

Chapter One

A copperhead snake slithered out of the strawberry patch and onto the road. Sensing vibration, the reptile's languid trek came to a halt. Only the tongue continued moving, darting out to smell the air for prey. Tan and black markings matched the underbrush so well, Jackson barely caught sight of the telltale triangular shaped head. He pulled up on the reins, then gave Charger a pat. The horse had nerves of steel. Having survived the war, there wasn't much his mount couldn't face, except, a snake. "Men, don't move." His assistants pulled up their mounts. Quietly, Jackson removed his colt revolver from the holster. Getting a bead, he aimed right for the head. The shot echoed across the Valley as the snake jerked, then lay still. Jackson tipped his gun to his mouth and blew away the smoke. He was a man used to taking care of trouble.

They continued on across the beautiful Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Apple orchards were in full bloom and birds chattered to one another announcing the arrival of spring. The horrors of the civil war were finally over. After four long years, the valley lurched and crawled its way into recovery. It was going to be a long, arduous, process.

Jackson Daniels, accompanied by his assistants, Lawrence, Felt, and Manning, were there to buy up land for the railroad. "Look right through that pass boys." Jackson pointed. "Just where that little cabin sits. The slope of the land suggests this will be a perfect spot for laying track."

Manning, the most talkative of the group, agreed. "Yes, sir, Mr. Daniels, the only thing blocking the path, is this farm. Not too many rocks or trees though, it won't be much of a problem. The B&O will roll through here like Sheridan on his valley campaign."

Jackson ran his hand along his beard. "Unlike Sheridan, we, Mr. Manning, won't be torching the place." His thoughts drifted back to the Battle of Cedar Creek. Jubal's Early's attack had nearly broken through the Union lines. The loss of life and depth of suffering rested heavy on his heart.

He shook the depressing thoughts from his mind. "Men, the Shenandoah was the breadbasket of the south and will be again. The Baltimore and Ohio will usher in a new day for these people and for the nation. Let us push on."

He brought them to a halt and gave instructions. "Split up and fan out across the area. Cover a one-mile swath. The survey team wants that report as soon as possible." He pulled his

watch out of his waistcoat pocket. “We will meet back in two hours’ time. That would put us at about one o’clock, understood?”

“Yes, sir,” they replied in unison. Jackson smiled to himself. If this had been the war years, the young men would have given a smart salute. He was glad it was not. Their current mission did not cause him nearly the same consternation. For that, he was grateful.

Jackson directed Charger up the apple orchard path as it veered to the right. He passed a rickety chicken coop and a broad field being prepared for spring planting. The mountain laurel displayed white foliage in celebration of spring. He was lost in thought as he gazed at the lovely display.

“Stop right there.” A sharp little voice rang out from behind a large apple tree. The barrel of a shotgun accompanied it. He heard the lever click as the gun was lowered straight toward his head. Hair on the back of his neck stood up at the familiar feeling.

A skinny boy stepped from around the tree. Dressed in overalls and tattered shirt, his feet were covered with boots that had seen better days. A floppy hat was mashed so low, Jackson could barely see the young man’s eyes.

The high-pitched voice continued. “Git. We don’t abide trespassers.” The boy motioned with his head. “Git off my land.”

Jackson ground his jaw in anger. What did this little bootlicker think he was doing? Charger gave a snort and pawed the ground. Jackson reached up and removed his hat. With his handkerchief, he slowly wiped the sweat off his brow. He knew from experience it was best to try and distract the enemy when held at a disadvantage.

As cool as a cucumber, he sat back in the saddle. The weight of the pistol on his hip made his hand itch. He would bide his time. “I like to be introduced before having a gun pointed at me, young man. Jackson Daniels, of the Baltimore and Ohio Railway, at your service. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

The shotgun was slightly lowered and the miscreant licked the sweat off his upper lip. “The railroad, huh? I don’t give no never mind if you’re here with the angels in clouds of glory. You git off my land.”

This little ragamuffin was infuriating. Charger took a step forward and whinnied. Jackson rolled the tobacco in his cheek and spit a brown wad on the ground. “I’d be glad to answer any questions you pose, just as soon as you lower that weapon.”

“Ain’t got no questions.” The young man looked suspiciously at Jackson and narrowed his eyes. “I just want you off my land. You and those Yankees you came with.”

“And just how do you know we’re Yankees?”

“Dressed up like a fancy rooster. Nobody got no money for such things round here except Yankees. Now turn that horse around. I’ll follow you till you leave my place.”

“I’ll be glad to leave. Just as soon as you lower your weapon. I didn’t survive the war to be shot by the likes of you. I’m here to speak to the owner of this property. Kindly put down that gun and take me to him.”

“You’re talking to him. I know the railroad is buying up property all over the valley. We ain’t selling.”

“To whom do you refer as ‘we’?” Jackson was growing impatient. He didn’t like bandying words with a child and he liked having a gun pointed at him even less. The boy was far too ignorant and aggressive for his taste and it didn’t look like he had any intention of taking him to any adults on the place.

Charger shifted from foot to foot as Jackson adjusted his weight. The leather saddle underneath him squeaked. “I assure you, young man, I pose no threat. I’ll ask you one last time, put that gun down.” The mountain boy slowly stepped from behind the tree, his shotgun still raised. The skinny body was covered in a pair of overalls, two sizes too big. A rumpled hat framed a face so dirty, it was nearly the same color as the red-brown earth of the mountains. Jackson noticed the boy’s shirt had a large, un-mended tear in the elbow

Slowly, the boy un-cocked the shotgun and brought it down. “All right. I’ve done what you asked. Now git.”

Jackson kicked Charger into a run and headed straight for the young rascal. The rebel was overtaken in mere seconds and so shocked, he dropped his gun to the ground. Jackson swooped down and jerked the boy up by the overalls dangling him by Charger’s side. “How dare you point a gun at me, young man! You’re lucky it’s me. Another man would have shot you clear through.” The little waif struggled to free himself but Jackson held him roughly by the gallouses. “I see you’ve still got some fight left in you.” Tossing the boy facedown over his lap, he directed Charger to the closest apple tree. “You’ll not do such a foolish thing again, I’d wager.”

Jackson reached over and picked a switch. Leaves dropped to the ground in a flurry as he ripped it loose. With rapier-like precision, he lay a set of six stripes across the skinny, wiggling rear end. Giving the boy another shake, he dropped him to the ground whereupon the scrawny young man danced up and down, rubbing the seat of his pants and waving his boney fists. Amazingly, the miscreant had managed to keep his filthy hat on.

“You cussed Yankee. Owweeee!! How dare you whip me! Why, I oughtta...”

“Ought to what, young sir? Be careful of that mouth. There’s plenty more switches on these apple trees if you haven’t had enough.”

The boy flashed Jackson a look of pure hatred then took off running for home. The floppy boots didn’t seem to slow him down a bit and soon, he disappeared over a small rise. Jackson guided Charger to the shotgun, dismounted and scooped it up. Cracking it open, he let the shot fall to the ground.

“Let’s go find the owner, Charger.”

Jackson turned his horse back along the road toward the small cabin that sat in the cleft between two hills. He expertly scanned the area. It looked as if the next heavy thunderstorm would save the work crews the task of knocking it down. Chickens scratched in the yard and an old hound dog slept in the shade. Boards needed mending and junk was stacked on the porch. The smell of wood smoke permeated everything. A pair of long johns lay across some twine stretched between the porch posts. Having perused the land plat to the property before arriving, Jackson knew the owner to be, one, Thomas Overton.

“Whoa, Charger.” He called to the cabin from his horse. “Overton! Thomas Overton! I am Jackson Daniels of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. I have business to discuss.”

The weathered door opened a crack. Jackson could see a pair of eyes peering out from the darkened interior. There was no reply. He was getting more aggravated by the minute. “I say, my name is Jackson Daniels and I’m here representing the railroad. I’ve business with the owner of this property. I need to speak with Thomas Overton.” After a few more moments of silence, the door was finally pushed ajar and the same young miscreant stepped out onto the porch.

“Paw ain’t here, Yankee. Why don’t you just go on and git like I said!”

It was beyond infuriating. He did not have time to exchange jibes with a no account child. Holding the shotgun as he dismounted, he walked toward the cabin. The boy’s eyes grew round

and he retreated behind the door, quickly slamming it shut. Jackson heard the sound of a latch falling into place.

The high-pitched voice called from inside. "Leave my shotgun on the front porch, Yankee."

Jackson surveyed the scene. He wished he had inquired about the owner of the property before coming. It was one thing to read the name on a plat. It was another to find out what the owners were like. Enough was enough.

"Young man, I am through dealing with you. Is this the residence of Thomas Overton?"

"Yep."

"Where is he?"

"He ain't here."

"Where is he?"

"Don't rightly know, Yankee. He's out amongst our apple trees. Could be anywhere on the place."

Including inside, thought Jackson. By this time, Lawrence, Felt and Manning were riding into the yard.

Manning removed his hat before addressing the boss. "We've finished our trek, Mr. Daniels. It looks as perfect for the pass as you thought. We're ready to write up the report."

Jackson nodded then turned his attention back to the front door. "You tell your Paw that I was here and I need to talk to him. You hear me young'un?"

There was no reply.

"You'll get your shotgun back just as soon as I meet with Thomas Overton." The stubborn boy refused to answer. Jackson tucked the shotgun under his arm and turned Charger around to leave. "Come on men, we'll come back when the owner is home."

The horses clopped along the dirt road paralleling a swiftly flowing creek. Water splashed up around them as they crossed. Jackson made sure he held the shotgun so it could be seen. He reached behind to check the saddlebags.

The grimy little boy, still wearing the dirty old hat, stood on the front porch. He lifted his skinny arm and shook his fist while his voice echoed across the mountain. "You come back here, Yankee. I'm going to unload a round of shot in that uppy arse of yourn." Jackson ignored him and rode completely out of sight.