
★ 1 ★

VIRGIL WAS SULLEN. Other than “yep” and “nope,” he hadn’t said much in the last few days. We crossed the Red River and entered the Indian Territories aboard the St. Louis & San Francisco Express out of Paris, Texas. At just past five o’clock in the afternoon, Virgil broke the silence.

“A good pointer don’t run through a covey,” Virgil said.

I tipped my hat back and looked at him. He was gazing out the window, watching a line of thunderclouds spreading across the western skies.

The St. Louis & San Fran Express was a new breed of train. It was the nicest we’d been on since we traveled up from Mexico, with automatic couplers, Westinghouse air brakes, and a powerful Baldwin ten-wheel engine capable of pulling twice as many cars as other locomotives. The fourth and fifth cars back were first-class Pullman sleepers with goose-down beds and leaded-glass transom windows. The coaches were fancy, too, with luminous pressure lamps, mahogany luggage racks, tufted seats, velvet curtains, and silver-plated ashtrays. Virgil and I sat at the back of the last pas-

senger car. Behind us was a walk-through freight car followed by a stock car that carried livestock, including Virgil's stud and my lazy roan.

After near twenty years doing law work with Virgil Cole, I knew well enough he wasn't talking about hunting, but I obliged.

"No, a good pointer takes it slow. Moves steady," I said.

Virgil continued looking out the window and nodded slowly.

"They do, don't they," he said.

"They do if they're trained right."

Virgil watched the clouds for a moment longer, then looked back to me.

"What was the name of the philosopher we were reading about in the Dallas newspaper the other day?" Virgil thought some, then answered his question: "Peirce?"

"Charles Peirce."

"Charles. That's right," Virgil said. "What was it they called him the father of?"

"Pragmatism . . . He's a pragmatist."

"That's right. Pragmatist . . . Hell, Everett, that's you, too. You're a pragmatist."

"Charles Peirce is a pragmatist," I said.

"You went to West Point, Everett. You're educated."

"About some things."

Virgil glanced back out the window again.

"You never said nothing."

"Said nothing about what?"

A dark thundercloud in the far distance flashed a hint of white and silver lightning, and for a brief moment, the western horizon lit up some.

“We’re talking about Allie; this is about Allie?”

“Of course it is.”

“What are you getting at?”

“What I’m getting at is, you might have apprised me not to run through it over a woman who’s got the disposition to do the things she does.”

“Could happen to any man.”

“Not Charlie Peirce.”

Virgil hadn’t talked about Allie since Appaloosa, and his comment took me by surprise. Not so much by the elapsed time since he’d last talked about her, but by the comment itself. Virgil never asked, needed, or took advice from anybody, including me.

“Better to pull up short than to run through it like a pup, you know that, Everett.”

“I do.”

“You never said anything.”

“I did not.”

“Why not?”

“Not my place.”

Virgil narrowed his eyes at me as if he’d eaten something that didn’t taste so good. He focused his attention back out the window.

Virgil Cole was always steady—never rattled, never bothered, and incapable of confusion—but at the moment, something was sitting sideways with him.

He shook his head a little.

“I love that woman,” Virgil said.

★ 2 ★

AFTER OUR SHOOT-OUT with Sheriff Amos Callico and his clan in Appaloosa, Virgil was appointed territory marshal, and I was appointed his deputy marshal. The position was better suited for Virgil and me. It was better than being town sheriffs or city police. The job didn't restrict us to one town. Our duties were to oversee everything within our territorial jurisdiction.

On the third day after our new commission, we got orders to carry out the assignment we were on.

Before we departed on this mission, Virgil selected Chauncey Teagarden and Pony Flores as interim deputies of Appaloosa. Chauncey and Pony were good gunmen. They had helped us in the altercation with Sheriff Callico and proved to be trusted allies.

Our job was to collect two Mexican Wall Street con artists and deliver them to Mexican authorities in Nuevo Laredo. The job was a simple matter of transporting top-priority criminals. This was not something Virgil and I were accustomed to doing, but it

was part of our new marshaling duties, and we did just that, transported criminals.

Though there was a considerable amount of train travel involved, the journey was less than formidable, and Virgil and I got along with our prisoners.

Virgil figured any man who could make money from people who stole the money in the first place couldn't be all bad.

The Mexicans spoke good English, were polite, and knew nothing about firearms. We played cards and even shared a bit of whiskey.

Virgil intended to ride horseback on the return to Appaloosa, seeing the country, as he preferred to see it, from the view of the saddle, but a telegram he received the day we dropped off our prisoners to the federales in Nuevo Laredo changed our plans.

I was not privy to the details regarding the telegram or who it was even from, but I figured the content of the telegram wasn't good, and it had everything to do with Allison French. The devil is always in the details, or, better put, the devil is in Allison French.

We had barely made it to the train station in Nuevo Laredo before we received word our prisoners had been placed in front of a firing squad and shot. Mexicans have a swift way of dealing with other Mexicans.

It had been four full days on the rail before we were close to getting out of Texas. We had traveled up through San Antonio and Austin City, crossed the Brazos, changed to the Texas Pacific, and stopped for a spell in Dallas. There, we got a big T-bone dinner near the Trinity River, walked the horses a good bit, and

hoteled for the evening. In the morning, we got a plateful of food at a Hungarian café near the depot and boarded the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas line heading north into Indian territory.

We had been within roping distance of the Chickasaw Nation and were leaving Texas behind before we got detoured just south of the Red River. The MK&T track running north from Sherman was under repair, so we had to catch the Pacific Transcontinental line, a sixty-mile jaunt east to Paris, Texas. We made a final stop in Paris. It took a while to make the changeover there, so I walked the horses again before we transferred to the St. Louis & San Fran Express and headed back north.

Currently, the Express was struggling a bit up a steep grade.

Virgil slid a cigar from his breast pocket, bit off the tip and spat it out the window. He fished out a match, dragged the tip of it on the iron frame of the seat in front of him, and lit the cigar. After he got it going good, he repeated what he'd previously said.

"I do," he said. "I love her."

"Except for the unfortunate stint of whoring, you or me have killed all the men she has been with," I said encouragingly.

"Got no guarantee," Virgil said.

I thought about that for a moment.

"No," I said. "I suppose you're right about that."

Virgil shook his head slightly and turned, looking out the window.

"Been enough, though," Virgil said.

"There has."

"Can't say there might not be more."

IRONHORSE

“No, we can’t.”

Virgil got quiet. After a moment or two of silence I leaned forward a bit, looking at him.

“That what this is about?”

Virgil looked at me.

“You thinking she’s fucking Chauncey Teagarden?” I said.