

CALLOWAY



A SHORT STORY BY
D. CHRISTOPHER BADER

D. CHRISTOPHER BADER

Calloway

A Short Story by D. Christopher Bader



First published by Iron Canyon Press 2025

Copyright © 2025 by D. Christopher Bader

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

D. Christopher Bader asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book and on its cover are trade names, service marks, trademarks and registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publishers and the book are not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. None of the companies referenced within the book have endorsed the book.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

Find out more at reedsy.com

Calloway

Northwest Wyoming Territory, Summer 1878

Obadiah Calloway sat tall in the saddle, boots still caked with trail dust, reins slack in one hand as he checked his gold pocket watch. Below him, the camp sprawled in a loose scatter of tents and muddy intention, half-born and already weary. It wasn't a town yet, just a lean-to saloon that leaned harder than it stood, a few smoking fire pits, and a single stone foundation rising slow and stubborn along the wagon-rutted trail someone had begun calling Main Street, maybe as a joke, maybe in hope.

Smoke curled from cookfires. A hammer rang out in the stillness, measured, deliberate strikes, like it was trying to will something permanent into the dust.

At the far end of the row, a hand-painted sign hung from a raw timber frame:

MAHLER ASSAY OFFICE, in bold, Eastern script, the kind you'd see on a bank window or land deed back in St. Louis. The paint still gleamed.

Obadiah took in the sign a moment longer than necessary. He knew the type. Eastern money, drawn west by rumor and greed, sniffing out veins and corners before the land even had a name. Men like that didn't build towns. They measured them,

claimed them, and moved on.

Boone shifted beneath him, the big Morgan horse blowing a breath through his nostrils and flicking his ears at the wind. Obadiah reached down, gloved hand brushing the gelding's neck, a quiet reassurance between two creatures who'd carried each other a long way.

He was a large man, built like someone who'd spent his life in the saddle, broad across the back and barrel-chested, with long arms that moved slow but certain. His hair, black and curling, spilled from beneath a battered slouch hat, and a heavy beard shaded a face carved by sun, war, and years without rest. The Confederate gray was long gone, burned somewhere along the Platte when the weight of it got too much, but the saber still rode at his side, and the past still followed.

He'd come north out of Fort Smith that spring, chasing neither redemption nor land, just distance. A place with no memories and no markers. And this patch of high-country wind and hard stone they were starting to call Bridger seemed about as far from everything as a man could get.

What came next... that part was still being built. Stone by stone. Claim by claim.

Obadiah nudged Boone forward, letting the horse find his own pace down the slope. The wind carried the scent of woodsmoke, mule sweat, and something faintly sour, unwashed men or bad coffee. Maybe both.

They passed a crooked hitch rail and a scatter of barrels. A boy hauling water paused to stare. Obadiah gave him a nod. The boy didn't nod back.

He pulled Boone to a stop beside a tent more settled than the others, canvas stretched tight, split logs stacked with care, and a rough-hewn board hanging crooked above the entrance.

HARTLEY – MEALS & WASH WATER.

He studied the sign. Practical. Direct. Not too proud, not too desperate. The kind of place a man could sit with his back to a wall and finish a plate before someone tried to sell him something, or shoot him.

Obadiah dismounted slow. Boone shook his mane but stayed still. He knew the drill.

Inside, a woman stood over a cast-iron kettle, stirring with the kind of focus that came from repetition, not interest. Sleeves rolled past her elbows, forearms browned by sun and streaked with flour. A shotgun leaned just inside the flap, next to a chipped washbasin full of gray water.

“Food’s two bits,” she said without looking up. “More if you want it hot.”

Obadiah took off his weathered slouch hat, ran a hand through his tangled curls, and stepped inside the smell of salt pork and ash.

“I don’t mind hot,” he said. “Don’t mind plain, either.”

That got her to glance up. Green eyes, sharp, not surprised. She took him in the way you take in weather: silently, thoroughly, and with no intention of changing course.

“You just in, or been watchin’ us from up on that ridge?”

He shrugged. “Little of both.”

“You plannin’ to stay?”

“Not sure yet,” he said. “Wasn’t sure I’d even stop.”

She gave the pot another stir. “Well. You’re here now. Sit if you’re eating. Water’s clean enough if you want to rinse the trail off your face.”

He took a seat on a cut-log bench near the flap, where he could keep one eye on Boone and the other on the fire. She ladled a thick scoop of beans and salt pork onto a dented tin

plate, slid it his way with half a biscuit balanced on top.

"I'm Elle Hartley," she said, settling back beside the fire. "Most folks just call me Hartley."

"Obadiah Calloway."

She gave him a once-over that didn't feel flirtatious, just assessing.

"Well, Mr. Calloway," she said, "if you're wantin' to vanish, Bridger ain't quite far enough."

Obadiah took a slow bite, chewed, and finally said, "We'll see."

He wiped the last of the biscuit through his beans, set the tin aside, and sat back in silence. So did she.

The fire crackled between them. Outside, someone cursed over a hammer slip. A mule brayed near the dry well.

"Anyplace a man can stable a horse?" he asked at last.

Elle jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "Two lean-tos down. Fella named Tip runs hitch and feed. Bit soft in the head, but he treats animals better than people."

"And for sleep?"

She shrugged. "Depends what you're after. If it's a roof, you're a few weeks too early. Closest thing is Wilker's saloon frame, there's a tarp out back some of the survey boys curl up under. Or you can bed down behind here. I don't charge for dirt."

"I've slept worse."

"Most who end up here have."

Obadiah leaned back, gaze shifting toward the street, or what passed for one. "What is this place, exactly? Camp, claim, or con?"

"That depends who you ask." She kept stirring the kettle. "To the Mahler men, it's a staging point. To the ranchers coming down from the north, it's a threat. To the folks living out of tents... it's a maybe. Maybe it sticks. Maybe it doesn't."

"They're calling it Bridger?"

"Started as a joke. Fella got turned around in the mountains and claimed he saw Jim Bridger's ghost. Someone slapped the name on a supply manifest and it stuck. Now the company writes it on letters. That makes it real enough for some."

He made a noise that passed for agreement, or maybe doubt. "I thought Jim Bridger was still alive."

With a faint, amused lift of her eyes, Elle said, "Doesn't stop people from seeing what they want to see."

He took that without arguing, then: "Mahler got big plans?"

"Always does. Assay office went up first. They say it's about minerals. Could be coal. Could be gold. Could be they're just trying to lock down land before the railroad creeps this way."

Obadiah glanced west, toward the mountains shadowing Bridger. "That government park's not far from here, is it? Yellowstone?"

Elle responded, "Couple days' ride, give or take. Geysers, canyons, hot springs that'll boil a man down to bone. Whole place smells like sulfur."

"You been?"

"No," she said, feeding another log into the fire. "But I've heard enough from trappers and surveyors. It's no place to live. Pretty, maybe. But it doesn't feed you. Doesn't warm you at night. It's the kind of country folks paint and leave behind."

Obadiah glanced past the tent flap, eyes landing on the stone foundation at the center of the would-be town.

"And that?"

"The Buffalo Belle. Gonna be a hotel. Two stories, real lumber. You wouldn't know it by how they're stacking stone, but it's supposed to be the crown of Bridger." She finally turned his way again. "Assuming it gets built before someone burns it

down.”

That gave him pause.

“Trouble?”

“Nothing yet,” she said. “But it’s coming. Always does when money gets ahead of law.”

Obadiah pushed to his feet and worked the stiffness from his shoulders. Boone flicked an ear without lifting his head.

“I’ll get him settled. Camp here tonight, if that’s all right.”

“You clean up after yourself and don’t bring trouble to my door, you can stay as long as you like.”

“I only ever bring dust,” he said.

The wind picked up after dark, rustling canvas and carrying the smell of mule dung and scorched beans across the camp. Obadiah slept light, blanket rolled tight around him, hat pulled low over his eyes, one hand resting beneath his makeshift pillow: a folded coat over the butt of his LeMat.

He didn’t dream, not usually. Not since Indian Territory. But something clawed its way through the haze now, hoofbeats pounding hard against dry red earth, gunfire echoing in a ravine, a man calling his name just before everything turned to smoke.

Always the same ravine. Always the same voice. The one who got away.

He’d never known the name, just the face, the eyes, the smirk before the shot. He’d buried his partner in a shallow grave and spent the next three years trying not to follow.

A single gunshot. Close.

Obadiah’s eyes snapped open.

Someone screamed. Real this time. Not the partner he couldn’t save. Not the war.

This was now.

He stayed still a moment, ears sharp. One shot. Then silence,

except for canvas snapping in the wind and the shuffle of boots on gravel.

Reaching beneath his coat, his fingers wrapped around the cold grip of the LeMat. Thumbed back the hammer slow.

Voices outside now, murmurs, nervous, distant.

He slid out from beneath the tarp, boots crunching softly against the packed dirt behind Elle's tent. The sky was still dark, just a sliver of silver-blue edging the eastern horizon. Stars fading. Air sharp enough to bite.

Across the way, figures were gathering, drawn like cattle to the sound. No one was running, not yet. Just walking toward the dark end of the main trail, toward the low rise near the assay office.

Obadiah holstered the LeMat and followed, steps slow, deliberate. Boone nickered softly from his tie post, sensing something off but not panicking.

Ahead, someone lit a lantern. Another voice said, "God above..." low and hollow.

Obadiah picked up his pace.

By the time Obadiah reached the crowd, a dozen or so had gathered, rough men in boots and blankets, some still buttoning coats or clutching coffee tins, others wrapped in the kind of silence that only follows a bad noise in the dark.

No one spoke above a murmur. Voices overlapped in low, uncertain bursts.

"Shot himself, maybe."

"No, I heard two people."

A freckled teamster with a split ear said, "Murder, that's what it is."

"Coulda been an accident, don't go throwing words like that."

"Where's the sheriff?"

"There ain't one, you fool."

Someone held up a lantern, and for a moment the crowd's faces flickered in that uneasy yellow glow, half-awake, half-afraid, and unsure who they were supposed to look to.

Obadiah edged forward. No one stopped him. They didn't know him yet, but they stepped aside just the same.

At the front, near the low brush behind the Mahler Assay Office, stood a clean-shaven man in a wool coat too fine for this hour. He had a writing board under one arm and a pistol holstered backward on his belt like he didn't know how to draw it. His boots were polished. His voice was steady, but too steady, like someone practicing calm.

"Everything's under control," he said, addressing no one in particular. "There's been an incident, yes, but let's not jump to conclusions. We'll take statements and send for the superintendent."

Obadiah stepped up, stopping just short of the man's shadow.

"What happened?"

The man turned, caught off guard by the voice. He studied Obadiah, coat, hat, the beard, the resolute steel behind the eyes.

"Who are you?"

"I asked what happened."

The Mahler man hesitated, lips twitching toward diplomacy, then straightened his writing board.

"One of the camp laborers was found dead. No clear indication of how. Could be an accident. Could be... something else. Until we know, I suggest folks return to their tents and let the company handle it."

Obadiah's eyes shifted toward the brush. He could see boots, one heel turned sideways, leg stiff, half-concealed by scrub.

"Dead man got a name?" he asked.

"We're working on that," the Mahler man replied, tone clipped.

Obadiah didn't move. The crowd had gone silent behind him, waiting.

He didn't raise his voice. He didn't touch his gun. He held the man's gaze and asked again, slower this time.

"Who was he?"

The Mahler man hesitated, eyes flicking again to the brush.

"Name was Vic something. Vic Reed, maybe. He worked supply offload I think. I found him near the brambles, shot clean through"

"That him?" Obadiah asked, nodding toward the boots.

The man gave a short, uneasy nod. "Yeah."

It should have ended there, but it didn't.

Someone behind them said, "Shot clean through the chest. That ain't no accident."

"Mahler's tryin' to bury it."

"I say we find who did it and string 'em up."

The murmur swelled into a low growl, feet shifting forward, men tightening coats or moving toward the scrub. Someone in the back shouted, "Ain't no law says we can't handle it ourselves!"

The Mahler man raised a hand. "Let's all just take a breath."

Obadiah stepped forward, not fast, not loud, but enough to pull the air his direction.

He turned to face the growing crowd. "Anyone see it happen?"
Silence.

"Anyone hear the shot? See someone run off?"

More silence. A few heads shook. One man spit into the dirt.

"Then you don't know what you're gonna hang someone for," Obadiah said flatly.

A voice snapped from the back, sharp and rising:

“And who the hell are you?”

Obadiah turned toward it, slow and steady.

“No one. Just a man who’s buried good friends over the wrong guess.”

That landed hard.

The crowd wavered, not backing down, but not stepping forward either.

The Mahler man straightened, seizing the lull like it was leverage.

“We’ll take statements and conduct an investigation.”

Obadiah cut him off.

“No, you won’t.”

A blink. “Excuse me?”

“This ain’t a company matter. Not anymore.”

The Mahler man’s voice tightened.

“There’s no authority here, Mr.—?”

“Calloway.”

“And what exactly is your role here, Mr. Calloway?”

Obadiah peered past him, at the crowd, faces lit by firelight, tense and ready to tip. Then back to the man.

“Until someone else shows up, I’ll see to order.”

He didn’t know what made him say it. Only that he couldn’t watch another crowd get it wrong.

Obadiah crouched beside the body, the LeMat heavy at his hip, but untouched. The light from the lantern cast long shadows over the brush, the boots, the cooling blood.

Vic had taken the shot clean, center chest, downward angle. Close range. No drag marks, no scuffle in the dirt. If he’d struggled, it hadn’t been here.

“Someone move him?” Obadiah asked without turning.

The Mahler man shook his head, a shade too fast. "No. That's how we found him."

Obadiah's eyes swept the ground again. One set of tracks, Vic's. Another, maybe, near the edge, lighter footprint. Hard to tell with the gravel and the dew, but it was there.

"Get me a tarp," he said. "And keep folks back. No one touches a thing till I say."

They cleared the scene slowly, tension still thick enough to choke a man. The lantern stayed, casting a pool of light over the blood-stained brush and the portfolio Vic had dropped, or been holding when he died.

Obadiah gathered a few names as folks drifted off. He remembered the ones who turned away too fast.

He made his way back toward Hartley's tent, the sky lightening behind him.

Elle was waiting just outside, arms crossed, jaw tight. She didn't ask what he found, just said:

"Well?"

"Name was Vic Reed," Obadiah said. "Shot close. Real close. Might've known who did it."

A momentary pause, then her eyes narrowed. "He wasn't well liked."

Obadiah tilted his head. "Why's that?"

"Some folks thought he was scared," she said, glancing toward the edge of camp. "I wasn't so sure."

Obadiah raised an eyebrow.

"Saw him snap at a man once. Cold and sharp. Like someone who'd made a promise to bite back if cornered."

"So not scared?" he asked.

"Maybe scared," she said. "Or maybe ready. There's a difference."

Obadiah gave a quiet nod. "Thanks."

"You find what you needed?"

"Not yet," he said. "But I'm close."

She didn't ask anything else. Just stepped aside and let him pass.

Next stop was Tip's lean-to. The man was up early, brushing a mule that was better fed than he was. Stringy and sun-creased, with a limp to his stance, Tip squinted at Obadiah like he almost recognized him, but couldn't place the memory.

"You know a man named Vic Reed?" Obadiah asked, stepping closer.

Tip kept brushing. "Talked to him a couple times. Never about himself."

He paused, then added, "Caught him patchin' a mule harness once, nobody asked him to. Just sat down and did it. Like he owed something."

Obadiah traced the scuffed toe of his boot. "You think he was scared?"

Tip spat into the dirt, wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. "No. Seemed tired. Sick, maybe. But not scared. Scared men flinch when you raise your voice. He never did. Just kept his head down and his hands busy."

"You think someone was after him?" Obadiah asked.

Tip shrugged, gave the mule a final pat. "Could be," he said. "Could be they found him."

Obadiah gave a slow nod, then turned back toward the heart of camp. He passed two tents before a voice slipped from the shadows behind him.

"He thought he was being followed."

He turned.

A young man, barely shaving, thin as fence wire, stepped

forward. He wore a stitched-up vest and boots too big, but his voice was steady.

"He told me once. Said he used to be part of something bad. Not the law. Something worse. Said when it went wrong, he ran. Said he thought Bridger was far enough."

Obadiah met the boy's eyes. "What kind of something?"

The boy hesitated. "Didn't say. Just said some men don't forget. And some don't forgive."

That hung in the air a moment, heavy and unfinished.

Obadiah glanced back toward the tarp now covering Vic's body. One set of bootprints. One shot. One quiet man who thought he could outrun the past.

Maybe he'd been wrong.

Or maybe it had just taken longer than expected to catch up.

He didn't say another word to the boy. Just nodded once and walked on, boots crunching through frost-hardened dirt as the sky turned from steel to pale gold. If Vic Reed had been running from something worse than the law, maybe someone else had seen what caught up.

Obadiah headed down to the freight line, where a row of mules stood while men moved slow between crates and canvas. The wagons had come in two days prior and now the laborers were mostly killing time, stacking what didn't need stacking, checking straps already tied.

He paused near the edge of the group. "Anyone here know a man named Vic Reed?"

A few heads turned. Most shrugged or kept working.

One man straightened up from a feed sack, squinted, and spat a stream of brown into the dirt.

"Name's Hatch," the man said, wiping his hands on his pants. "I hauled freight in with Vic last month."

He didn't offer a hand. Just stared at Obadiah, waiting.

He didn't soften it. "He's dead."

Hatch blinked. "Say again?"

"Shot," Obadiah said flatly. "Last night. Behind the assay office."

Hatch's jaw tensed. He didn't appear shocked, more like he'd already pictured this day.

"Huh," he muttered. "Well... guess he finally ran outta road."

"You two close?"

He snorted. "Man didn't talk. Worked hard, sure, but always watchin'. Like a dog that's been beat too many times. Didn't flinch, didn't growl. Just waited."

"Scared?" Obadiah asked.

Hatch shook his head. "No. Not scared. Just... expectin' something. Like he knew someone was comin'. Had that kind of certainty."

Obadiah's brow furrowed. "Like a reckoning."

Hatch shrugged. "Like a debt."

Obadiah studied him a moment longer. "You ever see anyone give him cause?"

Hatch hesitated, then gave a short nod. "Had a funny moment, come to think. Week or so back, we was unloadin' crates near Wilker's. Vic just froze, mid-haul. Starin' past me at someone crossin' the yard."

"Did he say who it was?"

"Nope. Turned white as a damn ghost. Set the crate down real careful and walked off. Didn't speak another word."

Obadiah let the silence settle a moment, then gave a curt nod and turned to go. Hatch didn't call after him.

The mule line offered no answers. Hatch had gone quiet, and the others kept their heads down, whether they didn't

know Vic Reed or just weren't willing to say. The only lead Obadiah walked away with was a name: Ward Jensen, one of the surveyors.

He left the freight line behind and headed up the slope toward a row of canvas tents staked above the main camp. The survey team kept their distance, Mahler liked his measurements precise, and his men kept away from the drink and dice to preserve that illusion. But Obadiah knew their type: underpaid, overeducated, and always listening.

He found a man crouched over a half-frozen table, maps spread wide, a cracked compass clicking faintly in the morning light. A thin cigar clamped between his teeth, sleeves rolled high, skin wind-burned from days on the ridge.

"You Jensen?" Obadiah asked.

"That's me," the man said. "And if this is about the shouting match with Reed, I already told the Mahler boys it was nothin'."

"Tell me instead."

Jensen glanced up, took stock. "You with the company?"

"No," Obadiah said. "That's why you'll get a fair shake."

He studied him a moment longer, then took a drag and leaned back on his heels.

"Reed found something. Up above the second switchback, near the shale shelf. Brought back a flake of something shiny, wasn't gold. Could have been galena, maybe. I told him he oughta mark it. Stake the claim. He just laughed. Said he wasn't interested in diggin' or profits. Just wanted to mark the spot with his name and move on."

Obadiah frowned. "Why?"

"Said it meant something to him. Wouldn't say what."

"You argue?"

"I said if he didn't file, someone else would. He said, 'Let 'em.'"

And walked off.”

Obadiah watched him a long beat. “That the last time you spoke?”

Jensen hesitated. “No. Two nights back, he came to my tent. Wanted to see a list of Mahler’s payroll. Said he was looking for a name, claimed someone was here who wasn’t supposed to be.”

“You give him the list?”

“Didn’t have a full one. Sent him to Wilker’s. They keep the ledgers for camp supply draws.”

Jensen paused, then added, “But before he left, he held up a slip of paper, something he’d pulled from one of the crates. Just a name, scrawled across it. ‘Lomax.’”

Obadiah went still.

“He stared at it like it was a snake coiled in his bedroll,” Jensen added. “Didn’t say what it meant. Just stuffed it in his coat and walked out like he’d seen a ghost.”

That was the thread.

Obadiah made his way to the back room of Wilker’s saloon, where he talked his way into the records with a few hard stares and a coin for the clerk. He spread the latest work rosters across a table and ran a finger down the names.

And there it was.

Lomax, G.

Not on any payroll. No supply draws. No tent registration. Just a name signed in ink, once, on a shipment manifest from six days ago.

He folded the page and tucked it into his coat.

Outside, Bridger had shaken off its sleep. Hammers rang sharp through the chill. Mules snorted at passing wagons. Obadiah moved through it all without hurry, letting his boots carry

him past cookfires, freight stacks, and water lines, watching, listening, waiting.

He didn't know what Lomax looked like. Didn't need to. A man hiding leaves a different trail than one just passing through. And sooner or later, someone always noticed something.

He checked Tip's feed stall, then circled the Buffalo Belle site. Nothing. No one had seen him. Or no one wanted to admit it.

It wasn't until he passed the southern edge of camp, where the tents got thin and the scrub grew thick, that a familiar voice called out.

"Calloway."

Elle Hartley stood outside her tent, apron dusted with ash, sleeves rolled to the elbow. "You look like you're hunting something."

"Someone," Obadiah said. "Lomax. Galen Lomax. Name ring a bell? "

She frowned, wiped her hands on a rag. "Not really. But I saw that same look on Vic. Couple days before he died. He stood right where you are now, tight across the shoulders, eyes on the horizon, like he was waiting for something he didn't want to see."

Obadiah didn't speak.

"I've seen it on soldiers, drifters, men trying to outpace what's behind them. And now I'm seeing it on you."

A pause. Wind brushed the flap behind her.

"You sure you want to find whoever it is?"

Obadiah didn't blink. "I'm sure."

Elle studied him. "Then I'll tell you what I know."

"Go on."

"Saw a man last week, kept to the edges. Didn't eat, didn't talk. Camped north out toward the river."

"That still within the claim boundary?"

"Barely. But folks that far out tend to stay that way. Weren't like the others. Had that same weight on him, like he knew the clock was ticking."

Obadiah tipped his hat. "Appreciate it."

"Just be careful," she said. "There's a difference between a man trying to be forgotten... and one making damn sure no one finds him."

He found Boone tethered behind the wash tent, pawing at a dry patch of grass. The big Morgan gave a low huff as Obadiah approached, ears flicking in greeting.

Obadiah rubbed the gelding's neck, then knelt beside his saddle roll. One by one, he checked the tools of his trade, not all of them for hunting.

The 1851 Navy came out first, gleaming dull steel in the morning light. He spun the cylinder, satisfied with the click, then holstered it under his coat.

The Bowie knife followed, wide-bladed and worn, the handle wrapped in old rawhide. He slid it into the leather sheath strapped to his back, high enough to reach over the shoulder.

His LeMat rode his left hip, heavy as ever. Nine rounds in the cylinder, a tenth waiting in the smoothbore barrel. Close work, if it came to that. The crossdraw sat easy on him, he'd practiced it enough.

He cinched the saddle, double-checked the strap, then swung up smooth. Boone shifted beneath him, as if he knew what kind of ride this would be.

North of Bridger, the ground sloped down toward the river flats, open country gone silent in the warming light. Not much cover. Just enough for a man who didn't want to be seen.

Obadiah nudged Boone into a steady walk, scanning the

treeline. If Galen Lomax was still out there, he wasn't hiding by accident.

The river wasn't much, just a slow, meandering ribbon cutting through willows and cottonwoods. Obadiah dismounted in the shade of a scrub pine and led Boone the last few yards on foot, boots sinking into damp earth.

The signs were there, if you knew how to read them.

Ash from a dead fire, cold and scattered. A bed of crushed grass, flattened just enough to hint at a restless sleep. No saddle, no canvas tarp. Whoever had camped here had packed light and left quiet.

He crouched low, gloved fingers brushing the edge of a bootprint half-swallowed by the riverbank.

Size matched the others.

Faint, but heading east.

He stood, eyes following the line of prints as they hugged the water's edge before angling into the low hills, toward the rust-colored ridgeline that jutted sharp against the pale sky.

Obadiah checked the cinch on Boone's saddle, gave the horse a quiet pat, then swung up again. He let the reins hang slack as they picked up the trail.

The river whispered beside them, soft and indifferent.

East it was.

The sun was low by the time Obadiah reached the rust-colored hills east of Bridger. Beyond them, a jagged line of peaks cut into the horizon, snow catching fire in the last light. He didn't know their name, but they'd be in the ledger soon enough. Everything was, eventually.

Boone picked his way across broken ground and twisted brambles, ears twitching. The trail was faint, but Obadiah wasn't tracking anymore. He felt it, tight in his chest, low in his

gut. The end of something.

He dismounted near a weathered boulder, tied Boone to a wind-stunted tree, and checked his gear. The Bowie went across his back. The LeMat rode heavy on his left hip. But it was the 1851 Navy he drew now, worn smooth, black powder reliable as breath.

He moved slow, quiet.

There, half-hidden behind a split outcropping, a man was crouched near a runoff channel, cinching down a saddlebag. Broad-shouldered. Dusty. Rifle resting just out of reach.

Obadiah stepped into view, gun low but ready.

The man lifted his head and froze.

Recognition flared in Obadiah like a struck match.

That face.

The same one that came up out of the dry wash after shooting his partner point-blank in Indian Territory. Same eyes, same stillness.

The man stood slowly, hand easing toward his belt.

Then he saw Obadiah. Really saw him.

"Well, hell," the man said. "Ain't you a ghost."

Obadiah didn't speak.

The man gave a slow, crooked grin. "I always wondered if you'd come for me. Didn't think it'd be here. Didn't think you'd still be breathing."

"I didn't think you'd be stupid enough to stop running."

The wind tugged at their coats. Far off, a hawk called once and went quiet.

"You Lomax?" Obadiah asked.

The grin widened. "You didn't know then. Don't need it now."

He went for his gun.

Obadiah fired first.

The Navy barked, just once.

Lomax staggered, stumbled, and dropped to his knees. For a moment, he seemed surprised. Then he pitched forward, face-down in the dirt.

Dead.

Obadiah stood over him.

Same as his partner had been. No trial. No last words. Just silence.

He holstered the revolver.

The wind carried the smoke away.

He turned back toward Boone, toward Bridger, toward whatever waited next.

Behind him, the red hills held their peace. Obadiah rode back into camp near dusk, coat dusted red from the hills, the weight of something old finally laid down. Folks glanced up as he passed, eyes curious, cautious, but no one asked. Not yet.

At Hartley's, Elle poured him coffee without a word. He took it outside, sat on an overturned barrel, and watched the last light catch the stone bones of the Buffalo Belle.

Bridger was quieter now. Work slower. But steadier. Maybe it would hold.

Elle stepped out, arms crossed. "Was it him?"

Obadiah tipped his hat once.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

She studied him a long moment, then sat beside him. "You stayin'?"

He didn't answer right away. Just watched the smoke from the cookfires curl into the sky.

"There's no law here," she said. "Not unless someone stays."

Obadiah sipped his coffee. "Then I guess I'll stay."

The next morning, someone hammered a rough plank into the ground outside the tent with three painted letters:

LAW

No one said who did it. But no one took it down.

Bridger had its first lawman.

About the Author

D. Christopher Bader writes western noir with a crooked grin and a soft spot for small towns, eccentric weirdos, and Boston Terriers. He lives in Arkansas, works in public service, and tells himself that late-night edits count as sleep. When he's not writing, he's probably drinking too much coffee, plotting fictional crimes, or losing arguments with his dogs.

You can connect with me on:

 <https://dchristopherbader.com>

 <https://x.com/dchrisbader>

