

Excerpt from John Boykin's forthcoming novel, *The Stone Candle*

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[Background: The novel is set in 1872, mostly 30 miles north of San Francisco. One of the country's richest men has been traveling on a ship he owns when it wrecks there, near the town of Toler. He and a few of his sailors are rescued by Ben, the young hero of the novel. Ben helps them recover from their ordeal, getting them medical care and a room in the hotel.]

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Back home in Portland, Walter Thibodeau had an understated twenty-three-room mansion, four house servants, three groundskeepers, and two grooms for his thoroughbred racehorses. He rarely went to parties, but no hostess in Portland would ever fail to invite him. He rarely gave interviews, but the newspapers covered his every move anyway.

In addition to downtown Portland, he had offices in Seattle and San Francisco. Lieutenants oversaw his railroad, his shipping line, his three ranches, his logging operations, his sawmills, and his government contracts. He had earned the fierce loyalty of his employees. They cooked up excuses to be in his presence. The most coveted spot was observing him in a negotiation. The governor of Oregon had urged him to run for Senate, in hopes (according to the newspapers) that he would not run for governor. Thibodeau assured him he had no interest in either office.

But Thibodeau had washed up near Toler with only the nightclothes he was sleeping in when his ship went down. Not a dime in his pocket. Not even a pocket. He was now wearing – and stretching – Ben's clothes.

As soon as he got settled in at the hotel, he and Ben walked down the street to Toler Bank while the sailors went to their room to sleep. The banker, Percy Van Cleef, probably didn't know Ben was the reason Abby had broken off her engagement with his son Jerome, but Ben thought it best to wait for Thibodeau outside just in case.

Thibodeau sat down in front of Van Cleef's desk with as much dignity as Ben's tight pants would allow. "I need to have some money sent from my bank in Portland to me here," he said. "Can you arrange that?"

“Portland. Oregon?” No one had ever asked for that kind of thing before. “How much are we talking about?”

“Five hundred dollars.”

Van Cleef blanched. That was enough to buy twenty cows or a three-room house. With his best poker face, he wrote down the figure.

“I see. And what bank in Portland would that be coming from?”

“Ladd and Tilton.”

“I see. Well, that would take probably several weeks. Toler is not on the Wells Fargo line quite yet.”

Thibodeau shifted in his chair. “I can’t wait that long. I need it now.”

“Now. I see. I’ll need just a little more information. Your name is – ?”

“Can you get it or not?”

“Money does not move that fast, Mr. – ?”

“Then how soon could you get it from Wells Fargo in San Francisco?”

Van Cleef bristled. He was unaccustomed to being pressed by a customer, and certainly not by a stranger.

“Is your relationship with a bank in Portland or in San Francisco?”

Thibodeau’s mouth tightened and his eyes narrowed. He had not yet gotten a straight answer to any of his questions, and he was unaccustomed to bankers being any less than obsequious.

“Both. You haven’t told me how long it would take.”

“San Francisco could be quicker. Perhaps a week. But either way, there would be telegraph costs, transportation costs, fees from the other bank, plus our own fees. They would add up. It could become quite expensive, Mr. – ?”

He sighed. “Thibodeau.”

“Thibodeau. I see.” Van Cleef wrote that down. “And your first name?”

“Walter.”

The banker pulled back his head, then indulged a look up and down the clothes Thibodeau was bursting out of and the splint on his arm.

“Walter Thibodeau. I see. Any relation to the Walter Thibodeau I’m thinking of?”

“What Walter Thibodeau are you thinking of?”

Van Cleef did not reply.

“I am he.”

"I see. And what exactly brings you to Toler, Mr. Thibodeau?"

"I would rather not say. It's a private matter."

Van Cleef tapped his pencil on the desk a few times in thought, then beckoned his clerk over, stood, and extended his hand. "Well, thank you for coming in, sir. We will take this under advisement. This young man will see you out. Good day."

Thibodeau stayed seated. "Excuse me?"

"We will take your request under advisement. That's all we need today. Good day."

"What do you mean, 'under advisement'?"

"I mean that I do not have time for jokes."

"What is the joke?"

"The joke, sir, is for a ruffian to come into my bank doing a poor imposture of Walter Thibodeau and ask me to help him steal \$500 from the real one. We have no truck with confidence men here, sir. Good day!"

"Sit," Thibodeau said, keeping his eyes on Van Cleef and lowering his head like a bull. "I am not to be dismissed. What problem are you having? Make whatever inquiries you must, but I need you to do me this service. If you cannot, please point me to someone who can."

"What proof do you have that you are Walter Thibodeau?"

"What kind of proof do you need?"

"Someone who can vouch for you."

"Three of my employees are in town with me."

"Your employees. Does anyone in Toler know you?"

"Ben. Out by the ocean."

"I don't know any Ben. Does this Ben have a last name?"

"I didn't get his last name."

"I see. Someone named Ben. And how long has this Ben known you?"

"A few days. Also your doctor. Wilson. Or Watkins, I believe."

"I see. And how long has Dr. Watkins known you?"

"A few days."

"And having known you for 'a few days,' how do either Ben or Dr. Watkins know that you are who you say you are?"

Thibodeau rose, gave Van Cleef a stern look, and walked out the door.

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“Sir!” Ben called out and waved as Thibodeau came storming down the street. Thibodeau strode over with an indignant fire in his eyes.

“Ben, is there a telegraph office in this town?” he asked.

“Yeah. At the train depot.”

“And do you have enough money with you to pay for a telegram?”

Ben knew all too well the price of a telegram. It had been only a few weeks since he had fired off his angry one to his would-be New York employer. He nodded.

“Could you please take me there?”

The bleak, lonely North Pacific Coast Railroad depot on the eastern edge of town consisted of a one-room ticket/telegraph office, a water tank, and a freight shed. A swaybacked brown horse grazed just beyond the tracks.

When Ben and Thibodeau opened the depot office door, apprentice stationmaster Soapy snapped awake. As his head jerked up off the desk, he shot them a look of panic. They were apparently not who he feared seeing, though, so he took a deep breath, suppressed a yawn, and straightened up in his chair. He looked to be about 17, skinny as his pencil, with a rat’s nest of blond hair. Probably the regular stationmaster’s ne’er-do-well son.

“You wanna send another telegram?” he asked Ben. “We didn’t get no reply to your last one.” Ben looked away and shook his head.

“I will be sending one,” Thibodeau said. “To Mr. Arthur Bettencourt at Northwest Holdings in San Francisco.” He asked Soapy how long the telegram would take to reach Bettencourt and how far the nearest Wells Fargo line was from Toler. He then asked how long it would take someone leaving San Francisco at dawn tomorrow to reach Toler.

“Well, they would have to take a ferry across to Sausalito.” That concluded what Soapy had to say on the matter.

“Yes, and then what?” Thibodeau asked impatiently.

Soapy gave him a blank look that quickly darkened into panic. He rummaged around for the timetable book and examined it, apparently for the first time.

“Well, they would – I mean, they would – ”

After an agonizing wait, Ben said, “Could I just – ?” and reached for the book. Soapy eagerly shoved it into his hands. “I came this way myself a few weeks ago,” Ben said reassuringly. He quickly determined that a passenger leaving Sausalito at 9:15 A.M. would reach Toler at 11:57 A.M.

With that, Thibodeau started dictating. "*Lunar Dance* and I have been shipwrecked –" He suddenly stopped himself, took a look at Soapy twirling his hair with a finger, and said, "Let me start over." He waited for Soapy to pick up his pencil, cleared his throat, and dictated, "I am delayed. *Lunar Dance* will not arrive. Bring me \$500 cash to Toler California Hotel 1 P.M. Friday. I will brief you then. Confirm."

Soapy read that back to him, then said, "And it should be signed –?"

"Thibodeau. T-H-I-B-O-D-E-A-U."

"We could say Walter Thibodeau!" Soapy joked, winking at Ben.

"No need," Thibodeau said unamused.

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Thibodeau returned alone to the depot next morning to find Soapy staring out the window, absently biting his fingernails. Soapy spun around with a fright, looking like a cornered rat.

"I need to pick up the reply to my telegram from yesterday," Thibodeau said.

Soapy tightened up and crossed his arms as though bracing for a scolding. "Didn't get none."

Thibodeau frowned in surprise.

"I sent it right after, as soon as you left," Soapy defended himself needlessly. "It would have reached San Francisco in seconds. The delivery boy there would have got it to your man within two or three hours. But if your man wasn't there, no way of knowing. Or somebody received it but didn't hand it over to your man. No way of – that I can't say. But I sent it for sure. I got the Morse code table right here."

"Let's send him another."

"Or he might not have believed it. I mean, asking for \$500? Who sends that kind of money from a telegram?"

He had a point. Thibodeau gave it some thought, then started dictating his new telegram. "Artie, I hired you away from Picardy Lines October 1868. Come to Toler Hotel with \$500 cash for me 1 P.M. Friday. Dawn ferry to Sausalito. Train arrives Toler 11:57. Thibodeau."

"You're not really Walter Thibodeau, are you, mister?" Soapy asked out of the corner of his mouth.

Thibodeau regarded him a moment. "I am."

"Huh," Soapy said, looking over Thibodeau's ill-fitting clothes and splint. "Well, Mr. Thibodeau, that'll be one dollar."

Thibodeau tried to reach into his pocket, but Ben's pants were too tight on him to get more than his fingernails into. He patted each of his pockets from the outside. Empty. He looked around and put his hand over his mouth in thought. At last he announced, "I'll need to give you an IOU."

"A what?"

"An IO – A written, signed note promising to pay you later."

"Your autograph would be nice, but I still have to collect the dollar."

"I don't have any cash with me now. That's why I'm sending this telegram. To get some cash. I will pay you when my associate comes with the money."

"You mean you're a millionaire but you can't pay for a one-dollar telegram?"

Thibodeau closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and took a few deep breaths. "I can't today. It's a long story. But if you would please just send this telegram now, then I will give you an IOU – It's like a little contract. I will pay you double as soon as my associate brings me the money."

"I don't 'upposed to be taking no contracts. I'd get in trouble."

Thibodeau sighed. "How about if I give you some business advice? Would that be worth a dollar to you?"

Making snap decisions was clearly not Soapy's strength. Thibodeau went ahead anyway. "Let me ask you a question, son. Which would you rather have, one dollar or two dollars?"

Soapy thought about that. It might be a trick question. "Two?"

"Very good. Yes. And which would you rather have, one dollar today or two dollars tomorrow?"

This was getting complicated.

"You would rather have two tomorrow. That's business: taking some risk today for a greater payoff tomorrow. And you lower your risk by having a signed agreement, to be sure you come out ahead. In this case, the signed agreement is called an IOU, and this one guarantees you two dollars tomorrow instead of one today. That's just good business." He wrote it on a scrap of paper and signed it. "And as my thanks, I will give you personally an extra five dollars."

Of course, even if Bettencourt did get the telegram, would he believe it really came from Walter Thibodeau? What if it was real but he had sent it at gunpoint? Why would the great man be in Toler, California – wherever that was – anyway?