

*“One can survive everything nowadays,
except death, and live down everything
except a good reputation.”* Oscar Wilde

Prologue

1895

Telegraphs clacked around the world with the breaking news of the conviction of Oscar Wilde. Mr. Wilde, noted celebrity and one of the most successful playwrights, novelists, poets, and short story writers, suffered a stunning defeat when he was sentenced to two years of hard labor in prison after being convicted for “gross indecency.” Wilde’s case, one of the first tried under Britain’s recently passed Criminal Law Amendment Act, criminalized sexual activity between members of the same sex, thus changing people’s attitudes about homosexuality from a mood of pity and tolerance to hatred and abuse. The unofficial buzz in the tabloids was that Wilde was caught in the act with another male, Lord Douglas, the son of the Marquis of Queensberry, and Victorian London would have none of it. The news of trial and conviction spread fast and furiously to towns large and small around the world, exactly the kind of news story Red River Pass, a small town in Nevada, relished.

Anyone who lives within their means suffers from a lack of imagination. "Oscar Wilde

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In the middle of the night, in the sleepy town of Red River Pass, a lonely telegraph machine clicked away, with no one yet present to receive its message, delivering in Morse code the news of a writer in England who had just made legal history for being the first famous person convicted of *committing acts of gross indecency*. The news, significant as it was, would repeat hourly around the clock, with deciphered words setting in motion titillating gossip about homosexuality.

Red River Pass, a small Nevada town, had a similar incident of smaller magnitude several years back when a couple of local boys told lies about seeing two men hugging. This caused an upheaval in the lives of those men and their families. Some still believe the lies told were true, especially after one of the men committed suicide over the incident. Back then, two men hugging was bad enough; but now a man had been put on trial and thrown in prison for sexual activity with another man. The fact that this was now recognized in England as an illegal criminal act was sure to cause a frenzy.

*The early morning dry cool air had just enough breeze to send a tumbleweed or two through its empty streets, as wooden sidewalks gained new cracks, and bodies stirred to wake.

Mildred Dunlap's day started, like every other, at five-thirty sunrise. While dressing she looked out her bedroom window to a place several feet from the house to notice a six-foot sagebrush move. At first she did not see anything in the sand nearby. Then at closer view she caught sight of a sage grouse browsing leaves. The plant had not yet blossomed into the tiny yellowish white flowers that would come with

summer, still a few months away. She loved this time of year when spring starts, paving the way to summer, and her body surrendered to the warmth. A time when life begins to slow and relax in the heat, like a quiet that comes with the nighttime in a bustling city.

The good mood she was in abruptly ended when she went to her kitchen and found the beginning of a rat's nest at the bottom of a pantry. Twigs, leaves, bristles of pinecone, tiny particles of what looked like wood from a mesquite shrub, and a corner of a piece of fabric from a towel were alongside several droppings.

"Darn it!" she yelled, waking her cousin Edra from her sleep.

When Edra found her, she was in the kitchen on her knees. "What's ...?" She looked at the mess. "Oh no, I thought Ben took care of that."

"Not what I like waking up to," Mildred replied. "I know. I know." "Now I'll end up spending the day here cleaning this mess and trying to find how they're getting in." She peered in further to survey the extent of the damage and mumbled something unintelligible, then backed out in disgust. "Do I have to do everything myself?"

Edra moved closer to put a hand on Mildred's shoulder to assuage the frustration. "I can clean this up. Ben can patch the openings...you need to get the horse medicine in town."

"Ben's not coming out to work till this afternoon. If the right thing had been delivered in the first place..."

"Mil. It's just a rash on Lil," Edra commented about Mildred's horse. She knew Mildred was annoyed at having to return to town to rectify the mistake, and now this on top of it. "You hate those rats. You go to town and I'll handle this. The rest can wait till Ben gets here." Edra smiled.

Mildred softened. She didn't want to have Edra do what she herself found repulsive. "You sure?" She laughed, releasing some irritation. "I was in such a good mood when I woke up."

"By the time you get home you'll feel better." "Yeah, you're probably

right.”

*Mildred, still in a bad mood when she saw the crowd outside the telegraph office, became even more annoyed that people were milling around, not getting on with their business. When she got within earshot she heard the excited voices.

“That’s disgusting! Can you imagine...they wrote love letters to each other. That turns my stomach...two men together.” Sarah Funkle was not discrete in pointing her comment in the direction beyond her circle of friends, which happened to be in earshot of Mildred who was approaching.

“Two men together?” Josie Purdue raised her voice above the crowd, drawing a hush and attention to her. “More like five! All his past lovers came forth. Shows what an ungodly lot they all are. He deserves what he got. Throw away the key, that’s what I say. Those kinds don’t deserve to walk the face of the earth.”

“Why didn’t they throw them all in prison?” “The news says ‘they repented’ for their crimes.” “Repent? Their words don’t undo their sinful actions!” Josie was irate. “Lock ’em all away!” The women broke their conversation when they noticed Mildred near them. Josie gave Mildred a disapproving once-over as if to say, *With all your money, can’t you do better for yourself?*

“Why, hey Mildred,” greeted Sarah. Mildred nodded and tried to continue past them. “Did you hear the latest?” Josie directed her question at Mildred, in an uncharacteristically friendly manner. “Ladies,” Mildred did not take the bait but turned back for a moment to face them, “If you’ll pardon me, I have a sick horse to tend to.” She exaggerated her horse’s condition as an excuse to get away. She had already heard enough.

“I tell you, that’s the most disgusting thing I ever heard.” Josie turned back to Sarah. “Just like with Harold Simmons and Bert Langley. And to think it happened right here in our God-fearing town. The nerve... I shudder to think what would have become of things if the Parker boys hadn’t found them. That whole lot deserved what they got!”

The edge in Josie's voice with the mention of the Parker boys sent a chill down Mildred's spine. A hot flush surged through her as she recalled the incident that happened several years back. The Parker boys were out playing by the lake when they ran across Harold Simmons hugging Bert Langley. When the Parker boys ran home and told their parents, they exaggerated what they saw. "They were kissing, starting to undress..." said the younger Parker boy to his father. Within twenty-four hours two families were thrown into irreversible turmoil. "Two men don't do things like that," spread like wildfire. Five days after the incident, Harold Simmons took a gun to his head and blew his brains out. A week later, both families moved from Red River Pass.

Although she could not make full sense out of what all the commotion was about, the voices, screeching about Wilde and the Parker boys, echoed in Mildred's head as she moved through the crowd into the office where she saw Satchel Purdue busy chattering with several people from town. None of them appeared to be doing any business with him, which further irritated her. She found a spot to write the telegram she had come in to send.

"Yes, it's a busy day here. This'll keep Josie going for months," Satchel laughed, referring to his wife. "She's been at it all morning and..." The sound of ticking from the telegraph machine distracted him. "Excuse me. I better see what this is and get anything new over to Gus's public noticeboard."

Mildred knew Satchel was right about Josie. She thought of them, Josie and Satchel, going at it together. An odd couple they were: he with his tall stiff appearance befitting a telegraph operator whose glasses fogged up with the mention of his wife's name—a thin body and neck that mildly bulged over a tight shirt collar supporting a face that housed wrinkles belying his age, just into his forties; and she loose in her five-foot-four figure with excessively endowed breasts and hips that drew even more attention to her shrill voice.

In contrast to Mildred, Josie thrived on being the center of attention. Outside of them both being women, there was absolutely no similarity in appearance between the two. Whereas Mildred was a large woman

with a face masculine in appearance, Josie was pretty in a feminine way with curved lips and eyebrows that accentuated her blue-green eyes and overly dilated pupils seeming always to be alert like an animal stalking prey. Were Josie to have a different personality or attitude she could be beautiful, like Edra, but her demeanor was so distasteful with constant faultfinding in others that it cast a dark ugliness over her. The mere comparison of Edra to Josie, for Mildred, was like comparing good with evil, beauty with ugliness, complete opposites that had nothing desirable in common. Mildred was distracted from her thoughts by the chattering machine that was taking forever to deliver its message. The longer the ticking occurred with everyone's attention riveted on Satchel, and the more time that passed, the more aggravated she became.

“Anything?” Several in the room kept asking while Mildred contained her fury and waited for him to finish.

Satchel took notes on the dots and dashes then turned to the group with a disappointed look, “Nothing about that Wilde fellow.” He looked at Mildred waiting at the counter. “What can I do for you?”

She tried not to let her emotions show when she handed him her telegram. “Can you send this today?”

The machine started to click again. “Yeah, sure...” He turned around to see what was arriving, and without looking back at her said, “Just leave it on the counter.”

She wanted to wait, to insist he send it, and felt put upon with how unprofessionally he conducted his business. But, as usual, she said nothing and left. She wound her way back out through the crowd that had gathered a few more stragglers. The last thing she heard was, “Hanging isn't good enough for the likes of them.” That comment sent her gut into a knotted tension as she made her way down the wooden walkway of the main street. She noticed how dull and devoid of life everything appeared. Dirt in the road was loose from the dry winter sending billows of dust following footsteps, tumbleweeds following horses. Buildings, in need of new paint, looked dreary. Even the

women dressed in various shades of colors looked drab. She thought of Edra, her cousin, out at the ranch alone and her heart grew heavy. *What if...* It was futile to try to stop the replay of the telegraph office conversations.

She passed the sheriff's office where she noticed through the open door overweight Sheriff Matt Roper sitting at his desk with his feet up, stuffing a piece of pie into his mouth and talking to Deputy Jake Cummings. The minute Roper caught sight of Mildred he jumped up and lumbered out of his office.

"Mildred!" He wiped some crumbs from the side of his mouth onto his already dirty pant leg.

Mildred felt the tension in the back of her neck rise to the top of her skull. She turned around when she heard her name called and harsh footsteps banging on the planks approached her. "Yes, Matt." She moved a hand to the nape of her neck to rub a tender spot.

"Hey, Mildred. About that loan you authorized at the bank last fall..."

Mildred looked on, preoccupied by the throbbing behind her eyes. "I reckon we'll be able to start making payments next month." Mildred winced. "You okay, Mildred?"

"Why yes," she lied. "Lot of commotion going on at the telegraph office this morning." She wasn't good at small talk but this was the only thing that came to her, which she regretted the minute she said it.

"Good thing they put that guy in prison. Tell you this, he's lucky he wasn't shot on the spot. Me? I know what I'd a done. Hang the..."

Mildred, preoccupied, heard jumbled words coming at her that made no sense.

"Two men together..." Matt's face flushed. "Not the thing for me to be talking about with a lady, Mildred. I better mind my manners."

Anxiety gripped her chest, making it difficult to get air in. "I better be

getting on now. I have a sick horse I need to tend to.”

“Yeah, well. Just wanted to thank you again for all your help. We’ll be getting to those payments.”

“Just pay when you can.” She turned to walk away.

“Sure thing, thanks.” Roper’s voice trailed after her as he watched her walk down the street past the bank. When he was sure she was out of earshot, he walked to the door of his office and laughed to Jake, “Man, that’s one ugly woman. To think I just called her a lady.”

“More like a cow, a giant cow. Man, that’s one tall giant cow,” Jake laughed.

Town talk about Mildred centered on her plain appearance, a slightly prematurely receding hairline with some facial hair above her lip, muscles that showed through her dress sleeves like a man’s through his shirt, and a height that towered over a lot of the men at close to six feet. She did not take a liking to dressing herself fashionably, instead finding comfort in simple attire that served a purpose for riding Lil and overseeing ranch work. Her looks, the way she dressed, her wealth, even her relationship with Edra brought her constant criticism. It mattered not that she was generous to a fault and helped support anyone in need when occasion arose nor that she forwent more than half of those she loaned money to when they failed to pay her back.

*At the northeast corner of the block, business as usual was going on in Gus Spivey’s General Store when Mildred entered and was instantly taken by the aroma of cinnamon. She moved past displays of tins of biscuits and jars of hard candies and approached where Gus was piling up bolts of fabrics next to the boxes of buttons, needles, threads, and other sewing items. One of the ends of the bolts came loose, sending a bin of nails, screws, latches, and other hardware flying to the floor.

“Damn it!” He placed the bolt of cloth on a shelf then turned to see Mildred behind him. The bowtie tightened around his neck.

“Apologies, Mildred. Didn’t see you there. How can I help you?”Gus

had a kind face that suited him well. He was a pudgy man who wore circular glasses that were always slipping down his nose, and when he talked his stubby little finger would constantly have to readjust them to get the blur to disappear. He liked his work and catering to people in town and knew no enemies, for he went out of his way to be amicable. Whereas Satchel's telegraph office brought gossip into it freely, Gus's store rarely harbored more than a few sentences passed along from customers to him. He tended to curb things from getting out of hand, with rare exceptions (of which this day was one), and he was frazzled by all the commotion. But, like Mildred, it was his habit to keep his inside to himself. Mildred took in the mess splattered over the floor. "Take a minute to clean that up so you don't go and hurt yourself. I'll just take a look around." She was glad she had a minute to catch her breath, to distract her attention from how she was feeling. She went to the display of canned goods, spices, and coffee. She took hold of a canister of tea, then walked over to take a look at the new crockery, pots and pans Gus must have received since her last visit to town.

A crowd began to gather around the noticeboard at the end of the aisle where Gus posted the latest news, including telegrams, for the town to read. When Mildred moved into range she heard the same commotion going on, mainly women chattering, that she had heard at the telegraph office just a short while before. She quickly moved back to where Gus was after he had all but cleaned up. She put the canister of tea and several other items she had chosen from the shelves down on the counter.

"I think I got it all now. Thanks for your patience, Mildred." Gus looked at her and then to the crowd. "That poor guy met a bad lot."

Mildred drew in a slow breath through her nostrils, noting what she thought was a tone of sympathy in Gus's voice.

"Will this be all for you, Mildred?"

"Yes." She hesitated a moment then decided to comment on why she came in.

“That horse medicine you ordered, the wrong one arrived.”

“Oh no, I’m sorry, Mildred. I don’t know how that could have happened.”

The din of the crowd rose. “If that guy would’ve been churchgoing, he wouldn’t have sunk to such evil!”

“Perversion!” “It’s a mockery of God. I tell you it’s a slap in the face of the Lord.” Gus noticed Mildred’s distraction. “They’ll be going at it for weeks over this one.” He was trying to say he was sorry that there wasn’t much he could do about it and wished she didn’t have to hear it.

Although Gus smiled at Mildred, it did nothing to calm the feeling of nausea rising in her belly. She paid for the items she’d gathered and made her way out of the store. The crowd’s words rang in her mind: *churchgoing...violating the Lord...church...along* with surfacing images of her beloved deceased father Max. Even though she never understood or questioned the wisdom of her father’s aversion to going to church, Mildred had worshiped him. Her mother Sadie had spent years pleading with her husband to go until, with utter hopelessness, she gave up and let him be. Although Mildred never cared for attending church, she did continue her mother’s tradition of making generous annual contributions. Josie rumored that it must be hush money. While Max was alive there were whispers around town because he did not attend but no one dared say as much to his face. After his and Sadie’s death, Josie Purdue stopped being careful with her talk, persecuting Mildred at every opportunity. While Mildred was generous in helping people financially when need arose, it did not stop them from joining Josie in the shunning, ridicule, and mean-spirited gossip. No one dare butt up against Josie’s forceful personality to gain an understanding of why she had such a strong distaste for Mildred, which ran deeper than jealousy, nor did they chance her wrath by disagreeing.

As she left, Mildred noted that Josie was now at the public notice-board loudly voicing her opinion. “Homosexuality is officially illegal. We didn’t need England to tell us it’s a vile criminal act! Shooting is too good for him.”

Even though Mildred knew Josie's comment wasn't directed at her, unlike earlier times when Josie accused her of being sinful for not attending church, she felt the sting. She had never worried about an escalation to something dangerous before, but after all she'd heard this morning, she was no longer sure. She knew Josie could no longer be ignored. As she rode back to her place soaked in sweat from worry, she tried to think of what she could do were things to get out of hand. When she passed the Whitmore's ranch, a couple of miles from her place, she had an idea. By the time she arrived home, it had percolated into a plan she was sure would work. It took her a couple of hours to convince Edra.