

ROCK SLIDE—
A BUCK HANSON STORY

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It was early spring of the year. The numbing cold that had gripped the mountain through the winter began its slow but steady thaw. The ice that had entombed the rocks and frozen in the fissures began its annual melt. On the granite skin of the mountain, pieces of shale were freed from their icy embrace and lay loose against the slope, in precise balance of gravity and weight.

But, as always with nature's catastrophes, all it would take was one errant scrap of rock to dislodge it from its place and the delicate balance was shifted. The lone stone would slip down the face of the mountain, dislodging one slab and then more, until hundreds then thousands poured down the slope in full-scale rockslide.

A prudent man knew that the only thing to do when caught in the path of a rock slide was to grab what he treasured and move swiftly aside, letting the danger hurtle past unopposed. Only later, when the dust had settled, could a man expect to step back onto the path and resume his course, whatever it had been before. That single errant slab of shale dictated the course of a man's life for the duration of its brief reign. There was no force of nature or man that could arrest the onslaught of a rockslide. Once a man understood that, he survived the mountain.

Washburn Kelly was the lone stone that slipped first on that early spring morning. By evening, when the dust had settled in the mining camp of Silver Creek, four men had died, caught in the death grasp of the slide.

Buck Hanson and his brother Scrape came down the gully from their claim at the Lucky Lois mine. They'd come to Silver Creek camp for their monthly supply run.

The Hanson brothers, two Norwegian boys who basically kept to themselves, were nevertheless well known in Silver Creek. This was due to the combination of contrasting

personalities of the two: "First time I ever seen vinegar and water mix," according to one miner.

Scrape Hanson, the eldest, was known to be quick off the trigger, a break-heads type who willingly knuckled it up with any man who had the misfortune to oppose his will.

Buck, smaller and leanest of the two, was much cooler of spirit, quiet but with a force of personality that hinted at the strength within. Buck held Scrape in check, not by muscle, but by the power of insight. Scrape was a hot head but he recognized and acknowledged his brother's clearer mind. For the most part.

As was typical in a mining camp, most personalities tended toward the rougher extreme, as men clawed at the earth in a desperate attempt to find their fortune in the unyielding ground. Gentlemen and sages were rare among the throng at Silver Creek. Here a man fought to survive—fought against the elements and against his fellows. Scrape championed the brothers' cause against their fellow miners when necessary, while Buck saw to their survival against nature.

Buck and Scrape went first to Inga's General Store to place their order for supplies and dry goods for the following month. They had been placing the same order for two years and now only had to let Inga know they were in town and the order was filled.

"Morning, Inga," Buck hailed her as they entered the dark dusty interior of the store.

"Well, hey there, Buck," said Inga. "My, but you two are a sight for sore eyes. I heard you were headed this way. Looks like you could use a day or two off of that mountain." She motioned toward the Mad Mabel Saloon through the swinging doors. "Go on in and tell Mabel I'll stand you your first round."

"Thanks, Inga," said Scrape with a chuckle. "I thought you'd never offer."

No questions were asked about how the digging was going. Fellows either struck it or they didn't. If they did, they'd never tell until their claim was dry and their tent folded, and if they didn't, they stuck it out, so it was no use asking.

Buck and Scrape walked through the swinging door to the saloon for the first of several whiskeys and card games. Supplies were ready in just a few hours but the Hanson boys took two days for each of their trips, needing the extra companionship by the end of each month.

The saloon was crowded with bearded, roughly clad men at all hours, every day of the year.

Buck and Scrape slapped some backs and returned hollered greetings as they made their way to the bar.

"Hey there, Mabel, you good looking lady," Scrape called to the woman behind the bar. "Your sister said she'd stand us our first drink, so how 'bout you make it a double for me and Buck here."

"Well, now, Scrape, I wouldn't do this for just any old corpse the wind blew in, but seeing that Buck's with you, I guess I can see my way clear." Mabel obligingly poured two double ryes and sent them down the bar to the brothers.

Their backs against the bar and one boot hooked against the brass foot rail, Buck and Scrape took stock of the room. Men came and went in the camp with the mindless abandon of loose tumbleweed, so it was never a certainty that they'd see anyone they knew on their trips to camp.

All the saloon tables were crammed with men either drinking, eating, or playing cards. A honky-tonk piano player at the back of the room added to the constant din of a hundred men intent on doing nothing but having a good time.

If a fellow wanted to join in a game he had to be quick to grab a seat when another fellow stood. There was no standing at the tableside waiting to be asked in. That was likely to get a fellow shot in the gut, just in case he was keeping an eye were it wasn't wanted.

Buck and Scrape knew the rules and settled in for a long wait until they could take a place at the tables and lose a few hours and maybe some cash. Neither was much of a gambler but Silver Creek offered little else in the way of entertainment.

"You egg-suckin' cuss!" All eyes in the room focused on Washburn Kelly, standing red faced and white knuckled at his table, chair fallen back behind his legs. "I'll teach you to play with cards that didn't start out in the deck."

One-Eyed Archie stood, throwing his chair backwards with his knees. "Who the heck you calling a cheat, you wasted bag of skin? Why, you ain't worth the powder it would take to blow you up. Why'd I try to cheat a natural-born loser like you?"

"I'll wring your scrawny little neck, you near-sighted skunk."

"Sit down and quit yer caterwallin', both of you," said a third man at the table, "or you can both up and outta here and let some decent fellers play."

"Don't do nobody no good to have a fella going off half-cocked like that," mumbled One-Eyed Archie as he turned to retrieve his chair. "If you can't stand to lose some, Washburn Kelly, then git the heck outta the game."

Men at the other tables turned back to their games and drinks. Blowups like that were common enough and once tempers flared and were spent, order was usually restored quickly.

But Washburn Kelly wasn't spent. Maybe it had been a hard month, or maybe he'd just slipped a gear and nobody had noticed. As One-Eyed Archie's back was turned toward him, he unsheathed his hunting knife and palmed it against his forearm, unseen by the other men at the table.

"I ain't playin' with no double-dealing, cripple eyed...," muttered Washburn Kelly as he walked around the table towards One-Eyed Archie.

A fourth fellow at the table grabbed at Washburn Kelly's arm as he walked behind him. "Come on, forget it and get on with the game, fer gawdsakes."

Washburn Kelly whipped his arm out of the man's grasp. "Let go of me, iffen you don't want the same." Before the man could react, Washburn Kelly had stepped up behind One-Eyed Archie and plunged the knife hilt deep into Archie's back.

One-Eyed Archie reared up with a roar of astonishment and pain, flailed his arms at his back and crashed face down onto his chair, arms and legs flung out to all points of the compass.

Men swarmed all over Washburn Kelly, grabbing his arms and pinning him to the floor. Scrape Hanson leapt towards the fray, only to be dragged back by brother Buck.

"Stay out of it, Scrape," Buck warned. "Ain't none of your business."

"Let go of me, Buck. He's got it coming."

"Not from you, he don't. Now stay back and let the others take care of it."

By this time, the others had hauled Washburn Kelly to his feet and five men tried to hold onto him as he twisted and reared against their hold.

"He's out of his head!" yelled one of the men. "Hold tight or he'll slip off again!"

"Shoot the bastard," yelled someone outside the tangle. "That'll hold him and rightly so, killing old One-Eyed like that."

Voices raised in answer to the suggestion, both for and against the idea. Several more men rushed the group holding Washburn Kelly, some to grab at him and others to protect him.

"Get your hands off him or I'll smash you!"

"Hang the cur!"

"Back off. Any closer and you'll get yours!"

"Grab his legs. Take him down! Stomp him!"

Scrape tried again to get into the melee. Buck grabbed his sleeve and pulled him back to the bar. "Let it go, Scrape!" he yelled above the din.

"Take your hands off me, Buck," said Scrape, thrashing his arm free. "I'm getting into this." He started toward the crowd.

"On which side, then?" Buck asked him calmly, quietly.

Scrape stopped, uncertain. His hands clenched into fists. "Heck, what does it matter? I just gotta get in and take a few whacks. Just 'til this thing is finished." He waded his way through the crowd around Washburn Kelly and began throwing punches at any heads around him.

Others, seeing the flailing fists, rushed to the rescue, or the assault. Thought vanished in the heat of the moment and any open face became a target.

Up to this point, the fight centered round the original game table, but gradually the surge began to spread across the floor as bodies were hurled from the center to the edge of the crowd and someone new darted in to fill the void.

Somebody fired a gun and the noise level doubled as shouts of anger responded to the escalation of violence. Suddenly it was no longer a fight of knuckles and knees. Knives were drawn and bottles brandished.

Buck had kept his eye on Scrape, watching him move with the ebb and flow of the crowd as the fight grew. At the flash of knives, Buck balled his fists, ducked his head, and

pushed into the throng, sidestepping fists slung his way and punching bodies when they wouldn't move, intent on getting to Scrape's side.

A body slammed against him, sending him crashing to the muddy floor. He grabbed at the seat of the pants nearest him and hauled himself up, tumbling his benefactor to the floor in his place.

Scrape was still in the thick of the fight, his blond head seeming to bob along on a tide as he towered above most of the other combatants. Blood flowed from a cut over one eye but his face was aglow with the maniacal energy of the moment.

Buck reached Scrape. He knew he had to get Scrape out of the pull of violence but Scrape's taller, larger body was going to make that difficult, especially since Scrape was likely going to resist the idea with all his might.

Buck pivoted on his heel, read the crowd, chose his target, and slugged the fellow in the gut. The bearded giant doubled over briefly and then reared up, his eyes promising murder. Buck backed up against Scrape, positioning himself just so against Scrape's side. As the giant's boulder-sized fist came arching toward his head, Buck ducked and the fist smashed into Scrape's shoulder, sending Scrape reeling sideways and backwards, completely off balance.

Buck grabbed his brother's wind-milling arm and used Scrape's momentum to sweep him to the edge of the crowd, flinging him to the floor at the base of a wall.

"Now sit there, you damn fool!" Buck yelled at him.

Scrape growled and tried to get to his feet. Buck shoved him back to the floor and knelt on his chest. "God dammit, either you sit still or I'm going to bash you myself. Understand?"

The tone of his voice reached through the pulsing fog in Scrape's mind. He nodded dumbly and turned to watch the tangle of men nearest them. Buck stood guard and flung bodies back into the throng as quickly as they hurtled out of the fracas toward him.

The noise in the saloon was an inchoate roar. No longer individual voices shouting and cursing, it was a mindless bellowing that shook Buck to the roots. These were no longer single miners in combat but a massed mob of temper, frustration, and unfettered release from man's law and order.

More gunshots rang out, their sound hardly rising above the din.

Buck saw Washburn Kelly slam against the bar, his body bouncing like a rag doll, and go flopping back into the pack. Suddenly, a shrill yell rose above the rush of noise, a shriek of pain that silenced the crush of men like a switch.

To a one, they all froze, fists still raised, shirtfronts clenched, jaws tilted. Then, like a tide at ebb, the swarm of men slowly receded, away from the sight on the floor.

Washburn Kelly, the man who had slipped, lay dead on the floor, impaled on his own hunting knife, his body contorted from his last scream.

The men backed away in silence. Some lurked in corners, others lined the walls or sidled out of the saloon by the nearest exit.

Besides One-Eyed Archie and Washburn Kelly, two others lay dead on the floor. One lay dead in the middle of the room, the other against the bar, where he had been caught in the sidewash of the fray and killed.

In the silence, Mabel and Inga entered the saloon from the dry goods store. They surveyed the destruction with tight-lipped dismay.

"Run and fetch Doc Weatherbee," Mabel instructed nobody in particular. Someone rattled down the wooden steps and ran off in the direction of Doc's tent. "The rest of you, move these men outside, for God's sake."

Like shocked survivors of a natural disaster, men began moving in slow motion, feet shuffling and bloodied hands hanging loose at their sides. In pairs, they lifted the bodies of the dead men and carried them out through the saloon doors, placing them gently on the wooden slats of the porch.

"Come on, Scrape, let's get it started," said Buck, helping his brother to his feet at last. The brothers grabbed the broken tables and chairs nearest them and began stacking the debris in a corner. As they worked, others slowly joined in, not speaking, working with minds voided by the crash of violence.

A hat was tossed onto the bar counter, its owner saying quietly, "Okay, gents, fill 'er up." The men knew it wasn't up to Mabel to replace what had been shattered. It was the miners' saloon. If they smashed it, they had to rebuild it. Coins and nuggets were scraped from the floor or hauled out of deep pockets and tossed into the hats.

"Thanks, boys," Mabel said in a hushed voice. "Mighty kind of you."

In less than an hour, the saloon had been swept and the floor washed. The front window had been neatly mended with boards, and crates and boxes were set up to take the place of tables and chairs. Several miners had taken up their games and drinks as before.

Buck and Scrape returned to the dry goods store. "Any chance our supplies are ready yet, Inga?" Buck asked.

"Boxed 'em all up as soon as you hit camp, Buck," said Inga. "Like I knew something special was going to happen. Like when you smell a spring blizzard going to hit and you make ready for it without thinking? Anyway, it's all ready, if you're fixing to leave right now."

"Guess if you got what we came for we'd just as soon head back."

"Take a bottle with you since you didn't get your fill in there?" she said, motioning toward the saloon.

"There's a good old girl," said Scrape. "A man's gotta get his fill once in a while now, don't he?" He took the proffered bottle and shoved it in among the other supplies in his box.

"See you in a month, then?" she asked the brothers as they walked toward the door.

"The good Lord willing and the creek don't rise, guess you will," said Buck.

The early spring day was drawing towards afternoon as the brothers headed back up the gully to the Lucky Lois.