

Silver Lies

Excerpt

If there was an arctic version of hell, Joe Rose was living it in Leadville, Colorado.

Hugging the ten-thousand-foot mark in the Rocky Mountains, Leadville in December 1879 had winter air cold enough to freeze a man's lungs, if he wasn't used to it.

A light, white snow, soft as angel wings, descended to the black mud of Tiger Alley in Leadville's red-light district. The icy paste—mixed with a season's worth of animal excrement and human garbage—had been churned up by beasts of burden, carts, and lost souls. In some spots, it lay knee deep. At 2:30 in the morning, Tiger Alley was no place to fall down. Joe knew that as he flailed about, trying to regain his footing and his dignity. Raucous voices and honky-tonk music blasted through the saloon's half-open back door, the door through which he'd been unceremoniously ejected moments before.

On his feet at last, Joe reached for his pocket handkerchief to wipe the filth from his face. His fingers touched the slime coating his favorite waistcoat. "Damn!" He tried to scrub the mud off the silver and gold threads. "Ruined!" The word reverberated in his head, and Joe pictured it all again. The dealer raking in his last gold eagle across the waxed cloth of the faro table, the bouncer closing in on him to haul him away.

"I'm ruined," Joe whispered. Money, gone. Reputation gone as well, thanks to Harry. He owes me, Joe thought. We had a deal, we shook on it. I risked my neck meeting my side of the bargain, and he backs out.

As if through a haze, Joe remembered the curses he'd screamed at Harry just hours before, the cold, dismissive look on Harry's face, and, most frightening of all, Harry's silence. Panic welled up, bitter and black, in Joe's throat. There was no future for him in Leadville. For him, his wife Emma, or their son. Joe closed his eyes in anguish. An image of Emma, her face pale and serious, rose before him. He spoke as if to a ghost: "I did it for you." Even as he said the words, he realized they weren't entirely true. He'd tried to protect her, true,

but his troubles had really started when he tried to be someone he wasn't. Someone who'd gamble a fortune on a hunch at the poker table or a promising claim. Now, with the last of his five thousand dollars gone, any hope of making that elusive fortune in silver had disappeared. Worse, he could see no way of extracting himself from the mess he'd created.

The only money he had left was a fifty-dollar bill he dared not gamble. It all whirled around in his brain: his debts, the fifty, Emma, the deal gone bad between him and Harry, Denver....The bleakness of his situation penetrated his whiskey-induced fog. "How will I ever explain to Emma?" he said to the night. His hand automatically strayed to the waistcoat pocket where he kept the pocket watch she'd given him six years ago on their wedding day. It was gone. Heart sinking, he searched his trouser pockets frantically and tried to strike a deal with God: Just let me find the watch. I'll go straight home, tell Emma everything. I'll use that damn banknote to buy three stagecoach tickets and we'll start over with a clean slate. I swear I'll never touch cards or another glass of whiskey.

The lack of moonlight made it difficult to see in the alley. Crouching, Joe scabbled through the frigid muck. His fingers felt, then closed on a familiar metallic disk. He clutched the watch to his chest in relief and thought, now I can go home. Everything will work out.

A slight vibration in the ground. A soft "whuff," barely heard. Something was behind him.

Joe sprang to his feet and turned to see a monstrous dark shape. Too tall for a man. Joe heard a jangle of bit and bridle, an equine snort. The shape moved, became a horse and rider. The rider urged the mount forward. Straight toward Joe. "Hey!" Joe shouted, trying to get out of the way. The horse jerked its head up with a snort and pranced backward. It unexpectedly lunged forward as the rider applied the whip. Joe stumbled to one side. Mud sucked at his boots, slowing his escape. The horse's bulk slammed into him, knocking the breath out of his body and nearly toppling him backward. The rider pulled up short with a vicious rein. Breathing hard and cursing, Joe grabbed a stirrup leather, staying well to the side to avoid being stepped on. He peered up, trying to discern the rider.

The voice that floated down to him was filled with menace. "Well, well, if it isn't Joe Rose."

Fear crawled over Joe, freezing the sweat on his back, choking the curses in his throat. Oh Jesus, he thought. Not here. Not now. He couldn't force his thoughts any further, couldn't frame a reply.

Words poured over him with increased fury. "Looks like Lady Luck's deserted you for good this time. Are you short on silver again? Greenbacks? Or are you cheating at cards now?"

The rider leaned over, seized the dangling fob, and yanked. The pocket watch flew from Joe's grip, a comet streaking beyond his reach. Joe let go of the stirrup leather and made a futile grab, desperate to recapture the watch. The rider shifted athwart the saddle, away from Joe. The next instant, a booted foot smashed into Joe's face, sending bright daggers of pain streaking through his vision. Joe cried out and fell backward, breaking through a thin icy crust into the scum below. Blood, warm and wet, poured from his battered nose and bathed his lips and chin. The pain loosened his tongue at last. He struggled to raise himself, searching purchase in the slime. "Wait! I was coming to see you." He tried to sound assured, sincere. But all he heard in his trembling voice was desperation and fear. "I...I've got what you want. All of it. The shipment arrived today. About the other business, the chemistry was wrong, but it's straight now."

"You liar. You double-crossing son of a bitch. Your next drink is with the Devil!" The whip hissed through the air. Joe flinched, raised a hand, anticipating the cut of the lash across his palm. Instead, he heard—but didn't feel—the smack of lash on flesh.

The horse brayed and reared. For a moment, Joe saw mount and rider looming over him, an enormous shadow against night-dark clouds. The whip fell again. The horse pawed the air, then leaped forward with a grunt. Joe recoiled in terror. He heard, then felt a bone-crunching snap. And screamed.

His leg.

Intolerable pain engulfed him like a black avalanche. He tried to grab something, roll away. His fingers closed on ooze and shattered ice. The horse

reared again, fighting rein and whip. Hooves plunged down, flashing past Joe's face, crushing his ribs with a sound like dry wood splintering. Joe's last scream was muffled by mud and honky-tonk music.

And the piano played on.

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