

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a dry, sandy landscape. A large, gnarled, and bleached piece of driftwood lies diagonally across the center. The ground is composed of reddish-brown sand and small pebbles, with some sparse, dry vegetation visible. The lighting creates strong shadows, emphasizing the textures of the sand and the weathered wood.

# the Rise of a Warrior

Harvey Stanbrough

Book 1 in the Wes Crowley series

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a FrostProof808 publication  
an imprint of StoneThread Publishing

Most of the traditional front matter appears at the end.

## The Rise of a Warrior

Around 10 a.m. on July 26, 1868, a small troop of Texas Rangers rode into a livery yard on the outskirts of Watson, Texas. The town, two days' ride northeast of Amarillo, served a regional population of small ranches and farms. The livery yard itself was bordered by a corral, a windmill, a barn and a house.

They reined-in amidst a flurry of stamping hooves and whinnying horses. A cloud of finely powdered dust followed them into the yard. It billowed upward, then settled over everything, putting a fresh coat of dust on the sign that hung over the barn door: Billings Livery and Feed – Est. 1832.

As his men began to dismount, Corporal James Riley Connolly glanced around, then rode toward the house.

Beyond the house, a short distance across a field and a road, was the Watson General Store. In the heat of the day, very few people were on the street. A couple of boys were sitting in front of the store, leaning back against the wall in wooden chairs. Sunlight slashed the boardwalk about a foot in front of them.

When the Ranger troop rode in, seventeen year old Otis “Mac” McFadden leaned forward in his chair. He gazed across the street at the commotion in the livery yard, then tapped his friend on the shoulder with his palm. “Wes?” He pushed lightly. “Hey Wes, look. I think those are Texas Rangers.”

A year younger than Mac almost to the day, Western Z Crowley respected his friend as if he were an older brother. Still, he couldn't resist an inclination toward sarcasm when such a perfect opportunity presented itself. Without so much as opening his eyes, he smirked and said, “Can't put nothin' over on you, can they, Mac? I mean, we are in Texas.”

“Well hell, I know that.” He tapped Wes on the shoulder again. “But look. That one broke loose from the others. He's headed toward ol' man Billings' house. Gonna do some palaverin' I'll bet.”

Wes rocked his chair forward and straightened his hat on his head. He looked up at Mac. “A'right, what makes you think that?”

Mac gestured with one hand. “Just look. All the others are over close to the corral. Only one rode toward the house. Bet he's a captain or somethin'.” He turned to his friend, his eyes wide. “Wouldn't that be somethin'? Bein' a captain of the Texas Rangers?”

Wes glanced in the direction Mac had pointed and nodded. “I guess, maybe.” Then he tipped his hat down over his eyes and rocked his chair back against the wall again. “Then again, I'm good right here. I have all I can handle just bein' who I am.”

Mac looked at him and shook his head, then turned his attention back to the scene unfolding across the field.

Seemingly the only other person in town not already barricaded inside against the heat, the widow Clarendon, had just come out of the store.

Mac half-stood, glanced up at her and touched the brim of his hat.

She nodded primly and moved away down the street toward her boarding house. She lived there with her two sons, William and Jackson. They were twins and had recently turned thirteen years old.

The town of Watson didn't get a lot of visitors except those who were only passing through. Mrs. Clarendon's place was currently devoid of boarders. Farther along the street beyond the crossroad were a granary, a church and several houses.

On the outskirts was the McFadden family home.

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The McFadden family had lived in Watson, Texas since Mac was five years old. Just before he turned six, an old man—an elderly Comanche—had entered the north end of town.

Dressed in moccasins, deerskin breeches and a deerskin vest, the elder was carrying a gourd that, when he shook it, made a sound like a rattlesnake. He paced slowly, evenly, north to south, shaking the rattle with every other step and intoning, in broken but clear English, "This is my homeland. You must leave. This is my homeland. You must leave."

His vest was decorated with fine beadwork on either breast. Several horizontal rows of small beads alternated between turquoise, coral and mother of pearl. Around his forehead was a single strip of leather, less than an inch wide. Behind his left ear, three feathers dangled from the head band, intertwined with five or six strings of turquoise beads.

As he walked, repeating his intonation, a wagon passed him. The driver slowed and turned to stare, but he didn't stop. A horseman heading north on the road passed the old man, brushing near him but not touching him. Another passed on the other side.

Townsppeople came out of homes and stores one and two at a time to gawk. The old man seemed not to notice the wagon, the horses or the other people. He continued to pace and chant.

Mac was standing in front of the general store, waiting for his father and mother to come out. As he watched the old Indian, his father put one hand on his shoulder. "That is a brave man, Otis. Brave or crazy."

Mac had looked up at his father. "Who is he, Pappy?"

His father had paused for a moment and squeezed his shoulder. "He is a Comanche brave, son. There was a time all of this land belonged to his people." He paused again and crouched down next to him so they were eye to eye.

"How would you feel if somebody we didn't know walked into our house one day and sat down at our table. And when we told him to leave, he just laughed at us and refused? That is how this man feels now that all of us live in his homeland."

Otis frowned. "Is he right, Pappy?"

His father nodded. "From his perspective, this is part of Comancheria, his homeland, and he is right." Then he shrugged. "But from our perspective, this is Texas, the place where we live, and we are right. The Comanche were here first, but we are here now. Who is right depends on—"

There was an explosion, and the Comanche elder fell.

Women screamed as they and their men hustled to safety.

The Comanche man's left leg was bleeding just below the hip. As he struggled to get to his feet, the echo of another explosion slapped off the storefront and red matter blew out of the back of the man's right leg.

He went down again.

Again, he pushed himself up, the dark skin of his hands and chest and face covered with powder from the dirt street.

A crude voice came from down the street. "Stay down, damn you!"

Finally two men rode up on horseback, ranch hands from their appearance. One dismounted as his horse slid to a stop. He kicked the old brave in the side with his boot. "This is my home now, Injun. Your time is done." He kicked him again. "Now you say it."

The old man shook his head as he struggled to rise. "No. This is my homeland. You must—"

The man kicked him again, hard, lifting him and rolling him onto his back.

As the old Comanche gazed up at the sky, he smiled. "It is a good day to die here, in my home."

The cowboy pulled his Remington and cocked it. "This is the white man's homeland now, understand? Now you say it."

The old man smiled and shook his head. Quietly, he said, "This is my homeland. You must leave... boy."

"Boy?" The cowboy squeezed the trigger and a geyser of dirt erupted next to the Indian's right ear. "Who has the gun, old man? Who has the cattle and the houses and the land? Say it!"

"You cannot harm me. This is my homeland. You must—"

Again the Remington exploded and the bullet slapped into the old Indian's face just inside his left eye. He jerked and lay still.

The cowboy turned, glaring at those who were gawking from the boardwalk. He pointed with his revolver, sweeping it past them as if forgetting it was in his hand. Harshly, he said, "Just doin' what none'a you got the guts to do. You forget all this. Just forget it."

He put his revolver in his holster, got his lariat from his saddle, then knelt and tied the brave's feet together. He got on his horse, looped the other end of the lariat around his saddle horn, and spurred his horse. Then he pounded out of town at a gallop, dragging the old brave behind him.

The show over, the various citizens turned and began moving away toward their stores or homes. Nearly all were mumbling to each other and shaking their heads, some with shame for the cowboy, some at the foolishness of the old Comanche.

Little Otis McFadden looked up at his papa. "That man was brave," he said. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

His father just nodded, not sure which man he was referring to. He didn't want to think his son thought the cowboy was brave, but he never asked. He put his hand on his son's shoulder and guided him toward home.

Otis cried over the old Indian for two days.

Over the next few years, he realized that old Comanche hadn't died for land. It was about resolve. Someone else had the land before Comanches had it. Someone else would have it when the white-eyes were vanquished. He never forgot the sight of that brave old Comanche, his resolve and his death, and he never forgot the lesson he learned that day.

Those who lacked the resolve to take what they wanted and defend it should not endeavor to live here in the Comanche homeland. They simply didn't belong.

The Comanches belonged. The Texas Rangers belonged.

More than anything, Otis wanted to belong, and he wasn't Comanche.

That left him only one option.

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Tired as he was, as Corporal Connolly rode toward the house at the livery, he sat ramrod straight in the saddle. The circle of his badge, cut from a fine Mexican silver coin, glinted dully against his tan shirt. His boots, trousers and vest were brown, and his gunbelt was a latigo tan. Everything was covered with the same layer of dust, including his rig, except where it contacted his horse. There it was bordered with a thin line of red mud.

Beneath his wide-brimmed silver-grey hat were deep-brown eyes, a nose that someone had set off to one side, and a moustache that dropped over the corners of his mouth. He also had a four-day growth of whiskers, as did all his men, to mark the time they'd been chasing the renegade Comanche war chief, Iron Bear.

As he neared the house, he yelled, "Hello inside the house!"

The face and shoulders of a man appeared on the other side of the screen door through the dusty haze. The man hesitated for a moment, then withdrew, then pushed open the screen door and took a tentative step outside. He retained his grip on the screen door.

The Ranger reined-in, then nudged his horse to turn sideways to the porch. He twisted in the saddle and touched the brim of his hat. "Howdy sir. I'm Corporal Connolly with the Texas Rangers."

Still holding the screen door open, the man glanced at the corporal and nodded, then redirected his attention to the activity near the corral.

Some of the men were dusting themselves off with their hats and wiping their necks with their bandannas.

A few were crouched in front of the watering trough, filling their canteens.

One was standing at the corral, his chest against the fence. His arms were folded on the top rail, his right foot propped up on the bottom one.

The man released the screen door and moved to the edge of the porch, still eyeing the men and horses. His wide-brimmed light-grey hat had seen better days. A permanent sweat stain extended above and below his hat band, which was formed from the skin of a diamondback rattler. It had been a big one, and thirteen buttons lay along the brim of the hat next to the crown on the left

side. The brim itself drooped unevenly all the way around as if it had given up. The man was wearing a pair of light brown pants over sweat-stained long johns and scuffed brown work boots. Wide tan suspenders, also streaked with sweat stains, reached up over his shoulders.

As he continued to watch the goings on near the corral, he gestured with his chin. "Those your men out there?" He glanced up at Corporal Connolly and frowned. "They know what private property is, do they?"

The Ranger nodded. "Yes sir, they are, and they do. And are you by any chance Mr. Billings of Billings Livery and Feed?"

"Oh, sorry. Sorry. Ayuh, that's me." He wiped his hand on his pants, then proffered it. "Mitchell Billings. You can call me Mitch, young man. Good t'meet you." He leaned back and hooked his thumbs in his suspenders. "Y'know, I never met a Ranger before. What brings you to Watson?"

The corporal nodded. "Good to meet you too, Mr. Billings." He gestured toward the corral. "My men and me, we're almost a week out of Amarillo. We're on the trail of some renegade Comanch', but our horses are almost gone. Now we're plannin' to catch 'em by nightfall and put 'em to rights, but we'll need to requisition some of your fresh mounts."

The man nodded. "Ayuh, ayuh. Well, I'm glad you stopped here to ask before you continued on. You might be on a bad trail. Ain't been no Comanches come through here, or any other Indians either."

The corporal shook his head. "No sir, you wouldn't have seen them, and you're lucky. It's a bad bunch we're after. We figure they passed about five miles north of here a couple hours ago, headed almost due east and bearing north. They're takin' a more circuitous route. We're plannin' to intercept 'em about twenty miles northeast of here."

Beneath him, his horse shifted as if it were impatient.

"Now, thing is, Mr. Billings, we'll be requirin' those mounts. Maybe only for a couple days, but it could be a little longer. And not to be rude, sir, but we ain't got a lot of time. What I mean, we need to saddle up and be on our way."

The man frowned. "Requirin', eh?" He rubbed one palm over his stubbled cheeks and down over his chin, then nodded. "I see."

He glanced toward the corral, then back at Corporal Connolly. "Well, they're good horses for sure. There's a fee, ain't there?"

"Yes sir, there's a fee. I'll give you a paper an' you'll get four bits a day for each horse for the time we have 'em. Pay comes outta Austin. Takes a couple weeks after we're done."

The man looked past him in the direction of the corral again. The other Rangers were already busy selecting and saddling mounts. "An' what if something happens, one of my horses don't make it back?"

The corporal nodded. "Governor'll pay for that too, a fair price. Also he'll pay you to feed and water ours while we're gone." He moved his right hand in a horizontal slash. "That's the whole

deal.”

“All right... I guess. Well, I mean, a’course I’m glad to help, you men bein’ Rangers an’ all. Anything to get those Comanches to stop raidin’ around, I guess.”

He glanced in the direction of the corral, then back up at the corporal. “Course like I say, we ain’t never seen ‘em come through here.” He paused, removed his hat and scratched his head. “Aw, you know what I mean... they ain’t never hit me an’ mine yet, so it’s a little hard for me to—”

“Yes sir, I understand.” Corporal Connolly dismounted. His reins loose in his left hand, he said, “You ever seen a place after the Comanches hit it, Mr. Billings?”

The man put his hat back on. “Well, no, I can’t rightly say I have, but—”

“Scuse me, sir.” Ranger Courtney Lee Edwards, the man who had been looking over the horses in the corral, walked up. He looked at Corporal Connolly. “Sorry to interrupt, Jim, but we’re just about ready. Want me to cut one out for you?”

Courtney Edwards had been friends with Jim Connolly since they’d fought together during the war. When that ended, Jim had joined the Texas Rangers. Edwards had chosen to try ranching and dry farming in the panhandle of Texas.

That had been twelve years ago.

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Usually Court took the wagon into Uaka by himself for supplies every other week. But on a particularly clear, crisp spring day, the whole family had turned a necessary trip for supplies into a day out. They would get the supplies, and then stop for a picnic in a grove of cottonwoods near a narrow river on their way home. It was his wife’s favorite spot.

Court was inside, chatting with the owner of the store while the latter gathered Court’s supplies, when someone yelled, “Comanches!”

Gunfire started almost immediately.

Court ran out of the store, his Remington revolver in his hand. The wagon was gone and the men on the street were firing in one direction. Court turned, cocked his Remington and fired. One of the fleeing Comanches slumped over his horse’s neck. A second round from someone else dropped him. Court cocked and fired again and another Comanche fell off his horse.

Men were still firing down the street but the Indians were too distant for accuracy with a revolver. Court turned and looked for his wagon. It was about ten yards down the street in the opposite direction. The horses must have pulled it there against the brake.

Then he saw a bit of Mary’s dress and remembered she and Buck were with him this time. The electric sensation of fear rippled over him as he raced toward his wagon. He yelled, “Mary? Mary?”

She was there, but slumped to the left, lying face-down across the seat of the wagon. She wasn’t moving even in response to him calling her name. He recognized death when he saw it. The war had taught him that much. Still, he didn’t want to accept it. Not in this case.

More quietly he said, “Mary?” And where was Buck?

He tried to look past her but the angle was all wrong. Finally he put his trembling hand on her shoulder and pulled her onto her left side. For an instant he thought she was heavier than usual.

Then he saw why. The shaft of an arrow had pinned her left arm to her son, and her son to her chest. They were both dead.

For a long moment, he stared.

How could this happen? He was gone for less than a minute and it had been a beautiful day. If only she had stayed home as usual. If only she had come into the store with him.

Then he remembered, and he shook his head. When she'd mentioned at the house that she wanted to get some fabric, he had told her they should wait a month or so until their small crop sold. With no reason to come into the store, she'd opted to wait in the wagon in the fresh morning air.

His hand on her hip, his other forearm resting on the seat, he lowered his forehead to his arm. After a long moment, he realized some townspeople were beginning to gather.

"Aw damn, Court," someone said.

From farther along the boardwalk he heard someone say, "Is she alive?"

Someone else said, "No," tentatively, as if after shaking his head.

The owner of the store came out and hustled to Court's side. "Jesus, Court. Jesus. Is there anything we can do?"

Without a word to any of them, he climbed onto the wagon seat and drove out of town.

Back at the house, he snapped off the shaft of the arrow, then carried Mary and his son into the house and lay them on his bed. Carefully, he arranged little Buck on his wife's chest, her arm still wrapped protectively around him. He bent to kiss them both on the forehead, then covered them with the quilt.

Back outside, he retrieved a shovel from the barn and spent the next few hours working out his grief.

When he'd finished digging the grave, he went into the house for a blanket and his wife's pillow. He took them outside and arranged them in the grave, then went back in and picked up his wife and son, still wrapped in the quilt.

Outside, he knelt and positioned them alongside the grave, then climbed down into the grave himself. Tugging on the quilt, he carefully eased his wife and son down into his arms for the final time and lay them on the blanket. Finally, he folded the blanket carefully, lovingly over them and climbed out of the grave. He turned and looked at them, at what should have been the future.

Finally his shoulders heaved and he nearly went to his knees with grief. Racked with sobbing, he spent the next hour filling in the grave. When he was finished, he built a cairn, covering the top of the grave with some of the limestone rocks he'd pulled out of the field the first year they'd plowed. Then he fixed a marker that read simply,

Mary & Buck Edwards

## Mother & Son

Beneath it he carved the date and year. When he'd set it firmly at the head of the grave, he looked at it for a moment. Quietly he said, "Goodbye, Mary. 'Bye, little Buck. I'm awful sorry." Then he turned and went back to the wagon.

Almost two years after he'd returned from the war, Courtney Lee Edwards had buried his wife and infant son.

He released the horses and chickens, then saddled his favorite mount. He packed his saddle bags full of his clothing, ammunition and some food, slipped his Henry .45 caliber carbine into the saddle scabbard and mounted his horse.

The war had taught him to recognize death.

It had also taught him to ride away from it.

Three days later in Amarillo, in the presence of his friend, Ranger James Riley Connolly, the captain had administered his oath as a Texas Ranger.

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Corporal Connolly passed the reins to him. "Thanks, Court. I 'preciate it." As the Ranger took the reins of the horse and led it away, Corporal Connolly turned back to Mr. Billings.

Mr. Billings shook his head. "I ain't seen the results of a raid first hand, but I heard the Comanches can get kind'a rough." A sneer tugged at the corner of his mouth.

The corporal nodded. "Yes sir, you could say that. You have a woman here?"

"Ayuh. Three of 'em." He hooked his thumbs under his suspenders again. His chest swelled. "Got a wife an' two daughters."

"Uh huh... well, different groups hit in different ways. But this group we're chasin', Iron Bear's bunch, if they hit here several things are gonna happen, and none of 'em are good. Let me just lay it out for you so you understand what you're dealin' with here. Now your women, they're inside? So they can't hear this? I mean, when the time comes, it would be better comin' from you."

"Yes, yes, they're inside. But I'm sure you aren't going to tell us anything we haven't heard before."

"Okay. First and easiest," and the corporal gestured broadly all around, "all this'll be burned to the ground, most likely along with everything else in town. But there'll be enough of 'em to pay particular attention to you and yours, especially with you havin' all these horses.

"Now, you get some grand notion of dying defending your property, I'm just gonna tell you up front, they won't let that happen. They'll take you alive even if it costs them a couple of braves. They want to torture you first so your women will hear you beggin', but they'll keep you alive so you can watch them torture your women too.

"Now what this particular bunch will do specifically, Mr. Billings, first they'll drag you over there and tie you to that corral yonder." He pointed. "After they've got you trussed up like a hog, they'll slice off your eyelids so you can't close your eyes. Then—"

Mr. Billings frowned, but his sneer was gone. "That's hard to believe, Corporal. How can they do that? What I mean, that's almost impossible, what with a fella fightin' an' movin' his head an' so forth."

"Mr. Billings, can you grab your own eyelid, like if you got somethin' in behind it?"

"Well yes, but—"

Connolly shook his head. "No buts for the Comanch'. They'll gouge a thumb in there, stretch your eyelid out and slice it off, quick as that." He snapped his fingers. "And then they keep comin'. Think of it.

"At that point you're already dealin' with more pain than you could ever imagine. You can't close your eyes even though you're movin' the muscles to close 'em same as you always have. And you're tryin' to force yourself to think you're havin' a nightmare and you're trying to wake yourself up all at the same time. Only it ain't a nightmare. It's real."

"But—"

"Then maybe you'll remember your wife and your daughters. You don't hear anything, so you hope they at least escaped. And just as you start to wonder why that big buck Indian in front of you is laughing, another one will come up behind you and slash the tendons behind your ankles.

"Then you'll slump. You still can't believe any of it's happening, especially since there ain't no reason for it. Then you feel the knife of the one behind you drawing a line across your back just below your shoulders, just below the top rail of the corral. He'll cut a little slit down on each side, too, and another little one in the middle. He wants to make sure you know what's about to happen.

"And maybe you do know, but the thing is, it don't matter. You can't do anything about it. Just as you start to beg, he'll grip the skin on one side with both hands and rip it straight down.

"If you weren't screamin' before, Mr. Billings, you will be then. And then, while you're already screamin', the one who was laughing at you will spit in your face. Then he'll take your scalp. They see that as the ultimate insult."

He leaned forward. "Now understand, none of that will kill you. And if you pass out, they'll throw water on you and slap you around to wake you up. They don't want you to miss the show. Once they know you're awake again, they'll go after your women.

"They'll prob'ly drag your wife out first. They'll tie her the same way they tied you, Mr. Billings. They'll put her where you can see her, but not close enough for you to reach her. After they get her tied up, they'll scalp her, and then they'll throw her scalp in the dirt at your feet. And that's just to get your attention.

"While she's still screamin', they'll rip her dress off, Mr. Billings, or at least the top of it. But not for the reason you're thinkin'. If they wanted her for sex, they already took her earlier. But they'll rip off the top of her dress so they can slice her gut open." He paused. "Then they'll pull out her entrails so they're stringin' down to the dust at her feet. She'll hang there on that fence, Mr. Billings, and she'll die slowly.

“All you can do is hope she goes before the coyotes catch the scent. Or that you die so at least you don’t have to watch them song dogs tearin’ at her guts.

“And don’t forget your daughters. They’ll drag your daughters out too, and they’ll take ‘em, over and over and over again, right out there in the yard, with you and your wife, if she’s still alive, forced to watch. Then they’ll kill your little girls in a similar way to how they killed your wife.”

He paused. “Now, Mr. Billings, what I just described ain’t make believe. It’s what we found yesterday on a place about 12 miles west of here, except it was a man and his wife and a boy and a girl. The man and his wife were trussed up like I just described. The boy was killed with a bullet to the head. The girl had fourteen arrows pinning her to the ground. Fourteen arrows, Mr. Billings.

“Those are the men who passed a few miles north of here probably two, three hours ago. Are you startin’ to get the picture?”

Billings had gone stark white, his eyes wide. “I... oh... oh god, I never would have imagined they— But why? Why would they do such a thing?”

“You better hope you never find out. I suggest you keep your pistol loaded. If you see ‘em comin’, pull your gun, tell your wife and daughters you love ‘em, an’ then kill ‘em. But be sure to save a bullet for yourself. Dead’s a whole lot better’n bein’ butchered alive.”

He slipped his fingers into his vest pocket and fished out a slip of paper. He handed it to Mr. Billings. “Here’s your voucher for the horses, sir. Just write a number seven on there when you get a chance. That’s how many we’re borrowin’, an’ that’s how many we expect to bring back. Texas appreciates your help.”

Mr. Billings took the voucher, his hands trembling, his gaze still locked on the corporal’s eyes. He nodded, unable to speak.

The corporal turned away and headed for the corral. By the time he got there, Ranger Edwards had already transferred his saddle and bridle to a fresh mount. The whole transaction had taken less than five minutes.

On fresh horses, Corporal Connolly in the lead, the Rangers rode out of the yard and down the street at a canter. As they passed in front of the general store, the corporal glanced at the boys sitting there and nodded.

Mac’s eyes were wide, his mouth hanging open. He’d witnessed the entire event. Although he hadn’t been able to hear everything that was said, at times the wind shifted just right so he heard some of it. He watched the backs of the receding Rangers for a moment. As they neared the edge of town, they broke into a lope, then increased to a gallop.

Mac turned to his friend. “Wes, did you see that?” Then he looked again in the direction the Rangers had gone.

Still leaning back against the wall in his chair, Wes nodded, although his eyes were closed and his hat was tipped forward, resting on the bridge of his nose. “Yep, heard it too.” He shifted in the chair, but remained under his hat. Then he yawned and stretched, rocking the chair forward. He straightened his hat on his head and said, “Man, them Comanches are just bad, ain’t they?”

Still looking after the Rangers, Mac said, “What?” Then he turned back to Wes. “Well, not all of ‘em are that bad, Wes, what I’ve heard. I mean they’re bad, but not that bad like he was sayin’.

“But I mean the Rangers themselves. Wasn’t that somethin’? That was the most impressive thing I’ve ever seen. I mean, they just rode in and took what they wanted.”

Wes looked at his friend and frowned. “Wait—the Rangers robbed Mr. Billings?”

Mac huffed. “What? No they didn’t rob him. You know that ain’t what I meant. But that one Ranger, the leader, he talked to Mr. Billings for a bit, then handed him a little piece of paper. An’ then just like that they swapped horses seven for seven and rode out again.

“And while you were sleepin’ against the wall, the main Ranger, the one in front, he nodded at us as they went by.”

Mac paused. Again he turned and stared after the Rangers. Quietly, he said, “And what would it be like to have an enemy like that Iron Bear?” He looked at Wes. “Man’s got an enemy like that, he’s got a purpose in life.”

Wes laughed. “Hell I guess. I reckon you got an enemy like Iron Bear your purpose is to keep breathin’ an’ hope to go to bed with clean long johns. Sounds like that ol’ boy’d have me messin’ myself if he just snuck up an’ hollered boo.”

Mac ignored him. He gestured in the direction the Rangers had gone. “Y’know, Wes, I’ll bet that one Ranger, an’ maybe all of ‘em, want that guy more’n they want the sun to come up on Sunday.”

He turned again to look toward the receding Rangers. Only a small cloud of dust indicated where they had disappeared into the grasslands to the northeast.

Mac turned to his friend again. “Wes, I think it’s a sign.”

Wes sighed. “What kind of a sign, Mac?”

Mac looked at him. “You know, a sign. Like maybe that’s what I ought’a do, join up with the Rangers. That’d be a sure path to fame and fortune... adventure.”

Wes laughed and shook his head. “Adventure maybe, but I don’t know about that fame and fortune thing. I’m pretty sure you can’t get rich bein’ a Ranger.”

But Mac was serious. “Well yeah, but money ain’t all it’s about, Wes. Fame and fortune, that’s just what folks say. It’s a sayin’, that’s all. But adventure... a man’s gotta have adventure in his life. Else he ain’t livin’, not really.”

He looked at the boardwalk for a moment, then slapped his palms on his thighs and got up. “Well, that’s it. Wes, I’m joinin’ the Rangers.”

Wes got up too. He stretched again and yawned, then shook his head to clear the cobwebs. “All right. So when we leavin’?”

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A little over an hour later and not quite six miles east-northeast of Watson, Corporal Connolly reined-in beneath a stand of ancient cottonwoods gathered around a natural spring. The largest trunk was well over five feet in diameter.

The men dismounted to rest their horses for a few minutes and let them drink.

The corporal, standing beside his horse, opened the left saddle bag and pulled out a well-worn map of the Texas panhandle. He walked toward the wide trunk of a fallen cottonwood. The bark had dropped away on one side of it.

Just as Connolly started to roll out the map against the smooth side of the fallen tree, Courtney Edwards came walking up. With him was Blake Stanton, a sharp new man who'd joined the company only recently.

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Blake Stanton had turned 19 years old five weeks earlier. He was just under six feet tall, clean shaven, lean and wiry. His off-white shirt was tucked into his brown pants, and they in turn were tucked into his scuffed brown high-top boots. His gunbelt matched his boots, and the holster held one of the new Colt .45 caliber, 5-shot revolving pistols.

He reined-in at the hitching rail in front of Ranger headquarters in Amarillo and dismounted. He whipped the reins loosely over the rail, then took his Henry repeating carbine from the scabbard alongside his saddle. He crossed the boardwalk with a few steps, worked the latch on the door and pushed it open.

As he crossed the threshold, he released the door latch and quickly reached up to take off his hat. He held it to his chest with his right hand and let his eyes adjust.

There was only one man in the room, an older, tall, stout man sitting at a large desk on the other side of a short partition. He looked up. "May I help you?"

At 63 years old, Captain Odie Ray Flowers, the longtime commander of the company at Amarillo, was all set to retire. He had his eye on a piece of prime property over in New Mexico Territory, a couple hundred miles southwest of Amarillo. The site he had in mind was up on a formation called the Caprock.

Friends who'd moved there previously said the grass there was belly high to a bull most of the year, and when the wind blew just right you could almost hear the yucca bells ringing. Best of all, there was none of the red clay that plagued the area around Amarillo and turned the streets to a sticky red muck when it rained. He was waiting only for word from Austin and a replacement. But for now, it was still his job to do.

Quietly, Stanton said, "Yes sir. I need to talk with a Texas Ranger, sir. Well, what I mean, I want to sign up."

Flowers eyed him, then stood and walked stiffly to the gate in the partition. He swung it open and gestured with his hand. "Step into my office here and let's talk. I'm Captain Flowers. I'm in command of the company here." He indicated a chair to one side of his desk. "Have a seat."

"Thanks." Stanton sat, then leaned the Henry gently against the corner formed by the captain's desk and the partition. It was as if he were handling an infant.

Captain Flowers rested one hip on the corner of his desk. "So you say you want to sign up?"

Stanton nodded. "Yes sir."

The captain waited for a moment, then said, "May I ask why?"

"Oh, sorry... Indians, Captain. Well, Indians and Mexicans I guess. But for me, I've known some good Mexicans, so mostly Indians. Somebody's gotta stop 'em."

He paused and rubbed the open palm of his right hand over his forehead, then down over his face. "They hit my folks place. I was out huntin'. Comanches I think, but it could'a been Apaches I guess... maybe even Caddo." He looked at the floor for a moment. "I-I don't know a lot about 'em yet." He looked up at the captain again. "They killed my folks, my sister... my brother."

The captain nodded. "I'm sorry to hear that. When did this happen?"

"It's been close to a month ago now, I guess."

Flowers watched the young man's face very carefully when he asked, "About your folks... were they mutilated in any way? Scalped, or otherwise harmed in any way that was more than just killing them?"

A slight frown creased Stanton's brow. He thought for a moment, then said, "You mean did they torture them?"

Flowers nodded.

"I-I didn't look 'em over real thoroughly, but there wasn't anything like that as far as I could see. My pa had an arrow through his chest and was shot in the head. The others were only shot, once each in the head."

The captain nodded. "All right. Well, it probably wasn't Comanches. Be glad for that."

Stanton said, "I can ride, Captain, and I'm handy with a gun, short, long or scatter. I can read too. And I can read sign as good as the next guy and better'n a lot of 'em." He paused. "I need to join up with the Rangers."

"Son, I'm sorry for your loss, but the Rangers aren't here for revenge."

The young man's eyes grew wide. "Oh, no sir. That's not why I want to join. Really. I mean, I admit that was it at first. Soon as I got my folks buried, I grabbed my carbine here and all the ammo I could carry and went after 'em."

He traced his fingers along the forestock of the carbine as he looked at it. "My pa gave me this for my birthday, two days before they came in on him. I took it out to get us some venison. I was only gone three days."

He shook his head and moved his hand back to clasp fingers with his other hand. He looked at the captain. "Good as I can track, it wasn't good enough. I still lost 'em, but not 'til I'd been on the trail for almost two weeks. Then they just vanished."

He shook his head again and his voice grew softer. "That's when I realized revenge ain't no good. I guess bein' on their trail that long drained all the mad out of me." He shrugged. "Now I just want to help make it stop. If I can keep someone else from goin' through this, that's good enough."

The captain nodded. "Sounds like you've thought it through. What if I said you have to go to Austin to sign up?"

Stanton looked at him. "Really?" He looked away for a moment, then back at the captain. "Guess I'll overnight here and head out in the mornin'."

The captain frowned. "You sure? You don't want to just head that way right now?"

"Oh, no sir. I gotta get a little sleep first. One night ain't gonna make no difference. I-I been losin' some sleep lately, you can prob'ly tell, but I'm gettin' better. No, I'll have to get some rest. I'll head out tomorrow."

Flowers nodded, got up and moved around his desk. "Good enough. I just had to be sure." He opened his desk drawer and passed the young man a five-dollar gold piece. "That's for necessities. You can board your horse down at Sanchez Livery Stable, back down the road. No charge to Rangers.

"Then go across the street, Amarillo Inn. Tell 'em I sent you, that you're gonna take your oath as a Ranger. They have rooms reserved for us. Pick yourself out a room. You don't pay for that either. Stow your gear, then get something to eat, get some rest, and be back in here tomorrow morning after breakfast. I'll administer your oath then."

Stanton looked at the coin in his palm. "So I don't have to go to Austin?"

Flowers smiled. "No. I'll swear you in right here. I just had to be sure you weren't out for vengeance."

Stanton nodded. "I understand." He closed his fist around the coin. "This comes outta my pay though, right?"

"Absolutely."

"A'right then. See you in the mornin', Captain. And thanks." He stood, picked up his Henry and headed for the door.

When the door closed behind him, Captain Flowers said quietly, "You're welcome." He'd seen too many come through that door only to be put into a narrow box far too early.

The following morning, the captain administered the oath for Blake Stanton. Over the next several days, he had one or more of the senior rangers take Stanton out into the prairie to test his ability at riding, tracking from horseback and on the ground, and shooting. He proved more than efficient at all three.

When word came in that Iron Bear was raiding west and north of Amarillo, the captain assigned Corporal Connolly, along with Court Edwards, to see whether they could intercept him and bring him to justice. He also thought it would be a good way to immerse young Stanton in the Ranger experience.

So far, the young Ranger had held his own.

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Court said, "Jim, I figured you were gonna check the map. Blake here's interested in readin' maps. He knows the country north and east of here as well as we do too, so I thought I'd bring him along."

The corporal nodded. "Sounds good." He looked at Stanton. "How you likin' the job so far?"

Blake took off his hat and wiped the brim with his bandanna, then put it back on his head. "I could'a gone awhile longer without seein' what we found over west of Watson."

Jim nodded. "I reckon we could all do with less of that."

"But all things considered, I'd still rather be doin' this than anything else I can think of. I just hope I can make a hand for you, Corporal Connolly."

"You already have. You've been right there with the rest of us through the whole thing. Can't make a much better hand than that." He unrolled his map on the fallen cottonwood. "Here, let's take a look at this."

More for Stanton's sake than anything else, he tapped his index finger on the map. "See right here to the right of where this creek comes down off the hill? That's where we were yesterday. That's where they hit last." He looked up at Stanton. "Okay?"

Stanton nodded. "Got it."

"All right. Now," he said, and he drew a line with his finger from the previous location through Watson, then northeast a ways and stopped. He tapped the map again. "We're right here. See how these little lines seem to pinch together on both sides? That's a draw just below this spring, about a quarter-mile that way." He pointed.

Stanton nodded. "A'right."

Connolly put his finger back on the original location and followed an arcing line of loosely connected arroyos northeast, then more easterly. "Now after the Comanches hit that place, they didn't head out straight the way we did. They headed up through this series of arroyos."

"See how it runs generally in a broad arc? Iron Bear's been pulling this trick for a long time. He gets us following this arc, and then he either stops and sets up an ambush or he circles back and hits another place while we're still up on the arc."

"Now, he's been out awhile on this little raiding trip. His men need rest but he still has us to contend with. So he has to rest his men, but he also has to get rid of us. Now think about that, and then look at the map. If it was you out there, where would you want to rest your men if you also had an enemy coming after you?"

Stanton frowned. "Place where there's water, maybe some shade. But also a place where I could set up an ambush. Preferably with as few men as possible." He looked around, then grinned. "So a place like this."

"Yeah, but this ain't it. Remember, he thinks we're tracking along behind him. But I showed you how this place looks on the map. See anyplace else that looks similar?"

Stanton moved sideways a half-step so he could get a better view of the map. He leaned forward slightly and frowned again, then put his index finger on the map. "Right there. Is there a spring there?"

Connolly and Edwards grinned at each other. "Wouldn't surprise me if there was. And it's only barely south of his arc, see?"

After Stanton had a moment to look, Connolly straightened. He started rolling up the map.

“For my money, that’s where he’s headed. Good news is, that’s probably around four to six hours from where he is right now, depending on whether he’s saving his horses.

“The other good news is that it’s only two and a half hours from where we’re standin’. I intend for us to be waitin’ for him.”

\* \* \*

As Corporal Connolly was rolling up his map, just over twelve miles to the northwest a group of nineteen Comanche Indians on horseback were walking along the sandy bottom of a dry wash. The horses were fairly plodding.

Intentionally, Iron Bear had left a trail that would be easy enough to follow for an accomplished tracker—even a white man like the Ranger, Connolly—but not so easy that those following would suspect a trap.

He and his men would reach the location—a spring-fed well about five hours away—just after dark. There they would settle in for some much-needed rest. They would have at least overnight, and perhaps almost a full day, to rest before the Rangers rode into the trap. Afterward he and his braves would remain there and rest for another day before heading south to raid again.

Iron Bear twisted around on his stallion and looked at his men.

They were doing well, especially for very tired men. A few were slumping a bit—that was to be expected—but all of them were riding as if they were an extension of their horse. He was especially pleased with the youngest member of the party, Four Crows. The boy was only recently turned fourteen, but Iron Bear had seen something special back in camp.

Four Crows trained like any other Comanche boy, but when the others knocked off to go fishing or hunting, he continued. He was in training from the time he rose from his mat until he went to sleep. Iron Bear mumbled, “In fact, I’d be very careful about slipping up on him even when he is asleep.”

He smiled as a memory crossed his mind.

Iron Bear was sitting in the woods one early morning, practicing being still and enjoying the silence.

Four Crows passed within a few yards of him on his way to the creek. He moved along the path as silently as Iron Bear was sitting in the brush near it. A light breeze made more noise in its passing.

Dangling by a leather thong from Four Crows’ left hand was a gourd.

Probably fetching water for his mother, Iron Bear thought. Good for him, to still think of his mother when he was focusing more and more on growing into a warrior.

At the edge of the creek, the boy knelt to dip the gourd beneath the surface, so the water itself would push away any of the impurities. When the gourd was filled, just as he stood and turned, three men leapt from the thick brush near the creek. All three had thick sticks, which they were brandishing as clubs, and they all attacked at once.

Four Crows moved so quickly, so effortlessly, it was difficult for Iron Bear to follow the action

in the dim light. Seemingly without thought, Four Crows dropped the gourd and ducked, then straightened, flipping the center attacker over his head and into the creek.

By the time he hit the water, flailing and trying to regain his footing as he floated downstream, Four Crows had already locked his left elbow around the second attacker's throat. He collapsed to his left, taking that one to the ground and landing on him as he kicked the legs out from under the third attacker.

Before the third attacker hit the ground, Four Crows was on his feet again, his elbow still locked around the second man's neck. He simultaneously twisted his entire body hard to one side and jerked his elbow, flipping the second attacker over his hip. The man rolled with mind-numbing speed across the leaves and mulch and small brush for nearly ten yards before coming to rest hard, his back against the trunk of a scrub oak tree. Before the second assailant had rolled twice on the ground, Four Crows had leapt high in the air and come down with his heel on the third attacker's solar plexus.

The sound of air rushing out of the man brought a hint of a smile to Iron Bear's face. Then he frowned. The boy had defended himself successfully, but he had not killed his adversaries. Despite opportunities, he had not pulled the knife he was wearing on his hip.

He was too compassionate.

He would not make a good warrior.

Then, Four Crows stepped purposefully down off the second assailant and assumed a defensive posture, crouching, his feet widespread, his knees bent.

The second assailant lay at his feet to the right, still gasping for breath.

The one he'd flipped across the ground lay straight ahead of him about ten yards, only beginning to pry himself away from the base of the scrub oak.

And the one Four Crows had flipped into the creek at the beginning was to his left front, slowly making his way out of the water.

So Four Crows could see all three of them. Perhaps he was more aware than Iron Bear had first thought.

Suddenly the first assailant, still standing in the stream, put his hands on his hips and started laughing. He bent over, cupped his hands and splashed his face with water, then flopped his head backward, flinging water off his hair.

Iron Bear frowned. There was something familiar about the man in the stream.

He looked at the other men. They were familiar to him too.

The third assailant, having finally got to his feet, was still standing near the scrub oak. He looked at the ground for a moment, shook his head, then laughed as well, though more sheepishly. He looked at Four Crows with admiration.

The second assailant finally got up, albeit gingerly, holding his stomach. He wasn't laughing at all, but then he had only barely reclaimed his breath.

The first assailant came splashing out of the creek, still wiping water from his face and hair. "I

don't know that I want to play this game anymore. You play rough, Four Crows."

Four Crows looked at him. "It is a game, but it is also training. What better way to prepare for the unexpected than to have people you trust suddenly turn on you, and out of nowhere?"

"Ah," the second assailant said, "but then you will come to trust no one."

Four Crows put one hand on the man's shoulder. "See? You have learned the lesson well." He laughed.

Iron Bear was impressed. The attack had seemed authentic. It had come and been repelled so suddenly and effortlessly that it had fooled even him. And he did know the attackers.

The assailant from the stream was Twin Deer, his brother's oldest son. At twenty years old, he had been participating in raids for the past three years. Another was Twin Deer's younger brother, Young Elk. He was eighteen and had been going on raiding parties for the past several months. The third was a friend of the family, Takes Leaves, seventeen. He too had been on raiding parties.

Iron Bear realized he had been wrong. Four Crows already was a warrior, and a good one. He needed only to see the reality of battle. There he would test himself.

The next time Iron Bear went south, he took Four Crows with him. No matter what Iron Bear told the boy to do, he hadn't flinched.

Except once.

When Iron Bear ordered him to fire an arrow into the girl at the farm they had raided, Four Crows had hesitated. He looked at the girl's eyes and saw something there he liked. Over his shoulder, in an almost dismissive tone, he told Iron Bear, "I have decided I will not kill this one. I will keep her for myself. She will be my wife."

A strong will is necessary in a warrior, but discipline is the fire that tempers it. Iron Bear could not allow the disobedience. "No. Someday you will make such decisions, but today is not that day. You do not yet require a wife, and you will not have this one. Kill her now!"

Any other warrior who had ever served with Iron Bear would have obeyed immediately. But Four Crows approached the girl. He looked at her. As he reached to take her hand, he parted his lips to reject Iron Bear's order and—

The girl spat in his face.

He stopped, his lips pressed into a tight line as he stared at her. A frown formed on his brow. Did she not know he was trying to save her life or did she simply not care?

In that moment he drew a parallel between her contempt of him and his insolence toward Iron Bear.

His deep-set dark-brown eyes smoldered.

She peered into those eyes, and she was paralyzed with the terror of what she had just brought upon herself. Unable to look away from his eyes, she whispered, "I'm so sorry."

He flashed his left hand forward, grasped the top of her dress and jerked her toward him as he dug his knife deep up under her ribcage. He held her there for a moment as he wiped her spittle from his nose onto her cheek. Then he twisted the knife blade hard in a circle.

She choked, then choked again, then sighed.

He shoved her away.

The front of her dress flooded with red as she landed on her back, dust billowing up around her, settling on her skin and dress, mixing with the blood. She gasped for another breath, another, her eyes wide but staring at nothing, her heels moving against the earth in an attempt to back away.

Four Crows followed her through the dust. He knelt hard over her, shoved his hand through the hole under her rib cage and pulled out the part of her heart he'd cut off.

He stood, turned to look at Iron Bear, and held it aloft. Then he dropped it over his shoulder. It landed on the girl's dress.

Four Crows walked past Iron Bear toward his horse. As he passed another brave, he jerked a thumb over his shoulder and said, "She is my first. Shoot her with fourteen arrows."

The act would mark Four Crows' years on the earth and set firmly in his mind his sole purpose in his life: to drive the invaders—all invaders—from the Comanche homeland.

Iron Bear shook his head at the young warrior's resolve. What was even more impressive was that the older brave had obeyed Four Crows' order without question.

Four Crows never again disputed an order from Iron Bear.

\* \* \*

Corporal Connolly led the Ranger troop around the point of a low-slung mud hill with a grey-clay cliff ringing the top. The nearly trackless plain, a place where weary, unwary travelers would most likely expect to die of thirst, also looked like the last place anyone would think they could find water. Still, there it was.

Like an emerald gleaming on a bed of ash, at the base of a slope was a stand of ancient cottonwoods. Within it was a spring, almost identical to the one they had left only a little over two hours earlier. Only this one was larger, with a pond that covered a quarter-acre.

He glanced back. "Dismount and take a rest. We've got maybe an hour. Then I'm gonna put everyone in position. You won't be able to move again until it's over."

The men stepped down from their horses.

Stanton started to remove his saddle.

On his way by, Connolly shook his head. "Leave it on him. We have to ride to the ambush site."

"It won't be here?"

Connolly stopped and grinned. "Naw. Remember on the map, that pinch in the rocks? That's where it'll be, right close to there." He moved away.

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Not quite an hour later, as they rode to the ambush site, Connolly gestured, inviting Stanton to move up alongside him. When he did, Connolly said, "Next time we have the map out, take a look at it and compare it to what I'm doin' here."

He gestured up the trail. "Now when you're settin' this kind of trap, you're takin' advantage of

the enemy's state of mind. When the enemy's goal is close, especially after a long road, they'll be tired and anxious. That means they won't be quite as careful until they get right up to the goal.

"If the ambush were at the goal... well, it's impossible to surprise the enemy when you're waiting where they want to be. When they approach the goal, they'll naturally be more wary than usual. You probably noticed before we rode into the springs, I sent a scout ahead each time. I wanted to make sure we weren't gonna be greeted by a bunch'a scalp takers.

"Now the second thing is, if there's a good site for an ambush close to the goal, they'll be wary there as well. Just not as wary as usual. Once they feel like they're in the clear, they'll stop being so cautious in favor of getting to the goal quicker.

"That's the situation today, and I'll show you how we're gonna handle it shortly. All right?"

Stanton nodded. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

A little over a mile down the broad arroyo, Connolly called a halt. Farther down the arroyo, it pinched almost closed. At that point, no more than two riders could ride abreast between the rocks.

He twisted in the saddle and gestured to his men, gathering them around him. When they had, he said, "All right. I'm gonna deploy you.

"Now we're here a little early, an' that was my intent. We've prob'ly got at least a half-hour, maybe longer to wait. That'll give the critters around here time to get back to normal. So once you're in position, don't move until everything's over.

He twisted in the saddle and pointed. "Now you see down there where those rocks pinch together? When this thing starts, your targets will be well this side of that, so there's no reason to get antsy. Don't fire until you hear my signal. If you're up on top, remember not to overshoot your targets."

He looked around the group. "Any questions?"

Nobody said anything.

"All right, good." He pointed to Jack Stilson and Mason Philby. "Stilson, you and Philby go up that trail. See there?" He pointed. "When you get to the top, get in among those boulders. Be sure you're not right on top of each other."

Stilson said, "Jim, you sure you don't want one of us to go up by those pinched rocks to cut 'em off if they turn tail after the ambush starts?"

Connolly shook his head. "No. If you settle in up there an' Iron Bear sends a scout up out of the arroyo on the other side, you'll be a sitting duck. At best you'll have to defend yourself, and that'll give away the ambush. No, you guys both just slip into those boulders up there. But remember to stay out of sight until you hear me start firing. Chances are, they'll be watching the rim on both sides more than they'll be watching down the arroyo. I'll be down here in the breech."

They left.

He gestured toward two others, Harold Reeves and Enrique "Ricky" Mimbres. "Reeves, you and Ricky go up that trail over on the other side. Only difference, once you've got the horses taken

care of, one of you come back down a ways.”

He pointed. “See that small group of boulders there? About a fifth of the way from the top? One of you get in there. The other stay up on top in that brush. We’re gonna nail these bastards.”

When those men left, he looked at Edwards and Stanton, then pointed toward a large grouping of boulders a little farther up the arroyo. “Let’s put the horses over there.” He turned his horse and rode at a canter toward the boulders.

When they’d dismounted, he looked at Stanton. “Remember earlier I said they’d be wary when they approach a natural ambush site that’s close to their goal?”

Stanton nodded.

Connolly pointed toward the pinched rocks. “That’s it right there. They’ll probably send a scout, maybe two. They might even send the whole party through one at a time, though I doubt they’ll go that far.

“But sooner or later, they’ll feel safe and come on through. Once they’re all through an’ gettin’ close, the three of us will start firin’ on ‘em. I’ll fire first, and then you two come in with me. When the others hear us open up, they’ll start firin’ as well. If everybody does their job, we’ll wipe out the whole damn bunch.”

He looked around, then pointed across the arroyo. “I’m gonna get over behind that mud rise over there. Court, you an’ Stanton find places right along in here.”

A few minutes later, with everyone finally in place, they settled in to wait.

\* \* \*

With less than an hour left on the trail to the spring, Iron Bear was weary. As they approached what the Mexicans called the *boquilla* (little opening), he peered forward carefully and halted the group.

His two lieutenants, Running Elk and Stout Pose, moved up alongside him.

He glanced at them, then said quietly, “The spring is only a half-hour from here. There we will rest and prepare a trap for the Rangers.”

He looked at the tight, tall bluffs. “But first, if I thought they were coming through here, this is where I would set a trap.” He looked at the brave on his left. “Running Elk, send the young one, Four Crows, up there.” He pointed toward the rock formation towering over the boquilla on the left. He turned to Stout Pose. “Send another young one up to check the other side.”

The braves left to carry out his orders and Iron Bear returned his attention to the boquilla. He scrutinized every shadow, every bush and every depression in the arroyo. He looked closely at every fold in the walls and boulders along the sides. Nothing seemed amiss. Sparrows were flitting about playfully from boulder to boulder and from one scraggly creosote bush to another. His scouts would find nothing—of that he was certain—but their actions would give him an excuse to praise them publicly once they made camp.

A few minutes later, the young brave on the right took a position on top of the rock and waved both arms in the air. Young Four Crows waved a moment later.

Stout Pose said, “Let me ride through, my chief. I will gladly—”

“No. No, we will waste no more time in this heat. We have been properly cautious. Let us get our party to the shade of the grandfather trees and the water of the earth. Give the signal, please.”

Both braves signaled their groups to move forward and the Comanches rode in staggered pairs through the boquilla.

The young Indian who had ridden to the top of the right side of the boquilla rejoined his group just before the last man passed by.

Four Crows had other ideas. He would strive to impress Iron Bear as a kind of penance for his impertinence before. He would ride ahead. He would continue scouting all the way to the spring. It was less than an hour ahead if memory served, and there was a much more gentle trail back down into the arroyo just beyond the spring.

Iron Bear would be pleased.

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Four Crows realized the good fortune of his mistake a few minutes later when three explosions slapped off the far wall of the arroyo in quick succession. He fell off the side of his horse and crept quickly to the edge of the arroyo. He couldn't tell immediately where the shots were coming from, but he watched as Iron Bear and Running Elk fell.

Corporal James Riley Connolly fired three rounds in quick succession from his Henry carbine. The first two rounds hit Iron Bear, one in the throat and one in the chest. The Indian flipped back off his horse as if he'd hit a rope stretched across the arroyo. The third bullet took off the top of Running Elk's head. He rode another several yards before collapsing off the right side of his horse.

As Four Crows started with surprise, more explosions came from the floor of the arroyo, the sounds slapping off the wall beneath him before reverberating up along the arroyo. More explosions came from the other side, and then from the top of the other side.

The young brave backed away from the edge, moving back to where his horse was. He resisted the urge to mount and find a way down to aid his people.

He put his hand on his horse's neck and patted the animal to keep him calm, but he held himself back, waited, listened. He was trying to think, trying to determine the number of weapons in use and where the shots were coming from.

Soon the explosions were ongoing, seeming to cascade down over the top of each other. Before the shots were fired, the Comanches' horses had made no sound to speak of as they walked along the floor of the arroyo.

Now there was the frenzied sounds of hooves on rock, horses neighing and twisting around frantically, trying to escape. The warm air had been clear, but now dust was roiling up out of the arroyo in thin clouds.

Then another carbine barked, still beneath Four Crows but nearer, higher up on the ledge.

He passed under his horse's neck and moved away to investigate. Moving stealthily through the brush, soon he found a trailhead and hoof prints. Shod hooves.

He crouched low to the earth and studied the land. The shots had come from beneath him, but there had been shots earlier from the top on the other side. It would make sense to have the same setup on this side.

He looked about again. The only hiding place on top was a small stand of brush near the precipice.

He lay face down on the ground and concentrated on peering through the openings in the brush. He searched for a foot, a leg, a hand.

There. Boots. There was a white-eyes hiding in the brush.

Four Crows crept forward for a better view.

The man was staring at his carbine, frowning. Something was wrong with his weapon. He slapped the lever, then did something to the part on the far side just ahead of the hammer. He slapped the lever again, then tried again to work it. Whatever was wrong with the weapon was still wrong.

Four Crows slipped his knife from the sheath.

Silently, not even breathing, he moved up behind the man and—paused.

The back of the man's neck was brown, and not only from the sun. This was not a white-eyes. This was one of the people. That made it much worse that he was here, bearing arms against his brothers.

He leapt forward and upward, grasped the man's face with his left hand and jerked his head sharply to the left as he drew his knife hard across the man's throat.

His eyes wide with horror, Mimbres dropped his carbine. He fell to his knees and grasped at his throat.

His bloody knife still in his hand, Four Crows stepped in front of Mimbres, slapped his hat off his head and smiled.

When the young brave reached forward with his left hand, Mimbres could only watch. He kept his own hands at his throat. If he let go, he would surely die.

Four Crows grasped a handful of hair above the man's forehead and jerked his head up and back. Blood spouted freely from his throat, a pulsing stream hitting the young Comanche three times as he took his first scalp.

Mimbres screamed and fell to his back with the inertia of the scalping, still clutching at his throat.

Four Crows held up the scalp for the man to see. He dangled it there for a moment, then tucked it into the top of his breeches. The flesh was moist and warm against the front of his right hip.

He knelt over Mimbres and looked at him for a moment, then shook his head slowly. His eyes appeared to be smoldering. In Comanche, he said quietly, "You have killed your own. You will not see them in the afterlife."

Mimbres swung his hands up, finally trying to ward off his attacker, but Four Crows was ready

for the attempt. Quick as a striking snake, he slapped Mimbres' hands down against the man's own chest and placed his right knee on them.

Then he leaned forward and dug the point of his knife into the outer corner of Mimbres' left eye, gouging it out. He shifted his weight and did the same for the right eye, then sheathed his knife and stood.

Mimbres moved his arms slowly off his chest into the dirt at his side. He clenched his fingers, clawing at the ground as if trying to drag himself into hiding.

Four Crows looked at Mimbres—the black and red eye sockets, the eyes dangling on his cheeks—and an idea formed in his mind. He allowed the left eye to remain on the man's cheek, but he knelt and grabbed the right one, tearing it loose. He was careful not to crush the orb.

A string of viscera followed the eye out and strung down along Mimbres' right cheek to his chin.

Mimbres didn't even react, but continued to slowly, rhythmically flex his fingers.

\* \* \*

Within a few seconds of Connolly killing Iron Bear and Running Elk, Edwards dropped Stout Pose with a round to the chest and continued firing. At least three more Comanches fell to his carbine.

The floor of the arroyo was hectic, the air churning, heavy with dust and heat and the curses of men. All of that was mixed with the frenzied stamping of hooves and the frightened neighing of horses. The Indians wheeled about frantically on their mounts, simultaneously searching for the attackers and trying to escape the attack.

Increasingly, the men with the Henry carbines saw only flashes through the heavy clouds of dust: a Comanche back and shoulders here, a Comanche chest there, occasionally the side of a Comanche horse and a leg with a moccasined foot. A body falling to the ground, being trampled, raising more dust.

A short distance away from Edwards, Stanton was smoothly working the lever on his own Henry. He dropped three Comanches with his first seven shots, then drew his Colt and continued firing while Edwards was reloading his carbine.

When Connolly began firing, the men up top had begun firing as well. He had heard plainly the reports of two carbines from above his position, but he had heard only one from the other side. There was no time to think of it until the work was finished in the arroyo.

A few minutes later, of the nineteen Comanches in the raiding party, the eighteen in the arroyo were dead or wounded.

Up top, Four Crows remained with Mimbres for another long moment, watching as the man bled out and expired. Then he turned away and walked quietly to the edge of the arroyo.

The battle was over. Nearly all the shooting had ceased, and the floor of the arroyo was littered with Comanche dead.

Edwards looked at Stanton. "Stay here, understand?"

Stanton nodded. "Yes sir."

Edwards moved out from behind the boulder and walked from one Indian to the next. Those who were only wounded, he dispatched with a single shot to the head. When he was through, he had to put five new cartridges in his Colt.

Connolly came walking across the arroyo.

Behind him, Stilson and Philby were working their way down the trail from the top.

On the other side, Reeves, near the boulders below the top of the arroyo, was waving his arms over his head. He yelled, "Hey Jim!"

Connolly remembered only one carbine had spoken from that side of the arroyo. He waved, then cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "Come down! Leave your horse!"

Some thirty feet from Reeves' position, Four Crows turned and quickly dragged Mimbres' body deeper into the brush. That's when he saw the horses.

Reeves looked down at Connolly and put his hands to his ears. Then he shook his head and pointed up the trail. "I'm gonna check on Ricky right quick."

Connolly waved again. "No! Come down now!"

Four Crows mounted Mimbres' horse, turned it into the brush and walked it toward the trailhead.

Reeves either didn't hear him or chose not to. He climbed up the narrow trail, rocks and clumps of clay clattering down off the side of the slope beneath his left foot.

Connolly yelled again. "No! Reeves, no!"

But he kept climbing, and all they could do was watch him go.

The trail was steepest at the top, and Reeves was on his hands and feet. As he topped out, he straightened, then turned around and waved. When he turned back around, he took a step but stopped in mid-stride. He staggered and turned left. He was gripping the shaft of an arrow. It was protruding from his chest.

In plain view of Connolly and the other Rangers, a short, slim Comanche on Mimbres' horse sidled calmly up alongside Reeves. He was wearing breeches but was bare chested, with only a thin strap of leather around his forehead. A single feather protruded almost straight up from the back of his head. It canted slightly to the left.

Reeves staggered away, trying to escape, and he kept repeating, "No no no no no no...."

The Comanche sidled Mimbres' horse up next to him again. The whole time the Indian was glaring down at the Rangers gathered at the base of the slope.

Reeves tried to move in another direction, but again the Comanche casually moved Mimbres' horse up alongside him.

Finally, as if weary of the game, Four Crows reached down, grabbed a fistful of Reeves hair and tugged hard upward.

Reeves grunted, and for a moment he released the shaft of the arrow. He tried to reach up, but the Indian pulled harder. Something inside Reeves tore. Pain fired through his side and he was

unable to reach the Indian's hand.

Almost willfully, as if thinking perhaps obedience would save his life, Reeves stopped trying to grab his attacker. He struggled to bring his hands down. Then he put them on the shaft of the arrow again, grasping it, not to drive it through or pull it out, but to have something to cling to.

The Comanche sneered, then rose in the stirrups of Mimbres' saddle and drew his knife. He held it up to be sure the Rangers would know his intent. Then, with a quick twist of his body, he slashed his knife through the flesh beneath Reeves' hair. He ripped the scalp free and held it aloft.

Reeves screamed, his eyes wide as if surprised at the Indian's betrayal. He looked down at Corporal Connolly and the others, still clinging to the shaft of the arrow, and frowned. As if confused and asking what to do, he said, "Jim?"

Behind him, the Indian stood in the stirrups and yelled, "Tilo ka Tuwikáa Hayarokwetü!"

Still sounding confused, not wanting to believe what was happening, again Reeves called out. "Jim? Jim?"

The Comanche lowered himself in the stirrups to sit in the saddle again. A moment later he put one foot against Reeves' back and shoved him hard over the edge.

Reeves slid straight down the steep shale and red clay and limestone slope on his face. He didn't even try to slow himself.

Stilson and Philby galloped past the others on their horses and reined in just short of Reeves.

Stilson got to him first. He raised Reeves' shoulders and cradled his head as well as he could.

Reeves stared at him, frowning as if confused. Blood was running in three separate muddy streams down his face. "I just... I just wanted... to get Ricky." His frown deepened with pain, and he convulsed.

Then his head jerked violently left and he emptied his stomach of blood. With his last breath he sighed, "So... sorry."

Connolly looked at Philby. "Take Stanton and go up top. Be careful. I'm sure both horses are long gone. Bring what's left of Mimbres down here and we'll bury the two of 'em."

"Yes sir."

Philby and Stanton turned away to walk up the trail.

Something came sailing over the edge and landed on the trail just in front of Philby.

His eyes grew wide. "Oh Jesus! Jim, c'mere."

Connolly looked up. "What is it?"

Philby was still staring at the ground in front of his feet.

Stanton looked, then turned around. "It's an eye, Corporal."

Philby said, "It's Mimbres' eye. It's Mimbres' damn eye."

"All right. Leave it there for now if you want. Go on up and get the rest of him." Connolly turned to the remaining two. "Let's get to diggin'."

Stilson said, "Beggin' your pardon, Corporal, you sure we shouldn't go after that rotten Comanche son of a bitch?"

"No, goddamnit!" He stopped, took a breath, then said, "No. No, I'm not. But if we do I guarantee you he'll lose us. And that'll come after a few days of wearin' us down out there an' maybe pickin' us off one by one. No, we won't get him today, but you can bet we'll see him again. And I have a feelin' it won't be long."

Two hours later they had dug two graves along the uphill side of the arroyo and buried their lost friends. As they were placing the final few stones over the graves, Reeves' horse came down the trail from the top.

Corporal Connolly looked up. "Well I'll be."

The horse cantered over to the men and stopped. He neighed lightly, as if saying he was glad to see them again. He was lathered up, as if he'd been galloping hard for awhile.

Stilson looked him over. "No worse for wear. Looks like he broke himself free."

Connolly thought for a moment, then patted the stallion's neck. "Well, I thought I was gonna have to tell Mr. Billings I'd lost two of his horses, but I guess it'll just be one now." He looked at Philby. "Reeves didn't have any family, did he?"

Philby shook his head. "I don't think so."

Stilson said, "No, I'm sure he didn't." He ran his hand over the horse's mane. "That ol' stallion we left back at Billings' place was about it."

Connolly nodded. "Well, I think when we get back I'll just let Mr. Billings keep him."

The others agreed that would be a good idea.

The formerly insignificant area of that particular arroyo stretching across the North Texas landscape would become known as Boquillas Draw after the battle that was fought there.

It's better, sometimes, to go ahead and name a place where twenty men lost their lives. Maybe naming such a place even lends it an air of dignity.

Of course, it was also the place where a new war chief was born.

\* \* \*

After he killed the traitor and the white-eyes on the lip of the arroyo, Four Crows remained on the traitor's horse, gathered the reins of his own horse, and rode hard away.

Probably they wouldn't come after him. For all they knew he might have a hundred braves waiting only a few miles away. Still, it was better not to take chances, especially when he was outnumbered. Besides, time was on his side. He would gather the men he needed and he would drive all who did not belong from Comancheria.

The only concern was those repeating rifles. Such weapons gave the Rangers a great advantage. He would have to work on getting those for his men. He had heard Iron Bear and others talk. There were other ways of getting such firearms without taking them off a dead enemy.

Once he was certain the Rangers were not following him, he would make for his own camp. There he would tell a few of this battle and gather those who wished to follow him. Twin Deer would ride with him, as would his brother Young Elk and their friend Takes Leaves. Perhaps a few others would go as well.

When they left they would circle around to Red Hawk's camp. There he would deliver the news of Iron Bear's death, but also proclaim his own rebirth in the image of Iron Bear himself.

Even as he had watched the great chief flip backward off his horse, Four Crows had sensed Iron Bear's spirit flashing up over the edge of the arroyo.

It had hovered over him for a moment. Then it had settled into him, filling him with the abilities and wisdom of his predecessor as well as a terrible resolve.

It was Iron Bear's patience and ability to move more softly than a breeze that had enabled him to come up behind the traitor undetected.

It was Iron Bear's strength that had created within his left hand and arm the might to nearly tug the traitor's head from his shoulders and to lift the much larger white-eyes to his tiptoes.

It was Iron Bear's artistry with the knife that crept through his right hand and took his first two scalps cleanly and effortlessly.

And it was Iron Bear's will that formed the smirk on Four Crows' face as he spoke disrespectfully to the Rangers, proclaiming himself their greatest antagonist.

Few could have withstood Four Crows' assault even without the infusion of Iron Bear's spirit. Now he would be unstoppable.

\* \* \*

After Wes and Mac saw the Rangers leaving Mr. Billings' place, they had decided to join up, but before they'd gotten back to the house that evening, Wes had talked Mac into thinking it over.

For the next full day, everywhere they went, whether they were fishing a stock tank for catfish, sitting down at the general store or just out wandering the countryside, the topic seemed to have a life of its own. When they were fishing, Mac wondered aloud whether the Rangers stopped to fish and hunt when they were out or whether they always bought rations to carry along with them.

When they had pulled up after racing their horses across the plains, Wes, grinning and gasping for breath, said, "Y'know, I bet if we were tryin' to outrun a Comanche huntin' party, these ol' horses would run just a little faster than their fastest."

When they were mucking the stalls in the lean to on the side of the barn, Mac leaned on his pitchfork for a moment and said, "Wes, you reckon Rangers feed their horses only oats all the time? I bet they feed 'em somethin' special like that for sure. Prob'ly oats an' honey or oats an' molasses or somethin' like that."

They considered the hardships too, or at least the ones they could imagine. They would have to spend days on the trail, but they'd camped out before. They considered all the hours they would have to spend in the saddle, but they'd both spent several hours in the saddle at a stretch often enough that it wouldn't be anything new to either of them.

They considered the relationships, or possibly the lack of relationships, they would have with other people, especially women, though neither of them gave voice to that aspect of it. But both of them made acquaintances easily and released them just as easily. So relationships also would not be something to be concerned about, at least for the foreseeable future.

Three days after they'd seen the Rangers, they wandered into the general store. Wes stopped at a counter and was looking at some sidearms. The Remingtons seemed lacking in some way, though he couldn't quite put his finger on it. But the Colts—he'd be absolutely pleased with any of those that were showing.

As they turned the corner up the street from the store and headed back for the house, Wes said, "Mac, about the Rangers... only thing I can think of that we need and don't have is guns." He cocked his head and looked up at Mac. "But now I got a feelin' the Rangers prob'ly would help us out in that regard, don't you think? Like maybe they'll advance us enough pay so we can get a Colt an' maybe a Henry carbine an' ammunition an' all that?"

Mac looked at him. "I didn't think about that. You think they will?"

"I'm sure of it. Guess they might even issue us a sidearm. I hope they use Colts, though. I'd a lot rather have a Colt than a Remington. An' them others, them foreign jobs, they look like they'd just shake apart if you fired a bullet through 'em."

Mac nodded, but he wasn't really listening. He stopped walking and looked at his friend. "Wes, listen. It's been three days. I think it's time we make up our minds. Can you think of anything we haven't thought about yet?"

Wes shook his head. "I don't think there's anything under the sun we haven't thought about and talked to death, Mac. I think it's either do it or don't."

Mac nodded. "Good enough, then. Let's do it."

And with that they crossed the street and stepped into the broad yard of the house that had been Mac's home for most of his life and Wes' home for the past several years.

\*

The rickety old house on the outskirts of Watson, Texas, an odd combination of salvaged wood and canvas, was covered with a permanent layer of North Texas dust. There was even a dust drift in one corner of the only window sill on the front of the house, a remnant of the last dry storm that had come through. One pane was missing from the six-panel window, but the owner, Herbert Otis McFadden, saw no reason to fret over it at the moment. July in Texas is a good time to have all the windows open anyway.

The house was simple, with a front room, a kitchen, a back room and, off to one side behind the kitchen, a bedroom. Herbert thought of the bedroom as his wife's room, and when she'd passed away, he'd started sleeping on a cot in what had been the living room.

The boy, Otis, had used the back room for his bedroom, but when his young friend, Wes, had come to stay with him, the two of them had moved out to the barn. They slept on cots in an old tack room in the winter, and they most often stayed in the hay mow during the summer.

When the boy moved out, Herbert turned the back room into a kind of shop. It's where he skinned out his hides. The back door opened off the back room and had a simple turn latch that swiveled on a nail. At the front of the house, there was a regular door with a doorknob, though it didn't work right all the time, and a screen door. The screen door set ajar, the top hinge loose on

the rotted wood door jamb.

The porch creaked when Mac stepped up on it with Wes right behind him. Mac crossed the porch, gripped the handle on the screen door, then lifted the door and swung it aside. As he stepped through the opening, he called, "Pappy?"

Four steps into the room, he stopped and wagged his hand in front of his face. "Holy— Damn!"

Wes bumped into him from the back, then backed up a step. "Mac, what in the world is that smell?" He turned around, gagging and laughing. "I'm gettin' outta here." Wes almost leapt through the door.

Mac was right behind him.

Both boys continued down off the porch, dust billowing up in small clouds around their feet. In the yard they both stopped and concentrated on breathing fresh air.

Wes looked up at Mac, still grinning. "Man, that was disgusting! Think he's got somethin' dead in there?"

Mac shook his head. "Hell, I don't know. I ain't gonna go back in there an' find out, either." He looked toward the house and cupped his palms around his mouth. "Pappy?" A breeze whipped around the house and out in front of the boys, carrying the same scent they'd encountered in the house.

Mac gagged, pulled his hands down and looked at the ground. "Whew! That stuff's nasty." He stepped a few feet to one side and cupped his palms around his mouth again. "Pappy, we need to talk to you. You in there?"

In the back room, Herbert McFadden looked up from the rabbit he was skinning out. Under his breath, he said, "Sounds like somebody's scaldin' a cat out there, all that yellin'. Wonder if it's too late to change my name?"

He got up, put down his skinning knife, and wiped his hands on a stained dishtowel.

The rabbit's head, which he'd severed but hadn't yet tossed out, was staring at him from the corner near the window.

He looked at it. "Be back in a minute. Wait right there." Then he laughed and turned to walk through the kitchen and the living room.

He looked up and saw that the screen door was open and sitting at an odd angle. Somebody must have come in and forgot to close it when they left. Or had he left it that way? Seeing it propped open like that spurred a memory.

\*

Back when McFadden's wife was still alive, the wood in the door jamb was still good and the screen door still hung right, mostly. Back then, the pastor, Reverend Perot, sometimes came around to visit. After all, Edith was one of his more loyal parishioners when it came to tithing.

It was important to her that the house looked good as people approached, or at least as good as it could. So every now and then Herbert and his boy Otis would scrounge a pail of whitewash and paint the plywood walls. And every now and then he would fill the nail holes beneath the hinge on

the door jamb with wood slivers, then drive new nails so the screen door would hang right, or at least close to right.

On the occasions of the pastor's visits, if the screen door had worked loose again, Herbert would prop it open with a rock so it wouldn't embarrass Edith. He always meant to get around to fixing it permanently, putting in a new frame, jamb and all, but Edith had passed away five years ago and his desire to fix the screen door had gone with her.

Besides, nobody ever visited, and Herbert didn't miss the company. The good reverend himself had been around only one time since Edith had died, ostensibly to offer his condolences and check on Herbert. He'd seen it as a duty.

It had been three days since the funeral and nobody had seen Herbert around town. The investigation of his disappearance had fallen to the reverend. That afternoon, the pastor had stepped up on Herbert's porch and rapped on the door jamb three times. Receiving no response, he turned the doorknob—he found he had to press down on it while he was turning it—and discovered Herbert was home, but he was also much deeper in his cups than usual.

The reverend rushed to his side. He allowed his right hand to hover over the man's sweaty, hairy shoulder, but decided not to touch him unless doing so became absolutely necessary. After all, he didn't want to startle the man. He bent until he was near Otis' ear. "Brother McFadden?" he said quietly.

But Brother McFadden was not lucid enough to be startled.

Dressed in his usual overalls without even an undershirt, he was slumped in a hand-made chair with one short leg. To keep it from going cockeyed, he had propped his left forearm across the back of it. Sweat trickled in rivulets down his left side from his armpit, darkening the thin, faded-blue fabric of his overalls where it soaked in.

His neck was bent, his head facing the bulge of his ample belly.

For a moment the reverend thought he was asleep, but on closer inspection he saw that Brother McFadden's left eye was open and his right eye was half-open.

In addition to the sweat running down his sides, it also was trickling down from his throat through the coarse, curly, red and grey hairs on his chest. Beads of it lay among the diamond shaped wrinkles on the back of his neck and the close-cropped red and grey hairs on the back of his head. Likewise on the bald spot at his crown.

McFadden's right forearm was resting on the small table that had served as the dining room table in better days. The fingers of his right hand were curled around the neck of a mostly empty bottle. It was laying on its side, the amber liquid filling only the bottom quarter-inch of the side of the bottle.

The reverend began ministering to him.

"Of course, Brother McFadden, I am distraught to find you in this condition. On the other hand, I certainly realize your entire world has come undone, yea verily, even been devastated, and I fully understand the need of a weak man for drink.

“You know, it’s no secret even to someone of my breeding, that sometimes the temptation to the devil’s juice is simply too difficult to resist, dulling, as it does, the excruciating pain of having lost a loved one.”

He leaned forward a bit and quieted his voice an appropriate degree. “Truth be told, Brother McFadden, if I myself had recently suffered the loss of a good wife and companion of forty-three years—especially such an excellent wife and companion as Mrs. McFadden was—well, I might even be tempted to imbibe a bit myself, strictly as a result of my abject misery, you understand.”

He straightened and adjusted the volume of his self-righteousness accordingly. “So take heart, Brother McFadden.” He wagged one finger in the air. “Now I’m not giving my approval of such acts, mind you, but I am saying that it is completely understandable given the circumstances.”

Then he clapped Herbert on the back and said, “However, Brother McFadden, it appears to me you’ve been mourning under the influence of this remedy for some time. As you well know, there comes a time when a man has to put the miseries behind him and get on with his life.”

He drew himself up and shook his head and wagged his finger with authority, just as if Herbert could see him and would care. “You can’t just go on living in the past, mourning your good wife and all the wonderful times you and she shared. And you can’t just go on drowning your sorrows in the bottle. Oh no, Brother McFadden, you’ve got to be getting past the bottle, and soon.

“You have to grab life by the horns, man! You’ve gotta get back into the flow of everyday things, everyday life. You still have a church family who needs you and your donation. And don’t forget, you’ve a boy to raise. Now I know there ain’t nothing easy about raising a boy by yourself, but the thing is....”

The reverend continued talking as Herbert began to emerge from his fog.

In the wake of feeling the slap on his back and hearing the reverend’s voice, which was beginning to rasp from overuse, he came to realize there was someone else in the room. With difficulty, he found a way to raise his head and twist it around and up to his left to look at the reverend, who at the same moment bent at the waist to peer more closely at him.

“And furthermore, Brother McFadden, there comes a time that you must simply stand up for what’s right. You have to get up on your feet and....” The reverend continued.

McFadden’s eyes were watery and bloodshot, and he frowned as he tried to focus. Then he recognized the reverend and curled the corners of his mouth into a half-grin.

The reverend grinned as well. “Brother McFadden, you are a brave man to smile in the face of such adversity. In fact....” And he went on.

McFadden’s grin moved up his face to wrinkle the sweaty skin at the corners of his eyes.

The reverend, holding his breath against the aroma of his most wayward parishioner, smiled again too, wanting to show McFadden he was there to help. He leaned forward again, grinning broadly to encourage Brother McFadden, and said, “I’m here for you, Brother McFa—”

McFadden flung his mouth open and belched, long and loud.

As the hot, moist stench of alcohol and rot washed over the reverend’s nose and cheeks and

ears, he quickly turned his face to one side, but not quickly enough. He arrested a gag reflex, and when he turned his head back to look at Brother McFadden again, his own eyes were watering.

Still grinning, McFadden said, "Oh, howdy reverend. Sorry about that. Hey, if you stopped by to see Edith, she ain't here. Ol' gal's gone. Can y'believe it?"

Blinking back the tears in his own eyes, the reverend said, "Ah, well yes, she is gone indeed. And Brother McFadden, I know it's hard to believe right now, but things will get better."

McFadden frowned at him. "Huh? Better'n what?"

The reverend thought the man must feel a terrible need to hold his emotions in check. Still, his job was to free those emotions so the healing could begin. "What I mean, the sooner you're able to accept that our dear Edith has gone on to a better place, the sooner you'll be able to get back to your normal life."

McFadden's frown deepened. "Huh?"

"I'm just saying it'll be all right, Herbert. May I call you Herbert? I know it doesn't seem like it now, but mark my words, everything will be all right with the passage of time. Why, one fine day you'll be reunited, you and your good wife Edith."

At that, McFadden frowned and stood, all six feet four inches and three hundred pounds of him, perhaps a bit too quickly. He staggered a half-step and nearly fell, but he caught himself on the table with his right hand.

Then he raised his left hand and extended his index finger in the general direction of the door. "You get outta here, reverend! I thought you was comin' to say howdy, mebbe even celebrate with me a little bit. If you just came around here to threaten me, you get on outta here!"

The reverend's eyes grew side. "What? B-but I was only saying that you and your lovely wife would be reunited someday and—"

"Lovely wife? Are you talkin' about my Edith?"

"Wh-why yes. Of course."

"So you're a liar as well as a party pooper. Get on outta here! Go on, git!"

The reverend retreated toward the door, backing away, but somehow he was unable to stop dispensing worn-out platitudes. "Y-you're just confused right now, Herbert." He raised his right hand above his head and wagged that finger again. "For this too shall pass! The almighty lord god never would send more than you can bear! In the sweet by and by, on that beautiful shore beyond those gates of pure gold, you shall walk on streets of silver. And there, on that beautiful morn', you shall be reunited with your beautiful Edith and—"

McFadden clapped both hands over his ears. "Ahh! Stop sayin' that! Git! You git outta here, an' don't come back!"

The reverend finally had turned and hurried through the door, leaving the screen door half-open and canted at an odd angle as he flung himself off the porch. Feeling safe at last, he looked back and yelled, "You'll feel different in the morning, Brother McFadden. All things work to the glory of the lord. I have to run now, no more time to chat. You come see me then, when you're

ready. Maybe we can talk about you continuing Edith's tithe to the church." The right arm shot up and that finger began wagging again. "For whatsoever ye give to the church shall be delivered back ten fold unto thee, and—"

The nearly empty bottle that had been laying on the table next to McFadden's right hand sailed through opening and past the reverend's left ear. "You git!"

The bottle hit a few feet behind him with a puff of dust and rolled several feet away. Then Herbert McFadden filled the doorway with his shotgun.

The reverend took only two steps to get up to full speed. He passed the bottle at a dead run.

Herbert laughed and lowered the shotgun. "Guess he didn't want my offerin' after all."

But that had been five years ago.

\*

These days the only other person who was around much was his boy Otis, him and that goofy kid who had come to live with them a few years back. And right now the two of them were out front, no doubt wanting something.

He stepped through the opening left by the screen door and put his hands on his hips. "Whaddayou boys want? I'm busy skinnin' out a brace of jackrabbits out back."

Just as Mac opened his mouth, Herbert held up hand, palm out, and wrinkled his nose. "Hold on." He sniffed, then took a step and sniffed again. Finally he stepped down off the porch, his nose still wrinkled. The powdered ground on the well-worn path puffed a dust cloud up around his feet and ankles. He sniffed again. "You boys smell somethin'?"

Wes laughed and looked at Mac.

Herbert looked at him. "What's funny?" He tilted his head and sniffed again. "Is that a skunk? You boys smell a skunk? It ain't strong. Kind'a like mebbe like he was here but he's gone now?"

Wes glanced past the man as a small black and white intruder ducked past the corner of the house and headed for his den in the roots of the elm tree near the field out back. He hooked his thumbs in his pockets and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "No sir, I don't smell no skunk." He looked up at his friend. "You, Mac?"

Mac looked at his dad. "No sir. I don't smell no skunk either."

McFadden looked at his son, then Wes, then back again. "Uh huh." He sniffed the air. "Well, I don't seem to smell it now either. Anyhow, what was it you boys wanted again?"

Mac said, "We got any biscuits left from this mornin'? Maybe a slice or two of bacon?"

"I think there might be. You plannin' a trip?"

Mac nodded. "Yes sir." He paused and looked at the ground, then back up at his father. "Somethin' like that.

Herbert looked at them for a moment, as if appraising them, then nodded. "Plannin' to be gone awhile I reckon." He looked at the ground and shook his head, then looked at the boys again. "Wait here for a minute." He turned around, grunted as he hefted himself back up on the porch, and disappeared through the door.

Mac looked at Wes, who shrugged.

Herbert came back out. He was carrying two gunbelts on his right forearm. His left fist was closed around the neck of a lumpy flour sack. He set the flour sack on the ground, then handed a gunbelt to each boy.

"I knew you'd be takin' off 'fore too much longer. I seen the way you look even when the stage comes through town." He paused. "Ah, but it's only natural. I remember them urges an' that need to get out an' see things. You're gonna have to go do what you need to do."

He nodded toward the guns in the holsters. "Those are Navy Colts. They ain't the prettiest an' they're used. All I could afford. But they was both cleaned and tested, an' they both work like brand new."

Mac hefted his revolver, then slipped it back into the holster. He looked up at his father. "Thanks, Pappy."

Herbert shrugged, then cleared his throat. "Navy Colt's the best revolver out there right now. Some folks like the new Remingtons, but I'd go with a Colt every time."

He paused. "Anyway, no matter what you decide to do with your life, you can always use a good sidearm. Practice whenever you can. Don't go for speed. Take your time, be calm, and shoot for accuracy. Speed will come with time. If it's another man, aim for his middle. That's the part that's hardest to get out of the way fast."

As the boys were strapping on the gunbelts, Herbert bent and picked up the flour sack. He offered it to Mac. "A little food. Just somethin' to get you started. Matches. Stuff like that."

Mac took the sack. "Thanks, Pappy."

Herbert nodded. "Well, you prob'ly better to go on an' go instead of draggin' it out." He looked toward the barn, then back at the boys. "You can take your horses or you can trade 'em to me and pick out a couple others. Up to you."

Wes said, "Mr. McFadden, I'm really partial to that two year old sorrel. Him an' me get along real good. If you're sure—"

Herbert nodded. "I been seein' that. Go on an' take him. He'd prob'ly just mope around here after you left anyway."

Mac looked at his father. "Thanks for everything, Pappy. An' I mean everything."

Herbert looked at him for a moment and nodded, then turned and started for the house. He stopped and turned around. "Boys, listen. You don't have to end up like me, glued to one spot. I mean, there ain't nothin' wrong with it, but you can do anything you want to do. Don't forget that. There's only three secrets to it: the first is to know who you are. Don't matter who the other guy is if you know who you are. The second is to know your abilities and don't overreach 'em. And the third is to be aware that most men will try to overreach theirs. Understand?"

Both boys nodded. "Yes sir," Mac said.

"Yes sir," Wes said. "If you don't overreach and they do, that's when you've got 'em."

Herbert grinned and nodded. "You're gonna do fine." He turned and stepped up onto the

porch. On his way into the house, he took the time to close the screen door right.

Mac and Wes turned away and headed for the barn.

They each took an extra saddle blanket for a ground cloth, and they each took two wool blankets from their cots to make a bedroll. When they had everything stowed and they were mounted, they rode slowly past the house.

Herbert was standing back away from the window as the two rode past. "*Vaya con dios, mijos.* Go with God, my boys." He turned and went back to his rabbits.

Mac twisted in the saddle, looked around. "I'm guessin' Pappy got busy with those rabbits again."

Wes nodded. "I 'spect he didn't wanna watch us ride off."

Quietly, Mac said, "Can't say I really blame him for that. Some ways I'm gonna miss this ol' place."

The boys walked the horses until they got to the corner. There they reined in for just a moment and looked back up the road at the house. Then they turned south and urged their horses to a canter.

Wes leaned forward and patted the sorrel's neck. "We're gonna have some adventures, boy. What sort'a name should I give you?"

The horse tossed his head and neighed. The sound that came out sounded remarkably like "Charley."

Wes looked at Mac. "Did you hear that?"

Mac laughed and shook his head. "He said 'Charley,' right? Yeah, I heard it, but if you ask me in public I'll deny it."

Wes patted the sorrel's neck again. "Good to meet you, Charley. An' thanks for lettin' me know."

He and Mac were still grinning and talking as Watson faded behind them to the north.

Amarillo, the Texas Rangers and the rest of their lives lay before them.

\* \* \*

Corporal Connolly and four weary Rangers rode back into Watson late in the morning the day after the Battle of Boquillas Draw. The corporal already had instructed his men. They would swap their gear onto their own horses, including his, while he was settling up with Mr. Billings.

As they turned into the livery yard, the cloud of dust that had followed them through town over the powdery streets drifted past. They slowed their horses to a walk, then stopped them and dismounted near the corral.

Corporal Connolly continued on foot toward the house as the others set to work. Just as he drew near the porch and started to hail whomever was in the house, Mr. Billings opened the screen door and stepped out onto the porch.

He shook hands with Corporal Connolly. "You get 'em?"

Connolly nodded. "Yes sir, we got all but one of 'em. We lost two men though—good men—and

one of your horses.”

Billings shook his head. “I’m really sorry to hear that about your men. As for the horses, it happens, I suppose.”

“Yes sir. We’ll let the governor know. He’ll reimburse you at a fair rate, like I said before. Also, we’re gonna leave a couple of extra horses here with you. They belonged to the men we lost. They’re yours as far as we’re concerned. No need to say anything to anyone about that. It’s our way of sayin’ thanks for helpin’ us out.”

“Oh. Well, you don’t have to do that, Corporal.”

“No sir, I know, but it’s all right. Actually, I think the men we lost—their names were Harold Reeves and Enrique Mimbres—I think they would have wanted you to have their horses.”

“Mimbres, eh? Sounds like an Indian name.”

“Yes sir. There’s a whole tribe of ‘em. Mimbres Apaches over around the Mogollon Rim country. Ricky was half Mex and half Apache. He was a damn good man.”

Billings looked at him. “Yes, I imagine he was.” He paused. “Listen, I want to thank you for what you do, all of you. And thank you for setting me straight, you know, before.”

“Yes sir. Well, it’s easy to lose sight of priorities when things are going too well for too long. You all just be watchful an’ you’ll be fine.”

Billings nodded. “Well, you all do whatever you need to do out there and I’ll hope to see you again someday. And thanks again.” He proffered his hand.

As they shook, Connolly said, “You’re welcome, sir. See you again, I hope it ain’t for the same reason. Good luck to you.”

“And to you, Corporal.” Mr. Billings turned and went back inside as Corporal Connolly headed toward the corral.

\* \* \*

A few hours after they left Watson, Wes and Mac reined in to rest the horses at Coldwater Creek. It was little more than a trickle, but there was a small pool so the horses could drink and cottonwoods for shade.

Wes opened one of his saddle bags and pulled out a book. He settled at the base of a cottonwood, took off his hat and placed it on his bent knee, then opened his book.

Mac frowned. “What’s that?”

“It’s a book.”

“Well hell, Wes, I can see it’s a book. Where’d you get it? And don’t say outta your saddle bags.”

Wes closed the book. “A’right. Fella was passin’ through town, oh, couple weeks ago I guess. ‘Member when I asked you to go fishin’ a couple weeks ago an’ you had somethin’ else to do?”

“You never asked me to go. I was cleanin’ up the barn. You were supposed to help.”

“That right? I didn’t know.” Wes grinned. “Hey, you should’a said somethin’.”

“I told you twice Pappy wanted us to clean up the barn that day.”

“Must not’a heard you.”

“You said all right, Wes, an’ a little while later you disappeared.”

Wes wagged one hand in the air. “Anyway, fella was in a wagon, looked like a big box behind him. I figured he lived in there.

“He asked me for directions to Amarillo. Said he had a load of books an’ he was takin’ ‘em down there.”

Mac frowned. “What kind of books?”

Wes shrugged. “I don’t know. All kinds, I guess. How many kinds are there? Anyhow, I showed him how to get to Amarillo an’ he gave me this book.” Wes held it up. “Guy named Shakespeare. All about kings an’ foreign lands an’ all kinds of stuff like that. Pretty good stuff.”

He read for a few minutes, then looked around. “Gonna be nightfall soon. Reckon we ought’a just stay here for the night, get an’ early start in the mornin’?”

Mac looked around. “Sounds all right to me.”

Wes got up, carried his book to his horse and put it in his saddle bag, then unstrapped his bedroll. He walked back to where he’d been sitting among two large cottonwoods and a smaller one and rolled it out. His little camp was protected from the wind on three sides. “Think I’m gonna sack out right here.”

Mac said, “Looks like a good spot. Maybe in the mornin’ we can get in some practice with these Colts ‘fore we head out. First light?”

Still arranging his blankets, Wes shook his head. “I don’t need no practice. Neither do you, not really.” He turned and headed back to take his gear off Charley.

“Didn’t you hear Pappy, Wes? He said we was to practice whenever we got the chance.”

Wes carried his saddle in the direction of his bedroll. “I heard him. I also heard him say to stay calm, take aim and shoot for the center of the torso.”

He dropped the saddle at the head of his bedroll, then dropped the saddle bags on the ground next to it. He knelt and dug through one saddle bag. “Thing is, we both hit what we aim at already, so we don’t need no practice to do that. The only practice we need is practice stayin’ calm, an’ you can’t practice that when nobody’s shootin’ back.” He shrugged. ‘Sides, I figure we’d be better served to save our ammo in case we need it.”

He pulled a cloth out of the saddle bag, straightened and turned around. “Got a few biscuits here, and a little bacon. You want some?”

Mac shook his head. “Not right now.”

Wes nodded and took a bite of bacon. “Now then, Mr. McFadden, if you wanna go off up the creek in the mornin’ an’ blow off a lot of ammunition while we’re still out here on the prairie alone, be my guest. I’ll wait for you. Hell, I’ll even keep watch for all them Comanches your shootin’ ll prob’ly bring down on top of us. Matter of fact, I’ll even go so far as to—”

Mac threw up his hands. “All right, all right. No practicin’. We’ll just get an early start.” He turned and stomped off. Under his breath he muttered, “Sooner we get to Amarillo, sooner we’ll

be Rangers.” He stopped and looked back at Wes. “With any luck at all they’ll assign us to differ’nt outfits and I’ll finally be shut of you.”

Wes grinned. “Aw, now that just goes straight to my heart, Mac.” He sat down on his bedroll, leaned back against his saddle, and tipped his hat down over his eyes.

Mac frowned. “You gonna go to sleep just like that? What about settin’ a watch?”

Wes drew his Colt, cocked it, and laid it across his belly with his finger next to the trigger. He flopped the top blanket over himself. “I got it covered. No problem.”

Mac shook his head and walked over to his horse to take off his gear and settle in. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to set a watch. He’d watch first, then wake Wes up in three or four hours, and then Wes could wake him and so on. That probably would be best. He glanced back at his friend. Wes didn’t seem to want to participate.

He shook his head again. Quietly he said, “I’ll just stand watch by myself.” He grinned. Tomorrow or the next day they’d be Rangers. “Doubt I could sleep anyway.”

He moved down to the creek, crossed it on a few strategically placed rocks, and walked up a slight hill through the brush. Near the top of the hill was a boulder. He put his back against it and sat down. He had a mostly clear line of vision to Wes’ bedroll and where they’d hobbled the horses.

He checked to see whether he could get to his Colt easily and found he could. The night air was warm despite the lack of cloud cover. The scent of white thorn acacia was thick and sweet on the air, even heady. He lay his head back on the boulder and looked at the stars. There must’ve been a million of them, each one twinkling in its turn. The moon was a little less than half full and waning, still high in the western sky. A crater near the flat edge was cut off by shadow. It looked a little like a fish hook, turned the way it was.

He began tracing the Big Dipper with his gaze. From the outer side of the cup down to the base, along the bottom to the inner side, up to the handle. Then out, out, out to the little star on the tip of the handle and then a leap of faith out to the North Star.

He wondered vaguely how many days it would take to span that gap from the last star in the handle to the North Star. It would have to be quite a stretch. A lot farther than from Watson to Amarillo, that was sure.

Slowly his eyes closed.

\*

The following morning Mac jolted awake shortly before sunup, when the eastern horizon was just beginning to glow. He was still propped up against his rock, but the thin wool blanket cut some of the chill off the air. For just a moment he wondered where he was and why.

Then he remembered. He and Wes were on their way to Amarillo. They were going to join the Rangers. He smiled.

Then he remembered he was supposed to be on watch. He’d fallen asleep. “Oh man,” he said, then moved his arms out from under the blanket. He arched his back against the rock and

stretched his arms over his head as he yawned. Finally he flopped the blanket aside—blanket? Had he brought a blanket up with him?

Weird. He should remember. He shook his head, then stood and shook the stiffness out of his joints. He looked out over the camp. “Damn. Lucky I still got my scalp.”

“No luck to it, partner.”

Mac spun around, reaching for his Colt, every nerve awake.

Wes was standing atop the same boulder against which he’d slept. He shoved his hands out in front of him, palms out, and he was grinning. “Hold on, now. Hold on. Don’t go to shootin’.”

Mac frowned as he recognized him. “Wes? What in the world are you doin’ up there?”

Wes shrugged. “Right at the moment, tryin’ to avoid gettin’ perforated. Before that, it was my watch.”

Mac frowned. “What?”

“My watch. Don’t you remember yesterday sayin’ we ought’a set a watch? Remember I joked, said I had it covered? I guess you took sundown to midnight or thereabouts, an’ then I had midnight to sunup. ‘Least that’s what you said when you came an’ got me.” He shook his head. “I’m pretty sure it was considerably earlier than midnight though.”

“Wait, wait.” Mac pointed at himself. “I woke you up?”

“You don’t think I got up on my own, do you? Then you grabbed one’a my blankets, turned around an’ walked right back up here. You propped yourself against that rock an’ draped my blanket over you, and I think you were asleep before I even settled in good.”

“Really?”

Wes solemnly held up his right hand. “On my word as a Texas Ranger.”

“You ain’t a Ranger yet.”

Wes lowered his hand. “Technicality. Mac, do you really think I’d be on watch if you hadn’t badgered me into it?”

Mac looked at him for a moment. “No... prob’ly not.”

“There y’go. Now that we’re both up an’ about, what say we get our stuff together an’ get on up the road?”

“Don’t you wanna make some coffee or—”

Wes hopped off the side of the boulder and started down the hill. “We’re wastin’ daylight.” He moved down through the brush into the camp, with Mac following a short distance behind.

In camp, Mac was surprised to see that Charley was already saddled and ready to go. Wes had only to roll up his bedroll again and lash it to the back of the saddle. In response to the unasked question on Mac’s face, Wes said, “We rode out a little ways earlier, had a look around. I would have said something but I figured you saw us from up on the hill.”

Mac nodded. “Find anything?”

Wes didn’t want to embarrass his friend about his falling asleep during his watch. He shrugged. “Wasn’t lookin’ for anything.”

When Mac was ready, they mounted up and rode south.

\* \* \*

Corporal Connolly, Court Edwards and Jack Stilson were sitting in the headquarters with Captain Flowers. The other veteran, Mason Philby, was at the Amarillo Inn sharing a bottle with the newby, Blake Stanton. The captain would debrief the two of them later if necessary.

The corporal said, "Tell y'what, Captain, it was about the worst I've seen, an' I've been doin' this job for twelve years.

"I mean, it was Iron Bear's usual, the way he trussed the man and the woman up on the corral an' gutted em. Cut the man's Achilles' tendons an' skinned his back. Scalped the woman an' threw it in the dirt, strung her innards out. All of that was the same.

"An' the boy was typical too. Shot once, dropped. But the girl—" He looked at Stilson. "Figure she was about thirteen, maybe fourteen years old?"

Stilson nodded. "Bout that."

Connolly continued. "Captain, she had a hole in her belly the size of her fist, up under her ribs. Like they were tryin' to dig her heart out from down there."

Stilson said, "An' tell him about the arrows."

Connolly glanced at him and nodded, then turned back to the captain. "She had fourteen arrows in her, Captain. Fourteen, shot from close up, pinnin' her to the ground." He shook his head. "I never seen anything like it."

Stilson nodded. "It was pretty bad."

Edwards was looking at the floor. "Bad on the other end too." He looked up at the captain. "The way that skinny runt of an Indian kept blocking Reeves with Mimbres' horse. An' the way he looked at us while he took Reeves' scalp... like he knew there wasn't nothin' we could do about it. I've never seen anybody do that before. Not like that. Not to mention what he did to Mimbres."

He looked over at Corporal Connolly for a moment.

Connolly nodded, indicating he should continue.

Edwards said, "Captain, that Indian cut Mimbres' throat to kill him, and then he scalped him... but he also dug out his eyes. Both of 'em. His left eye was still there, but it was layin' on his cheek. Never seen that before. But his right eye... Captain, that bastard dug out his right eye and tossed it down the trail while Philby and Stanton were goin' up to get Mimbres' body."

The captain shook his head. "Incredible what these bastards will do."

Edwards turned to Connolly. "An' Jim, what was that he yelled right there at the end?" He looked at the captain again. "He yelled somethin' about two of a kind an' all of what we do or somethin' like that."

Connolly said, "Naw, he said his name." He looked at the captain. "Like he wanted to be sure we knew who he was. He said, 'Tilo ka Tuwikáa Hayarokwetü.' It means 'I am Four Crows.' It was like he was announcing himself."

Edwards nodded. "Yeah, that's what it was. Or that's what it sounded like at least."

The captain nodded. "That's exactly what he was doing, announcing himself. Ever heard of him?"

"No sir. He was some distance away, but he looked like he wasn't much older than that girl and boy they butchered on that farm."

Stilson said, "He sure acted older though. He took Reeves' scalp like it was nobody's business an' held it up. That's when he yelled that name or whatever it was, an' then he put his foot in Reeves' back an' shoved him down the slope."

Connolly nodded. "I got a feelin' we're gonna hear of him before it's all said an' done. Prob'ly a lot. We put eighteen Comanches in the ground that day, Captain, even ol' Iron Bear. An' frankly, two days ago I'd have told you if anybody other than Iron Bear escaped it wouldn't be that big a deal. But this Four Crows kid, I just don't know. I got a feelin' we witnessed the birth of a war chief."

The captain sighed. "Time will tell, I guess. Anything else?"

"Just the deal with Mr. Billings up in Watson. I think I told you about that earlier."

"Yep. I'll get a wire off to the governor in the next day or two. Reimbursement for one horse plus room and board for seven of ours, that right?"

"Yes sir, I think that'll do it. Well, no. Make that room and board for five of ours. I left Reeves' and Mimbres' horses with him too." He shrugged. "They didn't have families an' it seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

The captain nodded. "I think that's fine." He put his hands on his knees and got up. "All right. Now if you men will all stand, I have at least a little bit of good news."

Connolly stood up, with Edwards alongside him and Stilson on the other side of Edwards.

The door opened and Philby came in with Stanton.

Philby took one look and removed his hat. He gestured, indicating that Stanton should do the same and that he should move up to stand alongside Stilson.

Stanton did as he was told.

Philby moved up alongside him.

The captain nodded at Philby, then turned to his desk for a moment and pulled out an official looking sheet of paper. He held them up. "Gentlemen, I have in my hand a message from the governor. I had hoped it was my retirement certificate and a letter announcing my replacement."

He grinned and they all laughed quietly.

"But it wasn't. Actually, it's a warrant and a citation, and it's about the only thing that would give me greater pleasure than my retirement certificate. I'm going to read it to you, and then present it to our new corporal, Ranger Courtney Lee Edwards."

A huge grin spread across the faces of all present.

Captain Flowers read the full warrant, including the citation, then concluded with, "Therefore, it is my great privilege and honor to promote Ranger Courtney Lee Edwards to the rank of corporal with all the rights and privileges thereunto pertaining." He grinned and extended his

right hand to Court while offering him the warrant with his left hand. "Congratulations, Corporal Edwards."

Edwards was taken aback. "Thank you, Captain. Thanks so much. You sure you got the right guy?"

Everyone laughed and the captain said, "It's richly deserved, Court. I'm just glad it came through while I was still here to present it."

Connolly said, "Congratulations, Court. The captain's right, you do deserve it. You see any of those rights and privileges he talked about though, let me know." He laughed.

Stilson congratulated him and shook his hand as well. "Ah what's one more boss. Reckon I can deal with it."

Philby stepped around Stanton and shook Edwards' hand too. "Congratulations, Corporal. Well deserved."

Stanton nodded. "Congratulations, Corporal Edwards."

Connolly said, "Amarillo Inn, Captain? Seems to me a celebration's in order."

The captain laughed. "Sounds right to me. Why don't we—"

The door opened a bit and Sam Pencilman, a thin, mousy man, peeked his head around the door. The man's round spectacles had slid halfway down his nose. The tuft of hair at the front of his pate was sticking straight up, centered on the front of his otherwise bald head. The whole thing was framed by a distinctive, graying fringe. "Captain Flowers?"

The captain looked at him. "Yes? Oh hi, Sam. Got something for me?"

The small man pushed the door farther open and came in, a piece of paper in his hand. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up midway along his thin forearms. The shirt itself was stuffed into black trousers, which were held up by stained black suspenders. His black shoes were scuffed to the point they had little color on them anymore.

He pushed his glasses up his nose with one finger. "Yes sir. Beggin' your pardon, Captain, a telegram came in from Fort Perry. Seemed like it might be important, so I thought... well, here." He proffered the telegram.

The captain took it and looked at it. He read it, then glanced up at the small man. "Thanks, Sam. Please wire back that we're on our way."

Sam seemed to almost bow. "Yes sir. Right away." Then he pivoted and almost ran from the room.

Connolly took a couple of steps and closed the door behind him, then turned around. "What is it, Captain?"

The captain looked at the telegram again, then looked up. "Actually, I think I'll give this one to our new corporal." He glanced at Court. "Corporal Edwards, are you ready for your first assignment?"

"Yes sir."

"All right. This wire is from the colonel up at Fort Perry. Says he had some disturbing news

and he'd like to talk with a Ranger about it. Might not be anything at all. The colonel's fairly new up there I think. Been there only a couple months.

"Still, with this new renegade Comanche running loose I'd like you to ride up and check it out." He looked at Ranger Philby. "Mason, you want to ride along?"

Philby nodded. "Sure thing."

The captain said, "Good, then it's set. In fact, take our young Ranger Stanton too. Let him see a little more of the country." He turned to Stanton. "You okay with that?"

"Yes sir."

Connolly said, "You sure we shouldn't saddle up too, Captain?"

"No, I think it'll be all right. Better hang around. Never know what might come up right here in the next day or two."

He turned to Edwards again. "Of course, in that part of the country there's a chance this could turn into more. Send me a wire if you need to, and be sure to let me know if something comes up that'll keep you from being back in a week. All right?"

Edwards grinned. "No problem, Captain. We'll take care of it." He glanced at Mason Philby and Blake Stanton. "Meet me down at the livery stable in an hour? Lot of daylight left today. Be a shame to waste it."

Stanton said, "Yes sir, Corporal."

Mason grinned. "See you there, Court."

They turned to leave.

Edwards said, "That it, Cap?"

The captain nodded. "See you in a week."

\* \* \*

In hindsight, Wes thought maybe he should have roused Mac when he'd heard the Indians moving past, but the fact was, he didn't know Mac had fallen asleep on watch until he got back from his little side trip.

He decided it was better not to say anything after the fact. So Wes didn't tell him about the sounds moving west to east just north of their camp at the creek. He didn't tell him about the deep tracks of the unshod horses he'd found when he and Charley had investigated. Nine horses had passed, all heavy with braves. And he definitely didn't tell him how he had come to know they were braves.

Almost three hours into the morning they crossed the upper fork of Palo Duro Creek, and an hour and a half later, they came to the lower fork. They stopped there to rest and to water the horses and eat some breakfast.

Wes seemed lost in thought.

Mac looked at him. "A'right, what's got you spooked?"

Wes looked up. "What? Nothin'. Why?"

Mac shrugged. "Just seems like you ain't as talkative as usual. You seem more... business like,

sort of. Like you're on guard."

Wes shrugged. "Can't imagine that bein' on guard out here is a bad thing."

"Yeah, but you're on guard like you think somebody's after us, or maybe lyin' in wait. You see somethin' back up the way you ain't tellin' me about?"

"C'mon, Mac, wouldn't I tell you if I saw somethin'?"

After they'd rested for a half-hour or so, they mounted again and continued south.

Several hours later, when they reached the north bank of the Canadian River, Mac said, "How about we make camp for the night? It's been a long day, but tomorrow should be an easy half-day's ride into Amarillo from here."

Wes nodded. "Deal, but let's cross the river first. I'd feel better with nothin' between us an' Amarillo but the prairie."

Mac wondered at his friend's sudden bent toward caution, but he figured Wes would talk with him about it when he was ready. "All right," he said, and turned his horse south to look for an appropriate ford.

Once they had crossed the river, Mac looked at him. "Reckon I'll take the first watch again. Same deal as last night? I'll rouse you around midnight?"

Wes nodded. "Sure, Mac, that sounds fine."

As Wes was taking his gear off Charley and setting out his bedroll, Mac moved off to scout a good place to stand watch. He took one of his own blankets with him.

Again Wes lay on his bedroll with his Colt drawn, cocked and laid across his stomach. He spread one of his two thin wool blanket over himself, more to cover his Colt than for warmth. But he didn't sleep.

He had thought about the events of the previous night several times as he and Mac rode south, but it still didn't quite make sense. He was missing something. He played the scene through his head one more time.

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As he lay on his bedroll on the north side of Coldwater Creek, his hat was resting down over his eyes. He raised his chin a bit and watched as Mac made his way across the creek and up the low hill on the other side. When Mac settled against a boulder, Wes relaxed and thought about what they were doing. In a couple days they would say the oath and actually be sworn in as Texas Rangers.

He was more impressed than he'd let on by the men they'd seen in Watson at Mr. Billings' place. Mac had focused on how they'd taken over, but what impressed Wes was the way they sat their horses. Proud, maybe, or maybe determined... he couldn't quite put a finger on it, but it was something bigger and deeper than them riding in and taking over. It was something more important. Dignified, maybe.

Any group of ruffians could ride into a place and take over, from banditos to Indians to a brace of drunk cowboys with guns and feeling their oats. Hell, Auntie Mame's sewing circle could ride in

and take over when they were in their cups. But with the Rangers it was different. They had taken what they needed, and obviously they had coerced Mr. Billings, but they'd done so respectfully. They had made him feel he was part of their endeavor instead of a victim of necessity.

Maybe that's what impressed him about them: they were self-righteous but respectful.

It was a lucky thing that Mac had decided to join the Rangers. Wes would have done so anyway, but Mac probably wouldn't have followed him. Generally speaking, things had to be Mac's idea. This way the two of them would remain friends and stay together. They'd been through a lot together already, and they'd always watched out for each other.

Now they would be Rangers together. In times of trouble, they wouldn't have to wonder whether they could count on their partner. That was a comforting feeling, just like knowing Mac was on watch up on the hill. Wes looked up at the night sky a final time. It seemed endless, deeper than deep, and he drifted off into it as he closed his eyes.

Then a stick snapped.

Wes opened his eyes but lay perfectly still.

Beneath the blanket, he reached with his thumb to be sure the hammer was cocked on his Colt. It was.

The sound repeated, and it wasn't a stick. He frowned. It was a group of sticks and leaves, and again, again. A group of sticks and leaves being pressed into the floor of the prairie by something heavy. The sound repeated again, again. It was regular. A horse walking.

Wes closed his eyes to focus his hearing, and a new sound came to him: leaves and small branches brushing alongside something. Or something brushing alongside leaves and small branches. A horse moving through the brush.

The smooth sound of the brush moving alongside the horse was interrupted by a light, sharper sound, almost a slap, and then the smooth sound continued. A horse with a rider.

The sounds multiplied, expanded. Many horses. Many riders. All moving west to east along the north bank.

White men would be talking. Mexicans would be talking and laughing. Only Indians were at peace with silence. Only they chose to move that quietly.

The sounds faded to the north and east, and Wes moved his left hand carefully, brushing the blanket across his waist to his left side.

The sounds continued to fade. He sat up, carefully lowered the hammer on his Colt, then holstered it.

He stood, thought about whether he should go get Mac, then realized Mac could see him from his vantage point. When he saw what Wes was doing, probably he'd come down and join him.

Wes carried his saddle to where the horses were hobbled. He took the hobbles off Charley, then saddled him and mounted. He glanced back across the creek toward Mac.

His friend was not moving. Probably didn't want to call attention to himself and give away his location.

He walked Charley away from the camp, then angled northeast at an easy canter. Not quite a half-hour later he cut a trail. When he had followed it for a little over an hour, he realized the direction was remaining consistent. The Indians were headed east-northeast. Fortunately the slight breeze was out of the northeast.

The nearest settlement in that direction was Uaka. Similar to Watson, it was more the central gathering point for ranchers and dry farmers than an actual town. Still, it was a good day's ride away.

He continued to follow the troop of Indians without seeing them and, he hoped, without them seeing him. They stayed to soft ground mostly, so noise was not an issue, and what breeze there was remained out of the northeast.

Not quite two hours later the land sloped away slightly and he found himself riding alongside a small arroyo. That arroyo and the trail alongside it led down into a broad arroyo, perhaps eighty yards across with twenty to forty foot walls on either side.

Where the smaller arroyo widened out and dropped into the larger one, the trail went over the edge and angled sharply back to the left. It bottomed out some thirty feet below and twenty or thirty yards upstream of where Wes had paused on the rim.

He leaned forward in the saddle and peered into the distance.

And there they were. In the dim light of the moon, he could just make them out. He averted his eyes for a moment, then looked again.

The Indians were just coming up the other side of the arroyo some three hundred yards distant, riding in single file with the leader a ways out in front. He'd heard somewhere the formation was typical of Comanche raiding parties.

As he followed them, he had thought they might be hunters. Now that he had them in sight, he looked back along the line of horses. Each one was carrying a brave. There were no pack animals laden with hides or meat. There were no carts. None of the braves was sharing his horse with dead game. It was definitely a raiding party.

But there was something different about the leader.

Wes frowned. He studied the braves, then looked at the leader again.

If the braves were normal sized, maybe five feet eight to five feet ten or so and around a hundred and forty to a hundred and sixty pounds, the guy out front was only a kid. He was thin, and even taking into account the disparity in distance between him and the other braves, he was a good head shorter than they were.

Wes looked again. He thought maybe the man's horse was smaller, but the horses were all about the same size at around thirteen hands.

Maybe the actual leader of the party had the kid riding point. But if that were true the kid would be a lot farther out front.

None of it made any sense. The whole thing left Wes with an uneasy feeling. He watched until the party was out of sight, then turned Charley and headed back for camp.

He'd alternated Charley's pace between a canter and a walk until he'd cut the Comanches' trail, then had ridden at a canter until he'd come upon them at the arroyo. But he was in no hurry now. If they happened to see him, he didn't want them to know he'd seen them and was rushing to tell someone.

He moved Charley along at a leisurely pace, walking, as he considered what he'd seen.

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On the far side of the arroyo, as soon as Four Crows was over a low rise, as the last of his men were still topping out over the edge of the arroyo, he slipped from his horse and ran along the rise. Finally he settled behind a large creosote and peered through the dim light.

He glanced across to where he thought they'd come into the arroyo and saw nothing. The rider must still be following.

He shifted his attention into the bottom of the arroyo, about halfway between where they'd entered and exited.

For a moment he thought he saw a horse, but it was part of a fallen cottonwood. His vision was playing tricks in the dim light. The head of the imaginary horse was formed by a branch that arched up from the toppled trunk and had not yet lost all its leaves. It bobbed irregularly in the slight breeze.

He traced their path slowly from there back to the base of the trail where they had entered the arroyo. There, for a moment, he paused, carefully watching the boulders. Nothing moved. From there he traced the path up along its angle to the top of the arroyo. The path was barren, with no place to hide a man, much less a man and a horse.

At the top there was only mesquite and acacia and creosote, and— There. The rider that had been following them moved out from behind a creosote bush. He was still on his horse but had turned and was moving away through the intermittent brush. He seemed in no hurry. His horse was walking.

Either he had no fear or he was setting a trap.

Four Crows backed down the rise, then turned and ran back to his horse.

Takes Leaves and Young Elk watched as he came out of the brush and mounted his horse. They moved up alongside him. Takes Leaves said, "Why are we stopping here?"

"You saw the one following?"

Takes Leaves shook his head. "No."

Young Elk said, "I saw nobody." He looked at the ground. "I should be more watchful."

"I saw him. A lone rider," Twin Deer said as he joined them. He had been riding toward the rear of the group.

Four Crows looked at him. "How long did he follow us?"

Twin Deer shrugged. "I first saw him some time before the moon was at the top of the sky. He stopped when we entered the arroyo."

Four Crows nodded. "He waited on the far side. He watched from there as we climbed out. You

saw no others?”

“No. There were no others.” Twin Deer looked around. “This is a good place to camp.” He gestured toward Young Elk. “I could take my brother and go after him. Silence him.”

Four Crows thought for a moment. “No. I watched as he turned away. He was walking his horse. I think he was only curious. At the worst, he was baiting a trap. He wasn’t riding as if to raise an alarm.”

“Perhaps he suspected you were watching.”

“Perhaps. It is of no consequence. We have other things to deal with right now.”

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Four hours after he rode away from the arroyo, with dawn only a couple hours away, Wes reined in next to Mac’s horse at their camp and dismounted. He looped Charley’s reins over a low hanging cottonwood limb, then glanced up at the boulder on the low rise across the creek. Mac was still there.

Wes grinned, feeling more than a little like he’d gotten away with something. He walked back to his bedroll, picked up his top blanket, and turned toward the creek.

He followed a javelina trail up the hill and circled around behind the boulder, then quietly came up alongside Mac’s sleeping form. He gently draped the blanket over his friend, then walked back behind the boulder again to where the top of it angled into the ground. There he walked up on top of it and folded himself down, his legs crossed at the ankles.

As was his routine, he drew his Colt and laid it in his lap. He thought there was no possible way he would fall asleep, but it was better to be safe.

But he didn’t fall asleep. His mind was too busy for sleep.

Just over an hour and a half later, Mac had jerked awake.

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And now, lying on his bedroll on the south side of the Canadian almost a full day later, Wes still didn’t understand what he was supposed to get from having seen the Comanches on the move. He was sure it had something to do with the diminutive leader—he could sense that much—but he still couldn’t quite figure it out.

The guy was skinny, so he was probably young, but so what? Among the tribes, adulthood wasn’t as attached to age as to ability and experience. Maybe he was already an accomplished warrior. Or maybe the elders in his clan thought he had unusual promise. Or maybe his leading a raiding party was all a test.

Wes grinned. He mumbled, “Or maybe his mama just didn’t fed him right. C’mon, Crowley.” But he couldn’t dispel the sense of unease.

Something moved to Wes’ right, but before he had a chance to react, Mac whispered, “Wes?” Then he emerged from the darkness.

Beneath the blanket, Wes lowered the hammer on his Colt. “Yeah?”

“Time to spell me on watch, I guess. You awake?”

Wes grinned at the question. "Yeah, I'm awake." He sat up, then stood and holstered his Colt. He stretched and yawned. "You want to, just go ahead and stretch out here."

Mac nodded. "Good idea. Thanks." He offered Wes the blanket he was carrying. "You want this? Little breezy out there."

"Nah, but thanks. I'm runnin' a little warm anyway. See you in a few hours." And he walked out through the brush. The moon was a couple of slivers less than half-full, but it was plenty to see Mac's tracks in the soft soil.

When he found where Mac had stood his watch—the base of a broad desert willow—he settled in front of a nearby fallen trunk. He leaned back and thought more about the Comanche leader.

Over the next few hours he considered everything from the sounds the horses had made to the tracks. Nothing had been unusual about the tracks except that they were unshod. But even then, each of them looked like all the others. There were no particularly distinguishing marks.

He considered the speed at which they were moving, casually, as if in no great rush and perhaps with no particular target in mind. And he considered again how they had looked as they made their way up out of the arroyo. Nothing unusual there either except the leader.

He shook his head. Finally he decided he simply didn't have all the information he needed to come to a conclusion. Usually that meant he needed to compare notes with someone else. When he pooled his information with theirs, an answer would be forthcoming.

That someone wouldn't be Mac, though. He hadn't seen the raiding party.

Then it dawned on him. Tomorrow, probably around noon or sooner, they would ride into Amarillo and find the headquarters of the local Ranger company. If anyone else knew anything about that particular Comanche, it would be the Rangers.

With his mind finally settled on the question, at least for now, he feared he might fall asleep so he stood up.

But he was wide awake. He wondered who the young Comanche chieftain was. What was the significance of his leading a raiding party at such a young age? What had propelled him to leadership?

He was certain of only one thing, the same feeling he'd been unable to rid himself of earlier.

Someday he would meet the young Comanche war chief face to face.

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Four Crows had expected to circle around in a big arch through Indian Territory to the northeast, east and southeast after he stopped in his village. But from there, as he ate and related his tale, he and his three friends rode west-southwest on advice of Twin Deer. He was Four Crows' most trusted advisor, and he said there was a village in that direction where he was certain Four Crows would find more braves committed to ridding Comancheria of the invaders.

They picked up two more men there, then rode southeast to another village where they picked up one more, then east again to a village where they picked up yet another one. From there, they loosely followed the north bank of what the white-eyes called Coldwater Creek for a time, then

headed northeast for Red Hawk's village.

They had picked up a trail along Coldwater Creek too, but he had turned away once they passed through a particularly broad, steep arroyo near the Territory.

Along the north bank of Wolf Creek a few miles northeast of the trading post and fledgling settlement named after Alexander Shattuck, Four Crows and his eight braves rode into a Comanche village. Near the center of the village, Four Crows halted.

A few women were outside, a few children. It was late in the day. Most of the braves were inside, probably resting.

Four Crows yelled, "Tilo ka Tuwikáa Hayarokwetü!"

A few heads poked out through a few flaps.

Four Crows yelled again. "Tilo ka Tuwikáa Hayarokwetü!"

More flaps opened, more heads poked out, and braves began to filter out of the tents. They walked toward the diminutive brave.

Behind them, toward the end of the village, an elder poked his head out through the flap of his tipi, then stepped out and came up the center of the path. He raised both hands, palms up. "What is going on? Why are you yelling, young one?"

Four Crows looked down at him from his horse. Quietly, he said, "I am Four Crows. I come with news of Iron Bear. I was born where he fell. I carry within me his spirit, and I bear the sacred number in my name. I will drive from Comancheria the white eyes and all who are not Comanche."

The other braves from the village had slowly drawn nearer as Four Crows spoke to the elder.

A brave in his mid-twenties jostled the old man's left shoulder as he thrust his fist past him. Even as the elder frowned at him, the brave pointed at Four Crows. He laughed, then glanced around at the other braves, then looked at Four Crows again. He jutted out his chin, and said, "Who is this child braggart to come among us? I have ridden with Iron Bear many times, but this one has not. He lies. He is too young."

Four Crows locked the brave in his gaze, his eyes smoldering.

Slowly, deliberately, his gaze on the brave the whole time, he lifted his left leg straight up over his horse's neck and slipped off the right side, dropping only a few feet in front of the brave. Still staring at the brave, he said quietly, "I have never seen you before, and I know all who rode with Iron Bear. What is your name?"

The brave glared at him, but under Four Crows' withering stare he soon averted his gaze and looked around at his friends.

None of them showed any emotion.

He looked at Four Crows again. "I will not answer your questions. You are a child and a liar." He sneered and leaned closer, then hissed, "You should run along home before your mama misses you."

Behind Four Crows, his braves were still mounted. Takes Leaves glanced at Young Elk and

shook his head. Softly, he said, "Oh oh."

Twin Deer frowned at him.

But Four Crows smiled broadly. "I truly am sorry, Coward Who Has No Name. I came here to seek counsel with Comanche braves. I should not have bothered you." He extended his right hand. "Friends?"

The brave's eyes grew wide with anger. He drew his knife and lunged at Four Crows.

The smaller Indian stepped into the lunge, caught the larger brave under the left arm, and snapped forward at the waist, flinging the brave in a big arc over his hip.

No Name landed flat on his back, momentarily creating a man-shaped geyser of red dust. Some of the others winced at the sound of the breath rushing out of him.

Before the mouthy brave knew what had happened, Four Crows had driven his knee hard into the man's solar plexus, driving out another rush of breath, then grabbed the brave's right hand and torqued it at the wrist, disarming him. In a blink he was kneeling on the brave's chest, and the man's knife was strategically positioned at his own throat.

Four Crows leaned forward, pressing just hard enough against the blade so No Name could feel it. Four Crows' breath was hot on the brave's nose, and his eyes were filled with fire. Quietly he said, "Disrespect me again and I will skin you alive in front of your village." Maintaining his gaze, he leaned back. As he rose, he quickly shifted his weight to his knee again, then stood. He turned and handed the brave's knife to Twin Deer, who slipped it into the waistband of his breeches.

Four Crows turned again and deliberately stepped over the brave on the ground. He looked at the elder. "Elder, I apologize for the trouble. It was not my intention. However, I cannot allow such a show of disrespect."

The elder nodded. "Welcome, Four Crows. It is well that you have come. If you would come to my tipi, we will talk of many things." He looked past Four Crows for a moment at the brave who was still lying on the ground. He gestured with his left hand. "See to it these men are fed and their horses fed and watered, One With No Name."

The elder looked at Four Crows again and said, "Come." He turned away and Four Crows walked just behind him and to the right, a sign of respect for the elder.

As Four Crows' men dismounted behind him, the sounds of welcoming wafted through the early evening air. The elder had spoken.

At the tipi, Four Crows moved to one side and grasped the edge of the flap. He held it for the elder, then crouched and entered behind him.

When they were both seated and the elder's woman had given each of them a gourd of water, Four Crows sipped to show his appreciation. Then he looked at the elder. "Why did you not say your name outside, Red Hawk?"

A grin tugged at the corner of the elder's mouth. He leaned forward to place a small stick in the fire. "Ah, so you know. Perhaps I wanted to see whether you would kill me as well."

"I have a great deal of respect for you. Your brother spoke of you often. It is why I came to you first. I would seek guidance from you, as I sought guidance from Iron Bear."

"You said earlier that you were born where Iron Bear fell, and now you speak as if Iron Bear is no more. You have news?"

Four Crows nodded, then conveyed his version of what had happened in the arroyo near the place where the sides were pinched together.

In the manner of warriors of every clime and place, he was tempted to embellish the truth in places, but also in the manner of all warriors, out of respect for the elder, he did not. He even admitted not obeying Iron Bear's implied order to come down from the bluff after checking to make sure it was clear, that he had decided instead to scout ahead on his own and thereby impress Iron Bear further. The decision had saved his life but he realized Red Hawk could as easily take it for an act of cowardice.

He didn't. Red Hawk listened quietly, attentively, nodding occasionally.

Finally Four Crows said, "In the end, Iron Bear was not cautious enough, but only because he cared so strongly for his people. He was thinking more, I think, of resting them than of setting a trap for the Rangers."

The old man nodded. "His vision for the nation often was veiled by his compassion for those around him at the moment." He sighed. "And more than once he underestimated the Rangers. Did he tell you of those times?"

Four Crows shook his head. "No."

"You need to know. The Rangers will be your greatest adversaries."

"Six summers ago, the last time Iron Bear and I were together, he called a halt on the south side of the Canadian River north of the town of Amarillo. Even as we settled in, nothing felt right. The trees were whispering, and fish were leaping in the river although it was a moonless night. The crickets, even, were silent."

"We were too close to something bad, and I told Iron Bear so."

"He said we would move the following morning before first light, that he wanted only to give us all a few hours' rest."

"Less than an hour later, still unable to rest for every nerve standing on end, I gathered my men and told them we were moving northeast. Even as tired as they were, they recognized the danger and quickly made preparations."

"We mounted and walked our horses away from the camp. It must have been near the middle of the night. We had been moving at that pace for some time when Iron Bear caught up with us. His horse was lathered. He had been riding hard."

"He yelled my name, then broke through the brush to my left and stopped in front of me. Our riding out had undermined his authority, he said, and we should return to his camp."

"I said no, that we were unable to rest there. We would make a separate camp."

"Even as he parted his lips to respond to me, the gunfire broke out. There must have been a

hundred shots fired. Within a very short period of time, it began, built to a crescendo and died. It was over before we could get our horses turned around.

“Another time, toward the end of summer five years ago, two Rangers were waiting where they thought Iron Bear would be, and they were right. My brother was traveling alone through an arroyo when they opened fire. The first two shots missed, and then one bullet hit a medallion dangling from his neck. It left a bruise on his chest the size of my open hand.

“They continued firing as he wheeled his horse around and rode hard up the side of the arroyo. Other shots missed. Some bullets ricocheted off rocks as he rode past, and dirt was kicking up all around him as he continued up the side. Finally, a second bullet struck him hard in the back just before a third ripped past his neck, here.”

The old man drew a finger along the right side of his neck, then forward across his jawline to his chin. “That one bullet gave him those two scars on his neck and his jaw.” He shook his head. “The impact of the bullet that hit his back nearly took him from his horse, but it did no lasting harm. It was absorbed in his arrow scabbard. It broke all of his arrows but one.”

Red Hawk paused for a moment, his gaze lost in the memory, and smiled. He shook his head. “When my brother cleared the edge of the arroyo, he stopped his horse, dismounted and crept back to the edge. He spotted the Rangers, then took his only unharmed arrow from his quiver. Then he strung it in his bow and fired it at them. At the same time, he said he yelled at them, ‘Here is the arrow you did not kill. Use it in good health.’ Then he laughed.

“Do you see how he was? The Rangers were not within range, but he said he got the arrow close enough so they noticed. I think he did it only to prove to them he was unharmed.”

Again the old warrior paused, and a somber look came over him. “Sometimes, Four Crows, know that good fortune can be a bad thing. Never allow it to matter to you too much.

“My brother’s good fortune at having been absent when the Rangers sprang their first attack at the Canadian River bolstered his confidence. And then his escaping a fusillade of bullets in the ambush in the arroyo cemented in his mind that he was immune to the Rangers’ attempts to kill him.

“When he repeated the tale in villages, others believed him invincible as well, and in no time he had raised a large raiding party. Braves came and went, but the group remained large enough to separate into two or even three groups when necessary. Those times the groups would raid separately, then meet at a predesignated location to discuss other targets.

“When they raided separately, the Rangers couldn’t be sure whether it was Iron Bear or someone else. It kept them guessing at locations and even the frequency of the raids. It was a smart way to do it.

“But for some reason, Iron Bear began to raid again with the whole group. I never understood his reasoning. He was able to raid fewer places and he was easier to track. The time you rode with him was his fifth such raid in only two months.” He shook his head. “It was too much.

“What he did not understand is that the Rangers study the land. They respect it and they know

it as well as we do. They also study the Comanches, and they watch for patterns. That is how they caught up with Iron Bear before, and that is how they caught up with him the last time.

“When you ride, no matter the size of your party, never repeat a route or a tactic more often than every fourth time, or even less often. And never allow your emotions or your pride to enter into your work.” The old man paused again and peered at Four Crows for a moment. “I think you have signed what you have done. If you continue to do so, they will find you more quickly.”

Four Crows thought of the girl he had ordered pinned to the ground with fourteen arrows, and of his bravado on the bluff overlooking the Rangers, but he only nodded. He would not confess his foolishness to Red Hawk, even though the elder seemed to already know. It didn’t matter. He couldn’t change what he had already done.

Red Hawk said, “Your goal is noble. Your means will be what they must. All that remains is to decide your motivation. You must decide whether you will ride for Four Crows or whether you will ride for the Comanche.” He raised his hands before him, palms out. “This is not something you must decide for me, but only for yourself. Only within yourself.”

Again Four Crows nodded. “I understand, my chief.”

Red Hawk nodded. “And what of you for now, Four Crows? Would you gather the people, perhaps even the nations, to drive out the invaders?”

“No.”

“What, then?”

Four Crows looked at Red Hawk for a long moment. A weariness settled over him and he felt many times his age. His voice was quiet. “Though I hesitate to say it, despise the sound of it even as it comes from my own mouth, our time, the time of the Comanche, is closing, my chief.”

He paused, expecting a response.

Red Hawk only waited.

Four Crows continued. “The white-eyes will bring change upon us, as we brought change upon those who were here before. But the white-eyes must earn their way, as we earned our way.” He hesitated, then said, “I am the price they will pay.

“I and my braves will raid as Iron Bear raided. We will come as a wind, laying waste to the trespassers, and we will leave as a breeze, secretly and without remorse. We will have touched all of them and will have been touched by none.

“Those who see us will not live to speak of it. Those who attempt to remain in Comancheria will come to believe the land itself is rising up against them.”

Four Crows paused, then said, “When I am grown old they will have won, but they will know we were here.”

Red Hawk nodded, his eyes misting. He waited for a moment, then stood.

Four Crows stood as well.

Red Hawk offered his hand, and Four Crows reached past it, clasping the elder’s wrist as the elder clasped his.

Red Hawk said, "You speak a quiet truth when boasting would serve you better. Some here will want to ride with you. If I were a younger man, I would follow you myself."

Red Hawk released his grip, then patted Four Crows on both shoulders with his hands. "Four Crows, my younger brother, I am old, but I still have a few tricks left. I have knowledge of something that will help a great deal. I had not decided until now whether to share that knowledge with you. Now I have decided." He paused.

Though Red Hawk left an opening, Four Crows remained respectful and held his tongue, waiting patiently for the elder to continue.

Red Hawk nodded to indicate his approval, then said, "Two days from now, some men will bring a wagon with guns, the new repeating rifles. There will be enough for you and for all who ride with you."

Four Crows said, "Thank you, elder. I will rest here and wait."

Red Hawk nodded. "You are wise. Rest here for two days, and then you will ride well and well-armed, young chief."

\* \* \*

In the early afternoon of their third day out of Amarillo, Corporal Court Edwards and Rangers Mason Philby and Blake Stanton rode through the open front gate of Fort Perry. Court looked over at Mason and said, "You ever see the gate standin' open like that when you been here before?"

Mason shook his head. "Not just standin' open with nobody comin' or goin'. I didn't see no guards either. Strange." He looked about. "Place looks deserted."

Court nodded. Quietly he said, "Somethin' ain't right, that's for sure. Keep your eyes open."

Across the compound ahead of them was the squat, square headquarters building nestled near the south perimeter wall. When they were still some distance away, the door opened, a face appeared and then disappeared, and the door closed.

Nothing else was moving anywhere. Even the flag on the flagpole was hanging, listless in the hot, dry air.

The Rangers walked their horses toward the building. The sign in front read Headquarters, 4th Cavalry.

They reined in at the hitching rail and dismounted just as a sergeant came out.

Edwards looked at him. His uniform fit well, but he was a very large man at around six feet four inches and probably pushing three hundred pounds. In a holster on his right side was a Remington Army model revolver.

The sergeant glanced at them, put his hands on his hips and waited.

When Corporal Edwards stepped up onto the porch, he smiled and smoothly proffered his hand. "Corporal Edwards, Texas Rangers, out of Amarillo."

The sergeant briefly shook his hand, then released it as if he was touching something dirty. He put his hand back on his hip. "Sergeant McGaffey. What can I do for the Texas Rangers today?"

Court gestured toward his companions. "These men are Rangers Philby and Stanton."

Philby proffered his hand. "Good to meet you."

The sergeant held up one hand, palm out. "Yeah, yeah, good to meet you too, both of you." He looked at Court again. "So what can I do for you again?"

Edwards said, "If it's convenient, I'd like to talk with your colonel."

"About what?"

Something told Edwards not to mention the telegram to his captain. If the sergeant didn't already know, there was probably a good reason.

He shrugged. "I just wanted to see if maybe he can put me an' my men up for the night. We been on the trail awhile. It'd sure be nice to have a little whiskey an' then maybe sleep in a clean bed instead of on the ground for a change." He grinned. "It's another two, three days to Amarillo."

The sergeant frowned. "I see. Well, unfortunately it ain't convenient." He paused as his cheeks began to flush. "Well, what I mean, the colonel's not in just now."

Edwards frowned. "No? Do you know when he'll be back?"

"Ah... well, no, I'm not sure. He's uh... he's leading a troop up north. Northwest, I think he said. Expected to be gone three, four days."

Court nodded. "Okay. I think I understand."

He twitched his shoulders as if to turn away. As his Colt cleared leather in his right hand, he put his left hand on the sergeant's chest and pressed him hard back against the wall. Dust puffed around his shoulders.

The sergeant jerked his right hand down to his Remington.

By then, Court's Colt was cocked, the barrel pressed up against the sergeant's solar plexus. "I wouldn't."

The sergeant looked at him for a moment, then lifted his hand away from his revolver.

Philby took a quick step forward and snatched the sergeant's Remington from his holster. "Got it," he said quietly and passed the weapon behind him to Stanton.

Court focused his gaze on the sergeant's eyes as he pressed him harder back against the wall, the barrel of his Colt still digging into the man's midsection. Barely above a whisper, he said, "How many are inside?"

The sergeant rolled his eyes downward, looking past his cheeks. "W-what?"

Court pressed harder with the Colt. "You heard me."

"I-I don't know what you're talking about. Your captain's gonna hear about this and—"

"You ever seen a man gut shot at close range with a .45 caliber bullet? Blow your spine right out your back. You'll stick to the wall."

"Okay, okay. Just let me—"

Court pressed again with the Colt. "How many?"

"Three. Three inside here."

"Where's the colonel?"

“I told you, he led—”

Court dug with the barrel again. “Bullshit. Colonels don’t lead patrols. Where is he?”

The sergeant seemed to flag. “Stockade. He’s in the stockade.”

Philby glanced back at Stanton, then gestured with his chin toward a formidable building across the compound.

Stanton stepped off the porch.

Court said, “Wait, Philby, Stanton.”

Stanton stopped.

Court turned his attention back to the sergeant. He hooked his left hand in the sergeant’s uniform shirt and pulled him away from the wall, then put his hand on his left shoulder and shoved, turning him toward the door. “We’re goin’ in. You first.”

“But I—”

Court pressed the barrel of his Colt against the man’s back. “Shut up. Open the door, then step through.”

The sergeant turned the doorknob and began pushing the door open. He leaned his head left toward the opening, then quickly said, “It’s the Rangers! Don’t sh—”

Two explosions filled the room and the sergeant slammed back against Court, who shoved him forward to the left. The door slapped against the wall on the left and was trapped there by the sergeant’s leg and foot as he fell.

Court’s Colt bucked just as Philby’s exploded behind him to the right and the man in the center of the room dropped his revolver and staggered backward, clawing at his stomach with both hands.

Just as the sergeant hit the floor face down, Court’s revolver bucked again and a man near the left corner slammed back against the wall, then sat down hard in the corner, a hole in his chest.

Another revolver exploded and something scalding ripped through Court’s shirt just above his right bicep and across Philby’s shirt where his left shoulder joined his neck.

As Stanton stepped past Philby all three Rangers fired and the man was slammed backward to the wall, then fell forward. On the floor he arched his back once, as if his middle was trying to escape the rest of him, then died.

White smoke hung heavy in the air.

His Colt still leveled, Stanton said, “What the hell? What is wrong with these people?”

Court shook his head. “Sometimes people wake up with really stupid ideas, that’s all.”

Through the open door came the sound of a horse galloping away.

Stanton wheeled around and ran through the door. He stopped on the porch, his Colt cocked and aimed.

A man was just tearing out through the open gate, leaning low over the neck of his horse.

Stanton lowered the hammer on his revolver and stepped back inside. “Somebody just headed out through the gate as hard as he could go.”

Court was looking at his right shoulder. "Figures. Probably whoever was watching the prisoners in the stockade." The bullet had drawn an angry red line between the top of his bicep and the bottom of his shoulder. He grinned and looked around. "Just a scratch. Everybody else okay?"

Philby had one hand pressed to the base of his neck on the left side. "Could you look at this? Stings a little." He moved his hand.

Court looked, then laughed. "Man, you an' me have to be the two luckiest men who ever lived. Looks like he used the same red ink on you that he used on me." He glanced at Stanton. "You weren't hit?"

"No sir."

Court nodded, then looked at Philby. "Well, that makes us the two luckiest men who ever lived. Reckon we ought'a go get the colonel an' see what's goin' on. We get over there, keep your eyes open. The guy who left might just be a decoy."

Stanton turned and led the way outside.

As they crossed the porch, Philby pointed. "That building over there... that's the stockade. That smaller building to the right there's the armory." The armory was set at an angle to the stockade. He glanced back at Court. "Might want to check that too."

Court nodded. "Good idea." He glanced at Stanton. "Stand to one side of the stockade door. Anybody comes out, stop 'em."

Stanton nodded and moved away.

As Edwards and Philby neared the armory, Court gestured toward one side of the door.

Philby took his meaning and positioned himself to one side, his Colt pulled and cocked.

Court tried the door and found it locked. He rapped on it. Gruffly, he said, "Hey, open up. It's me."

There was no answer, and no sounds came from inside.

Court looked at Philby. "There's nobody in there. If that's what they were after, they hadn't opened it yet. If they had, they'd have been gone before we got here or we'd have caught them in the middle of loading."

Philby nodded.

They both turned and began to cross the space toward the stockade. When they got there, Philby took up a position on the other side of the door from Stanton, then reached across for the door knob. He looked at Court.

Court drew his Colt and cocked it, then nodded.

Philby turned the door knob.

The door came free and he pushed it open.

Court strode through the opening, ready for anything.

Except for a beat up wooden desk the office was empty. There wasn't even a chair.

On the back wall next to the door in the center was a large key ring with three keys on it. He

grasped the keys hanging at the bottom of the ring to keep them silent, then took the ring from the wall. He crouched and tried the door handle.

It was unlocked.

He pulled it toward him carefully and Philby stepped through, his Colt leveled.

"You a Ranger?" An older man was peering at Philby through the bars. He was wearing uniform trousers and an undershirt. "Man, am I glad to see you!"

Philby nodded, then put one finger to his mouth.

The man said, "It's all right. I'm Colonel Crutcher. There aren't any more of 'em here. I heard the last one taking off a few minutes ago, right after all the shooting started. I guess that was you boys, eh?"

Court came in behind Philby. Stanton remained in the outer office. Court said, "You know why we're here, Colonel?"

"I assume because of my telegram."

"Which you sent to who?"

"Captain Flowers down in Amarillo. Sent it a few days ago. What took you so long?"

"It's a three day ride, Colonel. We got here in a little over two." Court handed the key ring to Philby, then glanced at the colonel again. "Let him know who to let out. Where is everybody?"

As Philby opened the cell door, the colonel stepped through. "We're short handed too. Lieutenant's gone with most of the men on patrol. They left two days ago. Should be back tomorrow, but by then it would've been too late." He glanced at Philby. "Release everyone, please."

He turned back to Court as he stepped into the outer office. "You the leader of this group?"

Court followed him. "Yes sir. Corporal Edwards. Court Edwards." He proffered his hand. "Good to meet you."

The colonel shook hands with him. "Likewise, but I wish the circumstances were different. I assume there's a mess to clean up in my office?"

"Fraid so, Colonel. So what's goin' on?"

The colonel turned around. He pointed at a young soldier who had distinguished himself earlier. "You. What's your name?"

The young soldier snapped to attention. "Ryan, sir. Marly Ryan." He was the only one who had questioned the sergeant's orders when they were all being locked up.

"Ryan, you're a corporal now. We have what, about a dozen men left?"

"Yes sir. Thirteen, countin' me. Fourteen with you, Colonel."

"All right." He reached into the left front pocket of his uniform trousers and pulled out a key. He passed it to the new corporal. "This is the key to the armory. As soon as you're out of here, send four men to secure the main gate. Then they will report to my office for a burial detail. One of them should bring a wagon. They shouldn't carry weapons of any kind.

"Meanwhile, take the other eight men to the armory. Temporarily issue each of them a

Winchester repeating carbine and two boxes of shells. You'll have to have them wipe the packing grease off, but they should do that quickly. They can clean them more thoroughly later.

"Have them load the weapons before they leave the armory. The repeater has a side gate loading mechanism and the cartridges go in nose first. These are new. There are no caps and balls, no powder. It's all in the cartridges."

"Yes sir. I seen one before, how it worked an' all."

"Very well. Once those eight men are armed, post two on either side of the gate on the battlements. I recommend you switch them out every four hours, but that's up to you. Any questions?"

"No sir. Thank you for the opportunity, sir."

The colonel nodded and the young corporal turned to his task.

The colonel turned back to Court. "Well, that'll work if the armory's still there. I think that's what those men were after."

Court said, "We checked it on the way in, Colonel. Door's locked."

The colonel nodded. "Good. Very good." They left the stockade and continued walking toward the colonel's office.

The colonel said, "Well, I came in a couple months ago. My predecessor was supposedly killed during an attack on the fort. John and I—John Melcolm, my predecessor, and I—attended the academy together. We came from the same home town. I knew him well. Naturally, after I settled in, I started asking for details about the attack and how my friend died.

"The sergeant's descriptions were sketchy at best, but we officers are trained to know we can count on the sergeant. I assumed if he was withholding anything he thought he had good reason. Still, I was a little wary, so I asked a few of the men, in private of course, about the attack.

"Well, they looked at me as if I'd grown a new head. There had been no attack, they said. I couldn't be sure they weren't just trying to put one over on the new commander, but after a few days of that, I sent that telegram to Captain Flowers. In retrospect, I should have canceled the patrol too, until I was sure of what was going on."

He paused and shook his head. "But I didn't. I sent them out on schedule. Almost emptied the fort. That was two days ago.

"Then yesterday in the late afternoon, I was about to leave for the day when a question occurred to me. The sergeant had left a bit earlier, so I went by his quarters. He wasn't there, but the door was ajar so I called out. There was no answer, so I pushed the door open. I thought maybe he was in a back room and hadn't heard me.

"I walked into his sleeping area. There on the wall, hanging from a peg, was the set of matching engraved, pearl handled Colts John's parents gave him when he graduated from the academy. I thought it was peculiar that those hadn't been returned to his father.

"This morning when the sergeant came in, I asked him about them, and he said the colonel had given them to him before he died. Problem was, in his official report he had said the colonel

was dead when he found him near the gate. When I asked about that discrepancy, he pulled his gun on me.

“Turned out he knew almost a year ago when this fort would be receiving the new Winchester repeating carbines. He had himself transferred in as part of a scheme. He and his brother, a Comanchero from what I could gather, were going to empty the armory and trade the weapons to their friends, the Comanches. John uncovered their scheme and was killed as a result.

“He and I walked to the stockade together, his gun on me the whole time. He put me in a cell, then left, locking the door behind him. He said it would all be over soon, and if I made any noise he’d kill anyone who responded. The only ones left on the fort other than me and the sergeant were green young kids. He knew I wouldn’t sacrifice them.

“A few hours later, his brother and a couple of others arrived and they rounded up the troops that were still here. Sergeant McGaffey called them all to formation without weapons. Then he and his friends marched them to the stockade and locked them up. They thought it was training until they saw that I was in there too.” He looked at the floor of the porch as they stepped up on it. “And here we are.”

Court nodded as he held the door to the headquarters open. “That’s some story, Colonel.”

The colonel walked through.

When his gaze fell on the sergeant, he shook his head. He looked for a moment at the man sitting with his back in the corner, his chin on his chest, then walked around the desk. He approached the man on the floor, put the toe of his boot under the man’s right shoulder, and rolled him over.

He looked at the man for a moment, then shook his head again. “Well, the one you really wanted apparently is the one who got away.”

Just then three young men in uniform came in. One looked at the colonel. “Burial detail, sir.”

“Yes, yes.” He frowned. “There should be a fourth man.”

“Beggin’ the colonel’s pardon, sir, John—that is, Private Simpson—he’s gettin’ the wagon.”

The colonel nodded. “Of course. All right, drag the sergeant and these other men outside. Do that first. Then take their weapons and ammunition, and check their pockets for anything valuable. Then load them up in the wagon and bury them. You know where the cemetery is off post?”

“Yes sir.”

“All right. Go about your task.”

As he finished, the wagon pulled up out front and Private Simpson came in. It took all four of the young men to move the sergeant outside. Then they came back in and paired off to move the other two.

When the men had exited the office, Court said, “You mentioned the one who got away. Who’s that?”

The colonel looked at him for a moment and frowned. “What? Oh, he was the Comanchero I

mentioned, a fellow named Jade Talbot.”

Court nodded and glanced at Philby, then back at the colonel. “We’ve heard of him.”

The colonel said, “From what they were saying, he’s the sergeant’s half-brother. He seemed like a rough sort. I’m pretty sure he would rather have just killed the lot of us.”

“I don’t doubt that. He’s not a Comanchero though. He’s independent, but he’s worked with the Comancheros before. Them and some other bad types.” Court frowned. “So if all they wanted was to clear out the armory, why didn’t they?”

“I don’t know. They kept saying ‘the wagon’ was supposed to be here tonight. I guess they were waiting for a particular wagon. That Talbot guy didn’t seem too pleased. Seemed nervous most of the time they were here.”

Corporal Ryan came in and rapped on the open door with his knuckles. “Colonel?”

The colonel looked up. “Yes?”

“The gate is secured, sir, and the watch is set. I also took the liberty of preparing quarters in the barracks for the Rangers, sir.” He crossed the room, holding up the key the colonel had handed him earlier. “Here’s the colonel’s key for the armory, sir.”

The colonel held up one hand, palm out. “You’re the ranking enlisted man on post right now. You hold onto that for the time being. As for the rest,” and he turned to look at Court, “will you and your men stay overnight, Corporal Edwards?”

“Yes sir, and thanks.” He turned and proffered his hand to the young soldier. “And thank you, Corporal.”

The younger man grinned. “Yes sir, my pleasure, sir.” He glanced at the colonel, then executed a quick about-face and left the room.

Court grinned at the colonel. “Reckon maybe you made a good choice there, Colonel.”

\* \* \*

The captain had promoted Corporal Edwards only a few days earlier, and here stood two brand new would-be recruits before him.

The slim blond one had his hat in his hand, his fingers working nervously around the brim. He was every bit of five feet seven inches, maybe even five feet eight, though the captain was sure the young man would say he was at least five nine. He was maybe a hundred and fifty pounds, with a good frame that looked like he’d spent some time in the saddle.

The other one was tall, a legitimate six feet plus a couple inches, and maybe a little taller than that. His dark brown hair was rough-cut, but it wasn’t overly long. He was stocky, probably weighing in the vicinity of two hundred pounds, but he seemed to carry it well. Of course, he was only seventeen years old.

Captain Flowers got out of his chair and came around the desk. He sat with one hip on the corner of his desk and looked at the smaller of the youngsters standing before him. “Did you say Western Z Crowley? Western is your actual name?”

“Yes sir.”

“And you’re sure you’re every bit of sixteen years old?”

“Yes sir. Be seventeen in a few months. November, sir.”

The captain nodded. “Uh huh. And what does the Z stand for?”

Wes shrugged. “Just Z, sir, far as I know.”

“Well, what do your parents say?”

“‘Bout what, sir?”

“Well, about your middle name? Or about you joinin’ the Rangers for that matter?”

“Nothin’ about my name, sir, an’ I reckon they ain’t got no say about the other. I been on my own since I was seven. So almost ten years.” He locked his gaze on the captain’s eyes and nodded slightly. “I ain’t seen ‘em since then and I guess I done all right.”

A grin tugged at the corner of the captain’s mouth. “Yes... yes, I can see that you have.” He turned to the other youth. “And what’s your story?”

“I’m Otis McFadden, sir. I prefer Mac.” He jerked a thumb toward Wes. “Nickname my partner here gave me awhile back. ‘Course you can call me whatever you like.”

“And you’re wanting to join the Rangers too? Why?”

Mac nodded. “Yes sir. It was my idea. We seen some Rangers come through Watson—that’s up north a couple days’ ride—an’ I was impressed right away. One of ‘em even nodded at me as they rode out after they swapped for some horses. Seven for seven they swapped in about five minutes. Most impressive thing I ever saw. An’ we overheard ‘em talkin’ about that Comanche, Iron Bear. Well, then they were talkin’ about how they were gonna go after him, an’ —”

The captain held up his hand. “All right.” He looked at Wes. “What about you? Why do you want to join the Rangers?”

Wes shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Well, frankly, Captain, I like the way those men sat their horses when they rode by that day. Seems to me that’s somethin’ to aspire to.” He shrugged. “‘Sides, Mac here said he was gonna join, an’ me an’ Mac generally do everything together so....”

“All right, boys. Get your horses taken care of at the livery stable down the street. It’s called Sanchez Livery. Ramón Sanchez is the owner. Takes care of all our horses for us. Tell him I sent you and that you’ll be sworn in as Rangers tomorrow morning.”

Mac grinned. “Yes sir!” He spun on his heel.

The captain said, “Hold on, now, Mr. McFadden. Hold on just a minute. I have some other things to tell you.”

Mac stopped and turned around. “Sorry, Captain.”

“All right. That’s all right. After you get your horses taken care of, go across the street to the Amarillo Inn. Tell the man at the bar I sent you and that you each need a room. One for each of you, not together. All the Rangers in the company live over there. That gonna be a problem?” He looked from Wes to Mac.

Wes said, “No sir.”

Mac shook his head. "No sir."

"All right. You get your horses taken care of, then get your rooms and get your gear stored. Then you're off until tomorrow morning. I want you both back in here, with a bath and in clean clothes if you've got 'em, at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. You can meet everybody in the morning and we'll talk a bit more. Then I'll swear you in."

Wes said, "Yes sir."

Mac nodded. "Yes sir."

"All right. I'll see you then."

The boys turned away.

"Wait. Sorry. Hold on just a minute. I forgot something."

They stopped and turned back.

"You have any money?"

Wes said, "No sir."

Mac shook his head.

The captain went to his desk, opened a drawer and pulled out two five dollar gold coins. He handed one to each of them. "Use that to get a couple changes of clothes, a bath and a meal. You don't have to pay for your room or the livery, all right? And I recommend you stay out of the saloon, but that's up to you." He turned away. "See you in the morning."

Mac said, "Thanks Captain." He turned and headed for the door.

Wes turned toward Mac and said, "Mac, could you maybe take ol' Charley to the livery since you're goin' anyway? I'll catch up with you over at the Amarillo Inn."

"Sure. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to bend the captain's ear about my folks for a minute. It's kind'a private."

Mac grinned and nodded. "Got it. See you in a bit." He went out and closed the door behind him.

The captain said, "So what's this about your folks?"

Wes looked at him and grinned. "Actually I wanted to tell you about something I saw on the trail down here from Watson, Captain. Mac didn't know about it and it might be better to keep it that way."

The captain frowned. "Why's that? Don't you trust him?"

"What? Oh, yes sir, I do."

"Then why do you not want him to know what you saw?"

Wes shrugged. "Well... ol' Mac, he was on watch when it happened, but I guess he was really tired. He fell asleep. I didn't want to embarrass him, so I didn't tell him."

"Ah." The captain nodded, a slight smile playing across his face. "All right, so what did you see?"

"A Comanche raiding party, sir."

The captain's smile disappeared. "Are you sure?"

"Well, yes sir, I think they were Comanches. They were riding like I've heard Comanches ride, slow, single file, leader out front."

The captain nodded. "You sure it wasn't a hunting party?"

"Well, no sir, I couldn't swear to it. But there were nine of 'em with no pack horses and no meat. So they'd have to be the worst hunting party ever."

The captain nodded.

"But the thing is, it was really strange. I mean, the leader was strange. He was... differ'nt."

The captain arched his eyebrows. "Different how?"

"Well, now I was a good three hundred yards away, but even that far off I could see he looked like a skinny little kid, maybe twelve or thirteen years old."

"I see. And where did you see them?"

"Me an' Mac were camped on the north side of Coldwater Creek night before last. Mac had moved off across the stream and up a low rise on watch. Maybe an hour or so later I heard somethin' movin' through the brush north of me."

"Pretty soon the sounds kind'a faded, so I could tell generally what direction they were heading. Well, I got up, saddled ol' Charley and rode out after 'em. I cut sign about a half-hour out, then followed their trail for a couple more hours. They—"

"Wait. You followed a band of Comanche braves for two and a half hours?"

Wes grinned. "Yes sir. It wasn't that hard to track 'em and the wind was in my face so I knew their horses couldn't smell me an' ol' Charley."

The captain nodded. "All right. Go on."

"Well, they stayed true to the northeast. About three hours in, I come up on a broad arroyo. I stopped at the edge, an' they were just comin' up out of it on the far side about three hundred yards down."

The captain looked at the floor and shook his head, then looked up again. "Is that it?"

"Yes sir, that's most of it."

"I see. Well young Mister Crowley, that was selfish and irresponsible. If they'd seen you, even your friend would never know what became of you because you didn't tell him where you were going... well, unless they caught you close to your camp and decided to torture you. Then it probably would have cost your friend his life as well."

"Thing is, even if he was smart enough to let them have you, what he heard that night would have haunted him for the rest of his life." The captain pointed at Wes. "Now you think about that. You risked your life and your friend's life just to satisfy your curiosity. But what's worse, you didn't see fit to tell your partner about it even after the fact. You make a decision that big about his life, don't you think maybe you ought to let him in on it?"

"Well, yes sir, when you put it like that."

"That's the only way to put it. From what you've told me, that's exactly the way it was. And tell me, what did you plan to do if the Comanches had sent back a rear guard and he spotted you? Or

if they had circled back on you?”

Wes shrugged. Meekly he said, “Guess maybe I’d’a fought.”

The captain nodded. “Oh you’d have fought all right. But that isn’t a plan, Crowley. That’s a response to the other guy’s plan. You let the other guy do what he wants and you just respond, nine times out of ten you’re going to lose.

“But yes, you’d have fought, and if you were lucky they’d have killed you. If not, if they had taken you captive... well, you don’t even want to know.”

The captain stood and looked at Wes.

“Those are your first three lessons as a Ranger, and they might be the most important lessons you’ll ever learn. One, don’t ever go off by yourself without someone else at least knowing where you’re going. Two, don’t ever do anything serious without a plan. And three—maybe more important than the other two—trust your partner.

“If you feel like you can’t trust your partner completely, don’t ride with him. So I’ll ask you again, is Mac trustworthy?”

“Oh, yes sir. Me an’ him been through a lot together. I’d trust him with my life.”

The captain nodded. “Then you can trust him with the truth. You can trust me and the men you’re going to meet tomorrow morning too.” He paused for a moment, then said, “In fact, in light of this new information, I’m going to call a general meeting after you’re sworn in tomorrow morning. I’ll ask you to tell your story to the gathered men. Will you do that?”

Wes nodded. “Yes sir.”

The captain said, “Good. Good. I think the other Rangers will be able to add some things to your information about the leader of that raiding party. Now, is there anything else?”

“No sir.”

“All right. Tend to your personal business and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yes sir.” Wes turned away.

“And Crowley?”

He stopped and turned around. “Yes sir?”

“Good job, but don’t forget what I said about those three lessons.”

“Yes sir.”

\*

Not quite three hours after Wes and Mac had introduced themselves to the captain, they had bought new clothes, stowed all their gear in their rooms and had a bath. They felt newly minted as they walked into the dining room at the Amarillo Inn.

After they had placed their order for steak, potatoes and beans, Mac looked at Wes. “You have a good talk with the captain?”

Wes nodded. “Yeah. An’ I got some things to tell you too.”

Mac frowned. “Sounds serious.”

Again, Wes nodded. “Well, I didn’t exactly talk with the captain about my folks.”

“You didn’t?”

Wes shook his head. “Not exactly.” He paused. “Well, not at all, really. I talked with him about night before last. Remember we were camped up on Coldwater Creek an’ I told you me an’ Charley rode out a ways to have a look around?”

Mac waited.

“Well, that wasn’t actually the whole story.”

Mac frowned. “But—”

Wes held up one hand. “Let me just get through this, Mac, all right?”

Mac nodded.

The waiter came out with their food. “Excuse me, gentlemen.” He set Mac’s plate down, then Wes’. “I’ll be right back with more coffee.”

Wes waited until the man had returned to the table, topped off their coffee cups, and left. Then he looked at Mac, who was busy cutting his steak.

“Okay Mac, first, I want to say that I’ll never keep anything from you again, good or bad. Partners have to trust each other, an’ that means no secrets. That’s what the captain said. So I was wrong to keep this from you earlier.”

Mac looked up. “Like I said, sounds serious.”

Wes nodded. “It is.” Then he told him about hearing something passing through the brush just north of their camp. Then he told him about his decision to go investigate. “Thing is, I figured you could see me from up there where you were on watch. I didn’t want to waste time comin’ up to tell you.”

Mac said, “That makes sense. An’ that’s when you went out and had a look around, right? ‘Cause you told me that.”

“Well, yeah... sort of.” Wes told him the rest of it, coming across the tracks, reading them and realizing the unshod horses were laden with braves, and his decision to follow them.

Mac frowned. “You knew they were Indians and you decided to follow them? How long?”

Heat came to Wes’ neck and began climbing up into his cheeks. “Well, that’s the thing. I followed ‘em prob’ly ten, fifteen miles.”

“What? So you were gone two or three hours?”

Wes nodded. “Goin’ out. Plus another three or four hours comin’ back.

“When I got back, you still hadn’t moved. That’s when I figured you’d gone to sleep, so I grabbed a blanket and came up the hill. Then when you woke up, I made up the story about you wakin’ me up for watch an’ all that.”

He looked at the table for a moment. “I’m really sorry, Mac. I didn’t want you to know that I knew you fell asleep during your watch.”

Mac touched his napkin to his mouth. “Yeah, well... that would have been embarrassin’ for me all right.” He paused, apparently trying to hold his temper. “An’ I appreciate that, Wes, I really do, but what you did goin’ off like that was just plain stupid.”

"I agree. I know that now, an' like I told the captain, I won't ever do it again."

"So he knows all of this? Even about me fallin' asleep on my watch?"

Wes nodded. "I couldn't tell him my story without includin' that. He would'a wondered why you didn't go with me an' on an' on."

"Well, I guess that's right."

"He didn't make any kind of big deal about you fallin' asleep, Mac. I mean, just so you know."

"Anyhow, he wants me to tell the whole story to everybody tomorrow mornin' after we're sworn in. I won't say the part about you bein' asleep. Mostly he wants me to tell the other Rangers about that little Indian I saw leadin' the raidin' party."

"Why?"

"I don't know for sure, but he was really interested in that part."

"All right. So... I guess at least I know."

"Yep, an' like I said, now, I won't hold nothin' back from you ever again as long as we're partners. Ain't worth it. Never know what might happen as a result."

Mac looked up. "Deal."

\* \* \*

Shortly after eight a.m. in Amarillo in the company of the few assembled Rangers in the headquarters, Mac and Wes raised their right hands and repeated the words Captain Flowers said.

Mac repeated the oath loudly, seeming to stress every word.

Even during such a solemn occasion, that brought a smile to the faces of the veteran Rangers.

Wes glanced sidelong at him even as they were saying the oath. He was awed at his friend's obvious resolve to be the best Texas Ranger who had ever sworn to the badge. Mac was so avid, so eager to prove himself worthy of wearing the Ranger star, just keeping up with him would be a full-time job once they were out chasing Comanches across the plains.

After the ceremony, everyone gathered around and welcomed the new Rangers. When everyone had exchanged greetings, the captain looked at Corporal Connolly. "Jim, unless you have some pressing business, I'm calling for a meeting. If there's something you need to take care of right away, I can postpone it for an hour or two. Otherwise I'd like to knock it out right now."

Corporal Connolly looked around.

None of the men said anything.

He turned to the captain. "I think we're good, Captain."

The captain nodded. "All right. This probably won't take more than an hour or so anyway." He glanced at Wes, then back at the other men. "Rangers Crowley and McFadden here, that's Wes and Mac, came to us from Watson."

Corporal Connolly frowned. He said, "Watson?" He looked at Mac for a moment, then snapped his fingers. "That's where I saw you before. You were sittin' in front of the general store when we rode through there."

Mac grinned. "Yes sir. You nodded as you went by. It's— it's kind'a why I'm here now."

Stilson glanced over at Connolly and grinned. "I told you not to go noddin' at people, Jim. You don't know your own power."

Stilson and the captain laughed.

Mac flushed. "Aw that ain't what I meant. I mean, I—" He glanced at Wes. "Well, I mean we— me an' Wes—we saw the exchange at Mr. Billings' livery. Heard some of it too. We were impressed. That's when we decided we wanted to be Rangers."

Corporal Connolly nodded and smiled. "Well, I'm honored you fellas decided to join up because of me an' my men."

Stilson said, "Good thing they didn't hear all that about Iron Bear an' his bunch or they might be back east by now."

Mac's eyes grew wide. "Oh no sir, we did hear about what Iron Bear did to that family, and most of how you described it to Mr. Billings. An' you were right about Mr. Billings, too. He never did take things like that very serious, but he will now."

Mac turned to the captain, then back to Corporal Connolly. "When you get ready to go after Iron Bear again, Corporal, I'd sure like to go along."

Connolly said, "Well, I appreciate that, Mac, but that particular ride's over, thank God. We took him and his men in a wide arroyo up north, late the same day you saw us in Watson."

Stilson said, "I heard Ramón Sanchez talkin' with another Mexican down at the livery earlier this mornin'. The songwriters are already callin' it The Battle of Boquillas Draw. I guess 'cause of that tight little passage there between the rocks where the Indians came through."

Connolly looked at him. "The Battle of Boquillas Draw eh?" He shook his head. "Lot of men died there for someone to slap such a romantic name on it. Guess it's what they gotta do, though."

"Anyway, we—"

Wes said, "Seems to me, there's them that come up with the songs and there's them that come up with the reasons for the songs, only they ain't usually the same people."

Stilson nodded. "Ain't ever the same people, from what I've seen."

Wes grinned and said, "Man, I know that's right. If I had a choice, I'd—"

Corporal Connolly looked at Wes, and Wes stopped talking. Then, quietly, he said, "Sorry. 'Scuse me, Corporal. I get carried away sometimes."

Connolly nodded, then looked at Mac again. "Anyway, I was gonna say, we got all of 'em but one. Only one brave escaped, but he's a mean little son of a bitch. Name's Four Crows. I have a feelin' we're all gonna have our fill of him before it's all over."

Before anyone could say anything else, the captain held up one hand. "And that brings us back to the reason I called this meeting. Ranger Crowley has some news I'd like him to share. It's about an event that happened as he and Ranger McFadden were traveling to Amarillo from Watson." He looked at Wes. "Two nights ago, right?"

Wes nodded. "Yes sir." Then he frowned. "Do you think I saw Four Crows?"

Connolly's eyes grew wide. "You saw Four Crows?"

The captain nodded at Wes. "Just tell these men what you told me yesterday. You can leave out the part about Mac since he wasn't in on your late night jaunt."

"Yes sir."

Wes looked at the others. "A'right, but first I wanna say, today's the first time I've ever even heard the name Four Crows. Second, like the captain said, ol' Mac here, he's my partner, but sometimes I go off on my own an' do stupid things. Night before last was one of those times.

"Well, I was laid out there on my bedroll an' I heard somethin' movin' through the brush just north of our camp. We were camped on the north side of Coldwater Creek." He went on to tell them the full story, saying he snuck off to get a glimpse at whatever it was and that once he cut sign the temptation to follow was too great to resist. That's why Mac hadn't been along.

When he got to the part about the diminutive brave leading the eight other men up out of the arroyo, Corporal Connolly nodded. "I'll bet that was him. Did you see any feathers in his hair?"

Wes shook his head. "No sir, not really. He was about 300 yards away and I had the light of a little less than a half moon. Now I might'a seen somethin' but if I did it was stickin' almost straight up, maybe leanin' a little to the right lookin' at him from the back. But there was only the one of whatever it was."

Connolly looked at the captain. "I'll bet that was him." He turned back to Wes. "An' you say they were headed northeast?"

"Yes sir, the whole time I was trackin' 'em."

"So into the Territory. An' he had eight braves with him already?"

"Yes sir."

Connolly shook his head. "That is not good news. If he can gather eight men to follow him in only a couple days, think what he's gonna be later on." He turned to the captain. "Sir, we're gonna have to get the word out on this guy an' have folks watchin' for him. Even up to Fort Perry and down to Fort Worth."

The captain nodded. "Good idea. I'll let the governor know too. He can get word to a lot of places a lot faster than we can."

Connolly looked at Wes. "Can you add anything else? This is the time to get carried away, as you put it."

Wes flushed lightly. "No sir," he said quietly.

Connolly looked at the captain. "That about it, Captain?"

"Unless you have anything else."

Corporal Connolly shook his head, as did Stilson.

"No? Okay. Thanks men. Guess we'll see what happens.

The captain said, "Jim, how about you and Stilson take Wes and Mac out to the range, see what they've got? Sidearms and carbines, mounted and stationary."

Connolly nodded. "Yes sir." He clapped Wes on the shoulder and looked at Mac. "You boys get

your horses from the livery and meet us at the west end of town in say a quarter-hour or so.”

“Yes sir,” Mac said.

Wes nodded and he and Mac turned and hurried out the door.

Connolly looked at the captain. “Weird. I just met them boys, but I got an easy feelin’ about ‘em already. I think they’re gonna be all right.”

Captain Flowers said, “Well, let’s hope so. Maybe they’ll work out if we can keep Crowley from attacking the whole Comanche nation single handed.” He grinned. “Let me know what you think after you try them out on the range.”

Connolly grinned. “We’ll do that. See you, Cap.” He and Stilson headed for the door.

Wes and Mac exited the Ranger headquarters and Mac turned toward the livery stable. Wes continued across the street.

Mac stopped and turned to look at Wes. He put his hands on his hips. “Crowley, where in the world are you goin’?”

Wes stopped and looked at him. “Gotta stop by the room. Ain’t you gonna get your bedroll and your possibles?”

Without waiting for a response, he turned away again.

Mac raised his arms to his sides, palms up. “What? Why? We’re just goin’ to the range.” He dropped his arms and started after Wes. “You know, like a shootin’ range. A place they’ve got set up to practice shootin’. Didn’t you hear the captain?”

Still walking, Wes said, “Yes, I heard the captain, but we’re Rangers now, Mac. You gotta start thinkin’ like a Ranger.” On the boardwalk, he stopped and turned around again.

As Mac stepped up from the street, Wes said, “What happens if we’re out there ridin’ an’ shootin’ an’ havin’ a fine ol’ time, an’ all of a sudden there’s a bunch of shootin’ back here in Amarillo?”

Mac frowned. “What? What shootin’?”

Wes ignored him. “We all ride back here hell bent for leather to see what’s wrong, an’ we find out a bunch of Comanches—maybe even that Four Crows an’ his bunch—just slammed into town from the north, shot up the place, killed a few folks, an’ then hightailed it to the west.”

Mac was still frowning. “What? Wes, what makes you think—”

“Tell you what’d happen. Corporal Connolly an’ Stilson’d ride out right after ‘em just like the captain an’ Philby an’ even Stanton. But you an’ me, we couldn’t go. We’d have to stop off here first, go up to our rooms, get our bedrolls an’ our possibles bags an’ a note from our mommy.”

He turned away. “No sir. I’m a Ranger now, and by damn I’m gonna be prepared like a Ranger.” When he stepped through the door to the Amarillo Inn, he left it open.

Mac looked at the boardwalk and shook his head. “Crazy as hell.” He followed Wes inside.

\* \* \*

With Fort Perry a few hours behind him, Talbot replayed the events of the day. Very strange. When he and his two cohorts first approached the fort, he could only barely believe his eyes.

The gate was standing wide open, as if in welcome. It had to be a trap. Never had he seen a fort with its broad main gate standing open like that.

He sent one of his men down to check it out.

The man had ridden to the gate, then directly through it. He rode around inside the fort for a long moment. There was hardly anyone there and nobody seemed to pay him the slightest bit of attention. Finally, he had ridden back to the gate, framed himself there, and waved his hat high over his head.

Talbot and the other man soon joined him at the gate, and together the three of them rode to the headquarters building.

Just as they were dismounting, the door opened.

Talbot drew his Remington, cocked and leveled it only to see his half-brother, Sergeant Earl McGaffey, grinning at him from the doorway. "Earl, you idiot, I nearly shot you."

"How you doin', Jade? Guns came in two days ago. This place is ripe."

Talbot looked around, then back at McGaffey. "Where the hell is everybody?"

McGaffey laughed. "Colonel sent 'em on patrol yesterday. They didn't even take any of the new carbines with 'em. We don't have 'em recorded yet."

"So it's the full shipment?"

McGaffey nodded. "The full shipment. Three hundred brand spankin' new carbines an' several thousand rounds of self-contained ammunition cartridges, plus all the caps an' balls an' powder we can carry, plus the big guns. There's three of those."

Talbot looked around again. "Still, there ought'a be somebody around."

"Oh, well, the colonel got nosey so I put him in the brig. There's only a handful of greenhorns on post right now. Thirteen men, I think. They're in the barracks. I told them to stay inside until I call for them."

Talbot looked at him. "Well, I'd feel better if I knew they weren't likely to come up behind me."

"You an' your men come on inside. I'll get the boys in formation an' march 'em over to join the colonel. When it's time to load the wagon, I'll let 'em out."

Talbot looked at him for a moment, then nodded. "Sounds like that might work." He gestured toward the other two, indicating that they should follow him, then stepped up on the porch.

His men followed, then walked past him into the office.

Talbot stopped in front of McGaffey. "So when's your friend supposed to be here with that special wagon you were talkin' about?"

"Anytime between now and sundown, maybe a little after. That's why the gate's open. Anyway, it'll take a couple hours to load up the wagon. Either way, by the time we're ready to leave it'll be dark. Perfect plan. Go on inside, Jade. I'll be back in a minute."

McGaffey had gone to the main door of the barracks. From there he yelled and told the men to form up in front of headquarters in five minutes.

They had done so.

From the porch of the headquarters building, he called them to attention and explained that what would follow was a training exercise. Then gave the command, "Right face."

When the young soldiers snapped to, McGaffey gave the next order. "Forward, march," and directed them to the stockade. He halted them just outside the door. "Okay, so that this looks realistic, you're going to be locked up for a couple of hours. You'll see the colonel inside too."

"Now the colonel's taking part in the exercise too, but he might try to fool you into disobeying orders. He might say this isn't just a training exercise, that it's all real or some such nonsense. I told him you wouldn't fall for it. So if he says anything like that, don't worry about it. I'll be here to make sure everything goes as planned."

Then he walked past them and waited beside the broad door that led to the cells. "Come on," he said. "Single file, right through here, down the row and into the large cell at the end."

As they filed past the colonel's cell, the colonel glanced at them but he remained silent, fearful that if he said anything the sergeant might kill any who tried to resist.

But one young soldier, the third from the end of the line and a full head shorter than the sergeant, turned his head and looked closely at the colonel on his way by. He stopped at the cell and looked again as the two men behind him turned sideways and filed past him into the cell.

When the men had passed, the soldier who had stopped turned to look at the sergeant. "Sergeant, what's really going on here?"

"What do you mean? I told you, it's a trainin' exercise."

The soldier glanced at the colonel again, then looked at the sergeant and said, "Well, beggin' your pardon, sergeant, but I ain't never seen no trainin' where the army locks up its own men, 'specially when there ain't hardly nobody at the fort."

The sergeant moved his hand nearer to his Remington, and the colonel saw the motion. He quickly stood and grabbed the bars of his cell. "Soldier, am I to understand that you're questioning the orders of your sergeant?"

The soldier looked at him, his eyes wide. "Well, no sir. I mean, yes sir, but not if all of this is all right with the colonel, sir."

The colonel swallowed his pride. He spoke quietly, framing his words carefully. "Son, if you were a real prisoner right this moment and you showed such insubordination, you would be shot and killed. Do you understand?" The colonel flicked his gaze quickly to the sergeant's right hand and back.

The soldier caught the glance. He looked at the colonel for a moment, then up at Sergeant McGaffey, then back to the colonel. "Yes sir, I understand. Beggin' the colonel's pardon sir, and thank you for settin' me straight."

Then he turned his back on the sergeant as curtly as he could muster and walked into the cell.

The sergeant closed and locked the cell door, then turned and walked out. He was glad the colonel had set the young man right. If he'd had to kill the kid it might have thrown any number of kinks into their plan.

A minute later he was crossing the porch of the headquarters building and opening the door.  
“All locked up, nice and tidy.”

Talbot nodded. “Good. Better to know where they are. I didn’t hear any commotion.”

McGaffey grinned. “I told ‘em it was a trainin’ exercise.”

Talbot walked around behind the colonel’s desk and sat down. He eyed a humidor for a moment, then leaned forward and opened it. He took a cigar, bit the end off, then fished a match from his pocket and scratched it on the shale plate on the humidor.

As he looked at McGaffey, he held the flaming match head near the end of the cigar and puffed three times, rotating the cigar as he did. Around the puffs, he said, “We need to post a guard over there?”

“No. They’re locked in safe and sound. I told ‘em they’d be there for a few hours, that I’d come an’ get ‘em when it was time.”

Talbot shook out the match and tossed it over his shoulder. He took another, longer puff and the end of the cigar glowed red as a fine wisp of smoke curled up and away from the end.

Holding the cigar between his thumb and forefinger, he moved it away from his mouth, leaned back and put his feet up on the desk. “So the troops are gone, at least the ones who aren’t locked up, right?”

“That’s right.”

“So all we have to do is wait for your friend to show up with his special wagon. But he ain’t comin’ ‘til around sundown?”

“Well, sometime between now an’ then, but it’s worth waitin’ for. It’s a very special wagon. It’s armor plated, specially designed to carry weapons and ammunition. He picked it up down on the Rio Grande after the Mexicans abandoned a presidio down there. It can carry everything we take out of the armory in one load.”

Talbot nodded, his elbows on the arms of the colonel’s chair, his index fingers pressed together in a point beneath his chin. “I think I have a better idea.”

McGaffey shook his head. “Well, now I don’t think we ought’a change—”

Talbot held up one hand, palm out. “Hear me out.”

McGaffey stopped and nodded.

“When we rode in, I noticed there were three sturdy wagons over near the stable. Wouldn’t those three wagons hold what we want to take from the armory?”

“Yes, at least most of it, but—”

Again Talbot held up one hand. “If we use three smaller, lighter wagons, we could make thirty miles per day. With the larger, heavier wagon, we would be fortunate to make half that distance in a day. Isn’t that true?”

McGaffey frowned. “Maybe, but—”

“Plus we don’t have to wait for the lighter, smaller wagons. They’re parked outside right now. We could begin loading immediately, and we could be finished and gone before your larger, much

heavier wagon even gets here.”

“That’s all true, but the larger wagon is armored. We already have one man to drive it, and the four of us could be on guard either inside the wagon or riding alongside.”

Talbot grinned. “You’re thinking as if this is an army shipment. We are not an army with men riding inside an armored wagon fending off attacks from a few banditos. We are the banditos.” He looked at his two men and they all laughed. “Never mind that the damn thing would probably sink the first time we crossed a river with it, with all that armor plating. Either that or tip over, as top heavy as it probably is.

“See, it’s all reversed from how you’re thinking. We would be guarding against an attack by the army. They would easily outnumber and outmaneuver us, and if we chose to lock ourselves inside, it would be a simple matter for them to wait us out.”

He shrugged. “They would have nothing to lose, and time would be on their side.” He paused, took his feet from the desk and leaned forward. “I say we take the smaller wagons now. We open the armory, load what we want to take—guns, ammunition, mounts, powder and balls—and leave. Hell, we could even take the horses that were still in the corral. With luck, we would be sixty or seventy miles away before the cavalry even gets back to the fort. It’s foolproof.”

Sergeant McGaffey looked at him. “Why didn’t you say any of this when we were talking about it a half-year ago? If you would have come up with this idea then, we might have had time to plan.”

Talbot said, “When we originally planned, we didn’t know the fort would be empty of most of the fighting troops. Your plan is a good one, my brother. But even the best plans must be adaptable. When the situation changes, the plan must change to match.

“Now the fact remains that your man is maybe a few hours away with his large wagon, but we have three wagons available right now. The fact also remains that the wagon you counted on is large and cumbersome. Making good our escape in such a wagon will be next to impossible, and—”

McGaffey grinned. “I guess I forgot to mention that part. There will be no ‘escape,’ as you put it. We’re going to drive the wagon east-southeast to a place over on Wolf Creek in Indian Territory. Red Hawk and a few other war chiefs will be waiting for us bright and early tomorrow morning.”

“What? But Messina is expecting that shipment, especially the repeaters. He’ll pay us a good price and then trade with the Comanches himself. That was the original deal, remember? We get the cash money and Messina gets the risk of dealing with the Comanches. You don’t want to change that part of the deal, my brother. Trust me, Messina’s not a man you want to mess with.”

McGaffey wagged one hand. “Paco Messina’s a small-time bandito. I have it on good authority that he won’t be a problem too much longer.” He shook his head. “No, Jade, this was my idea and we’re going to do it my way. We’ll wait for the wagon, and when it gets here we’re taking it directly to the Comanches.”

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For a couple of hours after that meeting, Talbot almost let his anxiety over his half-brother's foolishness get the best of him, but he controlled it. He tried a final time to talk sense to the man, privately. He asked his men to step outside, just in case the sergeant felt he would lose face if he changed his mind in their presence.

But it was all to no avail. His brother just didn't know how to adjust his thinking when the situation changed. Once he had formed a plan, he would stick to it, period.

Finally, when his brother had shown the full measure of his blindered vision, Talbot had politely excused himself. He needed time to think.

He sent his men back inside out of the heat, then crossed the compound to the stockade. After checking on the prisoners to be certain they were actually locked up and that wasn't yet another flaw in his brother's plan, he took the chair from the stockade office. He walked outside, carrying the chair a short distance to the armory and then around the side of the building.

There he leaned it firmly back against the wall in the shade where there was a good breeze. Then he sat down and pulled his hat down over his eyes. The breeze kept the annoying flies down and carried to him the sweet smell of creosote and acacia flowers. It must have rained somewhere upwind.

He'd wait there, he decided, for his brother either to come to his senses or for the rest of their plan to show up. Or blow up.

A few times he considered taking his men and riding out. Then again, the money Messina had promised them was too enticing to pass up. He could only hope the Comanches would trade something worth at least as much money as Messina had planned to give them. But then they'd still have to offload whatever the Comanches gave them if they were ever going to see any real money out of this deal. What a mess.

He was still sitting there when he thought he heard someone riding through the gate. It sounded like more than one horse, so maybe the armored wagon his brother was dreaming of had arrived at last.

He listened more closely. There was no creaking and groaning, no heavy sounds that might come from horses expending the effort to pull a huge, heavy armored wagon. No matter. He'd wait where he was. Make that idiot come to him.

There was a quiet period. He figured his half-brother was making final arrangements with whoever was driving the wagon. Still, he'd never seen one of those armored wagons. He'd heard of them, but the closest he'd seen were the prison wagons they used sometimes to transport prisoners. But those were mainly a cage on a flatbed.

Maybe he could just peek around the corner, at least see what the thing looked like. It would be a curiosity for sure, and—

Then all at once the place exploded with gunshots.

He counted eight shots before he was able to get out of the chair. A seeming eternity later he

was mounting his horse behind the armory. Then he was leaning low in the saddle, digging in his spurs and riding hell bent for leather for the front gate.

He kept anticipating the burn of a bullet in his back but it never came. Then he was through the gate and there was a stout wall between him and whatever hell he was escaping.

He rode hard for the first few miles. As he topped over the fifth low rise away from the fort, his horse's breathing was ragged and froth was flying from his muzzle.

Talbot chanced a quick glance back over his shoulder.

Where he expected to see a blue-clad column of twos, there was nothing.

He looked again. Maybe a few Rangers were after him. He studied the terrain more closely, at least as much as he could from the back of his galloping horse.

Still nothing.

Nobody was following him, and that was a welcome surprise.

Finally, he slowed his horse to a canter. Running his horse to death wouldn't do him any good. But he continued to follow the contours of the land, keeping to the low ground wherever he could.

His half-brother was an idiot, and apparently he'd gotten exactly what he deserved.

He shook his head. About all he could do now was get to Messina down on Wolf Creek and do some damage control. Let him know this was his brother's mess, not his, and that his brother already had paid the ultimate price.

\* \* \*

Just over ten minutes after Corporal Connolly had told them to meet him at the west edge of town in a quarter-hour, Wes and Mac led their horses, saddled and otherwise outfitted, out of the livery stable.

Mac looked at Wes as they mounted up. "You watch. We get out there, they're gonna wonder if we've got a trip planned or somethin'."

Wes glanced at Mac. "Well, then I guess maybe we'll have taught them somethin', huh?" He grinned and shook his head, then turned Charley toward the road. "Let's go, Charley," he said, and nudged Charley, who broke into a canter and turned west into the road.

Mac caught up with him soon and they rode in silence until they spotted Corporal Connolly and Jack Stilson. The two men waved, then turned their horses and led the two new Rangers away from town.

Wes glanced at Mac and pointed at the horses in front of them. He grinned. Both of the veteran Rangers' saddles had a bedroll lashed to the back of it.

When they reached a narrow, dusty crossroad about three miles out of town, Corporal Connolly stopped. When the others had gathered around, he looked at Mac. "I don't know how familiar you boys are with this area."

Mac glanced at Wes, then said, "Not at all, really."

Wes just shook his head.

Connolly nodded, then pointed in the direction they'd been riding. "Keep headin' that way

you'll come to Tucumcari an' then Santa Rosa over in New Mexico Territory. Santa Fe's a ways farther down the same road, a little north."

He shifted his horse around and pointed to the southbound road. "This one turns southeast a ways out there. It leads to a big ranch headquarters down at Hereford, an' then on down to Portales in New Mexico Territory. It's also a pretty direct route to a place called Roswell. Along in there's where Mr. Chisum and Mr. Loving and Mr. Goodnight are raisin' their cattle. Keep on the same headin' an' you'll cross the southeast corner of the Territory an' end up back in Texas down in El Paso."

He shifted his horse around again and pointed him north. "Today we're goin' north about another two miles." He pointed. "You can see those low hills in the distance there. We've got a shootin' range set up out there. It's on part of the Wiljohn Ranch."

At the range, the men paired off. Mac and Stilson went to the nearby course and Wes followed Connolly to another course about a quarter-mile away.

As they started going through their paces, neither Mac nor Wes had any problems hitting the targets with their revolvers, and both of them grouped their shots really well.

Doing the same while riding through the course was a different matter. On his first pass on horseback, Mac hit four targets, but missed twice. The second time through, again he hit four targets—a different four—but missed two. He got the same results the third time.

He rode back to the beginning of the course with a grin on his face. "Well, I got 'em all at one time or another."

Stilson didn't smile. He said, "It's all right. We'll keep workin' on that."

Mac frowned. "I thought it was pretty good."

Stilson nodded. "It was. If that was six men out there, you'd have downed four of 'em on the first pass. Anybody would agree that's pretty good, but pretty good'll get you a long, slim ditch in the ground. Thing is, how sure are you that one or both of the others wouldn't have killed you?"

He shrugged. "Course it don't matter to me personally, except I'd hate like hell havin' to dig a grave in this heat. We'll try it again a little later." He turned, reached up and took his Winchester from the saddle scabbard, then turned again and tossed it up to Mac. "Here you go. Repeat the course with this."

"Riding?"

"Yep."

Mac just looked at him.

Stilson stepped closer to Mac's horse. "You ever ride with your knees before?"

Mac shook his head.

"All right. That's all right. Just ride through the course a few times. Ride a little slow the first time and build up. Hold your reins loosely in your teeth. It ain't to control your horse, but just so you don't lose the reins or the horse don't step on 'em. Carry the Winchester with both hands to get a feel for ridin' that way. Guide the horse with pressure from your knees.

“When you think you’re ready, ride through again at full speed. You ever need to shoot your carbine from the saddle, chances are you’ll be at a full gallop. When you want to shoot, put pressure on the stirrups, bring the carbine up, point an’ shoot quick. Don’t try to aim. You won’t be able to. The bullet’ll hit where you’re pointin’ when you squeeze the trigger.”

Over the next couple of hours, Mac rode the course five times without shooting, a little faster each time. The third time he rode the course while shooting, he hit every target.

When he got back, Stilson sent him through one more time.

Again, he hit every target.

When he got back that time, Stilson reached up for his carbine and Mac handed it to him.

Stilson said, “Okay, you wanna run it with your that Colt again?”

“All right.”

“Just remember, those are men out there. The only difference between them and you is they’re nervous.”

Mac rode the course, hitting five of the six targets.

When he got back, he said, “I missed the last one, but my horse stumbled.”

“And you were shot dead. Reload.”

Mac looked at him for a moment. He was on the verge of frowning, and then a light came into his eyes and he nodded. He finally understood. Excuses don’t matter when someone’s blown your spirit out through a bullet hole. Dead is dead. “Dead is dead, right?”

Stilson nodded. “Right. And until you’ve ridden the course and downed all six, you can’t know for a fact you can do it.”

Ah, lesson number two. Mac rode the course again, and he nailed all six targets. This time he didn’t ride back to Stilson, but paused at the start of the course and reloaded his Colt. Then he rode the course one more time. Again he hit all six targets.

Stilson nodded with approval. Quietly, he said, “Now you’re ready, Mac.”

On the other course a tenth of a mile or so away, Connolly was putting Wes through similar paces. Wes was a little cleaner with the Colt, hitting every target the first time through. To be sure it wasn’t a fluke, Connolly had him ride the course two more times. The results were the same each time.

As Stilson had done with Mac, Connolly passed his Winchester to Wes. “Can you shoot a rifle from the saddle?”

Wes nodded. “I think so.”

Connolly gave him the same basic instruction that Stilson had given Mac, then sent him through the course. The first time through he missed three targets. The second time, he didn’t miss any. Connolly had him repeat two more times. The results were the same, no misses.

Connolly nodded. “Looks like you’ve got a handle on this stuff. Far as I’m concerned, you’re ready.”

Wes grinned as he dismounted. “Thanks!”

Connolly just looked at him for a moment, then gestured toward a small outcropping of rocks low on the hillside. "Let's sit over there in the shade for a bit." When they were both seated, he said, "You're pretty good at all this stuff, Wes. Pretty confident too."

Again, Wes grinned. "Thanks."

Connolly nodded. "Now I don't know what the captain said to you about you goin' off chasin' after those Indians an' I ain't askin'. None of my business. But what is my business is makin' sure you keep breathin'."

He paused. "I got a feelin' about you. I think you could be one of the better Rangers I've had the privilege to work with, but just one thing: don't let your confidence get ahead of you."

"Oh, no, I won't."

Connolly looked at the ground. "Well, that's easy enough to say, but I lost two good men, experienced Rangers, just last week." He looked at Wes. "One was through no fault of his own that I know of, but the other one died as the direct result of lettin' his confidence get away from him."

"An' no matter what else was goin' on, that's exactly what happened to you up there on Coldwater Creek. In this outfit, you have to follow orders. The guy givin' the orders, sometimes he knows somethin' you don't know. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Now up there on Coldwater Creek, there wasn't nobody to give you orders, an' I understand that. But when that's the situation, well, then you have to think as if you were givin' someone else the orders. By that I mean, you have to think about the consequences."

The look on Wes' face showed he was focused on what the corporal was telling him. He nodded.

"An' how you think about it is like this: What if they'd'a ambushed you with a lone warrior an' he'd'a killed you with a knife or an arrow? Your partner wouldn't have even known what happened to you."

"Or what if they'd'a captured you an' tortured you? Or worse yet, what if they'd'a turned on you full force, an' then you hightailed it back for camp an' brought the whole damn mess of 'em down on your partner?"

Wes paled. "I never thought about that."

Connolly nodded. "I know. An' it's all right. We all have to learn, an' there was no harm done this time. But although we all have to learn, out here we don't have as much time to learn as the next guy does. What you learn right now might save your life a minute later."

"You know the old sayin' 'live an' learn'? Out here it's the other way around: learn and live. All I'm sayin', turn it all over in your head. Think about everything you can think of that might happen before you decide to do somethin' like that."

"Yes sir."

"Tell you one thing, I'm sure glad you didn't meet that bunch face to face. I got a nasty feelin' about that Four Crows. I think he's gearin' up to be worse than Iron Bear if that's possible."

"Yes sir, I'm glad we didn't go face to face too. But... well, honestly, I got the strangest feelin' when I saw him. Someday we will go face to face, I think. It's hard to explain. It's kind'a like that Injun and me exist for each other, sort of."

Connolly nodded. "Believe it or not, I understand that feelin'. That's kind'a the way I felt with Iron Bear. An' the weird part is, I have a feelin' that's how he felt about it too. I think he always knew it'd either be me killin' him or him killin' me. Guess I just got him first. In a way, I'm kind'a sorry it's over."

Wes nodded. "I think I know what you mean. Not that I've been through it, but... sort of that I know I will an' that's all right."

Connolly grinned. "Well, at least for now we're both still here. Oh and listen, whatever your reason for not lettin' your partner in on it when you decided to launch a personal attack on the whole damn Comanche nation, don't do that again."

"Yes sir, I won't. Captain Flowers and me already had that discussion, and so have me an' Mac. It won't happen again."

Connolly nodded again, then looked toward the other course. Stilson and Mac were mounted and heading toward him. "Well, here they come." He stood, then glanced at Wes. "I'm really glad you boys decided to join up. I think we're gonna be glad to have you."

Wes stood up. "Thanks, Corporal."

Connolly walked to his horse and mounted. Just as Wes put his left foot in the stirrup, Mac and Stilson rode up.

Stilson looked at Connolly. "You guys wanna go over to the Amarillo house? Maybe have a beer?"

Connolly said, "You guys go ahead. I need to stop by headquarters an' see the captain. I'll see you over there later or tomorrow mornin'."

They all turned their horses and headed back into town.

\*

Talbot rode through the evening without stopping except briefly a few times to water his horse. At around midnight he dismounted at the entrance to a deep, wide arroyo about thirty-five miles east southeast of Fort Perry and about twenty miles west of Indian Territory.

When the rains came, the arroyo would run off into Wolf Creek. The night was warm and humid and there was no breeze. The sky was full of stars.

His black hat was red-tan with dust, and it was white with sweat streaks around the bottom of the crown. In the dim moonlight, his black boots were scuffed to an eerie white along the outside. Even in the early morning, his off-white linen shirt clung with sweat to his back and chest. Beads of sweat glistened on his forearms below his rolled-up sleeves.

Holding the reins loosely in his left hand, he walked his horse along one edge of the sandy bottom. Every several steps he whistled a particular sound that was meant as a signal.

About thirty yards in, just as he began to repeat the whistle, came the distinctive click of a

hammer being cocked near his right ear.

In fractured English, someone said, “Shh. Keep joo hands whay up there where I can see ‘em good.”

Talbot raised his hands to his shoulders. Quietly he said, “That ain’t necessary, amigo. Name’s Jade Talbot. I gave the right signal. I gotta see Messina. It’s important.”

“Sí, sí... sure, I onnerstan’, eh? Ever’body’s gotta see somebody, an’ iss always muy importante.”

Talbot’s belt tugged at his right hip as the man tried to take his revolver from his holster without removing the hammer loop first. A moment later he corrected that oversight and took Talbot’s Remington.

Talbot said, “Look, you know who I am?” Talbot thought he might be able to spin around and take the guy out while he was shoving Talbot’s revolver behind his gunbelt. He had just tensed his shoulders and hips to do that when he felt the barrel of the man’s gun at his back.

“Oh sí, sí, joo are señor Talbot. Ain’t that right? See? I remember good.” The man tugged at Talbot’s belt again just behind his left hip. A moment later he was fitting Talbot’s knife into his scabbard alongside his own.

“Look, I understand you’re just doin’ your job here, but I really gotta—”

“Shh, shh, shh... iss okay... sí, I know, I know... joo gotta see Messina. But joo forgot the mos’ importan’ thing.”

“You don’t understand. I got news about those Winchester repeating carbines we were gonna—”

Then there was something like a collision and a blinding light flashed from a point inside the back of his head. It filled his cranial cavity, momentarily illuminating the back of his eyeballs, and then everything went dark.

The man laughed. He nudged the inert form with his boot. “I do’n forget, señor Talbot... I remember good. Pero joo forgot something... joo gotta see Messina, pero Messina, he do’n gotta see joo.”

\*

When Talbot woke up, Paco Messina was crouched in front of him alongside a small campfire, his forearms balanced on his knees. The firelight illuminated Messina’s face and his own. The heat reflected off his skin.

In Messina’s right hand was a revolver. In his left was a small branch he’d pulled out of the fire. It was an inch and a half in diameter and about a foot long. The end nearest Talbot’s face was glowing with over an inch of ember cut at a sharp angle.

“Jade Talbot, eh? Do I remember you, Jade Talbot?”

“Hey, Paco. Of course you should remember me. We’ve worked together a couple of times. And we were supposed to—” Talbot started to rise, but he could lift only his head. His wrists and ankles were tied to stakes in the ground.

Paco waved one finger side to side and grinned. “Eh eh eh. You might be a bad man, my friend. First we talk, then we decide what to do with you. For now, you are only the man who came into my camp in the middle of the night demanding to see Messina.”

Talbot frowned. “Is that what your idiot guard said? Guy’s a moron. It wasn’t like that. I had news.”

“News, eh?”

“Yeah, news. Big news. Look, it would have been easy for me to set up camp out there somewhere, wait for sunup, and then ride in. But I came straight to you with news that I figured couldn’t wait.”

A couple of Messina’s men had wandered over to listen.

Messina grinned broadly. “Yeah? So what happened?”

Talbot flushed. “Whaddya mean, what happened? I dismounted, like we’re supposed to, I gave the right signal like we’re supposed to, and one of your idiot guards waylaid me anyway. That’s what happened.”

A few more of Messina’s men gathered nearby.

“Can you do it now?”

“Do what?”

“Give the signal.”

Talbot frowned. “Sure, I guess.”

“Do it.”

Talbot wet his lips with his tongue, then repeated an approximation of the signal he’d whistled the night before. It was a little different, lying flat on his back.

Messina cocked his head and frowned as if in thought. “Again?”

Talbot repeated the signal.

Messina looked at him. “Yeah, yeah, when you are right, you are right, señor. That is the signal. So what happened again?”

“Some idiot guard—”

“No no. I mean what happened earlier? What is the news that was so important you were going to wake me?”

“Remember we were working a deal? My brother is a sergeant over at Fort Perry. Do you remember that? His name’s Earl McGaffey. I told you about him. He was gonna work it out so we could raid the armory there and bring you a shipment of brand new Winchester repeating carbines, remember?”

Talbot continued, relating an abbreviated version of what had happened at the fort. “So my idiot brother—”

Messina grinned. “It seems you are surrounded by idiotas, sí o no?”

“Yesterday and last night it sure seemed like it.”

Messina gestured with the stick. “Please, go on.”

“My idiot brother had decided to take the repeaters directly to the Comanches. He decided to cut you out of the deal.”

Messina frowned. “You could not change his mind?”

Talbot shook his head. “No. The only thing that could change his mind was a bullet. And that might be the only good news. Apparently it did. There was a lot of shootin’, so I got out of there.

“My men didn’t follow me, and my brother didn’t follow me so I figure they were killed. Probably it was Rangers. With all the troops either gone on patrol or locked up, that’s all I can figure.

“But like I said, them bein’ killed might be the good news. The guns, the repeaters, they’ll still be there. With the troops still away, we might even be able to ride back there right now and take them. We could go right now, Paco! Just cut me loose. It’s only about five hours if we ride hard.”

Messina grinned again. “You know, that would not have been a bad idea if I had heard it when you first got here. We could have hit them before daylight. The element of surprise would be on our side. But now....”

He shook his head. “No, señor Talbot, even such a hopeful and optimistic man as yourself cannot possibly trust that the troops will be gone long enough. Plus, even if we got away with the weapons, the Comanches as well as the army would be after us. That is not a good combination if you’ve grown used to breathing and want to continue.”

Talbot was getting desperate. “Okay, okay. That’s right. Maybe I wasn’t thinking. It ain’t easy to think straight when you’re staked to the ground. But look, we can still get someone else on the inside and take ‘em later.”

Messina nodded. “Now that one is a possibility. Maybe so... maybe so. In the meantime, it is a shorter ride to the east to repair any damage done to our relationship with our red brothers, eh? We can let Red Hawk know there are no hard feelings. Perhaps we can even team up with the Comanche to take the weapons.”

Messina seemed to be thinking. He reached down and patted Talbot on the cheek. “In actuality, you were right, my friend. This is very valuable information. Except that today is pretty much the same as yesterday.”

“What?”

Messina shrugged. “Yesterday the repeating guns were brand new and in the fort, were they not? And today the repeating guns are brand new and in the fort. So nothing has changed really.

“The only real difference is that now I have an opportunity I did not have before: to repair a relationship with the Comanche war chief Red Hawk.” He shrugged. “Then again, I have only your word to believe that relationship needs to be repaired.

“Still you are right about one thing. If I would have had this information some hours ago, I might not have acted on it, but at least I would have been informed, eh? At least I would have had the choice to act on it or not.”

“Yes. Yes. And that was my point. I tried to explain to the guard that—”

Messina held up the revolver, his fingers splayed. “Wait.” Still crouched down, he pivoted on the ball of his left foot and looked around, gesturing toward his men with his revolver. “Who was on guard early this morning? Who brought this man in?”

Nobody said anything.

Messina grinned and gestured with the gun again. “Come on, come on, I need to know. Am I going to shoot my own men? Now tell me, who defended me so thoroughly last night, ensuring that I was able to get my rest?”

One of the men stepped forward. “It was I, patrón. I brought him in.”

Messina nodded, the grin still in place. “Ah, bueno, bueno. And did he give the signal like he says?”

“Oh sí, mi jefe, pero pensé que—”

The grin disappeared from Messina’s face. He cocked his revolver and fired. “You thought?”

The man jerked backward, arms flailing, and fell, clawing at the point where the bullet had entered his chest. He struggled for a moment, digging the heels of his boots into the ground in an attempt to flee, then lay still.

Messina stood and looked at him for a moment. “No, I don’t think you thought, mi amigo. I don’t think you thought at all.”

He turned around again, crouched and looked at Talbot. “Now that, you see, that is what he gets for not allowing you through. Ah, and this,” he said and held up the stick.

He looked at the glowing end of it for a moment, turning it in his hand. “This is what you get for allowing your idiot brother to change the plan and for not bringing me the news sooner.”

He pressed the hot end of the stick against Talbot’s forehead just above his right eyebrow.

Smoke rose and the stench of seared flesh filled the air. A few of Messina’s men backed away.

Talbot gritted his teeth and tried to keep himself from passing out. Sweat broke out in beads over his forehead, cheeks and throat. The only sounds were the sizzling of the flesh at the end of the stick and Talbot’s quick inhalations and exhalations as he sucked air through his teeth.

“Ah, but it is lucky for you that I would not have acted on the information. If the information were of greater importance, and if you had denied me the ability to make a decision because of something so silly and inconsequential as an inexperienced guard,” and he shrugged, “eh, I would kill you now.”

Messina grinned, then leaned forward and dragged the hot end of the stick slowly down over Talbot’s closed right eye and across his cheek to his jawline.

Talbot continued to breathe hard through his teeth, determined not to pass out. His left eye remained clear. He focused on Messina with all the hatred he could muster.

Quietly, so nobody else could hear, Messina said, “You are one tough hombre, señor Talbot, and stubborn. It almost makes me wish we could be friends, you and I.”

Talbot, glared at him. “When I see you again, I will kill you.”

Messina looked at him for a moment, his revolver still in his right hand. Still quietly, he said,

“Yes, I think you might try. And perhaps you deserve that chance.” Abruptly he stood and holstered his revolver, then dropped the stick on Talbot’s chest.

He took a step back, then canted his head a bit and studied Talbot’s face. He grinned. Louder than before, he said, “You know, from the right angle, on that side of your face now you look like *una rana*, eh? In your language, that is a frog. I might have done you a favor, hombre. Now perhaps you have a nickname.”

He turned on his heel and laughed as he walked away. “Vaminos, mis amigos! *Cabalgamos!* We ride!”

As he walked toward his horse, he called to one of his lieutenants. “Ramón.”

The man raced up alongside him. “Sí, mi patrón?”

“Your horse is fast, sí?”

“Sí, mi patrón.”

“And do you know where is the camp of Red Hawk?”

“The Comanche, mi patrón?”

Messina nodded. “Sí sí.”

“Sí, mi patrón.”

“Bueno. Ride there, fast. Stay to the north bank of Wolf Creek and go east. No delays.

“When you get there, speak only to Red Hawk himself. Tell him I am coming later this morning and that he and I have much to discuss. Tell him it is about repeating rifles and deception. Nothing more.

“Sí, mi patrón.”

As the man turned away, Messina slapped him on the back. “Bueno. Vaya!”

\* \* \*

The captain was just coming out of the office when Connolly and Stilson came riding up from their training session with Wes and Mac.

Connolly said, “Captain, anything goin’ on?”

The captain shook his head. “So how’d they do?”

Connolly nodded. “Wes did well. Seems like he’s a natural at ridin’ an’ shootin’. Hit everything he aimed at. In fact, I put him through it a few extra times just to make sure it wasn’t a fluke.”

Stilson said, “Mac was about the same once he realized ‘good enough’ ain’t good enough.” He laughed. “He didn’t know how to use the carbine at a gallop either, but he picked it up pretty quick.”

Connolly said, “I talked with Wes a little more about goin’ off on his own like that too. I think he understands.”

The captain nodded and gestured toward the Amarillo Inn. “Shall we?”

\*

At the livery stable, Wes and Mac dismounted, hung the saddles over the walls of the stalls, then took care of their horses. Wes poked around and found Charley an extra helping of oats. He

brought some for Mac's horse too.

He looked at Mac. "Your horse ain't got a name, does he?"

Mac shook his head, patted the horse's neck. "Naw."

"Why not?"

"Pappy said one time you hadn't never ought'a name somethin' you might have to eat someday."

Wes looked at him, then wrinkled his face up in disgust and turned away. "Well, I reckon I'm safe namin' ol' Charley. We ever get in that much of a tight, we'll just eat your horse."

As they exited the stable, Mac said, "You ain't ever gettin' so much as a bite outta my horse, Wes Crowley."

Afterward, as they walked up the street toward the Amarillo Inn, Mac said, "Looked like you an' Corporal Connolly were havin' a pretty serious talk about somethin'."

Wes nodded. "More stuff about the other night." He shook his head and grinned. "Man, I gotta say, between yesterday with the captain an' then this mornin' with everybody an' then out there on the range with Corporal Connolly, that's the most talkin' I've done in a long time."

As they neared the Inn, they stepped up on the boardwalk. Mac grinned and shook his head. "You've got a weak memory, my friend."

Wes grinned. "Well, I mean serious talkin'." He opened the door to the Inn, then stepped aside, holding it for Mac.

As Mac stepped through, he said, "There they are," and gestured with his chin toward a back table.

Captain Flowers saw them at about the same time and waved, inviting them over.

When they were seated and everyone had a beer, the captain looked at the new men. "Corporal Connolly says it went well out there today. I'm glad to hear it. That doesn't mean your training's over though. Most of that will come on the job.

"Of course, the kind of job we do means there will be little or no room for error. Many times, you'll have to adapt to a very serious situation as it's happening.

"For that reason more than any other, the most important thing I can tell you is that you have to follow orders. If one of the corporals or even one of the more experienced Rangers tells you to do something, do it without question. If you wonder why he gave the order, you can question it later when things calm down. That's part of training too."

He stopped, looked about the table, then picked up his glass. "Now, if you'll indulge me, gentlemen, it's been a tumultuous few weeks. We suffered the loss of two damned fine Rangers in Harold Reeves and Ricky Mimbres." He raised his glass and watched as the others raised theirs. "To Rangers Reeves and Mimbres."

The others repeated the toast and then followed the captain's lead, only sipping from their glasses.

The captain said, "On the other hand, in defeating Iron Bear and his bunch, you rode one of

the more dangerous renegade Comanches in all of Texas to ground.” He raised his glass again. “To vanquished foes.”

“Vanquished foes,” they all repeated, then sipped from their glasses again.

The captain wasn’t finished. “We also acquired three new Rangers in Stanton, Crowley and McFadden. And finally, gentlemen, we witnessed the rise of what I suspect will become a major new adversary.”

The captain paused for a moment, then said quietly, “I have to tell you, it all makes me wish I was young enough to start over.” Then, his voice a bit louder, he said, “Gentlemen, if you will do me the honor of joining me in a final toast,” and he raised his glass. “To the Texas Rangers, old friends and new.”

Everyone clinked glasses and mugs. “The Rangers!”

\*

The next morning Mac woke up in a foul mood.

Wes had admitted to him just two nights ago over supper about following those Comanches. Then he had repeated the whole story again for the Rangers yesterday morning. Mac hadn’t had time to think about it afterward since they were on the range all day.

Then last night in a toast the captain had talked about Iron Bear and then Four Crows almost as if they were heroes.

Well, of course they were heroes. Or at least anti-heroes.

After all, what’s a hero without a prime antagonist?

And that had reminded him yet again of the first hero and the first heroic act he had ever seen, the old Comanche who had walked into Watson when Mac was only six years old.

The cowboy’s dishonorable actions back then contrasted with the honorable actions of the old Comanche who continued to stride proudly down the center of the street. That memory and the cowboy’s dishonor and the old Comanche’s honor all mixed in with what Wes had told Mac about his late night maneuver against the Comanche raiding party.

In bed that night, as he was going to sleep, Mac mumbled, “Only Wes would attempt to raid a Comanche raiding party.”

The thought made him smile, but it also jumbled together with the other thoughts in his mind and he drifted off into a dream. The dream had been pervasive, visiting him three times during the night, the last time just before he woke up.

Each time the dream came, there was a light mist rising off Coldwater Creek. Mac spotted Wes through the mist. He was getting up and sneaking out of camp.

Each time, Mac rose from his lookout spot near the boulder on the rise across the stream and waved his arms high over his head as he yelled, “Wes! Hey, Wes!”

Wes seemed neither to see nor hear him.

Each time, Mac had thrown caution to the winds, racing down the hill through the brush and splashing into the creek, yelling at the top of his lungs for Wes to wait.

But Wes had ridden off as if trapped in a fate he couldn't control.

The rest of the dream had repeated as well, despite Mac's near-conscious attempts to change it.

Finally across Coldwater Creek, his feet squishing uncomfortably in his soaked boots, Mac had splashed up onto the bank. He had stumbled clumsily several more yards, then clambered up onto the back of his horse, not bothering to take the time even to saddle him first. Then he had leaned forward over his horse's neck and ridden hard after his friend.

In the dream, Wes had continued to walk Charley for a good distance, and then broke into an easy canter. He was following dark, dim shapes that seemed always just about to drop over the horizon.

Mac repeatedly dug his heels into his horse's flanks, urging him to gallop faster, harder, yet always Wes remained just beyond the range of Mac's urgent warnings.

Finally, after several hours of hard, bone-jarring riding, Mac topped out over a low rise and caught up with his friend.

Wes was trussed up on a rail fence, his elbows bent over the top rail, his hands pulled back through and tied with a strip of rawhide across his belly. Sweat was pouring in streams down his sides and darkening his pants where it soaked into the waistband. He was scalped and badly beaten, his shirt was ripped off and someone had split him open.

In the distance, vague figures in a narrow line were passing one by one over the horizon. Only one remained motionless atop his horse. He was off to one side, and Mac could see him plainly.

He was thin, short, like a twelve or thirteen year old boy.

He was Comanche, and he was smiling, his arms crossed over his chest.

Mac tore his gaze from the Comanche, leapt from his horse and yelled, "Wes! Oh my god, Wes!" He raced toward his friend, but something in the dirt caused him to slide to a stop, his eyes wide.

He looked again.

It was rounded, red, coated with dust.

It was beating.

Unable to breathe, unable to think, he realized what it was but didn't want to know.

He looked at Wes again.

There was a gaping hole in the center of his friend's chest.

He looked again at the object on the ground. It was a heart. It was Wes' heart.

Beneath a heavy layer of dust, dirt and grit, it was contracting, relaxing, contracting.

His mouth locked open, Mac fell to his knees, not wanting to touch the thing but needing to put it back where it belonged.

He looked up. "Wes, I don't know what to do! I don't know how!"

His friend remained motionless, hanging there on the fence.

But Wes was still alive, wasn't he? If Mac could only bring himself to pick the thing up. If he

could only make himself put Wes' heart back in his chest, then maybe—

He looked again at his friend, still hanging limp on the fence. "Wes?" Helplessness raged over him. He rocked his head back and again he yelled, "Wes!"

And Wes, finally able to hear his friend, dragged his chin up from his chest. "Hey, Mac." He nodded with his chin toward the dusty muscle lying on the ground. "I see what you got there. It's all right. You can't put it back, Mac. There ain't nothin' you can do." He shook his head and grinned that stupid half-grin. "Damn, Mac, I reckon— I reckon maybe I should'a waited."

Then his head flopped forward and he was gone.

Laughter came from a point near the horizon.

Mac jerked awake, covered with sweat, his legs tangled in his blanket. "He belonged, you sorry bastard! He belonged!"

\*

Over breakfast, determined to pull himself from his bad mood, Mac sipped his coffee, then set his cup on the table. He looked across the table and grinned, honestly glad to see his friend. "So what you reckon we'll do today?"

Wes wasn't strung up to a rail fence.

He wasn't sweaty and bloody and beaten.

He was sitting in a chair across the table from Mac in the restaurant section of the Amarillo Inn.

And in true Wes fashion, he wasn't bothered by anything. He was holding the tip of his fork against the last piece of steak on his plate.

He shrugged as he worked his knife back and forth through the tines as he cut the piece of steak into two smaller pieces. "Finish our breakfast, first." He put his knife down, took a bite of the steak, and then gestured toward his plate with his fork. "It's a fine breakfast, ain't it? First rate. Eggs, taters, st—"

Mac grinned despite himself. "I swear you always focus on the least important things, Crowley."

"Well, no, now that ain't right." Wes grinned. He gestured toward Mac with his knife. "Thing is, you an' me just differ on our definition of what's important. That's the whole deal right there. It's the little things that make a difference in life."

Wes went back to cutting his steak.

Mac frowned. "All right, I'll bite. How you figure?"

Wes put another small piece of steak in his mouth, then shrugged. Around the piece of steak, he said, "Big things happen an' you deal with 'em, that's all. Got no choice. But most often the little things determine which big things happen, or at least which ones get a foothold."

He paused, looked at his friend for a moment and canted his head. "You okay, Mac? You're soundin' a little annoyed."

Mac frowned. "Yeah, I'm fine." He didn't sound fine.

Wes nodded. "Well, anyway, after we finish this truly fine breakfast, I reckon we'll walk across the street an' see what the captain has for us. Then we'll just do that, whatever it happens to be."

"Well hell, Western Z, I know that much. What I meant, I wonder what he has planned for us today."

"No way of knowin' 'til we get there, is there? An' wonderin' won't do no good. Gotta get there first. Now me, I don't never worry about nothin' 'til it's time to worry about it."

Mac gripped the edge of the table and leaned forward quickly. "Yeah? Well you damn near got yourself killed a few nights ago out chasin' Comanches across the plains too. So maybe I'm thinkin' you ought'a start worryin' at least a little bit about some things."

He looked around.

Three men at another table had stopped eating and were looking at him.

Mac nodded toward them and they looked away. He set back in his chair and grinned, trying to turn the whole thing into a joke. "Now who the hell ever heard of one crazy Ranger raidin' a Comanche raidin' party, Wes?"

He picked up his napkin and put it to his mouth. He belched lightly behind it, then dropped it. "Anyway, what you were sayin', you gotta worry about the little things and then the big things'll take care of themselves."

Wes was looking closely at his partner. He frowned. "That what I said?" He shrugged. "Either way, I imagine whatever the captain's got for us, it's just routine Ranger stuff, whatever that is."

He put his fork and knife on the table, then gestured with his hands. He leaned forward and said quietly, "As for that other, hey, I'm really sorry, partner. Thing is, I was lucky, an' I know it. It just worked out, that's all, an' I ain't ever gonna do anything like that again. All right? I mean, unless you an' me both decide to raid us a raidin' party." He grinned.

"Yeah, Wes, I know. An' about the captain, I was just wonderin', you know. Just somethin' to talk about. Don't you ever just like to wonder what's gonna happen an' then see if your version of it matches what actually happens?"

Wes looked at him. There was that half-grin again. "Nope."

Mac shook his head. "Well, I imagine the captain ain't gonna want us late on our first full day as Rangers, so you prob'ly need to get on through your breakfast."

Wes pushed his plate away, then slid his chair back. "You weren't payin' attention, Ranger McFadden. I'm done." He pushed against the table for leverage and stood. "You comin', or don't you wanna see what the captain's got for us today?"

\* \* \*

In Fort Perry a couple hours earlier, Corporal Court Edwards tapped on the door of the colonel's office, then walked in. He removed his hat.

The colonel was behind his desk. He stood and came around his desk as Corporal Edwards crossed the floor of the office.

"Glad you're in, Colonel. The men and I are headin' out. Just wanted to say thanks again for

your hospitality.”

The colonel proffered his hand. As they shook, he said, “On the contrary, it was the least we could do. Thank you, Corporal. If it weren’t for you and your men, there’s no telling what would have become of me and mine.”

He wagged one finger in the air. “I’ll be sure to let your captain know, too. You can bet on that.”

“Yes sir. Well, thanks. Just doin’ what we’re paid to do.” He gestured with his hat. “Thanks again, Colonel, and I hope to see you again some time, only with a little less drama.”

The colonel laughed. “We’ll make that a condition.”

“Anything you need, Colonel, any time.”

“Thanks, Court. Same goes to you.”

Court put on his hat, turned and left.

Outside, Philby and Stanton were mounted and waiting. Philby passed Court the reins to his horse as he came out.

As Court swung into the saddle, he said, “Well, the sun’s only got about a half-hour on us. Let’s see if we can get back in two days, whaddya say?” He grinned as they turned toward the gate.

Philby said, “Here’s to a straight trail and no snakes.”

Stanton grinned. “Yeah, either the belly sliders or the two legged feather hairs.”

As they passed through the gate, they broke into an easy canter and headed southwest. About two hours southwest of the fort they would meet Wolf Creek where it jagged sharply to the southwest. They would follow it for another three hours, and when it disappeared into the plains, they’d have another five or six hours to the Canadian.

It would make for a long day, but that would leave them with a shorter day tomorrow.

For one of them, it would be a much shorter day.

\* \* \*

In Red Hawk’s tipi, he, Four Crows, Twin Deer and Red Hawk’s eldest son One Bear were in council. Unable to confine his excitement, he grinned. “This very day we will receive a large wagonload of the new repeating rifles. Have you seen those in action yet?”

Four Crows nodded gravely. “I have heard them. They are what the Rangers used in the place of the narrow rocks to defeat Iron Bear. The shots came quickly, one after another like drops in running water.”

Even that reminder of his brother’s death couldn’t dampen Red Hawk’s enthusiasm. He nodded. “I miss my brother, but all things have led to this moment. Soon we will be able to even the score.

“The rifles would not have been here for two more days, but Talbot’s brother came to me himself. He said he wanted to cut out Messina. He would deliver the rifles directly to me and they would cost us less.”

He grinned broadly. “And that is how we will come to have them today. They should have left

the fort yesterday as the sun was going down. We can expect them soon after the sun reaches the center of the sky today.”

He turned to Four Crows and patted his shoulder. “You, my young friend, will have the honor of first pick, and then those who will ride with you. Then I and my people will arm ourselves as well.”

Then Messina’s man had ridden into camp with the cryptic message that Messina himself was coming.

A jolt like electricity raced through Four Crows’ body and he looked at Twin Deer. “Go now. Have those who would ride with us meet me at the north end of the camp.” As Twin Deer exited the tipi, Four Crows turned to Red Hawk. “Something has gone wrong. The guns are not coming.” He stood. “Thank you for your counsel and your help, my chief. I am well rested. We will ride now. I wish you good fortune in all things.” He proffered his hand.

Red Hawk got to his feet and shook Four Crows’ hand. “I agree, the coming of this man forebodes a change of our plans. Are you sure you will not wait to see what the change entails?”

“I am sure, my chief. We will meet again. But for now I have a favor to ask.”

“Anything, young chief.”

Four Crows told Red Hawk briefly of his intended initial target.

The old man smiled and nodded. “Iron Bear would be pleased.”

Four Crows said, “My chief, send riders to the north and west. Tell them to meet me late tomorrow night at the west end of the long lake.”

Red Hawk nodded. “I understand. It will be done.”

Four Crows clapped the old chief on the shoulder, then turned and ducked out through the tipi entrance. He turned right and moved up a narrow lane to the north.

Behind him, near the center of the camp, Messina’s man was nervously explaining to a group of increasingly annoyed braves that he was not at liberty to divulge the reason for Messina’s visit. “It has to do with repeating guns and deception,” he said. “There were Rangers at the fort and....” His voice faded.

Four Crows shook his head. He only hoped the deception was not ongoing.

But what else had the man said? There were Rangers at the fort? The fort had soldiers, unless they were gone somewhere. In that case the Rangers might have provided assistance. But why?

It didn’t make sense. The Rangers themselves in Amarillo were undermanned. They had sent only seven to the ambush in the draw of the pinched rocks, and they lost two men there. That would leave five plus up to three who had remained in Amarillo during the ambush.

They would not leave Amarillo undefended then or now, so there could be only two or three Rangers at the fort and another two or three in Amarillo. Those were excellent odds.

And the main Ranger, their chief, would be there.

As he reached the north end of the camp, he found that four more braves had joined their party and improved his odds against the Rangers even more. He had arrived in Red Crow’s camp

with eight braves plus himself. He would leave with twelve braves.

As Four Crows mounted his horse, a plan was forming in his mind. He would continue to avenge Iron Bear, and at the same time, he would teach the Rangers a valuable lesson about minding their own business where Comanche relations with the army were concerned.

After an hour of traveling almost due west, they forded Wolf Creek and headed west-southwest. Four Crows kept a strong pace, and eventually even Twin Deer wondered why and whether such a fast pace was warranted. Still, from what he had already seen Four Crows accomplish, he kept his reservations to himself.

He would be richly rewarded for his trust.

\* \* \*

Despite the fiery pain shooting through his head and down the right side of his face, Jade Talbot began tugging at the stakes holding his wrists almost the moment Messina turned his back. He hoped to pull one free and brain Messina with it before the man could mount his horse.

That was not to be, but when the sun was halfway to its zenith he finally was able to work free the stake holding his right wrist. Messina and his men had been gone for three or four hours.

When Talbot rolled onto his left hip and reached for the stake at his left wrist, an electric sensation fired along his back, the result of moving too quickly after having been in one position too long.

When the cramp abated, he worked briefly at the binding on his left wrist, but finally opted to tug on the stake there as well, jerking it back and forth until he worked it free.

Finally he sat up and slid his butt forward, bending his knees to draw himself closer to the bindings holding his feet. As he leaned forward at the waist, something flashed in his periphery.

He looked. It was the guard from last night. Messina had shot him, and the others had left him where he was lying face down.

Well, he wouldn't get any help from Talbot either. He was the one who had caused all this mess. But what had flashed?

Talbot looked again, more closely. His knife was protruding from the man's belt just above his right hip. His gunbelt lay beneath the man's left hand. The Remington had slipped from the holster.

Talbot judged the distance. About eight feet.

He put his hands beneath him and stood, unsteadily, then fell in the direction of the dead guard.

Even with his arms outstretched, he couldn't reach his knife, but he could reach the dead man's neckerchief. He wrapped the fingers of his right hand through it, then dragged the dead man closer, then closer. After a third pull, he was able to reach his knife.

He rolled over and used the bindings on his feet to pull him closer to the stakes. A moment later, he'd slashed through the rawhide bindings. He knelt, placed the stake dangling from his left hand against a rock, and sliced the binding away from it, then repeated the motion for the other

hand.

Finally free, he walked back to the dead man, knelt and pulled his gunbelt and his revolver from under the man's lifeless left hand. He slipped the Remington back into the holster, then buckled the gunbelt around his waist. He looked down for a moment, then knelt again. He rolled the dead man over and unbuckled his gunbelt.

He stood and pulled the man's Remington from his holster and stuck it behind his gunbelt. Then he shoved the cartridges out of the gunbelt, dropped them into his pants pocket, and dropped the gunbelt on the dead man's face.

He thought for a moment. The Comancheros were riding fast when they left. They wouldn't have taken all the horses. He started walking, investigating the other, smaller arroyos feeding into this major one. Soon he found three horses, including his.

His horse was still saddled. "I'll get that off you and let you rest tonight. Right now we have to ride though. What say we head for Dalton?" Talbot mounted, turned the horse to the west, and rode along the bottom of the arroyo at a leisurely canter.

Not quite an hour later, he exited the arroyo and moved south. Soon he picked up Wolf Creek and followed it to the west for a few miles, then continued when it turned west-southwest. When it flattened out again and turned more due west, he dropped off it. He continued southwest for another hour to get away from the more normal routes, then turned back west and struck out across the open plains.

His plan worked well. For four hours, he didn't see another rider. Then he topped out on a low rise, and as he peered out to the west, three other riders came into view. They were heading to the southwest, and they were moving at a pretty good pace. He slowed his horse, then reined in.

He leaned forward in the saddle. Quietly, he said, "Well, what do we have here?"

His saddle and saddle bags had still been on his horse, so maybe the contents of his saddle bags were still there too. He dismounted, though he kept the reins loosely in his left hand. He turned and opened the left saddle bag and reached down into it.

"Not there," he mumbled. "Well, maybe I stuck it in the other one."

He crossed in front of the horse, patting his neck as he did so, then opened the right saddle bag. This time when he reached, the fingertips on his right hand bumped against a cool metal tube. "There it is."

He shifted some other things out of the way, then closed his fist around the tube and pulled it from the saddle bag. It was a telescope. In its current compact form, it was just over a foot long and a little over an inch and a half in diameter. Fully extended, it was almost two feet long.

He extended it, then put it to his left eye and turned the bezel ring to focus it. It felt awkward there since he normally looked through it with his right eye. But that side was too tender, thanks to Messina.

He focused on the first rider. He'd never seen the man before, as far as he could remember.

Something flashed. He focused the bezel ring again. There was a small silver circle on the

man's shirt. He'd seen that before. The man was a Texas Ranger.

He lowered the spy glass. "Must be the same guys who messed up the deal in Fort Perry."

He put the telescope to his eye again and focused on the second rider, but just as the focus brought him into view, the third rider pulled alongside him.

Talbot adjusted the bezel ring again and took a closer look at the third rider. He'd never seen that one before either. He shook his head. "They keep gettin' younger and younger."

He continued to look through the glass, his fingers poised on the bezel ring, waiting to see whether he could identify the second rider. Finally, just as he was about to give up, the younger man fell back just a bit and the second one came into view.

Talbot looked at him, then lowered the spyglass. "I'll be damned." Then he put it back up to his eye and focused again. He shook his head. "That's Morgan Powell."

He was wearing a Texas Ranger badge as well. "How in hell did he pull that off?" Obviously his past hadn't caught up with him yet.

Powell had been arrested in Laredo right alongside Talbot nine years earlier.

Three days later he'd broken a jailer's jaw and escaped.

On his way to northwest Texas, he'd picked a new name.

Mason Philby.

Talbot recognized opportunity when he saw it.

He turned his horse southwest.

\* \* \*

Eleven hours after they left Fort Perry and not quite two hours after the sun had gone down, Corporal Edwards and Rangers Philby and Stanton had covered almost sixty miles.

As they approached their usual ford on the Canadian, they heard it several minutes before they saw it. The water was much louder than usual.

As Philby edged his horse down to the water's edge, he stopped. In the moonlight the surface was rippled, a sure sign of deep water. He looked back at the corporal. "Court, you sure this is where we crossed on the way up?"

Court edged his horse forward. "Yep, this is it. Must'a been a heavy rain upstream somewhere."

He leaned forward in the saddle and looked west, then twisted around and looked back to the east. "This is it for sure. See that big cottonwood?" He pointed. "And right across from it, that grove of desert willows? This is it."

Philby said, "Water's awful fast."

Court nodded. "And deep."

Stanton was a little higher on the bank behind them. "My dad always said fast water when it's usually calm is an easy place to find water mocs."

Court laughed quietly. "That's true enough. Since we ain't lookin' to find any, I reckon we'll set up over here for the night. In the mornin' we can either ford here or look for a better place.

Amarillo won't be any farther away."

They turned away from the river and moved back up into the brush. When they came across a small clearing, Court said, "I'll sit up for awhile. You boys get some sleep."

Philby and Stanton didn't argue.

\*

Court had drawn his Colt earlier and laid it across his lap.

Sometime after midnight, he jerked awake. His first reflex was to pull back the hammer on his revolver.

Something, a sharp, short sound maybe like a stick snapping, had pulled him from sleep. He remained very still as he cleared the fog from his mind, tried to remember where he was and how he'd gotten here.

It came back to him. He, Philby and Stanton had been to Fort Perry where they'd encountered and rectified a situation. Now they were on the north bank of the Canadian. The river was up so they hadn't forded.

He was on watch, so he shouldn't have been asleep. He shook his head. Once this was settled, whatever it was, he'd rouse Philby and get a few hours' shuteye. It was still another six or seven hours to Amarillo.

He listened carefully, unmoving.

After a time, he thought what he'd heard probably had been only the wind in the brush. The night was calm when he'd first settled down, his back to a large cottonwood. But the wind had picked up, apparently, while he was dozing.

Now it was unrelenting. That had to be it. The wind whipping through the brush.

Still, he was sure whatever had pulled him from sleep was a sharp sound. It would take a pretty hard wind to create a sound like that. He grinned. If you had a wind that hard, you'd have bigger problems than the noise it was making.

He continued to listen, but a few minutes later he was starting to feel drowsy again. Probably he should go ahead and wake Philby. Stanton was younger, but Philby was the more seasoned Ranger.

Philby would be more likely to keep them alive through this night. Then they'd have more time to train Stanton later, when there were more Rangers around or when they weren't trapped on the wrong side of a river.

He listened again for a long moment, but there were no sounds beyond the rushing of the river in the background. He wondered when the flood would abate so they could get across. They might have to ford farther down.

He shook his head and dug his heels into the mulch at the base of the cottonwood tree to push himself up. He lowered the hammer on his Colt and as he stood, he slipped it into his holster.

Something dark and heavy crashed out of the brush to his left, grazing his left knee and almost knocking him down.

Off balance and leaning to his right, he pulled his Colt, cocked it and fired. Something grunted hard, and there was another loud crash in the brush. That was followed by some rustling noises, then silence.

Court had regained his balance. He kept his Colt leveled in the direction the thing had disappeared, his knees bent, his other hand out for balance, sweat pouring off his forehead.

“Court!” Philby yelled, then rushed into the clearing, wide eyed, followed closely by Stanton. Both had their Colts drawn and cocked.

Philby saw Court. “You all right?”

Stanton had assumed a stance similar to Courts and was still peering around the clearing, his Colt leveled.

Court nodded, but continued looking in the direction he’d fired. “I’m fine. I heard somethin’, or thought I did. I listened awhile and waited, but the sound never repeated. I was just about to come get you to spell me on watch when all hell broke loose.”

He grinned. “I’ve got a feelin’ I shot one’a them wild hogs in the butt.” He gestured with his Colt. “Went right through there. From the sound of it he only made it about twenty yards.

“You boys want some hog meat, that’s where you’ll find him. Either that or a dead Comanche midget. Whatever it was, it wasn’t quite two feet tall. Movin’ pretty fast too.”

Philby lowered the hammer on his Colt, then holstered it.

Stanton followed his lead, the moon illuminating a broad grin on his face. He kept his thoughts to himself.

Philby said, “You wanna go get some shuteye, I’ll take the watch. I don’t reckon I could sleep anymore right now anyway.”

Court shook his head. “That was the plan, but dancin’ with that hog changed my mind. I don’t think I could sleep now on a dare.”

Still looking around, Stanton shook his head. “Me either.”

Philby was looking up at the sky. “You know, judgin’ from the Dipper, it’s only maybe another two hour ‘til sunrise anyway.” He gestured toward the sound of the rushing water. “Sounds like the river ain’t calmed down any. Chances are we’re gonna have to ride on downriver on this bank anyway for awhile.”

Court took his meaning. “You thinkin’ we ought’a saddle up an’ head out?”

Philby said, “You’re the one ain’t had no rest. If you’re good to go, I’m ready.”

Court turned to Stanton. “Blake?”

Stanton continued to watch the brush. “Sounds good to me.”

Court turned back to Philby. “I guess it’s unanimous. Let’s break this non-camp and head on downriver. Be good to get back to Amarillo anyway. We find a ford, we could be there by mid-afternoon.”

\* \* \*

When Four Crows and his band reached the Canadian, he reined in and looked at Twin Deer.

“Have them water the horses. We will cross about a mile down. Then we will have a hard ride until almost sundown.”

Twin Deer dismounted and gestured, indicating the others should do the same. As the other braves let their horses drink, he relayed the message from Four Crows.

One young brave who had joined them at Red Hawk’s village frowned. “Will we not kill these animals if we continue in this way?”

Twin Deer said, “You just do what—”

“You have met Red Hawk, yet you have seen nothing.” It was Takes Leaves. “Red Hawk is a great chief, yet he himself would ride with Four Crows if he were younger. I heard him say so.”

Twin Deer glared at him.

Takes Leaves flushed. “I was outside, just passing by.” He turned back to the other brave. “I have seen Four Crows do things no other Comanche could do, brave or chief. It is magic. He is able to do these things because he believes he is able to do these things. Trust in his judgment, and you will see for yourself.”

The brave looked at Twin Deer.

Twin Deer glanced at Takes Leaves, then looked at the other brave and nodded. “It is true. If you trust, you will not be disappointed. Someday you will tell your grandchildren of this chief, and that you rode with him.”

Another brave in the crowd muttered, “If you live to have grandchildren.”

Twin Deer spotted him. “Yes, or if you are able to make grandchildren.”

The others laughed, one jostling the shoulder of the brave who had spoken.

When everyone was mounted, Four Crows moved up to face them. “Some of you do not know me yet. I appreciate you joining our band on faith. What we are doing will not always be easy to know, but I have learned hard lessons from the best of our warriors. I will not lead you astray. When there is time, I will explain. Now is one of those times.

“After we ford the river, we will ride hard for another two hours. There we will exchange horses. Our horses will rest, but we will not.

“Many will meet us at the west end of a long lake. From there, we will ride on a vengeance trail for Iron Bear, my chief and the brother of Red Hawk. Before another full day has passed, we will have that vengeance.”

His target was set. He would reach Amarillo while it was minimally defended. Even if the Rangers from the fort had returned, they would be weary from their trip.

He would burn Amarillo, and as the Rangers had killed his chief, so would he kill theirs.

His horse wheeled around, and he faced them once again. “Follow me!”

He turned his horse and rode away. The other braves, laughing and whooping and calling to each other, followed.

A mile later they forded the Canadian River, then turned southwest.

\* \* \*

With the river still swollen and running heavy, Corporal Edwards led his Rangers north about a quarter-mile to a trail that ran along the north bank of the Canadian. From there they could more easily identify and investigate each fording opportunity. They turned back west and urged their horses up to an easy canter.

After almost an hour, Philby rode up alongside the corporal. A thought had been nagging him. "Hey Court, you know that main ford downriver, maybe fifteen miles from here? Right near that small place the old guy calls a trading post?"

Court thought for a moment, then nodded. "I think I know the one you mean. Johnson's Ford, he calls it. That'll take us a couple hours out of the way from a direct route to Amarillo, though."

"Yeah, I know, but I think that's where we're gonna have to cross. I think that's the first place where the river's wide enough and shallow enough to cross when it's floodin' like this."

"I think you might be right about that."

Stanton had moved up alongside Philby. "Right about what?"

Philby said, "There's a really wide ford with a pebble bottom about three hours from here. We're thinkin' about headin' on down there instead of lookin' for a ford here."

Stanton frowned. "What's the difference?"

Court said, "We cross here, it's another six or seven hours to Amarillo straight southwest. We spend the three or four hours it'll take us to go due west to Johnson's Ford, it'll still be another seven hours or so to Amarillo."

Stanton shrugged. "Either way's good for me."

Philby said, "Your call, Court. Overall we might save more time just goin' on down to Johnson's Ford instead of poking along here hopin' to find another crossin'."

Court said, "I imagine you're right. I'd have preferred a straight shot home, especially after the long day we put in yesterday, but we can't help the river bein' swelled. We'll head on down to Johnson's Ford."

\* \* \*

Talbot had ridden through the night, resting in the saddle when he had to. When he reached the cabin near the wide ford on the Canadian, the sun was still a couple hours from reaching the top of the sky. He dismounted out front and tapped on the door, then worked the latch and pushed it open.

"Anybody home?"

Sunlight streamed in ahead of him, illuminating the dust in the air and slicing across the floor. An old man was seated behind a long, narrow table, his right side toward the door. Without looking up, he said, "Hey, prop that open, would'ya? More light might be just what I need to finish this thing."

In his left hand was a figurine. In his right was a small knife.

Talbot glanced down. A large black rock lay on the worn, splintering wooden plank floor. He used the toe of his boot to slide it over against the door, then looked up. "What'cha got there,

Crate?”

The old man turned his head. “What?” He held his right hand up to shade his eyes, the blade of the knife coming close to the outer corner of his right eye. He glanced at his left hand, then held it up in front of him. “Oh, it’s a figurine. Whittlin’ a figurine. The Injuns seem to like ‘em, an’ ever’ now an’ then I sell one to a white-eyes.”

He peered toward Talbot, squinting. “You know me?”

“I’m Jade Talbot.”

“Oh Jade. Sure. Been awhile.” He laid the figurine and the knife on the table, got up and walked around the end.

Jade nodded and proffered his hand. “A few years, I think.”

As they shook hands, the old man frowned. “Whooee! Who done that to your face?”

“Guy who’s gonna live to regret it. Listen, any Texas Rangers come through here lately? Probably headin’ north to south?”

“Rangers? Wasn’t no Ranger done that to you, was it? I known a few Rangers in my time, but I ain’t never known one that’d do somethin’ like—”

“No, no. Nothin’ like that. I crossed trails with a few Rangers yesterday. I was a ways behind ‘em, but I figured if they were on their way home they’d come through here.”

Crate Johnson shook his head. “Nope, nope. Not unless they went by real quiet like. Most often, though, I hear anybody goin’ by even if they don’t stop an’ come in.”

Talbot nodded. “All right. Well, hey, it was good seein’ you again. Guess I’ll head on down to Amarillo.”

“Interest you in some jerky? I got antelope an’ I got jackrabbit. Jackrabbit’s lookin’ a little green though. Might not’a cured right.”

Talbot grinned. “I reckon not. Maybe next time I’m through.” He turned for the door.

Crate walked back around the table. As he sat down he raised one hand. “Suit yourself.”

Outside, Talbot mounted, then turned his horse west. A hundred yards downriver, he rode carefully into the swiftly moving Canadian. As they forded, with the water belly deep on his horse, he considered the situation with the Rangers.

He had assumed they were heading for this ford, so he hadn’t bothered tracking them. Instead, he had ridden hard all day, hoping to catch up with them. But he hadn’t seen them again, and they hadn’t crossed ahead of him, at least not that the old man had noticed.

There were only two possible scenarios. Either they had crossed elsewhere on the river, farther upstream, or they hadn’t arrived here yet.

Crossing farther upstream would make sense if they were riding on a beeline from Fort Perry to Amarillo. On the other hand, Johnson’s Ford was usually only about a foot deep. Judging from the depth of the water here and how rapidly it was running, the Rangers probably had not been able to negotiate the deeper, more narrow fords upstream.

Then it dawned on him. “I’ll be damned.” Not quite to the midpoint of the river, he stopped.

“They’re coming downriver. They were gonna cross farther up, but they couldn’t. They’re coming downriver.”

And he’d cut the corner off their route. If they stopped for the night, they wouldn’t be here for another two or three hours.

He turned his horse around and retraced his path back to the north bank. When he splashed out, he walked his horse due north. The old man would think he had forded the river and gone on to Amarillo.

His current path would bring him out a hundred yards west and a quarter-mile north of the cabin. Then he’d turn back east and find a good place to lie in wait.

He took his time, allowing his horse to walk east along the river trail. It would be at least two hours before the Rangers would be here. He’d seen two or three passable ambush sites nearer the cabin, but he’d bypassed those, preferring to find a site at least a mile away.

From that distance, he hoped the cottonwoods and other foliage along the river would deaden the sounds of gunfire, or at least deflect it enough so old Crate wouldn’t be interested. He’d hate to have to kill the old man too.

Talbot didn’t notice the trail was gently ascending as he continued east. For a couple hundred yards around the cabin, it was only a few feet above the level of the river. But here, a mile from the cabin, it was a good eighty feet above the water.

When he was about a mile and a half away from the cabin, ahead of him the trail led over a low rise. There was a sheer dirt cliff to the left and a gradual slope to the right for about thirty yards. Then the land disappeared into the river gorge.

As he approached, Talbot looked at the rise. That might be the perfect place to set an ambush. Riders coming from the other direction would be slower there as they topped over the hill.

He might even set up on the other side of the hill. That way he could catch the Rangers as they were ascending, and the hill itself would deflect the sounds of the gunshots. That would be the way to go. He’d make short work of the Rangers, including his faulty ex-friend. Then afterward he could continue on his way west to—

Just before he topped over the rise, the sound of horses’ hooves suddenly echoed off the wall to his left.

It was too late to rein in, and there was no place to hide. He hoped it was someone else. The Rangers shouldn’t be this far west yet. They couldn’t be.

But they were.

\*

The first man he’d seen through his telescope the previous day came around a bend and started up the hill from the other side. The younger rider, the third rider from the day before, was just behind him on his left. Talbot’s old friend, Morgan Powell, was just behind the leader to his right and pulling even. He was leaning forward and left in the saddle as if he was about to say something to the first man.

At the sight of his ex-friend wearing a Ranger badge, an unbridled rage built in Talbot's gut and spread outward. His skin seemed to stretch with the force. The right side of his forehead and his right cheek were suddenly on fire again, and it was excruciating.

Without realizing he was doing so, he spurred his horse hard and it broke into a panicked gallop. He put his weight on the stirrups, leaned forward in the saddle, and drew his Remington. As he pulled the hammer to the rear, he yelled, "Powell, you rotten son of a bitch, die!"

He squeezed the trigger, and the Remington exploded and bucked in his hand.

Court's eyes grew wide when he saw the man break into a gallop and draw his revolver. As the man was bringing his revolver to bear and yelling something about a guy named Powell, Court frowned. He was thinking that a case of mistaken identity could easily cost a man his life. At the same time he was drawing his Colt and leaning low to the left over his horse's neck.

Behind Court to the left, Stanton had drawn and cocked his Colt and was beginning to level it.

Behind Court to the right, Mason Philby instinctively reached for his Colt, then stopped. He frowned, sat up straight in the saddle and quietly, he said, "Talbot?"

The slug took Philby in the center of the chest, knocking him backward out of the saddle.

Talbot fired again. The bullet scalded a line through the empty space just above Philby's still oncoming horse.

Court's first round burned a red line across Talbot's right cheek.

Stanton's Colt exploded and the bullet passed a few inches to the right of Talbot's second shot, tearing a hole through Talbot's shirt and scalding his shoulder.

Talbot fired again. Then, as he felt the fire in his left shoulder, he pulled hard right on the reins and raced through the scrub oak and creosote bushes.

Court and Stanton reined left and followed him.

Court leveled his Colt and fired, and Talbot flipped forward out of the saddle. He disappeared.

Talbot's horse had stopped cold. It was covered in lather and trembling.

Court and Stanton slowed their mounts and veered around Talbot's horse, Court to the left and Stanton to the right. They meant to finish the pursuit and find the gunman, but there was something unusual about the way Talbot's horse was just standing there.

Then Court saw the edge. "Stop!"

They both reined in, and Stanton leapt from the saddle. He ran to the edge and looked over. It was a sheer drop to the river some one hundred feet below.

Stanton frowned, then looked back at Court. "You got him, didn't you?"

Court nodded. "Yeah. Hell, he flipped forward outta the saddle. Must'a fallen into the river. The water mocs'll take care of him if there's anything left to take care of."

Then Court looked around. "Where's Mason?"

Stanton had forgotten about their friend. "Damn. Guy shot him."

Court reined his horse around. "Let's go get him."

They rode back out onto the trail. About forty yards back the way they'd come, Mason Philby

lay face up just off the trail in the brush.

Court dismounted and ran to him. "Aw Jesus... I'm sorry, Mason. I'm so damned—"

But Philby shook his head. "No. Listen. Listen." He took a deep breath. "He was Talbot. Jade Talbot. Me an' him. Robbed a bank in Laredo." He rolled his head side to side. "Long time ago. I... I was Powell... Morgan Powell. It's okay now. Okay now."

Court shook his head. "You're gonna be all right, Mason. We'll get you back to—"

Again, Philby shook his head. "No. It's okay now." A slight smile curled his lips. "Was good... bein' a Ranger." He sighed and was gone.

For a long moment, Court held him. After a time, he looked at Stanton. Quietly he said, "Do me a favor, would you?"

Stanton nodded. "Anything, Court."

"Two favors. First, stay here with him for a little while. I know ol' man Johnson. I'll ride down an' get a wagon, all right? We'll bury him there. An' the other thing, you know, forget what he said about that other guy, that Powell guy, all right? I have no idea who that is. Shot like that, how it must'a hurt, I suspect he was talkin' out of his mind."

Stanton nodded. "Sure."

Court looked at him and nodded, then lowered Philby's head and shoulders to the ground and got up. "He was a damn good Ranger."

Stanton nodded.

Court turned away, then mounted and rode west.

\*

At the old man's cabin, he stepped down and crossed the broken porch. The door was open. "Mr. Johnson?"

The old man was still sitting behind the long table. The slash of sunlight was nearer the left corner of the table than it had been an hour ago. He looked up. "Yes? Oh, hi Ranger. Court Edwards, that you?"

"It's me, Mr. Johnson. Need to borrow your wagon for about a half-hour. I'll be needin' a spot of your ground too."

"A spot of ground?"

Court nodded. He stopped just short of the table. "Fella shot and killed Mason Philby, one of my Rangers. Don't know whether you knew Mason."

"Philby? Oh yes, yes. Mason Philby. Yes sir, he was in a time or two. Shot, eh? An' killed?"

"Yeah. Mistaken identity from what I gather. Guy called him by some other name, then shot him. Me an' the other Ranger got the guy but he flipped off his saddle into the river. Guess the water mocs'll get him.

"Mr. Johnson, been anybody else through here this mornin'?"

"Oh... well, yes, Jade Talbot come through about... oh, maybe an hour ago, maybe two. Said he was on his way to Amarillo. Funny, he asked me the same thing."

"He did?"

"Well, no. I mean, he asked me the other end of that. Asked if I'd seen any Rangers come through, an' then here you are. Ain't that a coincidence?"

"Maybe. You sure he went on to Amarillo?"

"Yep. Well, I didn't see him goin' down the trail on the other side of the river, but I did hear him crossing. What I mean, he splashed in, splashed out. Water's so deep right now you don't hear much splashin' when they're in the middle.

"So I couldn't swear he went on to Amarillo, but if I was a bettin' man an' had a dollar to my name, I reckon I'd feel safe bettin' he did."

Court nodded. "Okay. An' nobody else came through?"

"Nope. Nobody else but you."

"All right. Thanks, Mr. Johnson. Wagon's out back?"

"Yep. Already hooked up. I was gonna ride out to find some driftwood after awhile, but I hadn't got gone yet."

"Well, I'll have it back to you in a half-hour or so. I'll need to borrow a couple shovels then. An' you can point out where you'd like me to put my friend."

"Deal. I'll take a look around while you're gone."

Court left and led his horse around the side of the building.

\* \* \*

All in all, Captain Flowers thought it had been an exceptionally good day.

Shortly before noon, Sam Pencilman had brought him a telegram from Colonel Crutcher at Fort Perry, thanking him for sending the Rangers and assuring him the situation was resolved.

Pencilman was an odd little duck. Each time he had a telegram to deliver, he came in tentatively, delivered his message pensively, and disappeared like smoke in a high breeze. One of these times, the captain needed to catch him and talk with him about his obvious lack of self-esteem. There was simply no need to let it go on.

The day before, Corporal Connolly and Ranger Stilson had taken Rangers Crowley and McFadden to the range in the morning and then out for tracking practice in the afternoon. The two senior men had come back with glowing reports for the new Rangers.

And then today, on Corporal Connolly's recommendation, they had reversed those training exercises, letting Crowley and Mac practice tracking in the morning and shooting in the afternoon. The variation would enable them to be familiar with and take advantage of the different lighting, temperatures and mental acuity that accompanied the different times of day. Then too, they had returned with glowing reports.

When they'd returned at almost six p.m., the captain had sent them home for the day to be back in the morning at 8 a.m.

Now, at just after 7 p.m., he was at his desk in Ranger headquarters, finishing a letter. It was his response to a letter he'd received a few days earlier from his sister in St. Louis. Their elderly

mother was in ill health. His sister hoped he'd be able to visit before their mother passed.

In his response, he had said he couldn't leave at the moment because they were severely undermanned. However, he would be retiring as soon as his replacement was named, and he intended to return to St. Louis then for an extended visit if not permanently.

He was certain his replacement would be named any day. He asked her to express his love for their mother and to let her know that he would be there to see her as soon as he could do so. He was about to sign his name to the letter when there was a tentative knock on the door.

The knock was so light, at first the captain wasn't sure he'd heard it. He focused his attention on the door and waited. After a long moment, he gave up and bent over the letter to sign his name.

The knock came again.

He looked up and frowned. Who knocks on an office door? Only Pencilman ever did anything that pensively, but surely it wouldn't be him at this hour. "Yes? Come in."

The door opened as tentatively as the knock had sounded. Sure enough, Sam Pencilman's head and narrow shoulders appeared. As if it were his normal state, his glasses had slid halfway down his nose again, and the tuft of hair at the front of his pate was sticking straight up, as it had been earlier in the day, and as it had been earlier in the week.

Pencilman used the index finger of his left hand to push his glasses up his nose, which he then wrinkled as if he had just smelled something bad. For a moment, his mouth formed an O. It seemed the appropriate gesture to accompany the wrinkled nose. Then he said, "Captain Flowers?"

"Yes, Sam, what is it?"

The little man pushed the door open a bit farther and his left leg appeared, then his entire body. Still, he clung to the doorknob with his right hand as if the door were a security blanket.

He held up a slip of paper. "A telegram. Well, what I mean, it's for you. I mean, I have a telegram for you."

The captain nodded. "I can see that, Sam. Could you bring it over please?"

Sam frowned and cocked his head slightly, then looked down at his hand. "Oh. Oh, yes sir." He crossed the room. "Sorry, sir." He stopped at the low gate that separated the captain's area of the office from the rest of the room. He leaned forward, straining to reach the telegram far enough so the captain could grab it.

The captain looked at him. "It's all right, Sam. Just open the gate and come through. Or step over."

"Oh no sir. No sir. I would never—" He stopped talking, reached down with his right hand and pulled the small gate open, then stepped through. "What I mean, I don't want to do anything that might seem disrespectful. I mean, stepping over the captain's gate would be disrespectful, I think." He reached the slip of paper up to the captain.

Captain Flowers took it. "Sam, how long have you been bringing me telegrams?"

Sam pushed his glasses up his nose again. "Oh. Well, close to five or six years, I'd say."

The captain nodded. "Closer to six. And have I ever once said to you that I thought you were being disrespectful?"

"N-no sir."

"That's right. You're one of the best men I know, Sam, and I'm glad to know you. I wouldn't ever do anything to seem disrespectful to you either. You see what I mean?"

"Oh, but Captain, I mean, you're a Texas Ranger and I'm just a little—"

"You're not a little anything, Sam. You're 'just' the man who keeps me in touch with the whole outside world. None of my Rangers can do what you do." He proffered his hand. "I appreciate you, Sam, and I'm glad to know you. I'm proud to be associated with you."

Sam shook his hand, and a grin spread across his face. "Well, thank you, Captain. Thank you."

"So let's not have anymore talk about disrespect and all that, all right? Let's just treat each other as equals. Just two men doing our jobs. All right?"

"Yes sir. Captain. I mean, yes, Captain. I mean, if you think that's best."

"I do, Sam." He held up the telegram. "Thanks for this."

"You're welcome, Captain."

The captain just looked at him.

"Oh, yes sir. I, uh... what I mean, I need to be going."

The captain nodded. "See you later, Sam."

"Yes sir." He turned and all but ran from the room. Smoke in a high breeze.

Captain Flowers shook his head, then unfolded the telegram and read it.

It was good news.

His replacement, Captain James Henry Wilson, would arrive in three days on the stage. When Captain Wilson was satisfied that he no longer needed Captain Flowers' assistance, Captain Wilson was authorized by the governor to relieve Captain Flowers of his command. Captain Flowers would then consider himself retired. His pension payments would be sent to his sister's address in St. Louis.

He sat back in his chair and smiled. As the smile faded, he said quietly, "God how I'd love to do it all again."

A half-hour later the captain had signed the letter to his sister and taken care of a few minor office chores. He rose from his chair, walked across the floor and took his hat from the rack beside the door. He stopped for a moment and turned around, just looking.

There was the table the men used as a desk. The chairs, scattered about the room, seemed never to be in the same place two days in a row. The small, neat fence and gate that separated his area of the office from the rest reminded him of the courtrooms in some of the larger cities.

The sense washed over him that his desk, the area he had occupied for the past six years, looked empty without him sitting there. That was an odd feeling, considering he'd never seen himself sitting there. He grinned. Probably the office was just too quiet. It felt morose.

A drink or two over at the Inn would help him through it. Maybe Jim or Jack were still downstairs. Maybe even Wes and Mac if the older guys hadn't worked them too hard. The thought made him smile.

\*

In the saloon, Corporal Connolly and Rangers Stilson, Crowley and McFadden were sitting at a table near back corner.

Jack Stilson sipped his beer, then leaned forward, his forearms on the table, and looked to his right. "So Wes, when you saw Four Crows up there, were you using a spy glass?"

"A what?"

"A spy glass. It's kind of a metal tube that expands out. Well, really there's two or three tubes and each of 'em has special glass in the end. So the inside tubes expand out of the outside tube."

Wes frowned. "What's it for?"

"It lets you see far off things like you were three or four times closer. When you get it stretched out, you put the little end up to your eye and look through the tubes."

Corporal Connolly said, "I think you said Four Crows was about three hundred yards away. If you looked at him through a spy glass, he'd look like he was only a hundred yards away, or even fifty." He took a sip of his beer. "How close he looks depends on how big the spy glass is."

"Naw, I didn't have nothin' like that."

The captain overheard as he came up. "A telescope. A spy glass is also called a telescope because it telescopes out. We'll have to get you one." He grinned and gestured toward the table. "You guys mind?"

Connolly grinned. He raised his glass. "Not at all, Captain. Pull up a chair."

Captain Flowers grabbed the back of a chair from a nearby table and swung it around as Wes and Mac each edged their chairs to the side a bit to make room.

The captain sat down and looked at Corporal Connolly. "Edwards, Stanton and Philby ought to be back sometime tomorrow, probably around noon. When they get back, check with everybody and see how many we need. We ought to have one for each man plus a few extra for when new men hire on."

"Yes sir."

The bartender brought a glass of beer and set it in front of the captain. "I know you're leavin' us soon, Captain. Just want to say it's been an honor knowin' you."

The captain looked up and smiled. "Thanks, John. I appreciate that."

The bartender smiled and nodded, then headed back toward the bar.

The captain sipped his beer and grinned. "I've heard good things about Captain Wilson. He'll do good for you guys." He hesitated. "Still, I almost wish I could ride out one more time. Feel the heat of battle one more time."

He sipped his beer again. "It ain't to be, but at least I know when I retire I'll be leaving Texas in good hands." He raised his glass. "To you, gentlemen, and your colleagues."

Connolly hoisted his glass too. "And to you, Captain."

They all drank, and the captain slid back his chair and stood. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll turn in. We have a lot to do in the next couple of days to get ready for the change over. Goodnight, gentlemen."

In one voice, Connolly and Stilson said, "Night, Captain."

Wes and Mac nodded and raised their glasses.

Mac said, "Night, sir."

\*

Four hours later, a loud knock came on the door to his room in the Amarillo Inn. "Captain?" The knock came again. "Sorry, Captain, but we need to talk with you." Again, the knock. "Captain? It's Corporal Edwards and Ranger Stanton. Captain?"

Dressed in trousers and his undershirt, socks and suspenders, the captain pulled the door open just as Corporal Edwards was about to knock again. He rubbed one hand down over his eyes and face, then blinked.

"Sorry, I was asleep." He blinked again. "Court? Is that Stanton with you? What time is it?"

"Yes sir, it's me an' Ranger Stanton. It's almost midnight, sir. I'm sorry about the late hour. Could we come in, sir?"

The captain pulled the door farther open. "Of course. Sorry. Please, come in, both of you. What's the matter?"

Court walked past him. "We lost Philby."

Stanton followed him into the room.

The captain's mouth dropped open. "What?" He closed the door.

The captain sat on the bed and gestured toward the two chairs in the room. "Please, sit. Take a breath and tell me what happened."

"Well, everything went okay at the fort. I mean, there was some trouble but we took care of that. I'll fill you in on that later or tomorrow."

The captain waved one hand side to side. "Never mind that. The colonel wired me. I thought everything went fine."

"Yes sir. But on the way back, you know that wide ford up at Mr. Johnson's place?"

"Yes."

"There was a guy there. Well, actually he was east of there about a mile. He was waiting, I think. But it was mistaken identity, Captain. He called out some man's name an' then he charged us."

"What name?"

"I don't know, sir. Phillips or Polson or something like that. Some name that started with a P. But then he charged us, outright."

"There was only the one man? And he charged you by himself?"

"Yes sir. He fired two or three times an' one of his bullets killed Mason."

Stanton said, "It was the first one. His first bullet hit Ranger Philby."

Court looked at him and nodded. Then he looked back at the captain. "We turned on him, Captain. I winged him, I'm pretty sure, an' then Blake here nailed him, but he was still ridin'. I think that's when he turned hard right off the trail, when Blake got him."

"Anyways, I wasn't thinkin' about where we were, I mean with the river right there an' all. Anyways, I fired at him again an' I think Blake fired again." He looked at Blake. "Did you fire at him after he turned off the trail?"

Stanton nodded. "I think so. I don't remember though, to be honest."

"Well, anyways, I fired at him an' I think Blake fired at him after he turned. Well, one or both of those bullets hit him an' he flipped forward out of the saddle, right up over his horse's head."

"But then when we got close, his horse was just standin' there. We were gonna ride around him and go get the damn guy, but it turned out his horse was right near the edge of a drop. That's why he stopped. I'll bet it was a good hundred feet straight down to the river."

He shook his head. "Captain, thing is, we didn't get the guy. I mean, we got him, but we didn't bring him back. He was shot at least twice, an' maybe as many as four times, plus he fell that far an' went into the river."

Stanton said, "An' plus, it's floodin' right now, so there's prob'ly water moccasins everywhere. That's what my dad used to say. Fast water where it's usually calm is where there's usually water mocs."

Court said, "An' what we were doin' there, up at the Johnson Ford I mean, we were comin' on a pretty straight course from Fort Perry. Wanted to make it back in two days. There's a little place on the Canadian near some desert willows on one side and a big ol' cottonwood on the other. It's usually about belly deep an' not very wide. Pretty good ford. So that's where we crossed on the way up."

"But when we got to the same place on the way back, it was floodin' bad. So that's why we were goin' down to the wider ford at Mr. Johnson's place. Even there the water was belly deep to a horse an' it usually ain't deeper than a foot or so. An' then we—"

The captain held up his hand. "Hold on. So where's Ranger Philby now?"

"Oh, sorry, Captain. We buried him up there on Mr. Johnson's place. He, uh—" Court looked away for a moment. "Ranger Philby told me more than once he'd like to be buried right there along the Canadian." Then he smiled at the rest of the memory. "Only he always added that he wasn't in no particular hurry."

The captain just nodded. "Well." He nodded again. "I'm just damn sorry to hear that, Court. I know you were close."

"Yes sir."

"Listen, tomorrow's soon enough for the debrief on the rest. Unless you can think of anything else I need to know right now, you men go get some rest. Get some sleep and be in the office at say 10 tomorrow morning. I'll have the others there then too." He stood and clapped Court on the

shoulder. "I'll see you in the morning." He glanced at Stanton. "Blake, you get some rest."

Stanton nodded. "Yes sir."

Court said, "See you in the mornin', Captain."

He opened the door, and he and Stanton went out into the hallway.

Stanton clapped him on the shoulder and said, "I'll go tend to the horses. I'll see you all in the mornin', Court."

Court looked at him and nodded. "Thanks, Blake."

Stanton nodded and went downstairs.

\*

Corporal Edwards went straight to his room when he and Stanton left the captain, but as he had expected, he was unable to sleep. He waited a half-hour to give Stanton time to get back from the livery and head up to his own room to get some sleep.

A few minutes after he heard Stanton pass in the hallway, Edwards went downstairs. It was half past one a.m.

When Court reached the bottom of the stairs, he angled to the right past the front desk and walked into the saloon. It was deserted except for the night bartender, who seemed to be busy closing up the place.

As Court approached the bar, the barkeeper put down a glass he was wiping. "Get you somethin', Court?"

"Beer, please." He glanced around, then back to the bartender. "Big crowd, huh?"

Something in the Ranger's tone was different, subdued maybe. The bartender nodded. "Been like this since about ten. Guess the natives just aren't all that restless tonight." He tried a grin, but it didn't quite develop. He put Court's beer on the bar in front of him, then said, "Stay as long as you like, Court. I'll be here." He hesitated. "An' look... you need to talk or anything...."

Court nodded. "Thanks, John." He turned away and crossed the room.

He took a table near the base of the door to the lobby of the hotel. He sipped his beer and looked around. Amazing how much he could see without Mason sitting across from him. He sipped his beer again. Or was it Morgan? What had he said? Morgan Powell?

Had he been serving with a bank robber? And he hadn't even known his real name?

But no, that wasn't quite right. Mason had come on the Rangers not quite a year after Edwards had, and they'd been fast friends ever since. They were practically inseparable. If anything, Mason was the real Mason Philby and Morgan Powell was the fake. Mason had never shirked his duty, and he'd always made a hand.

But he hadn't fired at Talbot.

He must have recognized him, but he didn't fire at him.

Still, that would only speak to his loyalty, wouldn't it? Being hesitant to shoot down a bad memory from his past to protect himself?

Yes, that was the Mason Philby Court knew. If they'd captured Talbot and Mason had lived,

Mason probably would have risked his own career with the Rangers to come to Talbot's defense. Court shook his head.

That's who Mason Philby was, the kind of man he was. He didn't know Morgan Powell at all, or even know of him. He'd never met the man, or even seen any evidence of him. He suspected his friend Mason had arrested Powell and locked him away years ago. That's what must have happened.

So no reason to bring up Powell again, ever.

He looked around again. It definitely looked different without Mason sitting across the table. Much more open, for one thing. Court wasn't sure he'd ever known what the bar looked like, not really.

When the bartender noticed the level of beer in Court's glass getting low, he brought him another.

Court raised the new glass slightly. "Thanks, John. I 'preciate it."

John nodded and carried the empty back to the bar. For the next couple of hours he tried to time the delivery of the next beer so it coincided with Court draining the previous one.

That was Court's regular table, but he was never alone there. Mason Philby was always with him. They laughed and joked mostly, only occasionally engaging each other in quieter, more serious discussions.

Then it dawned on John. Mason wasn't there. For the first time since Mason had joined the Rangers and the two of them had come in here for a celebratory beer, he wasn't there.

John carried another glass of beer to Court's table. "Just so you know," he said as he set it down, "these are on the house tonight. Mason's memory."

Court glanced up at him and raised his glass slightly, then drained it and nodded. He handed the empty to John.

John quietly said, "Well." He nodded, then turned away.

Court sipped the new beer. Mason would never be back. He was in that damn cold ground up there along the Canadian. And on the north bank at that. Court mumbled, "Should'a put him on the south side. Safer there." He took another drink of his beer, then naturally looked across the table.

Mason wasn't there, but that was all right. For a moment he seemed to focus on the emptiness where his friend should be. He'd always thought it was impossible to focus on nothing, but there it was. Not impossible at all. At the moment it was easy.

For a second he saw Mason, saw a hole in his forehead, but it was a white hole.

Court frowned and looked away. It didn't make sense. It was a white hole, plus Mason wasn't shot in the forehead. He looked where his friend used to be again, looked for the hole again, the white hole, because by damned Mason wasn't—

But it wasn't a hole at all. It was white and round, but it was far on the other side of the space his friend used to occupy. It was on the wall above the bar.

It was a clock.

Just an old clock with an old round face. He was sure he'd seen it before in passing. If he remembered right, it kept good time when the bartender remembered to wind it, which he did about every third day, again, if Court was remembering right. Then again, Court had never paid much attention to any clock. He'd never paid much attention to the specific time. It never seemed to matter.

But maybe it did. Maybe time did matter, or the passing of it, or something.

He looked again. The clock was about thirty feet away. He squinted a bit, and read three-fifteen. Three-fifteen. That was late. If he'd gotten into bed by his normal time of ten p.m. it wouldn't be late. It would be early.

He held up his glass and raised his voice. "Hey, John," and he gestured with his glass toward the clock. "You wind that thing today?"

The bartender looked up, then looked over his shoulder. He looked at Court and nodded. "The clock? I did." He glanced over his shoulder again, then back to Court. "It says it's three-seventeen."

Court nodded. "It's Monday too, ain't it?"

John said, "Yep, unfortunately all day long."

Court looked at the table. Quietly he said, "Three-seventeen in the mornin' on a Monday. Well I'll be." He thought back about the past week.

He shook his head. Only eight days earlier, he'd ridden into Watson with Jim Connolly and five other Rangers on their way to a showdown with Iron Bear.

Only eight days earlier they'd erased one of the worst renegade war chiefs and his whole band, save one skinny young brave. What was his name?

There was a rumbling outside, then high pitched yells punctuated by gunfire. A pane in one of the front windows shattered inward under the force of a flaming arrow.

It hit a table, then slid off and skittered along the floor in front of the bar.

John doused it with the glass of beer he was about to carry to Court's table, then ducked behind the bar and came up with a double barreled shotgun.

Court sprang up from his chair and ran into the lobby, his Colt drawn and leveled.

The clerk was frozen behind the front desk, his skin paling to white.

Court looked at him and pointed. "Get down behind the desk and stay there!" He turned toward the front door.

Wes was coming down the stairs in a hurry, Mac right behind him. Both were dressed in pants, boots and hats. Both were wearing their Colts. Wes was wearing a stained undershirt. "What in the hell is goin' on?"

Court said, "I don't know yet. Indians." He moved toward the front door, then flung it open. He brought his Colt to bear and fired at a Comanche who was racing past on his horse.

The horse reared and the Comanche was slammed to the ground. He arched his back for a long

moment, then settled and lay still.

Court fired at another passing shadow but missed, the bullet splintering a porch upright across the street at the Ranger headquarters.

Wes and Mac joined him in the doorway, both firing at Comanches whenever they saw one.

The captain came rushing up behind them. "Corporal Connolly and Stanton and Stilson went out the back way. Looks like an all-out raid. Mac, you're with me to the right. Wes, you're with Corporal Edwards to the left. Let's move out. Be careful."

Comanches were everywhere, screaming war cries and shooting arrows or guns. In an instant Amarillo was transformed from a silent, sleeping community to a noisy, hectic hell.

The night was a cacophony. Comanche war cries mixed with the voices of yelling men and gunfire. All of that filtered through the roiling sound of horses' hooves on the hard-packed streets. The whole thing was punctuated with the crackling pop and hiss of fires consuming dry wooden buildings.

The air was filled with all that noise as well as dust from the churning hooves of the horses and smoke from the fires. Several buildings on the west end of Main Street were ablaze, and there was an eerie glow to the north where buildings were ablaze along the major north-south cross road, Second Avenue.

At first few people were on the street other than the Comanches and the Rangers, but soon civilians were running among the Comanche horses, organizing bucket brigades or trying to protect their property.

Behind the Inn, Jim Connolly had just hit the bottom of the stairs, followed closely by Blake Stanton and Jack Stilson, both with their Colts drawn. Connolly had gestured, indicating Stanton should join him. They would work their way down the street to the east to Second Avenue.

He looked at Stilson. "Jack, you head around the side and up to the front. If I know the captain, he has some watching their rear on Main while he heads toward Second. Go help the rear guard. Probably those two new guys.

He nodded, turned and raced around the corner.

Connolly and Stanton moved down the street to the east. As they crossed Texas Avenue they looked left just in time to see the captain and Ranger McFadden moving onto the boardwalk on the east side of the street.

Connolly frowned, surprised to see one of the rookies with the captain. Then again, he had a rookie with him as well. He looked at Stanton. "We'd better hurry."

Stanton nodded, his eyes wide.

They moved along at a good clip. As they stepped off the boardwalk into First Avenue, Connolly was in the lead. An arrow flashed past his face.

He yelled, "Look out!" then crouched and spun to the left, bringing his Colt to bear.

Stanton stepped out behind him and brought his Colt up.

The lead Comanche was just lowering his bow and leaning forward over his horse's head to

attack.

Connolly adjusted his stance and fired just as the second Comanche pointed and fired a revolver.

As the first Comanche reared backward and fell off his horse, Stanton grunted and was spun hard to the left by the second Comanche's bullet.

Connolly cocked his Colt again and fired just as the second Comanche was pulling the trigger to the rear on his Remington.

The Comanche bucked straight up off his horse and seemed suspended for a moment, then crashed off his horse to the left.

Connolly looked behind him.

Stanton was sitting on the street.

"You okay?"

"I'm hit, but it ain't too bad. I think." When the second brave had fallen, he had holstered his Colt. He was holding his left chest just inside his shoulder with his right hand. Blood was seeping from beneath his hand. "Hurts like hell though."

Court straightened from his crouch. "All right." He holstered his Colt and moved to Stanton. "Here, take my hand." He reached down.

Stanton reached up with his right hand. His left hung at his side.

Connolly grabbed his wrist. "I'm gonna set you over here on the boardwalk. You stay put and I'll be back, all right?"

Stanton nodded as Connolly lowered him to the boardwalk, his back against a building.

"Keep that Colt drawn. You see anymore of 'em, give 'em hell." Court moved off down the street.

On Main Street, Wes and Corporal Edwards were walking west just as Stilson came up from behind the Inn. Quietly so as not to startle them, he said, "Hey guys."

They both jerked their heads to the left.

Stilson held up his hands, his Colt in the right one. "It's okay. I'm with you on rear guard. Jim and Blake are headed up to help the captain. He took Mac with him, eh?"

Edwards nodded. "Yeah. Let's head up toward those fires, but move slow and watch the damn cross streets. I don't want anything to come in behind the captain."

As they continued up the street, Edwards was thinking about the attack. Something wasn't right. There were fires, but they weren't at buildings that were important to the community. They hadn't hit the general store, for example, or the livery or even the saloon. He could already see, on Main Street, one fire was at a small private home and the other was at an old barn across the street. It wasn't even still in use.

Still there were civilians with buckets scurrying all over the place, even around the old barn.

Without knowing for sure, Edwards would almost bet it was the same situation up at the north end of Second Street. It was almost as if the Comanches had set the fires only to create a

diversion.

And that's something else. There were Comanche braves on horseback all over the place, and civilian men with buckets running among them, yet the Comanches were paying them hardly any attention.

So again, it all seemed a diversion.

But to divert the attention of whom? And from what?

Again he thought about the last week. The only really unusual event was still the escape of that skinny runt of an Injun from what everyone was calling The Battle of Boquillas Draw.

But it had been only a week. Probably thirty or forty Comanches had come screaming and whooping into Amarillo tonight. That Injun couldn't possibly have rallied that many Indians to follow him that quickly.

Still, somehow he was sure that diminutive Indian was behind all of this.

But even if he was, what would be the purpose of the raid? If the Comanches were here to burn Amarillo to the ground in retribution, that would make sense. But then Amarillo would be on fire. It wasn't. So why were they—

Wait. Retribution. Why would that Indian feel a need for retribution? Only Boquillas Draw had anything to do with him, and he'd escaped that. So why would he want retribution? For what?

Then it hit him. For his chief. He was following Iron Bear. Iron Bear was his chief.

How do you take retribution when someone kills your chief? You kill their chief. The captain!

"Jack, you're the more experienced. Set up in a dark corner somewhere and provide rear guard. But honestly, I don't think you're gonna see anything to shoot at." He looked at the rookie. "Wes, you're with me. Hurry." He turned and they both ran back up the street.

The captain and Mac had almost reached the corner of Main Street and Second Avenue when four Indians raced past to the south.

Mac cocked his Colt, aimed, and turned with the passing braves. He squeezed the trigger, the big Colt bucked in his hand and the fourth Comanche in the group was slammed off the left side of his horse.

The captain squeezed the trigger on his revolver and—nothing. He looked down. "This damned thing!"

The other Indians reined in and pulled their horses hard around to the right just as an explosion sounded to Mac's right.

Corporal Connolly had fired, and another of the Comanches fell.

The captain had the cylinder out of his revolver and was reloading it with fresh ammunition. An arrow came whistling in from the dark across the street, then another and another.

The captain looked up in surprise, then looked down. He frowned, then backed up three steps. He sighed, then sat down hard, his back against the wall.

There was a heavy sigh to Mac's right rear but he was focused on the two remaining Indians. He cocked his Colt just as Connolly's revolver sounded again. Then there was another explosion to

Mac's left as he squeezed the trigger. His shot missed the final Comanche in the group, who turned his horse and rode south as hard as he could go.

Mac was grinning and trembling with excitement. He turned to his right and said, "Captain, did you see—"

But the captain wasn't there.

Wes and Corporal Edwards were still a block away when Corporal Connolly fired at the fleeing Indian a final time. The shot missed and the Comanche continued south. Connolly turned the corner to the north. "Captain?"

Wes stopped in the middle of the street and fired at the Comanche, but he missed.

Corporal Edwards glanced back and yelled, "Come on!"

Mac was on both knees, bending over an inert form. "Oh my god... he's down," he said. Then he looked up and yelled, "He's down! The captain's down!"

Corporal Connolly ran to him. He stopped beside Mac and then knelt. He started to lean closer, but he stopped. There were three arrows protruding from the center of the captain's chest. "Jesus," he said quietly, and settled back on his heel.

Mac hadn't moved. He was staring.

And just like that, silence descended. The only sound was the faint crackling of the fires in the distance.

The dust was settling. The frantic Comanche horses were gone, and the yipping braves with them.

The captain was dead.

Then there were boots on the boardwalk as Corporal Edwards and Wes came running up and stopped, gasping for breath.

Corporal Edwards looked at the inert form, then turned away and walked into Main Street near the corner of Main and Second. "Sons of bitches. The filthy, rotten sons of bitches."

Wes looked at him, then reached down patted Mac on the back. "C'mon, Mac. Step over here with me." He waited a moment, then said, "Mac, c'mon. C'mon now."

He finally had to reach under Mac's right arm and lift him to his feet. He turned him away and guided him into the street, nearer to Corporal Edwards. Wes said, "It was intentional, wasn't it?"

Edwards nodded.

"The rest was just a diversion? The fires, all the noise?"

Again, Edwards nodded.

Wes shook his head. He was about to say something else when he happened to glance down Second Avenue. "Oh damn! There!" He pointed.

Corporal Edwards looked where Wes was pointing just as Corporal Connolly and Mac both looked up from the captain.

Several blocks distant, a dim form was sitting atop a horse in the middle of Second Avenue, his slim silhouette backlit by the fires. When everyone was looking, he raised his left arm. In it was a

Comanche bow.

Connolly and Edwards would know that relaxed stance anywhere. They had seen it on the rim of Boquillas Draw.

As the Rangers watched helplessly, Four Crows turned his horse and rode slowly up the street to the north.

\* \* \*

After they'd transported the captain's body to Hanson Funeral Home farther east on Main Street, Corporal Connolly, as the ranking Ranger, told the others to meet him in Ranger headquarters at 1 p.m. Then he dismissed them.

Corporal Edwards went back to find Stanton and escorted him to the doctor's office. His wound was a clean shot and was more grazing than not. The bullet had entered his left chest, but it had traveled just under the skin and exited his back beneath his armpit.

By sunrise, the few fires in town were extinguished. Only the old unused barn was a complete loss, but it was a loss even before the fire was set.

At 1 p.m., the Rangers gathered in their headquarters.

Corporal Connolly had them gather near the table they had used for a desk. "I've been down to see Sam at the telegraph office. I sent a telegram to the governor's office in Austin. I informed them of the attack and the result."

He lowered his head for a moment. "They answered me almost immediately. We are to stand down and take no action until Captain Wilson arrives. He was supposed to be here on Wednesday anyway, so he's still comin' on Wednesday. He'll be on the stage.

"The stage should get here around 2 p.m., so I'd like everyone back here by then. I'd like all of you to be here, inside the headquarters. When the stage arrives I'll meet it, and then I'll bring the new captain in and introduce him."

He paused and looked around. "Any questions on anything?"

Corporal Edwards said, "Captain Flowers' funeral?"

Corporal Connolly nodded. "Thanks, Court." He looked at the others. "Captain Wilson was supposed to relieve Captain Flowers of his command. I asked ol' Henry down at the funeral home to hold off on the funeral until sunset on Wednesday. He said that wouldn't be a problem." He paused for a moment. "Only fitting the captain should be properly relieved."

The others nodded.

Quietly, Wes said, "It was Four Crows, wasn't it?"

Connolly looked away.

Edwards said, "Yeah. It was Four Crows."

Wes nodded. "Well." He nodded again.

\* \* \* \* \*

YOU'VE REACHED THE END!

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THE RISE OF A WARRIOR  
Book 1 in the Wes Crowley series

a FrostProof808 publication (ebook)  
an imprint of StoneThread Publishing  
<http://StoneThreadPublishing.com>  
PO Box 604  
Saint David AZ 85630

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DISTRIBUTED WORLDWIDE BY  
Draft2Digital ISBN 9781516344475  
Smashwords ISBN 9781311849250  
XinXii ISBN 9783959262729

Also available in Trade Paperback ISBN 9781511822169

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