Chapter 1
Lovely

June, 1867

As the leading topers of this rowdy neighborhood, Lovely Smith’s whiskey pals sometimes had little to say. Especially those who carried on after midnight, after the more determined prospectors had returned themselves to their hovels or their tents, and the whores had skimmed off and pacified the younger, noisier men who had carried a little extra cash. Or dust.

And therefore Lovely almost never knew, when the time came for him to leave the saloon, whether the men who were carrying him, the men who were dragging him, were his usual friends or not: When they spoke, their voices were nearly lost to his hearing; sometimes their voices would blend into the clatter of his bootheels scraping across the warping floorboards that formed the gallery; but more often, the men did not speak at all.

Always by now, at the end, was the word. The word was death: It was the same at every ending, that final word that repeated itself from somewhere within his comprehension, always insistent and always standing above the few haphazard mumbled words of the men, but always that one word would become softer and whispered, soon nearly unhearable, as if it were a toneless and time-consumed church bell stroking slowly in a small village from which he was now departing forever. And this village, knowing nothing and noting nothing about his life or about his dreams, remained forever, remained asleep. And he understood, now, that all the sounds of death came from some horrifying depth within him, that they were not solely the probing spirit of some evil, some deadly pursuer, that would soon accost him from outside, because in his life now there was no outside; in his life now, in his absolute aloneness, there was only an inside, and a relentless disintegration of all of it.

In the dénouement, in the collapse, there were no participants except himself and the word and the sand and the darkness. Somehow, in his drunken mind, the word and the sand and the pervasive star-glow of nighttime upon the sand had become one: In his final imagining he would sometimes see the infinitude of rock that he had torn up from this same sand and had pulverized and sorted and studied and sorted again and again, and then had returned nearly always to its place without any prospect of reward, and he would sometimes think of his life in the placer fields, of the high hopes spilled with the muddy liquidity of his life into the same morass ten thousand times, all essentially for nothing, and he would feel a
deep sadness and a deep frustration. And when these same thoughts came to him in his sober and reflective moments, there came also the rage.

In these times he wanted to kill—except that, in his isolation, he had never received guidance toward killing: He did not have the Mexicans or the Californios, he did not have the Yokut or the Tübatulabal, he did not have the Army of the United States. He encountered no object of sufficient hatred beyond the rocks and the sand and the companies that created the mud—the gushing streams of mud oozing from mountainsides like gouts of blackened blood-foam—and himself.

Over the first few years of his descent, Smith managed to pan or dry wash small amounts of gold and to use the money for worthwhile enterprises; but soon he began squandering most of the proceeds on whiskey. He slowly lost control of his life, and over time, predictably, his way of life evolved into an enemy. He lacked the will—not the courage, but merely the will, and perhaps even the necessary knowledge—to commit suicide quickly and easily, although many times he had thought about it. Within less than a year of uncontrollable drinking he was falling into a superficial lethargy that is, in truth, an active self-directed suicide of drunks reaching the lowest levels of self-hatred and despair, where there is no remaining hope for magical salvation, where there is essentially no remainder of anything except destruction stumbling onward in an inverted image that Lovely saw in sober moments, of Los Hermanos Penitentes of New Mexico: Inverted, because Lovely’s agonized struggle, in his mind, was not toward salvation but toward damnation, and when he sometimes heard in his mind the sad notes of the reed flutes and then imagined the flagellants, near naked, their faces creviced like a hard desert surface and contorted in suffering, and the multi-tipped whips tearing into their flesh, he felt and he saw the same scourge upon himself, but this brutality was confined to the internalities of his body and his spirit, and there were no onlookers partaking of his message, and it was not truly his seeing but his feeling, the deep feeling that said that his life was dissolving outward like another mountain melting into mud, from the center of his body.

In his infrequent sober moments, usually during the few days each month—lately disappearing—when somebody would give him work, he would sometimes promise himself that he would soon write to his daughter and his sister-in-law, and send money. At last, he stopped thinking about them altogether—except when the guilt would come.

The guilt, mechanism of his suicide. The guilt, convoluted on itself and folding into itself everything that had to do with the years of frustration and danger and anger in Kansas, and with a war that he had evaded altogether, and with the
loss of his wife and the abandonment of his child at a time when the war ravaged nearly everything except the one place where Smith remained hidden; and finally, the newer dimensions of guilt that took hold of him because of the now totally devastating poverty of his life in California, his powerlessness, his drunken incompetence, his inability to disentangle himself from any of it. He had heard stories about torture in Kansas, in bleeding Kansas. He often wondered whether he would have the strength to survive torture, but if the torture he knew about in that unhappy state was sustained by the mutual hatred and anger of abolitionists and their enemies, of those who fought without constraint against goals different from their own, then Lovely’s self-torture, his determination to suffer and to die alone, had exactly that same nurturance, except that it all came now from within, it all closed in on him powerfully like a collapsing mineshaft and it could not be denied.

Sometimes, when Lovely was sober, he knew that his guilt and his rage were indistinguishable.

In his helplessness he no longer cared about his appearance, he never bathed and rarely cut his beard, and his clothes became little more than dirty, stinking rags. The man was a scarecrow abandoned to the weather and to the laughter of birds—a scarecrow disintegrating in a place without gardens.

He shrouded himself in a slow mental, physical, and emotional death, and there had arrived a point where Smith could gaze upward toward a billion booze-bedimmed midnight stars and fail to discern anything at all. His only earthly possessions were his prospecting equipment, his meager supplies of rotting and rotted food, and his loyal and capricious mule whose name, of unremembered origin, was Doc. One day a few years preceding, a fellow miner and former soldier of the secession had looked with disgust at the derelict lying in the dirt of Havilah, and remarked to his partner, “ain’t that a lovely mess!” From there the name got around, and it stayed with him. James B. Smith, unperson, sinking ever deeper into alcoholic dissolution.

Years ago, when he left New Jersey for St. Louis and ultimately for Wichita, Jim Smith knew that the frontier would bring experiences that would change his life. He was ready for change: He had left New Jersey on his thirtieth birthday, at a time when even the most sober reports from California cast a magical glow across the entire continent and made it seem as if all the lands trans-Mississippi were alive with opportunity and wealth. An intelligent and energetic man, he had received good schooling, and by the time he left New Jersey he knew everything one needed to know in order to manage, for those who owned
them, mercantile shops offering every combination of ironmongery, stationery, candy, tobacco, second-hand goods and antiques, the findings of artisans, books, clothing, furniture, leather goods and saddlery, liquor. His friends of the Emigrant Aid Society knew that Smith was not deeply involved in the politics of slavery and abolition, but they saw in him precisely the combination of ambition, skill, courage, and alienation that, in their view, was badly needed in Kansas and Missouri; they also knew that moral support, which he required, was cheap, and that heavy financial support, which he did not require, would have been far more difficult for them to provide. Their efforts came to a happy culmination five days before Smith’s birthday: In a final speech before Congress, President Polk himself said that the gold in California was real, that every reasonable claim had been verified by what he called the authentic reports, and that a large part of the nation’s future would rise unrelenting out of the western wilderness.

Jim Smith was ready for a carefully planned migration—long in time and long in distance.

In 1860, after nearly ten years in Kansas, the argonaut was determined to move westward once again. Jim Smith, student of circumstances, knew about the horrendous violence of the ‘fifties in Lawrence and along the Pottawatomie and in other parts of Kansas, he believed that men like the dead Calhoun, like Douglas and Buchanan and Frémont and Lincoln and Bully Brooks, within only a few years—perhaps five, six years—would make a war of secession in the east inevitable, and he believed that the violence almost certainly would spread throughout Kansas. And he knew that in all likelihood he would have to escape with his family to the safety of Texas or the New Mexico territory or the far west.

A man of ambition, Smith left his bride of six months to search for gold in California. On the day when they parted for the last time he had held his wife close in his arms, proud in the knowledge that she was soon to become the mother of his child. Her tears had wet his cheek as he assured her that the parting was but temporary, that there was still plenty of gold to be taken in California. All reports from the west told of men making fortunes—plain men, strong and hard-working and not different from himself. His wife had wanted to go with him but, because of her pregnancy, he finally had discouraged her; accommodations were just too mean. He promised her that he wouldn’t be gone for long—no more than eighteen months—and that, when he returned, they would be rich—at least, rich enough to do many of the things about which they had dreamed. He pledged that, should circumstances make it necessary for him to do so, he would send for her and the baby as soon as possible.
He did not foresee that his wife would die in childbirth.

It was not long after he received the news, in a letter from his wife’s sister, that he began to drink. The letter told him that his wife had died, that the baby, a girl, had lived, and that his sister-in-law would care for the child until he returned. All plans composed by Mr. and Mrs. Smith in their brief and happy time together, shattered. Smith had loved this woman deeply, and he told himself that he had trekked west only to find a fortune that might enable him to give her comforts, security, and perhaps a few luxuries. And she was taken from him in a few calamitous moments that he had not even known.

Mrs. Smith, in the days preceding the horrors of her death, somehow certain that the baby would be a girl, had decided to name her Jerre, a diminutive of Geraldine. For reasons unknown to Mr. Smith, the child had always been known as Joan.

In the quiet of early morning, Lovely lay flat on his back.

From the livening breezes of the high desert and the igniting blue of the sky, the old man in his sickness knows that the coolness of the night is soon to end, and that the heat of the approaching sun will interrupt and add to his peaceful miseries. Slowly, painfully, he opens his eyes wider to the penetrating light, eyes set deep and constrained in the fleshiness of sockets that frame the redness, and seeing, before all else, the looming and contrasting darkness of a rocky boss metamorphosed above him, that obscures half the morning sky above his accustomed place of collapse. Lovely Smith—surprised and perhaps chagrined that he has survived to see another day.

Legs stretched out, arms straight and taut against his body, a sentinel held stiff upon a still-cold rocky talus forming the rise of a small trash-littered cuesta. A troubled sentinel guarding the stars that lie close above the clear desert air, his head ached with a throb, a slow, surging roll of deadly drums. His body, struggling to revive itself, felt as though an army of voracious ants had crawled under his shabby clothes; and indeed he soon saw the ants, or thought he saw them, on the darkened and filth-stained shards of denim and felt and flannel that for many months now had done service as his entire wardrobe. As always, he had an aura of whiskey re-breathed a thousand times until it smelled of vomit vaporized.

The soft descending rays of the morning sun soon reach and touch indifferently his haggard and creviced and filthy face. Still lying flat, he looks around turning his head slowly, tentatively, from side to side—guilty sentry briefly feeling shame—and finally manages to sit up. He scratches himself vigorously and...
rubs his booze-reddened eyes and closes them again in sorrow and, turning his face downward, whispers to himself a profanity repeated many times—damn, damn, damn—and now he turns his head side to side faster, although not for seeing, but in order to deny the pervasive negation of his life. A startled gray squirrel scolds furiously from its hiding place in a nearby oak tree: broken, the peaceful demeanor of the early morning stars.

On the mornings of his misery Lovely would always gaze at the Monarch saloon as if he were seeing it for the first time, as if it had materialized out of nothing during the hours of his unconsciousness. The Monarch saloon, famous abode of the principal ginmill serving Keyesville, a hell-roaring gold town founded in 1854 by Richard Keyes, the astute and noted soldier-miner who was to die early in life, late one morning, by dynamite. Its unpainted exterior boards warping inward, the structure entire seeming to shrink from the brightening rays of the early sun, grieving and ashamed that the searching glow might reveal evidence of the happenings within. Other buildings clustered around it, for the Monarch was not the sole reason for the existence of Keyesville: A scattering of tiny cheap wooden structures served as abodes for sporting ladies and sometimes for pimps and sometimes provided service merely for storage or for outhouses. Here, in this makeshift place, an aspiring whorehouse was typically an outhouse not yet dragged away from its ditch; and a future outhouse was a whorehouse that did not yet have a ditch installed beneath it.

The Monarch, then, was of importance primarily because dry-throated miners, still producing dust, liked to toss off a few fingers of whiskey before indulging in the more basic pleasures, at a far more attractive price. There were few mercantile establishments in Keyesville: The place had been spawned for seekers of delight and, by default, for drunks. One of the pimps, however, claimed to have a rampant trade in beef jerky.

Lovely had spent most of the previous night in the saloon. Nowadays he never patronized the whores—on principle, he said: another principal reason being that alcohol was now his primary passion, and he had become so filthy and unkempt that even the most used-up and desperate among prostitutes refused to minister to him at the standard price or even triple the standard price, which he had not offered for several years. Lovely, this night, had spent all his money on drinks for himself and even his few cronies until he was obliterated, and he knew that he had either wandered out of the Monarch or been carried out. He tried for a moment, without success, to remember. He had had his latest fling, and he now knew retribution.
His shadow-world conscience bothered him this morning, as it did invariably after another night of drinking. For it was in the midst of these painful aftermaths, paying off the latest installment on his own mortality, that he remembered his daughter, a daughter whom he had never seen. Vaguely he recalled that she was somewhere in Kansas. Vaguely he also knew that he had an unfulfilled obligation to her.

Although he had hardly yet moved, Lovely sensed the pervasive stiffness and lameness of his body. His every joint ached. As he turned his head and raised it and lowered it, and did so several times, he could hear the crackling sound at the point where his throbbing skull joined the spine. He felt himself cautiously, thoroughly, to see if he had new cuts, broken bones; he found nothing, except for a bad cut where his elbow must have scraped a rock during the night or as he was being dragged, and there was evidence of a nosebleed as he slept. The squirrel in the oak, finally deciding that the unknown spectacle did not hold forth any threat, quit coughing its angry insult and abuse, appearing now to be merely curious, and even solicitous over Lovely’s sad state. Lovely, his attention captured by the squirrel’s sudden silence, looked up. “—the hell you care?” he said. Returning to its own reciprocal indifference, the squirrel went back about its business.

Lovely wanted to lie back again on the ground, but he knew that with the arrival of the sun, and given his own misery and weakness, doing so would produce a death over which he would have no control. Moving in slow, deliberate stages like an old man, he struggled shakily to his feet. Again, in the sobriety of the hour, he meticulously checked himself for injuries, mumbling further the soft curses either for himself or for nothing. He ran a grimy hand through his sandy, gray-flecked hair. He stopped the cursing, entertained for himself the thought that he was now ready to begin a day of positive accomplishment, and he laughed in the same soft voice that earlier had cursed.

Then he realized that there was something wrong, something different about this morning: Doc was nowhere to be seen.

Lovely was astounded. As his anxiety grew he began searching, turning his gaze in every direction, several times in every direction, walking forward a few steps and shading his eyes as necessary, scanning repeatedly across the terrain. The mule always remained near him on these wretched occasions, patiently grazing on whatever fodder was available, waiting for him to wake up, eventually prodding him and snorting at him desperately in the growing warmth of morning, as if there were a deadline that could not be allowed to pass. Animal and man had formed a strong attachment during the years of their association, and Lovely had never
mistreated Doc. He was always disgusted by the ways in which so many prospectors would destroy one mule after another, overburdening them with packs that would cut and tear deeply into their backs, allowing their legs to be damaged and swollen and infected, rarely seeing to the provision of adequate feed and water, and then, when there was no possibility of recovery, simply beating the mules into agonizing activity with lariats and clubs, and working them to death. And it was, thought Lovely, precisely his kindness to Doc that had made the mule an arrogant, self-assertive individualist. Forever loyal, the old mule was nonetheless becoming willful and increasingly cantankerous and irritable. Several times in the gray, early dawn Lovely had watched Doc labor to his feet, sitting first on his haunches like a dog, groaning in anticipation of the heavy pack that he knew he would have to carry.

Lovely couldn’t understand why or where Doc had gone. He couldn’t lose Doc: The animal was the only living thing of value left to him. The very thought of it panicked him and made him realize once again that, as long as he and Doc remained together, he himself still had a tiny prospect of survival: If Doc died, everything would die.

Then he remembered—or at least surmised: He hadn’t unpacked his mule the night before, and the confused animal must simply have wandered off. Frantically, moving fast with anxiety, Lovely stumbled forward spiraling in circles of larger radii as he scanned the ground for hoofprints; finally, he found them. The tracks led southward, away from Keyesville, and he began to follow. There were no signs that Doc had stopped to eat or to investigate anything of interest to a mule; he too had moved fast. Lovely trudged onward, his head clearing with exertion and his rapid inhalation of cold, early morning air. As he walked briskly across the opening terrain, the occasional large patches of mud served to mark Doc’s passage, and each time Lovely found a new fragment of the mule’s trail he would walk faster and his consternation seemed to grow and there were irregular sharp palpitations of his heart that ordinarily would have alarmed him, but now they merely added to his cursing and his anger toward himself for having neglected the mule, and Lovely himself was surprised by his indifference toward his own well-being, by his sense that if he were to collapse and die at this very instant, at least there would be a reasonable prospect that somebody would find the mule and adopt him, and perhaps not abuse him beyond what he could bear.

For perhaps two miles he trailed the mule—unaware that he was now under careful observation by a young man of the Tübatulabal.
After more than an hour and close to exhaustion, Lovely found Doc standing in a circle of oak and scrub pine near a rocky outcropping, perhaps a little dejected or perhaps relieved that he had finally found the security of an enclosure. The pack saddle was intact but askew. Lovely called to Doc, but the unhappy mule began to move farther away. Exasperated, Lovely reached down, picked up a rock, and threw it at Doc with all his booze-diminished strength. The missile struck the mule on the neck, stunning him into submission; at last the animal stood still, his eyes reflecting the irritable indifference of his breed, and awaited the vestige of a man once his master. Lovely set to work, not successfully, trying to improve the balance of Doc’s load. Soon tiring, he looked away from the mule, concentrating for a moment on his immediate surroundings, for he had never before stumbled upon this particular ground. The place was desolate, rarely and perhaps never knowing a human presence. Returning to his task, Lovely began to unload a few of the lighter items from the peripheries of Doc’s pack. As he did so, he tried to remember whether his sample sack for rocks contained the usual assortment of heavy and worthless specimens.

Then came the nausea. Nowadays, in the mornings, it nearly always came. This time it was worse, because he had so exerted himself. Lovely hated it, resisted it; unlike most drunks of his acquaintance, he did not find it easy, a simple matter of daily routine, to vomit up all the wastes of the preceding day. He would try to overcome the nausea by talking to his mule, or to his cronies: When he did so, affectionately or not, the nausea would be held back for a time. But when he stopped talking, the sickness would return immediately; the sickness of silence. On these occasions the mule, if not Lovely’s friends, always seemed to have an extraordinary indulgence, seemed to listen attentively, sympathetically, and with understanding. Whenever the battle was lost, whenever Lovely succumbed, Doc would react far more intensely than his master: Lovely’s coughing and choking, and the vomiting into the sand of poisons that were not a coagulation but a thin, stinking liquid, were as fearful and maddening to the mule as a huge unnoticed streamer suddenly caught and whipped to life sharply in a livening breeze.

Lovely leaned over repeatedly, trying to make sure that the sickness was gone. Then for a long moment he stood up straight. And then, once again, he put his head down, and his eyes closed. And suddenly, all thoughts of sickness vanished. Penetrating Lovely’s whiskey-benumbed brain was the realization that the small rock he had just thrown at his mule was extraordinarily heavy. He stepped away from the place of his sickness and squatted and examined other rocks around his feet, and he saw that he was standing on a decaying and partly
collapsed quartz ledge. Dull yellow veins interlaced individual pieces of rock—many of them—and he began to turn round and round and to search again with great animation and near panic, just as he had when he first discovered the disappearance of his mule. He took a rusty pen knife and anxiously dug into the yellow of several rocks scattered loosely across the sand. After several moments of frenzied experiment, Lovely was satisfied: The yellow did not flake; it was malleable. He could scar an auriferous rock with his knife, toss it to the ground at random, and fail within minutes to find it again in the richness of this deposit. His excitement grew, and he could hardly control it: He felt as if his body in its post-drunk malaise could not contain the now returning throb of his heart. Again uneasy, Doc moved away from him, sensing the unaccustomed madness of his master.

Lovely’s hangover suspended itself immediately as a new, unfamiliar intoxication filled his exhausted body. Gold! At last! At last! Gold! He saw that the ground around him abounded with the largesse yielded by this unbelievable formation. He checked other specimens—all unbelievably rich—and as he did so this new word, gold!, gold!, my god, gold!, gold!, began repeating itself insistently at the surface of his brain and he heard it clearly and savored it just as he had the earlier words, the words of death and damnation, and it totally escaped his awareness, as he heard the happy patter of the new words, that these older and stronger and more dangerous words always had come to him with a slow rhythm, a resounding beat like that of the drums following small fifers marching in echelon, marching in full battle formation while sounding sprightly tunes in the lead, and it was to be these same formidable drumwords that would prevail on this day, that would not be denied.

Doc inadvertently had led Lovely to fabulous wealth: the blind leading the bedeviled. Lovely was exhilarated, ecstatic. And then, after a few moments, depressed—and the tears again invaded and glistened in his bloodshot eyes. Why hadn’t this happened much sooner, in a time when he still could have returned to Kansas? But if he were now to become rich, why could he not return? A rich man, after all, need not feel shame for his previous failures.

But what if his failures had hurt deeply those he loved?

And what is the future of this man already seated at the barstools of death? Will new aspirations, if they come, pervade both his heart and his mind? Or will some part of him continue to say no?

Lovely turned. He walked a few steps, and glanced back at his mule. He looked at the ground around him, and stepped toward the slope that fell from the
edge of the quartz platform on which he stood. He bent over. He knew he was filled with a wild ecstasy, and he vomited. Vomit—of a volume that astounded even him, and caused Doc to turn toward him with measurable surprise enlivening the fringes of his indifference. And Lovely, for once, felt clean, and he was crying.

His face contorted with conflicted emotions, Lovely groped in his pocket for the unused stub of pencil that he always carried. He found it. He then walked calmly to the penitent mule, opened the pack, and soon disentangled two blank claim notices, still fairly new, that he had somehow managed to preserve although they had become as badly crinkled and stained as the skin of his face. He looked around for an unmistakable identifying landmark that would prove the location of his claim.

He saw it, and it sobered him even further. Near the top of a high granite cliff, sun and ice and wind had combined their eternal talents and sculptured a bust of an Indian, as though an ancient and forgotten aboriginal had stood upright and erect through millennia and had then eroded and crumbled slowly into the mountain, forever condemned to peruse with eyes unbelieving a million chunks of rock filled with the white man’s pelf. For a time Lovely gazed upward at the cliff; finally, the spell broken by the more powerful lure of gold, he set to work on his discovery notice, using the majestic stone Indian as his principal landmark. He had trouble remembering the exact date, but he wrote down what he thought would be a likely guess.

Everything in his life, prior to this day, was collapsing, but Lovely Smith remained prepared as always for the one spectacular strike. His pencil and his blank claim notices were still serviceable, and the containers he carried to store the notices—should these containers ever be needed—had been ready since the days long ago when Lovely could still pay for explosives. Two durable tins that once held percussion caps, each carrying the confident insignia of the California Cap Company, San Francisco, each bearing on the face of it the Maltese Cross that Lovely still regarded as his personal amulet: The Maltese Cross of the blasting-cap tins, drab in its grey, but which in his mind would come alive with the memory of his wife’s love for the scarlet-red lychnis and its crossed-over petals, which Lovely had never seen. He emptied from the first of these tins a small amount of tobacco, carefully saving the contents in a pocket, and put a copy of the claim inside it. He built a cairn—a monument to his continued and renewed existence—inserting the claim securely near its base. He then made out the second claim notice, emptied the second container of its forgotten paraphernalia, placed the claim carefully within it, and hid it away in Doc’s pack.