

**Ragtime Dudes**

**In A Thin Place**

A Novel

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for Victoria Woodhull and Tennie Claflin  
who advocated free love a century before the hippies

# CHAPTER 1

**New Mexico, 1904**

“Hey, DUDE!”

Mo Silverstein glanced at his business partner, Julius, strutting down the train station platform. “Hey, dude, yourself,” Mo said. It was obvious they weren’t locals returning home. Their fashionable New York waistcoats practically screamed: “eastern dandy.”

A young boy pushing a hand truck scrambled to keep up with tall Julius’s strides. Mo counted the crates, trunks and suitcases the train porter had piled at his feet, and tipped him a nickel. “Help that boy get these on the hand truck.”

“Yes, sir,” the porter said.

“Where the hell are we?” Julius said.

“Tres Piedras,” the porter said.

“Mo, I thought we were going to Taos.”

“Me, too.”

“No, Sir, Taos is twenty-five miles from here,” the porter said. “You need a horse and wagon. You could take the stagecoach, but the stage don’t run regular.”

“Where do we see about the stagecoach?” Mo said.

“Other side of the depot.”

The hand truck had a bad wheel and once it was fully loaded, it made a thump, thump, thump sound as the boy pushed it. When they reached the edge of the platform, Mo said, “Julius, wait with our stuff. I’ll see what I can find out.” He walked around back of the depot where a

chalkboard advertising the stagecoach schedule was nailed to the whitewashed station wall. A dusty-looking fellow wearing a cowboy hat and a handlebar mustache was currying a large horse.

“You the man we see about the stagecoach to Taos?”

“I am. Name’s Dunn.”

“Your schedule sign says ‘Taos: occasional.’ What’s that mean?”

“Upon occasion when there’s any passengers or if there’s mail for there,” Dunn said. His teeth were brown with tobacco stains.

“There’s two of us,” Mo said.

“That’s fine.” The man ejected a stream of tobacco juice from between his teeth. It hit the dirt and curled like a desiccated garter snake. “I got to take mail there anyway.”

Mo nodded and entered the depot. The interior was devoid of life. Against the wall were two wooden pews that belonged in a church, between them a brass spittoon that needed cleaning. Two more benches, just boards without backs, sat in the middle of the room, and the ticket counter was unattended. The train steamed off and a young man wearing a clerk’s cap came in.

“You the man I see about tickets?”

“Train’s left. Where you going?”

“Taos.”

“You’ll want the stage, then. Mr. Dunn’s leaving pretty soon.”

Mo’s hands and clothes were covered in coal soot from the train ride. It’d been hot and all the passenger car windows had been down. Sucked the smoke right in. “We got time to get a bath?”

“Not if you want to catch today’s stage. No reason to bathe anyhow. Trail’s dusty. You’d get dirty again on the ride there.”

Mo brushed the dust off his clothes best as he could. “All right, give me two tickets to Taos.”

“No tickets—pay Mr. Dunn directly,” the clerk said.

Dunn had hitched a team of four to the coach and was helping the boy load the crates and luggage into the boot by the time Mo came out. Julius was already in the coach, sipping on a flask he kept in his coat pocket. Mo got in and closed the door. Dunn climbed up top, gave a whistle and cracked the reins. The coach surged forward and soon Tres Piedras was behind them.

The rutted road caused the stagecoach to bounce up and down and lurch from side to side. “It’s not like taking a hansom through Central Park,” Mo said.

Julius pulled back the curtain on the coach window, and peered out through a cloud of dust at the reddish-tan colored rocks. “It’s not exactly Central Park, either.”

After seven days of the rhythmic motion and steady clack-clack of the train from St. Louis, the jerky stage ride was jarring. Mo finagled his own flask out of his jacket and lifted it to his lips. They hit a pothole, and the contents jostled out and spilled down his shirt front. “Damn.”

“Shameful waste,” Julius said.

Mo swiped at his shirt several times and then, with a steady grip, tipped the flask over his mouth. “Empty. Give me some of yours.”

Julius didn’t hesitate to share, but after Mo had a swallow he held his hand out for the flask’s return. He took one more swig himself and then capped it and slipped it back in his pocket. Mo gave him an appreciative nod of thanks.

“Julius, before we get to Taos, I want to talk to you about something.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve decided to change my name.”

“What for?”

“This is the Wild West—no one out here will respect a man named Silverstein. Besides, everyone comes west to get a fresh start.”

“You got a point. These cowboys probably think a Jew is a tailor. So, what you want to be called?”

“Well, you know Mo is short for Mordecai, that’s not any better, so I was thinking, Morgan. Then I’ll just drop stein off my last name and I’ll be Morgan Silver. What do you think? Can you start calling me Morgan?”

“Morgan. I like it, a real cowboy name, like one of the Earp brothers. I’m not Jewish, but maybe I should have a cowboy name too. How ’bout you call me One-eyed Jack?”

“Sure, we can both have new names. Only problem is, you’ve got two eyes.”

“Hmmm, Two-eyed Jack doesn’t sound right, does it? Which jacks have one eye?”

“Spades and Hearts.”

“So, it’d have to be clubs or diamonds... OK, Jack Diamond’s my name. I like the sound of that.” He stuck out his hand. “Morgan.”

Mo grabbed the offered hand and shook it, “Jack.”

Jack and Morgan grinned at each other as though they’d accomplished something large.

“We better write Bryce and tell him, soon as we get to Taos,” Jack said.

“Right,” Jack said. “If we’re gonna make these names stick we can’t have him sending telegrams to Julius and Mordecai.”

“I’ll do it now. The driver said he does the mail run. He could take our letter back with the outgoing mail from Taos.” Morgan, an artist, always kept a small pad and pencil in his pocket for making quick sketches. He took it out and began a letter, but after a few failed attempts he said, “I can’t write anything the way this coach is jerking.”

“Do it when we get to Taos. There should be time enough while the driver waters the horses,” Jack said. “Tell Bryce not to spread it around the city though. No reason for certain Micks back there to know what we’re called out here.”

“I hadn’t thought of that, but you’ve got a point. Bryce’s supposed to take care of that situation before he comes, but if he screws up—”

“As he’s wont to do... Jesus, it’s hot in here. Hold my hat. I’m gonna ride up top with the driver.”

Jack tossed his bowler on the seat next to Morgan and threw the door open. The ground raced past and clouds of dust from the horses poured in. In a heartbeat Jack was leaning backward out the door, putting his foot in the window opening.

“Jack, you’re crazy, you’ll kill yourself.”

Jack leveraged his weight onto the coach window and pulled himself up in one swift move.

“Well, I’ll be,” Morgan said.

Jack leaned over the edge and hung upside down grinning like a fool. “Come on. It’s cooler up here.”

Morgan doffed his hat and put it on the seat next to Jack’s. He peered out the door at certain death, turned around and leaned out backward. He struggled to lift his leg high enough to slip his boot in the window frame as Jack had done, but he was too short and couldn’t reach. He

put one foot on the coach seat which got him a little higher, but it was too far from the door and he was practically lying horizontal. That wouldn't work.

He held onto the door frame with one hand and reached overhead with the other. He found the iron railing that ran the circumference of the coach roof and grabbed hold. He let go the doorway and got his other hand on the railing too. He tried to pull himself up by doing a chin-up, but lacked the upper body strength to lift himself onto the roof. All he succeeded in doing was losing his foothold. Now he was suspended by both arms, flopping against the bouncing coach like a sack of meal. Jack reached over the side, grabbed his coat collar and pulled him up.

The driver took his eyes off the team and turned around. "You city fellows are destined to die young, pulling stunts like that. Why didn't you just holler? I'd have stopped and you could have climbed up top like normal persons."

Jack laughed at the driver and pulled out his silver flask. He unscrewed the top, drank deep, and handed it to Morgan who took a long pull. "We finally have a story that'll outdo Bryce."

"You know if Bryce told it, he'd have pulled himself up with one hand while shooting some Spaniards."

That cracked Jack up. "Yep, and Teddy Roosevelt would have been riding in the coach, egging him on."

"Don't worry," Morgan said. "I'm sure we'll have plenty more adventures before Bryce gets here."