

## Chapter 19

It was an hour before sunrise when Cole mounted Patch and began leading his small pack train of three mules down the road toward Canvas Creek. Cole wanted to get away from the ranch before he drew any unwanted attention and had to answer questions about what he was doing or where he was going. The train shook their heads and put up a small fuss as they crossed in front of the courtyard to the house. After the first thirty minutes, the mules settled down as they normally did, and they began clicking off the miles. Cole thought to himself that there was nothing more beautiful than a good string of mules working together.

It took nearly four hours to reach the trailhead, where they turned up and started the long, gradual ascent to the line cabin. Cole was not excited about staying there by himself, but if the bear came back, the cabin offered the best protection. He was determined to remain focused at all times and not let his guard down even for a second.

Cole stopped at the first creek they came to and examined the mud. With the exception of a few deer and coyote tracks, nothing had crossed. The further up the hill he went, the more the wind blew, and it grew colder. Cole worried he might not be able to find the trail to Old Man Rock, as he called it. At every open section of mud on the way up, Cole checked for tracks, but saw nothing. After over ten hours of hard riding, Cole rode into the small meadow that surrounded the cabin. Nothing seemed to have changed since he left. He carefully unloaded and brushed the mules by the porch, with his rifle no more than ten feet away at any time. Then he led them to the corral, opened the gate, and corralled them for the night. Cole watched the mules roll and then settle down and begin grazing, before he returned to the cabin. He thought to himself how great a watchdog a mule was, with its incredible eyesight and those long ears for hearing. He felt safe, knowing their only concern was how good the grass was.

At the porch, Cole carried the rest of his supplies into the line shack. He hadn't been sure how much evidence of Jay's death would remain inside, so he was pleased to smell the clean air that a slightly open window had left, but there were still numerous claw marks on the wall to remind him of the power of the vicious attack. Cole reached down and picked up his rifle and a bucket, so he could get some water for the cabin and stepped out on the porch. In the quiet between gusts of wind, he heard the howl of a distant wolf. Dusk was thirty minutes away as Cole headed down to the creek.

Once there, he stopped and looked around for several minutes, examining the brush and the creek bank for fresh sign. After he determined it was safe, he sat the bucket under an old wooden down spout that someone had made by hollowing out an old cedar log. It hadn't been used for years and was clogged with green moss, but enough water streamed through it to allow a person to fill his bucket without dunking it in the shallow creek. It took almost three minutes for the bucket to fill, and all the time Cole cautiously examined his surroundings. Maybe it hadn't been the best idea to come up here alone but if people learned they may have found the mine, there's no telling who would be up here and what they would do to get the gold. After all, the original miners thought they were alone, too.

Cole slept peacefully, and the next morning he walked out on the porch into fog so thick he had a hard time seeing the corral. He heard the mules breaking branches to get some of the last good grass that was left between fallen aspen trees from an earlier windstorm. Cole didn't like not being able to see more than thirty feet. If the bear were nearby, he could stalk Cole from any direction.

After several minutes of standing out in front of the porch, Cole decided to cautiously walk over to the mules and get Patch. He knew he would feel better with his smart mule beside him. Cole brushed Patch's thick coat, which was becoming heavier due to the cold, autumn nights. The saddling went well, and Cole tied on his saddlebags and his rifle, then mounted. On the ride out, Patch's ears swiveled back and forth, searching the area for unusual sounds. It took a little searching but finally he found the trail leading up to Old Man Rock. The fog bothered Cole, but after fifteen minutes of riding, they broke out of the low hanging clouds, revealing a beautiful blue sky with a bright warm sun. Cole relaxed as he scanned the jagged ridges in front of him. The clouds looked like a dirty cotton ball floor that stretched as far as the eye could see.

For several hours Cole followed the trail, trying to remember the path to Old Man Rock. As the trail veered slightly uphill, Cole noticed a small, odd shaped rock at a turn in the trail, and he recalled that this was the place he had changed direction and meandered down the ridge. He had learned young from his dad to always try to visually remember the small things as he traveled in the woods, because sometimes, like when fog settles in, even the smallest detail could save your life. It began to look familiar as he rode further down the ridge and on to a faint trail that worked its way through the rocks and grass.

The clouds were now beginning to break, and Cole could see ridges exposing themselves further down into the valley that only moments before were hidden. He thought about how much time he had spent on a horse and how Patch was measuring up in his ability to find an old trail,

one that he may not have ridden for months and then only once. Cole was able to ride right to the burned patch of spruce and then around it to Old Man Rock. He wasted very little time looking at the rock then tied off Patch to a small aspen tree. He immediately dismounted and climbed the rock, and it didn't take long for him to see what Jay had seen earlier: an old, but very well-defined indentation that seemed to wind across the mountainside toward the steep timbered ridge to the east.

From the ground the trail was hidden by tall grass and rocks. A man would have a hard time seeing it from horseback or just standing on the site, but the elevated view from the rock allowed Cole to make out the faint track. Whoever had built this trail had entered from many directions, an old prospector's trick. The terrain in front of him was wide open and didn't look like an entrance to anything, much less a trail. The closer he walked towards where he thought the trail began, the more the terrain in front of him looked rocky and impassable. Then suddenly the deeply carved imprint of a trail seemed to appear just over a small rise. Whoever had placed this trail had done a great job of hiding it.

Cole slowly began down the path, which seemed to get slightly better the further he went. Patch seemed comfortable with the straight, gentle trail and started making good time. Once in a while, there was an old snag, or a rock had rolled out onto the trail, but in most cases he could see where Jay had led his horse around it. Cole was impressed that, in bad spots, Patch would slow and carefully take the best route around the obstacle without any instruction. It was eerie thinking about Jay and this being one of the last places he had ridden, but Cole remained focused. A man alone on a steep mountain trail is in enough danger without daydreaming.

The trail slowly narrowed and worked its way through the rocky terrain, with a variety of large boulders lining both sides. Being on the northern face, this part of the trail spent most of the day in shade, and the wet, mossy stones made for difficult footing. Finally, he broke out of the rocks and was greeted by an overgrown patch of grass that was more in the sun but fairly well treed, with steep banks on both sides. The ponderosa pine trees were old and large and totally blocked Cole's view of the valley below. A couple of times, he came to a place where Jay had used his hatchet to clear a deadfall. Small chips of wood littered the trail in spots and somehow made Cole feel he was, in some strange way, sharing this adventure with Jay.

As he rounded the corner, an old, narrow, rock bridge suddenly appeared in the trail. Whoever had built this had intended it to last. It was wide enough to ride a horse across and was built up against the steepest part of the ridge face. The builder had been a craftsman and had spent precious time tightly fitting each stone. The trail had to lead to a mine or something of great importance, for someone to have spent so much time

constructing the bridge in the middle of nowhere. With the exception of a few areas where rolling rocks from above had damaged it, the bridge was in incredibly good shape.

Twenty minutes after crossing the bridge, Cole emerged into a small, sunny meadow on the ridge with a picket stake up to his right. The fresh, splintered wood on the stake showed someone had hammered it into the ground recently. That, as well as several piles of horse manure, told Cole that this was where Jay had tied his horse. Cole removed Patch's bridle and hung it from a snag's dead limb in clear sight, where he could easily find it in the dark, and picketed Patch in the same spot Jay had used. Somewhere nearby was where Jay had to have found the bayonet, Cole thought, as he slowly scanned the terrain.

He pulled his rifle from its scabbard and grabbed his canteen. One large snag that stood alone above the meadow caught his attention, and he climbed up the hill about twenty feet to where it stood. The giant Limber Pine was old and thick with hundreds of dead branches, but only a few with needles, and it looked like it had seen better days. The small, torn patches of old bark and the lack of new growth showed the great tree had served its time with honor against the wear and tear of the high mountain winds and snows. Cole walked up on the ridge and looked back at the huge monarch. It took only minutes to notice the bayonet about fifteen feet above the ground, just as Jay had said. It protruded about ten inches away from the bark and was very rusty, but you could definitely tell what it was. I found it, Cole thought. Now I need to find the trail.

He began hiking up the ridge, distracted by a camp robber bird that kept flying ahead of him and scolding him on his journey. Finally, it flew to a big branch on a Limber Pine tree and stopped. Cole had paused to look at the bird, when he saw it—a small red handkerchief partially hidden on a low branch, the beginning of a trail, an old trail.

Once Cole got under the tree, he could clearly see where Jay had worked branches back into the entrance to disguise it. The trail had not been used for years, and the number of cut branches showed that it had taken some time to clear the initial debris for the first hundred yards, and then the clearing stopped. From that point on, the trail was heavily overgrown, and Cole could see how hard the task of clearing had been. It would be impossible to get a horse or even a mule up to it without a significant amount of additional work. Now the going would be harder, and several times he thought of going back and getting the short axe that he had packed, but his desire and curiosity to find where the trail led were far more powerful.

After an hour of fighting his way up the hill, the trail broke out into lightly timbered hillside, and Cole took a minute to enjoy the newfound elbow room. The path was cut into a steep hillside and again showed the

craftsmanship of its builder. The farther he went, the steeper the slope, until it entered a small canyon with vertical rock walls. At this point, the trail was cut into solid rock in some places and then worked its way through massive rock outcroppings. Cole thought that a person would need a hot air balloon or to be half mountain goat to find this place.

On the downhill side of the trail was a cliff and the sound of waterfalls echoed up from the canyon belly. Cole looked over the side—it had to be at least a hundred feet to the bottom. This would be a great trail to avoid at night, even with a lantern. The flat part of the trail was three to four feet wide and, with the exception of a little debris that had collected over time, was clear and passable.

For the next twenty minutes he walked carefully up the path, creeping around the blind corners that continually presented themselves on the winding trail. Several times he checked for tracks in the soft gravel of the trail, but he found only the sign of deer and small animals. It appeared that no human had been in this canyon for a long time, and Cole was convinced that Jay had not traveled this far. Farther up the trail, he came to a large boulder that forced the path to detour, and at this point it narrowed to three feet for over thirty yards.

At the end of the straight stretch, the trail widened again and appeared to end. Two rotting timbers stood on either side of a four-foot wide entrance ahead of him, flanked by crumbling, waist-high, hand stacked rock wall. The wall had lost a few rocks, but Cole was impressed with the placement. Both posts, probably twelve inches by twelve inches square and over six feet tall when they'd been installed, had rotted, until one was only a little over two feet high and the other four feet above the walls. At one time, Cole surmised from the rusted metal hinge hanging from the taller of the two old posts, this had probably been a gate.

He reached the wall, stopped and tried to figure out exactly what he was looking at. The area behind the wall was spacious compared to the trail, and it appeared to have been built for protection or to keep livestock in or out, but these were only guesses. After several minutes, he continued cautiously up the narrow canyon, and soon the trail widened again—but this time into a thick, lush meadow at least sixty yards wide with numerous ancient, large, rotting stumps. Cole scanned the terrain in front of him and then looked up but all he could see were the steep faces of the ridges that hid this valley from the rest of the world.

He slowly entered the grassy meadow as ground squirrels scurried for safety. Several of them stood on one of the many old stumps that littered the valley, and they allowed Cole to get close before letting out a high-pitched peep and running back down into their holes. He had just passed one of the old stumps when one of the ground squirrels chirped right beside his foot, and Cole jumped and looked around. It was then he saw it,

a small log cabin neatly tucked under a large rock overhang. The cabin was difficult to see because of the number of small trees that had grown up around it, almost totally camouflaging the structure. The remains of a large spruce tree lay bound over one side of the cabin, caught on part of the huge rock shelf that covered over half of the building. It did a good job of further camouflaging the cabin's outline. The wood on the cabin was black from age, and it appeared to have a small window on at least one side. The front had a sturdy, plank door with two rusted bars that held it together, secured by heavy bolts. The roof was made out of heavy cedar shakes, almost completely intact. Cole didn't want to put caution aside, so he slowly turned and continued up the valley a bit to make sure that he was still alone. Then he backtracked to the cabin.

The plank door was built to last. It opened inward, as with most cabins, and Cole could see through a crack part of the heavy hinges that still supported it. Cole tried to shove the door open with his shoulder, but it wouldn't budge. Then he hit it with his foot, with the same result. There was no keyhole or lock on the door, so either the building had settled on the frame, or the door was jammed or bolted shut from the inside.

Going around to the window on the side of the cabin, he found his view blocked again by wooden planks that had been added to the inside window frame, much like an outdoor shutter. Cole made his way around to the back of the cabin, but there were no windows or door—the cabin was built right up against the steep, stone face of the canyon wall. He turned around and went back to the front door and reexamined it. A stone fireplace of angular granite stood beside the door, and the chimney extended four feet above the roof of the cabin. Finally, Cole walked around to the last side of the cabin.

This side was difficult to see at first, because of the dead tree that straddled the roof and the dead branches that hung down to the ground.

He found another window about the same size on the other side, hidden by branches. Carefully, he broke off a large branch to allow himself to climb closer and look into the window. It was shuttered from the inside like the other window. Cole walked to the front and looked for something to use as a battering ram and found a log that he felt would do the trick. After several failed attempts, he said out loud, "Damn, that's not going to work." Next, he took his ram to the first window and broke several of the old panes of glass. He tried again, bashing the window boards, but with no more success than he had on the door. Cole was about to give up when he decided to try the final window. After several attempts, he decided the builder was equally gifted in construction on all three openings. He sat down, and looked at the last window and thought, who was this guy, and how did he get out of the cabin?



With several branches of the large snag touching the roof, Cole decided to climb up to see if he could get a better vantage point. He moved his rifle closer to the snag, leaning it against the cabin. He found the snag easy to climb, and within seconds he was above the roof looking down. The damaged roof had an opening the size of a man's waist from where a tree branch had pierced the shakes. The tree must have twisted when it fell, making the hole slightly back and protected under the rock overhang. Cole broke off another chunk of the snag and tried to widen the hole, so he could either look into it or lower himself down into the room.

After three branches and numerous attempts, he was impressed with how strong the roof was, far stronger than the aged branches he had tried bashing against it. Its solid strength made him feel comfortable in his next venture of sliding across the roof, while spreading his weight over an area equal to his body. Cautiously, he inched over to the hole and looked in.

It was almost pitch black in the room, and Cole couldn't see much more than outlines of furniture and the old fireplace. He inched nearer the hole and had stuck his head a little deeper to get a better look, when he heard the creak of lumber. With a crash, Cole found himself lying in a pile of shakes and dusty broken boards on the floor of the cabin. "That hurt," he said softly. "I guess that wasn't one of my better ideas."

Cole used his cowboy hat to slap the dust off, and with the exception of a skinned knee and a little lost pride, he was fine. He continued to dust himself off as he walked to the door. The light from the new opening filled the inside of the cabin to the level of a bright, full moon. Cole saw that several large timbers had been lodged in the jamb to secure the door from the inside. That's strange, he thought, as his eyes adjusted to the low light. He removed the plank and, with great effort, opened the door wide enough that he could exit.

Now that he knew that he could get out, he turned and started examining the room, as his eyes adjusted more to the darkness. A small, single bed lay in the darkest corner, and Cole went over and looked as closely as possible to try and figure out what was stacked there. At the head of the bed he touched a round object that was smooth on top. Why didn't I bring a lantern or flashlight, he muttered to himself? At first, he just touched the round object on the bed with one finger, and then he reached down and let his hand wander around it. Suddenly he jerked back. He had just realized his finger was in the eyehole of a skull.

"Okay, that's enough of that." Cole walked to the door and squeezed out into the full light. It took him a minute to catch his breath, and then he grabbed the log he had used for a battering ram, wedged it into the doorway and pried the door totally open. "That's better."

The room was twice as bright as before, even with the shadows. Cole reached down, picked up the skull off the floor, and replaced it in its

original position on the bed. The room smelled musty, with mouse droppings on the bed and the floor. He moved slightly and felt his boot brush something on the floor. He looked down and saw a pistol sticking out from under the bed. He carefully picked it up and stepped back into better light. It was a single shot, pre-Civil-War-era gun, rusted but intact. It appeared to be loaded.

Fluffy chunks of mattress created by rodent activity lay on the bed around what looked to be a full, human rib cage. Cole decided on his next trip he would give this man a decent burial, for he knew if the tables were turned, he would have wanted the same. He thought how odd this situation was; finding the remains of a body this long after the person had died. He walked back outside, sat down on a rock, and looked at the cabin. For the first time, he realized it was lunchtime and that he was hungry. Cole took a drink from his canteen and then pulled a sandwich wrapped in wax paper from inside his shirt. The sandwich was thoroughly smashed from the roof cave in, but it tasted fine. As he sat there eating, he looked at the valley and wondered if this could be the skeleton of Vern Creager, Virgil's brother, or someone else. Whoever it was, his loved ones never knew what happened to him, and that was just plain wrong.

Cole ate and scanned the valley for any movement, but there was none. Finally, he got up, grabbed his gun, and proceeded up the beautiful little valley. About twenty yards past the cabin, a small waterfall spouted out of the cliff's solid rock. Where it landed, it had created a pond with a narrow creek that ran down through one side of the valley. It was small but would have provided plenty of water for a couple of people and their livestock.

It was obvious they had built the cabin with trees from the meadow, but they had also created pasture, which would have allowed them to feed livestock and remain unseen. Cole was totally fascinated at how much planning and work had gone into this project. The valley soon narrowed where a lot of the original timber still stood. The trees were so thick that the valley floor was devoid of plant life, and an old trail meandered under the branches. Cole continued on and noticed another building tucked beside the canyon wall in a small opening.

Little remained of the old building. Many of its boards had rotted away, and the roof was decayed and mostly gone. The door lay on the ground a few feet from the building. It had been well built of planks, but now it was rotted and sat broken in three pieces. Cole stepped around it and peered inside to see that the room had shelves and several long, narrow tables. Cole had seen ore separating tables before and believed this was what he was looking at. Several rusted lanterns hung from log beams on the one wall that was still intact. The other wall leaned badly and had a number of chunks of rotted leather attached to it, but Cole had no idea



what they were for. He could easily see most everything inside the building, so he decided not to enter—it wouldn't be the first time an old miner booby trapped his mine shed. He walked to the back to see if he had missed anything, and with the exception of a large pile of old tailings he found nothing.

Suddenly, he felt something looking at him, and it made the hair stand up on the back of his neck. In one quick motion, he swung around with his rifle, but nothing moved, and the only sound was distant birds chirping. He thought the old skeleton must have spooked him, and he needed to regain his composure.

He returned to the trail, which grew more difficult due to the abundance of overgrown branches which he broke, pushed aside or crawled under. After another five minutes, the trail finally emerged into the open, and Cole found himself on a narrow path similar to the one coming into the valley. In open country he felt much more relaxed as he walked and only periodically turned and looked at his back trail. Everything appeared normal and, at least for the time being, he could see well. The trail was in excellent shape, and he made good time following it up the canyon. The track led closer to the cliff edge, where the creek below roared from its many small waterfalls.

The rock hillside to Cole's right rose straight up over a hundred feet, and as he looked over the rim to the creek below, he saw it was about the same distance straight down to a bottom of huge boulders, dead trees and whitewater. What an amazing trail, Cole thought to himself, as he continued his journey up the valley. He was careful to keep his gun ready as he went around each rock that could hide anything, but every time he examined the ground for tracks, the largest he saw were from a Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep. After seeing the new tracks, he figured there was probably another way out of the valley, even though it may be extremely difficult. He was excited and his imagination wandered. He knew that it was just a matter of time now, before he found the mine and could help pay off the ranch and—

A rock the size of a football landed five feet behind him. Cole jerked to the side and immediately looked up, just in time to see a small man disappear out of sight. Then he saw the beast behind him, the huge grizzly charging only ten yards away. How had he gotten so close without Cole hearing him? Cole leveled his rifle for a shot but was too late—the bear crashed into him. Cole felt the blow, and the bear's horrid breath hit his face as it roared. The last thing Cole saw was blue sky and the bear's open jaws as he fell over the steep cliff. Then it was dark.