

West from Hell

Chapter Three

By Matt Channen

The wind blew through his hair as Thomas rode swiftly to work the following morning. It had been a long time since he had been so eager to sit down in Hirschcot's office. In fact, he couldn't really remember a time that he had given the director news that would make him smile. But he had never needed to deliver an update that pertained to his personal life as well as his career. Anyways, Thomas sped through the streets toward his office. He flew through the parks, and across the bridges until he eventually reached his destination where he did not hesitate to mount his horse and walk with such haste you could have mistook him for sprinting down the halls to meet Hirschcot. He noticed that some of his coworkers were eyeing him in envy. Word must have gotten out of his big escape. He finally arrived at Hirschcot's office door so he knocked three times to alert the director of his presence. KNOCK...KNOCK... KNOCK...

"Get in here!"

Yelled his boss from the other side of the door. Why would Hirschcot be so enraged with his arrival? Didn't he say to come talk to him the following day? He hesitantly opened the door and peeked in. Hirschcot was standing with his back to him staring out the window. He turned his head to see Thomas peeping through the door.

"Ah Mr. Cross, I apologize. I thought you were the Secretary of the Treasury." *He quickly said to clear things up as he walked in front of his desk to the door to allow Cross in.*

"Is this a bad time sir?"

"No not at all. I'm expecting a conference with the Secretary, which I am not to keen on. But no matter. So! About my proposal, did you "charm" your wife into the matter?"

"As a matter of fact, Sir, yes I did. She and I would be more than delighted to take the assignment."

"Wonderful! That is fabulous news my friend! Fabulous indeed! Tell me, how did you convince her?"

“Actually, I wasn’t forced into using real negotiations like the ones I sometimes use here. I simply told her as it was and how I felt about it. She eventually realized that this could be a blessing in disguise.”

“Excellent Thomas, excellent indeed. You know, from the moment I offered you this opportunity I could tell you were interested.”

“Could you?”

“Sure, sure. It’s no secret that being summoned to my office is no real treat. But the way you perked up once I made the proposal was enough to know you wanted the job. But your eyes, they seemed to sparkle with glee. If the sudden adrenaline increase wasn’t enough to give it away, your stare surely was, “ *He then put his hand on Thomas’s shoulder*, “Just by seeing your eyes I could tell that you would be standing where you are right now accepting my offer.”

Thomas was left speechless. He truly did not know what to say. He never knew Ben Hirschcot could be so emotional. After a few moments he finally mustered up some words.

“I don’t know what to say sir, except, thank you. I’ve been wanting something like this for quite along time.”

“No need to thank me. You’re a damn good marshal, you’re going to do just fine out in Carson City.” *Replied his boss as he walked back to his desk, sat down in his leather chair and pulled out some forms regarding valid information.*

“Down to business. Your company will consist of three wagons, one for your family, crew, and supplies. You will be accompanied by two navigators, and an interpreter. I believe you are familiar with one of the navigators, Douglas Walker. Am I correct?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Walker was involved in the Boston incident. I haven’t spoken to him since. But I do remember that he was disturbed by some aspects of the case.”

“Those aspects forced him into a professional change a few months after you closed that assignment. Since then he has traveled to the western region twice and back.”

“Do you believe that pairing him with me once more is a good idea?”

“ First off I believe he is the right man for the job, and working with you again may benefit him in more ways than one. So yes, I do believe it is a smart choice. Now, your route begins at the...”

Hirschcot was interrupted with the opening smashes of his office doors, and in ran his assistant, he bent over as he gasped for air.

"What do you think you're doing?! Barging in here like that!" Said the boss.

He attempted to speak as he gasped for air.

"Sir...please..." He tried to say.

"This will have to wait! Can't you see I am in the middle of an important briefing?"

"I'm sorry sir, but "He continued to gasp," but we have a situation "

"What is it?" He asked as he shot up from his chair with apprehension

"There is a...a...hostage situation, sir."

"WHERE!"

"22 Courtly Road."

Cross and Hirschcot looked at each other. They both knew their meeting could not continue any further. The director looked at Cross and simply nodded. He knew that Cross excelled in negotiations, and although he cared about this western expedition, he would dare not to hold him back.

"On it?" Asked Hirschcot

"Absolutely." Thomas replied.

"Courtly is a twenty minute ride. You best get to it."

So with that acknowledgement, Cross rose from his chair and sprinted down the hallway, through the lobby, and into the courtyard where his horse was eagerly waiting it's next adventure. He mounted his steed and rode through the streets as fast as he could muster. Nothing but haste. Nothing except his fastest until his destination was reached. That is how each ride to an epidemic was treated.

Courtly Road was a narrow street that surrounded a small park with trees, a pigeon fountain, and a few more goodies for the kids. The street was already filled with law enforcement and fellow marshals by the time Thomas arrived. He approached the current commanding officer.

"God damnit," Cross said to himself before speaking to the CO, "Sergeant Laudy." He said to him.

"Welcome to the party Mr. Cross." Replied the Sergeant.

Laudy was a fat, reluctant man who did not exactly pride himself in the proper arts of law enforcement. This was not the first time Thomas had been forced to associate himself with the Sergeant. He remembered that during their last acquaintance they had a bit of a tiff regarding proper procedure.

“Agent, Captain. Agent. And I find it doubtful that this ordeal resembles a festival. I was not briefed at HQ due to the sudden occurrence of the situation, so if you please, spare me the apologies and small talk and give me the details.” *He retorted. Laudy could tell Thomas was serious so as he requested he began to brief Thomas.*

“His name is Anthony Ruther. He barricaded himself within the service tunnel nearly thirty minutes ago.”

“Service tunnel?”

“It is a narrow passage that runs underneath the park that is accessed at either end of the street. He has blocked off the west entrance and has locked the east. He is employed by the state to maintain the park which gives him access to the tunnel in the first place.”

“Hostages?”

“Apparently he has taken two of his coworkers, Gregory Bellows and Martha Ingrid. Ingrid’s young daughter, Samantha, was seized as well.”

“Hmm. Are there any other coworkers around who could give me some personal information on him?”

“Yea, we asked one of the park keepers to stick around in case we needed some info. Where did she go? Ah! There she is.” *He signaled a woman sitting down on a park bench to come over.*

“Agent Cross, Linda Wrentha. She works the same shift as Ruther.”

“Linda how are you?”

“Bit shook up but I’m alright.”

“Good I’m glad to hear it. Now you have worked alongside Ruther for how long now?”

“About a year and half, Sir.”

“Good, than you could fill me in on some of his personal information. You know, his likes, dislikes, what he did during his spare time? Anything at all could be beneficial.”

“I never really saw him outside of work. I do remember by seeing him on the job that he hates trash. He always said his job was hard enough and it doesn’t help when the little youngish are littering all over the place.”

“Interesting. What about his lunch?”

“His lunch?”

“That’s right. His lunch.”

“Well he actually tended to bring a lot of red meat to lunch. A lot of steak, and beef from mules.”

“Excellent. That will be all so thank you very much, you can go,” *He waited until the witness left the scene before continuing his briefing,* “Now, what are his demands?”

“None yet, but he does want to talk to someone. I’m guessing that’s where you come in.”

“Sure as hell isn’t going to talk to you.” *He said as he began to walk away from Laudy toward the east side entrance where the Sergeant directed him.*

“Yea well maybe we’ll be a little more careful this time. Eh, Cross?” *He yelled to him. He stopped short in his tracks once he had that remark. He walked back over to the fat oaf and responded in a very low tone right up front.*

“You’ve got some nerve talking to me like that.”

“Well I’m right aren’t I? Last time I let you run the show it cost us a lot more than we were supposed to bargain for.”

“Perhaps if I had allowed you to do my job you wouldn’t be here right now acting as if you could have prevented the consequences of our actions.”

“Maybe so. But nevertheless, it was on you!” *He said with an arrogant grin.*

“You may be right. You truly may be right. But with those comforting thoughts you may want to try something new today.”

“Oh yea? What’s that?”

"Doing your job." He said as he walked away from the officer leaving him in awe.

He continued to walk toward the tunnel entrance after his quarrel with Laudy, and when he did reach the door, he knocked three times.

KNOCK...KNOCK...KNOCK...

"Mr. Ruther! Are you in there?"

"Who's there!" *A voice came from behind the door.*

"Mr. Ruther my name is Thomas Cross, I'm here to help you!"

"What do you want?"

"I want exactly what you want, Mr. Ruther. A happy ending. That's all."

No voice came for a few moments. Then Cross heard an unlatching.

"Open the door." *Ruther said from the other side of the door.*

So as commanded, Thomas opened the door and starred into the long, dark and narrow corridor. Dimly lit, he could just make out a man holding a rifle aiming directly at his head. With his hands in the air, Thomas slowly began walking toward the kidnapper.

"Slowly" *Said Ruther.*

"So, how are you doing today?"

"Mr. Cross, don't try to sweet talk me. You just keep on walking. We'll be reaching the junction where the hostages are soon. And don't try any funny business. I've got my iron-sight here aimed right at your skull."

"Since when is asking a general question supposed to be funny? I tend to ask that to most of my acquaintances."

"Well this aint an acquaintance. This is business."

"Right, right. Business. Careers, jobs, offices, all that. You know right now I'm on the clock? Yea you wouldn't have guessed it would ya? Well it's true. I don't think I mentioned it but I'm a Marshal."

"You're a what!"

"You know... a Marshal. Here take a look at my badge." *He said as he began to reach into his pocket for his badge.*

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE! YOU GET YOUR HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE EM'!!"

"Don't worry. Remember you said no funny business? Here, look at my badge." *He tossed his badge over to Ruther who caught and looked it over.*

"So you are a Marshal. Heh. I think I'd better hold onto this for awhile."

"Sure. Why not?"

The two men reached the room where the hostages were being held. It really wasn't much of a room, just an enlarged section of the tunnel that most likely marked the middle of the passageway. It was lit a bit better than the rest of the tunnel. Thomas could make out the hostages fairly easily. They looked like they weren't harmed. At least, not harmed yet.

"Looks like there IS a party down here! Heh. How is everybody doing? Good? That's good."

"Ok, here's the deal. I want you to tell that women over there..."

"Which one?" *Interrupted Cross.*

"The one with the child, damnit! I want you to tell her to give me my job back!"

"That's it? That is all you want? Not a raise, benefits or anything else?" *Said Thomas in question.*

"Fine! I want a raise, and a...a... a weeks' vacation! For free!"

"See now we are getting somewhere. I wouldn't stop there though."

"Well what else would you get?"

"Hmm. I would probably ask for a lifetime supply of my favorite dish, and I'd probably want them to name something after me. You know a street or something. Oh and the food would be top sirloin with a side of potatoes, gravy, and corn."

"Ah a meat man! So we have something in common."

“Apparently so. Perhaps when this is over we could sit down and enjoy a nice meal.” *Thomas replied*

“Well that depends on how we are when it’s over.”

“I suppose. But anyways, onto business. You have told me what you want, now I need to tell you what I want.”

“Before you speak your needs, remember, I am in control here. Not you Agent Cross. It’s not in your power to decide whether you get what you want or not. But it is in mine.”

“Fair enough. What I need you to do is release the girl. She is very young and had no role in this at all. It isn’t fair for her to be cooped up like this when she could be out and about away from this mess. You see what I’m saying?”

Ruther had no response. Thomas could tell he was at a loss for words so he decided to keep on arguing.

“You don’t think I have some fancy plan designed to take you out of control do you? You said no funny business right? I just want an innocent girl to run through the streets once more. Think about it, why would I go behind your back? After all, you’re in control.”

“Damn right I am!”

“Damn right you are! So why don’t we let the girl go, eh?”

“I think she should stay.”

“How come? She has no part in this?”

“She comes to the park everyday with her bitch of a mother, and every day she leaves her crud around for me to pick up! She has everything to do with this!”

“But is that not what children are supposed to do? Come now, don’t you ever recall littering or leaving a mess for someone else to clean up?”

“I, I don’t know.”

“I sure remember. There are times I regret it, but we were all children once. It’s part of the job.”

“I remember!” *The male hostage spoke out for the first time.* “I used to leave my lunch leftovers at my grade school table every day. My friends and I would laugh at the custodians who picked up after us. I look back on it and wonder how we were so immature.”

“And I bet you wish someone had taught you a lesson back then don’t you?” *Said Thomas*

“I sure do.”

“So Mr. Ruther, I think you are in a pretty good position to teach this young lady a life lesson. A lesson without the need of violence. So what do you say?”

A moment of silence

“My friend, let this child go.”

The room fell silent after Thomas’s words of wisdom, and all eyes fell on the captor as he tried to decide his next course of action. He looked to the left, he looked to the right. He stared at the man, then the mother, then the girl, and finally at our friend Agent Cross.

“Go. Just go. May this be a lesson to you.”

The mother still holding tightly onto her beloved child looked in awe and confusion at Thomas. He nodded to her, signally that it was ok for her to let go.

“It’s ok, Sam. You just walk right down that hallway until you get outside. I’ll be with you soon. I promise.”

Martha then let go of her child and she ran down the hallway. She watched her run until she was lost in the darkness. She began to cry. She raised her head and looked at her captor.

“Thank you. Thank you so much, Anthony.”

“I’m not done with you yet so keep your mouth shut! We’ve got a lot to talk about!”

“Anthony calm down now. You did the right thing in letting her go. Now that she’s gone we can work this out like adults. That’s what you want right?”

“You have no idea how angry I am right now, Cross. You have no idea.”

“Do you want to get through this or not, Ruther? If you do I suggest you bury your rage just for now so we can work this out, so please! Can we please sit down and discuss our terms peacefully and calmly?”

“Anthony we don’t want to be here anymore than you do. Just take a seat so we can get out of here.” *Spoke out Gregory*

"You watch your mouth, Bellows! I am in control here not you!"

"Alright I'm sorry!"

"No you aren't! But I've got a good idea how to make you sorry!" *He raised his gun to Gregory Bellows. He began to tremble as he looked down the wrong end of the barrel.*

"Anthony. Lower the gun," *Said Thomas quietly,* "You don't want to do this." *Ruther did not respond,* "Anthony I don't want to die here. I've got a ticket to a new life. A life far away from this, where the biggest concern is feeding your horse. I want to live that life. I know you don't want to die either, and I know you don't want to pull that trigger."

"What if I do! What if I want to blow him away and you and you with him!"

"Then I suggest you think about your options if that is what you plan on doing! One, you go to jail for the rest of your life! There you will rot in a four by four cell eating the worst food imaginable, never being able to walk outside or ever feeling the sunlight on your face, and eventually dying in a place that could be mistaken for hell! That is, if they don't hang you, for murder! Second! You take the easy way out! You use the last of that ammo on a very unfavorable target. And by unfavorable I don't mean me or the other two."

Ruther looked at his gun; he caught on to what Thomas was saying. The unfavorable target wasn't the agent or the two the agent was trying to save. It was himself.

"That's right. You know what I'm talking about."

"You bastard!" *He then walked over to Thomas and hit him in the stomach with the butt end of his gun. He fell to the ground and grasped his stomach in pain*

"That's been your plan all along hasn't it? Have me choke on this barrel and quiver my finger? WELL IT ISN'T GONNA HAPPEN!" And for your stupidity, AGENT CROSS, someone is gonna die!"

He lifted his rifle once more and aimed it at the woman. He lined up his sights, placed his finger on the trigger, and...

"NO!"

*Thomas jumped from the ground at Ruther and knocked him down as he fired his shot. **BANG!!** The shot missed! The two began to fight, rolling on the ground! The gun, still in the possession of the captor! Thomas, grasping the*

opposite side of the rifle, attempting to force it out of his enemy's hands! A punch delivered, a knee conveyed! **BANG!!** Another set off in the brawl, **BANG!!** Another! Now Thomas had the upper hand. Positioned on top, he bashed Ruther's head into the floor! **BANG!!** And another! But Thomas didn't care! He knew this was the opportune moment to win this battle! So he kept on bashing until he let go of his firearm! Cross grabbed the weapon and rose to his feet! And just as he rose so did his opponent! He stumbled across the room but to his dismay he was now blinded by the blood gushing from his own head. He cleared the blood from his eyes and saw Thomas with the gun standing merely two yards ahead, and he pounced at him with the thought of knocking his enemy down and retrieving his weapon! **BANG!!** The final shot. Silence. Complete and utter silence. Ruther lay dead on the ground, in a pool of his own blood.

Thomas stood above him victorious. He dropped the gun at his feet and walked over to the corpse. He reached into Ruther's pocket and pulled out his badge. Although he had won the fight he did not feel triumphant. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. His vision was now fading in and out. What could it have been? And then it came to him. Three shots were fired during the brawl. The problem was, only two missed.