

ICICLES IN THE SUN

The northern wind blew cold—bone-chilling cold. Yet, Wesley Parker couldn't stop. He figured if he could make it through Connor's Pass and reach Redwood, then he could blend into the population. Out on the lonely plain, he was an easy target. At least, he would be a moving target. The Hunter clan had vowed revenge for the killing of one of their kin. It didn't matter that it was self-defense, pure and pure. It didn't matter that Chuck Hunter fired four shots at him in a drunken rampage. A fifth shot, if he had gotten it off, would have surely hit Wesley dead-on. The law cleared Wesley completely, but the Hunter gang had no use for the law.

Up ahead stood an oasis of trees that might provide a temporary respite from the savage wind. If nothing else, it gave him an opportunity to hold his hands under the warm breath of his horse. He worried about Chester, his horse. His sturdy mount had been with him a long time and was getting on in years. He hoped Chester had enough left in him to complete the journey. After a handful of oats for Chester and a few bites of jerky for himself, Wesley remounted and continued on his journey.

As the afternoon wore on, Wesley longed for a crackling, warm fire. But did he dare have a fire come nightfall? It would have to be somewhere protected, so they couldn't see the orange flames in the night sky. The smoke wouldn't be visible against a dark background. He had to make Connor's Pass by nightfall. He would have some cover there and with the right spot, he could watch the path below.

Hours of falling snow made the trail hard to follow. It seemed like every step became a monotonous edge. Every few minutes he whispered encouragement into Chester's ear.

“Just a little bit longer, boy. We can make the pass.”

The snowy sky muted the remaining light of a fading afternoon sun, but it shone through just enough to show the shadow of a mountain range on the horizon.

“There it is, boy. I think we can reach it before dark. Just give me the best you've got, big fella.”

While Connor's Pass stretched higher in the sky as it made its way through the mountains, the rocky windbreak would offset the lower

temperature of the higher elevation. As the grade of the trail became more of a struggle, Wesley could feel that warm campfire calling his name.

Seeing a little outcrop of rock overlooking the path off to the right, Wesley got off Chester and they walked the narrow ledge leading up to the overhang. Yes, it would do. It provided just enough cover, and it gave him a view of the path below.

Everything around him was cold and wet, but he needed a fire. He gathered up some small branches and twigs and made a small pile. He tried to light the pile with some matches, but by the fifth match, he knew it wasn't going to happen. Reaching into his pack, Wesley pulled out a well-worn Bible. Tearing out the last two pages of Revelations, he crinkled them up and laid them on top of the twigs. Then he took out the last six matches from his pouch and put five of them with their heads together on top of the crinkled-up pages.

“Lord, I know you will provide and I sure hope you'll forgive me for this.”

He struck the sixth match and laid it on top of the heads of the other five. The dry paper of Revelations caught fire when all the matches lit at the same time. The twigs underneath soon began to burn and Wesley added more branches to the fire.

Weary and aching, Wesley longed for some sleep. Remembering what an old scout once taught him, he gathered a few rocks and a small log from a fallen tree and placed them together in a line near the fire. Then he took out a spare blanket and covered them up. The final touch was his spare hat placed at the top of the blanket. Then he went up to the small clearing above his campsite and made his bed with his remaining blankets and poncho. Despite a sense of alert, he could no longer keep his eyes open.

The crisp, early morning air reverberated with the sharp sounds of gunfire. Grabbing his rifle, Wesley looked down and saw the Hunter gang emptying their guns into the rolled-up blanket by the fire. They slowly walked closer to their target and soon realized he had tricked them. Dexter Hunter just caught a glimpse of Wesley peering over the ledge.

“He’s up there, boys,” said Dexter.

The Hunter’s reloaded and began firing wildly at the rocks above them.

“Lord, I’m in a spot here,” said Wesley. “I sure hope you understand what I gotta do. There’s no place left to run. It’s them or me. I’ll either be

seeing you shortly or, if you're willing, later on down the line."

Wesley moved over twenty feet or so and took another look. Jake Hunter saw him, but Wesley's aim was sure and Jake fell to the ground. Bullets ricocheted off the surrounding rocks, but he crawled over another twenty feet and looked below. A shot grazed his right ear and warm blood trickled down his cheek. He waited and slipped over to a flat rock. Laying down, he took aim at Frank Hunter and fired a lethal shot. He then put Billie in his sight and fired. Billie slumped to the ground with a pool of blood quickly covering the ground beneath him.

Wesley got down and slowly walked into the small clearing of his campsite. Standing with his back to Wesley, Clay Hunter, the youngest of the gang, reloaded his gun. Wesley had an easy target to kill, but he didn't pull the trigger.

"Drop the gun, Clay," said Wesley.

Clay, with his gun pointed at the ground, turned around and faced Wesley.

"I know you only shot Chuck in self-defense, Wesley," said Clay. "I was there and saw it. But Pa wouldn't listen to me. All he wanted was revenge."

“It doesn’t have to end this way, Clay,” said Wesley. “Just go home.”

“I can’t go home, Wesley,” said Clay. “Not with all them dead ... I can’t.”

“Then just go away. Go to California.”

“I just can’t,” said Clay. “I’m sorry, Wesley.”

Clay raised his gun and fired it at Wesley, but the shot missed. The teenager then joined his lifeless kinfolk on the cold, hard ground. Wesley sat down on a rock and hung his head. Two years of misery and death on the battlefields of Virginia and Tennessee had taken its toll on the man, but the instinct to survive was strong. Somewhere in that war, there seemed a long purpose. But this today ... it seemed so senseless.

“I’m sorry, Lord,” said Wesley. “I’m tired ... I just want to know when it will all end. When will it be over?”

After a while, he stood up. He knew he had to keep moving or die from the cold. As he looked around for Chester, his horse, he suddenly saw a hundred tiny rainbows on the white rocks enclosing his campsite. The morning sun came in at just the right angle through the icicles hanging off the trees to paint the snowy canvas of the rocks in

sprays of color. It seemed such a contrast to the red pools on the ground.

“Maybe, it is over,” said Wesley. Putting his gun back in its holster, he wondered, “Maybe, I won’t need this anymore.”

He found Chester laying on his side with six bullet holes in him. He had to find a way out of the Pass. Spotting one of the Hunter gang’s horses a short distance away, he walked over quietly, trying not to spook him. He swung his leg over the saddle and rode it back up to the camp.

The ground was too hard to try and bury the Hunter’s. He soon found a recess in a group of rocks. Carrying each body over to the recess, he laid them out between the rocks. Though he certainly didn’t feel like he owed them anything, Wesley still felt it was the right thing to do. He then piled small boulders in front of the rocky tomb to seal it off. Before completely sealing it off, he covered up Frank Hunter, the head of the gang, with the bullet shredded blanket from the fireside.

Before heading back to the trail, he cast one last glance at the rocks, but the sun had melted the icicles and the artist had withdrawn his work.

