

## **Riders of the Purple Stage**

By J.E.S. Hays

Devon Day and the Sweetwater Kid, that dashing pair of outlaws, were on the way home for a hard-earned rest. Or rather, their above-suspicion alter egos, Kye Devon and Chance Knight, were currently stuffed into the brightly colored stagecoach on the way to Reno. There, they could obtain a more civilized form of travel on the newly completed railroad line.

Chance was looking forward to a first-class seat on that train the way a man in the desert looks forward to a cool beer. And didn't that sound nearly as good, with all the dust filtering in through the coach's open windows? A nice, tall glass of beer, a hand-rolled cigar, and maybe a steak supper in the dining car.

The stagecoach hit another hole and Chance was shaken from his happy reverie. A man couldn't even relax and get a good nap on one of these contraptions. Not with every seat taken and your feet propped up on the mail. And the only seats available had been at the front, where you were riding backwards, your knees interlocked with those of the middle passengers facing forward. The whole coach smelled of horse dung, new leather, and desert sand. Thunderation, it was practically 1870. You'd think the country could afford a decent public transportation system.

The coach swayed. The pretty lady to Chance's left let out a faint "oof" as she bounced nearly into his lap. Chance put out a hand to steady her—then slapped it against the slender fingers currently investigating his jacket pocket.

"That's hardly polite," he murmured as she jerked her hand away, empty. Chance actually kept nothing but his cigarette makings in that pocket, but the lady did have a smooth touch.

Another fellow would have felt nothing until he'd reached the end of the trail and found his pockets empty.

The burly man across from the lady frowned. "Eulamae, we done talked about this."

The lady froze, her already-pale cheeks going the color of the snow atop the mountains. "Aw, Marshal!"

At that, Chance also froze—as did his partner, to the lady's other side. Chance must be getting old not to spot a lawman at this distance. He forced his shoulders to relax, adjusted his body language. This man wasn't after him. The odds of him having heard of the Nevada Queen payroll robbery yet were slim.

Chance still swallowed hard as the man pulled out a pair of handcuffs. He and Kye had never been caught, but that didn't mean the sight of the paraphernalia wasn't leaving beads of sweat along Chance's forehead.

The marshal nodded to Chance. "Best check your other pockets, son. Make sure she didn't get your wallet." He gestured to Eulamae, who sighed and held out her wrists for the cuffs. "Just remember, I was willing to let you ride comfortably. You're the one who couldn't control yourself."

"Aw, Marshal," Eulamae repeated. "How's a girl supposed to resist a chance like that?"

Chance had to smile at the unintended play on his name. And after all, it was a well-known fact that women found his thick, dark curls irresistible. When they weren't gray with trail dust, that is. He made a show of checking his wallet, though he knew Eulamae hadn't had her sticky fingers anywhere near it.

"Everything's here, Marshal," he reported. Just another law-abiding citizen—nothing to see here.

“What about you?” the marshal asked Kye, who’d frozen like a hare facing a coiled rattler.

“Did she get anything?”

Kye shook himself. He darted a glance at Eulamae, who’d slouched in her seat with her lower lip protruding.

“Better check,” Chance said, leaning forward to give his partner a good, stern glare. “Make sure your wallet’s still there.”

“Oh ... er ... yeah, it’s fine.” Kye pulled out his slender wallet and counted the bills. Neither of them carried much cash openly. The hidden compartments at the bottom of their carpetbags did an excellent job of that.

Now, though, Chance had the wild notion the marshal could spot that tiny extra layer in the bag on his lap, would know the paper bills stored there were what was left of the Nevada Queen’s payroll—after they’d bought shares in her competitor, the Ruby. He and Kye had visited every little town between the mines and Unionville, changing a few hundred dollars at a time so there would be no way of connecting them to a large sum of money with traceable serial numbers. They hadn’t gotten everything yet, though. They’d been counting on changing the last of it in Reno.

The marshal, however, merely glared at Eulamae, who shrugged. “Good thing you didn’t get away with anything this time.”

The prissy looking gentleman to the marshal’s right spoke up. “I suppose this is why you’re taking the young ... er...lady in, sir?” Chance had him pegged as a pastor or a schoolteacher. His fingers were ink-stained and he looked as if a good breeze might topple him.

The marshal nodded. “Eulamae here’s wanted in California for trial. She was pretending to be a French princess. Conned a whole bunch of gullible folks out of their money and jewelry.”

“Allegedly,” Eulamae said sharply.

The marshal nodded. “Allegedly. Until the judge makes it official.”

The slender fellow gave a sniff like he’d never heard of such a thing as a criminal. “The name’s Loftis. I’m bound for California myself. I have a teaching job waiting for me.”

The marshal tipped his hat. “Ephraim Pitts.” He turned to the burly man on his other side and raised an eyebrow.

If this one hadn’t been wearing a robe, Chance would have never picked him out as a religious man. He was built like the proverbial ox, with shoulders broad enough to squeeze the marshal and schoolmaster up against the far wall of the coach. Now, he smiled and said his name was Father John. “On my way to my new flock in Reno,” he told them.

With the ice broken, they quickly learned the passengers in the back seats were Grandpa and Grandma Keeler, headed out to visit their latest grandchild, and a peddler, Sanderson by name, a battered case on his lap. Not that knowing any of this alleviated the discomfort of stagecoach travel, but at least now they could name whose toes they were trampling.

Chance shot a glance at his partner. Kye still looked way too nervous for a law-abiding citizen. Chance cleared his throat loudly and Kye started.

I don’t suppose anyone has such a thing as a newspaper or novel with them?” Chance asked.

“My schoolbooks are in my trunk, young man,” said Loftis with another sniff. “Atop the coach.”

Just as well. Chance had no desire to be read to from anything that reminded him of his miserable days in the schoolhouse. He glanced around at the other passengers.

Peddler Sanderson spoke up. “I have a newspaper,” he said, pulling the folded sheets from his pocket. “Were you interested in anything in particular?”

“Just something to pass the time, friend. Would you care to read or shall I?”

Sanderson read in a monotone, as if reciting in front of the schoolmaster. Better than silence, though. Unfortunately, the first headline brought the sweat back to Chance’s forehead. “Nevada Queen Payroll Robbed. Devon Day and the Sweetwater Kid At It Again.”

“Now there’s a couple of fellows I wouldn’t mind hooking up with,” Eulamae murmured. The marshal shot her a glare.

As they listened to the dastardly exploits of those two reprobates, Chance relaxed and found himself hard pressed to keep a smile from creasing his cheeks. Tarnation, but Eulamae was right—what a pair! The law was baffled, as usual, by the crime, which had been accomplished with split-second precision. Just as the armed escort had cleared a narrow canyon, Devon Day’s trusty explosive skills had brought down half of the hillside, stranding the payroll wagon on the other side. By the time the guards had made their way over the blockage, the payroll—and the outlaws—were gone.

“Hooligans,” Schoolmaster Loftis pronounced when Sanderson finished the article. “They probably dropped out of school, too.”

In fact, Chance had. Not because it had been hard, of course, but because he’d been bored out of his skull. Kye, on the other hand, had stuck it out until the deaths of his parents forced him to look for work to support his younger siblings.

The marshal shifted in his seat. “They’ll get theirs in time,” he rumbled. “Nobody escapes the law forever. Right, Eulamae?”

The lady folded her arms and glowered.

“Be nice to have that kind of money, though, wouldn’t it?” Grandpa Keeler ventured. “Imagine what you could do with \$10,000.”

“Probably already blew it on wine, women, and song,” the marshal retorted.

Chance wanted to educate the man on the wisdom of investing one’s hard-earned gains. He clamped his lips together though. The less the marshal thought about that robbery, the better. Luckily, the next newspaper article was about the new railroad connecting Reno to the rest of the country. Chance settled back and tried to relax.

The stagecoach made several “swing” station stops, where they just exchanged the team for fresh horses, but around noon, they stopped at a proper way station and were treated to what passed for fine dining out here in the wilderness. Beans and cornbread, that is, and Chance had his questions about the quality of the former. Especially as the aroma that greeted them within the adobe hut reminded him more of last week’s fireplace than fresh food.

“Watch out for Paiutes,” the station master warned as they headed back towards the stage. “They’ve been up in arms lately.”

Chance exchanged a look with his partner. That was all they needed. He knew better than to ask if they could delay travel though—the mail must go through. Passengers were incidental.

Back in the stagecoach, Kye pulled out his box of cartridges and laid it atop the carpetbag in his lap. Chance followed his lead, although his gun skills left a bit to be desired, according to his partner. Chance wasn’t about to part with one of his prized blades, though, so pistols it would have to be.

“I don’t suppose you’re peddling revolvers?” Marshal Pitts asked Sanderson, who shrugged.

“Ladies’ notions,” he replied.

“Well, we can’t throw notions at a Paiute.”

“Sorry.”

“There’s no guarantee we’ll even run into trouble,” said Grandpa Keeler.

The marshal nodded. "It's just best to be prepared."

"Grandma and I got you covered," Grandpa Keeler pulled an enormous Smith and Wesson Number 2 from his bag. Grandma's looked even larger in her petite fist. Chance's eyebrow rose.

She gave him a grin. "This old fellow's picked off many an Indian, young man."

Chance had a thought. "Kye, you still got that old LeMat revolver you picked up?"

He meant the one they'd relieved from the payroll driver. Kye dug around in his bag and came up with the firearm.

"Who doesn't have a weapon?" Chance asked, looking pointedly at the schoolmaster, who blanched.

Father John held out one brawny fist. "I think I still remember how it works, God forgive me."

Eulamae shifted in her seat. "What about me? You can't leave me helpless with murderous Indians roaming around."

Marshall Pitts gave her the eye. "Ain't nobody giving you a weapon, Eulamae."

"Well, at least take the handcuffs off so I can die a free woman."

"You should be on the stage," came the reply.

Eulamae aimed a kick at the marshal's shin, but the stagecoach hit a pothole and she connected with Father John instead. The big man winced but said nothing. Eulamae stuck out her lower lip and subsided into a pout once more.

As the day wore on, the tension inside the coach lessened. A man just couldn't stay on edge forever. The longer the expected Paiute raid held off, the more relaxed everyone became. Everyone except for three passengers. Marshall Pitts still kept a wary eye on the road as the sun began to sink below the horizon. Hostile Indians wouldn't catch that man napping.

Chance and Kye were on the alert as well, more from habit than from knowledge of Paiute custom. In their line of work, a man had to stay on his toes in case a lawman suddenly popped up, pistol in hand. Like the one currently sitting across from Eulamae. As the orange light began to fade into gray, Chance peered out the window to his right.

“It’s a well-known fact,” said the schoolmaster, “that Indians will not attack after dark.”

Marshall Pitts snorted. “Somebody better tell the Indians about it, then. I’ve seen plenty of night raids.”

Well, it wasn’t as if it’d be the first time Chance and Kye had slept in watches. “Maybe we should take turns keeping an eye out,” Chance suggested, giving the schoolmaster a pointed look. The man had been nodding in his seat all afternoon.

Loftis didn’t even have the grace to blush. “Who could sleep on this road?”

Chance rolled his eyes and gave it up. Not even worth the trouble to prick the guy’s temper. He kept quiet as Marshall Pitts assigned watches to the male passengers.

“I could help keep watch,” Eulamae spoke up.

“You’re one of the things we’re watching,” came the reply.

Chance ended up with the midnight watch, which suited him. He was a night owl anyway. The stage made one more stop for supper, then Chance settled back in his seat and tried to doze off. Not easy with Father John’s oversized knees interlaced with his. And the inevitable potholes. And the swaying of the coach on its straps. Eulamae snuggled up against his side, burrowing her elbow into his ribs.

Chance gave it up as a lost cause. Eventually, he’d be so exhausted he’d have to doze, but for now, he stared out the window into the darkness, wondering how any of them were supposed to



even spot a Paiute. At least the moon was nearly full, painting the landscape with its pale beams. Everything looked gray though, with enough black shadow to hide several tribes of Indians.

At midnight, the marshal nudged Chance with his knee, then dropped his head onto his chest, seemingly asleep as he sat. Chance wondered how that worked, without even an armrest to hold onto. He supposed Pitts was wedged in so tightly he couldn't fall over. Eulamae had been dozing for hours, her head lolling against Chance's shoulder, her mouth slightly open. Her teeth were in fine condition.

The stagecoach rolled on, rocking and swaying and bouncing over potholes. They made three more swing stops to trade horses. Most of the passengers didn't even wake up during the brief pauses. Chance kept his eyes open and his ears pricked. Surely a band of murderous Paiutes would come at them whooping and hollering. He wondered if they'd have firearms or just bows and arrows. He didn't know which choice was worse: being felled with a nice, quick bullet or a slow, barbed arrowhead.

By the time dawn broke, Chance was almost disappointed to have seen not one Paiute warrior. They had only another day's travel before they reached the railroad in Reno. He and Kye would hole up in the Reno Arms hotel for the night and catch the early train tomorrow morning for San Francisco. After this ride, they deserved some rest.

Following the breakfast stop—Chance thought this morning's beans might be from the same bag that first station master had served—the stage made two more swing stops, then headed out across a small valley. The passengers were currently listening to Granma Keeler's Bible, read aloud by Grandpa. Chance himself could take it or leave it, but it seemed to keep the rest of the folks calm, so he leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

Crack!

Chance's eyes flew open. That was a gunshot. He glanced to his right. Thunderation, that was a Paiute. Black eyes stared coldly into Chance's. The painted face was set in a grimace. The spotted pony he rode galloped hell bent for leather alongside the stagecoach. And not one whoop nor holler. Where in the name of all that's holy did he—and the rest of the blasted band!— come from? There was no cover anywhere in this valley.

When facing the wrong end of a rifle barrel, one doesn't quibble about a little thing like cover. Chance opened fire. The Paiute fell back. He didn't fall off, though. Chance risked a quick peek out, tried to aim his pistol.

A horse went down behind the stage. No telling if Chance had hit it or if it had stepped in a prairie dog hole. Beside him, Chance heard the rapid thunder of Kye's Colt. That would pick some of the devils off. Kye could hit the wings off a fly at twenty paces.

Movement to his left jostled Chance's aim. His next shot went wild. He glanced over to find Marshall Pits had traded places with Eulamae. A painted warrior rushed Kye's side of the coach. The marshal extended his arm and fired. The Paiute went down.

"Thanks," Kye said, his fingers busy reloading the Colt.

Father John had one of the doors open, shielding behind it as he fired the LeMat. After each shot, he'd mutter something. Chance leaned closer to hear.

Crack. "God forgive me."

From the other side of the coach, Grandpa and Grandma let fly with a hail of bullets, first one old gun booming, then the other. The acrid tang of gun smoke stung Chance's nose.

Sanderson clutched his supply case to his chest and aimed a little pocket derringer out his window. "I think they're going to rush us," he called.

In a thunder of hoofbeats, the band surrounded the stagecoach. Chance fired blindly out his window. One Paiute jerked back, tumbled from his horse. Another took his place.

“Reload,” Chance called to the marshal, who stretched his arm out the window while Chance thumbed fresh cartridges into his revolver. From atop the stage, the boom of a shotgun sounded.

Suddenly Chance was nose to nose with a painted warrior. He’d leaped from his horse, clinging to the side of the coach. One arm snaked inside, a knife in the fist. Chance grabbed the wiry wrist. The Paiute got off a slice, hit the carpetbag. For an instant, the knife caught in the thick fabric. The Paiute grunted and yanked it free. Then Chance’s good left hand had found his own blade beneath his lapel.

The Paiute’s eyes widened at the sight of the smaller knife. He grinned and pulled his wrist free of Chance’s grasp. He swung his arm back, ready to strike. Chance’s hand darted forward, towards his chest. For an instant, the Paiute clung to the door, arm upraised. Then the arm muscles Chance had sliced through gave way, dropping the warrior from the side.

Another Paiute tried the same stunt, only to meet Father John’s pistol barrel. The priest pulled the trigger, then crossed himself.

Chance glanced to his left. Kye was grappling with another Paiute, this one practically inside the coach. Chance reached across the marshal’s lap, sliced once, twice. The Paiute’s arm went limp. His knife fell from his fingers. Kye shoved the man backwards through the window. He dropped away.

One more rush, met with gunfire from within and atop the stage, and the Paiutes fell back. Chance drew a breath. The coach hit a pothole, flinging Eulamae and the schoolmaster into the air. Eulamae landed on Chance’s lap.

“You were so brave,” she cried, planting a kiss on his cheek.

Chance strong-armed her back to her seat and retrieved his carpetbag, which had fallen to the floor. As he tugged it back onto his lap, his heart thudded. A thick stack of green bills peeked from the rip the Paiute had made in the cloth. He lifted his gaze just in time to catch Eulamae adjusting the fit of her bust line.

Chance held out a hand. Eulamae gave him a blank look.

“C’mon,” Chance said, “where are you planning to spend that once you’re in jail?”

She stiffened. “I ain’t had no trial yet.” One hand clutched the visible bulge in the middle of her bosom.

“Eulamae, what in tarnation are you up to now?” Marshal Pitts asked. He shot a look in Chance’s direction. Chance was a hair slow covering up the rip in his carpetbag. The marshal’s right eyebrow rose.

Time for a little diversion. Chance tucked the bills back into their compartment while he stared directly into the marshal’s suspicious gaze. “This doesn’t belong to me,” he said, that being strictly true.

On the marshal’s other side, Kye let out a choked cough.

Pitts raised his other eyebrow. He glanced at Eulamae, who shrugged.

Chance cut loose with a talent he rarely resorted to. Tears welled up in his eyes. One rolled down his left cheek. “This money,” he said, “is all I have left of my dear old grandmother, may she rest in peace. She always wanted me to see the world.”

The marshal took one look at the waterworks, as Chance had hoped, and dropped his gaze to the floor. No grown man liked to watch another weep, no matter how young that other man appeared. Chance took the opportunity to snatch some of the bills peeking from Eulamae’s bust line. She let out a squawk that got the marshal’s attention.

Chance sniffed hard, throwing in a little quaver at the end, like he was about to burst into sobs. The marshal heaved a melodramatic sigh.

“For Pete’s sake, Eulamae, give the boy back his money.”

Eulamae opened her mouth. The marshal gave her a hard glare that had her closing it again. Her shoulders sagged. She dug the rest of the wad she’d stolen out of her bosom and threw it at Chance. The bills scattered over his lap and he collected them quickly.

Not quickly enough. Grandpa Keeler let out a surprised whistle. “How much you got there, son?”

The schoolmaster looked down his nose as Chance tucked everything back into the hidden compartment. “A boy your age shouldn’t be trusted with that much money.”

Chance let out a sigh of his own. Sometimes Fate was a witch. Just when he didn’t want anyone connecting his name with a large pile of cash, that blasted Paiute had made sure exactly that happened. How long would it be before someone put two and two together?

Chance ran his sleeve underneath his nose to remind them he’d been crying. He let a couple more tears leak out. “Would anyone have such a thing as a sewing kit?”

Grandma Keeler dug into her large reticule. “Always carry a needle and spool of thread, young man. It’s the wrong color, but—”

Chance barely kept from snatching the spool out of her fingers. “It’s fine.”

He wiped his blade off with a handkerchief and busied himself stitching up the long rent in the bag. Grandma could probably make a neater line, but the less anyone else saw of that money, the better. He tied a final knot, snipped off the thread, and handed Grandma back her sewing gear.

Just in time, too. The stage swung into the next station, where they'd be offered what they optimistically called lunch. Chance had lost his appetite. He climbed down with the rest of the passengers, though, standing next to Kye beside the coach as the others filed inside.

"Now what?" Kye muttered. "That marshal's going to figure it out. How are we going to get out of this?"

Chance shook his head. "We can't just steal horses and ride away. That'd cinch it. I'll have to stick to the grandmother story."

Kye snorted. "Dear old grandmother—couldn't you have come up with something better than that?"

"You're lucky I noticed the damn bag was ripped before everything fell out."

Kye patted his own bag, thankfully unmarked from the battle. "At least we got this much if the marshal decides to confiscate your half."

Chance gave him the side eye. You'd think, after all these years riding together, a man would trust his partner a little more.

"Nobody's going to confiscate anything," he said, "but we'd best get inside and eat something before they get suspicious."

He had to force himself to down a few spoonfuls of the expected beans. At least the cornbread was edible. They couldn't get to Reno fast enough though. A man just couldn't live on beans.

As they ate, the driver filled the station master in on the Paiute attack. "We'll telegraph the main office once we get to Reno this afternoon," he said, shoving to his feet and clapping his hat back onto his head. "And if we're to make it, folks, we'd best get back into the coach."

Chance climbed in last. Eulamae was back in her original seat to his left, between himself and his partner. She gave him a disgusted look as he squeezed into his seat, then turned her face pointedly toward Kye's window.

"Now, son," Marshal Pitts said as the stagecoach started rolling, "about that money—"

Chance clenched his jaw and managed not to roll his eyes. He might have known the man wasn't going to turn loose of that. Chance had used up his entire arsenal of guile already. What more could he add to his story? On Eulamae's other side, Kye's posture stiffened. His right hand rested on his belt buckle, inches from his Colt.

"—you'd best put the whole lot straight into the Bank of Reno," the marshal finished. He looked Chance in the eye, his brows lowered. "Young fellow like you, you might think you're safe carrying that much around, but I've seen men shot dead for less. Put it out of temptation's way."

"He's right, young man," Grandpa Keeler put in. "With a bank, you have what you need wired to your account within minutes. And no flashy bills attracting attention."

Chance let his shoulders sag as though he'd taken their advice to heart. Rather than the grin that wanted to stretch his lips, he put on a Chastised Face. "I suppose it was silly to carry it all with me."

Just to cinch the deal, he let a couple more tears well up. "I was just trying to honor poor old Grandma's last wishes."

Father John put a beefy hand on Chance's shoulder. "Just remember to share your wealth with God, young man."

Chance nodded, though the God he believed in wasn't short of cash. Some of their hard-earned bills would find their way into the coffers of San Francisco's charities, though. He

and Kye liked to support good works that actually did what they were purported to do. Now, he took a deep breath as the priest removed his heavy hand.

“I’ll be careful,” he said, looking each of the other passengers in the eye in turn. “As soon as we get to Reno, I’ll stop by the bank.”

That much was true anyway. Now, more than ever, they needed to swap the last of the large, traceable bills for smaller ones with different serial numbers.

“What I want to know,” Sanderson said, his tone puzzled, “is where in Hades—‘scuse me Grandma!—those Paiutes came from?”

Chance shrugged. “I sure didn’t see any cover in that valley.”

“I’ve heard of something similar,” the marshal replied. “They tie up the front leg of each horse so’s it has to lie down. Then the whole blasted band just lays there until it’s time to attack. One slice with a knife and the horse is back on its feet again.”

Chance had to admire the Indians. That was a plan worthy of the great Sweetwater Kid. In fact, he might use the idea himself someday. He just had to come up with the right scheme.

The stagecoach rolled into Reno just after 4:00. Chance climbed down, feeling as old as Grandpa Keeler. He leaned against the dusty purple door of the coach, trying to stretch out his aching back. There had to be a better way to travel.

Reno wasn’t much to look at: the big toll bridge, one main street lined with brick and stone buildings, a couple of church steeples off to the sides, and a scattering of private dwellings. It smelled of wood smoke and river mud. A few citizens wandered the town’s street, most of them huddled together in front of what looked like a newsstand. Word of the Nevada Queen robbery must have gotten this far.



Tipping his hat to Grandpa and Grandma Keeler, Chance hefted his carpetbag and headed pointedly toward the large bank visible at the end of the block. Kye fell in behind him. As they drew near the newsstand, the reason for the small knot of onlookers became apparent. The newsboy waved a copy in their direction, bellowing.

“Devon Day and the Sweetwater Kid Hit Unionville Bank! Read all about it!”

Numbly, Chance took a paper, handing over a couple of coins. The headline was exactly as bellowed. Some lowlife was impersonating them!

“They must have been right behind us,” Marshall Pitts spoke up from Chance’s right side. “If they hit Unionville yesterday, we may even have seen them as we pulled out of town.”

Chance mumbled something the marshal must have taken for assent. His vision was going red. The unmitigated gall of some people.

This was going to require a Plan, and soon. The world must know that Devon Day and the Sweetwater Kid would not tolerate impersonators, whether or not they got away with the money. Chance ramped his brain up to full speed, barely aware of the marshal walking along beside them.

“Eulamae and I will walk you to the bank,” he was saying. “The jail’s just beyond.”

“You got no heart, Marshal,” Eulamae said. “How could you turn me in after all we’ve been through together?”

“Write a letter to your senator, Eulamae.”

An official letter—that would do it. Straight from the mouth of the Sweetwater Kid. He’d copy down the serial numbers of some of the bills they still had in the carpetbag to prove it was really them. Then denounce those imposters as the incompetent oafs they were. He and Kye would never have hit such a small bank.

“Just think,” Marshal Pitts was saying, “if we’d been delayed, Devon Day and the Sweetwater Kid might have held up our stagecoach. Can you imagine running into that pair of owl hoots?”

“Nope,” Kye muttered from Chance’s other side.

“You’d better get your money straight into that bank,” Pitts said as they reached the proper door. “Just think if you’d had to hand it all over to a ruthless outlaw.”

Chance had the presence of mind to tip his hat to the marshal and Eulamae as they crossed the street to the jail. Then, he grabbed Kye’s arm and hauled him back around.

“Where we going? I thought we was gonna change out—”

“Change of plans,” Chance told him, striding towards the hotel. “We’ve got a letter to write.”

END

Author’s Note: on July 3, 1868, a band of Paiutes used the same trick I’ve described to ambush a group of wagons along the Silver City Road in southeastern Oregon.