

Riding The Chisos Trail

CHAPTER 1

When I woke up a sour-faced old man was hunkered over the embers of my fire pouring coffee into a tin cup with one hand and pointing my own pistol at my head with the other. I blinked awake awful sudden. The hammer on that Navy Colt was pulled all the way back; if he let go with his thumb I'd never see full sunup again.

I hoped he liked last night's coffee.

It was just shy of dawn in the foothills of the Chisos, with the sun beginning to show to the east through a notch in the mountains. I lay in my blankets with my head pillowed on my saddle and considered my situation.

It didn't look good. My empty gunbelt was slung over a dead branch in the mesquite above my head. My Winchester was propped against the trunk of the tree, not far from my bedroll yet still out of reach. There was no chance of grabbing for it without risking a bullet for breakfast.

I cursed myself for a fool, for being careless enough to sleep beside my fire. It takes only one mistake in wild country to land a man in serious trouble; I should have known better. I wondered what it might be like to die on my eighteenth birthday, and me on my way to meet up with my uncle Arlo for the first time in two years. I hoped not to find out.

The old man taken his time drinking coffee and staring at me with chilly, pale blue eyes, not saying a word.

I closed my eyes and wished I was in New Orleans, which I'd heard tell of but never seen. That didn't work a lick. Truth is, I was dry-camped alone under a mesquite tree, a full day's ride southwest of my old horse-camp. That old man had found me smack dab in the middle of the most god-awful stretch of broken rock, rattlesnake-filled West Texas country you ever saw.

I'd packed up my camp the morning before at dawn, and pointed my horse towards some civilized doings. I hadn't set foot in a town for nigh on a year, and was beginning to feel curly around the edges. I'd sent word to my uncle to meet me in Bentley on my birthday. He was just back from Montana, and I'd not seen him since I was sixteen.

My first mistake was trying a shortcut across unfamiliar territory. Now I was at least a day late, if not two, and low on water. My second mistake was believing I was alone in that wild country. It doesn't pay to take anything for granted when riding through the western deserts.

I opened my eyes and he was sure enough still there, holding the cup so little drifts of coffee steam blew across his face. I studied him: thin and wiry, maybe sixty or so, dressed in greasy buckskins and an old felt hat. He couldn't weigh more than a hundred and fifty pounds soaking wet, although looking at him I didn't guess he'd been all the way wet in years. His face was carved sharp, hard and creased with a week's worth of grey stubble pushing through. Those deep-set eyes just stared at me like chips of flint, every so often

skipping over my gear and out across the desert. One thing was certain, that heavy barrel was rock steady and still aimed at the bridge of my nose.

The old man gulped a final swallow, dumped the dregs onto the coals and stood up, moving quick like a wild animal. I saw that his feet were bound in bloody rags, shapeless dirty bundles with no shoes or boots.

"Where's your horse, boy?" His voice was dry and pitched high, as though he used it seldom.

"Yonder, in the draw behind that slab of rock," I answered. I rolled out of my blankets and stood facing him in my sock-feet.

"Mister, if you plan to set me afoot out here you'd best just have at that six-gun and shoot me now."

He tugged the brim of his hat lower over his eyes and looked me over. He shifted the Colt to his left hand with a quick border-switch. It looked to me like he'd done it a few times before. He hoisted a canvas tote-sack and held it up, grunting with the weight.

"Nervous, are ye?" He chuckled. "Don't like the idea of walking too far in this country?" He flung the tote-sack over the fire where it landed at my feet with a hefty thud. "Look in there," he said.

I reached down and untied the drawstring. The sides of the canvas sack were slick and stained dark. I lifted it up and dumped the contents on the ground. A crudely severed head fell out and rolled a little ways before stopping against a rock. Two unseeing eyes were open and glazed in a blood-soaked

copper face. Beside it lay a chunk of quartz the size of my fist, and it was laced with a thick ribbon of gold.

"Comanche renegades, boy. The best they had. See my feet? I've been running over rock and cactus for three days and nights. I hightailed it out of their camp the second night they had me, before they set the women loose on me." He spat into the coals. "That one was on my trail for two days, running me through the toughest country in the territory. I was barefoot, boy. He was tracking me by my blood sign." He motioned with the gun. "Now get your boots on and we'll fetch yonder pony, careful like. I expect the rest of them to show up afore too long, and I'm not wishful to be here when they do."

I put on my hat, shook out my boots, jammed my feet into them and headed off to get my horse. I was mad, deep down mad, but that old devil had me dead to rights. I cursed myself and him, but I had no choice in the matter. That forty-four caliber Colt was awful persuasive in his hand. He limped along a few yards back, chewing on a strip of jerky he'd pilfered from my saddlebags. Well, it wasn't the first time I'd made do without breakfast.

Now, that horse of mine was a strawberry roan with a purely ugly disposition. I'd picked him out of a small herd of mustangs I trapped and gentled for a Mexican vaquero the past winter. That roan was cantankerous, but he was desert-bred and would go the distance on poor graze and a hatful of alkali water.

He wasn't much to look at, but then again neither am I, standing six foot three in my socks and with a face like a side of beef, or so I've been told.

Mostly when I saw my face it was in pools of spring water, so I wasn't much judge. That roan was ornery and short-coupled, a mustang stallion with a barrel chest and a hammer-head, but he had bottom. No one but me had ever ridden him. We got along just fine so long as I was careful never to turn my back on those big teeth of his, or give him any chance to plant his hind hooves in my belly. Some folks said that horse and I were suited to each other.

I'd hobbled him in the wash where he could get at a thicket of mesquite beans and some dry grass. He looked up as we approached, laid his ears back and bared his teeth.

"Here, boy, easy," I soothed. He stepped back a pace and warily eyed my outstretched saddle.

The old man snorted and said, "Ever think of getting an animal as is used to folks?"

"If you don't like the look of my horse, then you can just run along and steal one from somebody else," I said.

He gestured with the Colt. "You saddle that broomtail, and be quick about it."

I slipped the bridle over the roan's head and let him chew on the bit while I smoothed out the saddle blanket. I noticed a tiny spur of cactus in one corner. I flipped the blanket over and spread it out on his back with that spur of prickly pear over his near shoulder, then I slung my old working saddle up and cinched it down snug, just behind the piece of cactus. Well, it looked snug, but I knew that horse had bloated up like a poisoned toad because that's what

he always did. Normally of a morning I'd have to belt him a good one in the gut to get the cinch good and tight.

I stepped back, leaving the reins trailing, and glared over at the old man. The roan sidestepped a little, but stood calm enough. I figured I knew what he was thinking, and I hoped I was right. I'd always been a hand with horses; it was people I shied away from.

"Boy, I'm taking your horse but I'm not going to shoot you," the old man said. "I'm no murderer. Besides, I reckon them Comanches'll show up soon enough, they'll likely take care of that themselves. But I'll leave you your six-gun so you'll have a fighting chance. You do yourself a favor and save one bullet for the end. Big fella like you ought to hold them off a good while, keep those devils busy like." He motioned me back with my rifle, slipped his wrapped foot gingerly into the stirrup, and swung aboard with a wince.

"You tell them heathen bastards howdy, you hear? Happen you kill them all, head south and you'll mebbe hit water. Hand me up that tote-sack," he ordered.

I tossed it to him and he tied it to the saddle-horn, where it dangled just about dead center over the cactus spur. He tossed my Colt into the sand a few yards away, but kept the Winchester trained on me.

"Don't make a move for that gun until I'm out of sight," he warned.

He jerked the roan's head around and started him trotting south, leaving me standing in the sun with no canteens and little hope of getting out of there alive. I prayed that mustang of mine hadn't suffered a change of temperament.

They made it fifteen yards down the arroyo before that roan come unglued. He stopped dead in his tracks, cocked one yellow eye back at the old man, and commenced to pitch and swap ends like a frog on a hot buttered skillet. He squealed and bucked and crow-hopped in a bone-jarring loop, raising a cloud of dust so thick I could scarcely see where he ended and the old man started. Sand and gravel scattered around like storm hail with every one of those jumps. My old saddle slipped sideways on its loose cinch and I headed straight for them at a dead run. I snatched up the Colt on the way, and thumbed the hammer back to full cock.

I'll hand it to that old man; I caught a glimpse of his face as he sailed through the air and there was no fear on it. But he was mad!

He slammed heavy against the dry arroyo bank and dropped the rifle, hard winded by the impact. He lay there stunned and sucked for air. I leveled my forty-four at his face and stood over him. I could have shot him then and there, and no jury in the west would have blamed me. Stealing a man's horse and leaving him afoot in that country is tantamount to a death sentence. I was sore tempted, but I am not one for killing a man out of hand. And I worried about what ears might hear a gunshot, especially Comanche ears.

"You aim to shoot me, boy?" He'd caught his breath, and his voice was calm enough, considering. That was one salty old man.

"You're not worth the powder, mister," I said. "I think I'll take you along and hang you in town for a horse-thief. Ain't right to show up after two years gone without somethin' to amuse my uncle."

My horse looked almighty pleased with himself. He snorted and pranced a bit as I re-saddled him, but seemed content to have bucked off one rider and he settled down after. I untied the tote-sack and let it fall, but I did keep the chunk of quartz, which I stowed in my saddlebags. I slid the Winchester into its scabbard.

"That head is powerful medicine, boy," the old man said, "you want to keep it handy."

"Mister," I said slow and even, "you best just keep quiet. I've still got a mind to shoot you right now and send you to hell."

His face tightened and he stared over my shoulder at the bend in the wash. He got to his feet with a grimace. "Shoot me then, and get her done," he said. "We got company."

The roan snorted and pricked up his ears. I heard a horse whicker in reply, and the sound of unshod hooves moving softly in the arroyo behind me. The hairs stood up along my neck, and I turned slowly.

CHAPTER 2

There were four of them, all bare-chested, solid muscled men, and all wearing streaks of war paint on their hard faces. They sat astride rugged desert ponies and they held lances in their hands. Each brave in the war party wore a tanned leather breechclout and fringed buckskin leggings to protect him from the desert brush. Three of them had short, thick bows slung across their

backs; the other, who I pegged for the leader, had an old carbine in a beaded scabbard tied to his saddle. He had on a stovepipe hat and sported a necklace of polished bones around his throat. His lance was decorated with three fresh scalps, and they weren't Indian scalps.

The warrior on the chief's right had a braided rawhide lariat wrapped around his waist, and behind his pony stood a captive girl with the other end of the lariat knotted like a collar around her neck. Her blond hair was a tangly, matted mess, and hung to her shoulders like a dirty yellow rag. She had on a tattered gingham dress and a pair of worn-out deer-hide moccasins. Her legs were scarred and scabbed over with cactus sores, and she swayed on her feet, clearly all but done in. She looked up at me with frightened eyes set in a bruised and sunburned face. Those wide blue eyes beseeched me.

What could I do? I looked at the four Indians and weighed the odds. Now, I'm a fair hand with a six-gun, as are many men raised in the western lands. I've had my run-ins with drunken cowhands on the prod, the odd rustler a time or two, even a band of Apaches that tried to steal my string of horses up on the Brazos. A body doesn't grow up on the frontier without facing shooting trouble from time to time, and I've seen my share of men die.

No one ever said I was shy about a scrape, but here I was faced with four seasoned Comanche braves and armed only with my revolver. My Winchester was belted into its scabbard and might as well have been in Montana. I wished my uncle Arlo was beside me right then; he was hell on

wheels with a belt-gun, or any type of weapon, for that matter. Everything I'd learned about fighting and tactics I'd learned from him.

The leader urged his mount forward a few feet, those scalps dangling like flags from his lance. He reined up and looked at me and the old man with unreadable eyes. A knot of muscle moved along his jaw.

He leaned across his pony and lifted the tote sack from the ground with the tip of his lance. The head fell out upon the sand with a thud. There was a sudden commotion as the other three Indians reached for their weapons. The leader raised his hand and said something sharp in Comanche. The others sat back on their ponies and watched with glittering black eyes.

He stared at the old man. "That was my brother," he said in rough English, then he fixed those grim eyes on me. "You are with this man?" he asked.

"No," I said. "He was trying to steal my horse. I stopped him."

"Will you kill him?"

I shook my head. "No, I have the horse back now. It is not my way."

He looked me over for a longish time, then twisted his head and examined my horse with some care.

"Then I will kill him, and I will take your horse. It is a good horse."

"If you take my horse I will kill you," I said. "That horse is my brother."

His hard eyes gleamed. "What do your people call you?" he asked.

"I am Jethro Morgan."

He ran a finger through his mouth and picked at his teeth, all the while sizing me up. I held the Colt at my side where he could see it plain.

"I will trade the girl for your horse, Jethro Morgan," he said.

I shook my head. "I will trade the old man for the girl," I replied. "I will not trade the horse. I have six bullets in this gun. If I must, I will leave your bodies behind me in this place."

"What the devil did you say? Trade me?!" the old man squawked. He must have known he didn't stand a chance in hell, but he took off anyway, running down the wash on his busted feet like a wounded jackrabbit.

The Indian leader barked an order, and two of the warriors cantered after him. They let him run some, for the devilry of it, then caught up with him before he'd gone fifty yards and knocked him sprawling to the ground. One of them laughed, and poked viciously at the old man's ribs with the tip of his lance. They each grabbed one of his arms and dragged him upright, half carrying him between their horses. He kicked and fought but they held him firm, almost tearing his arms out of their sockets. They both thought it was as funny as all get out.

"Now I have the man and the girl," the leader said. He grinned a yellow grin. "What will you trade for the horse?"

I raised the forty-four and pointed it at his head. "Leave the girl and go, or you will die. That is the trade."

He studied me with unblinking, hooded eyes. He wondered if I was bluffing. Well, I wasn't. I was mad, and my temper is an ugly thing to behold.

Once it takes hold there's not much a body can do but let her rip. It has brought me to trouble in the past, but I have never understood the philosophy of turning the other cheek. Ma often read to us from the Bible when we were growing up, but me, I leaned toward the Old Testament.

The warrior who was holding the girl's leash fitted an arrow to his bow and drew the bowstring tight. His eyes were twin black coals as he looked down the feathered shaft at my chest. I had no doubt he was a good shot with that bow.

Indians learn to hunt game and fight their enemies from the time they are weaned; for them it can mean the difference between survival or death. Many a Comanche can accurately shoot a half dozen arrows from the back of a galloping horse before a white man in good cover can get off three shots with a repeating rifle. If I pulled the trigger and shot the chief I would die. If I didn't, I would likely die anyway.

It had turned out to be one hell of a morning.

The girl suddenly grabbed the lariat around her neck with both hands and pulled with all her might, jerking the startled brave backwards off his pony. Hard used or not, that girl had sand, and she hauled on that rawhide for all she was worth. The Indian landed flat on his back with the wind knocked right out of him. I thought I heard a rib crack when he hit. His arrow whistled through the air and split a mesquite branch in half above my head.

I grabbed the roan's mane, threw myself into the saddle and kicked him into a run. The Comanche chief jerked his carbine out of its beaded scabbard

and worked the bolt, but I hammered at his face with the forty-four as I spurred past him, and I put my shoulder into it.

Now, I was raised on hard, back-breaking work from the time I could walk. I cut my teeth on work, everything from chopping cords of firewood to wrestling three hundred pound calves to the ground for branding, so when I hit something I generally give it a good lick. That Indian's eyes bulged wide as eggs when the barrel of my Colt smacked into the bridge of his nose. It knocked him clean senseless from his horse.

The girl clawed the rawhide collar from her neck and sprinted toward me with her hair streaming behind her. I reached down with one arm outstretched and scooped her up behind me as the roan stretched into a full gallop. She leaned into my back and wrapped her arms tight around my waist. There was no getting around the fact that she was all woman, and a mighty fine figured one at that. I pushed the thought out of my head and concentrated on not falling out of the saddle. The roan's muscles strained beneath the unaccustomed weight of two riders, but that animal was game. He galloped flat-out across the wash, his hooves spraying gravel up behind us.

Ahead of us the arroyo was blocked by the two Comanche braves still holding the old man captive. I looped the reins over the saddle-horn and gave the roan his head. He never did cotton to having other horses stand in his way. He laid his ears flat back and charged straight for them at a dead run.

The Indian on the left let go his grip on the old man's arm and reached for his bow. The forty-four bucked in my hand and he

went down hard, shot through the lungs. His war pony danced sideways, then stood still over his body. Those Indian ponies may look scrubby, but they aren't skittish in a fracas.

The other brave gathered himself to hurl his lance, but that old man clubbed at the side of his head with both fists and spoiled his aim. The lance sailed harmlessly past and clattered into the rocks behind us.

The Indian kned his pony in a tight circle, whipped an arrow out of his quiver and notched his bow. The old man sprang onto his back, sank his teeth into the Comanche's ear, then jerked sideways with his head and the ear ripped free in a spray of blood.

The brave howled and dropped the bow. He grabbed a handful of the old man's buckskin shirt and pawed for the knife in his belt. The long blade gleamed in the sun, its cutting edge as sharp as a razor. The Comanche's face was contorted with battle lust and pain. He screamed out his war cry and slashed savagely at the old man's throat. The old man twisted away like a sidewinder and the blade traced a thin crimson line across his cheek. The Indian raised his arm to strike again.

I snapped off a shot as the roan thundered past and that Comanche spun sideways off his horse with a bullet in his shoulder. He rolled to a stop in the sand with the knife still clutched in his good hand and got to his knees. He snarled deep in the back of his throat and leaped to his feet with blood pouring down his side.

Wounded or not, he was ready to fight. When it comes down to bravery in battle, few warriors in history can match the raw courage of the Comanche brave. They were a people defeated by overwhelming odds and advanced weaponry, not an unwillingness to fight.

The old man snatched up the dead Indian's fallen war lance and plunged it into the brave's chest with both hands. He gave it a mighty thrust, in through his heart and out the back. The Comanche grunted in surprise and fell back to his knees, but he still wouldn't quit. He gripped his knife with its cutting edge up and challenged the old man with eyes that were dark slits of hate. He tried to get back on his feet, but his body betrayed him at the last. He was already dead and didn't know it. He jerked once, and slowly toppled forward onto the shaft of the lance into a widening pool of blood. The girl's arms tightened around my waist, and she turned her head away. We raced past in a cloud of dust.

"Keep going! I'll grab the horses!" the old man shouted. He swung aboard one of the ponies and grabbed the trailing reins of the other. With a whoop he kicked them into a run and followed us as we turned the bend and galloped hell for leather towards old Mexico.

CHAPTER 3

Arlo Morgan rode into the town of Bentley leading a loaded packhorse behind him. He was a tall man with an economy of movement that echoed the

grace of the buckskin he rode. His clothes were dusty from months of rough travel, and his flat crowned hat shaded a hard face tanned from a life in the outdoors. His gray eyes swept the rutted street as he rode, missing nothing. He wore a simple, unadorned gun-belt strapped around his lean waist. An old-fashioned Dragoon Colt was in the tied-down holster on his right hip. The wooden butt of the gun gleamed with evidence of meticulous care and years of use.

He sat his horse as if tacked to the saddle, and rode slowly down the center of the street. It was mid-afternoon and hot. There were no town-folk in sight. Bentley was deserted at that hour except for two yellow dogs asleep in the shade of a water trough, and four horses hitched to the rail outside of a false-fronted saloon. An empty ore-wagon was tilted on three wheels in front of the blacksmith's shop, and a cluster of tumbleweeds had gathered in a bristling mound against an adjacent pole corral that stood empty.

The heat was oppressive. Siesta time, he thought, and wearily rubbed his unshaven jaw. He wanted a bath, a good meal, a woman, and a bottle of whisky. Not necessarily in that order, he chuckled to himself. Be good to lay eyes on Jethro too, he thought, and show him the sights. Two years is a long time; the boy must be damn near grown.

He nosed his horses toward the livery stable at the far end of the street and smiled a rare smile. He'd been on the trail for three months, and he was bone tired. He looked forward to a spell in town, and to spending time with his

nephew. A man needed some relief from the monotony of his own cooking and the poor company of a horse.

The hostler was napping in a high-backed chair he'd perched backwards against the open window of his office in order to catch whatever breeze might stir the still air. Arlo reined up outside the window and cleared his throat, but the hostler dozed on.

"You open for business, friend?" Arlo asked aloud.

The chair tilted forward and the man's eyes flew open. Arlo caught a glimpse of something strange in his expression, something akin to fear but at the same time mixed with anger.

"Who in the hell are you?" the hostler snapped. He had a face like a turtle, with a beak of a nose and wrinkled, leathery skin. His hair was iron gray and shagged over his collar.

"I'm a customer, mister," Arlo said evenly, "just passing through. You open for business or not?" He looked around at the ramshackle building and noted its lack of care. The place was needful of a lot of attention and hard work. He eyed the hostler with a trace of amusement tugging at the harsh lines of his mouth. "Sorry to trouble you if you've gone and retired already."

"You oughta know better'n to sneak up on folks in this town," the man grumbled. "People been shot for a sight less." He got to his feet, stretched, and went through an inner door to the barn. "Alright," he yelled. "Bring 'em on in."

The barn door creaked open and Arlo led his horses into the dappled gloom. He unsaddled his buckskin and rubbed her down carefully with a

handful of straw. He lifted the pack-frame from the packhorse and rested it against the side of the barn. There was no other livestock in sight.

"Appears business is booming," he commented dryly.

"Ain't no business to speak of," the hostler said. "I would've hightailed it out of this country a long time ago, but I got nowheres else to go."

"Seems I recall this town used to do a fair bit of trade," Arlo said. He slung his saddlebags over his shoulder and withdrew a Henry rifle from its scabbard on the pack.

"Town used to do alright." The hostler looked him up and down with suspicious eyes. "You one of them?" he asked. "Otherwise you gotta pay in advance."

"One of who?"

"MacLaren's outfit. You know who I mean. I seen a half-dozen just like you ride in this week already." He turned and spat into the dust. "Buzzards. Cain't wait to see a man swing."

"Mister, I don't know what you are talking about," Arlo said. "I know no one named MacLaren. All I'm after is a bed, a bath and a restaurant-cooked meal. I'll pay in advance for the horses. Give them each a bait of grain also, but don't overdo it. They're unused to the luxuries." As I am, he thought wryly.

"Two bits each plus two bits fer the grain. That'll be seventy-five cents," the hostler said.

"One more thing," Arlo said. "Have you seen a young fellow around hereabouts these last few months? Name of Jethro. He'd have had a string of mustangs for sale. He favors me, some say."

"Only strangers I've seen recent are them damn gunslicks workin' for MacLaren." The hostler shook his head and spat again. "No, I ain't seen him. I can't keep track of all you drifters."

Arlo fixed him with a level gaze. "Another thing," he said bluntly, "I expect all my gear to still be here when I come back. All of it. Untouched. I'm right particular about my gear."

"Mister," the man replied, "I may be a lot of things but I ain't a thief. I ain't sick, neither; I'm just old and tired." He stomped back to his office and dropped into his chair with a sigh. "Saloon's across the street," he offered, "but the grub's better at Mary's place over by the hotel."

Arlo flipped him a silver dollar through the window and walked out into the sun-soaked street, his saddlebags over one shoulder and the Henry tucked under his arm.

Bentley's main street boasted one hotel, an adjacent laundry and bath-house run by a Chinese man named Sing, a barbershop, a restaurant, a general store, and a saloon.

A number of the buildings sported false fronts that disguised what were in fact roughly framed canvas structures that backed onto a common alley. Their floors were generally of pounded sod, but occasionally a plank floor might be seen. Glass windows were a rarity; more often than not a

windowpane consisted of a sheet of oiled newspaper tacked over a gap in the wall. Many of the doors were hung on leather hinges, and fitted poorly. A permanent layer of fine desert dust coated the interior of every building in town.

Several of the buildings were in need of paint and repair. To Arlo's mind the entire town exhibited an air of neglect. A small cemetery overlooked the town from a knoll to the west. He noticed a number of freshly whitewashed headstones within its boundaries. He shifted the Henry under his arm and walked on.

His boots kicked small clouds of dust into the air as he crossed the street and headed toward the saloon. A hand-painted sign with faded, flaking letters was wired to the boardwalk: The Watering Hole. Arlo studied the four horses tied to the hitching rail with interest. A man's horse was often an accurate reflection of his character and economic status, and in Arlo's experience it always paid to take heed of anything that offered new information. There were times a man's life might depend on that small edge.

Three of the animals he judged to be better than average mounts for this part of the country. They were obviously not your working cowhand's string, and they all bore the brand M-BAR-C on their left hip. They each had new repeating rifles in scabbards lashed to their saddle-horns. The fourth horse was a thoroughbred, a beautiful long-legged gray with a high-cantled Mexican saddle on his back. The saddle was decorated with silver conchos and the animal's bridle was of soft, braided leather.

A bark of raucous laughter came from inside the saloon.

CHAPTER 4

I made the old man lead, followed by the girl as I brought up the rear. I wanted to keep my eye on both of them, but for different reasons. The girl looked ready to drop from exhaustion. She sat on the Indian pony like a rag doll, and I was worried about her. As for the old man, I didn't trust him an inch. He was still a horse-thief, and maybe worse. I wondered about the chunk of quartz in my saddlebag. Where had it come from? And where had the girl come from? Who was she?

A pair of buzzards floated high above us in the thin air, waiting for death anywhere below. So far they weren't circling over us, and I was thankful. We traveled due south, bound for the settlements along the Rio Grande. A forest of ocotillo and blind prickly-pear gave the land a weird and lonely look. It was a hard land, and it took a tough breed to survive upon it. But me, I knew no other life; it was the desert I was bred to, open and wild as far as a man could see, with no one to tell a body what to do.

We'd ridden hard and fast most of the morning, riding blind into unmarked desert with no time to talk or consider our next move. I was confident we'd outdistanced the Indians for the time being, but the thought of them tracking us nagged at my mind, and I kept up the pace. It was tough going. I kept a close eye on the horses, only slowing down when I thought

they needed rest. Those Indian ponies were all muscle and whipcord, though, and never slacked a bit. The roan didn't care one whit about how fast or far we traveled; the rougher it got the more he seemed to like it. That horse had a gait that would shake your teeth loose, but he didn't know the meaning of quit.

The day fused into heat. A roadrunner paced us for a few dozen yards as we traversed an ancient lake-bed. Now, there's a bird with personality. I've seen one dance a fandango around a riled sidewinder and peck it to death just for the fun, then carry it off to her young for breakfast. They'll eat nigh anything from scorpions to snakes, even baby rabbits if they come across a den, and they can get along fine for days without water. But we couldn't, that was certain. Water we had to have...

The bare ground beneath us was parched and cracked into a checkerboard pattern. The midday glare baked the land with shimmering waves of brown heat. The desert was silent except for the creak of our saddles and the sound of the horses' hooves cutting into the hard clay. I twisted in the saddle every so often and checked our back trail.

The route we took offered good visibility and I saw no sign of pursuit, but I knew that sooner or later the Comanches would follow. They would be bent on revenge, and they knew the country far better than I. I hoped to make it to Bentley, a small trading town near the Rio Grande, before they caught up with us. There I had friends, and could entrust the girl to their care. Better still, Arlo would be waiting for me there, and I couldn't think of anyone I'd rather have by my side in a shooting scrape.

I still hadn't made up my mind what to do about the old man. In our present fix it seemed wise to keep him with us; if it came to a showdown with the Indians two guns would be better than one, and he'd already proved he was handy in a fight. But I hesitated to arm him yet for fear he'd shoot me in the back and possibly even harm the girl. My mind worried at the situation while we rode deeper into the desert beneath the blazing yellow sun. Happy birthday, Jethro, I said to myself, and urged the roan into a trot.

We nooned in a meagre patch of shade under a rock ledge overlooking a dry wash. The girl was done in, and even the horses were all but played out. We needed to rest. A rattlesnake buzzed angrily from a pile of rocks nearby, and a tarantula hawk zoomed low through the dark, bare branches of a creosote bush. The girl slid from her mount and collapsed in the shade of the ledge. She sat hugging her skinned knees and stared out at the desert. I gave her a swallow of water and had to wrestle the canteen away from her.

"Don't drink so fast," I said, "it'll make you sick. Take it slow."

She looked at me and nodded, wiping her mouth with the back of one grimy hand. Despite the dirt and weariness, hers was the prettiest face I'd ever seen. Not that I'm much of a hand with the ladies, though I've met a few here and there. I always seemed to bottle up and fidget when it came to chit-chat with a girl. Arlo now, he'd know the proper things to say; he's right easy with womenfolk. This girl was needful of encouragement and cheering up, but I was flummoxed for how to go about it. I felt like an oaf. She made me nervous just looking at her. Her lips were full, and her eyes were a deep, mysterious blue

under those long lashes. A tear formed at the corner of one eye and she looked away into the distance.

"You did good back there," I told her. "If you hadn't pulled that Indian off his horse I don't know what would have happened."

"I was afraid," she said in a small voice. "I thought he would kill you and I'd never escape." She paused and bit her lip. "They will follow us, won't they?" The tear rolled down her cheek.

"The girl's right," the old man said. He was leaned against the rocks with his legs stretched out, examining his bloody feet. "We should have killed them all. That chief's name is Coyote Runs, and he don't have no give-up in him."

"Don't you fret," I reassured the girl. "Don't pay him any mind. They aren't coming back. We'll be in the settlements soon." I gave her another small sip of water. "What's your name? Mine's Jethro," I said.

She hesitated, then answered, "Theresa Russell. My brother is Wade Russell."

"What!" the old man said. He looked like he'd been kicked by a mule.

A small sad smile brushed across her lips. "Yes, Wade Russell, the so-called gunfighter. Why, have you heard of him?"

The old man sucked noisily on a pebble to ease his thirst, but didn't answer. At least he had the sense not to ask for water; what little we had would go to the girl.

I'd heard of Wade Russell alright, and not much of what I'd heard was pleasant. Whenever western men chanced to meet along the trail and share a

campfire, stories were traded, and many of the stories had to do with the exploits of outlaws who lived by the gun. Russell had the reputation of being a man with a very short fuse, and it was rumored he had killed more than a dozen men over the years. The one positive thing I'd heard was that he'd never shot a man in the back; each of his killings was face to face with an armed opponent. His name was often mentioned in the same breath as that of William Bonney, Jack Slade, Wes Hardin and the like. It was a lawless time, and a certain breed of men earned their keep with their guns, offering them to the highest bidder. Some said Wade Russell was such a man.

The girl picked up a rock and scratched at the ground.

"I never knew him," said softly. "My mother took me east when my father left us, two months after I was born. My father kept Wade out here with him, and raised him alone. Once in a while my father sent us money, then a few years ago we heard a rumor he'd been killed in Mexico. We never heard from him again."

It wasn't uncommon for a man to be swallowed up out west and never be heard of again. My own Pa left our cabin in Virginia for supplies one day when I was ten and never came back. We never did find out what happened to him.

Ma died soon after; she was heartsick at losing him, and she just let herself go. I buried her out behind the garden, and set myself to my chores. Pa had always taught me never to shirk what needed doing.

Arlo came back from the western lands in time for the funeral with a gun on his hip and leading a spare horse. He was a quiet, hard faced man, but my only kin. We headed out, and he took on the chore of raising me. He took me west, made sure I had some schooling, and taught me the ways of the desert. I was to find him playful and prone to joking with me when we were on our own, but when we visited a town he turned cold and watchful, and I noticed other men gave him a wide berth.

Once he reckoned I could stand on my own two feet he taken off and left me to it. I went to trapping mustangs and he moseyed off to look at new country. I was fourteen by then, and doing a man's work sunup to sundown. Now and again he'd stop back to check up on me, then he'd get the itch and saddle up again. He was a hard one to pin down, was Arlo.

Theresa wiped her eyes with the hem of her dress and continued. "All I ever knew of Wade were a few letters from him over the years. After my mother passed away last winter I received a letter asking me to join him, that he'd settled down and had begun mining. This is my first trip west since I was a baby." She shuddered. "The Indians attacked us two days out of Fort Stockton. They killed the family I was traveling with, and took me with them. That was three days ago." She fell silent.

It seemed like a good time to change the subject. Lord knows what she'd been through, and I hoped to get her mind off it.

"What about you, mister? What do they call you?" I asked the old man.

"I been called a lot of things," he said shortly.

I'll bet you have, I thought, and few of them good. "You have a name we can use?"

He thought for awhile. "Johnson," he said finally. "You can call me Johnson."

He turned his back on us and pulled his hat down over his eyes. He sat back up after a minute.

"Were you really gonna trade me to them?" he said.

"What?"

"Were you gonna trade me to them Comanches? Just like that?"

I was dumbfounded.

"You were stealing my horse," I reminded him. "What'd I do, hurt your feelings? I had to tell them something, I wasn't about to up and leave her with them."

"I gave you your gun so's you could fight 'em off, remember? I couldn't exactly walk out of there. Look at these feet. I had to borrow your horse." He snorted. "Durn animal about broke my back anyhow." He tugged his hat low again and closed his eyes. He stretched out on his back and yawned.

"Wake me up if you get any good ideas how to get us out of this fix."

Exasperated, I turned back to the girl.

"Theresa, we are in a bit of a tight spot, but I'm going to see you safe to a town. You can count on it."

She looked into my eyes and I suddenly felt lightheaded, like I'd run to the top of a mountain without taking a breath.

"Is it true that my brother is a murderer? That's what I was told in Fort Stockton, before we left for Bentley."

Johnson's eyes opened and he rolled onto his side to look at her. "Way I heard it, he shot a Mexican in the back," he said.

Her eyes flashed. "I don't believe it! If that is true then he should hang, but I won't believe it until I have proof."

"You've not seen him since you were a baby, and you'd still give him the benefit of the doubt?" he asked. His eyes were fixed on her face something fierce.

I noticed a shift in the way he talked, the hint of an educated use of words. Many a man out west had an education behind him, but most adopted the casual way of speaking we generally used. I'd worked my way through *Ivanhoe* and a number of other classics over dozens of lonely campfires, and I knew the difference between ignorant speech and simple habit. There was more to old Johnson than buckskin and wood-smoke, I reckoned.

"He's my brother," she said softly. "Nothing can change that."

Johnson lay back down and stared out into the distance.

"You were headed for Bentley too?" I asked her.

She nodded. "It's where I was born. I understand we still have claim to a small ranch near there, and I intend to make it work. And Wade's mine, I suppose that must be near there also."

"This is a hard land to start up ranching," I said, "and mining's no truck for a girl."

"It's all I have," she said simply. "I have nothing else in the world."

"You, Morgan, what'd you hear about it? What's your take? They gonna hang Russell?" the old man asked. He had a haunted look to him; there was something stirring around in that old head of his, but I couldn't put a finger on it.

"I know nothing of it," I answered. "I've not been near a town in nigh on a year."

"You do look a little on the ripe side," he said. "Now me, I make it a point to head into a town and have a hot water bath at least twice a year."

I felt my ears go red. I ignored him and stepped over to the horses with the canteen. I wiped the dust out of their dry nostrils with a dash of water on my bandana. The roan whickered his thanks and stood quiet, trusting me to think of something. Thoughtfully I shook the half canteen of water we had left. Two others were lashed empty to my saddle.

If we didn't find water soon it wouldn't matter if the Comanches caught up with us or not. The Rio Grande was a good two days ride to the southwest through some mighty rough country, and we were on no established trail. Three people and three horses would never make it on a half-gallon of water. Even if the old man and I held back from drinking, the girl would likely die. There just wasn't enough, and she was in poor shape to begin with.

Somehow the thought of her suffering, or worse yet, dying of thirst, troubled me more than I expected. The western frontier was hard on folks,

men and women alike, and death was accepted as a matter of fact, but I had it in my mind to get her to safety no matter what.

I'd heard of water in the foothills of the Chisos. Tinajas, or rock tanks, they called them, natural reservoirs carved deep by the elements into the bare rock, sometimes holding as much as five feet or more of fresh water between rains. The wild animals and Indians knew of them, and relied upon them when moving through the desert. Problem was, I didn't know where any of them were.

I'd kept my ears open back up the trail, as all travelers in the western lands did, and I remembered much of what I'd heard about trail conditions, Indians, and especially reliable waterholes. But right now I was in unfamiliar country and wishful for some detailed directions. A white-winged dove whistled past overhead, flying south.

"See that?" the old man said. "Dove. A dove won't go far from water."

I knew he was right; a man could survive in the desert if he paid careful heed to how the animals went about it. If we were lucky that dove might lead us to water and save our lives. I couldn't think of anything else to do.

"Mount up," I said. "We'll follow that bird."

CHAPTER 5

Arlo shouldered through the batwing doors and stepped to one side while his eyes adjusted to the gloom. The room was typically furnished for a West

Texas border saloon. A few moth-eaten examples of the taxidermist's art decorated the walls. A bar made of rough-hewn planks stretched the length of the back wall, and six rickety tables and chairs were scattered across the sawdust-covered floor.

At one of them a young Mexican vaquero sat alone, a half-empty glass of beer in one hand, a slender cigar in the other. He wore a knife in a tooled leather sheath on his hip, but bore no firearm that Arlo could see. He was a handsome black-haired man in his late twenties, with proud features that spoke of old Spanish blood. His face was flushed, and his dark eyes smoldered with suppressed anger.

Three men were bellied up to the bar, a bottle of tequila in front of them. A brass spittoon was strategically positioned on the floor between their legs. They all wore belt-guns, and the two youngest men were clearly drunk. They giggled at some joke while the older man refilled their glasses. Tequila sloshed over the rims of their glasses and onto the counter as he poured. They all turned and stared as Arlo walked across the room.

He nodded to the vaquero as he passed. "Buenos dias, amigo," he said.

The Mexican looked at him uncertainly, prepared to take offense. Finally he raised his glass and nodded back. "Buenos dias," he replied in a low voice. His curious eyes followed Arlo's wide-shouldered frame.

Arlo crossed to the far end of the bar and leaned his rifle against it. He placed his saddlebags at his feet and pulled the makings from his shirt pocket.

He glanced over the array of bottles arranged on a shelf behind the bar and rolled his smoke thoughtfully.

The bartender was a giant of a man with the shoulders of an ox. He stood at least six foot six and weighed an easy three hundred pounds, Arlo guessed. His huge bulk was solid, like thick slabs of rawhide layered over a framework of large bones, not soft blubber. He polished a glass with a dirty rag and chewed on the stub of a dead cigar. His head was shaved clean, and his pig-like eyes were set deep into folds of scarred fat.

"What'll it be, mister?" he asked, with the hint of an Irish brogue.

Arlo fired a match with his fingernail and lit his smoke. "Beer," he said. He spun a dollar on the bar-top. "One for me and one for my friend at the table." His voice carried clearly across the room.

The three men at the other end of the bar fell silent. The youngest, a skinny fellow with lank yellow hair, pushed himself away from the counter and turned to face Arlo.

"Now what do we have here?" he sneered. "That greaser sure enough your friend, mister? I never knowed a greaser to have a damn friend," he said. He giggled in a shrill, high-pitched voice and looked at his pals for encouragement. "Especially in this town. We done got rid of most of the greaser's friends, ain't we boys? And the last one swings next week."

The yellow-haired man reached for his glass and drained it. He held the empty glass in his hand for a long moment, eyeing Arlo, then threw it high into the air. His hand dipped to his side and came up with his gun. He fired twice

from the hip. The glass shattered in mid-air and sent broken shards tinkling across the room. He re-holstered the gun with a flourish and giggled again. The smell of gun-smoke drifted through the saloon. "That's what we do to greaser-lovers, stranger," he said. "What d'you think about that?"

"Fer chrissakes, Tommy," the bartender said sharply, "knock it off! I won't have you blasting away in my saloon, MacLaren or not!"

"Tiny, we keep you afloat!" the gunman snapped. "Wasn't for us you'd be outta business, so just shut up and get me a clean glass. I'm teaching my new friend here the way things are, that's all."

The bartender's moonlike face flushed and he squeezed the towel in his hands until his scarred knuckles cracked, but he held his tongue. He turned away with obvious effort and slammed a fresh glass onto the bar.

Arlo flicked the ash from his cigarette with his left hand and smiled at Tiny. "The beer, please," he said.

His right thumb casually slipped the thong from the hammer of his Colt. He looked down the bar at the yellow-haired man.

"As for that, I'm mighty particular about my friends. You aren't one," he said bluntly. "You are a two-bit kid who's had too much to drink."

The blond man's two companions stepped away from the bar and flanked him, one on either side. The one on the left was a cocky man in his thirties, short and squat with a narrow face pocked with acne scars. He wore two Remingtons crisscrossed around his hips, slung low and tied down. A shock of

greasy hair hung down his forehead, almost into his bloodshot eyes. He leaned forward like a pitbull and hawked into the spittoon.

The other gunman was older, a hardbitten man in his late forties with a horseshoe shaped scar on his cheek. He had the look of a man who'd ridden hard trails all his life. He stared at Arlo with uneasy eyes. A fleeting memory nagged at a corner of his mind and worried at him. He had a vague sense that he should recognise this tall stranger. There was something familiar about the way the man stood there, unafraid and easy on his feet, and that big Dragoon Colt...

"What did you say, mister?" MacLaren hissed. His hand hovered over the butt of his gun.

"I said you aren't a friend of mine." Arlo turned his cold eyes on the older gunman. "If you want this rooster to live out the day you'd best get him to pull in his horns and sober up," he said evenly. "I hate to kill a fool before I've eaten. But if it can't keep, I'm happy to oblige right now."

The older gunman hesitated. Arlo's bleak gaze triggered something in his subconscious. He had a hunch this soft-spoken drifter was a dangerous man, a man to be reckoned with, and he hadn't survived this long without trusting his hunches. He turned to MacLaren and said, "Tommy, leave it! Your father won't like another killing, not right before the hanging. You know what he said. Let's head back to the ranch. This ain't worth it."

"What's the matter, Case, you scared?" the acne-scarred man jeered.

Case turned his head and looked at him coolly. "I'll remember that, Slick," he said. "I say we leave and go see the old man."

"Tommy, I'm backin' you," Slick grinned. "Case here has got himself the willies. Show this greaser-lovin' drifter what you're made of."

Arlo's eyes narrowed. A familiar stillness came over him, a cool slowing down of time. He stepped away from the bar and walked toward MacLaren. His right hand curled gently above the butt of his Colt. "Are you really ready to die, son?" he asked softly. He stepped closer. "No more whiskey, no more girls, no more nothing." He stopped less than four feet away and stared hard into the blond man's eyes. "Neither one of us can miss from here," he said. "Make your play."

CHAPTER 6

MacLaren blinked, and a drop of sweat collected at the corner of his lip. The stranger's eyes bored into his own. He suddenly recalled a mountain lion his father's hounds had treed when he was twelve. It was his first real hunt. The big cat's yellow eyes had stared into his and he'd been unable to raise his rifle to shoot.

His father had been furious with him, and shamed him in front of the other men. There was something implacable about those eyes, something cold and deadly beyond his reckoning. He'd never forgotten the sensation of being

paralysed with fear. He felt that same unreasonable terror now, a sense of the nearness of death.

The vaquero's chair scraped on the floor as he abruptly stood and faced the men at the bar. "You, MacLaren, are a coward and a thief!" he said. "Your family steals what others work all their lives to build. You bring in pistoleros to do your dirty work, men like Slick, murderers of women. And then you frame an honest man and sentence him to die. But I warn you, your days are finished here. We will not crawl before you anymore!"

Slick cursed beneath his breath and turned toward the vaquero. His hands blurred into sudden motion and flashed for his guns. His twin Remingtons slipped from their holsters with shocking speed and their barrels swiveled toward the Mexican. Slick's fingers tightened on the triggers.

"Oh hell," Case said. He backed away from the group with his hands raised chest high, palms forward. "I'm not in this!"

Somehow Arlo's gun was already in his hand. It seemed impossible to MacLaren; he hadn't even seen the stranger's hand move. There was a single deafening blast from the Dragoon Colt and Slick's shirt blossomed with blood. His eyes widened in shocked surprise and his guns clattered to the floor unfired. He staggered backwards and clutched at his chest; his mouth opened and closed but no words came out. Blood poured over his fingers and soaked him to the waist. He tripped over the spittoon and fell on his back like a sack of meal, his eyes already glazed over in death.

Arlo's face was a harsh, drawn mask. Killing a man never sets easy, he thought in disgust. He turned his back on MacLaren and holstered his Colt. He stood grimly over Slick's body and said in a flat voice, "Take a good look at him, boy. I've seen a dozen punks just like you die just like him."

MacLaren swallowed with difficulty; he felt sick to his stomach. He steadied himself against the bar and tossed back his drink. The tequila bit at the back of his throat. Slick was dead! Slick, whom he'd looked up to, who had taught him to shoot, who had introduced him to liquor and to whores. He rubbed at his eyes in disbelief while the liquor churned in his gut. It didn't seem right. His father would blame him! He'd be branded a coward! The stranger's broad back filled his vision. A blinding rage exploded in his head, and he clawed for his gun.

"Tommy, no!" Case yelled. Recognition flooded through him. "That's Arlo Morgan!"

MacLaren fired at Arlo's back, but as he did his boot slipped in the spreading pool of Slick's blood and his shot smashed into the bottles behind the bar, spraying Tiny with a shower of liquor and glass. He steadied himself against the bar and aimed again.

Arlo whirled in a crouch at the sound of Case's voice. He saw MacLaren's gun rise again and braced himself for the shock of the bullet. His own Colt cleared leather and its familiar, deadly weight was alive in his hand, but MacLaren was already squeezing the trigger.

At that moment the vaquero's bone-handled knife flew from his hand and spun across the room like a bolt from a crossbow. It sliced into MacLaren's gunhand and pinned his palm to the bar with ten inches of razor-sharp steel. MacLaren screamed in shock and the gun fell from his hand. It hit the floor hard and discharged with the impact. The bullet ripped a furrow in the plank floor and ricocheted into the far wall. A fine spray of sawdust and splinters drifted down and coated Slick's lifeless body.

MacLaren's twisted face went white. He stared with disbelief at the knife jutting from his right hand. Hot blood welled up from the wound and filled his palm. He moaned deep in his chest and squeezed his eyes shut against the pain.

Arlo carefully un-cocked his Colt and slipped it back into his holster. He looked over at the vaquero and silently nodded his thanks.

The vaquero shrugged. "I threw for his heart, *senor*," he said, "but he moved."

"I've had enough!" Tiny's voice boomed through the room. "Get out! The next man who draws a gun in here gets a belly full of buckshot!" He held a scattergun in his huge hands and thumbed both hammers to full cock. Streaks of blood and liquor oozed down his fleshy cheeks.

Case stepped between Arlo and MacLaren and reached for the knife handle. "Hold still," he said. He held Tommy's pinned hand down and jerked the blade free. Tommy moaned again, his mauled hand a red-painted claw. Case took the bandana from around his neck and wrapped it tight about the wound,

staunching the flow of blood. "You can count yourself lucky, boy," he said. "By rights you should be dead. Not many men have pulled a gun on Arlo Morgan and lived to tell about it."

"Get him out of here, Case," Tiny said. "And don't come back. I've had it with you lot!"

Case put his hand on MacLaren's shoulder. "Tommy, let's go. We gotta explain this to your father." He glanced at Arlo, who watched with cold eyes. "The old man's not gonna like this," he said. "He was some partial to old Slick, and Tommy is his only son."

"The boy's a backshooter," Arlo said bluntly. "If I lay eyes on him again I'll kill him. You tell his Pa." He picked up the knife, wiped the blade clean on MacLaren's shirtfront, and tossed it haft-first to the Mexican.

"Gracias, amigo," he said.

"Por nada, senior." The vaquero flashed a quick grin and slid the knife back into its sheath. "It was my pleasure."

MacLaren followed Case to the door, his injured hand cradled to his chest. He spat onto the floor by the Mexican's boot as they passed and snarled, "This ain't over yet, greaser, not by a long sight."

The vaquero looked at him with disdain. "Next time I shall cut out your yellow liver, Tommy MacLaren, and feed it to my dogs. They are fond of offal."

CHAPTER 7

The big bartender pumped two glasses of dark brew from a barrel and slid them across the counter to Arlo. He poured himself a hefty shot of whisky and downed it neat. "You've bought trouble now, mister," he said. "Garrett MacLaren will be lookin' for you, and he's got a rough crew riding for him."

"Trouble rides my back-trail wherever I go. I don't have to buy it." Arlo's voice was bitter. "Who's the law in this town? I expect he'll want a statement."

"There is no law to speak of. Frank Hanson's the sheriff, but when MacLaren says jump, Frankie asks how high. This time of day he'll be drunk over at the jail if you really want to talk to him."

Tiny stepped out from behind the bar, grabbed Slick by the boot-heels with a grunt and dragged the dead man out the back door to the alley. "This makes fourteen this year," he spat over his shoulder. "I should never have left New York."

"Senor," the Mexican said, "I would consider it an honor if you would join me." He extended his hand. "My name is Domingo Escobar Santiago Puente. I am in your debt."

"Much obliged." Arlo clasped Puente's hand and shook it; the vaquero's grip was firm and calloused, the grip of a man who didn't shirk hard work. The two men carried their glasses of beer to the table and sat down.

"Seems we're in each other's debt," Arlo said. His eyes twinkled briefly. "You handle that knife like you've used it once or twice."

Puente's grin was white and clean on his dark face. "Si, my friend, once or twice." He sipped his beer and looked inquiringly at Arlo. "What has brought

you to Bentley? We are not exactly on the beaten track, and you do not look like the kind of man who would come just to see an innocent man die."

Arlo shook his head. "No, I'm hunting my nephew Jethro. I got word he set himself up to trap wild mustangs in this part of the country, and I figure to give him a hand. I've not seen him in two years. He's a stormy one, and I've been looking after him ever since I got back from the war."

"Ah, you are a soldier?"

Arlo's face hardened. "I was, I guess," he said shortly. He turned bleak eyes on the Mexican. "Mostly it was plain killing and ugly. Cold, wet, and no sleep for weeks on end. After a time none of it made sense anymore. I'm glad to be shut of it."

"I understand," Puente said, and looked away. "We have had more than our share of killing too, lately." He gazed somberly into his glass, then looked up. "You say your nephew's name is Jethro?"

"Yes, Jethro Morgan," Arlo smiled fondly, "my brother's son. He's eighteen today, and stubborn enough to get himself in plenty of trouble. If he's grown up like he was starting to when I left, I expect he's a big man by now. And he's a hand with horses. I've never seen a person who could talk to a horse the way he does."

"I know this man," Puente said. "Last winter my father and I bought seven horses from him, seven excellent horses. He trains them with his heart. I was proud to call him my friend."

“When did you see him last? I’ve been a little worried. I’ve had no word from him in almost two years except for a letter now and then. And letter writing is not his strong point. That boy spent more time running wild than he did with his school books, but I expect the fault was mine.”

“He has a camp to the east and north of here, maybe three days ride on a good horse. He is not one who comes into town often. I have not seen him in almost a year.”

“That sounds like Jethro. When he was just a youngster he had a hankering for the desert, and would go off by himself for days on end. Seemed like he was born to it.”

Puente smiled and rose from his chair. “Come, let us talk while we eat. You will be my guest. Senora Mary prepares a fine meal at her restaurant.”

CHAPTER 8

It is a sight easier to follow a bird to water if you’ve got wings like he has, I expect. Not one of us was equipped with feathers, and I was willing to bet that cantankerous old man would never sprout a pair, even at the gates of Heaven. As for me, all I knew was to keep on after it. We needed water to live, and there’s not much more urging a body can take than that.

The girl had cleaned herself up a mite, but she still looked like a Raggedy Ann that’s been dragged through the sagebrush. The brief rest and the few swallows of water I’d allowed her had perked her up some, but she was

nowhere near fit for a long journey. She'd been through a terrible ordeal, but she had spirit, that much I could see. If we found water I was hopeful she would recover completely.

The thought of her suffering, or worse, occupied my mind a good deal; I'd do anything in my power to prevent it. It was a new feeling for me, caring about someone else like that. It came on me sudden and it made me uneasy. I found myself distracted and out of sorts when what I really needed to do was pay heed to our surroundings.

The old man slouched on his pony with his legs hanging almost to the ground and grumbled to himself. His skin was clammy and feverish. His raw feet bothered him something terrible; they were swollen the size of melons and he was in constant pain. If they went septic he would die from the poison, for we had no medicine or salve to treat them with, nor even the means to clean them unless we found water. I had little pity for him, but I don't care to watch even a dumb animal suffer needlessly.

The dove had flown south, so I had to figure he was either headed to water, or headed away from it. North or south, which way? The country was harsh and broken in both directions, and I had no knowledge of what to expect in either case.

I decided to give the roan his head and see what he thought. He grew up wild in these mountains; maybe he'd remember where there was water. He stood and cocked an uncertain ear at me, waiting for me to show him what

needed doing. When I did nothing he headed slowly along the canyon to the south.

The trail led us up a steep ridge along the shoulder of the mountain, and we climbed higher and higher throughout the afternoon. At one point the trail narrowed into a rocky passage not much wider than a horse's body, and switch-backed up an increasingly steep slope. The sun's heat was trapped within the walls of the passage and baked us like an oven. The air was dead still. Clouds of pesky gnats swirled into our eyes and tormented us. Johnson and Theresa sat their horses in a daze, half senseless from the heat.

I tried hard to stay alert, but it was a struggle. What little moisture we had left in our parched bodies evaporated into the air. Even the horses, tough as they were, began to show the strain. My stirrups brushed the rock wall as we climbed and I grew worried the passage might peter out into a dead end. As narrow as it was, if it did we'd never get the horses turned around. Hours would be lost if we had to back them out of the ravine, and we didn't have hours to spare. The canteen was nearly empty.

A bumblebee flew past my head, then another, and I sat up straighter in the saddle. I knew that bees seldom build a hive more than a few hundred yards from a source of fresh water. With tired eyes I scanned the trail for sign. A slight depression in the dust ahead caught my attention, and I made out the faint track of a jackrabbit. Some desert animals will survive on dew alone, or what little moisture they can absorb from the plants they eat, but a rabbit likes to drink if it can. We were getting closer, but close was no guarantee of

anything. The trail widened and opened onto a small bleak clearing ringed with boulders, but there was still no sign of a tinaja. I trusted the roan to let me know when and if he smelled water.

"Stop here," Theresa said suddenly. Those were the first words she'd spoken since we began the climb up the canyon. She never complained once, and I was mighty proud of her. She slid from her horse and ran to a clump of desert shrubs and cactus growing out of a crack in the rocky wall. She plunged her hand into the brush and twisted a handful of thick, wedge-shaped stems free from one of the plants. She held the fleshy stalks to her nose and sniffed at them carefully. Satisfied, she wrapped them in a scrap of cloth and tucked them into a pocket on her dress. This little chore done, she returned to her horse and climbed back into the saddle.

The old man watched her with interest. "What's that you have there?" he asked.

"Aloe," she replied, "a plant the Indians have used for centuries to treat wounds. It's as good as any salve, if not better. When we stop I'll make a poultice for your feet."

"You'd do that for me?" he croaked. Johnson's grizzled face was a study; she'd perplexed him. "Why?"

I don't expect too many folks had ever offered to do anything nice for him without he'd demanded it of them at the end of a gun. That girl was a caution; she had him buffaloed already, same as me.

She said, "I'd do it for anyone. You're no different."

Now, I might have argued that point, but we were running short of time.

"Let's get a move on," I said. "We're burning daylight."

CHAPTER 9

Mary Hogan's restaurant was small, clean and filled with the honest aromas of good home cooking. She'd started the business in her home after her husband's death five years before from a punctured lung suffered during a disagreement over cards. Mary grieved for nearly a month, but then her natural inclination to stay busy and work hard took over. She used her own kitchen to cook in and had since expanded the parlor to seat more guests.

Word quickly spread about the fine quality of the food she served, and many a hungry cowhand, miner and traveling drummer now made it a point to visit her place when passing through Bentley. The food was delicious, fresh and plentiful, and she always had a pot of freshly brewed coffee simmering on her cast-iron wood stove.

A stout, cheerful woman in her fifties, Mary had her sleeves rolled up above her elbows and was busy chopping vegetables into a Dutch oven for a stew when Arlo and Domingo walked in. It was mid-afternoon, and there were no other customers in the restaurant.

"Domingo!" she said. Her brown eyes glowed with genuine pleasure. "It's good to see you! You haven't been by in a while."

"Senora Mary, I have suffered without your food for too many days," Puentes said with a smile. "Please, this is my friend Arlo Morgan."

Mary turned to Arlo and looked his somber frame dubiously up and down, from his dusty black hat to his cactus-scarred cavalry boots. She put both fists on her ample hips and jerked her head toward the back room past the kitchen. "There's a washbasin in there, and soap to go with it," she said firmly. "I'll not seat a man in my establishment that has collected half the territory on his clothes."

Arlo offered a rare smile and removed his hat. "Yes, ma'am," he said. "I'm obliged." He hung his hat and saddlebags on a hat-rack made of welded horseshoes and went to wash up.

Mary set a table for them and loaded it with freshly-baked biscuits, a dish of sweet cream butter, and two steaming mugs of coffee. "This'll get you started," she said. "Eat your fill, boys. I'll fry you up some beefsteak and potatoes pronto."

Arlo and Domingo seated themselves and went to work on the biscuits with a will. Moments later Mary placed a platter of juicy steaks and crisped potatoes before them, accompanied by a bowl of steamed green beans and corn.

The two men ate with gusto. They didn't spend time with idle chit-chat; they ate their food with serious concentration. Arlo thought he'd never put a fork to a steak so tender and flavorful. He wiped up the remaining gravy with his last biscuit and sat back with a sigh of contentment.

Domingo looked at him and smiled. "I was correct, no? The best food in Texas."

"I've never had better, and my mother was a fine cook. Myself, I never learned my way around a frying pan. When we went camping Jethro used my biscuits to hunt rabbits with a slingshot."

"Compliments will get you everywhere," Mary called out from the kitchen. "Leave some room for the pie."

She joined them for coffee after Arlo and Domingo had done thorough justice to the apple pie she put before them. Domingo pulled two brown cigarillos from his shirt pocket and offered one to Arlo. The men lit up and sat back.

"Domingo, what is all this talk of a hanging? And who is this MacLaren?" Arlo asked. He looked across the table at Mary. "I apologise for bringing up such an ugly topic, ma'am, but I'm a curious man, and we had some trouble earlier."

"Don't apologise to me, mister," she said. "I was born and raised in this country, I've seen it all." She poured them each another cup of coffee.

"I've lived through drought, Indian attacks, thieves and rustlers, gamblers... married one of them, in fact, the old galoot. He's buried out back under the cottonwood." She sighed, and continued, "I've survived black twisters and spring floods both, and I've watched more than one horse-thief hang. But this is a different situation completely." She shook her head sadly.

"This town is coming apart," she said. "Folks don't trust each other anymore the way they did. MacLaren's got this county tied in knots."

Domingo leaned forward and said, "A man named Wade Russell was found guilty of murder by a jury of MacLaren's gunmen, and sentenced to hang."

"I've heard of him," Arlo said, surprised at this news. In fact, he'd once shared a hotel room with Wade Russell, maybe ten years back. They'd both been marooned in a one-horse town during a high plains blizzard, and they'd holed up together for three days in the single hotel room still vacant.

Both were aware of the other's reputation as a man skilled in the use of guns, but they took a quiet liking to one another and passed the time playing gin rummy. They avoided all mention of gunplay and talked long into the freezing nights around a pot-bellied stove, trading thoughts about what they'd like to do if they ever settled down.

"Russell has the reputation of being quick with his temper, and he is rumored to be a gunman," Domingo continued. "Perhaps he was at one time; I cannot say. He was gone for many years, and we heard stories. When he returned to this part of the country he had trouble with MacLaren, I don't know what. There was bad blood between them and they became bitter enemies. I believe MacLaren would have killed him if he could, but Russell is a watchful man. After that, Russell settled down and began to build a cabin on land his father bought years ago. Something strange had happened to him, he was a changed man."

Arlo thought about himself, and the toll his way of life had taken. He knew something about change, he reckoned. He recalled Wade Russell making some mention of land he owned, and something about a mine he intended to work one day. Too much had happened in those ten years; he could remember few of the details Russell had spoken of.

Domingo sipped his coffee and went on. "The man who was murdered was a friend of my family by the name of Pablo Velasquez. He had a prosperous vegetable farm a few miles to the east of town, land to which he had legal claim. He was a gentle, kind man. He was shot in the back from ambush. Wade Russell's land is adjacent to Pablo's; they share the same water. MacLaren says that is the reason Russell shot Pablo, because of the water. We have no real law here, the trial was a joke from the beginning. Russell killed no one, Pablo was as close to a friend to him as anyone has ever been. He understood Wade Russell, the two of them would go off together into the mountains for days."

Domingo's eyes glittered with anger. "I think MacLaren's gunmen killed Pablo so the M-BAR-C could steal his land, and they blamed it on Russell because of his past. With his reputation it is easy to see why he was found guilty. MacLaren has more cattle than his own graze will support, and he has already moved one herd onto Pablo's land. Russell is to hang this Saturday. He is said to have a daughter back east, but with her father dead MacLaren will run his own herds onto their graze and water. Should she show up he will force her to sell, or even worse. He is driven by greed."

"Can't you take this up with the authorities? Surely the sheriff will listen to what you have to say."

"Amigo, the sheriff is not concerned with bringing the real killer of a poor Spanish farmer to justice. Wade Russell is known to have been a gunman, why hang someone else? MacLaren is a powerful man, and the sheriff would like to be mayor one day."

Arlo finished his smoke thoughtfully. Today was Monday. Wade Russell had very little time to live. He made up his mind.

"Let's go talk to this sheriff," he said. "I don't like the way things shape up around here. There must be something that can be done."

"This is not your fight, my friend," Domingo said. "You have no need to risk your life over this. MacLaren's riders have killed three of my people already, and terrorised their families."

Arlo smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. "It became my fight earlier," he said. "I'm not one to stand back and watch. If MacLaren's going to hunt me anyway, I'd as soon give him good reason."

Mary slapped one plump hand onto the table with a bang, rattling the coffee cups.

"Domingo," she said, "it's high time someone took a stand around here! If this Mr. Morgan wants to lock horns with Garrett MacLaren, then I say let him have at it!" She looked shrewdly at Arlo's chiseled features. "I've a hunch MacLaren's in for a surprise."

Arlo stood and retrieved his hat, rifle and saddlebags. "First, though," he said, "I need to find Jethro. He was supposed to meet me here today. He'd be handy to have around if things were to get lively."

Puente got to his feet and said, "I will go with you. I know the land, and I have spare horses available. We will need to ride fast."

"Let's do it then." Arlo tipped his hat to Mary. "Ma'am. I hope to be back for another meal soon, and I'll bring my nephew. You might want to lay in some extra supplies, though; that boy can eat."

CHAPTER 10

"I can't believe it! You got Slick killed! When you brace a man you see the job through, and you don't do it drunk!"

Tommy MacLaren stood before his father and cringed. The old man's scornful words whipped at him like a lash. His wounded hand throbbed with each heavy beat of his heart, and he couldn't erase the haunting image of the stranger's cold eyes from his mind.

His father's office was a tall, dark room constructed of fieldstone and massive pine logs, hand-hewn and freighted in from east Texas at great expense. Tommy had always felt uncomfortable in that room, even as a child. There was something unnerving about standing there in front of his father's wide desk beneath the soulless glass-eyed stares of stuffed deer, bear and elk.

"There were three of you! Three men against a greaser with a knife and some damn drifter?" Garrett MacLaren's broad face flushed a violent shade of red. He paced back and forth behind his desk and kicked viciously at a trashcan in passing. He was a powerfully built man in his early sixties, with short-cropped silver hair and blunt features. He'd never been a man with any patience for weakness or indecision. Tommy had been a disappointment to him for years, long before his mother passed away. The boy had been coddled for far too long.

"He was awful fast, Mr. MacLaren," Case said quietly. He turned his hat in his hands and watched the proceedings from a chair in the corner of the office. He'd never particularly cared for MacLaren, but the man paid good wages and the ranch grub was above average. Case had ridden many a cold trail in the dead of night, and slept on hard ground in every kind of weather. At his age a comfortable bed in a warm bunkhouse meant something.

MacLaren turned his furious eyes on the gunman. "Faster than Slick?" he asked in a voice as cold as ice. "No man alive is that fast with a gun, except maybe Wade Russell, and it damn sure wasn't him."

MacLaren still couldn't believe that Slick was dead. The young man had been like another son to him, a son who'd understood and shared his craving for power and dominance. Tommy had never exhibited that drive, except when he was drinking, and then he just grew mean and surly.

"His name is Arlo Morgan," Case said. "He's a known man, but I didn't recognise him right off. Slick drew first, and was fixing to kill the greaser.

Morgan shot him through the heart before you could spit. I never seen anything like it except once, up in the Nations." He tugged thoughtfully at the end of his mustache and searched his memory.

"Must've been nigh on ten years ago, I reckon. I rode with a salty bunch in those days, and we stopped at a roadhouse for a drink. Charley Coop had words with some stranger, and threw down on him. Coop was the fastest man with a belt-gun I ever saw, a sight faster than Slick, maybe even faster than Wade. He'd killed eight men that I know of, and all of them face up in a fair fight. That stranger shot him clean through the heart with a big Walker Colt. None of us ever seen him move." Case paused and eyed his boss. "I believe that stranger was Arlo Morgan."

The muscles in MacLaren's jaw twitched with controlled fury, and he fastened his eyes on the gunman. "Why didn't you take a hand, Case?" he asked softly. "That's why I hired you, for your gun."

Case regarded him with cool eyes. "I might work for you, mister, but I don't reckon even you've got enough money to stop a bullet. I'm damned good with a gun, but I'm nowhere near as good as Arlo Morgan, and I'm man enough to admit it. You can thank that greaser for Tommy getting out of there alive. If he hadn't stuck him with that knife Morgan would've blown his heart out his back just like he done Slick." Case shook his head emphatically. "No sir, I don't aim to trade bullets with Arlo Morgan. That man is poison with a gun. A man like that needs to be dealt with different."

"How do you mean, different?"

"From cover, with a rifle. That's the only way, and even that's chancy. Morgan's an old hand at this business."

MacLaren lowered his bulk into the leather chair behind his desk and rested his beefy forearms on the desktop. The chair squeaked as he swivelled it and stared out the window. He turned back and contemplated his son standing nervously in front of him. Tommy's injured hand was swathed in clean bandages, and he nursed it carefully to his chest. The boy was weak, he knew, and his encounter with the stranger had made him even weaker. Something had to be done. MacLaren made up his mind.

"Tommy, you track this Morgan down and kill him. Catch him outside of town if you can. Case, go with him, hire whoever you have to, but get the job done. We can't afford to let some drifter buck us and get away with it, not now."

Tommy's face was white and afraid. "Pa...," he started.

"Boy, you do what you're told!" MacLaren's fist slammed into the desk. "It's time you took on some responsibility around here. I'm not going to be around to wipe your nose forever."

"But Pa, he--"

"And get that greaser while you're at it. Those damn Puentes are too arrogant for my liking. It's our land now, dammit! My land! I'll take it anyway I have to take it, and to hell with the law." MacLaren paused for emphasis. "I will own every godforsaken acre between here and the Chisos mountains, and God help the man who stands in my way!"

CHAPTER 11

Arlo and Domingo rode out of Bentley side by side at a canter, leading two horses apiece behind them. They headed east along a well-used trail that followed the muddy banks of the Rio Grande. They kept their horses to a steady, mile-consuming lope for several hours, then switched to fresh mounts and continued. Every so often they passed a group of small adobe houses hidden away in the cane-breaks, and a few scattered cornfields irrigated with water diverted from the river. They encountered no other riders.

At dusk they paused to let the horses blow, and gulped a hasty meal from the bundle of food Mary had packed for them, thick beef sandwiches and wedges of cold pie. They washed the food down with swallows of tepid water from their canteens and remounted as the sun dropped below the horizon. They kicked their horses into a trot and continued in the growing dark with the stars as their guide. A waning yellow moon showed through dense thickets of mesquite and the drooping limbs of pepper trees as they traveled into the night.

Daybreak found them riding northeast, away from the river trail and into bleak desert. The sun rose in the east and quickly dissipated the pre-dawn chill, replacing it with searing heat as the morning progressed. They stopped

beneath the sparse shade of a dead cottonwood to swap horses again and stretch their weary legs.

"His camp is not far from here," Domingo said. He pointed to a cleft in the escarpment before them. "There, in that box canyon. There is a small spring, and he built corrals for the horses."

Arlo gazed out upon the desert. To Jethro, this spot would have been paradise. The sun's rays played over the varying rock surfaces and caused shadows to shift and dance on the distant foothills. The main body of the Chisos range was barely visible to the north, purple and transparent in the morning light. The desert air had a clarity about it that his nephew had always loved, a land where every living thing has its place and purpose. His mind drifted to the killing fields of the cattle wars and he had to fight to drag his thoughts back to the present. He could see no smoke from a breakfast fire; Jethro must have gone.

They rode into the canyon warily, and scoured the ground for sign. A tidy lean-to had been erected next to a pair of corrals fashioned from the trunks of ocotillo stalks lashed together, but there was no sign of life anywhere around. A blackened ring of stones held cold ashes from a campfire long since abandoned.

"I wonder where he has gone?" Domingo said.

Arlo knelt and felt the ashes, letting them drift through his fingers in a fine sprinkle of dust. He looked up at the vaquero and said grimly, "He was

supposed to meet me in Bentley yesterday. He wouldn't have missed that, not unless he ran into trouble."

CHAPTER 12

The roan stopped abruptly and pricked up his ears. He whickered softly and tested the air with flared nostrils, then broke into an eager trot toward a gap between two granite boulders that had fallen from the cliffs above us sometime long, long ago.

Another bumblebee buzzed by my face and I watched it disappear into the shadowed opening between the rocks. An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of my stomach, a feeling of being watched by unseen eyes. The Comanches would know of any waterholes hereabouts, and the spot was perfect for an ambush. But if there was water up there we had to have it. I reined up, and the others stopped behind me.

"Wait here," I said. I looked hard at the old man. "You look after her." I was taking a chance, but I had no other choice. Whatever else he might be, Johnson had sand, even as sick as he was. Most western men would not harm a woman, and I had to trust that he held to the same code.

He stared back at me with a different light in his pale blue eyes. He had changed somehow; I could see it on his face.

"I'll do it," he said simply.

I handed him the Winchester, and unholstered my Colt.

"I'm going in there to look for water. If I run into any trouble, you'll hear shooting."

"I expect that's likely enough," he said dryly.

"Be careful, Jethro," Theresa said. "We'll be fine. You look out for yourself. I'll fix up that poultice and we'll wait for you."

I have to say it felt right pleasant to hear the concern she showed in her voice. I'd been on my own and making do in rough horse-camps for nigh on six years. There was rarely anyone to talk to aside from the buzzards and snakes, and they don't make for lively conversation. Visitors were uncommon, and the few that did happen by generally needed either a bath or a noose around their necks, and sometimes both.

That girl changed the way I looked at everything. I wished I'd had a chance to clean up before I met her. If it wasn't for the tight fix we were in I might have danced a jig then and there, but there was serious business to take care of. I reined the roan toward the rocks and leaned low in the saddle to make myself a smaller target. The sun was behind and to my left, sinking low into the west. Afternoon shadows lengthened, and the roan stepped gingerly over the uncertain footing of the clearing.

The gap between the two boulders was as narrow as the passage we'd just negotiated, barely wide enough for one horse. The empty canteens tied to my saddle scraped hollowly against the wall. I dismounted and led the roan behind me as I moved into the shadows. The gap widened after a few feet and the trail turned to the right and opened up. Ahead of me a staircase of water-

smoothed white rock ledges fell in tiers from the mouth of a gully a quarter mile above. The surface of the rock was soft and rounded from years of flash floods and the endless scouring of the desert wind.

I left the roan at the bottom and picked my way carefully up the first of the terraced ledges. My boots made too much racket scraping on the naked rock, so I took them off and moved on quietly in my sock-feet. Every little sound I made was magnified and echoed in the stillness between the steep rock walls.

My eyes searched the surrounding cliffs for any sign of Indians. They could be behind any piece of brush and I might not see them. The Comanche was a master of concealment, and used every feature of the desert terrain to his advantage. I felt very exposed out there on that rock staircase with no cover, and I hurried forward as quietly as I could. I expected an arrow to fly out of the shadows and lodge between my shoulder-blades any minute; it wasn't a comforting thought. I scrambled over the lip of the second ledge, and there in the center of the rockface was a shallow depression two yards wide filled with an inch or so of damp, dark sand.

I fell to my knees and dug into the sand until I hit bare rock. The sand was still moist and cool, but there was no standing water. A stone rattled down the cliff wall to my right and bounced into a clump of blind pricklypear. I scooted to the left and came up with the Colt cocked and ready in my hand. I glimpsed sudden movement behind a deadfall halfway up the terraced ravine, and I dove headlong into the damp tinaja. I lay there and listened for any

sound, no matter how faint, but heard nothing but the hum of insects and my own breathing.

I risked a quick peek over the rim of the tinaja. The sun was lower in the west, and the canyon was already losing light. I saw nothing move, so I zig-zagged for the next series of ledges and rolled sideways over a two foot wall of rock.

The next thing I knew I was falling, and as I fell I saw the silhouette of the Comanche chief, Coyote Runs, standing on a boulder near the deadfall with his carbine to his shoulder. There was no mistaking that stovepipe hat. A shot rang out and splintered the rocks behind me as I fell.

I dropped maybe five feet, and landed with a splash in a tank of stagnant rainwater that was an easy eight feet deep. I sank beneath the surface and bobbed up for air. A bullet thwacked into the water inches from my head, and the echo of the carbine's report rang out into the evening silence. I threw myself backwards through the water into the cover of the tinaja's far wall.

From here the Comanche chief couldn't see me, but I couldn't see him either. My gun was soaked through, and I wasn't sure if it would fire when it came down to it. Nevertheless I held it ready, and considered my next move. Where was the other Indian, I wondered?

I heard soft footsteps scuff on the rockface above me. I could see him clearly in my mind, creeping closer on his moccasins with that old carbine ready to hand. When he found me it would be like shooting fish in a barrel. I looked around desperately for an escape route, but the tinaja walls were slick

as glass and sheer to the top. The rim was five or six feet above my head, well out of my reach. I didn't see how I could get myself out of that waterhole even if there were no Indians hunting me. There was nary a foothold or handhold to be seen.

Where I stood was the shallowest part, and I was in water up to my neck. I held the Colt outstretched above the surface of the water and waited, trapped like a beaver in its lodge. The thought of the girl waiting helplessly in the clearing below churned in my mind. Would the old man abandon her?

A shadow loomed over me and I swung the barrel of the forty-four up toward it. Coyote Runs stood looking down at me from the edge of the tinaja with his rifle aimed at my chest. His nose was swollen twice its size and a nasty gash cut at an angle across it. I squeezed the trigger on the Colt and heard a metallic click as it misfired. A crooked smile creased the Comanche's hard features. He looked to his left and called out something in a guttural voice, then returned his dark eyes to me. If looks could kill I'd have been laid out for burying already.

The other warrior stepped into view with his rawhide lariat coiled in one hand and said something to the chief. He pulled out a knife and ran his thumb over the blade, talking all the while. Coyote Runs shook his head. He placed his carbine on the ground, crossed his arms over his chest and gestured with his head at the setting sun. The two Indians had a sharp argument in Comanche that I didn't understand completely, but I got the drift of it alright. They were

squabbling about how to best go about killing me. They could have done it with a big enough rock, for that matter; I was defenseless in the tinaja.

Might be they didn't want to waste another arrow or precious bullet now they had me cornered. More likely they didn't want to foul the waterhole with my blood, and I couldn't blame them for that. I wasn't in favor of it either. It seemed that Coyote Runs had it in mind to let me sit in the tank until I got tired enough to drown myself, and the other one hankered to haul me out with his lariat and have himself a little skinning practice. Either way, I was mighty unlikely to enjoy the next few hours of the evening.

At least I wasn't thirsty anymore.

CHAPTER 12

Arlo and Domingo quartered for sign on their way back out of the box canyon, but first they filled their canteens at the spring. An experienced desert rider will never pass up an opportunity to stock up on fresh water. Evidently Jethro had left by some different route, for there were no recent tracks on what he'd obviously been using as a trail to come and go from his camp.

Arlo scanned the ground with worried eyes. Jethro was skilled in the ways of wilderness travel and survival; he'd spent his life hunting and exploring the remote canyons of the desert. If he hadn't made it to Bentley it meant he was in trouble of some kind. He had savvy, but he was still young, and even the most seasoned traveler can make an error in judgement.

There were a scores of ways a man might wind up injured or dead on the frontier, and none of them pleasant. Snakebite was one, although fairly uncommon. Livestock were far more frequently struck by snakes than were men. In fact, some held that a rattlesnake's warning rattle had developed over the years so the reptiles could frighten off grazing buffalo before they were stepped upon. But a snakebit, lame horse out in the far reaches of the desert was a serious matter also; it could mean a slow, agonizing death from thirst.

Indian trouble was always a possibility, although nowadays most of the warlike bands tended to keep south of the Rio Grande at that time of year. Still, a man never knew; Indians were notional and might show up just about anyplace, and usually where you least expected.

Mountain lions had been known to attack a man, but again, it was a rare occurrence. They occasionally developed a taste for horseflesh, though, and would sometimes leap upon a rider's back, not realising he wasn't just part of the horse.

A simple broken leg had been the death of more than one cowhand this far removed from town. There were no doctors or medicine available; a traveler had no one to rely upon but himself, or other members of his party. If a man's horse shied or bolted and he fell from the saddle, he was at the mercy of the land, and the desert showed mercy to no man.

Arlo searched both sides of the trail. Jethro couldn't have disappeared from the face of the earth; there had to be sign of his passing.

"Senor, over here," Domingo called out. He pointed to an overturned pebble at the mouth of a cut in the canyon wall. "I think he went through here. But he has been very careful to leave no trail."

Arlo examined the pebble and looked beyond it into the narrow cut. A slightly bruised sprig of manzanita lay on the hard baked ground, recently separated from the main plant. He smiled grimly. "That would be Jethro, alright," he said. "He prides himself on leaving little sign. Sometimes I think he'd rather be a mountain lion than a human being, if he had the choice."

"He has gone off into the Sonora, amigo. I hope he knows what he is in for. That is an empty wasteland, and few would chance a journey through it."

Arlo kned his buckskin into a walk, following what little sign there was. "If anyone understands this country, it's Jethro. I'll bet he figured to take a shortcut and got himself into a fix. Let's go find him, Domingo. Are you game?"

The vaquero shrugged eloquently. "One might as well die of thirst, I suppose. Once we return to Bentley I imagine MacLaren will have us shot on sight. Who is to say what is the better death?" He grinned cheerfully. "I learned many years ago that life is a matter of luck, good and bad. Beyond that, there is only fate and time."

"I've been lucky for too long a time," Arlo said. "As for fate, I reckon she'll play her cards out as they fall."

CHAPTER 13

I sidestepped an inch or two to my right and felt something hard beneath my foot, something that shifted when I kicked at it. I explored it with my feet; it was a sharp chunk of rock the size of my fist. I eased myself down into the water and grasped it between my toes. Leaning my weight against the tinaja wall, I slowly bent my knees and lifted the rock up behind me. My cheek scraped down the rock wall as my body slipped deeper into the water.

The Comanches continued to argue about how and when to kill me, but their palaver was more by way of an insult than anything else. They had me and they knew it. They reckoned I understood what they were talking about, and that tickled them. No one who's been around them ever said an Indian didn't have a sense of humor.

I reached down with my left hand and grabbed the rock, then dropped my feet to the bottom again so I could stand. My right hand still held the Colt above the surface, but I had little hope it would fire.

I backed away from the overhang and stood facing them in water up to my chin. I threw the Colt onto the ledge at their feet, and switched the rock to my right hand below the surface of the water.

"Here is my gun," I said. "I give it to you as a gift. Now go, before I have to kill you."

Coyote Runs doubled over with laughter and slapped his hands together. The other brave grinned like a wolf and held his knife up for me to see. I expect I was as much fun as they'd had in a while.

A crow cawed off in the desert distance, his call as clear as a church bell. I heard the roan whinny from the bottom of the ravine. The Indians stood stock still and listened. Coyote Runs dropped into a crouch and reached for the carbine, turning his eyes down the staircase of rock. The other Comanche slipped into cover behind a ridge in the rock and disappeared. Coyote Runs stood cautiously with his carbine at the ready and searched the ravine with careful eyes.

The heavy boom of a Henry repeating rifle echoed through the canyon. The top of the Comanche chief's head exploded inside his hat and he toppled out of my view.

The other brave crept forward to where I could see him again and headed down the gully on his belly like a snake. He has his eyes fixed on something, and he moved an inch at a time, stalking whoever it was. His bow was in his hand, and he notched an arrow to it, never moving his eyes from his target. I saw him pull the bowstring back all the way to his chest.

I lunged half out of the water and threw the rock with every ounce of strength I had left in me. Stone throwing was a skill I'd learned at a young age; there was seldom enough powder and lead to go around when I was growing up, and I'd hunted rabbits and squirrels with rocks for years before I ever shot my first deer.

My rock hit that brave smack in the temple and spun him around as he lifted his bow. I almost felt sorry for him; he hadn't got a shot off all day without something unpleasant happening to him.

The Henry boomed again, and the Indian was lifted off his feet and slammed backwards into the side of the ravine. He was dead before he landed. Whoever was out there was an uncommon good shot. The echo of the blast rattled away into emptiness.

I stood there in the water as the sun dropped behind the cliffs, and wondered who had done the shooting. For all I knew it was a war party of Apaches settling the score with an old enemy. If so, I could look forward to nothing but a slow and painful death. Out of the fry pan and into the fire, I said to myself.

I thought about the old man and the girl. They must have heard the gunfire, and she'd be worried. I prayed the old man had the sense to get them into cover, and that he'd figure some way to get her to town, although I couldn't see how they'd make it without water. I set store by that girl, and it tormented me that I couldn't see to her safety.

If I was to live long enough to help her I had to somehow find a way to climb out of that tinaja, but my clothes were waterlogged and weighed me down. I stripped them off and tossed them up onto the rocks, then swam in a slow circle and examined the walls for any crack or fingerhold. If there were Apaches waiting they'd just have to be satisfied to kill me in my skivvies.

CHAPTER 14

Spurs jingled softly as someone moved toward the tinaja from the gully below. I craned my neck to try and make out who it might be, but could see nothing but the wet rock wall. At least it didn't sound like Apaches; I'd never heard of one of them wearing spurs. A head appeared above the lip of the rock tank, and a familiar, grinning face looked down at me.

"Well I'll be damned, will you look at this!" the face said.

"Uncle Arlo?" I must have looked like a pole-axed steer. "Arlo, is that you?!" I could scarcely believe it, but it sure enough was. I'd never been so glad to see somebody in my life. I splashed around and whooped in the water like a wild man.

He vaulted up and sat easy on the rim of the waterhole with his old Henry rifle across his lap. He held up my wet clothes and shook his head. "Jethro, you look like you've started to wrinkle up in there," he said.

"Get me out of here and do it quick!" I held my arms up so he could reach them and haul me out, but he just sat there. "Arlo, there's a girl down in the arroyo and she--"

"Oh, you mean Theresa. Don't fret, she's fine." He glanced over his shoulder and smiled. "In fact, here she is right now."

My mouth dropped open. I took a swallow of water down my windpipe and spluttered.

"We met earlier," he said. "She told me where you'd gone. Domingo and Johnson are with the horses. I told her to come on up after I gave her the all clear." He chuckled. "Told her you were taking a bath."

Theresa stepped out of the shadows and kneeled on the rim of the tinaja with a pair of canteens in her hands. "Here," she said, "perhaps you could fill these for me while you're in there?" Her eyes were wide and innocent. "You look nice all cleaned up, Jethro."

I ducked lower in the water and was mighty thankful for the growing darkness so she couldn't see my ears burning red, or anything lower down either, for that matter. The empty canteens floated beside my head.

"Arlo," I hollered, "you get me out of here!"

He reached down and grabbed me by the hair.

"Now?" he asked. He grinned at Theresa and she smiled back at him. I couldn't help but notice her dimple up and blush. Like I said before, Arlo has him a right easy way with womenfolk. For some reason, though, I wished he'd fall in the damn waterhole himself, kinfolk or not. A man doesn't like to appear foolish in front of a lady.

"No, not now!" I said. I jerked my hair loose from his hand and backpaddled out of reach. I dunked the two canteens under and filled them both. She must think I'm one poor hero, I thought. The way I felt, I'd almost rather had the Indians to fight with. I threw the canteens over the rim of the tinaja and they clattered on the rocks. "Take some water to the horses," I said sharply, "they'll be needing to drink."

Later that night we sat around a good, hot fire and I boiled water for coffee. The desert doesn't hold its heat after sunset; even after the hottest day nightfall can bring a considerable chill, and I was soaked through. My damp clothes steamed as I tended to the fire, and I was thankful for the warmth. I added a few sizeable mesquite limbs to keep it going. We'd built the fire against a wide, flat boulder and its heat was reflected out to us.

Arlo threw a handful of coffee grounds into the pot and we watched them swirl around boiling. There's nothing like the smell of coffee brewing over an open fire to make a man feel alive. That and having a pretty girl in camp, which ran a close second right then.

Theresa mashed up her aloe plants and mixed the pulp with a dash of warm water. She added a few crushed berries from another bush that looked to me like a thistle, but which she claimed would help stave off an infection. She had Johnson soak his swollen feet in the mixture for half an hour, then dried them off carefully with a strip of cloth torn from her dress.

His pale eyes were shiny with fever as he watched her work. She made a thicker batch of the salve and spread it evenly over each foot. She lifted his legs and rested his feet on his saddle to elevate them and ease the pressure. She tore another strip of gingham from the hem of her dress, soaked it in cool water and folded it over Johnson's forehead. He straightaway closed his eyes and appeared to doze off.

Domingo came out of the darkness and into the light of the fire. He'd been seeing to the horses which we'd picketed in the small clearing. With the

spare mounts he and Arlo had brought along, and the two Comanche war ponies, we had a sizeable herd of nine animals to look after. Any Indian or renegade worth his salt would risk his scalp to steal them if he happened across us, so we'd agreed that one of us would always stay on lookout. Arlo poured himself a cup of coffee, picked up his rifle and moved into the shadows like a cat. We'd take turns standing guard through the night, two hours at a time.

I watched Theresa's eyes follow him, and tasted something bitter in the back of my throat.

"So amigo," Domingo said, "how is it you've got a beautiful girl and an ugly old man to keep you company?"

"We'd best get some sleep," I said shortly. "Tomorrow's not going to be an easy ride." I rolled up in my blankets and closed my eyes, but I couldn't get Theresa's face out of my mind. I lay there in the night and waited sleeplessly for my turn on watch.

CHAPTER 15

We saddled up the next morning at daybreak, having watered the horses and carrying full canteens. We drank last night's coffee and chewed on a handful dry biscuits for our breakfast, but we wasted no time. It would take some hard riding to make town before Saturday, but with the extra horses we

had a good chance. If Wade Russell was to hang, it wouldn't be because we hadn't tried to stop it.

We decided to take Theresa to her brother's cabin first and leave her there to care for Johnson. It was only a slight detour, and we didn't want to risk her getting caught up in the middle of a shooting fight, if it should come to that. From what Arlo had told me, gunplay was likely, and I had no wish to have the worry of a girl keep me from concentrating on the job at hand. Domingo would stay with them and see that no one bothered them, and keep an eye on the horses.

Arlo and I would ride into town and somehow figure a way to get Wade out of jail, but we had no plan other than to get there and start shaking the branches.

We traveled as fast as we could without being reckless. Arlo and Domingo rigged a makeshift travois out of a blanket and two saplings lashed together for Johnson to lie on. He was out of his head with fever most of the time now, and he bumped along in the dust behind his horse, drifting in and out of consciousness. He kept up a constant mumble, something about a cave, and lost gold and such. I thought about the chunk of quartz in my saddlebags and wondered, but I mentioned it to no one, not even to Arlo.

then he'd been high-spirited and full of mischief, ready to pull a silly prank at the drop of a hat. To be sure, he'd always had a serious side. He'd been known for his skill with a gun, and had ridden as an equal with many of the rougher

element, but he generally had a lighthearted way about him and never hunted trouble. When it came his way, he dealt with it swiftly and put it behind him with a laugh. More than once I'd seen him whip a man to a bloody pulp with his fists, and then cheerfully buy him a drink after.

Now I noticed that the lines in his face were deeper, and his mouth was commonly set in a frown. He carried grief with him like a second skin. I wondered what might have happened to him to change him so. His eyes were chillier than before; he seemed to measure everything around him and find it lacking. He never truly relaxed his guard, even when joking around with me. Now and then he'd turn back into the fun-loving uncle I remembered, but he'd soon catch himself and set to brooding again.

He often rode a little ways off from the rest of us, lost in thought, and his expression then became sorrowful and distant. Once in a while he'd take a pull from a flask he carried in his saddlebags. He'd not been much of a drinking man before. Whatever it was had left him with some terrible memories, and I sure hoped he'd find a way to get shut of them. If I could help him I would, but it was almost like working with a wild horse that's held onto a streak of meanness. He'd either let it go one day, or he wouldn't. It was up to him to decide. In the meantime, life went on.

Theresa rode her horse like a natural born westerner; she took to it the way some people will, and I was mighty proud of her. We rode side by side, and I was surprised how easy she was to talk to. Once I got over the flutter in

my belly each time she looked at me, I found myself telling her about all kinds of things, things I'd only thought about to myself in the past.

"What do you plan to do with your life?" she asked me once.

Now there was a question to stump a man. I looked out at the wide open desert and couldn't answer right away. What did I plan to do? I'd never really given it much thought. Does anyone really? I took stock of myself, and tried to imagine how things would be ten years down the road. What did I want to be doing?

"I don't rightly know," I said finally. "I've thought about raising horses." I knew about horses, and had always reckoned on breeding good saddle stock sometime. It seemed to me there would always be a need for solid, reliable, well-trained mounts, and a man could do worse in life than run a manageable horse ranch. But a ranch means land, good graze and water, and land costs money. I'd saved up a bit from selling the mustangs I'd captured and sold over the past four years, but it was nowhere near enough to buy any land. That girl had a way of stirring up my mind that made me skittish.

"That sounds like a fine idea." She paused, troubled. "Do you think you'll get there before my brother--" she broke off.

"We'll get there, come hell or high water," I said. "If need be Arlo'll go on ahead of us and hold things up. He can be right persuasive."

"I've noticed that about him," she said, and blushed.

There it was again. I knotted up inside and wished for the right thing to say, but it wouldn't come. You are a damn fool, I told myself. Here you are with

little more than the clothes on your back. How do you expect a girl to pay you any mind?

Gloomily I reckoned she'd set her cap for Arlo, and how could I blame her? He was a good-looking man and well spoken. He'd traveled widely and knew about music and books, and he fitted easily into any company. He may have changed over the years, but he was still a striking man who commanded attention.

I had no reason to expect her to look at me twice. I'd helped her out of a fix, and she was thankful, but that was as far as it went. After all, it was Arlo and Domingo who'd saved our bacon; me, I'd been floating around in my skivvies.

I spurred up ahead to scout the lay of the land. Glancing back, I saw Arlo rein his buckskin over and ride along beside her. He said something and she threw her head back and laughed. Somehow the morning sunlight took a tarnish to it. I kicked the roan into a trot and watched the horizon bounce through his ears. At least he knew me for who I was, and didn't expect anythingng different.

Domingo led the way, for he knew the country around Bentley better than any of us. Every so often Arlo or I would drop back and scout our backtrail while the other rode ahead, because a body never knew which direction trouble might come from. All we knew for certain was that trouble was coming. We rode fast, but with our guns close to hand.

Arlo headed off alone for town when we came to the turnoff that led to Russell's ranch.

"I'll have a word with the sheriff," he said to me, "and you come along once you get the girl settled in. Meet me at the livery late tonight. If need be, we'll break him out of jail and worry later, but I want to try and settle it without gunplay first. I know a little about the law, and if I can get a few solid citizens to listen we might have a chance. If not..." He shrugged, and a reckless light came into his eyes. "Then I expect MacLaren'll have to hire himself some new hands."

"I'll go with you."

"No you won't," he said. "You get that girl settled first. I'll start the ball rolling, see which way it heads."

"You be careful," I said. "Don't go stirring the pot until I get there. Sounds like MacLaren's got him an army of gunmen riding for him. You can't fight that whole crowd by yourself, you'll get yourself shot up, and likely killed."

"Jethro," he said quietly, "I'll shake the hand of the man who kills me, when I meet up with him in hell."

I stared at him, and knew I had no answer for that. He reined his buckskin around and started him on the road to town without looking back.

CHAPTER BREAK

Russell's spread was situated in a wide valley between two mountain ridges that narrowed into a canyon to the north, and it was the prettiest place I'd ever seen. The entrance to the valley was only a hundred yards wide, and screened from the trail by a broad thicket of mesquite. Domingo led us along a winding path through the trees that opened onto a meadow covered with grass so tall it brushed the bottom of our stirrups.

A small stream flowed from the canyon across the meadow, and a stand of cottonwoods grew along its banks. A cunningly built house of hand-laid fieldstone had been constructed on a level bench of land overlooking the stream, and was shaded by the massive limbs of an ancient oak. A pole corral had been built behind the house, with a water trough and feed bins close by. Mockingbirds whistled and scolded overhead as we rode across the stream toward the cabin.

Old Johnson opened his eyes and grinned from the depths of his fever. His face was pale and gaunt, but his eyes were bright.

"This is it, boy," he said to me. "This is your home. Don't ever give it up." I couldn't figure what he was talking about, and reckoned the fever had him rambling again. I spurred the roan into a trot and rode up to Theresa.

I glanced over at her and could see she was as impressed by the natural beauty of the spot as I was. She'd managed to work the tangles out of her hair somehow, and it framed her face like soft gold.

"It's beautiful," she said softly. "I've always known I'd come back to the west one day, but I never expected this."

"It's yours," I said, "yours and Wade's. And it's worth fighting for. Theresa, I want you to know I'll help you all I can, and so will Arlo."

She looked into my eyes and I flushed red from my boots to my hat, once again feeling like I'd had the wind kicked out of me. But I meant what I'd said, and she knew it.

"Thank you, Jethro, thank you for everything. You've been wonderful."

Me, I sat tall in the saddle and grinned so wide I thought my cheeks might crack.

Domingo cantered back from scouting the trail behind us and reined his horse to a stop. His face was worried.

"Amigo, we have trouble. There are a dozen riders moving a herd of cattle from the west, and they're armed to the teeth. I believe they are MacLaren's men, and they're headed this way."

I pulled the Winchester from its scabbard and rested it across my saddlehorn. "Domingo, take Theresa and the old man into the cabin. Barricade yourselves inside as best you can. Looks to be a good field of fire all around, you should be able to stand off an army if it comes to it."

"What will you do, amigo?" Domingo asked.

"Me? Why, I plan to throw a little shindig for those gentlemen. I believe they need to be read to from the Good Book."

"I will go with you," he said.

"No you won't, Domingo. This is my hand to play." I thumbed fresh shells into the Winchester and looked at him. "You get that girl safe. I'll be back directly."

I rode back through the mesquite and settled in under a cluster of overhanging limbs just off the trail. I could see out through the branches of the trees, but against their trunks I'd be almost invisible to anyone riding by. I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do, but the thought of MacLaren trying to run his herd on Theresa's grass had me riled, and I figured something would come to me.

I looked to the west and made out the approaching herd of cattle, which was nearly hidden in a thick cloud of brown dust. There looked to be about a hundred head of scrawny stock, with a few rangy longhorns thrown in. That grassy meadow must have been awful tempting to them, but I had it in mind to send them on their way. They had no right to that grass, and if it came to a fight, well, I'd danced at one or two and generally come out on top.

Well-mounted riders moved through the dust and I could hear their whoops and whistles as they chivvied the herd forward. Three riders rode drag, eating the dust, and I saw three others on each flank. Three men rode point, headed straight toward the entrance to the valley. They would pass within a hundred feet of where I sat watching them.

I checked my guns and loosened the Colt in its holster.

CHAPTER BREAK

Case and Tommy MacLaren rode at the head of the herd, leading the way to Russell's valley. With them on point was Vincent Garza, a Mexican gunfighter from San Antonio who owned the reputation of being a cold-blooded killer for hire. Garza's face was thin and dark, and he dressed like a dandy, but there was no mistaking the danger in his coiled frame. He made his living by killing men from ambush, and he prided himself that no man he'd been paid to assassinate was still among the living.

"It has been three days, and still no sign of this Morgan," Garza said. "Perhaps he has heard that I look for him? I was not hired to herd cattle." There was an edge to his voice.

Case glanced at Garza's insolent face. The Mexican was too swollen up with himself for his liking, but it was said he never missed his target with a rifle. And it was true they'd seen nothing of Arlo Morgan or Domingo Puente since Slick had been shot. Morgan's pack-horse and gear were still at the livery, but no one knew where he'd gone. Something was up, and Case couldn't put a finger on it.

He didn't figure Morgan cared a hoot if Vincent Garza was in the territory or not. Arlo Morgan shaped up as a man who didn't scare easy, if at all, and he was unlikely to be running from them. No, there was something going on, and it worried him. Still, the cattle had to be moved to fresh graze, and it was possible they'd run into either Morgan or Puente out here, so he'd brought Garza along.

Tommy rode silently beside Case, outwardly cool but a jangled, edgy bundle of nerves inside. He hadn't slept the night through since the day he drew on the stranger's back. In his dreams he saw Slick's eyes open wider and wider until they covered his face, and the boom of the Walker Colt echoed over and over again in his mind. His appetite had vanished, he couldn't eat more than a few bites, and he jumped at sudden noises. The only thing that seemed to help was the whiskey, and he'd taken to carrying several spare bottles in his saddlebags. He was glad Garza was with them; the only way to finally erase the demons that haunted him would be to see Arlo Morgan dead in the dirt with a bullet in his heart.

"What's this?" Garza said. His eyes were fixed on something ahead of them.

CHAPTER BREAK

I rode out from the cover of the trees and stopped the roan square in the middle of the trail, blocking the entrance to the valley. I recognized Case and young MacLaren from the descriptions Arlo had given me, but the third rider was unknown to me. He was a slightly built Mexican, wearing a short black velvet jacket decorated with silver conchos, and tight trousers flared at the bottoms where they covered his boots. His face was dark and narrow, with hard black eyes, and he was the first to see me waiting. He said something out of the side of his mouth, and the others sharply reined up their horses.

Case waved one hand in the air and the outriders behind him turned the bawling cattle off the trail, moving them in a slow circle to bunch them. All of the cowhands wore guns, and they looked like men familiar with the use of them.

"Turn those cows around and head out," I said, and I was blunt about it. My voice carried clear across the two dozen yards that separated me from the three men on point. "This here is private property, and you're not welcome."

"You must be crazy," Case said. "There's a dozen men here. Wade Russell's gonna hang, and we're takin' this range." He gave me a second look. "Who the hell are you?"

Tommy MacLaren slouched low in his saddle, looking as if he hoped not to be noticed. He seemed a mite pale and nervous, like he'd swallowed something that disagreed with him. I remembered what Arlo had said about him being a backshooter, and kept my eye on him, which appeared to make him even more jumpy.

The Mexican turned his horse to the side and casually reached his hand down for the stock of the Sharps rifle that was holstered in front of his leg. I guess he didn't think I saw him, or couldn't believe I'd do anything about it, outnumbered as I was.

"You pull that rifle mister, and you're dead," I said, and cocked the Winchester.

He sat stock still, his gaze unwavering, but then he brought his hands up to his saddlehorn and kept them in view.

I turned my eyes on Case. "My name's Jethro Morgan, and I don't care how many men you've got. You have a choice. Turn around and get, or when I count to ten I'll cut as many of you down as I can. I expect I can kill at least half of you before you get me, and mister, you'll be the first one I gut-shoot."

For a minute there nobody said a word. I figured to shoot Case first, then the Mexican, and the MacLaren boy next if it came down to it. As for the others, I'd see what happened. That temper of mine had got me going. I reckoned I might catch a bullet, but those boys would know I'd been to the fandango.

"Senor," Domingo's voice suddenly cut into the silence, "I can take the three over here with this shotgun if you like." He stood up from behind a stump to my left and thumbed the hammers back on a ten gauge scattergun he must've found in the cabin. "It's loaded with buckshot, and even though I'm not such a good marksman I think I might kill one or two."

I looked over at him and grinned. "I should have known better than to expect you to stay put," I said. "Whichever ones you want to shoot, have at it." I began counting. "Ten, nine, eight, seven..."

The fancy-dressed Mexican's head swiveled around but he was boxed. He knew when to give it up, and he looked ready to ride. He didn't like the odds one bit, I could see it on his face. That scattergun could cut a man in half. He wasn't mad, though, and that bothered me. To him killing was a business proposition, and he'd simply wait until the situation shifted in his favor. It was something to remember.

Case and Tommy MacLaren were frozen in their saddles, and Case looked to be mighty unhappy with the turn of events. The other riders were waiting for him to call the play, but we'd made the choice a hard one. He didn't want to go for his gun and maybe get killed, but he didn't quite know how to give up without looking like a coward, with twelve men against our two. This was the second time a Morgan had backed him down; if word got out he'd be finished as a hardcase in this part of the country. I didn't feel sorry for him one whit.

"Case, I have no quarrel with you. You're welcome to up stakes and hunt new country," I said evenly. "If you stay, sooner or later Arlo or me will have to kill you, it don't make no difference which. You'll still be dead, and all for trying to cheat a girl out of what's rightfully hers."

"Girl?" Case said. "What girl?" He sounded genuinely surprised.

"Yeah, what's this talk of a girl?" one of the other men called out.

"Theresa Russell," I said. I spoke loudly enough for all to hear. "Wade Russell's younger sister. She's come out from the east to lay claim to her legal land, and I mean to see she gets it. Any man here who would harm a woman, or steal her range, will answer to me. And boys, I'm not an easygoing man like my uncle. I'm plumb touchy, and I don't cotton to being pushed."

Case pulled at his mustache and stared down at his saddlehorn, then looked back at me. "I didn't hire on to fight no girl," he said finally.

"I hear Montana's nice this time of year," I said. "Cool, lots of grass, peaceful. Why, a man could ride for days in Montana and not get shot."

Case reined his horse around faced his crew.

"Boys," he said, "I'll not steal land that belongs to a girl alone. You do what you've a mind to, but I'm siding with Morgan on this. I reckon you'd best turn those cows and point them back to the M-Bar-C. Me, I'm headed north for Montana."

CHAPTER BREAK

Arlo sat his horse beneath a cottonwood and frowned at the horizon, his hands folded on the pommel of his saddle. His eyes studied the entrance to the canyon, and the rock formations beyond. The land looked familiar somehow, but he knew he'd never been there before. Two weathered pinnacles of rock sat upon a huge, round boulder near the mouth of the canyon, like a giant pair of rabbit ears, and below the boulder was a broad stretch of white gravel. It was the type of unusual formation a western man would remember and use as a landmark, but he couldn't place where he'd heard of it. He thought about it as he turned his horse and started him cantering toward Bentley.

CHAPTER BREAK

Saturday morning dawned clear and still, and we were up with the roosters. I studied Arlo's face as he belted his gun around his waist.

"What do you think we should do?" I asked him.

He spun the cylinder of his Colt, checked the action, and slipped it into his holster. He tied the thong tight around his leg, then turned and drew. I never saw anything move that fast. One minute his hand was empty, and the next the Colt was pointed at me with his thumb on the hammer. I looked into his eyes and for a second there saw a stranger staring back at me.

He smiled thinly and reholstered the gun as quick as he'd shucked it.

"I'm going to get Wade Russell out of jail," he said. "If MacLaren wants to kill a man, he can start with me." He picked up his hat and stepped to the door. "But I don't think he's got the nerve to face me himself."

"Johnson's got my Winchester," I said, "and he shoots plumb. His fever's broke, and I told him to set himself up on the roof of the livery. He's still a mite weak, but I reckon he'll manage."

"That's good," Arlo said. He shut the door behind him.

A small crowd of people had gathered near the gallows to watch Sheriff Hanson make the final preparations for the hanging. I saw Arlo stop and have a brief word with the big bartender, Tiny, who was watching from the boardwalk in front of his saloon. Tiny nodded in agreement at something Arlo said, and moved casually to a spot near the gallows steps.

Arlo nodded back to him, and strode through the crowd toward the jail with his coat unbuttoned and his right hand easy above his gun.

Further down the street I glanced up at the roof of the livery, and sure enough, Johnson was hunkered down against the eaves with my Winchester across his knees. Right beside him was the old hostler, with an old Sharps

buffalo rifle resting on the shingles. That Sharps was longer than he was, but he had the look of a man who'd faced up to trouble, and I reckoned he could shoot. Those two old men had more than a century of frontier living between them, and I wouldn't have wanted to be in their sights when it came down to gun play.

Arlo and I walked toward the jail with long, easy strides. He was looking forward to a fight, and I just wanted the whole thing behind me. The sun was hot on our backs, and I noticed as though for the first time how clear a desert morning could be. The mountains stood stark and barren to the north, and a trace of clouds drifted above them in the sky.

The street was deserted, but I felt eyes upon us from behind doors and windows as we walked. I only hoped none of them was looking down a rifle barrel.

A pole corral behind the jail held a half-dozen M-BAR-C horses. We stopped outside the building and waited. The door was closed and the windows shuttered.

"Hanson!" Arlo's voice was harsh. "Send Russell out, now!"

The door opened slightly, and Sheriff Hanson slipped out, closing it behind him.

"Now listen here, Morgan--"

The door opened again and MacLaren stepped out. He was wearing two guns belted low on his hips, and they were tied down..

"Hanson," MacLaren said, "you git. I'll see to this."

Arlo stood stock still and fastened his eyes on MacLaren. I could see an eagerness about him.

"Hello, Arlo," MacLaren said. "Been a long time."

"It has," Arlo said. He stepped forward and to his left, and planted his feet wide. His shadow stretched behind him on the dusty street. His gunhand was curled an inch away from the butt of his Colt. "I have to kill you, MacLaren. There's been talk."

MacLaren's eyes narrowed and without a word he went for his guns. It seemed to me he had scarcely moved, but suddenly they were in his hands and spitting lead. The first shot took Arlo through the left shoulder and spun him around.

I'd heard of more than one reputation-hungry gunman who'd died young because he didn't make his first shot count. Boothills across the frontier were littered with their unmarked graves. Speed was one thing, but careful, accurate shooting were the hallmark of the seasoned gunfighter. The fast draw might be considered a valuable skill, but getting a gun out of its holster quickly will not stop your opponent from killing you, especially if he takes his time and is accurate. If not combined with accuracy, a man can draw and shoot all day long and hit nothing.

Arlo dropped to one knee and fired. The bullet took MacLaren between the eyes, and he fell. Arlo slumped to the ground, clutching his bloody shoulder. A few of MacLaren's men began to gather, and they didn't look friendly. Arlo shifted his gun to his good hand and watched them come.

I levered a round into the chamber of my Winchester and stepped out of the shadows. "Leave one or two for me, Uncle Arlo," I called out. "Ain't fair for you to have all the fun of killin' these boys."

Chapter Break

"Arlo," I said, "I can't let you do it."

His face paled and his eyes gleamed dark. I could smell the whisky on his breath, and I knew he was primed for a killing.

"You figure you're man enough to stop me?" He turned and faced me. His right hand was curled an inch above the butt of his Colt. "Jethro, don't make me kill you, boy," he said.

The sun was low in the west and a few scattered clouds shone blood red in the evening light. I looked at my uncle and wondered if I was to die here at his hand.

"Arlo, I don't want to shoot with you," I said, "but if I have to I will. You're almighty fast, but I have right on my side and you know it. All my life you've taught me to honor what's right, and you're the one taught me to shoot. I'm here to tell you you can't take that gold."

"There wouldn't be any gold if it wasn't for me," he said harshly. "I found it, I brought it out. That girl has no right to it."

What I'd said bothered him, I could tell.

"She's a girl alone. Mayhap she never knew it was up there, but her father left her that mine," I said quietly. "She'll need that gold to see her through." I stepped closer to him. "You and I, why, we could leave. Head up north, maybe run a few cows and horses. We could live quiet and easy, Arlo, the way we always thought about."

"Too late for that, Jethro. It's too late for any of that."

To be continued...