bought a flashy carriage and a handsome team of mares, parading his wife and two children about town like British royalty to a coronation. Writes another journalistic colleague for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, ‘When Flood drives up to the entrance to the Bank of Nevada, a hush settles over California Street. It is thus that Queen Victoria arrives to open Parliament.’

Flood then bought the Fair Oaks estate of John Selby, ex-mayor of San Francisco, then spent an additional million dollars enlarging the scope and presence of the property. Still dissatisfied with the state of his opulent living, he next built Linden Towers on thirty-five acres of Menlo Park landscape, which stands even to this day as an astounding tribute to baroque architecture in America. Known as ‘Flood’s Wedding Cake’ by the locals, the Menlo Park society ladies became considerably distressed over how to deal with these nouveau riche invaders. Finally it was the men folk who settled the matter of what to do, since a snub to a member of the Silver Kings could jeopardize their San Francisco business interests in very real and tangible ways.

Accordingly, the Athertons, the Parrots, the Howards and the Macondrays ordered their carriages out of their stables and each made formal calls on Linden Towers. There, the ladies sipped tea from fine china and admired the handsome service made of Comstock silver. There, they admired the immense drawing room finished in carved walnut with walls of embossed velvet, the music room in rose and satinwood, the dining room paneled in English mahogany, with ceiling frescoes by a noted Italian artist whose name remains beyond the scope of pronunciation. Outside, the guests inspected the stables, replete with a carriage room as large as a hotel ballroom. The men folk were taken to admire the private racetrack, the water and gas works, and the ingenious arrangements by which household sewage was conveyed a full half mile to the most costly of cesspools.

In 1879, General Grant reached San Francisco after his world tour, and while Senator Sharon triumphantly lured him off for a weekend at Belmont, Sharon was persuaded to bring his guests over to Linden Towers for what Mrs. Flood promised would be nothing more than light snacks, since the Senator had planned for a huge dinner banquet in Grant’s honor. When the party arrived, Sharon discovered that Mrs. Flood had put out a multi-course spread, of which Grant deeply partook. The luncheon became memorable for another reason, for it marked the beginning of a romance that captured the attention of the entire country. Grant’s second son, Ulysses Jr., known to his intimates as Buck, was a personable young man in his early twenties. At Linden Tower he met Flood’s daughter, Jennie, whose real name was Cora Jane. She accompanied the Grants to Yosemite, and there the romance progressed so rapidly that when the party returned to San Francisco, an announcement of their engagement was daily expected.

Since James Flood knew that Grant’s son was penniless, and that to marry his daughter would label the son a gold digger, he set up young Buck with a grubstake and launched him into a career as a stock trader, instructing him at length regarding the best practices for buying and selling stocks at a profit. In short order Buck’s investment operations netted him a cool one hundred thousand dollars, at which point Flood made no further opposition to the possibility of marriage. Loaded deep with money and a newfound confidence, Buck wandered east for an extended visit, and when he returned to the coast, he severely dragged his feet before rejoining his fiancee’s side. When Jennie got wind of this delay, she immediately broke off their engagement, allowing Buck to marry someone else, while Jennie spent the next half-dozen years breaking off engagements with a succession of highly-eligible bachelors.

Flood’s next triumph was the construction of a forty-two room mansion on Nob Hill. Through the middle and late 80s, every Californian who read their daily newspaper was familiar with the dimensions and décor of this vast behemoth; a forty-foot reception parlor done out in East Indian resplendence; a forty-six foot long Louis XV drawing room; a twenty-six by forty-six foot dining room paneled in carved Santa Domingo mahogany, and a smoking room done out in Moorish geometrics, topped by a domed skylight of iridescent blue and green glass. Odd as it may seem, it was not the house itself that enthralled the citizens of San Francisco, but the block-long fence that surrounded the property. Known today as ‘Flood’s thirty thousand dollar brass rail,’ its wealthy landlord employed a man full-time to polish the metal in much the same way as Flood had once maintained his rail at the Auction Lunch.

Like Mackay and O’Brien, Flood was a vigorous philanthropist, although he found great displeasure in gifting with even the slightest degree of anonymity. In the mid-1870s, he instituted a tradition of sending checks each Christmas to the city’s orphanages and retirement homes, which became an engrained family tradition long after his death in a lonely hotel room in Heidelberg Germany, February 21, 1889. At the time of his death, his net worth hovered around thirty million dollars, which in its day constituted 1/400th of the country’s Gross National Product.

When the advent of diamond core drilling began to expedite the pace and efficiency of hard rock mining, Fair, like his partners, came to realize that their big bonanza days were drawing to an end. Looking about for his next opportunity, James Fair briefly considered the life of a gentleman farmer or a career in the currently booming railroad construction business, then quite unexpectedly turned his attentions to politics and announced his candidacy for the U.S. Senate. Entering the race against his old Comstock rival, William Sharon, Fair conducted his campaign through a combination of excessive personal spending and political chicanery. Nevada politics at the time was an expensive proposition, and since he was running against an incumbent multimillionaire, he announced to the papers that he would outspend his rival at every turn and circumstance.

Fair’s champaign was executed with characteristic artfulness. Exchanging his luxury carriage for a common horse drawn buckboard, he toured the mining camps of Nevada in the haberdashery of a simple hard rock miner. By day he toured the mining camps and mills of the Comstock Lode, talking in a language the miners understood. By evening he went drink for drink with these very same men, renewing old acquaintances from his mining days, and cementing each man’s loyalty with successive rounds of gratis alcohol. He made capital of the fact that he knew nothing of the ways of politicians. He had, he boasted, never made a speech in his life, but he knew from experience what the miners of Nevada needed in terms of legislation, wages and mine safety improvements.

Sharon’s cold and aloof manner proved to be no match for Fair’s working man’s bluster. Beating Sharon handily at the polls, he proved to be a rather enormous political buffoon once in office. He brought only one bill to the table in six years—the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1881, which helped to further the white supremacy labor movement that had originated during the construction of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad. But what truly distracted the nation from his political ineptitude was the deeper character issues of his personal life and alleged marital infidelities. Returning to Washington in 1883 in advance of the annual convening of congress, Fair left his wife and children without any means of paying their bills. When Theresa pleaded for money via a rather terse telegraph message, he set her up with a fund to pay household expenses only, thereby gaining her enmity and immediate loathing for the rest of her life. Within days she filed for divorce, citing “habitual adultery” as her primary grounds for legal dissolution of marriage.

To level such a charge against the likes of a U.S. Senator, particularly in the prim and outwardly Victorian 1880s, sent the nation’s press into a tizzy of front page editorializing, which soon reached the pulpits of the senate chambers itself, where colleagues began to call for the immediate expulsion of the sexually deviant senator from Nevada. The divorce settlement became one of the great reversals of Fair’s life, earning both Mackay and Flood his undying hatred for their support of Theresa Fair during the divorce proceedings. Fair was awarded custody of his two sons, Charley and Jim, but that was the extent of his victory. Theresa was granted divorce and full custody of their daughters, Theresa and Virginia, as well as the family home in San Francisco and one third of their joint fortune; some $4.75 million. As of the writing of this diary entry, the judgement stands as the largest divorce settlement ever awarded in a U.S. court.

As the years progressed, Fair’s eldest son, Jimmy, became well acquainted with the family disease of alcoholism. Jimmy became so frequently intoxicated in the sundry bars of San Francisco that his father at last sent him to a Los Gatos sanatorium to undergo the Keeley Cure. Returning to the city after a three month reprograming in Los Gatos, Jimmy proceeded to celebrate his cure by throwing a lavish party at the Palace Hotel. There, to the admiration of his cronies, he consumed twenty cocktails in rapid succession in an effort to prove the completeness of his recovery. When Jimmy passed away a year later at the tender age of twenty-seven, his father publicly commented that Jimmy was his own worst enemy, and that he lacked the strength to withstand the harpies and parasites that clustered about every rich man’s son.

In later years Fair, found his own frequent if not accelerating solace in the bottle. From time to time he disappeared from his usual haunts and crossed the bay to Marin County, where he would embed himself in a small and inexpensive hotel known as the Parisian. There he would sit alone in the hotel barroom, speaking to no one as he drank himself to the point of insensibility, whereupon his male nurse, Herbert Clarke, would summon the proprietor, and the two would carry him upstairs to his bed. He died at age 63, igniting a huge public scandal when his will mysteriously disappeared from the County Clerk’s Office before any of his surviving children could read its contents.

The police hunted down the last person known to have seen the will, which turned out to be an employee of the private detective agency hired by the law firm of Knight and Heggerty, commissioned to look after the legal interests of Fair’s surviving son, Charley. While W.H. Davis, the employee in question, denied any knowledge of the theft, Mrs. Nettie Craven, a plump, middle-aged woman of the highest respectability, announced that she had in her possession a second Fair will, which she claimed had been drawn up by the capitalist in the parlor of her California Street home and given to her for safekeeping. The new document, scrawled in pencil on two sheets of foolscap, was dated Sept 24, 1893, three days later than the original missing will, which differed from the original in that the estate was to pass directly and to the surviving children without preamble or delay.

While the surviving children at first had reason to support this second ‘Pencil Will,’ Ms. Craven then produced additional handwritten documents that indicated that she and the deceased were indeed married in secret, and that the estate should rightfully pass to her. When the courts finally ruled in favor of the children, Ms. Craven filed an appeal, eventually settling the matter out of court with a cash payment provided by Fair’s surviving children. Plenty of money remained after the settlement, but at a cost of over two million dollars in legal bills, victory for the children came at an enormously heavy price.

A great many millions remained, however, and for many months, the west was entertained by a parade of claimants eager for a share of the proceeds. Hardly had Fair’s body been interred in his Laurel Hill mausoleum than an odd assortment of women came forth claiming to be the legal wives of the deceased. There was 18-year-old Sarah Gamble, known in her native Los Angeles as the ‘Flower Girl,’ where she operated a flower stand in the Nedau Hotel. Sarah’s story was that Fair, a frequent guest at the Nedau, had formed a habit of buying boutonnieres at her flower stand, had progressed to taking her on buggy rides, finally consummating their brief courtship by asking for her hand in marriage. In Portland, a young woman came forth proclaiming that the bonanza king had seduced her under the promise of marriage. In Oakland, a 26-year-old woman announced that she was the natural daughter of Fair. A young man came forward, announcing that he was born in Virginia City, and that James Graham Fair was his biologic father.

Toward the end of March 1895, yet another prospective bride had her brief season of headline fame. Miss Phoebe Couzins, the world famous woman’s rights advocate, announced that she was the affianced bride of James Fair at the time of his death. She confided to the press that they had met at the Riggs House in Washington when Fair was a senator. The pair discovered that they held like views on social and political issues of the day, and based upon these common interests, their friendship had speedily ripened into sexual intimacy. In the end, each of the claims from these would-be spouses were rebuffed by the courts as invalid, leaving the bulk of Fair’s forty-five million dollar estate in the hands of his more established and accountable descendants.

As for Adolph Sutro, once he had built a lavish estate for his family, his wealth increased tenfold by his astute investments in San Francisco real estate, eventually amassing upwards of twelve percent of the entire real estate market within the city proper. These land investments included Mount Sutro, where he built Cliff House Restaurant and The Baths, which included six of the largest indoor swimming pools ever built. Along with Cliff House, which sported a museum, a skating rink and vast pleasure grounds, Sutro purchased Woodward’s Gardens, which added a zoo, an amusement park and an aquarium to his ever-expanding role as the amusement king of San Francisco.

Because of his growing reputation as the provider of diversions and culture for the average San Franciscan, the politically weak and somewhat radical Populist Party drafted him as their candidate for mayor, which he handily won in 1894 on an anti-big business platform centered against the tyrannic stranglehold of the Southern Pacific Railroad. By year’s end he was quickly considered to be a failed mayor, and after he lost his bid for re-election in 1895, Sutro quietly retired from public life to pursue the steady expansion of his land holdings and personal wealth. Word has recently reached me that his health is in rapid decline, which would seem to indicate that the two of you are locked in competition for an eventual bout with the grave.

Marie Mackay solidified her entrance into Parisian society with the help of her father, Colonel Hungerford, who served as a Captain in the Mexican War, while Ulysses S. Grant served at the time as a lowly Lieutenant. Now that General Grant was on a world tour after the conclusion of his four-year presidency, Marie cabled him with an invitation to her mansion when he eventually made his way into Paris. Grant accepted her invitation, whereupon she set about redecorating the first floor of her palatial mansion in the colors of the American flag, reupholstering every stick of furniture in red, white and blue satin. A pavilion was hastily constructed in the garden, while one wall of the drawing room was torn out to permit joining it with the temporary pavilion to form one vast indoor/outdoor chamber. Parisians and Americans alike looked on in wonder as newspaper articles told of her petition to French authorities, requesting that the Arc de Triomphe be draped in the colors of the American flag for Grant’s arrival into Paris. When told that her plea had been rejected, she is said to have tossed back her pretty head and proclaimed that she would simply buy their silly old arch and decorate it herself.

Such stories traveled round the world, and made Marie Mackay a household name on both sides of the Atlantic. For did she not have a husband whose mines produced a million dollars a month with no end it sight? For her part, Marie possessed an all-consuming desire for social advancement, a fluent command of the French language, a poised and gracious manner, and the sort of female beauty that seemed to give pause to both men and women alike. To further her growing fame, Ludovic Halevy, a popular French novelist published *L’Abbe Constantin*, a book about a fabulously rich American woman who tires of her life in Paris and moves to a rural mansion. The book became a mainstay of young Americans learning French, and the main character, Madame Scott, was clearly drawn from that of Marie Mackay.

Marie’s social exploits pleased Mackay to no end, provided he himself could stay largely removed from the fray. He paid her extravagant bills without complaint, yet his infrequent visits to first her Paris and then her London homes left him agitated by the people he would meet in her drawing rooms. Birthright aristocrats and prissy men of letters had no relevance in Mackay’s world, and he soon devised an understanding with his San Francisco business manager, Dick Dey, that upon receipt of a certain code word received by telegraph, Dey would dispatch a cable back to Mackay, summoning the millionaire to the States on need of urgent business. Although for more than a decade he yearly visited Paris, Mackay stubbornly refused to learn so much as a single word of French.

In 1879 Mackay invested in a new kind of explosive that was said to be impossible to detonate except by the administration of a percussion cap. Mackay invested half a million dollars in a plant near Oakland California, and began the large-scale manufacture of what he called Eureka Safety Powder. One of his friends became a salesman for the company in the Arizona Territory, and spent several months providing graphic examples of Eureka Safety Powder’s almost mystifying stability before mine owners. During his demonstrations he would stomp on sticks of Eureka Safety Powder, run them over by ore cars or punish them with a sledgehammer. On his way back to San Francisco, however, his pockets bulging with orders, the lucky salesman picked up a newspaper to learn that the previous day, the Oakland factory had been blown cleanly out of existence.

In 1883 one of my newspaper articles estimated that Mackay’s fortune earned him nearly ten thousand dollars a day, which regrettably opened a floodgate of beggars harassing the man from nearly every corner of the globe. One Scottish woman asked for five hundred pounds to permit her to spend the winter in Italy. A German student demanded that Mackay finance the publication of his treatise on economics, which advocated the seizure of large private fortunes and their redistribution to far more deserving students. An American tourist urged Mackay to subsidize a boardinghouse in Paris so that traveling Yanks could obtain proper American food, well cooked and affordable.

Despite the volume of requests by undeserving lunatics, Mackay himself confessed to me that since making his fortune on the Comstock Lode, to his best calculations he had given away over five million dollars to a wide variety of charitable causes. For instance, whenever he arrived at his residence at the Palace Hotel, or to his office at the corner of Pine and Montgomery Streets, a crowd of expectant borrowers would line up daily to vie for his attention. Mackay himself reckoned that his short walk to his office cost him fifty dollars a day, and he always carried the price with him in gold or silver.

On many occasions he instructed his office staff to give needy pensioners donations in cash so the pensioners would be spared the embarrassment of cashing a check at his Bank of Nevada. During one slack borrasca on the Comstock Lode, Mackay secretly authorized a Virginia City grocer to supply provisions to any customer who was unable to pay. That winter, Mackay’s grocery bill averaged three thousand dollars a month. Due to his overwhelming love of the theater, in the summer of 1878, Mackay learned that a fellow guest at the Palace Hotel, an actor named Henry Montague who played opposite the nationally acclaimed actress, Adelaide Neilson, was desperately ill with consumption. Mackay quietly paid the man’s hotel and doctor’s bills, and after the actor passed away, he shipped the body back east to his family for proper burial.

While Mackay’s character was generally undemanding of others, one surefire way to arouse his anger was to be late for a scheduled engagement. Should a man or a woman fail to appear at an agreed upon time, that person would be rejected from his office and required to make a new appointment, which might be many days into the future. And should that man or woman commit the sin of a second tardy arrival, that person would be permanently removed from his calendar and social horizon. Another of his oddities was his almost irrational hostility towards Englishmen, a compensatory reflex most likely related to his wife’s admiration for all things British. One of the worst examples of his anti-British rage was his treatment of the Englishman, William Bonynge. During the 1870s, Bonynge’s brokerage office in San Francisco had executed many stock trades for both Mackay’s personal account, and for the joint account of the bonanza firm. Having prospered in the stock trade, Bonynge moved back to London in the mid-1880s and took up resident near Marie Mackay’s imposing mansion at No. 6 Carlton House Terrace.

In light of their common business background and the proximity of their London residences, a reasonable man might assume that a chance encounter between these two would be cause for a moment of mutual pleasure and reflection. Instead, when Mackay saw Bonynge in the offices of the Bank of Nevada, Mackay ordered Bonynge to defend himself while the two now elderly men started slugging it out toe-to-toe. The brawl required half a dozen clerks to separate the pair and send them off in separate hacks to their respective hotels.

Mackay’s lack of pretense was never more juxtaposed to his wife’s flamboyance, when on February 28, 1893, Mackay was shot at point blank range by William Rippey, who then fired a bullet into his own head in an attempted murder suicide. In Rippey’s pocket was a rambling note that accused the mega millionaire of having spent more on his wife’s well publicized three hundred thousand dollar sapphire necklace than would be needed to set up five hundred miners into a comfortable and well-deserved retirement. Later, before passing away from his self-inflicted gunshot wound, Rippey confessed to a surgeon by the name of Somers that he was sorry that he had not made a better job of killing Mackay, since the mining magnate was still alive after the attack. ‘I am an old man,’ he said to the surgeon, ‘and I knew perfectly well what I was about when I fired that shot. At one time I had over twenty-two thousand dollars, only I lost it investing in Mackay’s stock. That loss changed my life. Instead of the hopeful, energetic man I once was, I became a misanthrope. I avoided the society of my fellow men, and became a stranded hulk in Pauper’s Alley. I may be wrong, but I think all rich men like Mackay should be removed from the earth.’

Marie had been so long in the public eye that when it became known that she was racing across the Atlantic to her wounded husband’s bedside, those of us in the news business coined her journey ‘the race of death across the pond.’ By the time her steamer reached New York, however, Mackay’s physicians had pronounced him well out of danger, but the story nevertheless took on a life of its own. Marie and her attentive sons hurried directly from New York to Jersey City, where a private rail car awaited their dash across the continent. A crowd of friends and newsmen gathered in Oakland for her arrival, where she looked chic and surprisingly youthful as she stepped from the Corsair, her pet Skye Terrier, Jacques, tucked under one arm. One reporter wrote that ‘her dress was French, her hat was French and her smile was French.’ When asked why her trip across the continent had taken over a week to reach the coast, Marie said that a regular train had pulled her private car, since she disliked the otherwise jolting ride when a special engine was employed to pull her single car across the country.

Three years ago in October, Mackay was in one of his cable offices when he received word that his 25-year-old son was gravelly ill. Then came two more cables, the first instructing him to prepare for the worst, the second announcing that his son had passed away from a steeplechase accident in France.

The young man was buried with all the pomp of a royal prince. Marie’s house on the Rue Tilsit was reopened for the first time since her departure for London. The mansion’s front facade was covered in mourning drapes, while every lamp inside was dressed in crepe. Street traffic was entirely suspended in the vicinity of the Arc de Triomphe. One hundred thousand francs were spent to drape the nave and aisles of the Church of St. Ferdinand des Ternes, where high mass was said with full vocal and orchestral accompaniment, several leading operatic artists assisting in the choir. Later, the mile long funeral procession passed through the Paris streets to the Chapel of St. Augustine, where the body was placed—constantly watched over by nuns—until it was shipped onward to America.

Symbols of mourning were equally visible in the States. In New York City, five thousand yards of crepe adorned the entrance to Mackay’s company, The Postal Telegraph. While the body was brought across the Atlantic on the French liner *Lorraine*, Mackay hastened construction of the family mausoleum. The nation watched as the elaborate Greenwood Tomb arose from the cemetery ground at a staggering cost of a quarter million dollars, where shortly an American dynasty would bury the first of their fallen clan.

Feeling another fit of coughing about to overtake your calm, you close your diary and withdraw your silver flask from the inside breast pocket of your suit coat. Taking a healthy nip from the mouth of the flask, you look out the window to note that the train is arriving into the outlying ranches surrounding Carson City. In less than an hour, you consider, you will take your seat aboard a Southern Pacific Railroad car and leave Nevada for the final time in your life. Much like the fleeting nature of human life itself, the Comstock’s season of fame has come and gone in the sort of high drama the world may never see again in its lifetime. By 1879, Mackay himself had confessed to you that all that remained on the Lode was poor man’s pudding, yet like many others in Virginia City, you have stayed on Mount Davidson for nineteen years past all reason and accountability. As the Mexicans once said about their ancient silver mines, as many days as you spend in bonanza, that many days shall you spend in borrasca.

That philosophy alone has held you to the Comstock Lode, awaiting the next arrival of Mackays and Fairs and Hearsts and Haywards to pull new fortunes from an unsuspecting and hostile landscape. Gone is the *Crown Point*. Gone is the *Ophir* and the *Gould & Curry*, the *Con Virginia* and the *Best and Belcher*. Gone is the constant roar and thunder of an industrial city in the prime of her life, replaced now by tumbleweeds and the decay of hoisting works left idle by the sudden end of an era. Gone is your best friend, Cad Thompson, who died of a laudanum overdose lo these nine final years of your all too memorable life. For you came west with the Argonauts in search of your fortune, only most of your compatriots faltered along the way, lured off track by defeat, exhaustion and unforeseen circumstance. Only those of you hungry enough—resilient enough—to reach the coast earned a front row seat to a uniquely American drama that played out right before your eyes. And while you return to Iowa an old and penniless man, you think to yourself that your fortune lies not in any earthly, monetary gain, but in the privilege of watching a nation and a people come boldly into their own.

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# Author’s Notes Regarding Historical Inaccuracies

While the author has attempted to remain pure to the historical chronology of the story here told, the reader should note that the author has manipulated a limited number of events and dates in an effort to tighten the pace and scope of this most compelling of American stories. Accordingly, and in the interest of historical accuracy, the author submits the following points of clarification:

* History records that Silver Kings James Flood and James Fair rode their timber flume in 1873, while in *Westward Rising Sons*, Silver Kings John Mackay and James Flood rode the flume in the year 1875.
* Adolph Sutro broke through to the Savage Mine in 1878, not 1875 as portrayed in *Westward Rising Sons*.
* Adolph Sutro sold his tunnel in 1879-1880, not 1875 as depicted in *Westward Rising Sons*.
* Virginia City burned to the ground on October 26, 1875, not August 28, 1875. Furthermore, the fire started at 6 AM in the morning, not in the evening as the story portrays. It did, however, break out in a lodging house kept by “Crazy Kate,” who, during a drunken row with a lodger, managed to break a lit oil lamp, which quickly fueled and spread the fire by a then raging Washoe Zephyr.
* The Bank of California’s board of directors at the time of the banks suspension consisted of George Howard, David Tallant, Louis Sacks, John Earl, Darius Mills and William Alvord. For simplicity and continuity of story, I have retained the names and characters from the original bank board of 1864-1869: Darius Mills, Thomas Sunderland, Charles Bonner, Thomas Bell, William Barron. JP Jones and Alvinza Hayward were removed from the original board after their betrayal of Billy Ralston.