

ROAD TO RICHES

Prologue

“GEE-UP!” boomed a voice through the blinding rain. The sharp crack of a whip followed the words, and twin Belgian horses strained against their harnesses to obey. Gale force winds pushed against the horses’ powerful muscles, but they slowly made headway through the storm. A mud-encrusted length of steel crawled out of the surging river and came to rest on the sand beside a stack of similar rails.

A tall figure in an oilskin duster strode angrily up to the scene. The driver of the horses looked anxious as he approached.

“That’s the last of them, Boss,” he said placatingly.

“Whose dang-fool idea was that stunt?” the newcomer called through a wet kerchief over his face.

The driver kept his head tipped down to prevent his hat from blowing away. “The river weren’t so high a few minutes ago, Luke,” he shouted over the howling wind. Even to him it sounded a weak excuse.

Luke Ballister, gang boss of the Colorado Springs to Pueblo spur, removed his kerchief, exposing his face to the stinging rain, and glared at the driver with flashing green eyes. “I asked you whose idea it was!”

“See,” began the man nervously, not meeting the eyes of the taller man while he unchained the steel rail from the hitching chain, “Ben and me thought that it would be a lot quicker to move the rails to the new site if we floated them on the river.”

Luke looked at him incredulously, and had to shut his mouth against the rain. “You thought five tons of steel rail would *float*?”

“Well,” replied the driver slowly, “with a big enough raft . . .”

Luke shook his head as he tried to grasp the concept. “Tom, a raft big enough to float that much steel on a river this little is called a *bridge*!”

Tom winced at the obvious sarcasm.

Luke had opened his mouth to continue the reprimand when the sound of pounding hooves and furious splashes caught his attention. He turned to see a lone rider, head bowed low over his horse’s neck, galloping toward them.

He dismissed Tom with an angry wave of his hand. “Get that steel loaded back on the flatbed and rub down those horses! They’ve done their share for today.”

Luke walked toward where the rider was dismounting. He could read the yellow lettering of the Western Union on the oiled saddlebags.

“Can I help you?” Luke asked.

“Looking for a Colonel Ballister,” the rider shouted. “I have an urgent telegram.”

Luke started at the name. Colonel—now, there was a title Luke hadn’t heard in a while. He’d stopped using his war title when the war ended. Many men would use the title they’d earned forever. Luke had done so himself for a time. It was just that the war had been so hard, so bloody, and so damn *long* ago. He wanted to forget. Get on with his life. He was *Mister*

Ballister now.

“I’m Colonel Ballister,” Luke replied cautiously. Who could possibly be trying to reach him using that name?

“You’ll have to sign for it,” the rider said. “Can we get out of this storm?”

Luke couldn’t think of anything he would enjoy more. He led the driver to the rail car that served as an office. “Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe” was painted in tall, bright letters on the side of the car. Once inside, Luke gratefully removed his soaked hat. The Western Union driver did the same. He then pulled an oilskin sleeve from beneath his poncho and handed Luke the cable.

Luke had no way to dry his hands. Everything in the car was rain-soaked from repeated door openings, so he simply did his best not to smear the ink on the paper. He signed for the cable on the line of the log where the messenger indicated. The man then carefully replaced the log under his poncho. He put on his hat and pulled it down tight, opened the door to the car, and bulled his way back into the storm to make his next delivery.

Luke carefully opened the outer covering and unfolded the thick yellow paper. The cable was brief.

GREETINGS COLONEL—STOP—HAVE URGENT NEED OF YOUR
SERVICES—STOP—DRG OFFERING \$200 TO MEET WITH
YOU—STOP—PERSONAL FAVOR TO ME—STOP—LEAVE
IMMEDIATELY TO MEET WITH JACKSON DRG OFFICES LARIMER
STREET—STOP—\$100 ALREADY WAITING IN YOUR NAME AT WELLS
FARGO LITTLE LONDON—STOP—OTHER \$100 WHEN YOU
ARRIVE—STOP—WITH FOND REGARDS GENERAL PALMER

The name made Luke smile, and he spoke to the empty room, “As I live and breathe, General William Jackson Palmer!” He read the telegram through a second time, slowly. Two hundred dollars! What could be important enough to pay him two hundred dollars just to ride to Denver for a meeting? What was important enough for Palmer to pay Western Union to track him down to deliver the telegram?

Luke’s head spun with questions. He poured himself a cup of piquant chicory and stared out into the abating storm as he thought about it. A shaft of sunlight broke through the clouds briefly, only to be chased away.

Just a month remained until the job with the AT&SF was completed. He would earn the standard \$75 for his work as gang boss. He could nearly triple that money in a single day! Once more, he read the cable. It was the Denver & Rio Grande that wanted his services, not the general. Why was Palmer even helping the D&RG after they’d forced him out? Luke was suspicious by nature. It was how he had survived through the war. The only way he could think of to verify the contents of the cable was to travel to Wells Fargo in Colorado Springs, christened “Little London” by the general himself when he’d founded the town years before.

When work ended for the day, he saddled his horse, Star, and rode the ten miles to Colorado Springs. Sure enough, there was \$100 held in his name at the desk, wrapped in official Denver & Rio Grande stationery. He stood in the brightly lit lobby of the Wells Fargo office and

made his decision.

Chapter 1

Quiet rain pattered on the long glass window in the darkened hallway. Luke's duster dripped muddy water onto the elegant carpet underfoot. A chill in the air—even inside the Larimer Street office building, told him the rain outside could turn to snow. April weather was unpredictable in Denver. He hoped that one of the infamous spring blizzards wouldn't be the result. He could hear the splashes of shod horses and wagons on the cobbled street below, and a trolley bell rang brightly, oblivious to the weather.

He hesitated before opening the wooden door leading to the office of the Denver & Rio Grande Railway.

"Railroad," he corrected himself sharply, and a little sadly. It's a different company now. This isn't Palmer's "Baby Road" anymore. No, they took it away from the general.

Luke took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and opened the door. He was surprised to see that the interior of the office still looked the same. White painted walls with dark wood trim. A single desk graced the front room. A rug had been added to the polished wood floors. Luke dripped brownish rain on it as well.

A young clerk sitting at the desk looked up from a thick, red ledger. Luke could see the clerk's fine, spindly handwriting on the ruled paper. Luke removed his hat, and ran fingers through his dark blonde hair, hoping to make it a bit more presentable. A glance at his reflection in the looking glass above the desk showed that it hadn't worked. He put the hat back on.

Unfortunately, he couldn't hide the beard stubble as easily. Luke would have preferred to put on clean clothes and shave before the meeting, but he had been asked to come directly to the office upon arrival. He wished he knew why.

"May I help you?" asked the clerk in a soft tenor, his voice slightly haughty. He seemed just out of primary school. Luke tried to remember when he was as young as the clerk. The boy was scrawny, and had dark hair slicked back in the popular style. His weak chin made his nose look too big. He wore a starched shirt with a collar stiff enough to stand in the corner on its own, and thin, dark suspenders that stood out in sharp relief against the snowy whiteness of his shirt. A small pair of spectacles perched on his nose like some odd insect. He looked a little bored, and not terribly bright. The clerk examined Luke over the top of his spectacles with an expression of disdain.

Luke took mild exception to the look.

He couldn't decide why he felt so edgy, standing here. He had probably been in this office twenty times, and had always felt at home. He shook off the tension visibly and replied to the question with searing politeness. "My name is Luke Ballister. I'm here to see Mr. Jackson."

At this, the clerk's eyes went wide, and his whole attitude changed. Suddenly he was impressed. "Oh! Of course. I'll inform Mr. Jackson you're here, Colonel Ballister."

The clerk moved his chair back without a sound. Luke wondered how. The boy walked quickly to a door that Luke remembered well, knocked, and entered when requested.

Luke took off his brown, split-crown hat, and turned it round and round in his hands. Each nick and cut in the thick felt was evident as the damp brim slid through his fingers. It was a nervous habit. Why did he still feel nervous?

The office was essentially the same, but had a different *feel*, somehow. As though part of

its spirit was missing. Before, when General Palmer ran the road, the whole place sort of vibrated with the general's energy, his excitement.

Luke waited for the clerk to return and looked around the room. The furnishings were spare, as always. Two roomy wooden chairs for guests, a table, a coat rack, and the front desk. The rug was new. Something else was different, too. But what?

"Ah, that's it!", he thought suddenly. The portrait was missing—between the two long windows on the west wall.

The portrait of General Palmer had always amused Luke. Oh, it was a fine painting, and a good likeness, but Luke couldn't quite understand the ego it would take to have a picture of *yourself* hanging where you spent most of your time.

It made Luke smile suddenly. Ego personified. That was General Palmer. He wasn't a big man, but he had a *presence* that took you by surprise. He was clean shaven when Luke first met him, but Luke remembered that he had a thick, bristly mustache in the portrait. It seemed a lifetime ago that he had met the general on the flats of Pennsylvania.

The inner office door opened, interrupting Luke's musings.

Chapter 2

“Colonel Ballister?” the clerk said politely, and slightly nervously, as he held open the inner door. “They’re ready for you.”

They?

Luke removed his soggy duster and hung it on the coat rack, and placed his hat on the second wooden knob. It occurred to him that until that moment he believed he would be turned away, money or no.

He made another half-hearted attempt to subdue his hair, then gave up. He walked into the room, past the clerk, and faced two men.

“Thank you, Joshua,” said one of the men in a dismissive manner. The clerk quietly shut the door behind him as he left.

He didn’t recognize either man. The first sat behind the carved oak desk that had been designed and specially ordered by General Palmer. He was tall, with broad shoulders that filled his jacket fully. A wild, white beard and mustache hid half his face. His bald head was surrounded with a ring of tidy white hair. He looked ill. Not sick like a spring fever, but deeper, more long-term. He had a strong face, and clear, piercing eyes. Whatever the sickness was, it hadn’t dulled his mind. His suit was dark and expensive looking, but his hands had worked before. They were rough and calloused.

The other man, seated in a chair to the right of the first man, was shorter and stockier. He had the beginnings of a double chin, and a walrus mustache. His suit was also expensively cut, probably custom made to the man’s large frame. Luke guessed that the gentleman had probably never worked a full day outdoors in his life.

The first man stood and offered his hand. “Colonel Ballister,” he said, “My name is William Jackson.”

Luke shook his hand. Jackson had a firm, strong grip that tested Luke’s to the point of effort. Luke had never before met the new president of the D&RG. He only knew that Jackson was formerly the court-appointed receiver for the bankrupt Baby Road.

There was something about Jackson that Luke liked. There was a kinship that told Luke they were both railroad men. “A pleasure, sir,” Luke replied cordially.

William Jackson took stock of the man who had come at their call. He had been briefed by Palmer, but William liked to measure a man for himself. Luke Ballister was tall and husky. He had broad shoulders and narrow hips and an unruly shock of golden hair. He had a firm, strong grip, and looked a man in the eye squarely. William approved.

William found it hard to believe that this man had been a full colonel in the Union forces at only sixteen years of age. But Palmer had assured him it was no accident. Luke had earned his rank. Jackson looked him over, taking note of every detail. Ballister wore his holster low on his hip, gunslinger fashion. His polite manner belied a quickness, a certainty of purpose that Jackson wouldn’t care to stand against. William could see the intelligence that burned behind intense green eyes. Ballister appeared calm, and slightly curious; not nervous or skittish. But could he truly lead over a thousand men through the wilderness to their goal?

Luke turned to the second man. He sat far enough in the corner to give the impression of distance. Not just physical space, but personal as well. He did not stand. Nor did he offer his

hand. His arms remained comfortably on the rests of the chair. His fingers were clasped together over his buttoned vest. He looked Luke over as though inspecting a horse he had purchased.

“I’m David Moffat,” he said. A small amount of annoyance played through his voice. “I will be succeeding Mr. Jackson as President of the D&RG at the next Stockholder meeting. Mr. Jackson felt it was important for both of us to meet with you. I don’t agree, but I’m here in any event.”

Luke raised his eyebrows. He hadn’t realized there was to be another change in the management so quickly. Most everyone in the industry knew the gossip about the internal problems of the D&RG. Luke didn’t know any details; only that Palmer had been voted out by the stockholders, and then the company folded. Luke felt that it served them right to have the company go bankrupt after removing the general.

David Moffat also took a moment to size up Luke. Colonel Ballister was, without question, a railroad man. His hands were red and calloused, and his nails hadn’t been cleaned recently. There was no shame in that. But he didn’t wish to shake his hand. For the sake of hygiene, as well as other reasons. Hints of thick muscle showed at Ballister’s neck and wrists. His skin had a tanned, leathery appearance that told of countless hours toiling in the sun. He knew the muscles had been honed by years of hard labor, building roads. Moffat was interested in railroads—but in the profits they raised, not the work in the field. “I’m sure you’re wondering why we’ve called you here, Colonel,” began Jackson.

Luke thought about asking the men to call him by his Christian name, then decided against it. These older men were presently treating him as an equal, due to his war rank. So be it. “I must profess to a certain amount of curiosity,” Luke agreed with a nod. “The general’s cable was somewhat vague.”

William Jackson gestured with a hand, offering Luke a chair. Suddenly Luke felt the urge to brush off his clothing before sitting. He knew it was silly. These were both railroad men. Surely they understood road dust.

Jackson sat down only after Luke had, then fixed Luke with a piercing stare. Luke crossed one leg over the other so that his left boot rested on his right knee. Might as well be comfortable.

“Have you ever been to the Grand Cañon of the Grand¹, Colonel?” asked Jackson in a rolling rumble.

“I know where it is, but I’ve never been there,” Luke replied. “I was on the crew that took the road to Red Cliff in ‘83, but General Palmer decided that the canyon couldn’t be breached, and the rails were abandoned.”

“Actually,” Moffat interjected, “that’s not accurate. The road was abandoned because the company was nearly bankrupt, not because the job couldn’t be done. If Palmer hadn’t overspent, we’d already be hauling coal and silver from the valley.”

Moffat watched stubborn, angry lines set in Ballister’s face. He didn’t care. Those were the facts. He’d been faced with cleaning up Palmer’s mess and trying to hold together the fragile

¹ The ‘Grand Cañon of the Grand’ was renamed ‘Glenwood Canyon’ shortly after the arrival of the railroad in Glenwood Springs in 1887. The Colorado River was known as the Grand River prior to a bill signed in the 1902 Colorado legislature.

pieces of the D&RG. General Palmer had not managed the company properly. He had no concept of fiscal responsibility. Palmer had laid over one thousand miles of new rail in only a few years, spending millions upon millions of dollars. He laid more line than the population of Colorado had ever dreamed possible. If there was a town, Palmer wanted to reach it. He had a vision, and visions aren't cheap.

But millions were spent by other railroads, as well. Suddenly, the Baby Road was competing with the likes of the Union Pacific and Atchison's group out of Kansas. With cheap, available transportation from multiple sources, the public demanded, and received, lower and lower fares. Goods could be moved more cheaply as well. Suddenly, income from freight was reduced to the point that interest on the bonds could not be paid.

Then came the lawsuits. Soon they couldn't even pay wages. Far in debt, and forced into bankruptcy, the board quietly removed Palmer and agreed to allow a receiver to protect the assets. Hard decisions had to be made in '84. Construction, except for repairs, stopped. Workers found employment elsewhere. It had made Moffat both sad and angry. He knew many men had followed Palmer's vision blindly. For a time he had been one of them. This Ballister fellow was another. It was a fanatic sort of loyalty that would overlook every fault, refusing to believe until it was too late.

Luke held his temper. He already knew he didn't like Moffat. There was something about the man that was condescending. His voice was cold steel when he responded, but he was polite. "All I know is the general told me it wasn't cost effective to go through the canyon. I trust him in matters of money."

Moffat snorted lightly and didn't shrink from Luke's angry look. "So did we, Colonel. So did we."

Jackson watched the rising level of animosity between the two men with sympathy toward them both. He knew that Palmer had overspent, but also knew that Palmer was right to have done it. Last October, Jackson had written an open letter to the Baby Road's investors in London. He told them that the D&RG must either assert their ownership of the abandoned Red Cliff road—the gateway to Aspen, and fight for it, or quietly abandon it. He said that the D&RG could not afford not to build. If the road did not occupy the Grand Valley with a line, some other company would. Jackson understood the irony: they were now fighting one final time for Palmer's vision. In 1884, Palmer had tried to convince the board of directors in New York that the road must be taken to Aspen. It was the last step, he claimed, to connecting the riches of Aspen's silver mines and the Grand Valley's abundant coal deposits with Denver and Salt Lake City. The board had refused. On his way out the door, Palmer warned that they were making a fatal mistake.

It had been hard for Jackson and Moffat to admit that Palmer had been right in his predictions. Without the revenues from hauling the silver and coal ore from the Roaring Fork Valley, the Baby Road would perish. Now nearly three years later, they were obliged to complete the line to Aspen. They knew Palmer was laughing at them.

The most urgent concern in the minds of Jackson and Moffat was a new upstart local road, the Colorado Midland, based out of Colorado Springs. Small but well funded, it was a potential threat to the ailing D&RG. The Midland had surprised everyone when they found a back route to Aspen. Over a new pass they called Hagerman, named for the owner of the

Midland, they stood to reach Aspen in less than a year. Even broke, the board realized they had no choice but to build or perish. The investors couldn't decide. The decision was tabled month after month. So, without their permission, the board agreed to build. Without permission they hired crews. But they were losing the race. Now, without permission, they were about to hire Colonel Ballister. It was a gamble, and the odds were against them.

Moffat and Ballister continued to stare at each other with rising levels of animosity, until Jackson intervened.

“Regardless, gentlemen, of the reason why the road was abandoned, we are now embarking on a plan to complete the line. In October of last year we began to lay down track from the Red Cliff station. Last Friday our crews reached the eastern edge of the canyon. Over one thousand men are working, as we speak, to build a combination narrow and standard gauge bed through solid rock. We have less than six months to reach Aspen or we'll lose everything.”

Jackson stared at Luke until he was certain he had the man's full attention. “Our purpose today is to ask whether you would be willing to take over as head of the project.”