

Bad Times



A Novel

By
Denny Williams

BAD TIMES

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Denny Williams

Dedication

There's no doubt this book gets dedicated to my brother,

Buster L. Williams,

who passed before it was finished. How he would have laughed with me at every situation the characters encountered.

Also, to my daughter Denise who, without her help, guidance and differences of opinion, this book would not be what it is.

And, to my wife, Sharon, who urged me to keep on writing when I felt guilty about neglecting to help around the house.

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CHAPTER 1

Flaming Boots

An old man, bundled in a thin coat with holes at the elbows, tries to sleep on a bench in front of the stage depot. The air is cold this morning before dawn in Elna, Arkansas, much too cold for 76-year-old Jack O'Mally to be sleeping outside.

A blast from a gun nearby startles Jack. He sits up on the bench to see what is going on. From the report, he can tell it was a 45 long colt. Jack hates to be awakened like this. It reminds him too much of the war 18 years ago. The shot came from the saloon across the street. A yellow glow from two kerosene lamps seeps around the edges of the front doors and through the windows of the wooden building and onto the dirt street.

Mel Johnson, a hired gun, has shot a young cowhand just below the heart. The cowboy is on the floor beside an overturned chair, bleeding badly. Jimmy Gates and his cousin Nelson Gates had been playing cards all night with Johnson, trying to win back some of their wages they lost to him right after midnight. The trouble started when Jimmy Gates caught Johnson slipping a card up his coat sleeve. Jimmy's anger flared. He had slid his chair back only inches before the pistol Johnson had laying on his lap sent a heavy bullet into Jimmy's stomach. Johnson simply tilted the gun, one hand still holding his cards, and shot the young man from beneath the table.

"Johnson, you bastard. Jimmy ain't never hurt a soul," says Nelson, staring into the barrel of Johnson's raised gun. "You were cheating, you bastard."

"Another word out of you, boy, and you will be laying there beside your friend. My word against nobody," says Johnson.

The same shot that woke up the old man roused the sheriff from his sleep. As the sheriff bolts through the saloon door, Johnson holsters his pistol. Johnson walks toward the sheriff holding a fifty-dollar bill between his pointing and middle finger. Johnson tucks it into the sheriff's vest pocket.

"The boy went for his gun, Sheriff. I had no other choice," Johnson says.

"That's a lie," shouts Nelson, now kneeling at his best friend's side. "He was cheating and Jimmy caught him at it."

The sheriff can see by all the blood on the floor that Jimmy is not going to be around long.

"I'm sorry, son, but it is your word against his and that is not going to hold up in court," the sheriff tells Nelson. "Young man, you need to take care of your friend here. The doc's office is five buildings down on your left."

The sheriff turns to Johnson.

"Big fellow, you need to get on this morning's stage and leave. I don't deal with people like you."

"No problem, Sheriff. I was leaving this morning anyway," says Johnson, already heading for the door.

Mel Johnson is a man born without a conscience. He stands about 6 foot 4 inches and weighs more than 250 pounds. In addition to his intimidating size, he is fast with a gun. He dresses in the finest clothes he can purchase in whatever town he happens to stop in. Johnson also never carries any luggage. He buys what he needs when he gets to where he is going. While he thinks a lot about the way he looks, Johnson has no feelings for the life of another human being. He has killed men, women and even children for the right price. He compares himself to a bounty hunter who profits from slaying coyotes or other unwanted vermin.

In just a few minutes, the sun will touch the sky above this quaint town, where towering trees meet the buildings and grass comes right

up to the edge of the dirt streets. Wooden sidewalks and dim street lights line the main street of this sleepy place in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains.

Jack closes his eyes once again and huddles at the end of the wooden bench, pulling his denim coat tighter around him. His coat was fine last week in Tennessee but it's not quite enough here in Arkansas this November morning.

Jack O'Mally is an old man who feels like he has used up all of his good years. But he has too much heart and too much pride to just stop somewhere some night and die in the street. At 6 foot 5 inches, Jack always walks straight and tall. He refuses to let the years bend his back like it has others his age. His faded blue eyes and the lines on his face reflect a hard life and many memories. Surprisingly, Jack's dark brown hair hasn't changed much. His week-old beard, though is nearly all grey.

Around the corner from him in the dark is the silhouette of a woman crouched on the wooden sidewalk, clutching a cloth sack filled with all her belongings, which aren't much -- a raggedy blouse, one clean dress, a rag doll her father gave her when she was four, a hairbrush and her mother's silver broach with a yellow cameo. There also is a little box wrapped in paper and tied with a string for safe keeping. Inside is her mother's wedding ring.

The sun starts to light the sky as the clerk for the stage depot unlocks the front door. The old man slowly gets to his feet. He moves like he has arthritis in all his joints. But perhaps the cold crept in while he was curled on the bench. He steps up the one step into the depot and stands, watching the clerk build a fire in the pot-bellied stove.

The clerk asks, "Where you headed for, old timer?"

"I'm going to Bull Creek, Colorado to work with my nephew," Jack replies in a low voice.

"The stage doesn't leave for another hour but you can make yourself at home and warm by the stove if you like," the clerk offers.

"It is a might cold outside this morning. Seems to soak all the way into your bones," Jack says, moving toward the stove.

"Yep, it's 35 degrees out there -- a little too cold to sleep on that bench outside," the clerk answers.

The woman bundled up on the sidewalk suddenly steps through the doorway.

"Gosh, it's cold this morning. My feet are freezing," she interrupts.

"Yes, Ma'am," the clerk responds. "It's a might cool out there."

Jack turns a little and takes a good look at the woman, who he sees is actually a girl and one he guesses is surely not a day over 16. He stares down at her feet and sees just a pair of old high-top leather shoes without socks. She looks like a runaway, looks like a mess.

"Alright, old timer. To Bull Creek, Colorado from Elna, Arkansas. That will be \$6.80," announces the clerk.

Jack pulls out a worn, leather change purse from his coat and places a 10-dollar gold piece on the counter. The clerk hands him a ticket and some coins.

"Here is your ticket and \$3.80 in change. It's going to be a long ride. So you may want to get a heavier coat for that weather in Colorado," the clerk says.

Then he turns his head, looks at the girl standing behind Jack and raises his eyebrows.

Jack doesn't say anything.

Katie Lankford is a runaway alright. She is a poor kid trying to get away from a situation she was forced into. Jack has seen several people in her shoes. He himself has been in her place a few times before. He knows how it is to sleep in the streets, trying to keep out of sight, or under a porch to duck out of the rain.

"Well, little miss. Where might you be headed?" the clerk asks.

"Bull Creek, Colorado," blurts Katie.

"Are the two of you together?" asks the clerk.

Jack cocks his head around and then gives the clerk a puzzled look as he counts his change.

"No, I don't even know that man," Katie says, pouring nickels, dimes, pennies and two silver dollars from her father's old, leather change purse onto the counter.

"You are \$2.52 short, miss," says the clerk.

"Oh, I just have to get to Bull Creek," Katie says, turning to Jack. "Mister, could you loan me the money and I will pay you back as soon as I step off the stage?"

Jack still doesn't say a word.

"Mister, this is my life's savings. I've been saving for months to leave ... I mean ... go to Bull Creek," Katie says.

Katie turns back to the clerk.

"Give me a ticket for as far as I can go and I will walk the rest of the way -- to my grandmother's house."

Jack places his last three silver dollars on the counter.

"Oh, thank you. God bless you. I will pay you back double," says Katie.

Jack shakes his head a little. He remembers being in her shoes. But 16-year-old boys are treated differently. He remembers asking a stranger for money to ride the ferry once. He didn't get nearly the same response as this young girl. Back then, the clerk collecting money for the ferry came around the counter, grabbed Jack by an ear and kicked him out into the street.

Jack and Katie have just enough time to warm themselves and drink a cup of coffee before the stagecoach pulls up. Jack and the girl hand their luggage to the driver. The driver throws it on top of the coach -- Katie's cloth sack and Jack's suitcase, which is so battered he has to tie a rope around it to keep it closed. The girl steps up into the stage and, about then, Mel Johnson steps in front of Jack out of nowhere.

"Hey, driver," Johnson says as he tosses him two silver dollars. "Drop me off at Wolf's Fork."

"That is 25 minutes out of our way," the driver protests. "We have paying customers on board."

"The stage is always 30 minutes late. They don't mind, do you folks?"

Without waiting for Jack and Katie to answer, Johnson gets onto the stage.

"Now, wake me when we get to Wolf's Fork."

Jack is irritated but not enough to say anything. If Jack was 30 years younger, he would kick this big boy around a little and make him miss this stage.

As the stage pulls away, Johnson takes a seat next to Katie.

"Little miss, where are you headed for?" Johnson asks.

"We're going to Bull Creek, Colorado."

"Well, that's a long trip. What is your name, pretty lady?" Johnson asks her.

"I am Katie Lankford."

"And what is your name, mister?" Katie asks.

"Mel Johnson, miss. But you can call me Mel," the big fellow says, leaning back in his seat. He addresses Jack. "Well, old man, it is going to be a short ride for me to Wolf's Fork. So who are you?"

"Jack O'Malley from Clear Springs, Tennessee," says Jack.

Johnson reaches inside his jacket for a whiskey flask. He takes three quick swallows and slips it back into his coat. Johnson is drunk and sleepy after being up all night sipping whiskey and gambling. He reaches over and puts a hand on Katie's leg.

Katie jerks her leg back and Jack says, "Leave the girl alone."

"Mind your business, old man," Johnson responds sharply.

Jack yells, "Driver, stop the ..."

In mid-sentence, Johnson doubles his fist and punches Jack in the mouth.

Johnson yells to the driver, "It's OK, I thought I was going to be sick."

Jack's bottom lip is busted and bleeding. Katie offers him a handkerchief. Jack takes the handkerchief and wipes off the blood.

"Thanks, ma'am."

No one says anything else. Johnson takes off his boots and places them on the seat next to Jack. He stretches out his legs and falls off to sleep.

Jack takes out his pocketknife and starts cutting into Johnson's nice, shiny boots. Katie giggles but covers her mouth so she won't wake Johnson. Jack makes several short slashes through the leather. Then he reaches out the stage window and lifts the kerosene lantern from the side of the stagecoach. Jack opens the lantern and carefully pours the kerosene into the slashes he made in the boots. He quietly sits them back on the seat and returns the lantern to its place. Then, Jack pretends to sleep.

A few minutes later, the stage stops at Wolf's Fork.

The driver, obviously annoyed, opens the door.

"Mister, this is your stop. Wake up. We have a schedule to keep."

Johnson quickly slips on his boots and, still half asleep, stumbles off the stage. The driver shakes the reins and the horses start off, Jack lights a match and flips it out the window of the stage. The lit match lands right at Johnson's feet.

Suddenly, one boot is on fire. Johnson, standing in the middle of the street, looks down and the flames have jumped to the other boot.

Some fellow across the street sees what is happening and starts to laugh. Johnson stomps around, trying to put out the fire.

Suddenly, Johnson is wide-awake and begins to curse.

"I'm going to kill that sorry old man."

Onlookers standing behind him on the sidewalk hold their sides laughing, watching Johnson jump around.

Johnson hollers for help. Then, he starts screaming for help. He tries to kick the boots off his feet. The fire is now creeping up his pant legs.

A man steps out of the barber shop, sees what is going on and starts to laugh.

Mel Johnson is now in a rage, screaming with pain. Someone grabs a blanket off a horse and wraps his legs and boots to put out the fire. One boot falls apart. Underneath, his foot is roasted red.

"I'm going to bury that old man," Johnson screams.

He moans in pain as two men carry him off to the doctor's office.

"I'm going to enjoy killing that worthless old man."

CHAPTER 2

Trip to Bull Creek

I can't believe you did that," Katie says, laughing so hard her sides hurt. "That man is going to kill you. He is going to kill you dead. Did you see the way he was jumping around? His pants were nearly burned off of him. That was funny. That was the funniest thing I ever saw. He deserved it. Gosh! You are the meanest old man I have ever seen."

Katie holds her sides. She wipes the tears out of her eyes with her coat sleeve.

"You sure know how to get even. Set a man's boots on fire while he is still wearing them. He was sure mad. He could have eaten nails he was so mad. Did you hear him screaming that he is going to kill you?"

"He won't likely forget that for a while," Jack says with a grin.

"Gosh, he will never forget that. He won't be able to walk for a month. You sure fixed him good, Jack," Katie says, starting to laugh out loud again.

"Maybe that will give him a little taste of what hell feels like," Jack says.

Jack reaches inside his coat and pulls out a little cigar. He strikes a match on the bottom of his boot and holds it to the end of the cigar. Jack takes a short drag and slides his feet up on the seat beside Katie.

After about 10 minutes, he speaks again.

"Now, where are you really going, young lady?"

Katie places her feet up on the seat across from Jack, just like Mel Johnson had done.

"I'm going to seek my fortune," she starts. "My mother died when I was just two years old. Both her and the baby died that night. I can't remember anything about it myself. I just remember my pa telling me about that night."

She looks at Jack, who doesn't say anything. So she continues.

"It was February and it was the coldest it had been that year. The snow was about three-feet deep. No way for a doctor to get there. So ma tried to have the baby, just her and pa there. Pa always blamed himself for not knowing enough about what to do in a case like that.

"So it was just me and my pa for years after. My pa raised me as best as he could. He told me to always be a lady but I never exactly knew what that was. I suppose it meant to just be polite to strangers. My pa died about six months ago and I went to live with an aunt and uncle -- as a live-in slave. Now, it ain't like I ain't beholdin' to them and didn't appreciate what they done for me. I did all the washing and all the dishes. I had hoed the garden most of the summer this past summer and didn't complain a bit. But, that wasn't bad enough to make me leave. 'Til one night my uncle got drunk and hit me a couple of times. It really hurt. I had never been hit that hard before. He broke one of my teeth. See right here?"

She opens her mouth and points to the broken tooth behind her left upper canine tooth. The damage isn't noticeable, though, even when she smiles.

"I left that next night as soon as I thought they were asleep. Papa said, 'Never stay with a man that will hit you. He is not a real man. Even if you are married to him.' So here I am. I don't really know where I am going right now except on this stage headed west with you.

"So, Mr. Jack O'Malley, just what are you going to do when you get to Bull Creek?"

"I got this letter from my nephew," Jack says as he hands an old, yellowed envelope to Katie.

Katie opens the letter and looks at it.

"Gosh, Jack. This letter is over 10 years old. A lot can happen in 10 years."

"I reckon you are right. A lot of things have happened in ten years," Jack says.

"It says here, ..." Katie starts to read. She assumes Jack can't read when he hands her the letter.

"Dear Uncle Jack, This place is busy on Friday and Saturday nights now. I sure could use your help. I can't pay you a lot of money but you would get room and board plus \$10 a month. This town is starting to grow and there are other odd jobs you can pick up in town to make extra money. Write back and let me know as soon as you can. Yours truly, James O'Malley."

Jack says, "My nephew owns a saloon in Bull Creek. I know I'm a little late but that is where I'm going. My kinfolk usually watch after each other and I believe the job will still be open, him being family and all. Besides, that is the only offer I got from any of my kin. I know the rest are too poor to take in another mouth to feed. In just a couple of years, I won't be able to do enough work to earn my keep. I was hoping that later on I could just sweep up around the place after closing and my nephew would have the heart to let me stay."

When the stage stops that night, Jack stays with the horses at the livery stable. Every night along the way to Colorado, Jack finds a place in a hayloft where he won't be noticed and goes to sleep. And every morning, he gets up as soon as he hears the man at the livery stable start feeding the horses. Then, every morning he walks to the back door of the town's boarding house or any place he smells the aroma of frying bacon or sausage. Jack knocks on the door and asks for two biscuits -- one with jelly and the other with salt pork. When the cook brings them to the door, Jack offers to pay for them but hopes the cook has a good heart and the price will be free. But there's not a lot of charity in 1884 for an old man like Jack. He pays for his breakfast every morning. Except for the one time.

Katie, on the other hand, finds her own place to stay. That first night, the stage depot clerk in Connors, Arkansas, Ted Larson, lets Katie sleep on a bench inside the stage depot because the weather is so cold. The next morning in Connors, Mr. Larson brings in two jelly biscuits his wife had made for Katie. He had told his wife about the poor girl that was sleeping on the wooden depot bench.

"Oh, thank you, kind sir," Katie says as she fumbles with the paper wrapped around the biscuits.

Katie is a little rough around the edges. But she is always quick to

thank someone for anything they do for her. "Please" and "thank you" were things her father taught her that she always remembers.

It is a long, dusty ride before the stagecoach stops in Kelly Flats, Kansas the second night of their trip. Katie plops down on the bench inside the stage depot, just as she had done the night before in Conners.

The depot clerk approaches Katie.

"We're closing for the evening, ma'am. You will have to leave now."

"But, sir, Mr. Larson, the clerk in Conners, let me sleep in the depot last night," says Katie.

"Well, you can't sleep here. We have tickets and valuables left in here at night. Why don't you stay with the older gentlemen you are traveling with?"

"I don't even know him. He sleeps down at the livery stable in the hay loft. Do you want me to walk down to the livery stable, climb up in the hay loft and ask that old man if I can sleep next to him to keep warm?"

Now, Billy Wilson, the depot clerk here in Kelly Flats, Kansas always considered himself a good, Christian man. And when Katie asked the question the way she did, it made him feel like he was going to commit a sin himself, sending the young girl out into the night.

Wilson fills the stove with wood and turns the damper down so the fire will last all night. Maybe he could just stir the coals in the morning and wouldn't have to build a new fire.

"Now listen here, young lady. We don't ever do this for anyone. If anything is missing or even shuffled around like it had been looked through, I will call the sheriff and have you put in jail until I can go through this place from top to bottom. You hear?"

"I won't touch a thing except this here bench, sir," Katie says.

The next morning, Wilson brings buttermilk biscuits with bacon and apple jelly that his wife made for Katie to eat before getting on the stage.

"Oh, bless you, sir," Katie says. "I haven't had anything to eat since yesterday morning. Bless your kind heart."

These words made Billy Wilson feel he had stored a good deed in Heaven.

"You're welcome, ma'am. Don't tell anyone you stayed at the depot all night in Kelly Flats, you hear?"

"I won't say a word, Mr. Wilson," Katie says with a mouthful of biscuit and jelly.

On the fourth day, Katie wakes up with her belly rumbling in another town. Again, she has gone a full day without food – nothing since the biscuits in Kelly Flats. However, she did manage to talk the stage depot clerk there into letting her sleep inside the depot. Katie waits inside the depot by the pot-bellied stove for the stagecoach to arrive.

Meanwhile, Jack must have looked hungry to the nice lady who comes to the back door of the boarding house that morning. Or maybe she just likes the way Jack looks.

"Ma'am, could I trouble you for two biscuits -- one with jelly and the other with salt pork?"

"Well, mister, come on in," says the dark-haired lady who looks like she's in her 60's.

"I can only afford the two biscuits and I'll be on my way," says Jack. "I'm catching the stage this morning."

"Come on in anyway. I'm Dorothy Tyler," the lady says.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am. I am Jack O'Mally."

"Well, I will fix you a plate of breakfast, Jack O'Mally. You are my first customer."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I don't have any money for breakfast," says Jack as he steps through the door.

"The breakfast won't cost you anything this morning, Mr. O'Mally. Set yourself down there at the kitchen table."

Jack slides a cane-backed chair from under the small table and sits down.

"I saw you get off the stage last night. When I saw you, I thought of my father. No, I didn't mistake you for him. I thought of him because he was a tall, slender man. And also, because you walk just like my father did. My father passed away over 40 years ago. You reminded me of him as you walked toward the livery stable."

"Ma'am, I would not normally take charity but I am short of money and your breakfast does smell real good," says Jack.

"Well, let me fix you a breakfast you can remember. I won't start serving out front for about half an hour."

Mrs. Tyler breaks open two biscuits on a plate and smothers them in gravy. She places the plate in front of Jack.

"How do you like your coffee, Mr. O'Mally?"

"Just call me Jack, ma'am. Black with a little sugar will be fine."

"Well then, just call me Dot -- short for Dorothy. How do you like your eggs, Jack?"

"Ma'am -- I mean Dot -- this plate of biscuits and gravy is plenty."

"Well, Jack, I said it was going to be a breakfast to remember. Now, how do you like your eggs?"

"Over easy. I will be getting on the stage this morning, though, and I have no way to pay you back," Jack says.

"I already knew that. You like fried potatoes, too, don't you?" asks Mrs. Tyler.

She fills another plate with three eggs, fried potatoes and four strips of bacon and slides it in front of Jack.

"Dot, I haven't had this much to eat in years. I can't eat all this good food."

"Will you remember having a blueberry pastry with your second cup of coffee this morning?" asks Mrs. Tyler. "You can take what you don't eat with you. I'll wrap it up for you. But you save room for the blueberry pastry and the second cup of coffee."

She sits the pastry beside Jack's plate and slides her chair in on the other side of the table. She stirs her cup of coffee with cream and sugar. Jack knows he should be leaving about now to catch the stage but the lady seems to have something on her mind. He wants to stay as long as he can because of the kindness Mrs. Tyler is showing him.

Jack can only finish the biscuits and gravy before he starts eating the blueberry pastry.

Mrs. Tyler pours Jack a second cup of coffee and sits back down.

"I am going to tell you something, Jack. This was just between me and the good Lord and now you. My father sat down to have a blueberry pastry and a cup of coffee one morning. He never got to taste it. It was the first time I had made these blueberry pastries and I wanted so for him to try one. A bull had gotten loose and had hurt one of the horses. My pa jumped up from the table and went to the barn for a pitchfork. You know how you always move a bull with a pitchfork? But before he got to the barn, the bull hit him. Just one blow. The bull killed him with one blow. I had wished to the Lord that my pa could have tasted my blueberry pastries. I suppose I wished it every time I

made a new batch of them. Then last night, I seen you get off the stage and I thought of my pa again," says Mrs. Tyler.

"Dot, this is the best blueberry pastry I have ever tasted. I cooked in Louisiana for a few years and had a lot of French pastries and this beats them all," says Jack. "Your papa would have loved it."

Jack wants to take those last words back as he sees Mrs. Tyler's eyes start to water.

"Thank you, Mr. O'Mally," Mrs. Tyler says. "Here, I will put your bacon and eggs on a couple of biscuits and I will wrap your potatoes in paper."

"Thanks, Dot. This is the best breakfast I have ever eaten. I will drop in and see you if I ever come this way through Kansas again."

"You take care, Jack. I have heard that some of those mining towns are bad places."

"Thanks again, ma'am," Jack says as he hurries off. He can see the stage coming up the street toward the stage depot.

Before Jack gets to the depot, Katie comes outside all sleepy-eyed. He can tell by the way her hair is brushed that she didn't have a mirror to look in.

"Hey, Jack, did you get any sleep last night? Jack, what do you have in the bag? Jack, I haven't eaten anything since yesterday morning and I can smell that bacon from 10 feet away."

Jack knows Katie has hardly had anything to eat in the days since they got on the stage in Arkansas. So Jack just smiles at her when she asks about the paper bag. He follows Katie onto the stage. Their luggage is still on top from last night.

The driver slaps the reins and the stage heads out of town. Jack reaches in the bag and hands Katie a biscuit with bacon on it.

"Do you like bacon, young lady?" Jack smiles, knowing she could almost eat a mud biscuit right now.

"Jack, this biscuit is still warm. Gosh, I believe this is the best bacon biscuit I have ever tasted."

"Today is our lucky day. We have two egg biscuits and a double handful of fried potatoes for dinner," says Jack.

"I thought you only had money for a couple of biscuits, Jack. How did you get all of this stuff?"

"Sometimes, you just run into nice, generous people," says Jack.

"I wish you had generously woke me up. This biscuit is great," Katie says.

After a day's ride, the stage pulls into a little town at the head of a wide valley. Mountains rise up just beyond the buildings.

"Bull Creek," says the driver, "I know you two have had a hard trip."

The driver opens the stage door. Katie gets off first and Jack follows her.

CHAPTER 3

Man Shot With Old Pistol

As Jack gets off the stage, he turns to Katie and says to her, "Go over to the boarding house and ask for a job. They can always use some help around those places and take whatever you're offered."

"Work for free if you have to," he adds. "Just get a roof over your head. It's a lot better than sleeping in an alley somewhere."

Katie looks at Jack. "I suppose that is the boarding house up the street -- the big white building with green around the windows?"

"That would be my first guess, too. I'm not much help but I will be around for at least a couple of days if you need me."

Jack picks up his brown suitcase with the rope tied around it and heads down an almost-empty street to the saloon, a grey, two-story building with a covered, wooden sidewalk out front. The saloon's sign hangs only by one corner. A gust of wind will probably send it into the dirt street. It reads "O'Mally's Saloon" in large red letters. The words "& Kitchen" are painted in smaller, black letters. Two windows are situated on either side of a large set of double doors, which are replaced by swinging saloon doors during the summer. Jack can see this town needs an old man like it needs another stray dog.

Jack opens one of the doors and walks inside. He sees a worn, wooden floor and seven simple tables with chairs. Toward the middle of the room, there's a big, pot-bellied stove. A grizzly-bear head hangs

over the mirror behind the bar. A man in his 50's stands behind the bar, wearing a coat to keep warm on this winter day.

"What will it be, old timer?" asks the bartender.

"I am looking for James O'Malley," says Jack.

"Well, I'm Joseph O'Malley. James is my cousin.

"Pleased to meet you, Joe. I am Jack O'Malley, your father's oldest brother."

Jack keeps looking the place over, noticing the stairs going up to a walkway above the bar. He sees four doors along the walkway - four rooms where the saloon girls stay.

"I got a letter from James a few years ago offering me a job. I hope it is still open," Jack says.

"Well I have to tell you James isn't here anymore ... he had to leave town. There was some trouble with the sheriff and his boys about two years ago. If he hadn't left, the sheriff or one of his deputies would have killed him in an alley one night.

"Things are so bad here these days because of the sheriff and his boys that I can't break even on the whiskey and beer sales," Joe says, then tilting his head toward the rooms upstairs. "The girls are the only thing keeping this place open."

Joe reaches up for a bottle behind the bar and pours two drinks.

"Here's one on the house, Jack."

Joe offers his hand across the bar and Jack gives him a strong handshake.

Joe O'Mally is about 6 foot tall with a belly that hangs over his belt. Joe's big arms and shoulders make his belly look smaller than it is. He is not a man anyone would want to fight straight up. His beard is mostly gray and it's short. It looks like he shaves it off about every two weeks. There's not much brown hair left on top of his head. He seems easygoing, like an old hunting dog that just lies on the porch. That's the kind of dog you can walk up to and pet as he wags his tail. But he's a different animal when he gets cornered. That's when he shows his teeth. Joe has knocked out a few rough cowboys with just one punch. It takes a man like Joe to run a place like this.

"So, you are pa's oldest brother?" Joe asks. "Uncle Gordon is between you and pa. He still living?"

"No, he died twenty-one years ago - November 22nd," says Jack. "You know, I really need a place for a couple of weeks and then I'll be moving on."

"Old man, you can barely get yourself around much less do any work of some benefit. I ain't taking on no charity case. Can you cook?"

"I cooked some in New Orleans three years ago," says Jack.

"Why the hell didn't you stay there instead of coming out here?"

"I had some problems," says Jack.

"Drinking, I bet. Grand pa was a big drinker. I heard he stayed drunk all the time. I bet your growing up was a little tough on you, huh?"

"It was bad times then," says Jack.

"Well, I know the fix you are in and I need a cook. If you ever drink while you are working, you are gone. You'll be out in the street that very minute. And I can't afford to pay you. I will give you room and board for cooking, for cleaning up and keeping the fire in the stove going out here in the saloon. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," says Jack.

"You can stay in the little room to the right of the storage room. It used to be the whiskey locker but we don't have enough whiskey to even fill the bar now. It's at the back of the kitchen beside the storage room. There is already a bunk there."

Jack looks around the place a little more and finds the door to the kitchen. It leads off to the right of the bar.

"Joe, is it alright if I start with breakfast in the morning?"

"Yeah, that will be fine. But you can start keeping up the fire in the stove right now. A kid brings the wood in every morning and piles it up over there behind the stove. All you have to do is keep up the fire."

Jack carries his suitcase through the kitchen door. To the left, he sees two more doors. The one on the right must be the old whiskey locker. Jack walks into his new home, a small, cramped place with bare walls except for a mirror over the night table. There is a small bunk with an old mattress. Three folded quilts are piled at the end of the bed. They look warm and Jack knows they will feel good wrapped around his old bones tonight.

Also in the room is a narrow night table, almost large enough for the kerosene lamp and wash pan that rest on it. On the nightstand's bottom shelf is a water pitcher and 2 towels. His view of the outside world is through a tiny square window covered with bars. It lets in just enough light to see during the day.

Jack opens his suitcase on the bed. He hangs his coat on the back of

the door and his two changes of clothes on a nail beside the door. Jack takes out an old flintlock pistol that looks so worn it should have been thrown away. But it's all he's got. He slides it behind his belt, where it's hardly noticeable.

"Working in a saloon in a new town, you never know when you might need some extra help," Jack says to himself.

Jack heads back into the saloon and places more wood into the pot-bellied stove. Then he returns to the kitchen and finds two cold biscuits. He spreads butter on one and something that looks like fruit jelly on the other. After finishing off the biscuits and a glass of water, He goes to bed.

Jack sleeps better on that worn mattress than he has slept in weeks -- maybe because it is the first bed he has slept in for weeks. He wakes up rested and gets busy in the kitchen the next morning. Jack cleans the stove and gets a fire going inside. He slides a few freshly made biscuits into the oven.

When Jack hears the saloon door open, he walks out of the kitchen into the saloon.

Joe and another fellow are the only two who have shown up for breakfast this morning.

"What will it be this morning, fellows?" Jack asks, approaching their table with a scrap of paper and pencil in hand.

Joe jokingly asks, "What do you have back there, old man, that's good to eat?"

Joe, of course, knows exactly what is back there in the kitchen. He has been running the kitchen for the past year by himself. But, the girls who work in the saloon and he have been pretty much the only customers.

"We have bacon, eggs. We got some grits. Hot biscuits will be coming out of the oven in about 10 minutes. You can start with hot coffee, hot tea or water to drink," Jack says.

"Old man, it sounds like you know your way around a kitchen. That really is all we got back there. The coffee smells good," says Joe.

"Bring us some eggs. We'll take two of them and two strips of bacon, some of the grits and two biscuits each."

The other fellow nods.

Jack cleans up after breakfast and at about 11:30 that morning, he gets to work sweeping up the bar area. An elderly man on a cane

hobbles through the door. He is Reese Cannon, who helps sweep up at his grandson's dry goods store down the street. Reese is about Jack's age but he can hardly get around because he broke his back 10 years ago and it never healed right.

"Hey there, old timer. I'm Reese Cannon. I heard Joe had an old man working as a cook down here and I had to stick my head in to say hello."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Reese. I'm Jack O'Mally. Set down by the stove there and warm yourself a little."

"It is cold out there," says Reese.

Reese settles into a chair and watches Jack stir the coals in the stove and put in more wood.

"Reese, how many years have you been in Bull Creek?"

"Came here when I was 45," says Reese. "I could take on a hundred cattle by myself then. But I haven't been on a horse in 10 years because of my back. My back is real bad. I'm lucky my grandson still owns the dry goods store."

About that time, two men from the Mason ranch, one of the two big ranches in the valley, stroll through the front door of the saloon. They look like the kind of men hired to beat money out of someone -- too heavy to be in the saddle 10 hours a day working cattle. One of the men is Dan Coke, who has worked at the Mason ranch for three years. He is the meanest kind of man. He likes to hurt people. He enjoys breaking ribs or arms or legs just to see a man suffer. He has killed people but he has yet to be accused of murder. That's because he is careful to make sure it always looks like he's acting in self-defense. He saw his father hang for murder down in Texas and it left an impression on him.

The other fellow is Al Brewster, who always tags along as the back-up man. He's really quick with a gun. He waits until someone else starts to draw against one of the Mason boys -- there are six of them -- then Brewster, quick as a rattlesnake, kills them in "self-defense." Self-defense is a pretty common alibi in these parts.

Jack is on his knees, putting wood into the stove, when Coke walks over and kicks the chair from under Reese out of pure heartlessness. Reese falls to the floor onto his back and Jack watches Reese grimace in pain.

"Move. Let us get some of that heat," Coke says as he shoves Jack aside with his boot.

Jack doesn't have the patience for this. In one swift move, forgetting his age, he grabs the hatchet lying by the firewood and chops into Coke's foot, likely severing at least three toes.

Blood spurts out of Coke's boot. He jumps around holding his foot, trying to stop the bleeding.

Coke screams to Brewster, "Kill that old man. He just cut my foot off."

Brewster kicks Jack in the ribs, kicks him in the face and knocks Jack back into the pile of wood behind the stove. He starts kicking Jack in the legs when Jack manages to pull the old single-shot pistol from under his belt. He points it at Brewster's belly.

Brewster steps back and laughs.

"What do you think you're going to do with that? Did Columbus pass that gun down to you?"

"It will still shoot," says Jack, bleeding from the nose and mouth. "And it will put a hole in you that will make you leak like a bucket of paint."

Brewster backs up a couple steps. He can see by the size of the gun's barrel that it would make a big hole.

"You fellows, toss your guns here by me," Jack says.

Both men ease their guns out of their holsters and pitch them in front of Jack.

"Now turn around and walk toward the door."

Brewster turns and starts toward the door when Jack, still on his knees, hears the clink of a piece of metal hit the floor. Jack's face pales. His mouth drops open. He watches the rusty trigger bounce off the floor. And then, a fraction of a second later, the old gun fires.

Grey-white smoke fills the room. Brewster screams. A jagged hole appears in his pants -- in the middle of the rear seam. Brewster falls face down on the floor, hollering that he can't feel his legs.

Steve Dawson, the man who owns the shoe store next door, and another man, Earl Hanks, who lives above the bank, barges through the front door after hearing the gunshot.

Joe charges out of his cramped office behind the bar, knocking over his chair.

"What's going on in here, Jack?" Joe shouts.

"It was an accident," Jack says.

Blood is everywhere.

"I saw everything," Reese says. "It was an accident."

"It looks like someone butchered a cow in here," Joe says.

Joe and Steve lift Brewster and carry him out by his shoulders. Earl helps Coke hobble out.

Reese turns to Jack. Jack places Reese's chair upright.

"Do you know who those men are, Jack? They work for the Mason ranch and they beat people up for a living. They will come back and kill you and me both. You have dug your own grave by crossing those men."

Outside, they hear Steve holler as he and the others make their way across the street, "Someone get Doc Jones! Quick! This fellow's been shot and he's bleeding pretty bad."

Earl, following behind as he helps Coke, stares at the gaping hole in Brewster's backside. "I sure wouldn't want ol' Doc's job today," Earl mutters.

CHAPTER 4

Holes in the Saloon Floor

The next day, Dan Coke, with three missing toes, gets on his horse and starts to ride out of town. But before he leaves he stops in front of the saloon.

“Old man, you are going to die when I tell Mr. Mason you have cost him two good men,” Coke shouts. “Old man, your death will not be a quick one either. They will drag your sorry carcass through the streets at the end of a rope.”

He smacks his horse on the rump and rides out of town.

The next day, Jack is under the saloon drilling holes in the floor with a hand drill. He looks up through one of the holes to see if the location is the proper distance from the bar. Jack moves about two feet toward the rear of the saloon and drills several holes in the floor along the bar.

Jack goes back inside the saloon. The drill has left wood shavings on the floor in front of the bar. After Jack sweeps up the shavings, he looks at the holes and nods his head in approval. The holes are not too noticeable at all, Jack thinks to himself. Jack smiles a little as he continues to sweep the rest of the saloon floor.

About this time, Katie comes through the saloon door.

“Jack, I heard about the trouble yesterday. I suppose those two guys really upset you a bit, huh?”

“Gosh, Jack, how have you lived so long? In the week I have known

you, you have three people now wantin' to kill you. Is that the reason you had to leave New Orleans because of people wanting to kill you?"

"There was some trouble down there," says Jack.

"Should I watch for someone with a Cajun accent to come into town?" asks Katie. "Or should I watch for anyone coming into town looking like they want to kill somebody?"

"Did you find a job at the boarding house?" asks Jack.

"Yes," Katie says. "Washing sheets and pillow cases, washing sheets and pillow cases and washing sheets and pillow cases. My hands are sore because of the lye soap."

"Ask Joe if I could get a job here Jack. Mrs. Bates at the boarding house says the girls that work here make real good money," Katie says.

"This ain't no place for a girl like you," Jack says. "You need to stay where you are and look for a good man with a little money. And stay away from that stable boy that Reese said hangs around the boarding house. He is only after one thing and he don't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. Stay clean and dress as nice as you can and a good man will come along."

"I don't want no man," Katie says. "I can make it on my own. I can get a job as a cook like you, Jack. At least I can eat good food. The food is great at the boarding house."

"I hear your cooking is pretty good, too, Jack. Some man was complaining about your gumbo being too hot. He said it nearly burned him a new asshole this morning when he went to the outhouse," Katie goes on.

"Talking about assholes, you know that fellow you shot? He don't have one now. Doc Jones says he doesn't know quite how to fix things. People at the boarding house have been talking about it. Doc says the man needs to go back East to a specialist. Mrs. Bates says he got what he deserved. He should be hung for all the things he has done to the small farmers around Bull Creek."

Jack is busy sweeping around the wood behind the pot-bellied stove, nodding to Katie as she talks.

"So, Jack, I reckon you did a lot of good yesterday. But Mrs. Bates says they will kill you for it."

"You be careful, Jack. Your lip doesn't look too bad. It will leave a

scar, though. I have to be going back to the boarding house to wash some sheets and pillowcases. See you later, Jack," Katie says as she walks out the door.

Jack knows there will be more men from the Mason ranch who will come for him. Jack figures there should only be two or three of them. One to do the beating or killing and the others to make sure it happens. Jack is on edge all day, waiting. He cannot guess how the fight is going to go. Will they be coming to give him a beating within an inch of his life or do they plan to kill him? Jack wishes he was a younger man and his pistol would do his talking.

Around 8:00 that night, Jack finishes cleaning up the kitchen. The door of the saloon bursts open. He hears the door when it flies back and hits the wall.

Jack can tell trouble is close behind. He slips out the side door of the kitchen and disappears.

Four men from the Mason Ranch have charged into the saloon. They have come into town to get rid of a problem that Mr. Mason now calls Jack O'Mally. Van Harding, Harrison Briggs, James Horn and Lawrence Stout are the men who get things done for Mr. Mason.

Van Harding is a man that could be working at any job in town. He is one of the smartest, of the henchmen, that work for Mason. Harding is left-handed and carries a 45 long-colt pistol. Tonight he has on his nice, cream-colored rawhide coat. He doesn't plan on getting dirty. This is an easy job.

Harrison Briggs is a weasel of a man. Even the fellows that work with him don't like him. He is always looking for an angle to get something he wants. His angle is usually killing someone. Briggs likely will be the shooter tonight. He is the fastest of the four to get angry and pull his gun.

Lawrence Stout is less than 6 feet tall and a little smaller than Briggs or Harding. But he is like a wild dog -- as long as there is a pack. He growls the most and barks the loudest. Stout likes the money he gets paid by Mason but is scared of getting shot.

James Horn is a small fellow about 5-foot-7-inches tall. He looks like he never could get a woman. He is that ugly. His nickname is Ears and that says alot. He has beady eyes and a thick forehead. His nose is really crooked from a fight he had in the fourth grade. They say

some people have a face that only a mother can love. Horn's mother didn't love him. He likes to knife fight, that's the reason for the scars on his forehead and the one that runs down the left side of his face. And there is the most noticeable knife wound Horn carries. Half of his right ear has been cut away. That makes him a real girl catcher. That is why they call him Ears.

Together, the men's plan is always the same. They use the same tactics to force someone to start a fight that they will end. They will walk into the saloon and find Jack O'Mally. Briggs will start an argument with O'Mally which will lead to a punch. The other three will kick and push O'Mally while watching and making sure that no one else gets involved. They will beat on O'Mally until he picks up a knife, club, or gun to defend himself. At that moment, Briggs will draw his pistol and kill O'Mally in self-defense.

"Where is Jack O'Malley?" Stout bellows.

Briggs reaches across the bar and grabs Joe by the collar and yanks him up to the bar.

"We said ... where is Jack O'Malley?" Briggs says, pushing Joe back into the bottles behind the bar.

Stout walks behind the bar and grabs a good bottle of whiskey. He places glasses on the bar and says, "Have a drink on the house, boys."

Joe grabs the bottle but Stout slugs him hard and Joe falls to his knees. Stout kicks him in the ribs.

Joe could take him in a fair fight but he's not planning to take a beating by four men tonight.

"Look, bar keep, we mean business," Harding says. "You better tell us where that old man is or you will die with him tonight."

They are turning up drinks when Horn suddenly screams as if he is being mauled by a bear.

Briggs turns and shouts, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

No one notices the twisted spike nail sticking out of the top of the screaming man's boot.

Horn lets out another scream instead of answering Briggs's question.

Jack has crawled under the saloon floor with a 10 inch, twisted spike nail and a 2 pound sledge hammer. With one blow, Jack sends another nail up through one of the holes in the floor and into another man's foot.

Briggs screams.

Jack starts moving right after he sent the second nail through the floor. He knows he has only seconds before they figure out where he is. He crawls to the front corner of the saloon and crouches under the saloon floor, beside the steps.

“That old man is under the floor,” Harding shouts. “Shoot him! Everyone shoot him!”

Harding and Stout start shooting through the floor. The two injured men, now nailed to the floor, are in too much pain to think about drawing their guns.

Briggs is screaming like something is eating him alive. The twisted spike nail went up through his ankle.

Harding and Stout run out of the saloon. Stout turns to the right and Harding turns to the left.

A wooden walkway runs along the front of the saloon. At each of the front corners of the saloon, there are three steps to the ground and two paths. One leads to the outhouse on one side. The other leads to the hitching rails along the side of the saloon.

When Harding’s foot touches the second step, Jack hits his shinbone with the sledge hammer. It breaks right through the bone. Harding falls on the frozen ground and his six shooter flies out of his hand and slides about 10 feet away from his fingers. Harding doesn’t even think about his gun. He just grabs his leg and moans with pain. Mud and horse manure cover his cream-colored rawhide coat.

“Here, mister, I’m going to take the pain away,” says Jack.

Jack stretches his arm out from under the saloon and taps Harding on the side of the head with the hammer just hard enough to knock him out. Then Jack starts down the street toward the livery stable.

Steve Dawson and Earl Hanks rush into the saloon with guns drawn.

Steve lives in the back of the shoe and leather shop beside the saloon. He always is quick to help others in the time of need, especially if he gets to use his new double-barrel shotgun.

Earl Hanks lives above the bank. A set of stairs goes up the side of the bank to Earl’s apartment. He always is looking out his window in the evening watching people walk by on the street below. He always wants to know what is going on everywhere in town. Earl is quite a talker and he’s one of the reasons stories spread around town so fast.

"What the hell is going on now, Joe? We heard all of the shooting. Joe, what happened to you?" Steve asks.

Joe has a busted lip and is bleeding above the eye.

"Joe, who beat you up like this?" asks Steve.

"These pieces of shit in front of the bar are two of them," Joe says.

The two men nailed to the floor are hollering for help. At this point, they are not thinking about killing anyone. The pain they are feeling in their feet demands all of their attention.

Steve and Earl both grab Horn's leg and yank his foot up from the floor. Horn screams again.

Steve and Earl yank at Briggs's foot, too. They yank on it three times but it doesn't come free. Briggs screams and passes out from the pain. Steve and Earl need to cut the nail to free Briggs's foot. Steve goes back to the shoe shop and gets a saw. While Briggs lies unconscious on the floor, Steve cuts the twisted spike nail.

Earl and Martin, one of the sheriff's deputies carry Harding across the street to Doc Jones' office.

Steve gets under Horn's arm and helps him hobble across the street. Earl comes back and nearly has to carry Briggs to the doctor's office.

"Doc Jones is going to be busy again tonight. I wonder if Doc has ever seen a man step on a nail this bad before," Steve says.

Steve and Earl come back from the doctor's office and talk to Joe about what happened. Sharlet, one of the girls who work in the saloon, is wiping Joe's mouth with a damp cloth.

Stout comes back into the saloon with his pistol still drawn, "Did any of you see where O'Malley went?"

"I think he went down to the livery stable," Steve says. You can likely catch him down there."

Stout's facial expression changes -- like someone opened a lion's cage and asked him to step inside. Stout is not going alone into dark to look for Jack. He knows there are pitchforks, hammers, and axes at the livery stable and stumbling around in the dark looking for that old man is not a good idea.

Stout turns to leave and then turns back around and says, "We are going to kill that old man. Mark my words. We are going to kill him."

Stout slams the saloon door as he leaves. He gets on his horse and rides out of town in a hurry.

Stout is the only uninjured henchman Mason has left but he knows there are plenty of cowhands who can be persuaded to get involved. He is busy trying to figure out how to explain to Mr. Mason why several of his men are out of commission and O'Mally isn't dead when a large, white snowy owl drops out of an oak tree near the road and swoops across Stout's path. Stout hadn't even figured out how he was going to tell his story so Mr. Mason doesn't think he ran away when the horse, startled, bolts out of the road. Stout is nearly thrown. That was close, he thinks to himself -- a fraction of a second before a low-hanging branch comes into view. But it's too late to dodge this fall.

CHAPTER 5

A Stolen Supper

The next morning, right after breakfast, Joe walks back into the kitchen. Jack is wiping off the top of the stove.

Joe sits down at the table in the kitchen and pushes a chair back for Jack, "Jack, I need to talk to you. Set down and let me tell you how things are here in Bull Creek."

Jack hesitates but puts down his rag and sits down. Joe looks him in the eye.

"The judge, the sheriff and Mr. Mason run this town. Several people have died at their hands. James was told to leave or die because he wouldn't give the sheriff protection money and drinks for services he received. James took \$200 and gave me the saloon. I give the sheriff and his men what they want and I barely stay in business and stay alive. You have taken out five of Mr. Mason's hired guns. He only has one left and that is Stout. The sheriff won't take a chance on killing you outright. I suppose with those last three, you have bought yourself a little time. One of the sheriff's deputies is Martin Cobb. He is a big fellow about three hundred pounds. Horris Stubbs is the other deputy. He may be a good man but does what he is told by the sheriff. Yes, he roughs people up if he is told to but has never killed anyone for no reason. Martin, on the other hand, is just mean. He killed a stranger last year because he liked the pearl-handle pistol Martin now carries

on his side. This month is Martin's month to eat at the saloon. He eats one month at the boarding house and then he eats one month at the saloon. The food is free. He gets anything we have until it is gone or his hunger is satisfied. I just don't want any problems with the sheriff. Do you think you can do this without a problem, Jack?"

"I used to feed pigs when I was a kid," says Jack.

"Damn it Jack, I am not kidding here. You fix Martin whatever he wants out of the kitchen so we both can see next spring, OK?" Joe demands.

* * *

Jack cooks for Martin for eight days without incident. He puts up with a lot of verbal abuse every evening when Martin comes in to eat. Martin always orders the same two plates of food -- one full of mashed potatoes and gravy and the other full of whatever Jack has cooked that night plus a double helping of beans and two biscuits.

Martin comes in late on Thursday night. Only four people are left in the saloon eating when he barges in.

Steak is on the menu but Jack has served the last two steaks to a man and his wife seated by the window. They have just started eating when Martin arrives.

"I'll have two steaks with the usual," Martin tells Jack.

"We don't have any more steaks," says Jack.

"Why didn't you save me two steaks?" demands Martin.

"I suppose I was thinking about the paying customers," says Jack

"You are pretty stupid for an old man," says Martin. "I'll just help myself."

Martin walks over to the table by the window and takes the two plates of food from the couple. The man begins to object but Martin cuts him off with a slap to the face.

"Go get you some more steaks from the kitchen if you want," Martin shouts at the man.

Martin takes a seat at a table on the other side of the room. Jack comes out of the kitchen and tells the couple he will fix them something else to eat. He asks them to give him about 10 minutes.

Later, Jack comes back from the kitchen with three plates of food. He has fixed ham with green beans and corn muffins on each of two plates. The third plate is nearly overflowing with mashed potatoes and red-eye gravy. The plates of food look delicious.

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