

The Canyon Run

Summer 1881

Each trip down Taylor Canyon hauling freight etched new lines of experience onto Rory's young face. He had sent the letter, the money enclosed, a tangible piece of his success, and a sense of quiet accomplishment had settled deep within him. He knew the groan of the wagon's axles as intimately as he knew the whisper of the wind through the pines. He could read the sky for weather, the river for its temper, and the horses for their unspoken needs.

An early July morning saw him hitching his team to the ore wagons for another routine run. Even in July, the air was crisp, carrying the scent of dew-soaked grass. Several days before, Blackwood had set out with a haul over Taylor Pass and into the Roaring Fork Valley, leaving Rory in charge of the routine runs down Taylor Canyon. With Manly, Billy, and Cain accompanying Blackwood, Rory found himself with a different crew for the day: Joe, a young man a little older than Rory, eager but prone to losing his head under pressure, and Tom, an older fellow, stout but slow to react, whose usual duties were more mundane stable work than hauling ore.

"Alright, boys," Rory had said, his voice low but firm as they prepared to roll out of Virginia City. "Stay tight. Keep your eyes open. This ain't no Sunday drive, even if it feels routine." Joe nodded, adjusting his hat. Tom grunted, adjusting the lines on his own eight-horse team. Rory felt the familiar weight of responsibility settle on his shoulders, heavier than the ore itself. He was not just driving his own wagon, but leading two others, their safety, and the valuable cargo, depending on his judgment.

The initial hours of the journey were uneventful, a rhythm of creaking wood and pounding hooves. The road wound through stands of pine and spruce, dipping into shadowed hollows and climbing sun-drenched rises as they traversed Taylor Park. As they entered the canyon, the Taylor River roared beside them, a constant, primal companion for their trip to Almont. Rory drove his lead wagon with practiced ease, his quiet eyes scanning the landscape, absorbing every detail. He watched the interplay of light and shadow on the canyon walls, the darting movement of a squirrel, the distant flight of an eagle. Beneath the conscious observation, his instincts, honed by countless miles, were always at work.

It was as they entered a particularly remote, narrow stretch of Taylor Canyon that the prickle of unease began. The air, which had been fresh and open, seemed to grow heavy, confined. The roar of the river, usually a comforting backdrop, now felt isolating, muffling other sounds. Rory's gaze drifted to the high ridges, then to the dense thickets of willow and serviceberry that lined the deeper cuts in the canyon walls. Nothing specific, no sudden movement, no glint of metal. Just a feeling. A subtle shift in the usual hum of the wilderness. The feeling of being watched, an animal's instinct for unseen predators.

He glanced back. Joe's wagon, a several dozen yards behind, rattled along, the young man humming a tune. Tom's wagon, further back still, was a steady, if slower, presence. Their casualness gnawed at Rory. They hadn't felt it. He tightened his grip on the lines, his jaw setting. The isolation of the route, the thousands of dollars worth of ore in their wagon beds, the vulnerability of their small party all weighed on him.

"Joe!" Rory shouted, his voice carrying over the river's din. "Keep your eyes forward! And stay close!" Joe snapped to attention, and his humming ceased. Rory didn't explain the uneasy prickle. He didn't need to. The sharp edge in his voice was enough.

They rounded a long, sweeping bend where the canyon momentarily broadened, a narrow tributary trickling down from steep side-canyons to join the main river. It was a place of broken rock and sparse, scraggly brush, offering natural cover.

All three wagons passed the mouth of the tributary before three riders suddenly erupted from behind the cover of boulders. They were little more than dark shapes on horseback, bandanas covering their faces. They carried six-shooters, held easily in their hands. There was no warning, no shouted demand to halt, just the thud of hooves on rock, and the glint of gunmetal gray steel.

Rory's mind clicked into gear with astonishing speed. Run. There was no other option. Three armed men, positioned to take them by surprise, against three heavy wagons. Escape was their best bet.

"HYAH! GIDDUP!" Rory roared, his voice cracking like a whip. He cracked the long lash of his whip above the heads of his lead pair, a sound that exploded through the canyon. His team, already moving at a steady pace, surged forward, jolted by the sudden, desperate energy in his command. The wagon lurched, the heavy ore shifting with a groan, but Rory held it steady, his body braced.

Behind him, Joe's cry of surprise was swallowed by the sudden chaos. Rory heard the scramble of hooves, the panicked shouts. "JOE! TOM! PUSH 'EM! NOW!" he bellowed, his voice raw.

The three riders were already on their heels, galloping hard. They were trying to flank the wagons, to get ahead and block the narrow road. Rory saw a flash of movement to his left, heard the sharp crack of a pistol. A splinter of wood flew from the rear of his wagon. They were shooting to disable, not to kill, not yet.

The road ahead twisted violently, a series of tight S-bends with the river roaring on their left and sheer rock face on their right. This was a notorious section, often requiring careful maneuvering. Rory had to take it at a high gallop.

"Easy, boys, easy!" he murmured to his team, his hands a blur on the lines, guiding them with impossible precision. The lead horses leaned into the first turn, their powerful legs churning, muscles rippling. The wagon wheels screamed, protesting the G-forces as Rory cut the corner as close as he dared to the rock face, the hub of the fore-wheel scraping granite with a sickening shriek. For a heart-stopping moment, the outer wheels lifted, hanging precariously over the drop. He felt the wagon tilt, the weight of the ore threatening to pull them over, but then it slammed back down with a jarring thud, the springs groaning in protest.

He risked a glance back. Joe's team, less experienced at such turns, was struggling. The young driver was pale, his mouth open in a silent scream as he fought his own lines, mimicking Rory's desperate maneuver, but less cleanly. His wagon bounced violently, its outer wheels also lifting, closer to the edge than Rory's. Tom's wagon, further back, was clearly faltering, his team not as well-controlled, and the distance between them and the bandits shortening.

"KEEP UP, TOM!" Rory roared. He heard a closer shot, a sharp thwack as a bullet embedded itself in the wooden frame of Joe's wagon.

The pursuers were gaining, their horses fresher, unburdened by tons of ore. One rider, a lean man in a wide-brimmed hat, was drawing abreast of Joe's wagon, trying to come between them.

Rory knew he had to buy them time. The canyon was their enemy as much as the bandits, but it was also their only defense. The narrowness meant the riders couldn't easily flank them. They were trapped in a funnel, but so were their pursuers.

He pushed his team harder, the horses stretching out, their breath coming in ragged gasps, white foam flecking their muzzles. The steady rhythm of their hooves was now a desperate thunder, echoing off the canyon walls. The river's roar seemed to magnify the danger, a constant reminder of the boulder-strewn torrent beside them.

Another sharp turn loomed, even tighter than the last. Rory knew this one. It had a tricky dip and a rise immediately after. He remembered Manly's advice: "Hit that dip hard, let the momentum carry ye up the rise, but don't let her pitch too far." He leaned into it, his body anticipating the movements of the wagon, becoming one with the lumbering beast. The wagon plunged into the dip, rattling every bone in his body, then clawed its way up the rise, the horses digging in, their powerful haunches straining. Their speed was suicidal, but slowing down was certain capture.

Behind him, Joe's wagon copied the move, less gracefully. Joe cried out as the wagon slammed down, nearly unseating him. Tom's wagon, however, hesitated at the dip, and Rory heard the frantic shouts of the teamster as he fought to regain control. The distance between the three wagons was stretching precariously.

"Hang on, Tom!" Rory yelled, but his voice was lost in the din. He couldn't slow down, couldn't turn back. He had to keep pushing, hoping Tom could catch up, hoping they wouldn't lose a wagon to the river before they lost it to the outlaws.

The canyon walls closed in again, a section they called 'The Narrows.' The road was not wide enough for two wagons to pass, and required some careful, slow maneuvering to get one wagon through it. At speed, it was a blurred tunnel of rock and dust. Splinters flew as the wagon's sides scraped against the rough granite. The air filled with the acrid scent of burnt rubber from the brake blocks as he applied just enough brake to skid around the curve, and the metallic tang of horse sweat.

The outlaws, frustrated by the lack of direct hits and their inability to gain on Rory, began to ride closer to the river, attempting to draw alongside and board the wagons. One of them, a burly man, spurred his horse, trying to force his way between Rory's wagon and Joe's.

Rory reacted instantly. He swerved, just an inch or two, pressing his wagon closer to the river's edge. The move was dangerous, forcing the bandit's horse into the churned-up dirt and slick rock near the water. The horse lost its footing, and the rider cursed loudly as it stumbled and tossed him into the raging water of the Taylor. It bought them precious seconds.

They were running on pure adrenaline now, the horses, Rory, Joe, and even the struggling Tom. Every muscle screamed, every breath was a gasp. Rory's vision narrowed to the road ahead, the churning hooves, the straining wood. He was dimly aware of gunshots, slugs whistling past his ears, thudding into the ore bed behind him, but he couldn't afford to look. His entire being was focused on control, on pushing the boundary of what the wagons, the horses, and he could endure.

The river seemed to rise to meet them on every curve, a hungry maw waiting to swallow their valuable cargo and their lives. The wheels of the wagons, especially Joe's, came perilously close to the edge, sprays of water from the rapids splashing up onto the horses' flanks. Rory knew that one wheel slipping, one horse faltering, would mean the end.

The chase had stretched for what felt like an eternity, but was no more than ten to a dozen minutes of heart-stopping terror. The horses were lathered, their eyes wide with exertion, but they kept running, responding to Rory's desperate commands, their incredible strength holding firm. The wagons groaned, creaked, and shuddered, but somehow held together. Rory's hands were raw inside his gloves, and his forearms burning.

He saw a glimmer, a subtly different light. The canyon walls, so relentlessly oppressive, seemed to be receding, the narrow confines beginning to give way. The roar of the river, while still present, sounded less like a confined beast and more like a broad, rushing current.

They were approaching a wider portion, a section where the canyon opened into a broader valley for a few miles before pinching in again into another tight canyon, the last one before reaching Almont. It was a chance, perhaps their only one. But at the pace they were going, the wagons pushed to their absolute limit, the horses nearing collapse, they were a hair's breadth from disaster with every turn.

Rory, his face grimed with dust and sweat, his quiet eyes burning with fierce determination, hoped with a desperate intensity that they could make it that far. Even if they reached the wider valley, the chase wouldn't be over, but at least, for a few precious miles, they might have a chance to maneuver, to fight, or to escape the suffocating grip of the canyon.