FOOL'S BLOOD

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HOT STINKING BREATHS gusted Billy's chilled skin as he stared up at the stars in front of his newly purchased mine in Elko, Nevada. Billy glanced at the dark hole that reminded him of a man screaming through a broken jaw, but that didn't quell his excitement for staking out a claim in his name. He owned something now, a piece of land he could pass down to a new generation of Hills. The thought tingled the base of his neck as if mice scurried around it. He only wished his pa were alive to see it all.

'Go west' were William Hill Senior's last words as he passed on cradled in Billy's arms, unable to fight off the sickness that came with taking a bluebelly bayonet through his gut. Being the last two Hills from Jackson Parish, Billy thanked the Lord he and his pa got to serve together in the Twelfth. All three of Billy's brothers would've been jealous had any of them survived. Their pa was one of the best Jackson Sharpshooters in Buford's Brigade.

It had taken him three years to settle his family's affairs and gather up the money after the war, but Billy wanted nothing more than to up and leave home. Life in the South had changed, and as eager as the prospects had made him when his pa was alive, his pa's *'West'* wasn't anything like either one of them had imagined and talked about.

A low moan resonated from the dark mouth in the rockface and rattled Billy's chest.

"Just the wind," he said, knowing full well no wind he'd ever heard before made that sound. But since he'd got to Elko and its endless desert of rocks, dirt, and bramble, strange noises came in abundance.

Unable to sleep under the bright light of the moon, he sat up and shook his sleeves, and then gently swiped at them with the backs of his hands. Scorpions dropped to the ground. Wary, their stingers up, they took their time moving away. Billy pricked his ears and listened for the slow rattle of a snake. He knew better than to make any sudden movements. Three

weeks' time was all it took him to learn the most important things. Well, that and the townsfolk were plenty eager to give Billy advice on just about everything. Mighty helpful while he handed over his money. Not so much when he'd got low. It was up to him now to get to work mining. If he made money, they made money. They'd be friendly again. He learned that quick too. His pa would be proud of how smart he'd gotten.

He stood and stretched, hesitant about crawling through the low, cramped entrance to begin digging. For the second time in his life, he was thankful to be thin and small. The first and last time he'd gone inside was before he bought it. About twenty feet in, one shaft forked into two. 'Delgado digs 'em tight as a coffin,' the supply store owner had said. Billy had half-listened to the chatter while buying supplies in town, keeping his eyes on the trade man's daughter, Melinda. Billy wanted to marry her and have a new family of Hills after he struck it rich.

He shuddered thinking of the stench that rose up the shafts, belching their damp earth and metal stink, so much like the smell of blood. Billy knew that particular odor well. During the war, he'd crawled his way through mounds of piled bodies made up of Confederate and Union soldiers. He noticed no difference between the dying men. All of them bled the same, stunk the same, some still alive and moaning, eyes open and staring right through him. He had feared for his life, being buried alive under 'em. But those were tough days, and he felt no shame in it. That fear is what had kept him moving, kept him alive. And so, he'd do it again, scrabble his way to the gold, and for glory this time.

Billy shook off the chill as he finished relieving himself. A coyote laughed from afar. Billy straightened out his drawers and then kicked a rock in the direction of the yip-howls. He hated the damn animals and couldn't help but take their cackling as jeers against him.

He thought about the man who'd dug out the shafts before him. The deeds clerk had said Señor Delgado had done it all by himself. A Spaniard, he'd said. Struck a decent chunk of gold that had made him rich enough to register another claim for a bigger piece of outlying land about fifty miles northwest, Tusca-something. No longer in need, the Spaniard had sold off all his smaller claims around Elko, and Billy had bought the one where the man's gold had come from. A part of him couldn't help but wonder if the deeds clerk told tall tales just to sell worthless mines.

Voices echoed up and out of the mine. A clinking noise came next. He'd gotten used to the voices, or whatever it was that sounded like people talking, the moaning, howling, crying, and plenty of other sounds, but he'd not heard clinking before. He considered lighting a lamp but didn't want to waste the kerosene.

"Someone in there?" He stepped back and shouted down into the dark mouth.

It quieted, which wasn't right neither. The mine had never been quiet, particularly at night. Then footsteps came, boots thumping like a heartbeat and growing louder. Billy moved further away, scanned the ground for his shovel. He crouched down and grabbed it, giving the handle a shake to let off any scorpions.

At the cave entrance, nimble shadows felt their way around the mouth like feelers and then became hands and fingers. Billy walked toward the rockface and readied his shovel to strike.

"You better make yourself known right quick," he said.

A human figure dragged and pulled itself out and then stood at arms' length, towering over Billy by at least a foot, maybe more.

"Answer me, stranger." Billy turned the sharp edge of the shovel and leaned in. He wanted to touch the dark figure with it. Why could he see everything else in the moon's light except for this man?

"Get that out of my face, boy," a deep voice said.

"So, you are real," Billy whispered to himself. Then he said aloud, "Not until you tell me who you are, and what you're doing in *my* mine."

The man roared, more mocking than the coyote's laughter.

"Dammit! Stop—" Billy dropped the shovel and launched himself forward. He slammed into the man as if he'd hit a wall. The tall stranger didn't waver, and Billy clung to him like a child jumping and wanting to be picked up and carried. Billy slid down until his feet touched the ground and then he reached for the shovel again.

White light and pain exploded from the side of his head and then he saw nothing else.

Billy's breathing grew heavy and labored. As soon as the train had crossed the state line, he felt the last drop of Louisiana moisture evaporate from his body. This desert heat burned and stung as if he stood next to a crackling wildfire. He tried to keep any bare skin out of the searing sunlight. It hurt. Every hour or so, he'd rise and stand near an open window or door to let his sweaty clothes dry. He swore in the few minutes it took he was freezing to death. He couldn't be right about that though and figured the heat had gotten to his head.

Finally out onto the platform, he could almost taste gold in the air. Then a brown swirl of dirt spun around him, leaving him with nothing but the earthy tang and crunch of dirt in his mouth.

Welcome to Elko.

Town consisted of a main street that bisected two long rows of one-story wood buildings. He noted a bank, a hotel, a supply store, and other

small establishments out to make their share from prospectors and travelers passing through. Behind the wood buildings stood a bunch of shanties and tents, and beyond that, dry desert land and red clay mountains that went on forever.

A moist breeze, heady with foreign aromas came up behind him. Billy spun around and found himself in a mirage. High white walls inlaid with beautiful colored tiles made up floral patterns and shapes that surrounded him on all sides. Magnificent architecture like he'd never seen before towered above. He lowered his eyes, squeezed them shut, and then rubbed them with his fingers to clear out any dirt.

Rectangular pools with flowing green water and fountains filled his path. He walked toward one and drank his fill, taking everything in. *Had he died on the train?*

A man in robes, his head swathed in fabric, walked past the entryway of a building just ahead. Billy rushed after him and entered a circular room with ceilings of stone. He stopped and held his breath as his eyes looked up and saw artfully carved stalactites set like honeycomb in shapes of stars, painted a blue like the night sky. The walls and pillars also had inlaid tiles in floral shapes more beautiful than real flowers. So many brilliant colors and patterns. The robed man stood in front of smooth tiles with foreign writing, but somehow Billy understood it.

"Be sparse in words and you will go in peace."

He intended to do just that. Billy stepped next to the man and nodded. The man smiled and put his palm against Billy's back, guiding him to another room.

Massive wood tables, every inch covered in tall glass shapes, steam and smoke rising from them, jars filled with dust, rocks, dried flowers, and plants, took up all the space. More rooms of the same went on and on in a circle around the inside of the building. Men worked at these tables, writing in books, reading from them, talking among themselves. Soft, melodic music drifted through the windows along with that soft, moist breeze, ruffling vibrant fabrics as thin as the air itself. Their deep shades hung in wide ribbons from the walls.

The robed man asked Billy a question, but Billy couldn't think of how to respond. The man shook Billy's shoulder. Then again, but harder, almost hurting him.

"Stop that," Billy said.

"Son, it's time you woke—"

"Pa?" Billy opened his eyes, certain he'd died and gone to Heaven, or someplace else.

A man stood in front of him. One he thought he remembered. Then the star on the man's shirt brought his sense back.

"Sheriff? What're you—" Billy sat up.

"Take it easy, son," the sheriff said. "Señor Delgado here says your head hit a rock pretty hard when you tripped and fell."

"I, I didn't . . . Where am I?"

"My mine, boy." Señor Delgado stepped next to the sheriff. Both men hunched over Billy, eyeing him like captured prey.

Billy didn't retreat under their cold stares. He returned them, and got a good look at Delgado. The man's skin had tanned a deep shade of brown, but it didn't have the leathery, worn appearance of someone who'd labored under a burning sun. His thick, black, curly hair hung over his forehead, making his dark eyes more sinister than the man might've wanted. Billy knew plenty of folk whose families came from Spain and had settled in Louisiana, yet this foreigner had not one similar feature. Even his moustache and beard appeared wrong—too thick and dark.

Delgado quickly tucked his hair back up into the sweat-soaked scarf he'd wrapped around his head. The fabric seemed familiar, but Billy couldn't remember where he'd seen it before.

"What?" Billy said. "We were at *my* mine. That's right. You were in my mine, and then . . . "

"Then what?" Delgado said.

Billy didn't think it wise to mention that he'd attacked the man in front of the sheriff.

"I must've blacked out," Billy said. "Thing is, how did I get to your mine? I've no horse, just an ass, and you're nearly fifty miles out."

The sheriff rubbed his chin as if he hadn't thought of those particulars.

Delgado saw this and then quickly said, "I told you sheriff. He was walking around bewildered when I found him. Give him some time to rest here. I'll take him back to his mine when he's better."

The men stood and walked away from Billy. Delgado put his hand on the sheriff's back, guiding him out. The gesture recalled a familiarity in Billy's mind.

"Maybe I can convince him there's nothing for him here," Delgado said. "That he'd be better off back where he came from." He whispered the last part as if Billy wasn't right there.

The sheriff halted mid-stoop through a carved rock doorway and looked back. "You remember what happened, come and talk to me, son. A few of the folks in town are worried 'bout you."

"Yes, sir," Billy said. He hoped only for Melinda's concern.

The sheriff and Delgado left together, and Billy listened to them talking, their voices carried far through the air and across rock. Billy wondered at the size of Delgado's mine. *How could one Spaniard have done all this in such a short amount of time?* He sat up and thought his head might blow off. After composing himself, he moved slower, then rose, using the walls to keep steady. He walked over and picked up a lantern.

Billy ducked through the opening and glanced around. He headed the opposite way the men had gone.

A youthful voice, the kind that could've come from a boy or a girl, cried out ahead. Another narrow shaft opened up to his right. He raised the light, and a blast of hot air blew his hair back. Lucky for him, the lamp stayed lit. Billy stepped in, listening for the wailing. The supply store owner was right, the tunnel was tight as a coffin. Sharp edges plowed through his arms, and then the lamp went out. Heated gusts like the one that nearly baked his face on the way in traveled through the shafts and made high-pitched cries as they moved through the mine. That must've been the sound he'd heard before, not a child crying. Shoulder to shoulder against solid rock, Billy had to keep moving forward to find a space big enough to turn around. If he had this much trouble, no way Delgado could get through.

Stepping ahead and ever downward, Billy made his way to a larger, open area. He tripped over another lamp; the glass clinked but didn't break. He crouched down and pawed through the dirt floor for matches. Staying low, he found some, struck one on the wall and re-lit his lantern. Stacked wood crates came to light. Next to them, sat a couple of cots just off the floor, and another lamp. His flame flickered against hand-chiseled stone walls, setting fractured crystals in the rock alight, sparkling in the half-dark.

Glass jars and tubes, some of them broken, crowded the wall adjacent to the crates. He moved toward them. Delgado must be doing something down here other than mining. They reminded him of that mirage, but Billy couldn't recall exactly what the men did in all those rooms. He looked around for anything resembling a book or a notebook.

Billy bent over and put his nose to a large jar full of clear liquid. It had no odor. Curious, he stuck his finger into the liquid and then tasted it. Water. Billy tilted his head back and emptied the jar. He hadn't realized his thirst. A similar jar, still full, caught his eye. Billy replaced the one he'd drank from with it. He didn't think the Spaniard would take too kindly to his snooping.

Not finding any books, he headed back the way he came.

Nearing the entrance where he'd been left to rest, Billy's vision circled, his gut tingled, and he prayed the water he'd drank was just that and that it hadn't spoiled in some way or was tainted. It tasted good enough. Billy couldn't remember ever having a better drink of water. A scene of Melinda and him dancing at their wedding moved across the mine's ceiling.

His happy vision disappeared, broken up by more strange sounds. He hadn't seen any running water, but trickling, and rhythmic drips filled his ears. They sounded like a heart beating. The hot wind rushing through the shafts its breaths. Delgado's mines lived, and Billy yearned to find their hearts of gold.

"Follow me down, boy." Delgado's voice blared over the hypnotic pulsing and nearly shot Billy out of his boots. "There's something you ought to see." He slapped Billy's back and shoved him forward.

A potent gold fever gripped Billy. Maybe the jarred water put him out of sorts. Billy had to know all the man's secrets, so he went along without a fuss, hoping to gather anything he could.

"How'd you dig all this out in so short a time?"

"This was once a volcanic tunnel where molten rock used to flow. I found it quite by accident, I assure you."

They passed the shaft where Billy had found the jars of water. The space tightened around them as they continued downward. The air became humid and cooled. Billy's breathing became shallow, his head light, but his curiosity got the better of him. His body seemed to change shape and squeeze itself through an opening. Then the walls widened into a cavern. Down below, a pool of crystal-clear water. Above, stalactites that varied in size, water dripping from their tips, a vivid blue, even in the dim light.

"It's an underground spring, my boy, and a hundred times more valuable than all the gold in this desert. See, for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years, the rain's been collecting down here. I boil it to be sure it won't cause any sickness."

Billy thought of the glass containers filled with water in the room he'd found.

"What happened to your hand, boy? Looks like you cut it."

Billy hadn't noticed but wasn't surprised. Broken fragments had littered the entire area he'd sneaked off to. Delgado had sharp eyes if he could see the small line of dried blood so deep in the dark of the mine.

"I don't know," Billy said. "I can't remember. Anyhow, it'll be fine."

"You won't be so tough if it gets infected. Then you'll be worthless to the both of us. Those hands need to be in good shape for mining, right Billy?"

Billy didn't understand. Most days he was quick-witted, but he couldn't think straight or fast enough.

Delgado forced Billy to lead the way back and up to the room where he'd seen the jars.

"You're a lot bigger than me, Señor. How're you getting through this?"

"Don't worry about me, boy. I know my way. Stop ahead. Once you enter the small room there, have a seat on one of the cots."

They crowded into the room, and Delgado looked around, scouring the ground for anything disturbed, Billy thought. The tall man walked over to his makeshift laboratory and then opened up a brown leather case with smaller glass bottles inside. He pulled the vials out one at a time and read each label. Sometimes he opened one, smelled it, and then poured a little of its contents into a bowl. A few minutes later, he turned and brought the concoction over along with a roll of fabric.

"I've got something to fix that hand. Let me see. It looks nearly healed, but this will keep it clean." Delgado dipped the fabric into a green liquid and then squeezed it onto the wound.

"Ouch." Billy jerked away.

"Not so tough now then?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but I grew up in Jackson Parish, Louisiana with three older brothers, and served in the 12th Infantry Regiment. I'm as tough as they come."

"I've seen stronger soldiers march across the parapets of Alhambra Palace. Much smarter ones, than you. They all died."

"Is that where you're from, in Spain? This palace?"

"The Alhambra didn't always belong to Spain."

"To who then?"

"My people."

"And who are your people is what I'm asking?"

"They called us Moors, boy."

"I knew you weren't a Spaniard."

"For centuries we studied and experimented. We are learned men. The wisest. We discovered how to make gold, how to heal, how to live forever with the Elixir of Life. We succeeded in all these things, but we did not intend to share our knowledge with a world we thought unworthy. We disbanded, moved to all the corners of the world, always keeping our secrets with us."

"Make gold?" Billy said. "You take me for a fool, old man? Bet I'm a lot smarter than you think. Learned in other ways."

"It takes blood, boy. Spilling innocent blood. The less innocent, the less gold, but that is why I have yet to strike a mother lode. Only clumps here and there. More experiments must be done. The knowledge comes slower without my brothers working side by side, although we seek one another out when we can."

Billy scratched his hand. The cut was gone. "What in the—" Billy wished he had a revolver, or his hunting knife.

"Like I said, boy. I have the power to heal."

But even the Moor had said that the cut had already appeared to be healing. How? Delgado had only just put the salve on his hand. Maybe this elixir the Moor had spewed on about had other powers.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because you're going to die and become my next bit of gold."

Billy laughed. He couldn't help it. His manner had changed. He'd become foolhardy.

"You've been down in the mines too long, Señor. Maybe there's something in the water you've been drinking from that old pool you found. No way it only takes an innocent man's blood to make gold."

"Well, you're right in that. It does require a little more."

Billy raised his brow. "Since I'm a dead man anyhow, it'd sure be kindly of you to tell."

"Words from a special text," Delgado said. "They must be spoken aloud. You will believe me when you see it happening before your very own eyes."

"All right then. When does this show begin?"

"Now if you'd like."

"Right here?"

Delgado pointed. "Go over there and stand against the wall."

Billy nodded, astonished at his own goading and submission to this nonsense. But he wanted the recipe for making gold, and he wouldn't stop until he got it. It seemed the same arrogance that affected Delgado had taken him over as well. He rose from the cot and headed for the wall near all the glass jars and then leaned his left shoulder against it.

"This spot work?"

"As you wish," Delgado said.

"Is it gonna hurt?"

"Yes. Very much. But I thank you for being such a willing subject. You're the first one that has ever been so obliging, so I hope you don't mind if I take notes."

"Not at all," Billy said. He couldn't believe the gumption of this man. The arrogance.

Billy watched Delgado light a small fire. He positioned a glass bowl half an arm's length above the flames, held in place by a metal contraption, and then he poured some of the jarred and tubed liquids and powders into it. Delgado slid a book from the bottom of the brown leather box in a hidden compartment Billy hadn't seen before.

Delgado raised his voice and spoke his people's language, not Spanish.

Billy's eyes grew heavy, and he swore at times he understood Delgado. The singsong words reminded him of the music drifting through the window in the mirage. Billy's left ear itched, became warm, then hot. The stone wall next to his head fell into itself. The rock became swirling liquid. Billy stepped to the right.

"Don't move," Delgado said. "It's happening."

"What? The rock melting? I assumed you wanted that to happen. Is that where the gold is made? How is it gonna kill me?"

"Stop talking. Soon, the mine will speak to you."

"How?"

"Quiet and listen! Put your ear closer to it."

Billy heard whispering coming from the vortex, so he leaned in with all the confidence of an immortal. "Don't be too disappointed if this doesn't work, Señor. Remember, I'm far from innocent. Like I said, I fought in the war. Killed a lot of men."

"That doesn't make you less innocent, boy. It makes you a soldier who followed orders."

Many voices from the wall spoke softly of what he'd done. Billy saw it again in his mind, re-living all the details. How he'd crawled through those piles of dead men and pilfered their belongings. Reaching into their pockets, he took timepieces, wedding bands, precious heirlooms, gifts from fathers, mothers, and wives. Hell, he'd even pulled gold teeth, and taken anything of worth. Some items he yanked from the clutches of men still alive and dying. Their mouths often attempted to form words that became gasps of their last breaths. By God, he took it all. Billy howled at the pain assailing his ear.

"What is happening?" Delgado rushed over and pointed at something. "I've never seen this dark color before."

Delgado shoved Billy to the side, tearing Billy's ear off, separating him from the molten rock with the sound of a wet kiss.

"Ow!" Billy palmed the side of his head, hot blood gushing down his fingers and past his wrist.

"Aha! You see," Delgado shouted. "This is your value." The Moor reached up and took a small, dirty yellow clump from the churning stone. "Not worth a fraction of my effort. All the time it took me to find, collect, and prepare the ingredients." Delgado spat on Billy's boot.

"Just my one ear made that little bit of gold, you evil bastard."

"No. You didn't see. It was changing, turning black. That has never happened before. You must be so wretched a man that your blood becomes something else."

Red hot anger shot from Billy's ankles straight through his scalp. He sprang at Delgado, wrapping his legs around the man's chest, pinning his arms.

"How are you able to fight me?" Delgado stumbled. They struggled.

"You bastard! That's my ear. My gold." Billy snatched the nugget from the man's hand.

"Answer me. What did you do? You can't be as strong as me." Delgado turned to the water jars lining the wall. "No! You drank the Elixir of Life."

The stone vortex slowed. Before it came to a stop, Billy forced Delgado to move toward it and then wrenched his legs, thrusting Delgado forward. He grabbed hold of Delgado's head and put the man's face into the fluid wall.

Delgado's cries were muffled by the cooling rock. His arms flailed, every part of him trembled, jerked about, and then went slack. Billy fell as Delgado's body dropped from the rock. Delgado's face and the front half of his head gone. A rough surface of char covered what remained. Billy got up on all fours, looked around, and then scrabbled toward a few empty jars.

"If an innocent man's blood makes gold. What will yours make, Señor?" He rifled through Delgado's tools and got to work.

It didn't take much to convince the Elko sheriff Delgado had disappeared after two days while Billy lay recuperating. He was thankful the Elixir of Life had grown his ear back in that time. Billy left Tuscacora and headed over a hundred and fifty miles south to Eureka where he purchased a claim at Ruby Hill.

A year later, he put everything he'd learned together with Delgado's blood into the molten vortex of rock he called forth. The stone's color became dove gray and then the darkest black Billy had ever seen swelled up and swirled with the lighter shade, but the two never became one. Grays of every shade branched out across the mine walls, ground, and ceiling in flashes of lightning.

"I should've known your blood would be a darkness," Billy said. "Same as mine."

William Hill Jr. had struck one of the largest and richest silver-lead ore finds in history. He got his wish and married Melinda from Elko a month later. At his wedding, the sheriff told Billy that a man had come looking for Delgado and upon not finding him, wanted to know what had happened to his brother. The sheriff had explained the events, and then the man had asked for Billy's whereabouts. When Billy asked the sheriff what the man had looked like, the sheriff said, "A Spaniard."