

STONEPACKER'S GOLD

a novel by

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March, 1920. Willie's view of the Wasatch Mountains was blocked by Salt Lake City's Union Pacific depot, alongside which his rail car jerked to a halt. The air was too dense with coal smoke to see more than the top of the mountains, anyway. Brown soot stained the skim of snow covering the streets. On the other side, to the west, the familiar warm stench and bellow of stockyards disappeared into the fumes toward the Great Salt Lake. Willie stayed in his seat and let the coach empty, pulled his bag out and followed the stragglers, trying not to gawk at the carnival of faces on the platform onto which he descended. Topeka, the largest town in his experience, had offered nothing like this polyglot assemblage of ethnicities.

As he stepped down Willie nodded to the porter, a black man who had earned his respect for the manner with which he had handled the ruder elements among the passengers. Willie made his way through the wood pews and high ceilings of the depot to the front, which opened onto a sea of mud churned by the chained wheels of trucks and automobiles, the hooves of horses. The temperature was just above freezing, and the

streets were thawing in the midday sun. He realized that the two streets which began at his feet were separate sides of a boulevard wide enough to contain most of his hometown back in Kansas. The boulevard pointed east toward the mountains, past a great temple several quarter-mile blocks ahead on his left.

He rested his bag at his feet and rechecked the address of his uncle, Ted Wolanski, who ran a produce store and had agreed to put him to work. In the wake of Willie's disastrous marriage, it was his mother's idea to get him out of town to her brother in Salt Lake City, and he felt lucky to have that address.

Someone barked his name, and there was Archie, a boy who had boarded the train at Cheyenne. Dapper in his red wool hat, Archie claimed to be fourteen, though Willie would have guessed him twelve. Archie had filled the hours between Cheyenne and Ogden with a ceaseless patter about the angel Maroni and Joseph Smith and eerie wars between funny tribes. Willie thought he had disembarked at Ogden, but Archie explained that his father had put him back on the train to continue on to a friend's place here in Salt Lake City. He asked where Willie was headed. Willie red him the address, which the boy took for license to launch into a description of the city from where they stood, how the streets were numbered from the Temple Square, north and south, east and west.

Willie pulled his cap low against the glare. He had not slept well in days, and Archie's explanation of the street system jumbled with his earlier tales of angel warfare. It was more detail than Willie could absorb, and he did not pretend to understand. He urged to boy to simply point him in the right direction, and Archie responded by leading him to where Willie caught the correct streetcar. Ten minutes later Willie was standing in front of his uncle's store on 300 East near 800 South, a narrow clapboard building with a rotting wood sidewalk and many small windows. A sign that read Wolanski Produce covered the lower half of the second floor. The sign was freshly painted, in contrast to the building. He pushed through the door, which was fitted with several bells.

The place was mostly empty bins, a few tubers, barrels of pickles, flour that he guessed could be had more cheaply at several groceries he had noticed along the way. There was a table displaying expensive tomatoes, bananas, several greens that he didn't recognize, all presumable brought in by express train from California. Looking up from the newspaper under her elbows on the counter was a large woman he would have guessed was his grandmother's age. He hesitated. She clapped her hands, laughed, and said, "You must be Elizabeth's boy, Willie?"

"Yes ma'am." He grabbed his cap. "Willie Urgan." "

"We been expecting you all morning."

"The train was late."

"That's what Ted said. He'd a been down to meet you, but he had to get out to the farm. He couldn't wait."

So this was his Aunt June, he realized, only several years older than his mother. She posted a back-in-five-minutes sign and showed him upstairs to their living quarters, two small rooms over the front of the store. She left him a lunch of split-pea soup, bread and cheese, but he did not eat it. He was asleep in his chair before she was out of the room. By the time she closed the shop at five and returned, he was snoring on a shag rug he had dragged near the cook stove, head braced on his bag. Though he stood when she roused him, helped her stoke the stove with coal, and washed up obediently, he was still drowsy an hour later when his Uncle Ted topped the stairs.

Bald, and hairy everywhere else, red eyebrows and beard, bushy red on the backs of his hands, bulging blue eyes, Ted pumped the young man's arm hard enough to rub the sleep out of his eyes, then offered him a drink from his jug in the pantry. Willie declined. The odor of the drink that Ted poured himself made Willie vaguely ill, and Willie couldn't hide his exhaustion.

"You want to lie down?" June asked.

She showed him back down the stairs to the cot they had made up for him in a storeroom at the back of the store. It was furnished with a light bulb and chamber pot, clean sheets, lots of blankets. He slept well and was wakened by his aunt's voice announcing eggs from the top of the stairs. "Scrambled or otherwise? You want coffee?"

He plunged into his clothes and sat, trembling, on the cot. The room was dark and cold. Uncertain about his location, he stood, remembered the light bulb, and turned it on. The light cleared his head of the jumble of images that haunted him, and he climbed the stairs to warmth, food, Uncle Ted in his newspaper and overalls, the rumble of the streetcars outside. Though he had not fully developed a taste for coffee, he took a cup in the hope that it would sharpen his edges. He poked at his eggs, then followed his uncle downstairs through the store and onto the frozen streets. They caught an electric train called the Bamberger Railroad north to Bountiful, where they climbed down and walked several miles up Barton Creek toward mountains back-lit by dawn.

The farm turned out to be less than fifteen acres, but was irrigated, with several glass greenhouses that looked big to Willie, but which his uncle, he quickly realized, regarded as frustratingly small. Compared to the half section his family farmed, it was tiny operation, but the raw labor needed to make this oversized garden productive impressed Willie's practical eyes. He saw enough potting and weeding and ditch-repair to occupy an army. His uncle put him straight to work, and he was up to his elbows in dirt before the sun cleared the Wasatch Mountains. He tried to lose through his hands what he could not leave with Father Sorensen, his parish priest back home. In work he tried to leave all thought but that of work, to let his body do the thinking.

In the following days Ted and June tried to draw him out, but Willie preferred sleep to conversation, and avoided opinions on anything more personal than the weather. In the first weeks he rarely went out of the house. They tried to get him to church, but he declined. Then he ran into Archie, who invited him to Mutual the following Tuesday night. Willie had no idea what Mutual was, only that it was sponsored

by the Mormon church. Willie declined even faster than he had declined his hosts' invitation to Mass.

He wrote Thelma, his estranged wife, another apologetic letter. He did not expect a reply. She had never cashed the check he left her. As he gained distance from the breakup he began to realize that the celibacy Thelma had sworn him to was a foolish contradiction. Only a bumpkin would have accepted her terms, a humiliating insight that aggravated his shame at the assault that ended their two-month cohabitation. Father Sorensen might argue that a man cannot rape his wife, but Willie, just nineteen, knew he was wrong.

As the days lengthened he began to take walks after supper, rather than retreat to his cot with a novel or the *Deseret News*. One afternoon he stumbled into the Woodbine district, just south of the Union Pacific depot, location of several disguised speakeasies, a place called the Metro, cheap hotels and seedy bookstores, forward young women whom he couldn't pass without a shudder. From his mother he learned that Thelma was in school and doing fine, she didn't say where, or what she was studying. He walked and thought. Into the canyons to the east, turning lush, west toward the smelters. He explored Temple Square and the new state capitol building, and on Sundays occasionally took the train out to the Saltair resort.

One evening, returning from a concert in Liberty Park, he walked into a fracas in an alley across from the courthouse. His first impulse was to scoot quietly on by, but the squalls of a boy hoisted between two large men brought him to a halt. In the failing light the flicker of that red wool hat had to be Archie. The men dragging him were certainly not policeman, they were too scruffy, probably from the growing camps of laid off smelter workers. Simple robbery looked unlikely, but the way they were dragging the poor kid made it apparent that whatever designs they had on him were unpleasant.

Still, Willie hesitated. He knew nothing about this boy, just that he took his religion too seriously and was glib and friendly. Maybe he had cheated these men somehow, and had it coming. Maybe, but Willie looked around for a weapon, an ally, leverage of any sort. A Reo truck turned into the far end of the alley, forcing the abductors to veer toward one side, a strategy which Archie resisted well enough to force the truck driver to curse to a stop. Willie saw his cue and leaped in, hollering. The driver honked, and it was the turn of the men to hesitate. Willie stood tall as he could and shouted. "Let him go!"

Archie squirmed out of his coat, free of their grasp, and sprinted toward Willie, followed by a volley of curses. Then a gun fired. Willie never saw the gun, because he was focused on the face of the gunman's partner, whom he recognized. Archie flopped at his feet, a leg knocked from under him. The men turned and disappeared on past the truck by the time Willie looked up. The truck driver gawked, and heads came popping out of back windows. Archie sat up and ripped open his pants to examine his wound. When someone shouted that the police were on their way he leaped to his good leg, grabbing Willie's arm.

"Help me, help me get out of here!"

Willie hesitated.

"Dammit!" Archie hollered. "Help me!"

Willie reached around Archie's shoulders and took him by the armpit. He dragged him away from the scene, the boy hopping on his good leg. When they had a chance to pause, Willie donated his handkerchief and helped Archie tie a tourniquet on his leg. The house Archie directed him to was on Green Street, only several blocks. They came to a high fence composed of every shape and size of board, swatches of tin, tar paper, wire, a ring attached to a cord that Willie never would have noticed, even daytime. Archie jerked it sharply and waited. Though nothing happened, Willie took comfort in his patience, and soon a voice demanded their identity.

"It's me." Archie said.

The gate opened inward on a tall gray man who took Archie from Willie, and Willie followed them through a courtyard into the kitchen of the house beyond. The table was cleared and covered with bedding. Unlike his uncle's place, there was no electricity here, just candles and lamps. Several women took charge of making Archie comfortable while the bearded man dispatched a young woman to fetch a doctor. Somebody handed him a towel to wipe the blood from his clothes. Then Willie backed into a corner of the room, trying to be inconspicuous, and was disconcerted by the sudden focus of his host's attention, to feel himself assessed by those hard gray eyes as calmly as he might himself judge a hog.

"Who're you?"

"Willie Urgang, sir." He allowed his right hand to fall from where it shared his cap with his left, just in case. But the man didn't offer to shake his hand.

"Did you see what happened?"

"Just a couple guys."

Behind them, Archie moaned.

"You saw them attack him?"

"Not really. They were dragging him down that alley across from the courthouse, that's where I saw him."

"And you saw them, these men?"

"They must have been headed for one of those empty lots, or what?"

"There were two of them?"

"Yes."

"What did they look like?"

"Like drifters." he said. He described their faces, guessed at how old they might have been, said they were both wearing workman's caps like his own, heavy boots, coats

the color of dirt and grease. He volunteered everything but that he had recognized one of the men. In the end he blurted. "Why were they trying to kill him?"

From somewhere in the gray of his beard emerged a smile. "I'm Enos, son." As if that explained something, he extended Willie a muscular hand. "I guess we owe you a big thanks for helping my nephew out of a nasty situation."

"They already had him beat and robbed." Willie couldn't leave the subject. "They were hauling him off to that vacant lot to finish him. Why'd they shoot him? What did he do them?"

Anything like levity fell away from Enos' features.

"And why all the hush. Aren't you even going to report them to the police?"

The gate in the fence slammed and there were voices in the courtyard, then a doctor pushed into the room. Willie found himself forgotten in his corner again, and he started to edge out of the room, his unanswered questions dissolving whatever it was that interested him in the scene. He wanted out of the place. He preferred to disappear without fuss or farewells, unnoticed, but the young woman who had gone for the doctor intercepted him in the entryway. Gray eyes like Enos, but blond, and smiling gratefully.

She introduced herself as Glencora, and asked if he was still with the Walanskis, the produce people. He was amazed that she recognized him, that Archie could have given her enough information on the basis of such wispy contact. She walked him across the small yard, explaining that Archie was no ordinary kid, that he saw the Lord in places where other people might see only dust. Sometimes, she admitted, he upset people, saw and said things better left unnoticed.

He didn't reply. But he wondered--things to get you killed?

At the gate she shook his hand like a man, and asked him if he danced. He shuffled uncomfortably. A little, he admitted. Then you really ought to come to the Mutual next Tuesday, she said, there's a band. Yes, he knew where the Ward House was on State Street. You bet. At seven.

The gate closed in that bizarre fence and he was alone on the street, hands tucked in his pockets against a chill that smoked his breath. He was buoyed by a sense of escape, of dodging something worse than the blood he had picked up on his clothes. These people frightened him--why didn't they trust the police?