

Chapter One
Judge Iverson Hall, Jr.
1881

“What’s the name of this place, Mister?” the young man asked Pete Brown.

Pete, who stood six foot five inches tall, had to look around and finally down to spot the young boy doing the talking. When he did spot him, he was looking at a lad in filthy overalls, with matted hair, a dirty face, and whose general appearance was in pretty bad shape. But he was a good looking kid and he was carrying a mighty big rifle.

Pete Brown was busy pushing a rail laying crew of Irishmen and Chinese workers toward El Paso. He had a time line to meet with a bonus’ on the line, so he was none too happy to be interrupted by some kid coming around the work site. The day was a cloudy, overcast one in early fall and with the lower temperatures, he wanted to push the hell out of these workers to get about 3 miles of track laid today. But he held his irritation in check as something about the boy’s looks and tone touched his heart, bringing back memories of his own poor childhood.

“It ain’t got no name, son. We just call it milepost 296 on the Texas and Pacific Railroad Company right-of-way. It is just a town on wheels for the railroad workers. Where is yore Ma and Pa, young’un? This here is pretty rough country for a young boy if you traveling alone..... That’s a mighty big rifle you carrying so it looks like you ready

for any problems,” said Pete, kind of gruffly, looking all around for some folks that might be accompanying this youngster.

Seeing no one, he did not wait on an answer regarding the rifle, but he suspected the boy might be a runaway. “You oughtn’t be running around out here with no adults with you, boy. You could get into a lot of trouble doing that.” His irritation was beginning to show. Pete needed to be getting back to the crew to make sure there were no slackers.

“Well, sir, I buried my Ma and Pa up north of here a few days ago. They were attacked by some outlaws while I had the rifle out rabbit hunting. Pa had a six shooter, but I reckon that wasn’t enough to hold them off. I got back to the wagon and found them all shot up. They even tore Ma’s dress off her. I had to bury them right there where they was shot. We was on our way out west to homestead somewhere. I’m not sure where ‘cause Pa never told me where it was. He just said “West Texas,” so we must have been close to where we was a headin’, I reckon.”

Pete Brown was all ears and almost had tears in his eyes listening to this young fellow talk and seeing his condition. All of a sudden, the work crew and the need to push them left his mind completely. He was thinking on what to say next when the boy spoke again.

“You got something to eat here, Mister. I ain’t et in 4 or 5 days. I sure am hungry.”

Pete reached down, put a gentle hand on the boy’s shoulder, and gave him a slight nudge toward the way he wanted him to go.

“No, I ain’t. But you jest follow me, boy. I know where we can get some food. Lady up here by the name of Nellie Fay can feed you well. You ain’t gonna get no food no where that is as good as this. This lady can cook. We better hurry before the first crew is

turned loose for dinner. These railroad boys eat in shifts. That's the only way we can get them all fed."

Pete led the boy to a box car parked on a rail siding a little ways down the track. Steps led up to the open doorway. Smoke was boiling out of the stack from the top of the car. The aroma of food was overpowering to the starving young man. His mouth and stomach were ready for the promise provided by the aroma coming from the kitchen. Pete shouted as he walked in, "Nellie Fay, you got any food in this place for a hungry young man."

Nellie Fay was in the kitchen and could not see them immediately, but she recognized her friend Pete's voice. When she did stick her head out, she had flour all over her face and dress. The flour was mixed with a goodly amount of sweat created by the hot stove and her hurried movements. "A hungry young man? Well, who is the food for, you old codger? It sure ain't for you. You got to be sixty if you a day." About the same time she looked into the dining area of the boxcar and spied the dirty young boy. "Well, you do have a young man with you." Nellie Fay could see hungry all over the boys face, but anyway, she said, "So you are hungry, are you?"

"Yes'um. I'm starving. I buried my Ma and Pa a few days ago and I ain't et since dinner the day before that. I surely am starving, mam." Giving Nellie Fay a look that drew her heart right to him and won her over immediately and she was going to try her best to provide him all the food he could eat.

Nellie Fay's eyes had widened and a shocked look appeared on her face. The "buried my Ma and Pa a few days ago" struck deep in her heart. She could not speak at the moment so she wheeled and marched right back into the kitchen.

The boy looked around at the numerous tables and chairs lined up in the boxcar. Before he could choose a seat at one of the tables, Nellie Fay was back and had two hot biscuits and a bowl of stew for him. Now the wonderful aroma appeared before him in the solid form. His eyes lit up and no one had to ask him to start eating. The young man took a seat and started taking care of business right away. Nellie Fay looked up at Pete with questioning eyes. Pete shook his head gently and rolled his eyes, alerting Nellie to the fact that he knew nothing about the boy. Both of them waited until the boy had devoured the biscuits and most of the stew before they started asking him questions. Soon, Nellie could see that the boy was not only hungry but was extremely tired as he was nodding during the meal. She took Pete by the elbow leading him toward the doorway, "Pete, I am going to let this boy sleep in my bed while I am serving the men. Then we can talk to him about his folks and all later. You just leave him with me. Ok?"

"Well, yeah. He ain't none of mine. I just happened to be the one he came to when he first walked into camp. But he shore appears to be a good boy, so some of us need to look out for him some, lest 'til we can decide what to do with him, don't you reckon? I got to get back to the crew, so can I just leave him with you for now?" Pete was already turning to leave as he spoke.

"Yeah, sure. Come around after supper and we will talk."

The boy's eye lids looked very heavy as he ate, but he finished a third helping of stew and a couple more buttered biscuits. Then he pushed back from the table feeling as though he had just had the best food ever. Nellie Fay noticed that he had finished and motioned toward a water trough just outside the box car. "Why don't you go over there to that water trough, take off those filthy overalls and shirt, and wash your face and hands

real well. There is a bar of soap in a dish by the trough and be sure and use it. Come back over here to the kitchen. We have some old clothes that may fit you until we can get yours washed. Hurry up 'cause them railroad workers will be here shortly. You can take a nap in my bed in the back while I am feeding all those hungry men."

The boy was quick to respond to Nellie suggestion. He made quick work of the washing and shortly was back standing before Nellie in his long johns. She took one look at them and said, "Tomorrow we will have to wash them long johns, also. They will just have to do for one more day."

The boy saw two more women that he did not know were there, one cooking and one washing dishes. Both of them smiled at him. One of them was not much older than he was and she also was very cute. The other appeared to be about the same age as Nellie Fay and looked like she could be her sister. Nellie said, "That's Sadie cooking and Anne washing dishes. Girls, say hello, to, ah, what's yore name boy? You never told me and Pete what your name was?"

"Well, my name is Judge. Judge Iverson Hall, Jr. My Pa called me Junior, but my Mama knew I didn't like to be called Junior so she called me by my name, Judge. That's what I like for people to call me, Judge."

Nellie smiled and said, "Well, Judge it is then, son. Now you come on back through the kitchen with me and I will show you my cot where you can sleep for a spell." She led him around the stove and around a couple of work tables to a little area where three cots were pushed close together. "Crawl up on that one there. That's mine. You take you a little nap and when you wake up, I will round up some clean clothes for you. Ok?"

“Yes’um,” he said, crawling up on the cot while he answered her. By the time his head hit the pillow and maybe one snuggle up to the pillow, the boy was sleeping. He slept through the men eating lunch. He slept through the men eating supper. Nellie could not bear to wake the sleeping boy when it became her bed time, so she bunked with Anne and let the boy continue sleeping.

The next morning, just as breakfast was over for the early rising women and railroad workers, Judge Hall was stirring again. Nellie had found an old pair of Anne pants that looked like they would fit the boy along with one of her shirts. Luckily, she dressed more like a boy than she did like a girl anyway. Judge saw the clothes on the bed when he woke up and he stuck his head through the blankets that served as a door and asked if those clothes were for him. Nellie confirmed that they were his and told him to put on the under draws she laid out for him. “I want you to wash them filthy long johns and hang them on that bush by the water trough.” She got around to asking him if he was hungry.

“Yes’um, I’ll be right there. I’m starving again. That stew is done gone.”

This time Nellie, Sadie, and Anne joined him for the meal. They had served all the men breakfast. Now it was time for them to eat. There were plenty of flapjacks, bacon and syrup. The boy hurriedly ate his fair share.

No one had questioned him or talked much while they ate. But once Judge had his fill, Nellie said, “Well, what you gonna do now that you lost your Pa and Ma, Judge? You made any plans about your future?”

“No mam, I ain’t. I was just looking for my next meal when I came upon this here “boxcar town” that Mister Pete told me about. I got to find work or something ‘cause I ain’t got nothing ‘cept this here rifle of Pa’s. Them outlaws stole everything Ma and Pa

had I reckon. They burned some of the stuff. Pa had a couple of coins hid under the wagon bed and they didn't get them. That's all the money I got in this world.....No mam, I ain't got no plans." He looked at her in a very direct manner while speaking. Nellie liked that in a man, especially a young man.

Nellie said, "Well, Sadie and Anne and I need some help cutting and carrying the fire wood. And we go through a lot of water that has to be toted from the water cars down here to the kitchen car. There are about twelve water cars down there, so if one runs out, go on down and open the value up on another one. And there are some other odds and ends jobs that need doing: slopping the hogs, milking the cows, feeding the chickens and collecting the eggs, and helping wash the dishes. Are you up to doing that kind of work for us?"

"Shoot, I reckon. That's what I used to do for Ma. Cutting wood, and helping her around the fire, cookin' and all..... Pa would never do any "woman's work". That's what he called it." He had perked up while listening to his chores being named and it was giving him a feeling of belonging, something he had sorely missed the last few days. It also answered some mighty tough questions that he had about his future.

Shortly after he had buried his Ma and Pa, he climbed the highest hill in that area. He was tired when he reached the top. He looked all around and could see dust far off. He figured someone or something was stirring it up. That was the only activity he could see from his high perch. Judge sat down on a big rock under a small bush, allowing himself some time to rest. He surrendered to all the heartaches the last few days had brought. Sobs racked his little body and he shook as he cried. He missed his folks and needed someone to hold him and tell him that everything was going to be alright. He hugged his

knees tightly to his body while he cried. When he quit sobbing, he remembered his Pa praying around the fire at bed time and before meals. He thought maybe he ought to talk to the Lord about his situation. “Lord, I heard my Pa talking to you before and maybe you remember me being there with him while he was talking to you. I figure I need you to watch out for me and help me all you can. I surely don’t know where I am and I don’t know where I am going. I’m hungry and I ain’t got nothing. I don’t know if you will listen to me or not, ‘cause I’m just a boy, but I surely hope you will. I jest hope you will watch out for me some. I guess it’s just you and me now, Lord. Thank you for your blessings. Amen.” His Pa always finished up his prayers like that.

After several minutes sitting quietly, he dried his eyes and nose on his shirt sleeve. The crying and praying seemed to have helped him regain his strength. He started out in the direction of the rising dust, a determined young man with a new mission in life. Now, today, Nellie was giving him the opportunity that he had sought and prayed for. He thought in his heart that the Lord had heard and answered his prayer. He remembered his Pa saying that God was faithful to hear and answer prayer.

“Ok, then you are on the payroll starting right after breakfast. Your pay is the same as Anne’s, fifty cents a day and room and board. We will hang another blanket back here and you can sleep on a pallet on the floor. For now, you can bring some firewood in so we can start cooking dinner. Bring in about four big arm loads and then you can go fetch about five buckets of water. Ok, let’s get going then.....No, wait, you go wash them filthy long john first, then get the firewood. After that you can start your other chores.” Later, she pointed at the stack of wood on a flat bed car, showed him the water car down

the siding and told him how to open the valve to let the water run into the bucket. Once told, Judge knew what he had to do and he did not have to be told again.

Judge didn't get to stop and eat with the rail workers when dinner was served. But the late breakfast stayed with him, so he was holding up ok as he helped serve the water to the men and fetched different items that Nellie needed, taking the biscuits out of the stove and the like. He stayed busy and was a big help to the girls on his very first day on the job. The ladies liked having him there all the time. While he was just a young boy, the girls felt safer having him nearby as he kept the big rifle propped in the corner next to his sleeping area. He had told them he was a good shot and about how he killed rabbits and deer for his folks on their way west.

Rift-raft men were common place around the "box-car town" and pinches on the butt and hands on the bodies of the girls were far too frequent. The girls liked some attention and liked having the men-folk around as long as they didn't get "too rough".

Buffalo Soldiers were close by, keeping the Indians and Comancheros away, but keeping the peace in the boxcar town was not of their concern. They mainly visited the saloons and the girls that worked there, sometimes adding to the boxcar town troubles. The Buffalo Soldiers had their own cooks and food, so if they wanted to spend any of their money it was on drinks and floozies at one of the other cars. Matter of fact, there were two boxcars for that purpose. One car had more girls and one had more gambling. So they chose to spend their money there and not on food down at Nellie Fay's.

The workers did not come to supper like they did for breakfast and dinner. When the whistle blew in the afternoon, the men hurried over to the saloon for drinks, gambling and floozies. Therefore, as soon as the few who showed up for supper at the kitchen car

had finished eating and the clean up was done, Nellie, Sadie, Anne and now, Judge, could have a little time for themselves. The girls were not your Sunday school, go to meeting type ladies, but they were not your floozy type either. They had suitors hanging around and they would share a few minutes late in the evening with fellows of their choice.

One evening, Anne was sitting on the steps leading into the café. One of the Irish workers came staggering by. Seeing Anne, he says, “Hey, little lady, why don’t you and me take a little walk. It’s a nice evening for walking...and stuff...ok?” Judge was leaning against the doorway watching, not saying anything, and perhaps unseen by the whiskey dimmed eyes of the Irishman.

Anne moved over on the steps as far as she could to get away from the man and said, “No sir, I will have to go in shortly. We have to get up real early every morning, so it is almost time for bed.”

“Aw, sweetie, come on and walk with me. We won’t be gone long.” Then he reached over and grabbed Anne by the arm trying to pull her up closer to him. Anne was fighting him trying to get away. Judge had already moved inside to the wood pile and picked up a fair sized stick of fire wood, actually a piece big enough that it required Judge to use both his hands around it. He lifted it high and brought it down hard on the head of the Irishman. One grunt was all the Irishman could emit before crashing to the ground.

Judge hurried down to the saloon where Pete hung out and summoned him up to the café car. After Pete made the visit to the café he had a couple of hands carry the man back to his bunk to spend the rest of the night sleeping it off. Pete did not think he would even remember Judge hitting him since the “whiskey headache” was as bad as a “hit over the head” headache.

All the girls made over the new hero. Judge was standing pretty tall as the girls bragged on his courage and take charge attitude. Anne hugged him tightly making Judge blush. He did not particularly like all the attention his actions had brought, but in another way he felt good about it all.

While Sadie and Annie did not have a boyfriend among of any of the workers on the crew, Nellie Fay's choice of the workers happened to be Pete Brown. He would come by every afternoon and Judge soon learned that Nellie would start looking for him long before he would show up. But, that was ok with Judge, as Pete seemed to be one of the more likeable and caring of the men in "box- car town." Pete's demeanor had changed since he first saw Judge. Pete was also one of the supply supervisors and a good fellow to know. If Nellie needed something, seems like her needs went to the top of his list. The Superintendent of the rail line knew that full stomachs and good food meant a lot to the crews laying the tracks. He needed to have this tracks into El Paso before the end of September. Pete had worked for Grenville Dodge¹ on building the Union Pacific and had done him a good job up there. Dodge was a civil engineer, a former congressman and a Union general, and a pal of one of the owners, Jay Gould. So when Pete wanted something for the "kitchen car" or for anything else for that matter, he generally got it. Nellie pushed him for clothing for Judge and Anne. She knew that Pete would respect the two children's wishes and Nellie turned in a request for an outfit or two for her and Sadie. And Pete did just that, telling the Super that he needed to keep the spirits up in the kitchen car, thus keeping them going full speed.

On a supply train from Fort Worth a few days later, Judge received his new overall, two shirts, long johns, and boots. Anne got new pants, shirts and shoes. Nellie and Sadie

¹ www.periangen.com/estacado.htm

got new dresses that soon looked just like their old dresses. But, it was the thought that counted and they felt good knowing that they could ask for things and have Pete and the big bosses respond.

Judge had been on the job only a short time when the box car town up and moved. They had stayed at Milepost 296 longer than most because of the good springs close by. Now they needed to get the box-car town up closer to the workers. The water and wood could be hauled by the train as it brought in supplies, new tracks, and cross ties. But, other than being in a new spot, everything else was the same. A new siding was built and the flatcar with the wood and the water car were always parked the same distance from the kitchen car on every siding.

Anne and Judge played a lot of checkers in the evenings. Both of them really enjoyed the games. They were interrupted a lot also. Many suitors came calling or trying to call on Anne, but Sadie and Nellie were very protective of her and only the best looking and nicest young men had any chance at all. Sitting on the steps was about as far as the ladies would let Anne get from them. Judge saw her holding hands with one of them and he kidded her about him. Anne made Judge promise not to tell the ladies about what he saw. And he kept it a secret, never telling anyone. He did not want to betray Anne's trust. He liked her a lot.

Judge had never seen so much flat land as he had been seeing lately. The crew was now averaging about three miles a day laying tracks. Every third or fourth day, the box car town moved up closer to the work crew. One could see for miles. Judge was amazed that he could see a rain storm coming for a long ways before it would reach them. He was also alarmed by how far he had to go to find a bush to get behind to do his business. Most

of the time, he just went behind the last water car, as it was further away from all the workers.

Judge was serving Pete another helping of biscuits one morning. When Pete said, “You know, boy, I got a problem calling you Judge. I have stood before two or three real Judges before and have been scorned by their sharp tongues and demeaning looks, so Judge ain’t a good name in my opinion. I am going to start calling you, J. I. What you think about that, kid? J. I., that’s a good name, ain’t it.”

Judge stopped in his tracks and looked closely at Pete to make sure he was not joshing him, thinking for a minute or two. Then he said, “Yes sir. I reckon it’s as good as any. Matter of fact, I like it. Makes me feel a little older, calling me J. I.” He paused for a moment, thinking about his new name. “Yes sir, I do like it.” He thought a little longer. “I like it a lot. You can call me that then.” Judge went strutting away walking a little taller and muttering to himself, “J. I.” A few steps later he murmured “J. I.,”

J. I. became his name from that day forward.

Chapter Two

Hazel Hedges

1881

The Hedges Ranch and Cattle Company headquarters were located southeast of the town of Mesilla, NM. The eastern boundary of the ranch bordered on the Rio Grande River and the western boundary was up on the mesa west of the river, stretching from the fertile valley, filled with grasses and grains, to up on the Mesa for nearly ten miles, ten miles of sparse desert grasses and tumbleweeds. The ranch was only half as wide as it was long, but it still gave the cowboys working on the spread about 50 square miles of scantily covered land. Mesquites dotted the area and afforded the cattle some shade here and there. The cowboys had been known to make camp under a few of them from time to time, especially those on top of the sand dunes that gave them protection from the continuous blowing springtime winds.

Water was more of a problem than grass most of the time. They built earthen dams across draws and when the rains came, water would pool up until the sun got the best of it. During the spring and summer, the area around the river valley produced enough good hay to supplement the scant grassland of the mesa. The ranch hands also planted winter wheat, corn and a few vegetables to help make the spread more self sufficient.

The ranch house was a few feet higher than the river, but not by much. Some wet years the flood waters had almost reached the house, but had never flooded it. The ranch needed the water and was much desired by area ranchers because of it's proximity to the river.

. They had windmills on the ranch. They were of the European style with a fixed direction and would turn only when the wind was out of the direction they faced, which in this case was west. The windmill pumped water into a tank near the house, but the Hedges used the river to water crops through irrigation canals. Therefore, the fertile valley land produced beautiful crops of whatever they had planted and there was good well water for the ranch house and water troughs.

Round-up each year meant a lot of hard cattle drives to bring in the herd for branding and determine the ones to be sold. The mother cows were left for next year's crop. The branding and sorting was generally done in the pasture land in the river valley near the ranch house. For the last couple of years, the rains had come at an opportune time which increased the ground cover and made the round up much more difficult. The cattle lying in the tall grass and the small canyons made locating them and rounding them up much harder.

Mr. Harlan Hedges, the ranch's owner, had about fifty cowboys working for him during roundup time. He had fifteen to twenty hands most of the year, ranching and farming. Of the fifteen to twenty, he tried to have about four or five whose main job was the "hired gunman". Mr. Hedges did not like having to have the gunmen working for him, but he did it in self defense. His cattle had been disappearing and all indications were that they were going across the border. The border was just a few miles south of his spread. His neighbor to the south, Jacob Carter, was also losing cattle and they too were being driven across the border. Mr. Hedges intended to stop losing cattle even if it meant going to war. He felt like the "across the border" was a ruse to hide the real villain who he felt was driving them south across the border then coming back into the states over near Columbus. He was pressing his gun hands to find out just what was going on.

There was a rancher, Edward Black, over near Deming who was of questionable character. Mr. Hedges and Edward Black had had several quarrels out on the Mesa. Mr. Hedges suspected that Black had taken his cattle with the Flying H brand and rebranded them into a crude Bar-B-Bar brand.

They did not like one another and they did not cover up the fact that a fight was brewing. Mr. Hedges had followed some of his stolen cattle far enough to know they either ended up on the Bar B Bar ranch or, at least, had been driven through it. Either way, Edward Black had to know the herd had passed through his place, but Mr. Black ignored those facts. Edward Black made sure that Harlan Hedges did not get much of a look around any of his spread either. Mr. Hedges had hired a cowboy that had quit the Bar-B-Bar and he claimed that he had seen some of the Flying H Brand on Black's ranch, but he did not actually see the rebranding take place. Thereafter, the gunman had become

a part of the Flying H work force. Jacob Carter and Harlan Hedges both agreed on the questionable integrity of Mr. Black.

One day Harlan Hedges was at his desk studying his finances and was pleased with revenues for the last couple of years. With the rains and good grass, all of his mother cows were producing good looking calves. He had contracts with the Army to supply beef to Fort Bliss near El Paso and to Fort Selden, up at Leasburg, NM. He had even driven a small herd over to Fort Bayard near Silver City. He was thinking about how he could increase his herd when a beautiful young girl burst into the room, shouting:

“Daddy, can I go into town with you tomorrow? Momma says you are going into Mesilla to buy some supplies. I need a new dress for church and I want to come with you. Momma says it’s ok? Can I, please?” She had placed an arm around his neck and sat down on her daddy’s knees while she was talking to him. She often came to see him while he was working at his desk and Mr. Hedges did not mind at all. She took after her mother in looks and disposition and he loved them both immensely. Her coming in to visit and to sit in his lap was a welcomed interruption that he enjoyed and looked forward to periodically since she was big enough to walk. Now, she also came in to help with the books. And Harlan Hedges saying no to Hazel Hedges just did not happen. Her thirteenth birthday was coming up in a few days and he already had a beautiful white Tennessee Walker horse that had been shipped in from back east for her present. He was trying hard to keep it hidden from her. If any of the hands were questioned by the girl about the new horse, they were to tell her it was her daddy’s new ride.

“Yes, of course you can darling. Your birthday is coming up and we can let that new dress be your present,” said Mr. Hedges, then noting the sour look that came across his daughter’s face with that statement.

“Daddy, I was hoping for a horse. You know I want one. A dress shouldn’t be for a birthday present..... I want a horse for my birthday..... Daddeee, please..” Her bottom lip was pouted out like it often did anytime things didn’t go her way. Her head was drooping like it was the end of the world. This method had always worked for her, but sometimes it took longer than other times. She had on a freshly washed and starched gingham dress that one of the Mexican ladies had sewed for her. Every hair on her head was in place and a lot of attention had been paid to preparations for this visit. She knew she was pretty and she knew how to play her doting daddy.

Mr. Hedges did not want to let her know about what he had done. Certainly, he wanted to keep the Tennessee Walker a surprise, but he was already tempted to tell her the truth. But he held out, for the time being at least. “We will see about the horse. Horses are hard to come by these days, you know. All the stealing that is going on with our livestock, but we will see.” Mr. Hedges was remembering that one corral of horses had been torn down by stampeding cattle and many of the horses had not yet been recovered.

That was enough to perk her up. Immediately her head came up and she had a big smile for her daddy and kissed him on the cheek. “Ok, I will be ready to go to town early in the morning. Thank you, Daddy, you’re the very best daddy in the whole world,” she yelled to him as she was running down the hall. She knew she had said what he loved to hear. One thing she had learned early in life was how to get her way with her daddy, even if her mother had already told her no.

She was not always successful with Helen Hedges. Her mother could see how “little Miss Hazel” could manipulate Harlan Hedges and Helen knew she was very spoiled. She also knew that she was helpless to do anything about the babying and petting Hazel was getting from her dad. That was not going to change anytime soon.

Helen could see the difference in the way Mr. Hedges treated their son, Howard. He did not give Howard any slack on anything. He pushed him harder than he did his hired hands. Sometimes it seemed she could see hatred in Howard’s eyes while his daddy doted on Hazel and would not give him anything, easily anyway. He had wanted a fancy saddle for his last birthday and his dad asked him to work it out on the ranch. Even Helen thought that was extremely unfair and told Harlan how she felt. His response was that he had to work for everything he had and he felt it would be good for Howard to do the same. Helen had a few dollars put back for emergencies and she gave Howard enough money a couple of days before his birthday to cover the price of the saddle. Over the last few years, the battle had been quietly fought between Mom and Dad and brother and sister, without it ever being openly discussed.

Mr. Hedges did love his son; he just had a different way of showing his love for him. He had forbidden Howard to work with the gunmen he had hired or even to let him know what the gunmen were dealing with on a daily basis. Harlan gave them personal instructions, telling them when and where to go, and what to look for in their investigations. He felt that sooner or later they would find the thieves and he hoped the gunmen could take care of them on the spot without involving others from the ranch..

Mr. Hedges did let Howard boss the regular ranch hands and he had been trained well in doing that. He would never let Howard know that he felt like he was doing a good job

with the hands. Also, he had never let Howard do any of the office work or try to balance the books. One of the reasons was that he was so busy doing his outside work that Mr. Hedges did not want him taking time away from those duties.. He felt like he would have time to show him any book work later. He was pleased that Hazel could already do the math and handle most of the bookkeeping as well as he could himself.

However, Helen felt that trouble was brewing between Harlan and Howard.. She thought that before handing over the reins of the ranch to him, Harlan and Howard could come to blows. Lately, Howard had not been so quick to jump up and do exactly what daddy wanted. He had gotten to where he expressed his own ideas for running the ranch and, in Helen's mind, Howard had some excellent ideas for the future of the ranch. Howard had been pushing his Dad to go into the dairy business to take advantage of all the population growth in the Las Cruces, Mesilla and El Paso area. Fort Bliss was going strong and had a large force there that also needed milk and butter as well as beef and livestock feed. Howard wanted to cash in on that opportunity. Mr. Hedges thought that running cattle for beef sales was enough for his ranch and that ended that.

Mrs. Hedges was also concerned that Howard had taken to riding off for two or three days and not telling anyone where he was going. When she confronted him about it, he stated he did it to clear his mind and just to get a break from having to deal with his Dad on a daily basis. Still, she worried about him while he was gone. Mr. Hedges, on the other hand, would not see Howard for several days anyway, so the trips away from the ranch were totally missed by him.

Early on, Hazel tried to help her dad with the books and since she had nice, neat, printing skills, Harlan had let her help him in the office. At a young age, she was picking

up the financial end of the business. Mr. Hedges was thinking he could have Howard take care of the working of the ranch and Hazel could handle the business end. Howard, though a good hard worker, just did not think like he did and, therefore, Harlan was unsure of the direction Howard would take the ranch. He figured on Hazel doing the business thinking and planning and Howard doing the work. He was in the contemplating mode and had not expressed himself to anyone on the subject just yet.

The sun was shining brightly when the Hedges left the ranch for Mesilla. The buckboard had a fringe, but it had been removed and was used only for formal occasions. Traveling with the Hedges that day was two of his gunmen to serve as protection for the journey and a young Mexican girl, Maria, who was a servant girl and a companion of Hazel's. Harlan Hedges and the girls were in the buckboard and the two cowboys were tagging along near the rear of the wagon. What happened next was so fast that the entire group was caught unaware.

Two ravines close to the roadway were deep enough to give cover to a band of about fifteen Apaches who emerged from the ravines firing several shots, taking out the gunmen right away. Mr. Hedges reacted quickly to get the buckboard horses to speed up. The girls were holding on to their seats for dear life. Mr. Hedges shouted for them to lie down on the buckboard floor, but they had not responded quickly. Mr. Hedges quit firing his pistol long enough to push both girls down. When Hazel saw the desperate look on her Dad's face, she then complied with his wishes.

Hazel could see her dad looking back and shooting while holding the reins of the wildly running horses. The wagon was bouncing each time it hit one of the many rough spots in the road, so keeping his seat on the buckboard was difficult. Hazel looked back

to see an Indian leap into the back of the wagon. He had a knife in his hand. Stepping over Maria, who had slipped back under the seat into the back part of the wagon, he lifted his knife and lunged toward Mr. Hedges. Harlan Hedges fired immediately, but the knife continued its downward plunge into her dad's chest. The gunshot hit the Indian in the center of his chest and the Indian fell and was just hanging on the sideboard of the wagon. A rough push from Maria rolled him off the sideboard and he fell under the wagon wheel. Clutching his chest, Mr. Hedges managed to continue driving the team and firing at the Indians, hitting two more of them. They broke off the chase as some of Mr. Hedges other ranch hands, who had heard all the shooting, had come to their rescue. One of the cow hands noticed Mr. Hedges beginning to slump and so he rode along side the horses and grabbed the reins, slowing the buckboard horses to a walk.

Mr. Hedges was still sitting upright, but he was clutching his chest with his hands. He said, "One of you boys drive this rig and get me to the doctor in Mesilla." He looked over at Hazel as if he knew he was not going to make Mesilla and said, "I want you to know, honey, your birthday present is in the barn, a pretty white Tennessee walker. I had it shipped in for you from back east. I hope you like it." He coughed a couple of times and made some gargling sounds in his chest.

"Oh, Daddy, I will. I will."

"And Hazel, if I don't make it through this I want you to take care of the ranch's finances. You handle all the books and Howard can take care of the ranch work. And you need to take good care of your Mother, also. You think you can handle all that?" Mr. Hedges was now leaning over, bringing his knees up toward his chest and sounding pretty weak.

“Yes, Daddy, I can do that, but you just hold on. We will get you to a doctor. You will be ok.” Hazel was trying to help her dad, but he was too heavy for her to hold up.

Mr. Hedges slumped down in the floor of the buckboard. Hazel put the blanket from the buckboard seat under her daddy’s head. She did not cry or take on as the cowhands thought that she would. Instead, she held her daddy’s hand and kept saying over and over, “Hold on, Daddy, hold on. It will be ok.”

However, it was not ok. Mr. Hedges never reached Mesilla. They had gone less than a mile when Hazel told the driver, “I think my daddy is dead. He is not breathing.”

The driver stopped the wagon and he and one of the other hands, climbed into the wagon to check him out. They determined that he was, in fact, dead and covered him with the buckboard seat blanket. They decided to turn around to make the long journey back to the ranch.

Hazel Hedges, amid her tears and the sorrow of losing her beloved daddy, started thinking about running a ranching business. And she had two gunmen she needed to replace. Dad had always handled the gunmen, not Howard and she would hire their replacements. She decided that the next time she was in El Paso she would begin that search. She was already missing daddy, but she knew what he would want her to do, starting now.

Chapter Three

Pete and Nellie Fay Brown

Pete Brown was very disappointed when The Texas and Pacific Railroad Company pushed into Sierra Blanca and the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio Railroad had beaten them there. Many acres of land were at stake for the Texas and Pacific. The Texas and Pacific had been awarded 5 millions acres of Texas land for building railroads in that state. Since they failed to make the time line on this one, no land was awarded the Texas and Pacific between Fort Worth and El Paso. The only concession made to the Texas and Pacific was the railroad commission ruled that the Southern Pacific, (owner of the Galveston Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad) had to share the tracks from Sierra Blanca to El Paso. The GH&SA did not beat the T & P to El Paso. The Southern Pacific had built a rail line from the west coast to El Paso. After reaching El Paso, they then continued on eastward to meet the GH&SA somewhere to the east of El Paso. Sierra Blanca happened to be the spot, so the eastbound connection out of El Paso was awarded to the Southern Pacific. The combined efforts of those two lines created the time line failure for the Texas and Pacific.

This failure was a bitter defeat for General Dodge and the principal owners of the Texas and Pacific. General Dodge had promised Pete Brown a big bonus if he could get the railroad to El Paso before their competitor. Pete wanted to be successful as the winner of the rail building race, more than he did in receiving any bonus, felt like a double loser. Still, the General thanked him personally for his push to make it, as the general knew that it was their late start from Ft. Worth that was really the core of the problem, not Pete and

the rail laying crew. They had made a valiant effort and he was appreciative of those efforts even in his disappointment in not winning the contract.

Pete had not had time to spend much money from the time he had left Fort Worth until he reached Sierra Blanca. As a matter of fact, he had accumulated and saved since he worked for General Dodge up on the Union Pacific and had not spent much of that money either. He inquired of some of the locals at Sierra Blanca about any ranches for sell in the Sierra Blanca Area. He discovered there was still some homestead land available up toward Salt Flats, Texas. This land was not premium quality, but the price could not be beat.. He purchased wagons, horses, plows, furniture for the house, and the first of several wagon loads of lumber. He had to make several trips back and forth between Sierra Blanca and the Rocking B, the brand he chose for his ranch, in order to get the homestead houses, sheds and barn built.

He asked Nellie Fay to marry him after the news that the rail line was not going further than Sierra Blanca. She had wanted to marry him for some time, as she had been in love with the big fellow since she got to know him. But Nellie Fay was reluctant to let Sadie and Anne go it alone. Both of them were determined that they were going on to El Paso to get into the restaurant business. Marrying Pete won out over going to El Paso, so Nellie Fay had given them her blessings and had also given them all of her recipes. As a matter of fact, after getting paid for their railroad services, the ladies took the next available train on into El Paso. They left before the wedding took place. Nellie assured them that she would not be having a big wedding as she just wanted to find a preacher to get it done quickly before Pete changed his mind.

Pete had asked J. I. to come live with them and help on the ranch. J. I. agreed that he would until he got old enough to move on. J. I. liked Pete and Nellie Fay very much, but he had not really settled everything in his heart and still felt that a part of him was missing. Pete thought that was fair and wanted him to do what he felt was best for him.

After many months and several trips back and forth to the Sierra Blanca, the ranch house was finally built. It had four small rooms and a couple of shacks they had used for shelter while all the other building was going on. J. I. fixed up one of the shacks and continued to live in it, but he ate his meals at the main house. He had been eating Nellie's food long enough that he did not want to miss a meal. The lady was definitely some kind of cook.

The other shack was going to be the tool shed and barn until a bigger barn was required. No grain or hay was available for the first year which made their need for a lot of storage space unnecessary. The grain for the newly purchased livestock, horses, cows and pigs had to be purchased and hauled in to supplement the meager grassland on the ranch. One thing they did have going for them was an excellent spring, with water that as far as the three of them knew, flowed year round. This watered the small valley that ran through this part of his homestead. The bad part about the spring was the fact it was known for its good water by every Indian in the area, mainly Geronimo's and Victorio's Apache tribes. This knowledge could not have been much worse, as these tribe's were a vicious bunch. Just after Pete settled the place, a group of 15 or 20 Apaches approached the spring. Seeing the white people, they stopped short of coming into the ranch house area. They looked them over to determine just what they may be facing. Pete knew they needed water for their horses and for themselves pretty badly. Pete motioned for them to

come on into the springs. Pete, Nellie and J. I. were all armed, but they stood in a non-threatening manner to watch them as they came into drink.. The Indians took turns drinking and watching the whites watching them. After satisfying their thirst and filling their containers, they continued their journey toward the Guadalupe Mountains. One of the Indians lifted his hand to the whites before riding off. In all the years that Pete lived there, he was never bothered by Indian attacks.

The Three Hills area was just to the south of them. It provided an excellent hiding place for Indians and outlaws that were scouting the surrounding countryside for victims. That threat was another concern for the Rocking B Ranch.

“J. I., you seemed a little nervous while the Indians were doing their drinking,” said Pete to a tense young man.

“Yes sir. That’s the first time I thought about my Ma and Pa for a long time. I figured they was gonna get some water, then they would let us have it. I was ready for them. I figured I could take one or two of them.”

“Well, them ‘Paches been watering here a heck of a lot longer than we have. I figured that was all they wanted, a drink of water. I was right this time at least. But just to be sure, let’s me and you take turns watching out tonight.”

“Alright sir. I’ll take the first watch if that’s ok with you”

“That will be fine. You take some food from the supper table with you. I think the chewing will help you stay awake. Wake me up somewhere around midnight. The moon should be up pretty good by that time.” They kept watch for a couple of nights.

There was no trouble from the Indians, but it made Pete stop and think about the need for all the fire power they could get if they should come under attack. He purchased

several more weapons on his next trip to Sierra Blanca, a couple of Henry repeating rifles and he bought J. I. a Colt .45 and a holster. He spent the next few months teaching J. I. how to care for it and use it, including fast drawing. Pete was not all that good, but he knew how it should be done and was able to get the important points across to J. I. He let J.I. know it was not always the fastest who won the draws, but the most accurate shot. So he instructed J. I. to draw quickly and just like pointing your finger, cock and pull the trigger. He made him draw and point long before he let him use bullets. But after so long, he had to let him shoot to complete the training.

Before he was through, he felt like J. I. would be able to fast draw with the best of them. He just hoped it would never happen, but using side arms was a sign of the times, especially in the El Paso area. Word was getting over to Sierra Blanca about shootouts every day. El Paso had been dubbed “Six Shooter Capital”. They had a town Marshall by the name of Dallas Stoudenmire who had a name of shooting first and asking questions later. Pete felt like sooner or later, J. I. would end up in that area. He hoped he could keep him with Nellie Fay and himself, but he did not think he could keep him for long.

J. I. continued to grow and muscle up doing all the ranch work and the farming they had done. He was not nearly as tall as the six foot five inch Pete; he had made it to about six foot two inches. Pete did not think he would grow much more as his upward growing had slowed, but his weight was still picking up as he matured. Pete thought that with J. I.’s good looks, intelligence, and unassuming personality, he would make a good leader of men. He did all he could to prepare him for that time when this ranch no longer satisfied him.

One day out of the blue, a Mexican man, a woman and three children came walking up to the ranch. They were saying, “Aqua, aqua.”, pointing to their mouths as they spoke. Pete and J. I., who could speak very little Spanish, had picked up the Spanish name for water. J. I. led them to the spring and handed them the dipper that hung nearby. After passing the dipper around to all of them several times, the man looked at J. I. and said, **“Comida”, “frijol”, “tortilla”, “savvy?”** The man was pointing at his mouth and rubbing his stomach as he spoke.

J. I. had heard enough of the language and hand signals to know that the request was now for food. Pete had been around several Mexicans, so he knew a limited amount of the language and knew what they were requesting this time, also. Nellie Fay had never turned down a request for food. She had not lost her touch for pleasing folks.

Pete determined that this family was going to need a place to stay for a few days. He offered them one of the shacks that had been used as storage for some of the ranch items. He took some furniture from the shack J. I. used and a few items from the ranch house and found they had enough bedding, furniture and utensils to make do for a few days. During this time of moving furniture the Mexican man introduced himself to Pete as Julio Garcia. He repeatedly referred to Pete as “Patron” making Pete think that in Julio’s mind, he was already working on the ranch. So, with a lot of pointing, gesturing, and corrupted English, Julio was officially hired by Pete Brown.

. Julio, Maria, Juan, Anna and Eva Garcia added to the population of the ranch and each were assigned chores. Each one was taken around to the areas assigned to them.

Both Julio and Maria appeared to be in their mid-forties and very able bodied. Julio was a master farmer and understood irrigating crops. Juan fifteen or sixteen years old,

was a good size boy and was an excellent helper for Julio. Soon, the pasture land around the ranch was coming to life and Maria had a beautiful garden started. Maria and Anna, who was thirteen, were a lot of help to Nellie around the house with the cooking, gathering eggs, bringing in fire wood, carrying water, and other domestic chores. Eva, six or seven years old, was everywhere helping them all. She was in the way more than she helped, but she was so cute and cheerful that all of them loved having her around and she became the entertainment for them all.

Soon the garden had taken on a new life. Tomatoes, beans, corn, potatoes, even some watermelons and cantaloupes were soon gracing the table at the Rocking B. The atmosphere of the ranch had taken on a different air with the arrival of the Garcia's. Pete was beginning to see where he would soon be making some money on his investment. To date, he had paid out everything with very little coming back to him. He knew that would soon be reversed.

Trips to Sierra Blanca became less often, but the amount of items required at the ranch increased when they did make a trip. Also, with the addition of Julio, Pete was now able to take vegetables and eggs from the ranch to sell to the little store serving the rail station and folks in the small town. The income was not large, but it certainly helped out.

The cattle Pete had purchased were doing well and it seemed like each mother cow gave birth to a healthy calf. Soon, the original forty mother head he purchased was eighty. Then the eighty was 160 and Pete was thinking about selling a few head as soon as the price was right. El Paso and the fort near El Paso was a good market for beef. There was a holding pen in Sierra Blanca for those shipping cattle to either El Paso or Fort Worth.

As the work load increased, Julio had talked Pete into letting his brother's family move up from El Paso to help them out. Pete needed to build another small house for them. Julio's brother had a wife and two teenage boys which would add good strong help to the ranch. With things running well, J. I. thought this may be a good time to ask Pete about him moving on. He was now almost a grown man, just turned seventeen, and he felt like he needed to start doing something for himself. Of course, Pete and Nellie Fay tried to discourage him. However, they could understand his wanting to get out and see the rest of the world. Sadly, they agreed and paid J. I. wages for some of the time spent with them and gave him the horse he claimed while ranching for them. They could not pay him for all his time spent working. They did give him two hundred dollars and let him keep the six-shooter and rifle. He still had most of his wages from the railroad. He also still had the two twenty dollar gold pieces that his Pa had hidden under the floor board of the wagon. He did not intend to ever spend those coins, as that was all he had left of his Ma and Pa.

J. I. felt a major sadness as he was riding off from the Rocking B, heading for the rail station at Sierra Blanca. All the folks from the spread had turned out for his leaving. Juan had tears in his eyes as they had become fast friends and the two of them had spent a lot of time hunting in the hills around the ranch. Juan had taught J. I. a lot of the Mexican language and J. I. had taught Juan English, including et for "ate or eat." Now when Juan used that particular term around Pete or Nellie, they got a big kick out of it.

Pete and Nellie Fay had told him how they felt about him the night before. They let him know they felt like he was their own child and he had a place to come to anytime he was ready to come home. J. I. knew he was going to miss Pete and Nellie and his good

buddy, Juan and the homestead in general, but he felt leaving was something he really needed to do.

J. I. waved without looking back as his own vision was a little blurred. Pete and Nellie Fay had been his Ma and Pa since he met them many years ago at milepost 296 on the Texas and Pacific. That particular point on the T & P would always hold dear memories as that was the start of a new world for Judge Iverson Hall, Jr.

Chapter Four

S & A Diner, El Paso, TX

1886

When J. I. stepped from the Texas and Pacific railcar at the El Paso depot, he could hear shooting from afar as he walked back to the livestock car to get his horse. Another shootout was probably happening.. He knew he was in for some interesting moments and hoped he would not become involved in any of the many shoot outs happening in this town. Pete had warned him to try to stay away from the “hard cases”, Pete’s name for the bad guys, but Pete knew that staying away for the bad guys was easier said than done

This place was the busiest one that J. I. had been to since his family came through Dallas many years ago on their way west. Two story hotels and other building lined the street. Horses were tied up in front of many of the stores and saloons. People were walking on the sidewalks. Some were just strolling. The town certainly seemed to be busy.

J. I. had retrieved his horse from the cattle car. He needed to rub him down and feed and water him. The livery stable was pointed out to him. He made arrangement to leave his horse there for a while, after making sure it was well fed and watered. He paid for a week in advance, telling the man in charge he might be in and out for a while until he could find himself a steady job.

He was walking down San Francisco Street looking for a place to stay and admiring all the sights. Girls were calling out to him from the second story windows of buildings bordering the street. Pete had warned him about the bordellos around the El Paso area and of the diseases that could be caught with such a life style. Pete said, "I ain't telling you yes and I ain't telling you no, but I think you ought to know about it since it is pretty bad. I was a young whippersnapper once myself." And even with the warning, J. I. was mighty tempted with these pretty girls calling to him to come up and see them and sounding so sexy in the process. From this distance, all the paint on their faces did not show up.

He was contemplating paying them a visit when a sign came into his view, it read: "S & A Diner." He wondered right away if that could be Sadie and Anne's place. He figured there was only one way to find out and for the moment, the other girls became secondary to seeing if these were his two friends.

J. I. walked into the S & A and took a chair at the only table available. The waitress said, "I will be with you in a minute, sir," without really looking at him. She continued to wait on a couple of cowboys who could not take their eyes off her.

He could tell this girl was Anne, a grown up Anne, and she was a beautiful girl. She had filled out since she had left Sierra Blanca nearly four years ago. J. I. was stunned and amazed at how she had changed. She had a nice buxom and small waist with her hair tied back in a bun. The "neckline" of the dress was almost a "breast line" as it came pretty low; revealing the start of some interesting body parts as far as J. I. was concerned. She would bring in a lot of customers even if the food was terrible.

When Anne finally got around to coming to his table, J. I. was still in a state of shock with his mouth hanging open. J. I. did not realize how much he had changed as well as Anne. She did not recognize him. "May I help you, sir," Anne asked. But her eyes told J. I. that she thought she might know him, but she was unsure.

"I was wondering if I could get me a hug, Miss Anne," he said, looking at her with a big smile on his face.

"Do I know you? You look kind of familiar," Anne said still looking. But before the conversation could go any further between the two of them, there was a scream from the kitchen. All of the patrons in the place turned to stare as Sadie threw the pan she had in her hand and came running into the dining area with her arm outstretched, "J. I., J. I., you have grown up. You are so good looking. Gimme a hug. It is so good to see you." She threw her arms around J. I. and kissed him all over. Then it became Anne's turn as she began to see the little boy from several years ago in this good looking young man.

Anne thought to herself, "He is so good looking and well built." Soon she had displaced Sadie and was hugging and kissing on J. I. herself. All the men in the place were very envious of this young fellow and wondered how he was in such good favor with these two ladies. J. I. was as pleased as he had ever been in his entire life with all the attention he was getting.

After all the how you do's, Sadie and Anne fed J. I.. Then they had him stay until closing time. They had a small house behind the café and offered J. I. one of the rooms until he could find more suitable accommodations. He agreed to take them up on the offer for a day or two so they could catch up on all the news of Pete and Nellie and the ranch they had started. J. I. helped them close up, washed a few of the dishes and cleared a few of the tables. He also swept up the dining area of the café.

Sadie and Anne kept J. I. up well into the night learning about the last few years of the Brown's and the Rocking B Ranch. In the conversation, Sadie mentioned that she knew almost all the ranchers in the El Paso and Las Cruces area; so, if he were looking for ranch work she thought she may be able to introduce him to some of them. J. I. thought that was a great idea and agreed to help out around the café until other suitable employment could be found.

Things got an early start at the S & A café. People were up and looking for food long before the sun peeped over the Waco's. Sadie, Anne and now J. I., had the biscuits on and the coffee hot when the first cowboy walked through the doorway. He was the first of many. Sadie said that around here she cooked as many steaks for breakfast as she did for dinner. She could get steaks easier than she could eggs. But, she had a Mexican cook who

also tended a flock of chickens and she provided some of the eggs and chickens served in the S & A.

One thing Sadie never had was complaints about the food. Most of the complaints were over Anne spending more time at one table than she did at another table. The cowboys were jealous of her attention and did not like to be shortchanged on that end of the business. It seemed to J. I. that each cowboy who came in was in love with Anne and a lot of them felt she was in love with them. Bickering and fussing started early as the louder more obnoxious cowboys arrived. J. I. was really getting a kick about all the fuss this young lady stirred up.

Between the morning rush and noontime rush, things quieted down some. The three of them and the Mexican cook were taking a break when in walked one of the biggest guys that J. I. had ever seen. He ducked to come under the doorway into the café and J. I. wondered if the chairs would be big enough to support his weight. He had a big smile on his face as well.

“Sadie, did I miss breakfast? I was hoping for about six eggs, six or eight strips of bacon, five or six biscuits and a bucket of syrup. What’s my chance’s of getting all of that my dear?” he said as he was pulling one of the tiny chairs out from the table.

“Real good, Tiny, except for the bacon, I’m all out. I could fix you six or eight patties of sausage though. How is that?” she said, smiling back at Tiny.

“That would be great, Sadie. Why don’t you get started then? I’m sure hungry,” he said, rubbing his big tummy.

Anne spoke up and said, “Tiny, I have never seen you when you were not hungry. But, how have you been? We have not seen you for a while? Are you folks rounding up cattle these days?”

“Yeah, we sure have been and we are short handed. It is hard to get good help. And somebody is making off with some of our herd, heading them down into Mexico. We tracked them but it doesn’t seem to be much use in doing that. I don’t know if we could out fight them if we caught them. They are probably a pretty tough breed. But we gonna have to do something. We are just losing way too many head to rustlers,” said Tiny, shaking his head, and looking over at J. I. for the first time. He asked him, “How are you, sir?”

“I’m fine. My name is J. I. Hall,” as he stood up and walked over toward Tiny. Tiny stood to shake his hand and made J. I. look like a small man. His hand wrapped around J. I.’s and he had never thought about hand sizes until today. This guy was big, and strong. J. I. could feel the mighty grip of his fingers. However, Tiny was not menacing, as his smile was almost as big as he was.

“Frank Carter, though most folks call me Tiny. J. I, I am glad to meet you. You a gunfighter?” asked Tiny, looking at the six shooter strapped to his hip.

“No sir, I ain’t. Mr. Pete Brown up on the Rocking B north of Sierra Blanca told me to never go anywhere in El Paso without having it on. He is like a Pa to me so when he tells me something, I do it .I can use this six shooter though, if I have to. I am a pretty good ranch hand. You folks doing any hiring?” asked J. I., with his head reared back looking up at Tiny.

Tiny liked the boy immediately. He appeared to be a several years younger than himself and he liked his attitude and the way he talked. “Yep, but Poppa does the hiring for the J Bar C, that’s our brand. However, after breakfast, if you want to, you can ride out to the ranch with me and we will ask him if we are hiring. I’m pretty sure he will put you on today.”

“Ok, I will go get my horse and my stuff from Sadie’s place and I should be back here by the time you finish up.” J. I. went into the kitchen and told the girls goodbye.

Chapter Five

J Bar C Ranch

1886

J. I. went out the back door of the café to retrieve his bed roll and clothes before going after his horse. Coming back, he came to the front of the café where Tiny’s horse was tied. This had to be the biggest, prettiest horse J. I. had ever seen, standing a good 18 hands tall and weighing a good two thousand pounds by J. I.’s estimation. It was a dark

bay with white legs and stockings and massive hooves. J. I. was standing there admiring the animal when Tiny came out of the café.

“What you think of Baby? She’s a Clydesdale, imported from Scotland. My Pa has four of them, mainly for plowing and hauling freight from town. But he let me have Baby because I needed a good size horse to haul me around. I do love my horse. You can mess with me, but don’t mess with my Baby. I’ve owned her several years now.” Tiny had gone over to Baby while he was talking and rubbed her neck and patted her nose. Baby returned the love by nuzzling Tiny with her head and whining. “Well, let’s get started. It takes several hours to ride out to our spread. I want us to get there before dark.”

J. I. thought that Baby moaned when Tiny mounted up. Baby even seemed small with Tiny on her.

J. I. asked Tiny, “You work cattle with that horse?” He was thinking about the way his own horse would work cutting cattle. Baby did not look to be cut out for that type work.

“Naw, I wrestle them on the ground when I have to. I let my brothers and Pa do all the fancy cutting horse work. There is plenty of other stuff to be done without sitting on horse back all the time. I only ride when I have to. I prefer to drive the chuck wagon and do the cooking. That’s what I’m best at and my Pa agrees and he is the boss. I had Sadie give me some pointers on biscuits. Now I make mine just like Sadie’s and they’re pretty good, too. Them brothers of mine think the same thing. When they need some heavy lifting they go to calling for me though.” Tiny looked over at J. I. and grinned when he made that statement.

“How big a spread you folks have at the J Bar C Ranch? Pretty good size, huh?”

“Yes sir, it is big. It is all in the New Mexico Territory. The boundaries start at the Rio Grande on the east side and follows it up the river and then borders on Mr. Hedges Flying H Ranch. It runs right along the Mexican border about 15 miles then turns north and the west borders on Mr. Black’s Bar B Bar ranch. Some of the folks in this area think Mr. Black is the one doing all the rustling, but he has never been caught. Yet..... if it is him, we will catch him sooner or later. I sure hope sooner. It is creating conflict between the ranchers in the area, each one wondering about the other as to whether he is honest or not. We’re pretty sure the Hedges are good people though. And, it could be some Mexican or Apaches doing it too, but normally they just take a few to feed their families and such. That ain’t too bad. The folks who do tracking say it ain’t Apaches. Whoever is doing this is cleaning out pastures of all the stock in them and they do it fast. We are so big it could be several days before we miss a pasture full. Lately, we been watching a lot more closely. Papa done hired several gun hands to watch out for them rustling rascals. If they catch them there is going to be some shooting going on, I can tell you that for sure. Them gun hands think they are some tough dudes. They don’t even associate with the regular hands, feeling like they are lot better than a common cowboy. They are not very nice people if you ask me. However, Pa says they need to be tough to get the job done. I reckon I can put up with them for a while. I sure don’t like the way that look at my sister.” Tiny became silent as he thought about the last statement.

J. I. could see a lot of trees off in the distance and buildings were visible among the trees. Fields of green were beginning to show up and he could make out the river by the amount of vegetation along the banks of the stream. As they got closer he could see that it was a beautiful hacienda style ranch, with a high, thick, adobe fence around the main

ranch house. The barns and bunk house were outside the adobe fence area. J. I. got a good warm feeling looking this peaceful place over. It seemed to ooze wealth as he gazed at it.

The barn was in between the bunk house and ranch house. The corral was on the west side of the barn. Tiny and J. I. rode to a shed close to the corral where hay was stacked all the way to the ceiling of the shed. They took the saddles off the horses, wiped them down and fed and water them before turning them loose in the corral. “While you are working on the ranch, you can choose another horse for yourself, anyone of them except for them that’s already been claimed by another hand. They will let you know which horses are available. That way it won’t wear your horse out working all the time. I guess I better take you up to the big house and talk to Pa before I started telling you things like that. I sure hope he hires you, J. I. I am pretty sure you and me gonna be good buddies. What do you think?” said Tiny, looking over at J. I. and smiling big.

“Me too, Tiny. I hope Mr. Carter will hire me and I like you a lot already. I think you and me will get along just fine,” said J. I., giving him a big smile right back.

After going through the gate into the big house yard, J.I. saw a beautiful young lady tending some flowers in a very colorful flower garden. He could not see any weeds in the freshly hoed garden. He was pretty sure that the hands pulling last weeks blooms were not the same hands that did the hoeing of the garden. She was too perfect in her appearance and proper attire.

“Hey, sis. This here is J. I., er, was it Hall?” said Tiny pointing to J. I. “J. I., this is my sister, Janelle Carter.”

J. I. was impressed with Janelle Carter. She did not look anything like Tiny. She was very petite, tiny waist and long dark hair and beautiful facial features, J. I. would have never thought they were brother and sister had he not been told.

“Hi, J. I. You can call me Jan, same as everybody else. Are you going to be working on the J Bar C?”

“Well, I hope so, mam. And my last name is Hall. Your Pa has not hired me yet, but I think Tiny is going to put in a good word for me.”

“I hope so to, J. I.. Nice meeting you,” she said, returning his wide grin.

“Pa’s office is through this door, J. I. Let me introduce you and tell him you are looking for work. Come on in with me,” indicating that J. I. should follow him into the house.

They entered into a long hallway and the first doorway to the right was the office of the ranch. Mr. Carter was sitting behind a desk with a stack of papers in front of him and was presently trying to light his pipe. A breeze was coming through the open window blowing out his match. “Tiny, stand in front of that window for a second, would you?”

“Sure, Pa,” said Tiny. He walked to the window, his big body was almost as big as the window, filling in the empty space and immediately Mr. Carter was able to light his pipe. “Pa, this here is J. I. Hall,” he said motioning toward J. I. “I met him in town this morning at the S & A. He’s a good friend of Sadie and Anne and they said to tell you he was a good boy and a hard worker.” Tiny had walked over to J. I. and rested a hand on his shoulder.

J. I. stepped over and extended his hand toward Mr. Carter. “Yes sir, I am looking for work and I will certainly earn my keep, Mr. Carter.”

Mr. Carter stood up and reached over the desk to reach his hand shake, "If Sadie and Anne says it ok to hire you, by golly boy, you are hired. Can you start today? I pay \$18.00 a month and feed you well. Are you ok with that? By the way, I am Jacob Carter. I pay more if you are a gun hand, so are you a gun hand?"

"Yes sir, the \$18.00 a month will be fine and it's a pleasure to meet you, sir. No sir, I ain't a gun hand, but I can use it if I need to." Just talking about the gun seemed to require J. I. adjusting the gun on his hip, a fact noted by Tiny and Mr. Carter, making both of them wonder if he was better than he thought that he was or if he was just modest.

"Tiny, take him out to meet Matt and Isaac. I think Matt may need him back in that rough country out on the west end of the ranch. Tell Matt I said so, ok, Tiny?" Tiny gave his dad a slight head nod.

"My wife, Eleanor, is around here somewhere as is my daughter, Janelle. You will want to meet them before you start working. Sometimes we have hands start, then it is several days before they get back by the main house to see anyone again and my wife and daughter don't even know they are employees. So, Tiny, you make sure J. I. is introduced to Mrs. Carter and Jan and to all the big house employees", he said as he moved his hand in a go away motion and looked back down at the mounds of paperwork.

"Yes sir, Pa, I'll take care of it. See you later." Tiny was already in the hall when the "see you later" sounded.

J. I. could see where Janelle got her good looks when he met Mrs. Carter. She was as nice as she was nice looking. She seemed to like J. I. immediately and J. I. certainly liked her. Something about her reminded him of his own mother and a soothing feeling came

over him when he talked to her. Tiny saw Matt getting ready to ride off from the barn so they cut their visit short with Mrs. Carter in order to catch Matthew Carter before he left.

“Hey, Matt.” Shouted Tiny, “Pa wanted me to bring J. I. out to meet you and said for you to take J. I. with you. He just hired him a few minutes ago. J. I., this here is Matt. Matt, meet J. I. Hall.”

“Matt, how are you” said J. I. “I reckon your Pa wants me to work with you today. Do I need to saddle me one of the ranch horses? Mine is pretty near rode out for today.”

“Let’s take Red here. He is one of my mounts, but I have not ridden him for a while and he needs to be worked some. He is easy to catch, also.”

Soon Red was saddled and they were ready to go. Saying goodbye to Tiny, Matt and J. I. headed out to the west sections of the spread. “J. I., you got overnight stuff in that bed roll. We going to be up there a day or two, depending on how much Isaac has done. We are trying to bring that herd on down in the valley for branding and sorting out as we need to sell some of them in the next few weeks. Also, there has been a little rustling going on up this way. We need to do something quick like moving the herd on into the main ranch down here in the valley.”

Matt was an earlier model of Jacob Carter. He seemed to be about the same height and build, but without the pot belly the elder Mr. Carter seemed to be developing. J. I. could visualize the Mr. Carter of a few years ago looking almost identical to Matt.

“J. I., I better warn you. My older brother, Isaac, in addition to doing the round up, is out in the west section checking on some cattle losses. Isaac and Joe Bob have been out there a couple of days now. We have seen some strange tracks out that way, and lots of them. We suspect that whoever has been rustling is getting ready to hit us again. We hope

to be ready for them. I noticed your six shooter and I hope you can use it. I understand we did not hire you for a gun hand, but these days, all of us have to use our guns, want to or not.”

The flat land of the green valley was changing to an up hill climb onto the mesa .The climb out of the valley to the level part of the mesa was about two hundred feet. Matt said they would be in the shadow of Black Mountain, which they could see off in the distance. The steep hill was enough of a climb for the horses that Matt wanted to give them a brief rest before going on. While they were resting, from out to the west of them, they heard rapid gunfire and it sounded like it came from several guns.

Matt and J. I. immediately spurred their horses into a gallop, heading in the direction of the sounds. J. I yells at Matt, “Hey, I don’t know either of your hands. How will I know who to help?”

“Isaac rides a big gray and Joe Bob is just a tad smaller than Tiny. That should help you,” yelled Matt, as he continued to ride all out toward the sounds of gunfire.

A small herd of cattle was in a box canyon that backed up to Black Mountain.. The small canyon ran back up against two steep sides, forming a natural corral to hold the cattle while the branding was taking place. A branding fire was going down in the middle of the canyon. Two cowboys were at the open end of the canyon firing at about five hands scattered around behind rocks and a small ditch that ran down the middle of the canyon near the branding fire.

Matt said, “Isaac and Joe Bob are the ones closest to us. Let’s get as close to them as we can before we start firing.” Matt immediately rode up to the nearest cover and dismounted behind a rock. J. I. followed Matt, finding another nearby boulder to get

behind. Both Matt and J. I. joined in the shooting as soon as they were in position. Isaac and Joe Bob acknowledged their presence with a wave of the hand. The shooting had become a standoff as neither party was showing themselves. The firing became scattered as the rustlers shot from time to time to make sure the ranch hands did not try to get closer to them.

J. I. noticed that to his left was a series of scattered boulders that went back toward where the rustlers were hiding. He motioned to Matt that he was headed out toward the next boulder. He made it without a shot being fired. He waited for a bit, and then headed on to the next boulder. This time he drew a couple of wildly placed shots from the rustlers. While he drew fire from them, Joe Bob advanced closer from the other side. Now the rustlers were getting more earnest about their shooting. Joe Bob drew the gunfire for a time and J. I. advanced to another boulder. From his new vantage point he could see more of the rustlers. He got off a couple of shots, one shot hitting one of the rustlers in the leg. The rustler started screaming that he was hit and was rolling around on the ground. The others mounted up and started riding off. The rustler that had been rolling around on the ground tried to stand and called to his buddies, "Hey, don't leave me. You are taking my horse with you. Help me.....please...." One of the rustler's stopped, got off his horse, kneeled with his rifle pointed back at the man and fired. The shot was dead center of his chest and the rustler was dead before he hit the ground. The cowboys commenced firing at the shooter, but he was moving fast and the six shooters could not fire effectively from that distance. The rustler rode away untouched.

Isaac and Joe Bob joined Matt. The three of them walked over to J. I. who was standing over the dead man. Isaac said, "Some friends, huh. I imagine they were afraid if they left him alive he would do to much talking, you reckon?"

Matt said, "You are exactly right, Isaac." Then motioning toward his brother, he said, "This is my brother, Isaac. Isaac, say hello to our newest cowboy, J. I. Hall. And this here is Joe Bob Duncan." Both cowboys shook hands with J. I. and were slapping him on the back for making the move to flush the rustlers. J. I. thanked them for the kind words, but said it only made sense for him to advance because he was the one closest to the cover.

The cowboys pushed the herd over to the nearest line shack that had a small pasture nearby. Joe Bob and J. I. started cooking supper shortly after arrival at the line shack. Joe Bob was telling J. I. that Tiny had taught him how to cook. No matter his teacher, he was good. Matt had said that Joe Bob was a tad smaller than Tiny, but J. I. was not so sure about that. He would have to get them close together to determine that.

Matt and Isaac made plans for tomorrow and to start the herd back toward the valley early tomorrow morning. Isaac thought that the rustlers would return tomorrow with more help. His thinking was that once the herd made the valley it would be all but impossible to steal the herd. So they would make an all out effort to get the cattle before they got them off the mesa. Joe Bob chimed in and said, "Let's push them as a wide herd, with two of us riding drag, and two along side the herd but at a good distance apart. That way it will be harder for them to get to all of us. I think that will give us a better chance at fighting them if they attack. What do ya'll think of that?"

"That's good, Joe Bob. And I want us to get a very early start. Let's tie the dead cowboy on the extra horse. If the drive goes smooth, as soon as we get off the mesa, I

will take the dead man on in. The sheriff may know him or at least know something about him. As soon as it is daylight, I want us moving toward the valley. Ok, let's get some sleep. Tomorrow is gonna be a long day."

Chapter Six

Rustlers Win

At daybreak, the foursome started the cattle moving slowly toward the green valley of the Rio Grande River. The cattle were not as widespread as J. I. had hoped they would be, but they were probably 100 yards from side to side and from the lead cows to the drag riders was about 50 yards. They were moving in a steady pace. Joe Bob and J. I. had the drag with Isaac on the north side and Matt, with the dead man's horse and body, on the south. All of the cowboys had put biscuits and bacon in their saddle bags to munch on while riding. Stopping for lunch was not going to be an option.

The sun was bearing down and the only breeze seemed to be the horse's forward movement. J. I. had his bandana on to keep some of the dust out of his mouth and nostrils and was busy adjusting it when he thought he heard a roar or rumble. Looking to the north, J. I. saw a herd of cattle bearing down on them at a full gallop. He could also see that they were being pushed by several cowboys whooping and hollering and whipping them with ropes.

J. I. screamed at Joe Bob to push their herd forward, but Joe Bob was not listening nor watching him. He drew his six shooter and went to firing in the air trying to get Matt's and Isaac's attention. The J Bar C herd started to pick up speed, but not enough to get completely out of the way of the cattle bearing down on them from the north. Isaac was caught right in the middle of the stampede and turned his horse to ride with the incoming cattle. J. I. thought that firing the pistol now seemed to be the wrong thing to do as Isaac was caught between both herds of stampeding cattle. His horse lost its footing and went down and Isaac was trying desperately to get back on his horse. He finally grabbed the saddle horn, pulling himself back up into the saddle while the cattle somehow managed to go around them as he was mounting up. Isaac saw a big boulder just in front of him.

He pulled his horse back to face the oncoming herd, but from behind the boulder. That action probably saved his life as the main herd was now bearing down on him. Just behind the herd were the cowboys pushing them, firing wildly in the air to keep them moving fast. Isaac took aim from his place behind the boulder and shot one of the cowboys out of the saddle. He fired at a couple of others, but they were moving too fast and it was too far to be effective. The rustlers were trying to get both herds to mix together. They did get some of the J Bar C cattle moving to the south with the rustlers herd.

J. I. and Joe Bob joined Isaac in firing at the rustlers. Both of them being behind the herd riding drag had allowed them to miss the stampede and to get off several shots at the rustlers. They thought they had hit a couple of them by the way they sagged after shooting, but they were not sure.

Within a short time after the new herd passed though, the J Bar C herd quieted down and was soon back down to a walk or stopping altogether. They went to looking for Matt, riding in the direction of the rustler's herd. Several hundred yards south of the start of the action, they found him. He had gotten behind a small boulder that had provided him some protection, but he had gotten his leg and thigh stepped on a time or two and was in intense pain. Isaac tried to get him to go ahead to the ranch, but Matt would not hear of it. His thoughts were that the rustlers may make another attempt to come after them. Probably a third of the herd had joined the cattle that had ridden them down. Isaac wanted to go after them now. Matt said, "We've got to get these cattle on down to the ranch. Then we can get some reinforcement to go after them." Isaac reluctantly agreed.

The dead man the rustlers shot in the canyon and the horse he was tied to had apparently joined the rustlers once again. The horse had probably gone with the cattle as they passed through the J Bar C herd. But the rustler Isaac had shot had been trampled by several of the cattle in addition to the gunshot wound. His horse had started grazing nearby. Isaac and Joe Bob loaded this rustler on his own horse to take him into the sheriff for possible identification.

Pushing the herd into the river valley after the incident went easily enough. Nothing else happened. As soon as they dropped off the mesa, Matt, leading the dead man's horse went on down to the ranch telling them he would send back more help. He wanted to get as many of the ranch hands as possible rounded up to chase the rustlers.

It was late afternoon by the time the herd had reached the main ranch. Isaac wanted all the men to have a good meal and a good night's sleep before riding after the rustlers. He seemed to think they would do a lot better being fed and rested. Tiny and a couple of hands would stay at the ranch in case the women folks needed something.

Matt was in no condition to join the men hunting the rustler. The plan was for him to take the dead man up to Las Cruces by buckboard and get the law involved in this also. He wanted to stop by the Hedges Ranch and visit with Howard to see if they had lost any cattle recently. He believed the cattle the rustlers pushed through his herd were Flying H cattle. He privately hoped to see Hazel Hedges, if he was lucky. Anyway, he sure wanted to visit with her, if only for a few minutes. She was a little young for him, but out here in these parts marrying young was expected. She was a looker, for sure and Matt thought she liked him also. A dance was coming up next month and he wanted to ask her to go with him. This visit would be a great opportunity to ask her.

J. I. was told to go with Matt to Mesilla. Most of the ranch hands and gun hands were going after the rustlers. Mr. Carter had told Matt that he thought J. I. was a little too young to be mixing in the kind of fighting that he figured would take place. He also knew that there was a chance that the rustlers did not want the dead mans body taken in for identification and he did not want Matt to be completely alone. J. I. would be fine for that. Mr. Carter had been told of the fighting that took place up at Black Mountain and he figured J. I. would be able to hold his own if called on to fight.

They arrived at the Hedges Ranch about noon time. The dinner bell was just ringing as the buckboard pulled up under the shades trees near the ranch house. A Mexican fellow came from the barn to hold the reins of the horses and offered to water them for Matt. Howard had heard them come up and came out to meet them. He shook hands with Matt and they talked briefly before Matt introduced J. I. to Howard. Howard and J. I. seemed to like one another as soon as the introductions were made. After a few minutes of discussing the man under the blanket on the buckboard, Howard confirmed that they had lost a small herd up on the mesa night before last. He was sure it was his cattle that were stampeded through the J Bar C herd.

“Matt and J. I., our dinner has been served and I am sorry that I have not yet invited you. Would you please join us?” Howard asked.

Matt replied, “Yes, we will and we appreciate you asking us. Right, J.I.?”

“Yes sir, I am always ready to eat. Where can we wash off some of this trail dust?” asked J. I. He was pointed toward the well’s shed and wash pans inside the shed. Matt followed J. I. and took great pains in removing his hat and combing his hair. J. I. was a little amused at his primping. A mirror was available under the shed and Matt spent

several minutes examining his reflection. After turning his head and viewing himself from several different directions, he apparently declared himself ready to be seen and he spoke, "Let's go, J. I."

When the men entered the dining room, Maria, the servant friend of Hazel's, was serving the table. Mrs. Hedges had her back to the door. Hazel Hedges was seated facing the doorway that Matt, J. I. and Howard entered. J. I.'s heart jumped in his chest when he looked at Hazel. Never in his short life had looking at a female affected him like this. J. I. actually stopped in his tracks when he saw her. He tried to cover it up by looking as if he wondered where he would be seated, but this girl was really eye-popping gorgeous and stopped him cold.

At first she was looking at Matt and talking to him, but she finally got around to looking at J. I. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped a bit, but she recovered quickly, stood and held out her hand to shake J. I.'s. She then immediately asked that J. I. take the seat next to her.

J. I. was very pleased with the arrangement at first. Then he remembered some of the comments that Matt had made about this girl, and all the preparations he had made before coming in for dinner. He knew that he could be starting some conflicts. He had just met Hazel, but he had already determined that this girl was worth fighting for. He had heard Sadie talk about love at first sight and he had thought it was a joke. Now he knew it was no joke and he felt like he was ready to take possession of this young lady at his first chance, maybe today. He was hoping that she was feeling the same way.

With a quick glance over toward Matt, he could see that he was none too happy with the present seating arrangements, nor was he happy that Hazel and J. I. were leaving

everyone else out of their conversation. Matt turned to Howard to change the topic to the cattle rustlers and to his men being out looking for them. He told the story of the stampede in great detail, details that J. I. did not know about, making J. I. wonder if they were at the same stampede. Maybe it did happen like Matt told it, but J. I. certainly did not see that part of the raid, such as his shot that brought down the rustler out in the buckboard. J. I. was nearly certain that Isaac had shot him, but he could not argue the point as there was a lot going on at that time.

Matt had also stated that there was no need at present for the Hedges to send out any of their men as Matt thought his people could take care of it. During the speech Matt was giving, it seemed to J. I. that Matt was directing his words to Hazel, even though he was repeating Howard's name over and over. Too much, in J. I.'s opinion, but he really did not know Matt all that well, so maybe that's the way he spoke all the time. While Matt was dominating the conversation, J. I. accidentally brushed Helen hand under the table while they were both reaching for their napkins. J. I. said, "excuse me" and looked Hazel in the eyes. He saw the same caring, wondering, searching, "I think I like you a lot" look and again his heart started its pitter-patter pounding.

After the meal, Matt approached J. I. and told him that Howard was going into Mesilla with him and J. I. could just go back to the ranch and help Tiny around there and do any chores that Tiny needed him to do. J. I. wondered about the change of plans and also he wondered about Matt's sharper commands, sharper than J. I. had ever heard before from any boss, including those back on the railroad. Matt started over toward Hazel as J. I. was gathering his horse. Hazel excused herself from Matt and came over to J. I. to tell him goodbye and to invite him back over to see her when he had a day off. Also, there was a

dance coming up soon and she hoped that J. I. would be able to attend. J. I. was very flattered and told her he would do just that if he could get off work.

J. I. looked at Matt while he is talking to Hazel and now he saw hate in Matt's eyes. Things have taken a quick turn for the worst as J. I. saw it. He could do nothing about it now and he would surrender his job if need be to see Hazel. All of a sudden J. I.'s priorities in life had changed.

He was pretty sure Matt had sent him home because of the way the relationship was shaping up between the two of them. J. I. felt that Hazel was feeling about him as he was about her. One thing was for sure, one way or another, he would be back.

Chapter Seven

Trouble Brewing

Matt returned to the ranch the next day. He gave his horse to Hector, the boy who worked in the stable, and hurried into his dad's office. Tiny and J. I. had witnessed his return and Tiny said, "Wonder what Matt is in such a hurry about. He must have found something out about the rustler. He usually comes around to visit a little before he talks to Pa. I guess you noticed that Matt thinks he is boss when Pa ain't around. Isaac is really a better person for the bossing job than Matt, but Matt sure tries to assume command. Most of the time we let him boss, just to be nice. But, sometimes he can be a real pain in the butt. I try to put him in his place if he gets too bossy. Isaac does too, but Isaac is too easy going for his own good."

"Tiny, is Matt sweet on that Hedges girl? It seemed to me the other day that he was hung up on her quite a bit. She seems a little young for him or so it seems to me, anyway." J.I. was watching Tiny as he spoke to see what his reaction would be to the question.

"Matt has taken more notice of Hazel, especially now that Mr. Hedges has been gunned down. I think he would like for her to notice him, but I am not too sure she is looking at men just yet. She is a pretty young girl, younger than you are I expect. But folks marry pretty young around here and she is developed like she is ready for bearing young'uns, if you know what I mean." Tiny kind of smiled as he said that and looked at J. I. for a response.

"Well, I did meet her the other day, but I really didn't notice all that much. I did notice that Matt was trying to impress her or so it seemed to me anyway. But maybe not."

Tiny looked at J. I. and said, "You never really know about, Matt. Sometimes he is a little hard for me to figure out. But Pa generally puts enough work on me that I don't

bother about Brother Matt. We go our separate ways except when I'm cooking out on roundups and brandings or drives. Then he stays out of my way."

While Tiny was still speaking, Matt came walking up to them. Tiny knew Matt could have heard the last statement, but he was sure he did not know who he was talking about, but then again, he really didn't care as Matt had been getting under his skin lately.

"Tiny, you and J. I. head on out to where the boys are looking for the rustlers and give them a hand. The rustler we took in was identified as a hired hand of the Bar B Bar and now that we know that, we also know they will be doubling the herd back into the states, probably over around Columbus. You catch our hands, tell them what we found out, then all of you go on over toward Columbus and try to head them off. If you can, bring both the Hedges cattle and our cattle back to J Bar C and we will separate the herds. I will notify Howard we are holding his cattle over here. Take some supplies with you as you may be gone several days. Ok. Get a move on and don't waste any time getting to our boys. J. I., you make sure Tiny keeps moving. He tends to want to lolly-gag around from time to time."

"Matt, you would have to improve some to be an ass-hole, you know it? You bound to be adopted 'cause I don't think you can be kin to me and Isaac. I think them damn 'Paches kicked you out of the tribe when you was a kid. You was not smart enough to be a "Pache", said Tiny said as he was walked off toward the corral.

"Just keep on, Tiny, and I will go get Pa. He knows you can get ornery and lazy from time to time anyway. So, just keep on and I will get him. Don't you think I won't, Mister." Matt snapped at Tiny.

“Naw sir, Mister Matt, please don’t go get Pa.”. Tiny said mockingly. “He’s too busy to listen to your sorry, pitiful story. I’m going, but just to keep peace around here, not cause you said for me to go.”

Soon the horses were saddled and extra supply horses loaded for both riders. Matt hung around the barn until the two of them had hit the trail.

Tiny looked back after a few hundred yards and said, “Matt sure has a burr under his saddle, don’t he? Wonder what has got him all upset?”

“I don’t know, Tiny. It is probably having to deal with these rustlers and he seems to think it is all his responsibly and not your Pa’s. You reckon that could be it?” asked J. I.

“Damn if I know,” said Tiny, putting Baby into an easy lope.

J. I. was pretty sure the “lolly-gagging” comment was still burning in Tiny’s ears. They ate up the miles in silence. Tiny was apparently thinking about his brother’s comments and J. I. was day dreaming about the beautiful Hazel Hedges. He was pretty sure that some of Matt’s concerns were Hazel’s actions when he was with her. “A jealous man cannot be trusted,” thought J. I. and he figured he better start watching his back.

J. I. was thinking, “she wants me to come to a dance and I have no idea how to dance.” Only once, when Pete and Nellie were in a festive mood, did the three of them try to do some dancing and J. I. did not think that counted. He thought when the time was right he might ask Tiny to talk to Jan about helping him learn some steps.

As they rode along, they could track the ranch hands pretty easily since the tracks were fresh and there had been no rain since they had started chasing the rustlers. It turned dark before they could catch the hands, so they stopped and make camp by a spring that Tiny knew about. He said they sometimes camped here while doing some branding

around this area, when there is good grass. But the last couple of years they had left this land free of cattle to try and bring back the grass.

Tiny said, "I am gonna make us a 3 B's meal, if it is ok with you, J. I." as he looked at J.I. for his approval.

"I don't know what a 3 B's meal is, but I'm hungry enough to eat 'bout anything. What is a 3 B's meal, Tiny?" J.I. asked, casting Tiny a wondering look.

"Biscuits, bacon and beans and other than it getting a little noisy after bed time, it's a real good supper. That be ok with you?" asked Tiny.

J. I. pretty sure that he knew what the "getting a little noisy" meant said. "I will put my bed roll upwind a ways from you, Tiny, so it will be ok, I think." He laughed as he made the comment.

"I will make enough for breakfast tomorrow morning so we won't be "lolly-gagging around. That still makes me mad just thinking about Matt saying that. One of these days I gonna pop that boy in the jaw." Tiny said, shaking his head as the anger started turning his face a cherry red. Some of it could be the camp fire, but J. I. was pretty sure that most of it was thoughts of Brother Matt.

Tiny had them up before daybreak and in just a few minutes he had the fire going and the beans and bacon warmed up. Washing up in the spring went quickly and the two of them were in the saddle before sunup. Tiny pointed out to J. I. that they had just crossed into Mexico and he figured to catch the hands before noon, especially if they were close to the rustlers. Both of the men were aware that trouble could start at anytime, so both were more watchful. They scanned the horizon as they rode.

Shortly before noon, the sound of gunfire reached them. Both men put the horses into a gallop. Topping a slight rise, J. I. could see the cattle out to the north with the rustlers near them behind some rocks and in one deep ditch. The ditch meandered around, but it mainly ran east and west, giving the rustlers a better place to hide than what the J Bar C men had. While they were watching, trying to make up their minds what to do next, two of the J Bar C riders were hit, apparently, pretty bad, as they were not moving at all.

Tiny said, "Follow me. Let's ride right down that ditch toward the rustlers. When we get where we can have some cover lets dismount right there among them. That will give them two directions to cover. You ready?" and when Tiny saw J. I. nod, they were off, riding fast. The rustlers were taken by surprise and were not sure just who they were and since they were not firing at them, they did not fire either. All the J Bar C hands recognized Tiny and his horse Baby, even from the distance location, so they held their fire.

As soon as Tiny and J. I. hit the ditch, they started shooting at the rustlers. Immediately the rustlers started trying to rearrange themselves as the cover that worked with the J Bar C hands was not going to work with these two coming straight down the ditch at them. One of the rustlers was hit in the chest by a shot fired by J. I. He fell into the middle of the ditch. The other rustlers decided that they would have better luck riding for cover at some other location and broke for their horses. As soon as the J Bar C hands saw them running for their horses, they mounted up and started toward the ditch and Tiny and J. I. Once they got to their horses, the race was on. The J Bar C crew chased them for several miles, but Isaac yelled for them to give up the chase and go back and get the cattle.

Returning to the cattle and the battle scene, the men found both of the cowboys who had been shot dead. They were two of the recently hired gun hands. Isaac said they had both been good at their trade stating “it was a shame this had to happen.” They were both loaded on their horses for the trip home. Isaac and one other cowboy took them on toward the ranch while Tiny and the rest of the crew herded the cattle back toward home. Pushing the cattle on home presented no further problems. Late the third day, the ranch house came into view. They pastured the cattle within sight of the ranch house.

J. I. started thinking about Matt again and what his next job might be. He hoped he would be one of the hands picked to drive the Flying H cattle home. He was pretty sure Matt would not pick him for that job.

Chapter Eight

J. I. Learns to Dance

When the weather was nice around the J Bar C spread, the meals were served out near the well house. They had a cover over a shed that had benches and tables. It was just a few steps from the kitchen of the big house, so it became the place for all the hands to eat. Sometimes Mr. and Mrs. Carter joined them out there. Jan almost always ate out there unless her mom forbade her to for certain reasons. When the gun hands were around, Jan was not allowed to eat with the crew. Mrs. Carter felt they were paid killers and she did not agree with Mr. Carter about hiring them and she certainly did not want her daughter to get too close to them as she had heard some of the language they used at times. She said, “Who can tell when one of them might get mad and want to go to shooting. It is just too distasteful for any young lady to be around. The language they use is a disgrace.”

However, today, the first day back from bringing in the two dead gunmen and the cattle, Mr. Carter, Mrs. Carter and Jan, all joined the crew in a mini celebration for the victory of getting all the cattle back. Mr. Carter made a speech about how thankful he was that they had won this victory, even if they had lost two men in the recovery efforts. With the rustlers losing one when they first started the stampede and then losing one in the ditch which J. I. shot, he felt like they would think twice before stealing more cattle. He told them he had told Matt to get the sheriff to ride over to Mr. Black’s and confront him about these rustlers being Bar B Bar hands. He was also sure that Mr. Black would deny knowing anything about these hands doing any rustling. Mr. Carter talked about the ranch and some of the areas of trouble and special work he wanted some of the hands to do. When he had finished, the cowboys started lighting cigarettes, getting up to walk off

and talk among themselves. While this was happening, J. I. worked his way around to Jan. "Evening, Miss Jan. How are you doing tonight?" he asked.

"Well, J. I., I am just fine and thank you for asking. Pa was proud of the way you handled yourself when you and Tiny ran down those rustlers. Tiny told Daddy all about it. I happened to be in Pa's office when Tiny was telling the story. Pa was saying what a good hand you were making," said Jan as she smiled at J. I.

"Well, thank you for the kind comments, Miss Jan. I was wondering about something, well, it's.....I got a small problem, Miss Jan. Hazel Hedges invited me to a dance that gonna be over at the Flying H, andwell, I can't dance, Miss Jan. I'm kind of worried about it as I want to be able to dance if I get to go," said J. I. holding his hat in his hand, looking rather timid.

"So, you want me to teach you how to dance? Is that what you are saying?"

J. I. face lit up since she helped him say what he was trying to say. "Well, yes mam. If you would.... I sure would appreciate it if you would be so kind to help me out."

"You know that you are going to be getting on my brother Matt's bad side when you go to dancing with Hazel Hedges, don't you? Since her dad got shot, Matt has been over there several times to see Howard, he says, but when he come back, he talks more about Hazel than he does Howard. By the way, Howard has asked me to the dance also, so we can practice together. I will be happy to teach you, but don't you say anything to Matt, Isaac or Tiny about what we are doing. Let them think it's just me teaching you how to dance. Ok? They like to tease me about Howard and this will drive them up the wall thinking I have something going on with you. We will start tomorrow night, ok?"

J. I. was beaming. “Yes Mam. I will be over at the big house as soon as I can, Miss Jan.”

After supper the next evening, J. I. went over to the big house. Jan had been expecting him and in an effort to keep nosy people from seeing them, she waited for J. I. in an inconspicuous place. She was outside the house, but on the side away from the bunk house.

Jan was grinning as J. I. made his appearance. He looked like he was scared to death. Jan asked, “What is wrong, J. I.? Is something bothering you?”

“Miss Jan, I ain’t never done anything like this before. I don’t know if I can do it or not. I hugged Miss Anne a time or two, but she was almost like family, so she probably don’t count. So, me holding you close is going to be scary.” J. I. had washed up right before he came over and it was a good thing as the water in his hair and on his face hid the sweat pouring from him at the moment.

“It will be ok, let’s get started. I will hum a little of the song we will dance to and I have picked a waltz, that’s what everyone is dancing these days. It is called the Blue Danube. That’s what they always play over at the Hedges. It’s Mrs. Hedges favorite. I will hum it, but I will hum it slower than they play it so you can learn the steps. Ok, we take two short, quick steps, then one long step. But don’t be waiting to go back to the two quick steps, ok, you have to keep moving. Here we go. Da, da, da, da, da,.....da,da,...da,da...da,da, da, da, da, da,...da, da,, da,da...” On and on went Jan, J. I. watched every step of Jan’s and make one or two of his own, most of them more staggering than dancing. Jan gently corrected him over and over, kept him from falling a time of two, and finally he got it down..

They had really been working hard for an hour or so paying attention to their feet and making them move to the da, da's of Jan's and they did not notice the crowd that had gathered at the side of the house. When J. I. backed away from Jan and took a deep bow, all the cowboys started hooting and hollowing and clapping their hands. J. I. turned a very deep red and looked like he wanted to run, but Jan just laughed and bowed. J. I. caught on and took a bow as well.

Matt was among those watching the dancing and was frowning deeply when he turned and walked away. Isaac, on the other hand came over to J. I. and congratulated him on how well he could dance. As a matter of fact, he rather liked for Jan to be with J. I. as he thought that would be a very good match up. But then, he was not really a Howard Hedges fan. He did not dislike him, he just thought he was self centered and egotistical, and really not a good match for Jan.

The cowboys gave J. I. a hard time for several evenings running and J. I. took it all good naturedly. Soon, the new wore off for the cowboys, especially since J. I. did not buckle under the kidding he was taking from them. After a week or so, the crew did not even come over to watch anymore.

Jan was thinking she could take a liking to J. I. if things did not work out with Howard. However, J. I. was stuck on Hazel Hedges like flies on molasses. He brought her up to Jan several times while they were dancing and Jan could tell J. I. was as serious as he could be about that young lady. She knew that the only way for J. I. to not fall completely for Hazel was for Hazel to stop letting him think he had a chance with her. Otherwise, he was determined to have her and she knew there would be no stopping him

now. Not Matt's objections, not Howard's objections, not anything she could think of would be stopping J. I. from his mission to court this Miss Hazel.

The big day arrived. The dance was going to be at the Hedge's ranch with the festivals starting about 4 o'clock. All of the guests had been invited to spend the night with the men folk to be quartered in the bunk house and barn and the womenfolk in the big house. Every rancher in the area had been invited along with the sheriff, his deputies and some of the local business men from Mesilla, Las Cruces and El Paso. Some of the Army brass had also been invited, but they had elected not to spend the night. They had brought several troops with them and they would do some night maneuvers on the way back to Fort Selden, NM and Fort Bliss, TX.

J. I. was as excited as he had ever been in his young life. Jan had taught him well, he thought, so now he was ready to impress Ms. Hazel Hedges. He was in the process of getting his boots shined and his jeans pressed. He had already ironed his newest shirt and felt like he was ready for the big dance.

Tiny walked up to J. I. and said, "Matt wants you and me to stand guard over the Hedges herd of cattle. He is afraid that the B-Bar-B hands will come over tonight because of everyone being at the dance. He thinks you and me will be enough to handle the herd and the rest of the cowboys can go to the dance."

J. I. stopped in his tracks, shocked. "Where is Mr. Matt? I ain't gonna guard cattle tonight. I am going to the dance! I planned on it and he saw me dancing with Miss Jan learning how to dance. I am going. He will just have to get one of the other cowboys to help you, Tiny, I'm going. I don't want you to stand guard all by yourself, but you know

yourself that Matt is trying to keep me away from Miss Hazel.....” He walked off a few feet, then wheeled around again, “Dammit, I’m going. Where is Matt?”

Joe Bob Duncan was walking nearby, in hearing distance of Tiny and J. I. “What’s going on, J. I..... What’s got you so up in the air?” moving up close to Tiny. This is the first time Tiny and Joe Bob had stood side by side since he had wondered who was the biggest. In spite of himself being so mad, he compared the two. Tiny got heavy, but Joe Bob got tall. Joe Bob was probably two inches taller than Tiny. But Tiny probably outweighed Joe Bob by a good twenty pounds, if not more.

“Joe Bob, you know how I have been working with Miss Jan to learn how to dance, just for tonight’s big dance. Now Matt says Tiny and I have to guard the Hedges herd and not go to the dance. I am looking up Mr. Matt and I’ll tell him I am quitting. I am going to the dance.”

“Hell, J. I, ain’t no need of that. I ain’t going to the dance anyway. I will be happy to stay here with Tiny and guard the herd,” said Joe Bob.

“Matt will be mad anyway. It ain’t about the B-Bar-B coming around; it’s about me dancing with Miss Hazel.” J. I. was still pacing, looking all around for Matt.

Tiny spoke up, “You know J. I., I am in agreement with you about the dance, but Matt does have a point on the rustlers coming around with everyone gone. It would be something they would do. But you go on ahead to the dance and me and Joe Bob will handle every thing around here. He can’t fire you since he thought two men would be enough ‘cause two of us will be here. You go on and if anything is said I’ll tell Pa it was my idea, so Pa and Matt will have to fuss at me and not you.”

“Well, ok, Tiny,” said a relieved J. I., “but I got a very bad feeling about this night now and it is not at all the happy night I was figuring on about fifteen minutes ago. I’m taking my guns in my saddle bag, just in case.”

Several of the J Bar C hands were riding over to the dance together. While saddling their horses, Matt came around to saddle his. Noticing that J. I. was in the group of cowboys preparing to go to the dance, Matt said, “I thought I told Tiny to tell you to stay here tonight and help guard the cattle. Those B-Bar-B hands could make another attempt to steal them tonight. What’s the deal? Did he not tell you?”

“Well, yeah, he told me, but Joe Bob said he wasn’t going to the dance no-how and he would help Tiny with the guard duty. So, I am going to the dance and letting him do just that. Pretty nice of Joe Bob, huh?” smiling at Matt. He could see him burning inside and was kind of enjoying the way it was turning out.

“I don’t like my orders being changed by anyone without clearing it with me. I don’t think Joe Bob is good enough with a gun to be the one to help with the guard duty. You just go on back and the three of you can guard them. I need at least one good gun hand here during this watch.” Matt was burning up as he was talking to J. I.

“Mr. Matt, you ain’t paying me gun hand wages on the one hand and I ain’t agreeing to stay here on the other. I am going to the dance ‘cause Miss Hazel asked me to come and I am not going to disappoint her. I am pretty sweet on her and I intend to dance with her tonight. You saw Miss Jan teaching me how to dance just for this event and I intend to go.”

“You are refusing to obey my orders?” Matt was beginning to bristle and stiffen up. “Well, you can just go draw your wages. You are fired, mister!”

“I will collect my wages tomorrow. I am going to the dance right now, thank you,” and J. I. returned to saddling his horse, turning his back to Matt.

Matt grabbed J. I. by the shoulder and pulled him back around to face him and said, “don’t turn your back to me” and drew back his fist, swinging at J. I. Matt had telegraphed his move to J. I. allowing him to easily blocked the blow with his left arm, bringing his right fist around to connect soundly with Matt’s jaw. It was over after one blow. Matt was out cold, landing on his back in the dirt of the corral. All of the cowboys had witnessed the whole thing and had not said a word while it was going on. As soon as Matt’s back hit the dirt of the corral, the cowboys went to whooping and hollering with “way to go” and “atta boy” and other comments. A couple of the hands slapped him on the back. It was not often the boss was laid out by a cowhand.

J. I. finished saddling his horse and went to the bunk house and collected his belongings. He said goodbye to Tiny and Joe Bob, who had seen some of what was going on from the bunk house. Tiny had his arm around J. I. and was telling him that Isaac and him would have a say in firing thing also. He thought it was wrong for Matt to try and keep him at the ranch this evening.

“Well, Tiny, I may see you tomorrow when I come to collect my wages. I will see what Mr. Carter has to say then. But you know Matt is going to make sure it sounds like my fault. And then with me hitting him and laying him out cold.....well, you ain’t supposed to hit the boss. That’s reason to fire me. I will see ya’ll tomorrow, Tiny.” Looking over at Joe Bob, he tips his hat as he was riding off, “Joe Bob,”... he said and nodded his head. Looking over at the corral he can see that Matt was up and holding his jaw heading toward the water trough. When Matt looked over at J.I., as he is riding off,

he noticed that J. I. tipped his hat to him. By the look on Matt's face, thoughts of killing may have been running through his mind.

Before J. I. could make the trip to the Hedges Ranch the other ranch hands had caught up with him. J. I. had been riding a little slow, trying to collect his thoughts and wondering how the rest of the night would play out when Matt arrived. The cowboys were telling J. I. how Matt's jaw, cheek and lips were badly swollen and they did not think Matt would show up in that condition. J. I. hoped that was correct and then he felt maybe he could have Miss Hazel all to himself.

The entire yard was lit with luminaries and lanterns making for a festive mood. Tables were lined with food, meats on one, vegetables on another and desserts and breads on another. There was enough food to feed the Army J. I. thought as he came walking into the yard. One of the Hedges hands was at a table collecting guns, laying them on some tables behind where he was standing. No one seemed to be objecting to leaving their guns with him.

J. I. immediately went to looking for Hazel. There were so many people milling about he had to look them all over and did not see her. There were a lot of pretty ladies around and he spotted Miss Jan at about the same time she spotted him. They started toward each other and Miss Jan surprised J. I. by giving him a hug. J. I. turned a deep shade of red as he was not expecting that. She was one of the prettiest ladies there and J. I. felt pretty special to have been hugged by her. She said, "I heard Matt tell Pa that he was leaving you and Tiny at the ranch to guard the herd. How did you manage to get away?"

“Well, it’s kind of a long story, Miss Jan, but to make it a shorter story for now, I ain’t working for the J-Bar-C anymore. Your brother Matt fired me,” a little embarrassed to be the one to tell Jan.

“What? That can’t be. Pa was real proud of the way you were working out. And you are one of Isaac’s and Tiny’s favorite cowhands. Why did he fire you, J. I., why?” Jan was looking very puzzled about it all.

“I’m not real sure, Miss Jan, but it may be about me coming to the dance. Joe Bob offered to take my place guarding the cattle and I let him. When Matt found out about it he told me I had to stay because I was a better gun hand. I told him I had not hired on as a gun hand and since Joe Bob was staying with Tiny, I was going to the dance. He said I was disobeying a direct order and he was firing me. And that ain’t all, I turned to walk off and he grabbed me and swung at me and a blocked that blow and then hit him. It knocked him out cold. So, I got my things from the bunk house and I will go by tomorrow and pick up my wages. I hate it happened, Miss Jan, but I really wanted to come to this dance. That’s pretty much it.” He was a little worried about what Miss Jan would think about him hitting her brother and thinking she may change sides after hearing that part of the story.

“Matt had no business trying to keep you from coming to the dance. I think it was an act of jealousy and I am going to tell Pa to override that order. Pa don’t have to fire you just because Matt said. You let me and Tiny talk to Pa about it all, J. I. Ok?” looking at J. I. for confirmation that he would let that happen before leaving the ranch.

“Ah, Miss Jan, I really appreciate you, Isaac and Tiny. Your Ma and Pa have been very nice to me as well. But if I stayed Miss Jan, it would tear up the relationship

between your entire family. So I think it is best that I just go ahead and leave now. I thank you for feeling that way though.”

Just then J. I. and Jan spotted Hazel as she came down the steps from the porch to the yard. The lighting was a little better on the porch, highlighting Hazel as she came down the steps. J. I. thought she looked like she was an angel and just floated down the steps. His heart skipped a beat and Jan noticed that his mouth dropped open as he stared at this gorgeous girl headed their way. The fight with Matt was forgotten. Losing his job was forgotten. Jan was forgotten. As a matter of fact, all that was in his mind was how beautiful this young girl was and how his heart was beating in his chest, and how she was looking at him and was headed his way.

Just as Hazel came up and hugged Jan and turned to greet J. I., Howard walked up to speak to them and bowed and shook hands with Miss Jan and then with J. I. who returned his greeting, but J. I. was still pretty well engrossed with Miss Hazel.

The music started up and the band was playing The Blue Danube Waltz. Without asking, J.I. claimed Miss Hazel in his arms and took up where he and Miss Jan had left off, right in time with the da,da,da.da....da,.da., as if he had been dancing all his life. Miss Hazel looked just a little startled, but in a good, happy way

Jan stood looking at him amazed; noting the steps were in perfect time with the music, thinking what a wonderful dancer he was and realized that just a short time ago she was herding him around like an old steer. They looked wonderful together and seemingly floated across the yard. She then turned and held her arms out to Howard, who immediately started dancing with her. They were as good together as was Hazel and J. I. Some of the older dancers in attendance that evening noted the two couples and how

wonderful they danced and with both couple moving together, almost in unison, they just backed away from the part of the yard used as the dance floor and watched. The trained dancers were perfectly matched and timed with the music. They were captivated by the way Jan and Howard and J. I. and Hazel were making the same turns and steps, as though choreographed in movements to the music. None there, save a few of the J-Bar-C hands, knew the truth about many, many, evenings of dancing to Jan humming the same song and Jan teaching J. I. when to make the turns and steps. Now, he was remembering well and instead of J. I. being in awe of Hazel, it was Hazel amazed at the arms around her, that she felt so at home in, the giddy feeling she had at the moment. She felt that these were the arms of her future.

Before the music ended, Joe Bob came riding into the yard hard. He did not dismount, firing his gun once in the air to get the music to stop, so he could bring them the news. “Folks, some rustlers came into the ranch tonight and started firing at me and Tiny. We got behind the building close to the corrals and tried to hold them off. They got the cattle running south. Tiny and Matt are following them and Matt wanted me to tell all of you that could to come right away. There appears to be five or six men that started the stampede.”

J. I. said, “Bye, Miss Hazel, I better go,” starting toward the gun table.

Hazel said, “J. I., come back here.” When J. I. reached her, Hazel pulled his head down and kissed him hard on the mouth.

They embraced for a while, long enough for Jan to see what was happening, wondering if J. I. had told her he was going with them. She saw J. I. break away from

Hazel and head toward the gun table. She said, “J. I, where are you going? I thought you were fired?”

“Well, Miss Jan, I may be partially to blame for all this, so I feel like I need to go help out. I wouldn’t feel right not going. I will see you when we can get back to the ranch.”

Chapter Nine

The Rustlers Trail

J. I. was behind the others when they left the Hedges ranch heading back to the J-Bar-C. He could not see them ahead of him, but he could taste the dust from the horse's hooves as he rode up the moonlit road. He knew they were only minutes ahead of him. When he reached the Carter spread most of the riders were already heading off to the south in search of the rustlers. Tiny was still getting his stuff together when J. I. rode up.

"I thought you were fired, J. I.? Why did you come back?" asked Tiny.

"Gosh, Tiny, I just feel bad about it all. I let my feelings get in the way of taking care of business. That ain't the way I was brought up. So, after this is over we can decide what ought to be done with me, but until then, let's go get them rustlers," said J. I. as he waited on Tiny to mount up.

When they started to leave the ranch, Tiny started south, J. I. started west. Both stopped and looked at the other. Tiny spoke first, "Isaac and the boys went this way."

"Why?" asked J. I.

"This is the way the herd went I reckon," reasoned Tiny.

"Tiny, we know these guys are Bar-B-Bar men. They are going to or toward the Bar-B-Bar ranch. Let's go west. I don't know when they will turn west, but they will turn west, then back north at some point. Don't you agree?" asked J. I.

"By golly, I think you are right. What do you think? Shall we ride up toward Black Mountain? That the way you want to go?"

“Let’s start in that general direction. One thing about a herd of cattle, they can’t keep’um quiet. We will stop ever so often to see if we can hear anything. Let’s go get’um, Tiny.” The fresh horses wanted to run. The cowboys let them.

The moon was up until after midnight making the riding very easy. After the moon went down it got very dark, making riding dangerous. Tiny suggested they stop and get a nap rather than taking a chance on a horse breaking a leg in a pot hole or something. The night air was chilled, but neither man wanted a fire to give away their location. J. I. had grabbed a steak before he left the dance to eat later. Now he cut it into, giving half to Tiny. It was enough for them to enjoy and not have that empty stomach feeling. Sleep came quickly for both.

The men did not want to start a fire for breakfast. Tiny had some jerky in his saddle bag. He shared a couple of pieces with J. I. and they washed it down with a few drinks of water. They listened closely for sounds of cattle to reach their ears, but none did, being completely quite on the range this morning..

They continued their journey westward. Late in the day they came across the tracks of many head of cattle. Tiny was pretty sure this was the rustled herd.

“This is them J. I.” said Tiny, “looks like they ain’t too far in front of us either. The wind is blowing northeast and if it wasn’t for that, I believe that we could hear them don’t you?” asked Tiny.

“You are exactly right.... Tiny, from right here, where we are now, can you point in the direction of the Bar-B-Bar ranch house?”

Tiny looked around at the land marks and back at Black Mountain, then at Little Black Mountain which was a little further north, then looks back to the west. Then he points west, moves his finger a little to the south, “Right there. There’s where it should be.” He was pointing just a little north of the Florida Mountains.

“Tiny, I believe that is where they are heading. I think they have some hiding place around the Florida Mountains or maybe some canyon in the mountain range. Looks like the Florida Mountains are a few miles south and west of the ranch house. They would not have them out in this flat land, at least I don’t think they would, so I’m betting they are heading back up into the Florida’s, don’t you?” asked J. I.

“Naw, they would not leave them out in flat land, that’s for sure, not with us right behind them! They know that plenty of people are following them and I don’t think they want a fight. I reckon they would hide them as quickly as they could. The Florida Mountain would be the best bet, I reckon.”

“Ok, let’s ride hard for the south base of the Florida’s. I think that is where they are heading. Maybe we can catch them before they reach any kind of real cover.”

Both men spurred their horses into a gallop hoping to overtake their foes.

Before long, the dust clouds were up ahead of them, a tale-tell sign that the rustlers were just in front of them. J. I. motioned to Tiny to go to the north of the herd and he pointed to himself then to the south. They split, coming at the herd from both sides. J. I. was hoping that the rustlers would just see the dust and not realize there were only two riders approaching them.

One of the rustlers saw J. I. coming up behind them. He got off his horse and took his rifle from its scabbard. J. I. could see him sighting in on him and he quickly moved to the

left as he saw a small boulder, a couple of feet high and three feet or so long. Not a lot of cover, but better than sitting on the horse. The shot hit right in front of J. I., kicking up dust. J. I. only had his six shooter and the rustler was too far away for it to do any good. After a couple of shots at J. I., the rustlers mounted up and headed after the herd, only now several cowboys are riding out toward the shooter and stopped to talk some. Three of the cowboys rode back toward J. I. He pulled his horse back beside him, hoping the boulder would be enough to protect them both. They did not figure on Tiny having a rifle or maybe they did not even see him. Anyway, after the three of them opened fire on J. I., Tiny opened up with his rifle from a boulder up north of them, bullets hitting close enough to kick up dust around them. They immediately mounted up and headed back toward the herd. J. I. was sure they had no idea how many men may be with Tiny.

There was a meeting of all the rustlers after they got back to the herd. About four or five of them dismounted and took cover behind rocks between the herd and them. The others started pushing the herd harder and faster. It looked as if the rustler intended to stop them there.

J. I. mounted up and rode back east a ways, out of range of the rustlers rifles, then he turned back north toward Tiny. He turned back west after going some distance and then came in to take cover beside Tiny. The rock Tiny was behind was plenty big enough for them both and also gave cover to the horses. "What you think we should do, Tiny? We kind of have a Mexican standoff here, don't we?" Tiny was nodding his head in agreement, but said nothing. J. I. continued with the thoughts he was having. "I still am thinking on a couple of things; one, they know better than to go directly to the Bar-B-Bar with the cattle; and two, they have to do something with them. I believe they have a

canyon somewhere in the Florida's to hide this herd. Tiny, let's head off south from here....I don't think they will follow us and as soon as we can safely turn west, we head up into the Florida's, find a high point and see which way they go...we should be able to see the dust of the herd for miles. They may move them at night just because of that and the fact that Matt and Isaac should be pretty close to us by now. What do you think we should do, Tiny?"

Tiny shook his head, thinking for a few minutes, and then said, " My brothers should be coming up behind them any time now and those rustlers know it. They will have to hole up somewhere so they can shoot all of our boys or figure somehow to get away. I'm thinking there might be a dry wash or a canyon running east and west through the mountains, coming out somewhere south of Deming. If they have a good tight canyon up there they might engage our boys in a long term fight while some of them deliver the herd to its final destination."

"I think you are right, Tiny. Let's go to the south portion of the Florida's, take up a good high spot, and wait. Wait and follow them and maybe catch them in the act of selling the herd. There has to be some crooked Indian Agent or unknowing military commander involved. If you are ready, let's get started. Ok?"

"I'm ready."

Chapter Ten

Howard Hedges

When Joe Bob Duncan rode into the ranch house while the dance was going on announcing that the rustlers had hit the herd over at Mr. Carter's ranch, Howard became very upset. Ed Black had promised him he would not stir up any more trouble until things settled down some. He was sorry he had ever gotten mixed up with this whole sordid affair. At the time, he was having a lot of trouble with his dad and now that his dad had been killed by the Apaches. He was regretting his involvement in the cattle rustling business as it was literally making him sick and destroying his thinking process. It really was not for him, but he was in pretty deep now. While he had not done any of the actual rustling, he had helped to make it easy for the rustlers to know the location of the herd and the number of cowboys guarding them. Also, he would give the sheriff and his posse false information as to when and where the rustlers had hit them, and lie about anything that would delay the posse in an effort to give the rustler a little more time to get away. In return, Ed Black supplied him a pretty good salary, something his dad would never do. His dad's thinking was he was giving him all he needed, room and board, and a few dollars from time to time, and that should settle it. Ed Black would see to it that Howard got a small cut of the sale of the rustled cattle, sometimes a pretty good sum of money, something that would also make Howard an accessory to the facts and as guilty as the rest of the rustlers. Mr. Black wanted him to feel as guilty as the rest of the thieves, maybe more so, as he was stealing from his own kin.

The night of the dance, after learning of the latest rustling, he pretended to be getting his stuff together when the Carter hands were riding off with Joe Bob back to their ranch to give chase to the rustlers. He knew where the rustlers would end up with the herd, so he waited until the Carter ranch hands were out of sight heading south, then he mounted up and headed west, straight to the rustlers destination. He was going to get out of this mess with Ed Black once and for all. He was now a ranch owner, along with Hazel, and he did not have any need to be associated with Black and his thieving hands any longer. He never did have a need to be associated with them; but he was blinded by his Dad's lack of emotional involvement with him.

So now he figured to tell Black to keep all the money from the operation up to this point, but to count him out on any further dealings. He may have to consider paying some blackmail money to him. No, that would never work either. But he would need to come up with a good plan, to rid the world of a sorry, no-count thief Black and that to kill him would be a blessing to all of the people in the community. Anyway, he would just have to think all of this through, but telling Black he was getting out of the rustling business had to be the first thing needing to be done.

He was sweet on Jan Carter and she was counting on him being as good a man as everyone thought he was. Certainly, not as a rancher who was involved with rustlers. His involvement would go against every thing she stood for, of that he was sure. Lately, their visits had become a little more romantic and the relationship was something he did not want to mess up by being caught in Black's rustling operation. It had to stop and he might as well get it done now.

On his ride west he was thinking about how his dad would not give him anything and did not trust him with the books or the money. His dad seemed to be grooming his sister Hazel to take over the ranching operations and it seemed he was letting her handle the money. Howard never had any money for anything. On occasions, his Dad would give him a few dollars if he was riding into El Paso, but Howard felt he deserved a lot more than that. It was in El Paso in a saloon that he first met Ed Black, not knowing who he was at the time, and Howard unloaded on him about all the trouble his dad was giving him. Mr. Black let Howard see all the money he had on him and spent the evening buying him drinks and making offers to buy him some time with some of the lovely ladies upstairs. That never happened because Howard was not one to handle liquor very well. He became drunk and spent the night in a room also provided by Mr. Black. He gave him some more money for any wants and needs that he may have in the next few days.

Ed Black was delighted that he had met Howard Hedges. He had a son just a little older than Hazel Hedges and he hoped that one day maybe little Eddie and Hazel would get together. His spread bordered on the western property of the Hedges Ranch. The Hedges eastern property line was the Rio Grande, a wonderful source of water. He had a few springs on his property, but he really needed some of that river front property. Howard may open some doors for him and so a good supply of money to Howard may keep him coming back for more. Since Howard and Mr. Hedges did not have a very good relationship, this could also open other avenues for Mr. Black.

Ed Black had approached Mr. Hedges about buying a strip of land that would give him access to the river. Mr. Hedges laughed at him and offered to buy Black's property so that he would not need any river water. That was not the right answer in Ed Black's

way of thinking and Hedge's cattle became a target for Ed Black shortly after that offer to buy was turned down.

Howard rode far into the night, until the moon dropped out of the western sky, making the journey to dark for safe traveling. Prairie dog holes were too numerous to take a chance on his horse stepping in one. He made a dry camp, ate a couple of pieces of beef jerky and settled down on his saddle blanket using his saddle for a pillow. At daybreak, he took a couple of swigs of water from his canteen and after a couple more strips of jerky he was on his way again. He knew his journey would require two days of hard riding. He needed to beat the herd to the hideout and wait for Black to show up. While Black was certainly not with the rustlers, he would always show up at the hideout in time to handle rebranding or make out fake bills of sale's for the cattle he had stolen. .

So, he was sure that Mr. Black would be at the hideout to prepare to move the cattle on over to Arizona quickly before the posse could catch up to them. He put his horse into a hard gallop, pushing his horse much harder than he liked to push him. But he had a lot of ground to cover before dark.

Chapter Eleven

Edward Black

Edward Black arrived at the hideout early. He built a fire in the line shack's stove and cooked some beans they had there. He also found a couple of potatoes and put them in the oven. He knew he was early, but he wanted to have the fake documents ready for his hands when they showed up. He would then ride on ahead of the herd and make the sale to the Indian Agent over in Arizona. Since the Agent was in on the rustling scheme, Black needed some cash to pay him off. He had the money in his saddle bags and was ready to ride as soon as the documents were all set. He wanted his foreman to have the papers in case someone stopped them on the drive to Arizona.

Things were looking up for Black. He was going to put the pressure on Howard Hedges to sell all or at least half of the Flying H to him. He now had enough evidence on Howard that he would buckle under to his demands or he would take a chance on being hung along with the other rustlers. Cattle thieves paid for stealing to the tune of being attached to the end of a rope hanging from the nearest tree. Many times they did not take the guilty parties to jail. They just hung them on the spot, so he did not think Howard was man enough to take that kind of chance.

He knew Howard was soft and not at all capable of handling being roughed up. His daddy had coddled him all of his life and while Howard thought his dad was rough on him, in reality Black knew differently. He had been given everything he wanted in life. So, now was the time for the Hedges ranch sale to be discussed. And he planned to hand

the next batch of cash to Howard along with the ultimatum to sell out to him and sell cheap. Any offer of selling less than half of the ranch would be totally unacceptable. Little Eddie Black and the beautiful Hazel may one day still get together, but it was no longer something that Ed Black now had to count on. Ed Black had been having some nice thoughts of Helen Hedges lately. She was still quite the looker, he thought, but he remembered the last time he had seen her that she appeared a bit uppity and did not even speak to him. He wanted to make sure the next time he was around her that she took notice of him. She would notice him now, he thought, because now I will have her. He continued to day dream about all he would get from Helen Hedges and only the smell of burning potatoes brought him back to reality.

The nights were beginning to get very cold in the Florida Mountains. The highest peak was only around 9,000 feet, but this time of year as the wind came whistling through the passes and pines at thirty and forty miles per hour, it felt much colder than what the temperature really was. The wind was making the pines talk tonight, thought Black. All he could hear was the winds blowing the trees around and an occasional tree branch falling to the ground.

The cook stove gave off a warm fire making him glad he had come early and he was beginning to nod off, as the warm fire and full stomach was very comforting. He did not hear Tiny and J. I. slip up near the window for a peek inside to see who was staying in the line shack. When they saw it was Black, they turned and slipped back into cover of some heavy brush, seeking protection from the blowing wind. They were going to have another night of a cold camp and share more jerky and hardtack biscuits, washed down with cold water.

The two of them had just gotten fairly comfortable when Tiny noticed another rider had ridden up to the line shack and was going in. He punched J. I. on the shoulder to get his attention.. J. I. immediately moved to where he could get a better view. When the person entered the doorway and the faint light from the line shack outlined him in the doorway, both of them thought that it looked like Howard Hedges. They looked at one another and Tiny asked sharply, “Was that Howard Hedges?”

“Naw, surely not,” replied J. I., “but it sure did look like him.”

Tiny nodded in agreement, and then said, “But that horse even looks like his grey.” The person was leading his mount around to the barn stall to give it shelter and feed. Shortly, he came back to the line shack and went in.

J. I. said to Tiny, “I’ve got to know. I am going into the barn and check out the brand on that grey horse. This wind will cover up any sounds that I or the horses might make. I will be right back.” With those words, J. I. slipped out into the night.

J. I. made a beeline for the shed. No need to fear being heard in this wind. But he did not want to spook the horses, as they may be loud enough to attract attention. He did not have to do anything but crack the door and step inside. Howard’s grey was in the stall nearest the door. The match he struck did not burn very long, but it did not have to as the Flying H Brand was immediately visible from the first glow of the match.

Instead of going back to Tiny, J. I. went up to the shack and peeked in the window. Howard and Mr. Black appeared to be in a heated argument. J. I. thought, “He somehow knew about this hideout and has chased Mr. Black up here and is now calling him down about all his stealing and evil ways.” Just when he finished thinking that, he heard Black say, “You’re just as guilty as I am, Howard and now you are gonna pay up.” Howard’s

hand started for his six shooter. Before his hand had clasp the grip of his gun, Mr. Black's pistol was out of his holster and pointed at Howard. Howard did not finish his draw, but raised his hands slowly upward, indicating surrender.

J. I. pulled his gun from his holster and went to the doorway, knowing Howard needed some help. He held his breath for a moment, trying to remember where Mr. Black was in relation to the doorway. He charged into the room, firing as soon as he was sure Howard was out of the line of fire. His bullet caught Mr. Black high up on the right shoulder. Mr. Black's gun was still drawn and on Howard. He immediately swung his aim toward J. I. His bullet caught J. I. in the side, knocking him down and behind a table. Howard went for his gun as Black was firing at J. I. Howard's bullet caught Black in the left arm, spending Black completely around. Black made a complete turn and then came up firing at Howard. His shot was deadly, catching Howard in the forehead.

J. I. had recovered enough that he fired again, from the prone position lying on the floor, slightly under the table. Black dove head first out the line shack window that J. I. had been peeking through earlier. Black hit the ground rolling and rolled into the feet of Tiny, who was on his way down to get a look inside the window at what was going on. Black knock the feet out from under Tiny, who fell on Black's injured shoulder, causing him to swear and hold his shoulder with his shooting hand.

Tiny was trying to get his gun out of his holster and was having trouble as he was laying on his right side, blocking access to his holster. Black struggled up and ran for the barn. Tiny got off two shots at Black, but the night and his running caused Tiny to miss with both shoots. Tiny ran to the shed and opened the door. As he did, a bullet exploded in the doorway near his head causing splinters to fly all around. Some of the splinters

caught Tiny in the face. Tiny fell and began digging the splinter out as best he could. Black mounted up and came charging through the barn door riding hard, narrowly missing Tiny.

J. I. fired a couple of shots from the window as Black rode past the cabin. J. I. felt he was about ready to pass out from pain, so he slowly slipped to the floor of the warm cabin to wait on Tiny.

J. I. woke up with Tiny standing over him, washing his side with warm water. "Is it bad, Tiny? It sure hurts like all get out," said J. I.

"Naw, I don't think it's too bad, old buddy. It ain't hardly bleeding now. But it's all over for Howard." He finished cleaning the wound of J. I. and then he went to a small mirror and pulled out a couple of more splinters from his face. He then covered Howard with a sheet, pulling him away from the stove a bit. Then he put a tarp over the broken window.

"Wonder why Howard was up here and not out with the rest of the posse? He must have known about this line shack and was up here to confront old man Black," said Tiny.

"Tiny, I heard Black say to Howard, "You just as guilty as I am, Howard and now you gonna pay up." So, I don't really know what was going on, but Howard must have been working with them somehow. But why would he? That just doesn't make any sense, does it?" He looked to Tiny to see if he had any answers and when he did not, he continued, "But as soon as Black said that, Howard went for his gun, but Black had his gun up and pointed before Howard could draw. Howard raised his hands over his head and that is when I decided to come through the door, shooting at Black and hitting him in the shoulder. While he was shooting at me, Howard got off one shot at Black hitting him in

the arm. Then Black shot Howard. I got a couple of more shots off after Black tumbled out the window. Things kind of come and go after that.”

Tiny added, “Well, I can tell you that he did tumble out that window for a fact. He rolled a couple of times hitting me in my ankles taking my feet right out from under me. I hit the ground like a ton of brick. I was trying to draw my gun, but I was lying on the dang thing. While he was running off I snapped a couple of shots at him, but between the dark and him running, I don’t think I was even close. I gave chase but he shot at me, hitting the barn door and it covered my face with splinters. I just now got the last splinters out.” Tiny paused while he was pouring them both some coffee. “What in the world are we gonna tell Ms. Hedges and Hazel? You gonna tell them what you heard?”

J. I. did not answer right away. After a while he sighed and said, “I don’t think I can, Tiny.....I don’t think I can”

Chapter Twelve

Matt Carter

Matt and Isaac Carter caught up with the cattle rustlers and were able to drive all the rustlers off. They had left the cows straggling around, since all the shooting had spread them out. The shooting had become pretty fierce and the rustlers wanted to live to steal another herd, so they abandoned this herd, heading out toward the Florida Mountains. The posse had killed four of the rustlers and the few that were remaining had decided enough was enough.

Isaac and his cowboys rounded up the herd and started them back toward the Carter ranch. Matt wanted to take a few hands and follow the remaining outlaws and try and do them in once and for all. He had divided the men with Isaac and let him and his crew push the cattle toward home, while Matt and the gun hands started chasing the remaining outlaws.

They could tell the rustlers were headed for a canyon that went up into the Florida Mountains. Apparently, the rustlers were unaware that Matt was following them. Either that or they were hoping to set up a trap for them somewhere up in the mountains. Matt had the gunmen continue the chase, telling them to watch out for narrow canyon walls where an ambush would be easily set up. Then he told them he knew where Black had an old line shack. He thought he would ride ahead to it and check it out. Afterwards, he would make his way back to this canyon and meet up with his hands. He wanted to make sure that Black and other hands were not hiding out in the old cabin.

Matt did not make camp on his way up to the line shack. It had become dark and it was windy and very cold. He had already determined if no one was around the line shack that he would put up there for the night. He had pushed hard making it to the cabin and upon arrival he saw a light shining from around a tarp or blanket hung on the window. He sneaked up to the window and when the wind blew a larger crack beneath the tarp, he could see Tiny doing some cooking or warming some water. He immediately headed for the door.

Matt knocked a couple of times and let Tiny know it was him, and then he entered. He looked around at the blood and mess that all the fighting had caused. He saw a body under a blanket and wondered if it was Black. "What's going on, Tiny? Who is this?" pointing toward the body under the blanket. Then he added, "What happened to J. I.? Is he bad hurt?" Matt looked back at Tiny, pausing, waiting for Tiny to answer. J. I. had drifted off to sleep and was not aware of Matt coming in.

Tiny poured Matt a cup of coffee that had just finished brewing. Matt nodded a thank you and looked at Tiny for his answers to his questions.

"Well, let me tell you exactly what has happened since we left the dance the other night." He told the entire story to Matt, in detail, leaving nothing out, including what J. I. said that Black had said to Howard when the drawing of guns started. Matt was shaking his head.

"I don't believe that about Black saying Howard was guilty. J. I. could not hear good or he was making it all up. Howard would never have been in partners with Black. I don't think you believe that either, Tiny. Something about that is not right and sounds fishy as

almighty hell. The way this wind is blowing I am surprised he heard anything. Naw, that ain't right." Matt said shaking his head.

Tiny said, "Well, I don't know Matt, but while Black had his gun on Howard, J. I. charged into the room and then all hell broke loose, J. I. shooting Black, Black shooting J. I., Black getting shot by Howard and then Black shot Howard. Black knocked me down when he came tumbling out the window. I shot at him a couple of times and missed. He shot at me out at the barn doorway and that's where I got the splinters in my face. I did not witness any of the shooting before that, so that's all I can tell you. J. I. will have to give you a first hand account of the happenings." Tiny told that all very fast and did not take over a couple of breaths while telling the story.

"How do you two find this place? Did you know about it, Tiny?"

"Naw, J. I. thought the rustler's would be heading up this way, so he suggested we come west after the dance when you and the boys were heading south. He said if they were Black's men, west is the way we should go.....And he was right, Matt."

"J. I. ain't that smart. Something else may be involved here. I think we better tie Mr. J. I. up so he does not shoot us or try to get away. I think there is something very funny going on here, You said Howard was the one who shot Black, Tiny? You remember this rustling activity really picked up after J. I.'s arrival at our ranch. We better play this safe. I think we got a crook here."

Tiny could not believe what he was hearing. There was no way his buddy J. I. could be involved with Black, Matt had it figured all wrong. While he was thinking about it, Matt had taken a rope off a peg and was tying J. I. hands.

J. I. woke up and said, “What’s going on? Why are you tying me up, Matt? Tiny, what is going on here?”

“You just hold still there, Mister Hall. We are on to you and your connection with Black. We should have checked you out a little more. The only thing we know about you is that them two cook’s over in El Paso bragged on you some. Well, we gonna keep you tied up until we get to the bottom of this. I am not so sure which one of you shot Howard. Tiny seems to think it was Black, but I don’t know so much about that being right.”

“Matt, why would I shoot Howard? I was trying to help Howard and shot Black myself. Howard got one shot into Black arm and then Black shot Howard. I did not have anything to do with that except trying to help Howard out,” explained J. I.

“So you say, Mister Hall, so you say. But, we gonna keep you tied up just in case,” said Matt very sharply. “Keep your gun on him, Tiny,” said Matt.

“I ain’t gonna do no such thing, Matt. He is my buddy and I ain’t gonna.” Tiny had a fixed stare on his brother.

“By God, you better. I gonna tell Pa about the way you been acting lately. You are such a simpleton; I hope he leaves you out of his will, leaving the ranch to me and Isaac. You better straighten out or I am gonna mention that to Pa, so you better mind your manners around me, big brother!” Tiny’s jaw dropped open at the words spewing from his brother’s mouth. His brother had put him down for years, but lately he had been getting worse. He had never called him a simpleton before. He had called him a “big tub of lard” several times, but that was about his body, not his mind.

Tiny hardly slept any. He tried to sleep, but he rolled and tossed all night long. He was hurt by the ugly comments Matt had made and the reference to him being a simpleton. He

knew he wasn't the smartest man on the planet, but he did alright, he thought. Isaac always took up for him and Matt always was the one to say ugly things to him. He was up making coffee well before daylight and was cooking what vittles he could find in the cabin, mainly warming up the hard tack, bacon, and beans that Mr. Black had made the night before.

Matt said, "Tiny, I have to ride over to that east-west canyon. Our gun hands chased them rustlers up that way. I am going to meet them up there and finish up that battle. You load Howard across his horse and take him to our ranch house. And you take J. I., and keep him tied up, you hear me.....You.. keep.. him.. tied.. up.." really emphasizing the keep him tied up, "and don't let him get away. He has got to answer a bunch of questions so we can get to the bottom of Howard's death. If he is innocent, he does not have one thing to worry about. It is your job to get him to the ranch so we can get the answers. Don't you turn him loose for nothing....You hear me, Tiny?"

"Yassir, Massa Carter suh, I'se hears you, suh." Tiny looked over at J. I. and J. I. could see a twinkle in his eyes that he had never seen before.

"I'll take that as a yes, Tiny, but you screw this up and Pa will scold you severely." Matt saddled up and rode down the canyon toward his crew, not looking back.

Tiny did not say any more, but started picking up his bed roll and getting his stuff together, ignoring Matt before he left. He had put both horses in the barn last night after things had settled down some and went over to retrieve them..

After tying Howard across the saddle, he helped J. I. into his saddle. J. I. was giving in to his hurt side pretty badly and did plenty of grunting and moaning while Tiny was

loading him in the saddle. “Tiny, it would help me a lot if you would untie these ropes. Can you do that?” asked J. I.

“Yeah, I can J. I. and I will, but we are gonna put a few miles between us and Matt before we do. Matt has some field glasses and I imagine he is watching us for as long as he can see us. So you just bear with me while I try to pacify my dear brother. Ok?”

The trip to the Carter ranch house seemed like forever to J. I. His side was hurting very badly. Tiny had untied the ropes like he said that he would and that did help for a while. The only thing J. I. could think about was his hurting side and a good soft bed. Tiny had poured a shot of whiskey over the wound a while back to fight infection and gave him two big swigs for pain. After the initial burning, the pain did ease up some. Tiny decided that the best thing to do was to keep riding and not taking any breaks except those that necessity required them of them and then for only the briefest of time.

J. I. finally gave into the overpowering need to sleep and found himself nodding in the saddle and almost falling out of the saddle a time or two. Later, he did not notice Tiny lifting him down from the saddle and taking him into the bed of the bunk house. All of the ranch hands gathered round as Tiny told all of them the entire story, his story, his way and with J. I. as the good guy in the shoot out. Jan was working on J. I.'s side the entire time he was telling the story. Some of the cowboys helped to get his boots and gun belt off him. Through all of this J. I. never stirred.

Tiny did not tell them anything about Matt's thoughts on the shoot out and his wanting to blame J. I. for Howard's death. Tiny knew that all Matt had in mind was to make Hazel hate J. I. for some reason, any reason, and just putting a doubt in her mind about J. I. would work to his advantage, he was sure of that. He felt Matt would try to put enough

of the pieces together that would even incriminate J. I. in the rustling. What Matt did not know to be truth, he could add a whole lot of speculation and circumstantial evidence that would paint a very bad picture about J. I. Hall. Tiny was sure that Matt wanted to end up with Hazel Hedges as his wife. Tiny felt it was going to be his responsibility to make sure Matt's story was never believed, if that was possible.

Chapter Thirteen

Matt and Hazel

Matt told his family he is going to take Howard's body over to the Hedges. He had his ranch hands build a coffin for him and they loaded him in the buck board. He took one hand along with him to bring the buckboard home. Matt's idea was to tell his story early, while the hurt was new to the Hedges and to inflect doubt on J. I.'s character from the very first. That way it would be easier for them to jump to conclusion quickly and wrongly, from the initial telling of the story. Then, when Tiny and J. I. started telling their stories, they may sound false, vague, and incomplete in details to them. Matt was thinking, "You have messed with the wrong person this time, Mister J. I.. Hazel is going to be mine, you'll see."

Feeling that he had this all worked out, Matt started whistling and the hand driving the buckboard with Howard's body looked at him strangely. When Matt noticed him looking he stopped whistling. Then, his mind started on his story of finding Howard in the line shack and how best to implicate J. I. with Howard's' death.

The buckboard pulled into the Hedges ranch house. The decorations were still up from the dance a few nights ago. Most of the hands had been out with Matt chasing rustlers so there was no help to take them down. Mrs. Hedges came outside with her hand up shading her eye's, trying to figure out who Matt had in the coffin on the buckboard. Matt stepped off his horse, removed his hat and sadly walked toward Mrs. Hedges. She understood immediately and started screaming, "NO, NO" and sunk to her knees and fainted. Hazel came running out from the ranch house to see what was happening and she

sized it up without Matt saying a word. She ran to her mom. Matt already had her in his arms. Hazel said, "Let's get her inside to her bedroom." By then, many of the ranch hands and house workers were there. One of the ranch hands helped Matt carry her inside. The maids of the household took over from there and shooed the men folk out of the bedroom. Hazel stayed with her mom and did not come out to visit with Matt. He found the coffee on the stove and still hot. Pouring him a cup, he sat down at the kitchen table to wait on Hazel so he could tell her the story he had put together. He would need to follow the truth as far as he possibly could, but he would insert as much doubt about Mr. J. I. as possible.

Matt had several cups of coffee while waiting on Hazel and Mrs. Hedges. Maria came out and made another pot of coffee for him. She offered him some pie or cake while he was waiting. He figured he better turn that down and keep his mind on the business at hand.

After waiting for a long time Hazel came out. Matt stood and held out his arms to her. She stepped inside the circle of his arms and Matt held her without speaking for a long time. Finally she said, "Please tell me what happened to Howard."

"Why don't you get some coffee, it is a pretty long story," said Matt, "but, tell me, how is your Ma. Is she gonna be ok?"

"Yes, she will be fine. She is a strong lady, but Howard has always been her baby. So she is taking his death pretty hard, but she will be fine," she said as she poured her a cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table opposite Matt.

After warming up his coffee again, Matt returned to the table to begin his story. He started from the beginning, about all the hands following the herd and rustlers trying to

catch them, headed south right behind them and how all the hands were caught up in the chase, so he did not think about who was or was not with them. But for some reason, unknown to him or anyone else, J. I. convinced Tiny that they should ride due west because he seemed to know where they were taking the herd.

Hazel spoke up, "How could J. I. know that? He is just about your newest hand, is he not? Has he worked over west of here as far as you know?"

Matt felt a real sense of victory with those questions. "Well, that's what all of us wondered about. I don't know anything about his background except that a couple of cooks down in El Paso vouched for him to Tiny and Pa hire him. But, Pa would hire anybody that Tiny liked, just to please him. Tiny is a hard worker, but as you know, he is a little shy on brains. So Pa would accommodate him on a lot of things. Anyway, no we don't know about his background. Tiny said that J. I. said he knew they would be headed out toward Ed Black's place, but I don't think even Tiny knew how he found the line shack so quickly."

Matt went on and on, telling the rest of the story pretty close to the way it happened except when he neared the end he explained that, "For some reason, J. I. did not take Tiny up to the line shack where Ed Black and Howard were."

Matt continued, "I figured that Howard had at some point in time been somewhere around that old line shack and took a chance on finding Black or some of his hands up there and that he was going to stop them once and for all. But Howard did not count on J. I. being up there also, so when J. I. came into the line shack, well, I really don't know what happened about who shot whom. Black got shot and run off, J. I. got shot and is over at our place recovering and of course, Howard got the worst of it all. Howard could

have shot them both. I don't know. Tiny did get shot at by Black, but his shot went wild hitting a doorway and blasting splinters all in Tiny's face. I got J. I. tied up and under house arrest until we can get the sheriff over to sort through everything and prove J. I. innocent or guilty. I personally feel like he has ties with Black and maybe something went wrong in the payoff...or something like that...well, what I mean is, something just ain't right, Hazel. We got to watch that boy because he comes across as pretty good cowboy, but I believe he is rotten to the core. He just had us all fooled" Matt explained all that and he felt like he had put Mr. J. I. in a pretty bad light in Ms. Hazel's eyes.

Hazel just sat there for a time, holding her hands around the coffee cup, but not drinking. She said nothing for a long time. Finally she said, "Wow, that's hard to believe about J. I., but you are right. He needs to be investigated and either proven innocent or charged with a crime. Have you talked to the Sheriff yet, Matt?" she asked.

"No, I will go over to Mesilla today and get the Sheriff to come on out to our place. He will need to wait a couple of days as J. I. is still in pretty bad shape. Jan is spending a lot of time doctoring him. She has not been told all that I told you about how I found them. Tiny may have told her some stuff, I'm just not sure. Anyway, don't you worry any about your ranch or taking care of business. I will be happy to help you and with Isaac available to run our spread, I can take on your spread easy enough. Anyway, I think I love you and I would like to marry you. I know you have a lot to think about right now, but I wanted to tell you that before you grew desperate about your situation here. You just don't need to be worrying about anything, ok?" Matt now felt as if everything was settled and would be alright, at least in his mind, everything was alright. He did not notice the startled look on Hazels face after his quick confession of love.

He stood to leave. Hazel stood also, still in shock. Matt went around the table and took Hazel in his arms and held her for a long time, moving his hands up and down her back, loving the feel of her skin through her blouse.

“She's mine” he thought, “She's mine.”

Chapter Fourteen

Matt's Revenge.

When Matt returned from visiting with the Hedges and going on over to Mesilla to see the sheriff, he did not tell Tiny anything about what he had done while he was gone. Matt did not want Tiny to know he had told the sheriff the same story he had told Hazel. Matter of fact, he did not want Tiny to know he had told Hazel anything. Matt did not want Tiny preparing for his lies in advance. But Matt did tell his Pa the very same story, including how he felt about Tiny liking J. I. and not really knowing anything at all about him. Matt went through the entire spiel he had given Hazel Hedges with his Pa. Tiny just happened to have stepped into the hallway and could hear all that Matt had to say. Rather than confront Matt now, Tiny decided to think it over for a while before telling his Pa his story about the shoot out.. He wanted his Pa one on one and not have to fight Matt's argument while he was telling his story. Otherwise, he might get confused and mess it up and Tiny sure did not want to do that.

J. I. was feeling better every day now. He was getting up and around and was walking over to the ranch house to take his meals. Matt always had something to do while J. I. was around since he did not want any confrontations with him at the present time. Since J. I. ate with the ranch hands and not the house staff he did not see anyone to be questioned about the shoot out.

Tiny felt with J. I. getting better he should talk with his dad about J. I. and see if he was still employed by the ranch. It bothered Tiny the way Matt had told the story of the shootout. He thought as soon as J. I. was ready, the two of them would talk to Mr. Carter about the shooting and square things around once and for all.

Tiny approached J. I. a few days later and let him know Matt had told a fictitious account of what happened at the line shack the night Howard was killed and wondered if he was ready to tell the real story to Mr. Carter. J. I. agreed that the real story must be told right away.

The next day Matt told Tiny he had to ride over to the Hedges Ranch on some business. Tiny immediately got J. I. and together they went to see Mr. Carter.

Mr. Carter invited them into his office and had both sit in the easy chairs in front of his desk. Tiny said, "Pa we ain't talked to you since the shooting up in the old line shack and we figured we better let you know just what happened so you won't be wondering about it or have folks tell you false tales."

Jacob Carter started filling his pipe with tobacco while thinking this may take a while. He completed the filling and lighting his pipe before he motioned for them to continue with their story. Tiny continued, "Pa, J. I. and I decided to ride west the night of the rustling since we knew that Black was involved and we figured they would end up somewhere around the B Bar B."

Mr. Carter spoke up, "Tiny, did you decide to do that or did J. I.? Which one of you guys thought that up?"

Tiny continued, "Well, J. I. started riding west as soon as we left the ranch and I started out riding south. That is when J. I. mentioned if the B Bar B was to the west, then that's the way we should be headed. After thinking about it for a second or two, I decided he was right. So we headed out that way and sure enough we ran into them and had a brief encounter with them. J. I. suggested that they would probably hole up in the Florida Mountains because if they went any other way that big of a herd would most certainly be

spotted out on that flat land around the mountains.. We were looking for a canyon where they could drive the herd through the Florida's and on west to south of Deming.”

Tiny took a deep breath and continued, “Well, that's what we did and we happened upon that old line shack. We have learned since that it did belong to the B Bar B and old man Black was up there that night, but at the time, we did not know anything about the line shack. There was smoke coming out the chimney and a light was shining through the window. The wind was blowing hard and we sneaked up and peeked in the window. Sure enough, it was old man Black. We went back into the bushes to have a bite to eat and wait to see if any of the rustlers showed up. Well, we hadn't been waiting to long when a fellow rode up and J. I. and me both thought it looked like Howard Hedges from a distance, but we could not say for dead certain. J. I. says to me, “you stay here and I will go take a look.” He went into the shed and saw that it was Howard's horse for sure. Then he went on over to the window to take a look see. I'm gonna let him tell the story from this point Pa, because I did not go with him just then.”

Mr. Carter spoke again, “Tell me, did neither one of you boys know that old line shack was up in those mountains?”

“No Pa, I had never been around that place, ever.” replied Tiny.

“No Sir, I did not know about it either. We just happened on the place while looking for a good passage through the mountains running east to west. This old line shack is set back in the hills, up a canyon running north of the east – west canyon. It sure had some good grazing land up the north canyon, it was wide and there were several springs up though there. So it was a pretty good set up to be bring in herds of cattle. We just continued looking north until we came up on the line shack. But back to Howard's

arrival, like Tiny said, I checked out the gray that the fellow took to the shed and it certainly looked like Howard's, but I was having troubling figuring out why he would be up there. I thought he was with the other hands chasing the rustlers. Why would he be up here unless he was thinking just like Tiny and I was? I struck a match and saw the Flying H brand immediately, so it had to be him. Then, with the wind blowing like it was, I figured I could get a look in the window and them not hear me or see me. Looking in, I saw it was Howard and about the time I looked, Mr. Black said, "Howard, you just as guilty as I am and now it is time for you to pay up." When Mr. Black said that, Howard went for his gun. Mr. Black had his gun out and ready to fire before Howard's even cleared leather, so Howard dropped his gun back into his holster and raised his hands up high. I figured Howard had somehow gotten something on Mr. Black and things were coming to a head. I hurried around to the door, trying to remember how both of them were standing in relation to the doorway. I stepped inside with my gun drawn and shot Mr. Black in the shoulder, he shot back at me hitting me in the side, Howard went for his gun and shot Mr. Black, hitting him in the arm and then Mr. Black got a shot off at Howard hitting him right in the forehead. I fell under the table, but I got another shot off at Black. I missed him as he dove through the window."

"So, you don't have any idea what Black was talking about when he said, "Howard, you just as guilty as I am?" Nothing further was said about that, huh?" asked Mr. Carter.

"No sir, I went in shooting and no further words were spoken. Things happened real fast during that time. When Black went through the window and hit Tiny, I heard a couple of shots after that, then I started blacking out. Tiny came in to help me and a short time later, Matt showed up. That's about it, Mr. Carter. That's what happened and I don't

have any idea why Howard Hedges would be up there meeting or seeing Mr. Black. I can say that when I first looked in the window, Mr. Black seemed pretty relaxed while Howard seemed mighty upset. That's all I can tell you, Mr. Carter.” J. I. shook his head looking perplexed.

Mr. Carter said, “J. I., I have not spent a lot of time with you and have never talked about your background or where you spent your childhood. You know when I first saw you and the way you were wearing your gun, I mistook you for a gunfighter. How did you learn to use a gun as good as you do? And where did you grow up?”

J. I. was a little surprised by this line of questioning, but he answered. “Well, sir, it's kind of a long story, but my Ma and Pa were killed out in West Texas, somewhere north and east of Milepost 296 on the Texas and Pacific Railroad Line. I had to bury them up there by myself. I walked into that boxcar town at milepost 296 and met a fellow by the name of Pete Brown, a boss of the rail laying crew and also met the cook of the box car town, Nellie Fay. They fed me, took me in and kind of adopted me. The line terminated at Sierra Blanca and Pete and Nellie bought a ranch up northwest of Sierra Blanca. They raised me on that ranch and Pete Brown was the one who taught me how to shoot in self defense. I had never shot anyone until I came to work for you, Mr. Carter. When I decided to leave the ranch, I came to El Paso and saw Sadie and Anne who used to work on the Texas and Pacific Railroad same as me. They worked for Nellie Fay and we all lived in a box car when I started out helping them. Pete and Nellie Fay are like my Ma and Pa today. They are all the family I have now. They own the Rocking B ranch a ways north of Sierra Blanca. I hope they are still doing well, but I have not heard from them since I been down here working for you. That's about it, Mr. Carter.”

“Had you ever heard of Mr. Black before you started working for me, J. I.?”, asked Mr. Carter.

“No sir never heard of him or any of you ranchers in this area before, Mr. Carter. I got off a train from Sierra Blanca and worked for Sadie and Annie one day before I met Tiny in El Paso. No sir, I never heard of any of you fellows,” said J. I.

“In chasing after the rustlers, why did you decide to start out west when everyone else was going south, J. I. What prompted that?” asked Mr. Carter.

“Well, Mr. Carter, ever since I been here you all been saying that it was Mr. Black that was doing the rustling. Some of you were more serious about it than others, but it just made sense to me, if it was Mr. Black, to go where the cattle would eventually end up. And that is what I did.” And J. I. said, did, like he was putting a period at the end of a sentence.

Mr. Carter fiddled around with his pipe, stuffing in some more tobacco and then relighting it and taking several quick puffs, getting it fired up good again. “Well, J. I., I tend to believe you, but there are going to be some who will wonder about why you and Howard were up at that line shack and none of the rest of us knew anything about it. It leaves a lot of unanswered questions about the whole affair. As far as Mr. Black saying that Howard was just as guilty as he was don't make any sense either. Why would Howard be having anything to do with Black? Howard and his family have one of the best ranches in this area. They probably have better farm land than we do, good land, river bottom land that will grow anything and has the water needed to keep it going all year. It just don't make any sense for him to be mixed up with Black, in anything. We will have to have an inquiry into this whole affair, J. I., so you might as well get ready for

that. You guys pardon me while I get some office work done. We will talk some more on this later.”

Tiny and J. I. walked back toward the bunk house in silence. After a bit, J. I. spoke up. “I going over to Deming and bring Mr. Black in to the sheriff.”

Tiny stopped in his tracks, “You gonna what? You crazy? You can't go bring in Ed Black. He has got every no-account gunslinger in this part of the world working for him. They will gun you down before you can get on the ranch property. That is plum crazy kind of talking, J. I.”

“But I got to do it, Tiny. I got to do it. Ain't no other way I can see to make it right.”

“You gonna get yourself killed, that's what you gonna do. Why don't we ride up and see what Hazel Hedges thinks about all this. She probably has some idea as to what could have happened and may even know something, especially if Howard and Black had some deal going on. You want to go see her, J.I.?”

“No, I don't think she is feeling all that kindly toward me right now. You know Matt has been over there bending her ear about all he saw. You heard him up at the line shack. I feel like he has already turned Hazel against me.” Tiny could see that J. I. was feeling pretty bad at the moment. Both of them set on the rockers placed along the porch of the bunk house. Rocking seemed to help with the serious thinking they were doing.

“Tiny, are there some supplies I can get my hands on? I will pay for them. You know,hardtack, bacon, beans, a little coffee and maybe a few potatoes and the like.” He looked at Tiny waiting on an answer.

“Shoot, J. I. ain't no need to pay for them. We keep those kind of supplies in good quantities year round. Let's go get some. How many days do you think we will need?”

“Naw, Tiny, ain't gonna be no we. This is just for me to take care off. It's my battle and I will handle it. Thanks anyway. But I will need about a week or two of supplies. I might kill a deer or antelope while I am out.”

“J. I., I ain't gonna let you go by yourself. You can just forget that. I am going. Let's get some extra blankets and our heaviest coats. Nights get pretty dad blamed cold up in the Florida's this time of year. Let's stock up good on the food, 'cause nights are long and a body needs a bunch of fuel, know what I'm talking 'bout, J. I.?” said a grinning Tiny.

“Ok, Tiny, let's pay a visit to Mr. Black.”

Chapter Fifteen

J. I. and Tiny's Quest

“You ever been over to Black's spread before, Tiny”, asked J. I.

“Naw, I surely ain't, but I came within seeing distance one time. Pa and us boys were out looking for some strays a long time ago. We were just kids. Anyway, we were riding up toward the ranch house and out came a bunch of cowboys riding out to stop us from getting all the way up to the place. It seemed like they like their privacy and did not want any visitors, even way back then. But I am not sure the place would even be the same as that has been so long ago. But I can get us up pretty close to it, if that's what your asking,” said Tiny.

“Well, a couple of things are going through my mind. About how long is it going to take us to get there and is there much cover within shooting distance of the house. And I am kind of wondering what would be the best time to arrive there? I'm thinking about dinner time. Sun will be high overhead and not in our eyes, the ranch hands will be busy eating or napping if there ain't a whole lot of work to be done. Since we got the herd back, I'm not sure they have anything to do, except think about where they gonna get the next herd to rustle. So, I think we should show up at dinner time. You agree with that, Tiny?”

“Shoot, I hadn't given a minute thought to when we should show up. But what you are saying makes sense to me. If there is some ground cover around the ranch house, I will stay back and let you call them out from up closer. I can handle a rifle pretty good, but I

ain't worth a hoot with a six gun. So, I need to be where I can prop myself up on something to take good aim." said Tiny.

"That's good, Tiny. You put your sights on Mr. Black's chest, right in the center of his heart. I will tell all the hands you are sighted in on Mr. Black and one wrong move out of any of them and Mr. Black gets it in the chest. I think that will keep them calm. But you have to shoot if something happens, otherwise I will be a dead duck. You think you can shoot him if need be, Tiny."

"Of course I can. He done caused enough problems and it is time for it to come to an end. Yeah, I can and will shoot him if I have too. I hope he will come with us peaceable like though. I really hope there ain't no shooting." Tiny settled back in the saddle and let Babe trot her easy trot as he was wondering how long it would take them to get to Black's ranch.

After a couple of days riding, the pair came into sight of the B Bar B ranch house. All was quiet. It was early afternoon, too late for dinner and too early for supper. "When you want to go in to see them, J. I.?" asked Tiny.

J. I. motioned toward a clump of mesquites twenty or thirty yards from the house. "Let's get up close to those bushes and you cover me from there. I will let Mr. Black know that your rifle is on him and if any shooting starts, you will shoot him first. I am going to ask Mr. Black to come with us and he will probably refuse. It will probably come to a fight. So, if you are ready, I'll head on in."

"I'm as ready as I can get, J. I., so you be careful as you can." said Tiny.

J. I. rode up to within shouting distance of the house, but stayed on his horse. He made sure his gun was easy to get to and free in the holster. He noted when he left Tiny

that his Henry Repeating rifle was pointed at the door of the big house. Everything was still very quiet, J. I. figured it must be siesta time around the Black ranch. He rode within 100 feet of the house. "Hello, the house, anybody around? Hello, Mr. Black, are you home today?" shouted J. I.

Soon, a couple of cowhands came out of the bunk house, standing on the porch looking at J. I., but not making any moves toward him. He did not recognize these two guys. Just after they appeared, a younger man came out of the ranch house, strapping on his gun, and acting like he did not appreciate the intrusion on his nap today. Just behind him came Mr. Black, who pushed back his hat, looked at him for a time, then said, "What the hell you doing on my spread. I owe you a bullet or two so you better talk fast. Son, go get the hands out of the bunk house. We may have some shooting to do."

J. I. spoke up, "No, son," emphasizing the son and mocking Mr. Black in the way he said "son", "you just stay where you are. If there is any shooting to be done, my partner who is out yonder in those mesquites has his Henry Repeater pointed right at your chest, Mr. Black. He has instruction to shoot you right through the heart if any body starts shooting. I hope you fully understand, Mr. Black, if you or your hands shoot at me, you're a dead man." J. I. waited to let that statement sink in for a while before resuming.

"Mr. Black, your killing Howard Hedges has stirred up a hornets nest. There is all kind of speculation going round as to what happened to him and why was he up at that line shack the night of his death. So the only way I can see to clear all this up is for you to come in with us and you give a full statement to the sheriff. You have your boy there go saddle your horse and bring it around for you. In the meantime, you and your son drop

your guns right there on the porch. You better tell your men not to do any shooting 'cause my partner has a quick trigger finger. Go on, you tell them now." said J. I. quite sternly.

"Men, lay down you guns on the porch. There is a fellow out in those mesquites with a rifle trained on me. So, if you shoot at anybody, he shoots me. Lay them down quickly, ok?" shouted Mr. Black. Returning his attention to J. I. "I hope you know my men will not let you get away with this. They will have you shot before you can get me twenty miles from this ranch. You are in a heap of trouble, Mister, and I don't think this is really the way you want to handle this situation. I can come in own my own and visit with the sheriff about what happen to Howard, how you came into my line shack shooting and not saying anything to anyone. Howard happened to get in the way of a stray bullet. He was up there trying to sell me his ranch when you come barging in. You let me come in on my own and I will tell the story another way that don't look so bad for you. What you think?" looking at J. I. for a reply. When J. I. did not respond, Mr. Black spoke up again, "What is your name, fellow and which ranch do you work for."

J. I. was thinking about whither he wanted to tell him or not. Finally, he decided to tell him his name. "My name is J. I. Hall. I worked for Mr. Carter until Matt Carter fired me a few days ago. I was a brand new hand down there and they think that I may have had some ties to you since I wound up at the line shack when the shooting between you and Mr. Hedges was going on, when "Mr. Hedges was trying to sell you his spread". That pretty good, you steal Hedges and Carter cattle, then you use that money to try and buy the ranches you are stealing from...that is to hear you tell it. But, really sir, you are just a sorry ass thief, a cattle rustler pure and simple. That is all you are. I think the sheriff will get the real story out of you pretty quick."

Mr. Black was steaming mad. If he thought he could have gotten to a gun he would have killed this fellow right away. He did not like being talked to that way. While Mr. Black was looking around for the nearest weapon, Mr. Black's boy came around from the barn with a saddled horse. He stopped a few feet from the porch and tried to get the horse between Mr. Black and a line from the mesquites trees. J. I. saw quickly what he was trying to do. "You stop right there, "son" or I will shoot you and your old man will still get shot. You hear me?" Again, J. I. used the "son" in the same manner expressed earlier by Mr. Black. "Son" was frowning pretty sourly by now.

The boy heard him alright and stopped right in his tracks several feet away from where he aspired to be. "Mount up, Mr. Black. We will be going now and my partner will keep his sights on Mr. Black for a while. I would advise you to not follow us, but if you do and shooting starts up, we shoot Mr. Black. You understand?" Mr. Black's boy gave him a slight nod of the head and that was all." Mr. Black said, "One day, boy, I'm gonna kill you for this. You hear me.....I'm gonna kill you for this."

J. I. turned his back on the B Bar B hands, saying, "Let's ride, Mr. Black" and rode off with Mr. Black toward the mesquite trees. When they were behind the trees, Tiny lowered his rifle and mounted up.

Neither of the hands said any thing. Mr. Black was trying to figure out if he dared try to get away now. He looked over at J. I. while Tiny was mounting up and J. I. had his six gun trained on him, so escaping was presently not the thing to do was what Mr. Black was thinking.

The three rode hard until about dusky dark. Tiny was ready to stop and rest and fix a bite of chow. Mr. Black had said very little out loud all day long, but he had been

muttering under his breath a lot. He was thinking of the best way out of this for himself and how he could leave this amateur gunhand dead. He really had not figured on his end as a rancher coming to an end in this manner. He was sure that his crew would come after them. His crew had three sharp shooters with rifles and he felt if they could get within a ¼ mile of them, they could pick off J. I. and Tiny. He kept his eyes open for a likely ambush spot. He was thinking if they stopped for the night and built a fire his men would continue to ride and scout out a place for an ambush. He wanted to be ready to ride once that happened..

Chapter Sixteen

Mesa Battle

Tiny built a fire to cook a couple of steaks he had packed in salt, and served them with some beans and hardtack. It was pretty good eating for camp food. As soon as things were put up they prepared to bed down. Three pieces of meat were put up for tomorrow mornings breakfast. J. I. and Tiny wanted to hit the road early to try and make La Mesilla before dark tomorrow night.

The sun rays were just topping the horizon when the three men hit the saddle the next morning. Extreme care had to be taken watching for holes and ditches for about thirty minutes until they could clearly see their way.

Mr. Black knew that sometime this morning his crew would be out in front of them and attack in full force. He wanted to be ready to ride. At full daylight he could see four or five small sand dunes ahead of them. Mesquite bushes surrounded the dunes and it was a perfect place for horses and men to be hiding. He noted that J. I. was looking them over also. The country had been very flat with no obstructions up to this point and it seemed the sand dunes were making J. I. a little nervous. J. I. had chosen a path taking them away from the small hills.

Before they had traveled a quarter of a mile, the shooting started catching J. I. and Tiny by surprise. Immediately Mr. Black spurred his horse, bumped J. I.'s horse and grabbed the rifle from J. I.'s saddle and laid low on the saddle riding off., The sharp shooters were good enough they had J. I. and Tiny diving for cover. Mr. Black had gotten out of six shooter range already and Tiny's mount had run off a few feet so Tiny did not

have his rifle available. Tiny commenced scooting and crawling over to Babe and finally got his rifle. While he was crawling, J. I. got off a few shots with his pistol, but with the distance between them the bullets were falling short of the intended target. Tiny opened fire with his rifle and the shooting slowed down from behind the sand dunes.

“Tiny, I have got to follow Mr. Black before he gets to far away. I need you to go back and let Mr. Carter know what we have done. I will follow Black as long as I need to as it is my intention to either bring him in or kill him. I really need to bring him in to clear my name. You tell Mr. Carter and Mrs. Hedges exact what has happened. I never saw Mr. Black before our encounter at the line shack. You tell them all that. OK?”

“J. I., I need to go with you. You gonna need some help rounding up Black.”

“Tiny, I got to go before the tracks get cold. As soon as the sharp shooters leave, you head on out for home. You got to do this for me, Tiny, please?”

“Well, I don't like it none, J. I., but I reckon I will, seeing how it may help clear your name. You take care now, you hear me. I'll keep shooting for a while to give you a little more time to get away. I'll see you, J. I.” Then Tiny rose up and started firing some steady shots into the sand dunes to keep the heads of the rustlers down.

J. I. stayed low in the saddle until he felt he was out of the range of the sharp shooters rifles. He could still hear Tiny shooting. but he had slowed down some. He did not hear any return fire from the sharp shooters rifles so he figured they had up and left, trying to pick up Mr. Black's trail.

Mr. Black had headed north when he had escaped them. J.I. knew that if he was going back to his ranch he would have to turn back west then south to go home. However, he did not want to try and second guess Black as he may not do that. Rather than lose him he

decided that the best way was to stay on his tracks. This ground was dry and barren, with only a few clumps of grass and mesquite trees. Tracking a shod horse was easy, so J. I. decided staying on his trail was the best thing to do. Pete Brown had taught J. I. how to track back on the Rocking B Ranch. J. I. loved to do it, worked hard at it and he always felt he was pretty good at staying on a trail. Now he was capitalizing on his hard work.

He had followed Mr. Black for about two hours when out toward the northwest he spotted a rider heading west. He was sure it was Black by the way he sat the saddle. J. I. knew he could cut some time by taking a straight line of travel toward the rider. He had only traveled a short distance when he noted the rider had picked up speed, indicating that he had seen J. I. coming up behind him. He was a mile or more in front of J. I. and with darkness coming soon, J. I. wanted to get back on his trail as anything could happen after dark.

With J. I. closing the distance on Black, he turned north, toward the Goodnight Mountain Range. Black had ridden all around and through the Goodnight Range during his years as a cattle rustler and he knew them well. That range was nestled up close to the Cook Range, a much higher and rougher terrain than the Goodnights. Black figured if he could not lose J. I. in the Goodnights, or he could at least set up an ambush for him. Out in the flat land east of Deming, there was very little chance to ditch a fellow. And, worst case, he could lead J. I. on up into the Cook Range. Black kept looking back, trying to see if he was losing the young follower, but he was still there.

J. I. topped a small rise and looked behind him. Off in the distance he could see the dust of several riders coming up behind him. They were still a long way off, but J. I.

knew he was far out numbered. He figured Black would make it to the far off mountains, find a good ambush spot and get him trapped between Black and his band of outlaws.

J. I. figured his best bet was to stay as close to Black as possible out on the open desert because as he got into the mountain terrain he would have to travel very slowly staying ever watchful of an ambush. He knew Black would not think twice about shooting him.

Darkness came and J. I. tried to continue the pursuit as long as possible. He did not see a campfire up ahead but he was sure that Black would be making a dry camp. J. I. shared his meager supply of water with his horse, letting him drink from his hat. He allowed himself a couple of swigs. Tomorrow he would have to find some water even he had to stop chasing Black for a while. He knew there were springs and water holes around the in desert and he would be able to identify them by the greenery produced by the water. But for now a couple of sips after eating his jerky would have to do.

Early the next morning J. I. picked up the tracks from yesterday and took up the chase again. The tracks lead to an area of green that J. I. hoped would have some water. He could tell that Black had spent some time here, but there was no sign of a camp. The small spring had been dug around to allow for more water to accumulate for the horse to drink. J. I.'s horse was already drinking before J. I. could get dismounted. J. I. settled on the ground a foot or so from the horse's nose and began drinking himself. He figured to wait until the hole filled with water again then get his canteens filled. The grass was green and thick six or eight feet around the hole, so J. I. allowed the horse to graze for a while. The brush around the spring was six to eight feet tall, giving cover for them, but also making it difficult to see any one approaching. J. I knew his horse would alert him to

any approaching strangers. J. I. allowed himself another few bites of jerky washed down by the fresh water. A couple of hours rest and he knew it was time to move on.

Soon, the terrain started changing from flat land to mountainous terrain. The first mountain was not all that high, but in the distance he imagined that the mountains reached 8000 to 9000 feet. He hoped he did not have to follow Black through those mountains.

J. I. stopped regularly to look the ground cover over and kept a close eye on the mountain peaks and out cropping, anywhere a man could lie in wait for another. He had looked up at one peak in time to see a sparkle of reflection of a metal object. He dove off his horse and none too quickly as a bullet passed over his saddle striking the rocks on the nearby hill. There were two smaller rocks close by that J. I. could get behind. But it required him to lay flat. His horse ran off back down the hillside to a canyon containing a small amount of brush and grass. J. I. immediately knew that he should have checked Mr. Black for hidden weapons. He wondered why he did not use it last night. He guessed he knew that he crew would be coming after him shortly and he did not want to show the weapon to early. Now he was paying for that mistake.

J. I. tried for a peek over the top of one of the rock and a bullet ricocheted off the rock immediately. Within a few minutes, J. I. realized he had made a serious mistake. His canteen was with his horse. He knew it would be a long afternoon if he could not get out of this location. Back toward his horse was a series of rocks that had rolled down the mountain side apparently many years ago. They seem to be spaced ten to twenty yards apart. He knew it was unsafe to try and run from one to the other but he felt he had no other choice. He ran fast from one boulder to the next. Black got two shots off at him.

The shots were hitting behind him, but closer than he had liked. He immediately liked his new position. He could stand and another near boulder provided him a little shade as well as offered protection to his backside. He saw Black raise up to take another shot and J. I. squeezed off a shot at his head. The rock shattered right under where Black had been. J. I. was pretty sure he had peppered his face with rock shards.

J. I. had waited a couple of hours and no more shots had been fired. He dared not try to reach his horse, as the distance was too far and no cover to speak of. However, across the canyon and up the mountain Black was on, there were plenty of boulders and cover available. J. I. spent much of the day going from boulder to boulder and up the mountain to Black's hiding spot. By late afternoon he arrived close to the rock and found that Black had left that spot. He could see the spent shells from his gun and he also saw small drops of blood on the rock caused either by his bullet or the rock shards.

Within a short time, J. I. was mounted up and headed in the direction he figured that Black would be taking. Unless Black was badly hurt, he would have another ambush set up for him. He might not be lucky enough to get a reflection on the next one.

Chapter 17

Black Gets Help

Black was struck with the rock shards all over the face and in his right eye, his shooting eye. He knew he could not stay behind this rock and not do some shooting, so he headed for a different location. He either wanted a water hole or an area of cacti. And he would prefer the cactus plant. He wants to cut one open and rub the cactus plant sap over his eye. He felt sure that would give him some relief. Shortly, he came upon some prickly pear cacti growing around a bushy area with a few rocks in the middle of them. He felt this would be an excellent place to hole up and doctor his wounds.

He carefully peeled a prickly pear and made a peeled slice for his eye, letting the sap drain into his eye. He had an almost immediate relief, but when he removed it from his eye, he still did not have good vision. He knew he would have to shoot using his left eye and that concerned him. The sap from the cactus eased the eye pain enough that Black drifted off to sleep. When he woke up it was completely dark. He gave his horse some water in his hat, took a sip for himself and tested his eyes. He could not see anything but he was sure that was because there was no moonlight. He felt like the best thing to do was unsaddle his horse and make himself a bed for the night. He knew his horse would

alert him to anyone trying to approach his dry camp. He did not have time to pack any provisions and he only had a few pieces of jerky available in his saddle bags left over from his last trip. He was not happy with the young squirt that was following him and he would like nothing better than to put a bullet in him out here in the middle of nowhere and hope his body would never be found. Come morning, he would be up early to try and take care of that little chore. Hopefully, his men would be following him and get in behind the yahoo giving him all this grief. It would give him real pleasure to put a bullet in him.

Morning came after a restless night. His eye started hurting him again during the night and he did not want to light a fire to find more cacti to doctor it. As soon as it was light enough he found another cactus, cut a slice big enough to cover his eye and it gave him almost immediate relief.

After his eye eased up a bit, he saddled his horse and got ready to move as soon as he needed to. First, he intended to watch his back trail for a time to see if that Hall fellow was able to track him through the mountains. He was in a hurry and hurting last night, so he made no efforts to cover his back trail. He imagined that his pursuer would be along directly. He would wait.

He had not waited very long when he saw Hall coming up the canyon, walking slowly through the rocks, looking his trail over very cautiously. He could only see the top of his head right now. Soon he would be in full view and he would shoot to kill. He decided he would wait until he could see from his belt line up. That should give him a good enough target.

As he was watching, Hall dropped down out of sight suddenly and seconds later he heard the same sounds as Hall. Several horses were coming down the same canyon at a pretty good speed and with very little caution. Black could see the tip of Hall's rifle as it came over some rocks pointing back down the canyon in the direction of the on coming riders.

Hall got off a couple of shots and the sound of horses running came to a stop. He could hear some shouting and it sounded like at least one of the riders had been hit, but maybe more. Rifles started shooting back at Hall and were ricocheting all around. Black decided he better get off a couple of shots at Hall to let his outfit know where he was. He could shoot well using his left eye but he got off a few shots in the general direction of Hall. He could hear his boy shouting at the one of the others to go around the mountain to get to Mr. Black. The shooting really picked up for a few minutes in an effort to keep Hall down and not shooting at them.

Soon one of his men was coming down the mountain toward him and he certainly was not being quiet. He came near the rocks shouting, "Mr. Black, Mr. Black, where are you?" Black shot a couple of time up toward Hall and soon the man was by his side.

"How many men are with you, Roy?"

"Well, sir we had six up until a couple of minutes ago. That fellow picked two of us off. He shot Pickett and Bellows. Yore boy, and Wilford and Castles are back down the canyon a ways. They will keep that man pined down while we go back around and join them, if that's what you want to do."

"No, Roy, I want you to stay here and fire a few shots ever now and again to make him think I am still here. After thirty minutes or so, you work your way on back to us. I

need to get my eye some attention and I ain't got time to be holed up down here. You got that, Roy?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Black. But I might can sneak up the canyon while ya'll are firing at him and just kill the son of a bitch. Will that be ok?"

"You do that, Roy, as soon as I get there we will really start shooting. That's when you will know to take off, ok?"

After about fifteen minutes the firing really picked up. Roy jumped up out of the boulders and started running up the canyon toward J. I. hiding spot. Roy ran from rock to rock, seeking what cover he could find. The firing continued heavily for a few minutes but just before Roy arrived at it let up. Roy ducked down behind a boulder just in time as J. I. fired a shot that careened off his cover, making him hug the rock even more.

Once more the firing from the Black forces picked up allowing Roy another chance to move forward. He came to the back side of the rocks that surrounded J. I., huddling against the rock before stepping on a smaller rock. He placed his foot on it in order to jump up to the tallest rock making up Hall's hiding place. Drawing a deep breathe when the Black's stopped firing he jumped up to fire at J. I. To Roy's amazement, no one was there. Behind him he heard the click of a hammer being pulled back to the locked position.

"You move, sir, and you are a dead man." said J. I.

Roy thought he could get of the first shot and turned and fired, his bullet clipping J. I. in the ribs, the exact same place as his last wound, but not as deep or severe.

J. I. did not miss. His shot caught Roy in the middle of the chest. Roy fired once more as he was falling from the rock, a shot that went into the ground. J. I. eased up to where

the man lay, making sure he did not try to fire at him again. He took his rifle and his side arm and moved back inside the rocks where Roy lay.

J. I. stayed hidden for a while as no shots were being fired. He felt they were either sneaking up on him or they had ridden off. He placed his hat on his rifle and slowly lifted it above the rocks trying to draw fire. None came.

J. I. took the rifle and side arm from Roy. He also had a canteen almost full of water. J. I. had a big drink from it and after catching his horse, gave him some in his hat.

J. I. knew the only thing to do now was to head toward Las Cruces. He no longer had a job and his thoughts turned toward Nelly Fay and Pete. Maybe it was time to go home for a spell. His side hurt, but not nearly as bad as the last time he was shot.

Chapter Eighteen

Heading Home

1887

J. I. needs someone who cares for him and knows he has done nothing wrong. With the wounded side needing attention and his emotions at an all time low, he felt Pete and Nellie Fay was the answer.

All of J. I. belongings were stored at the Carter Ranch and so he planned to ride over and pick up them up. His money has been left in Mr. Carter's safe as he took only enough salary for incidentals. The two twenty dollar gold pieces he recovered from his folk's wagon years ago was also amongst the things in Mr. Carter's safe. He had to ride there before continuing on to Sierra Blanca. He arrived in Las Cruces a little before dark, finding the stable for his horse, a hotel and then a bath house. He purchased some clean dressing for his side and a bottle of whiskey to pour on the wound.

The next day riding to the Carter's ranch took him also by the Hedges spread. The road that connected the Carter's ranch to the business area of Las Cruces and Mesilla Park went within fifty yards of the Hedges ranch house. Hazel Hedges in standing out in front of the ranch house as J. I. went riding by. When she recognized who was passing she jumped over to the cowboy standing nearby, yanked his pistol from his holster and started shooting and cursing J. I. and calling him a killer and sorry no good bum. J. I.

hunched over his saddle horn and spurred his horse to a full gallop. He had to be thankful that Hazel was a poor shot as she emptied the six-shooter at him. They were either going over his head or hitting short, none of them hitting him or his horse.

Later, he told Tiny all about it. Tiny threw back his head and had a big laugh. "I know it ain't funny, J. I., but she went from a sweetheart to a killer in no time, didn't she? Well, Matt has been going over pretty regular and handling most of the manly duties around the ranch. I expect he will be asking for her hand in marriage before too much longer. And I expect you can thank him for the gal shooting at you. He enforces her thinking of "what a bad guy you are every day" or at least every time your name comes up."

"Tiny, Black got away from me so clearing my name does not look very good now. I am going home for a while, maybe even for good. After a time a may come back by to say hello. I will want to tell you how to find me if you are ever out east of here. By riding the train, its not very far. I need to pick up my money from Mr. Carter's safe. Is he here today?"

"Yeah, he is J. I. Let's go on over and see him." said Tiny

Just as they reached the ranch house, Jan came out the door heading for the barn.

"J. I.!. How nice to see you. How have you been?" She rushes over to him and hugs him, squeezing the sore area of his sides causing J. I. to let out a small moan.

"Oh, no! Have you been shot again?"

"Yeah."

"My gosh, you are going to have more holes than a pen cushion. How bad is it this time? Let me have a look at it." She immediately started pulling his shirt out of his pants

and up on his side where she can see the wound. “My word, that is exactly the same place as the other one. Let's go to the bunk house where I can dress it.”

“Well, I was going over to see Mr. Carter and get my pay from his safe. So I will come back and let you have a look.”

“You will do no such thing. You just march yourself right over there and let me doctor you, ok?”

J. I. knew when he had lost, so he started back for the bunk house. He looked over at Tiny who was grinning big. Tiny knew he had lost also.

Jan made over him for several minutes, washing and redressing the wound and in general doctoring J. I. like he was in serious need of attention. He did not complain about it, matter of fact Tiny was thinking he liked it a little too much. This wound was not nearly as bad as the last one, but J. I. didn't want Jan to stop caring for him, not just yet anyway.

“Tiny, go get me another bucket of water,” said Jan, “I want to make sure this is clean before rewrapping it.” Tiny took off to get another bucket.

Tiny was barely out the door when Jan leaned over and kissed J. I. on the lips, causing J. I. to gasp it surprised him so. He looked at her briefly as her face was still fairly close to his and this time he kissed her, pulling her head down for a long tender kiss. J. I. magically forgot Hazel for the moment, only it was later that he noticed that he forgotten her. Now his thoughts were a little muddled as he thought about how pretty Jan was and the kiss had a passion or something that he had not felt before.

J. I. heard Tiny's foot lumbering across the porch and turned loose of Jan just before Tiny came back into the room with the water.

After, Jan had J. I. all fixed up with the new dressing, Tiny asked J. I. if he was ready to go collect his pay? For some reason, J. I. had just been moping around as if he had forgotten what they were doing just a few minutes ago. And the memory of Hazel shooting at him had suddenly become cloudy.

Chapter Nineteen

Homecoming

1887

The train ride to Sierra Blanca went quickly. Shortly after noon J. I. had his horse retrieved from the rail car and was on his way to the Rocking B. It took a lot longer to ride from Sierra Blanca to the ranch than it did to travel by rail from El Paso to Sierra Blanca. J. I. was thinking how nice modern travel was and he wondered if Nellie Faye would like to go to El Paso to see Sadie and Anne. He had stopped by for a meal before leaving El Paso and told the girls he was going home for a while. They were extremely happy to see him and would not let him pay for the meal.

After the train ride and a few hours on horse back, just as the sun was going down, the ranch house came into view. He could see Jose and Juan moving around near the barn and he could see Pete and Nellie sitting on the porch in a couple of rocking chairs. The rocking chairs were new. There used to be a couple of benches on the porch for sitting late in the afternoon. J. I. thought that things must be getting better around the home spread.

He rode a few more steps and Nellie stood up, recognizing who was riding up. She yelled, "It's J. I., it's J. I." Pete stood up and started walking out toward him. J. I. picked up speed and dismounted before his horse had stopped. Pete and Nellie had him wrapped up in their arms and one of them squeezed the sore spot and he grimaced. Nellie picked

up on it right away. Both of them made over the wound and made it out to be a lot worse than it was. Nellie had to redress the wound even before she fed him.

The food was still excellent. Supper turned into a two hour meal as the three of them continued to pick over the food during the conversation. J. I. pretty well covered all of the things that had happened to him during his away time, including Hazel shooting at him. He did leave out the part of Jan's kisses and the way they had left him feeling. Then Pete and Nellie had to tell him all that had been happening on the ranch. Julio's family had grown and Juan had gotten married. His wife's name was Gloria he learned and they lived in the house that Julio brother had lived in. Julio brother returned to El Paso a while back and it worked out the Juan and Gloria was able to move in. Anna and Eva were helping in the house and in the garden. Anna was now a beautiful young lady and Eva had grown up and was a good worker according to Nellie Fay.

Julio was now Pete's foreman and he took a lot of interest in running the ranch. Pete admitted to J. I. that it would be hard to run the place without him.

“J. I., do you think you will stay around now or you still have some running around you need to do? I would like to have someone to leave this place to and someone that would take good care of Nellie should something happen to me. You are like a son to me and I want you to have this place.” said Pete looking at J. I. for an answer.

“Pete, I believe I have had all the running around I want. I may like to take an occasional trip to El Paso, maybe even taking Nellie down to see Sadie and Annie, as they want to see her pretty bad. But, otherwise, I am here to stay. You can count on me. Nellie has been a Momma to me and I will take care of her for as long as she lives. You

too, Pete, I aim to take care of you as long as you live. I am here to stay now.” J. I. said smiling at the two of them.

Pete and Nellie both patted J. I. hand and let him know that he had just said the words that they had yearned to hear. He was like a son to them and this was the homecoming.

“J. I. tomorrow Julio and I will show you around. We had to buy some more land to run all the cattle we are running now. We need to have another round-up soon to get another crop of the yearlings branded. I hope to sell a hundred or so head in the next few weeks. The market is good now and I can send mine down to El Paso and Fort Bliss and get more for them than sending them all the way to Fort Worth. I want to go over the books with you also so you will know how much things have improved around here since you've been gone. We finally got a pretty good nest egg built up. I can see us being the biggest outfit in this part of the country the way things are going. Well, let's go to bed. We got a long time to finish this conversation the way I see it,” said a happy Pete Brown.

Worked stop around the Rocking B for two days. Most of the first day was spent preparing and cooking food and all of the second day was spent eating. Neighbors had been invited from around the area and a few businessmen had come up from Sierra Blanca for the occasion. Julio and Juan could play guitars and Maria, Gloria, Anna and Eva sang. They were very good. No one could understand the words to the songs except the Mexican singers, but that was ok as it sounded special. Pete announced to all that J. I. was back for good and now Nellie and he could relax and know that the ranch would be in good hands should something happen to them. The party broke up around 3 o'clock the second day to allow the folks to get home before dark. All the neighbors agreed that they needed to get together ever so often as this had been a very special occasion.

Julio and Pete spent a couple of weeks showing J. I. what all was going on and what the plans were for the additional acreage they had. None of it was very good farm land, but it was excellent grassland so cattle was the future with one exception. The last time Julio went to El Paso, Pete had him bring a bunch of chickens. He then built a hen house and had lately added to the hen house and was now raising chickens to sell as well as eggs. He made runs to Sierra Blanca every week, selling both. It did not match the cattle business in revenue yet, but it did produce steady money between cattle sales and pretty much let Pete and Nellie operate without borrowing money. A lot of spreads had to borrow money between cattle sales and they sometimes got in trouble with the bankers over repayment. Pete started in the ranching business with a good bank roll and had managed to grow the size of the ranch and number of cattle without getting into debt. As of now, he was the single biggest depositor in the Sierra Blanca State Bank. And all the businessmen looked forward to the fresh eggs coming into town a couple of times a week. Both restaurants in town counted on them being there for eggs and chickens.

J. I. stayed busy for several weeks. His wounded side had healed and had almost been forgotten. But, one night after supper J. I. related his story to Nelly and Pete, leaving nothing out. He included the two girls he had met and the mixed emotions he had over the two of them. He also pointed out that he was sure he had lost Hazel because of the lies Matt was telling about him. After he had told it all to them, he asked their advise as to what he should do. Pete said, "I think you have to go back and bring that fellow Black to justice. Otherwise, some of those folks will always wonder if you were in cahoots with him. I could go with you and visit with the town Marshall in El Paso. I don't know him personally but we do have some mutual friends. He might be able to help us."

“Pete, I don't want you leaving the place here with all you have going on. Why don't you give me a letter of introduction and I will see if he can do something to help me out.

“Well, you are right there. We do have a lot to do now. I would like to have you back here for a fall round up if you can make it. So, maybe it would be better if you got started on that and maybe you could be back to help in the fall. Would that be rushing you to much?” asked Pete.

“No, I don't think so. I am tired of fooling around with Mr. Black. I think he went back to his ranch and I will be able to find him quicker and I am going to get him away from his outlaw friends somehow. Maybe we can watch the ranch until most of the hands are gone, then get him.”

Pete said, “I am going to ask Dallas Stoudenmire to deputize you so you can put him under arrest. Maybe that will help and maybe he will send a couple of people with you.”

J. I. replied, “It sure won't hurt to ask. I will leave for El Paso tomorrow if you will get that letter written tonight.”

Pete was already reaching for his pen and paper.

Chapter Twenty

Deputy Hall

J. I. arrived in El Paso in mid afternoon. There were a few strollers around and a few cowboys on horseback riding through town. The girls from the second floor windows were still calling down to the cowboys trying to get them interested in a visit. It did not seem that they had any takers, although a couple of the cowboys were still talking to them while continuing to ride.

J. I. went straight to the Marshall's office. Dallas Stoudenmire's name was not on the office door. Matter of fact, the "Office of Deputy Marshall for Western Texas and New Mexico" said the sign over the door, but no name was there. J. I. pushed the door open and went in. The fellow sitting in the desk rose and extended his hand to J. I. asking, "What can I do for you, sir?" smiling as he asked the question.

"Well, I'm looking for Marshall Stoudenmire. Is he around?" asked J. I.

"Well, son you must be new in town. He got into a shoot out with the Manning boys and he lost out. There was three of them to his one, so they took him out. They got most of the town on their side as old Dallas had done run plum out of friends. They will have someone else appointed before to much longer. In the mean time, I am keeping the office open and doing what I can to promote peace and tranquility in this hell hole. Is there something I can do to help you?" he asked with a wondering look in his eyes.

“Well, my Pa, really the fellow that has acted as my Pa for several years sent a letter of introduction to Dallas. He did not know Dallas personally but they had some mutual friends. His name is Pete Brown, lives up north of Sierra Blanca nowadays, but I think he met these people while helping to build the Union Pacific Railroad across the western United States. He seems to know a lot of folks all over the country. Sir, would you read this letter and see what you can do to help me out?” Handing the letter over to him said, “By the way, my name is J. I. Hall,” extended his hand out to him.

The fellow took it and shook it saying, “Thomas Moad, Texas Ranger. I'll be handling things around here for a while and maybe even long term, depending upon a few more things being settled. Hold on a second here and let me read your letter.” Motioning for J. I. to take a seat on the other side of the desk, he took his time reading the letter, his mouth moving with each word that he read on the page. J. I. had no trouble following him the way he mouthed the words.

Putting the letter down and looking at J. I., he said, “I do know of this fellow Black. Many of our citizens around here think he is guilty as blue blazes on the rustling, but not one has come to me with solid evidence yet. Now, maybe Dallas had gotten some words on him or had some type evidence, but I ain't got nothing. I am presently short handed and I don't have the man power to be running off into New Mexico and chasing a fellow that may or may not be guilty. I know what your Pa is saying and he knows you don't lie, for sure, but you put yourself in my shoes. I just can't go deputizing just anybody to go

out and make arrest. You got any witnesses or strong opinions from some of the local cattlemen in this area? Now, if you do and one or two of them will come forward, I will see what I can do based on the total stories and evidence I collect against him.”

“Yes sir, I understand. I do have a few friends and my former employer, Mr. Carter, out on the J Bar C. Him or one of his boys may come to you on my behalf. I will go out and talk to them and see what can be brought to your attention. Sadie down at the S & A Diner could verify my character also.” The Marshall said he would ask around down at the café.

The men shook hands again as J. I. departed the office. He looked down the street toward the S & A. His face lit up and he started walking just a little bit faster.

Only a couple of tables were available as it was close to noon. J. I. hesitated some and Anne spoke without looking up, “Just take any seat, cowboy.”

“Yes'um.” was J. I.'s only reply. But the voice was just too familiar and Anne jerked her head around, made a couple of hops and was in J. I.'s arm. Every cowboy in the cafe was envious of that hug. Her squeals brought Sadie running and J. I. got another big hug. The other fellows around the S & A had to wait a few minutes for business to continue. After a good meal and a lot of visiting J. I. told the girls he had to ride out to the J Bar C and talk with Mr. Carter. He hoped to be gone only a couple of days and then he would be back for some more visiting and good food. He mentioned the Marshall may ask them about his character and asked for their help if he should inquire.

J. I. walked outside the cafe and was watching a fight between a couple of cowboys. Suddenly, from behind, two arms wrapped completely around him saying, “Boy, I'm putting you under arrest.”

J. I. could not move as the two arms had him completely locked in an embrace and had his feet lifted off the ground. He was shocked and surprised to say the least and was about to get mad when a voice he knew well added, "And taking you home with me. I think my Jan wants to see you." And then he released him and sat him back on the ground.

"Tiny, you scared the crap out of me. What you doing in town?"

"Pa sent me into town to do some shopping for some of our food, sugar and flour and a sack of potatoes, that sort of things. I had lunch here at Sadies. I must have just left when you came in. How you been doing, J. I.? I shore have missed you. And I think Jan has missed you too."

"Well, I'm glad to see you, Tiny. And you might have saved me an extra trip out to your place. Would you come and tell Marshall Moad about Mr. Black and all he has been doing, rustling and all. The Marshall said he needed some evidence before he could deputize me. Why don't you talk to him for me?" asked J. I.

Tiny looked a little perplexed asking, "Why do you want to be deputized anyway, J. I. Are you going after Mr. Black again?"

"I just have to get him, Tiny. He has wrecked my whole life. I am not going to allow him to do that to me. And your brother, Matt, he ain't helping matters, spreading all the rumors that he has. So I have to have Ed Black arrested and all this stuff straightened out. And besides all of that, the man needs to be brought to justice."

Tiny says, "Well, I can agree with all that. Reckon Marshall Moad will deputize me too? I always wanted to be a lawman. I figure I could run for sheriff one of these days.

My platform is gonna be, "Tiny Carter, a Heavy Weight in Law Enforcement". What do you think about that, Mr. J. I.?"

"I like it, Tiny, and I am gonna vote for you. Well, we can ask Marshall Moad to deputize us both then maybe later, after you are elected, I can be a deputy for you. "A heavy weight in law enforcement", huh? Dang, that's pretty good, Tiny. Yeah, I'd sure like to work for you."

"You are hired, little buddy. You just got yourself a dad-gum job. Course, I guess I better get elected first, huh?" said a laughing Tiny Carter.

Both of the cowboys strolled over to the Marshall's office. Tiny was introduced to the Marshall by J. I. The Marshall spoke up, "One of the cowboys was telling me about you, Tiny, and he told me you were big. I just did not figure you to be this big. He told me your horse was a huge animal also. Is it out front?"

"No sir, it's down in front of Sadie's. We can walk back down there if you want to see Babe." said Tiny.

"No, maybe later. What you boys want to see me about?" said the Marshall.

"We want to tell you about Ed Black and all he has been up to. Marshall, we have track them rustled cattle down into Mexico then back up to Black property near Deming. Most of the time, he hides the herds in the Florida Mountains until he can arrange to have them sold. Probably sells them to some crooked Indian Agent, allowing the Federal Government to pay for the rustled beef to be used for the Indians. Then the agent sells them somewhere else and the poor old Indians don't get nothing. But that's just me talking there. I can't prove that yet. You deputize us and we will do a little snooping and maybe some arresting. All the ranchers over west and north of here have been losing

cattle for a couple of years now. It's time it was stopped. All the fingers point at Ed Black. We know he shot and killed that Hedge's boy. J. I. was shot during that same shootout.”

“Whoa, you didn't tell me about that, J. I. That's some pretty heavy stuff right there.”

Tiny filled him in on that shoot out.

The Marshall said, “Ok, give me a couple of hours to get the papers filled our and round up a couple of badges and you boys are on the job. And when you get up to Mesilla Park I need you to run off some Mexican's living in a line shack on a ranch up there. OK?” asked the Marshall.

“Yes sir, anything you need done, we will do. After all, this here is “Tiny Carter, a Heavy Weight in Law Enforcement” J. I. said laughing.

“Alright little buddy, you ain't hired yet, so you better be careful what you say,” responded Tiny with a chuckle.

Chapter 21

Jan Carter

1888

“Deputy Carter, that badge looks pretty good on you. Wear the darn thing high on your shoulder as some of the shooters use that star as a target. Hopefully, that will make them shoot high,” said a laughing J. I.

“I was wondering why that star of your was penned so high up. But we gonna practice fast drawing and stuff before we go after Ed Black, ain't we, J. I.? It's been a long time since I done any drawing and shooting.” said Tiny.

“Well, I suppose we could practice up soon. But, really we need to practice shooting. It's highly unlikely that we will be in a position to quick draw with Mr. Black.” said J. I.

“Darn, J. I., you just can't never tell about what them outlaws are gonna do. I want us to practice quick drawing. That way, if it ever comes up, we ready and if it don't, it ain't cost us a dime. That's how I feel about it anyways,” said Tiny.

“Ok, ok, don't get in such a tizzy. We will practice up some. Let's go see your folks and we can take a few days getting ready to do some posse work. We need some extra mounts and extra ammunition. Let's stock up here in town and I believe the Marshall will pay for both the ammunition and the horses, since we are chasing outlaws. Then afterwards we can go out to your ranch and do some practicing and I, eh,, maybe I can visit with Miss Jan some,” said a skittish J. I.

“I know for a fact Miss Jan is looking forward to that.”

“Boy, I sure hope so,” responded J. I.

Supper was in progress when the two arrived at the J Bar C spread. They had the crew gathered outside for tonight’s meal. Mr. Carter called out to them, “You boys get washed up and come on over to eat. It’s getting cold and a lot of it is already gone. But I imagine its enough for you two, no more than ya’ll eat.” which brought a big round of laughter from all the hands and the Carters.

Some of the cowhands started moving closer together to make room for the two cowboys. Jan waved at J. I. and motioned for him to sit by her. The wide eyes and the beckoning smile could not have been turned down by any cowboy. Tonight she was drop dead gorgeous. J. I. wondered if she knew he was coming or did she just simply look this good every night. Then he remembered that she did always look this good at supper. All the cowhands used to swoon if they got to sit close to or across from Miss Jan. That was all a lot of them talked about.

When he was seated next to her, she put her arm around his waist and said, “J.I., it’s so good to see you. I was afraid you might not be coming back as many times as you have been shot at, and shot. I thought you might just stay home. But I am glad you came back.” Smiling as she spoke to J. I.

“Miss Jan, I had to come back and clear my name. I have never been in trouble and I have never shot at someone who did not shoot at me. So, Tiny and I were deputized to go looking for Mr. Ed Black and to bring him in to stand trial for his rustling and for shooting Howard Hedges. Tiny volunteered to be a deputy. I hope Mr. Carter don’t object to him being a deputy.” J. I. paused there for a few minutes. Then he added, “Sometime

when you have a few moment you can spare, Miss Jan, I would like to talk over some things with you. I have a few things I need figure out, so let me know when you can talk, ok?”

“Sure, J. I., how about after supper is over, you come to the front door and knock and ask for me like a proper caller. Would that be ok, J. I.” she asked.

“Yes’um that would be great. I will come calling tonight.” he said with a big smile.

It seemed to J. I. after those few words that the rest of the supper meal drug on and on. He did not realize how he had come to think so much of Miss Jan in such a short time. Once Miss Hazel was put behind him, Jan just kind of took over his thoughts. In hind sight, he remembered he had danced with the two of them and of the two, his memory was sparked more by Miss Jan. Of Course, he danced with her every night for a long time, well until he fully learned the Blue Danube Waltz. Anyway, he could still feel her body against his and it was a wonderful memory. Once, while dancing with her, his hand had slipped too high under her arm and he had inadvertently touched her breast and it had made him come alive. While it was unintentional it was also unforgettable. He was ready to visit with her one on one for a little bit.

One time, years ago while living in the box car with Nellie, Sadie and Anne, he was in a hurry going back to his sleeping area and he had pushed the blanket back and had seen Anne’s bare chest, putting on her shirt. She covered herself and yelled, “J. I. always ask if it’s ok to come behind a closed curtain, ok!” She was mad. But he had remembered the occasion well, he could still visualize the sight and he thought of that often and it always stirred him. Touching Miss Jan that time had refreshed that particular memory. Miss Jan

seemed to have a fuller area there than Anne did, but J. I. was guessing. He thought he needed to get his thought back on supper before he spilled something.

Supper finally was over. He and Tiny walked back to the bunk house and all the cowboys lit up cigarettes, cigars and pipes. J. I. had a pipe, but it made him cough so he only used it on very special occasions and tonight may be one, but he did not want to get started coughing. He waited until all the crew had quieted down then he mentioned he needed to go over to the ranch house. Tiny spoke up and said, "Yeah, Pa don't know about me being a deputy yet. You gonna tell him, J. I.?" asked Tiny.

"Yeah, I'll tell him." He was glad that no one suspected he was going over to see Jan. But if he saw Mr. Carter, he would bring Tiny being a deputy up. He might bring up something else also, but he needed to talk with Jan first.

Jan answered the door on the first knock. She called over her shoulder, "Momma, I'm going to sit on the front porch with J. I. Ok?"

If Mrs. Carter answered Jan, J. I. did not hear her. Jan closed the door behind her and came on out. She came up close to J. I., looked up at him and said, "You wanted to see me? About something important? Let's sit in the swing and talk." Jan motioned to the swing at the end of the porch.

It was a cool night, not cold, but like so many nights in the desert southwest, a chill was in the air. If a breeze had been blowing it could have been cold. But the cool night air had Jan sitting very close to J. I., thighs touching. J. I. gave considerable attention in his mind to the warm touch. He became brave and took her hand, in both of his and said, "What I have to say is very important. Ever since you taught me how to dance, you have been constantly on my mind. I had Hazel always on my mind at first, then when dancing

with you I became confused on the inside, since you liked Howard and you were teaching me to dance with Hazel,....well, holding you became all of my thoughts, every day, thinking of us being together and dancing. I loved every minute of it. Then when things went bad with Hazel and me and you nursing me back to health, it changed everything for me. Now, it is you that is constantly in my thoughts.”

“I went home to visit my Ma and Pa, or the people who took me in after my folks were killed, and Pete, that’s my Pa, told me he was going to leave his ranch to me. They are Pete and Nellie Brown. They have raised me since I was a young man. So, I need to go back there after Tiny and I round up Ed Black and start learning the ranching business. I kind of know Pete's ranch already, but I need to make sure I know everything that is going on. He has enlarged the spread and added some things that he did not have when I was growing up there. I will go back to stay. It is a hundred miles or so east of El Paso and then north twenty or thirty miles. It's a lot bigger now than when I lived on it and he runs a lot of cattle with just a couple of hands. Jan, I was wondering if you would be willing to marry me, and move up to the Rocking B with me. You can be a help mate to me in tending the Rocking B ranch and maybe we can raise us a few boys and girls. Will you marry me, Jan?”

Jan did not hesitate; placing both hands on either side of his cheeks and kissed him full on the mouth. J. I. was pleasantly surprised, but he took advantage of the moment, taking Jan in his arms and kissing her proper like.

After a couple more kisses and embraces, J. I. said, “I suspect that was a yes. I reckon I need to ask your Pa for your hand in marriage.”

Jan said, “I reckon you should.”

Jan took J. I. into the house and asked if Mr. Carter could visit with them a few minutes. Mrs. Carter was sewing on a dress, stopped her sewing and looked inquiringly at Jan. Jan smiled at her and sat on the sofa. Mr. Carter looked up very inquisitively also and motioned for J. I. to sit on the sofa next to Jan. "What's on you mind, J. I.? You have been gone for a while. Do you need your old job back?"

"No sir, Mr. Carter. I went home for a while and my Pa, well he kind of adopted me and he said he wanted me to take over operating his ranch and that it would be mine when he passes on. I stayed for a while to let my last gun shot heal. You know Mr. Black's bunch shot me up north of Deming a while back. I have a couple of things to discuss with you, Mr. Carter. First, Pete Brown, my Pa sent a letter of introduction to the local Marshall over in El Paso asking him to deputize me so I could help clear my name over the Howard Hedges shooting. The Marshall serving now is not the one Pete Brown knew, but another fellow, but it all worked out and I did get the deputy's job. Only thing about it, Tiny came up while we were talking and he wanted to be deputized as well. Tiny wanted me to tell you about it since I will be riding out to try and arrest Mr. Black. Tiny is planning on going so if you object you might want to talk with him. Secondly, when I have Mr. Black under arrest and my name cleared, I will be heading back to the Rocking B Ranch up north of Sierra Blanca, TX. That is east of El Paso about 100 miles and then north about 30 miles."

"Mr. Carter, er, uh, I would like to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage. I have already spoken to her about it and she has agreed. I would appreciate it very much if you would also agree to my proposal."

Everything became extremely quiet. Mrs. Carter was looking first at Mr. Carter, who's mouth was wide open, speechless and at Jan who was wringing her hands in her lap, to J. I. who's face was a big question mark, then back at Mr. Carter. Mr. Carter then looked at Mrs. Carter and said, "Did you know anything about this, Eleanor?"

"No, Jacob, this is news to me. I am as shocked as you are. But I know this, if Jan is ready for marriage and she feels that J. I. is her man, then it is fine with me. We have talked many times about this day, both Jan and me and you and me. I told her she would know when the right boy comes along. She has made her choice and I could not nor would not disagree with her decision. It is a shock to me and it is a day I have dreaded in giving up my daughter. But, I like J. I. and I think he is a good man and will be a good husband. I had noticed how she looked at J. I. and I suppose I should have known, but I did not," answered Mrs. Carter.

"How big a spread you have up there, J. I.? Are you going to be able to provide for my daughter needs? You have a nice house? Tell me about your place."

"Well sir, I think Pete is running about 400 mother cows now. He also raised chickens and sells chickens and eggs in Serria Blanca. He started small with the chicken houses but now he has several hundred chickens that produce a bunch of eggs. He has a Mexican family that helps him and the surrounding ranchers help out with the round up and cattle sales. I suppose he has about 3000 acres all told of his own, and he rent another several thousand acres from a widow woman. He has a small spring fed valley for raising vegetables and grains. The grassland for the livestock is good, especially when he gets plenty of rain. Pete paid for everything as he went and he told me he did not owe anyone anything. He used his saving to pay cash for everything. The house is functional and

large enough for a nice size family. I may want to build another one for Jan in due time. I have saved most of my earning ever since I have been working. I opened a bank account in Sierra Blanca while I was back there. I have enough money to tide us over until we can get our pay started from the Rocking B. Yes sir, I do feel I can take care of Jan proper like. But, Jan will have to work there, Mr. Carter, that's for sure, well, until we can get us a family started. Then it will be a different kind of work. I love her, sir, and I will take good care of her and always treat her decent and kindly. You have my word on that.”

“Well, J. I., I reckon if Jan has picked you I will not find fault with you. I am counting on you to stick with your word about taking good care of her. You have my blessing.”

With that statement Jan jumps up and hugs her dad. J. I. stands and shakes hands with Mr. Carter. Mrs. Carter and Jan start crying and they both of them hug J. I. After things settle down a bit, Jan tenderly hugs J. I. and plants a small kiss on his lips. J. I. blushed. Being kissed by Jan in front of her mom and dad was a little unexpected. He got over it pretty quickly, however, and waves at them as he heads toward the door. “Folks, I will talk to you again tomorrow morning before Tiny and I head out. Goodnight.”

Jan follows him out the door and closes it. Then she really kisses J. I. and her hug is so tight that J. I. can feel all of her against him. He is on fire and pushes her away gently, telling her he has to get to be bunk house before it gets too late. He does not want to have to explain why he was so late to all the cowboys, after all, telling Mr. Carter about Tiny being a deputy should not taken all that long.

Chapter 22

Mr. Black Moves On

After saying goodbye, both Tiny and J. I. were anxious to get started. J. I. was especially ready so he could finish quickly and get back to his Jan. They took two pack horses for the supplies and water. They planned a direct approach the Black Ranch same as before with Tiny staying under cover until J. I. had the Blacks in handcuffs or dead.

The trip to the Black ranch was uneventful. They stayed around the camp a little longer than usual the morning of the arrival near the ranch, eating their fill, knowing this may be the last good meal for a while.

The ranch house was nestled at the foot of the Florida Mountains, a nice enough setting for a ranch and for all the bad the Black's did, one good deed was he took care of his home spread. J. I. had not noticed the flowers growing in the yard on his last visit, but this morning as the sun touched the front yard of the ranch house, the beauty of the ranch property struck him. Something was different about this spread. "Tiny, it's almost like a woman has moved into this ranch, huh? See all the flowers and how well kept the ranch house is. I wonder if Black or his son has married up since we were last here. What do you think?"

"By golly, something is sure different. I remember the place looking pretty drab the last time we were here. I ain't heard nothing about one of the Black's marrying up, but something dang sure has changed around here," answered Tiny.

J. I. and Tiny were concealed behind several mesquite trees watching the ranch house. While they watched, a woman came out on the front porch of the house and took a seat in

one of the rocking chairs. Shortly, a man came out and joined her. From this distance they could not tell who they were, but they could tell who they were not. And they were not the Black's. Around toward the back of the house a lone cowboy was working on the corral fence. The three people were all J. I. could see.

“Keep me covered, Tiny. We might as well get this started. These may be kin folk or something. I'll motion you on up if everything is ok, but don't get away from the cover until I give you a signal. Something ain't right here.”

J. I. mounted up and approached the house. From twenty or thirty yards, he calls to the ranchers asking permission to approach the house. “Good morning, folks. Ok for me to come on up in your yard?” he asked.

His voice had startled the couple as they sat on the porch, but they recovered easily enough, the man stood up and said, “Yes sir, come on over. How are you today?”

“I'm just fine. My name is Deputy Marshall Hall. I am out looking for some rustlers and I wanted to talk with you folks some.” J. I. said when he got in talking distance. He was close to the porch, but he did not dismount. “I wanted to see Mr. Black. Is he around?” asked J. I.

“No, we bought out Mr. Black a few weeks ago. He told us he was going to move over toward Tombstone, Az. He said he did a lot of business over that way and he wanted to move closer. We bought this place from him and have not seen him or any of his hands since that time. Anything we can help you with?” he asked.

About that time a three or four year old child came out on the porch, rubbing his eyes like he had just woke up. He came and crawled up into his momma's lap as she had sat

back down when J. I. and the rancher had started talking. That relaxed J. I. and he motioned for Tiny to come on up to the ranch house.

J. I. motioned toward the approaching Tiny and said, "This here is Deputy Marshall Frank Carter. Everybody calls him Tiny. We were looking for the Black's to ask them some questions. How long since the last time you saw him?"

"When we paid him for the place, I reckon that was about 6 or 8 weeks ago. My Pa owns a ranch on the west side of the mountains. so when we heard this place was for sell Pa helped me buy it. It would have been hard for me to come up with the cash on my own. We hope to have the place paying before to long. Anyway, that's the last time we saw Mr. Black. Pa never did like him and was glad to buy him out just to get rid of him. Has he done something bad? How come ya'll looking for him?" asked the rancher.

"Well, sir, evidence is pretty strong that Mr. Black was involved in some rustling around these parts. So we wanted to bring him in and find out a few things. Also, a man was shot by Mr. Black and he is also wanted for that. If he should come back around I would be very careful in dealing with him. He can be very dangerous."

Tiny had pulled up along side J. I. and spoke to the folks. After a few more exchanged pleasantries, J. I. asked if they could water the horses and fill they water containers. Permission was given for that. After the horses had their fill, Tiny asked, "What we gonna do now, J. I.?"

"Have you ever been to Tombstone, AZ, Tiny?"

"No, I ain't, J. I., but I been hankering to head out over that way sometimes. Reckon what Tombstone is like now that they got them dang 'Paches rounded up?"

"I don't know, Tiny, but we gonna find out!"

“Boy, that's gonna be a long hard ride ain't it, J. I.?” asked Tiny.

“Not to bad. Let's ride into Deming and take the Southern Pacific to Benson. From there it's just a two day ride on down to Tombstone. That will sure save a lot of wear and tear on our butts, Tiny.”

“Aw, I got plenty of padding myself, J. I. That old bony butt of yours might take a bad pounding though.” Tiny laughed pretty hard at his own joke and J. I. had to chuckle himself. “But I ain't never rode a train, J. I., so I think that is a pretty good idea. What about our horses. What do they do with them?”

“They have what they call a livestock car, Tiny. They can ship cattle or horses in them. We put them on at Deming and take them off at Benson. They will be as rested as we are. Good deal, huh?”

“Man, that's great. I'm ready when you are, little buddy.”

J. I. touched his spurs to his horse's side, enough to prod him forward, but the horse took it personal and jumped and took off running. Tiny was startled and a little slower getting started.

Chapter 23

Tombstone, AZ

1888

“J. I., what you reckon The Birdcage is. There shore is a lot of cowboys hanging out around there. Whatever going on there must be pretty good. You wanna go check it out. Old man Brown may be in there, you reckon?” asked Tiny. The rinky-dink of the pianos filled the late afternoon air, coming from several of the establishments, along with the high pitched laughter of some female partiers.

“He sure could be. Let’s find us a room and then we will look around a bit. Make sure your badge is covered up by your vest for a while. I don’t want to give old man Black any edge on us. Gonna be hard enough without him knowing lawmen are looking for him.”

“That is a beautiful courthouse, ain’t it, J. I.? I’ll bet you that thing cost a lot of money to build. That silver mine must really be paying off for this community. I hope we can get Mr. Black into that place, don’t you, J. I.?” asked Tiny.

“I want to take Ed Black back to El Paso, Tiny. I want him to clear my name on the killing of Howard Hedges. Hazel Hedges will keep trying to shoot me if I don’t.”

“I don’t think my little sister wants you to get all buddy, buddy with Ms. Hazel, J. I. Don’t you reckon we can take a statement from him back and clear your name that way?.

“We might could, Tiny, but I had rather have a trial there in El Paso because of your Ma and Pa, Ms. Hedges and all the others that wonder just who did shoot Howard. That needs to be heard back in our part of the country. That’s how I feel about it,” Said J. I.

After getting a couple of rooms in the Tombstone Hotel, Tiny and J. I. walked back to the Bird Cage. They could see through the windows that no one was eating in here. All were drinking and following some women around. The “bird cages” were hung high and a couple of ladies were leaning out the curtains of two bird cages encouraging some cowboys to come visit them. It seemed as though several young cowboys were trying to answer the call, pushing and shoving each other toward the stairway. There probably would be a fight before they reached the top of the stairs.

Tiny said, “I don’t think they serve any food in there, J. I. There are several cafes down the street. Lets pick the one that smells the best and have supper, what do you say?”

J. I. said, “Good idea” and heading down the street toward the closest café. The one they chose, smelled excellent and they could see the cutest little Mexican gal waiting the tables. One could tell she was avoiding the tables with the rowdiest men. They still tried to reach out and slap her behind as she danced by the table lighting fast, laughing at the slow moving men, giving them a flirty look in passing. They seemed to be enjoying the trying anyway.

J. I. and Tiny had to stand in the doorway for a few minutes waiting for a table to be cleared. The young Mexican girl beckoned them on to the table and asked what they wanted to drink and in the next breath said, “You know what you want to order?”

Tiny asked, “What are the choices? You got a menu?”

“No menu. You can have beans and chili or beans and steak. Both come with biscuits. So, what will it be? She asked.

“I’ll have the beans and chili and steak”, said Tiny, “and several biscuits, good and hot with plenty of butter.”

J. I. ordered the steak and beans noting that the girl eyes were flirting with Tiny. And the reason may have been the looks Tiny was giving the girl. J. I. was surprised as he had seen Tiny react with Anne in El Paso, who was gorgeous, and Tiny had never reacted like this. This girl was not looking at the other cowboys like she was Tiny. Tiny was eating it up and kept looking toward the back trying to get another glimpse of the girl walking by.

After cleaning their plates and the girl cleared the table, Tiny announced that he was buying supper tonight. He had two helpings of chili and beans and the girl made sure that Tiny got the biggest steak J. I. had seen in a while. She must have picked that special just for Tiny. Of the other steaks served that night while J. I. and Tiny were there, none was as big or as juicy looking as Tiny’s. They had learned her name was Juanita. J. I. stepped outside while Tiny was doing the paying.

The night air was cool and many cowboys were riding, walking, staggering down the street. All of them were happy it seemed. J. I. watched with interest keeping his eye peeled for Black or any of his cowboys. It had been a long time since he had seen them but he figure he would know some of them still. There were plenty of rough looking characters, but none that looked even remotely familiar.

J. I. thought that Tiny was taking an extremely long time to pay the bill. He walked back to the door and saw Tiny and Juanita in a very intense conversation. J. I. stepped back out and let him have his fun. He had never seen Tiny make over a girl and it made him feel happy that Tiny was making the effort.

A few minutes later, Tiny joined J. I. on the street. He could tell that Tiny was feeling mighty good and while they were walking, he layed his arm around J. I.'s shoulder saying, "Ain't it a beautiful night, J. I. Just look at that moon. Makes a man want to spoon, don't it, J. I.?"

"Now, listen Tiny, I ain't the least bit interested in you. I am thinking about your sister a little bit though."

"Gosh dang you, J. I., I ain't talking about you and you know I ain't. That Juanita wants me to come back at closing time and walk her home. What you think about that, J. I. That's about the prettiest little girl I ever did see. I think she likes me a whole bunch. She's the one that asked me to walk her home. I didn't even think about asking her until afterwards. Then it's like, "dang, you kind of slow, Tiny". Why didn't I think to ask her first? I never had a girl ask me to walk her home. I'm gonna do it J. I. and don't you try to talk me out of it either."

"What are you talking about? I ain't about to talk you out of it. You a pretty big boy and I figure you gonna do just what you want to, huh? Only thing, I wonder if she has some brothers or a papa who watches out for her like a hawk. Do you reckon she does, Tiny? They could be protective, you know," said J. I. in a humorous sort of way.

"Well, they better step aside tonight, my friend, cause this big boy is gonna be strutting down Allen Street. She said she lived down at the far end of Allen street where a lot of the Mexican live. I ain't ever walked a girl home before, J. I....Ah,..Er... What do you do when you walk a girl home anyway?" Tiny looked at J. I. with a wondering frown. "Do you try to kiss'um or what?"

“Well,” J. I. was thinking about how Tiny really should act as he knew this was unexplored territory for Mr. Tiny, “you know how you had your arm around my shoulder there a while ago. That is a good starting place. Then if she seems comfortable with that, then you might let your arm slip to down around her waist, pulling her tighter all the time until she kind of pushes you away. You will know I think. Let her have the lead some also and if she looks like she want to kiss you, go ahead and let her.”

“Goll dern, J. I., you reckon she would try that? How do you kiss somebody anyhow, J. I. ? I ain’t never kissed nobody. I would be scared to death if she tried that.”

“Now, now, calm down Tiny. Try this. Turn your arm up and try to kiss your own arm. You just kind of suck on it with your lips. Try it and see what you think. Anne told me about that when we were kids working on the railroad.”

Tiny turned his arm up and took a big chunk of his arm in his mouth and began sucking, making a sound that carried for several blocks. “No, no, Tiny, that is way to much sucking. You will kill the poor girl. Easy,... just an nice, easy gentle suck. You will get the hang of it. Keep trying on your arm. You might try running your tongue around on your arm some also. Don’t do that on the first kiss or two, ok? That’s probably second date kissing I think.”

All the way back to the hotel, Tiny was practicing. At least you could not hear him now. So, J. I. thought perhaps he was improving. Finally, he turned to J. I. and said, “I think I got it now. I think I can kiss her pretty good if I get the chance. Thank you for teaching me how to kiss, J. I.”

“Don’t say that, Tiny, don’t say it that way. Folks will think you been kissing on me. I didn’t teach you, you taught yourself how to, so far anyway. Maybe Juanita will take over later tonight and you will really get the hang of it. Reckon?” asked J. I.

“I sure hope you are right, J. I., I surely hope you are right.”

J. I. got to thinking later that night that this was the first time Tiny was away from home over night and he had never had the opportunity to walk a girl home before. And at Tiny’s age, it was certainly time for him to learn a little about life. The only thing was, this Juanita may be a little too educated romantically for Tiny. But, he did not know that for sure, but she certainly was forward in her approach.

The next morning J. I. was up early and out on the street. Tiny had the adjoining room last night, but J. I. never heard him come in. He waited out in the street watching all the miners going to work and cowboys staggering out of motels and rooming houses heading out to work or wherever the lot of them headed this early in the morning. Some of them looked to be in pretty rough shape.

He looked up to see Tiny sticking his head out the door, kind of timidly, making J. I. wonder what was going on. Slowly, Tiny approached him and J. I. knew right away that something was different in Tiny. He had a twinkle in his eye and a big smile on his face.

“What is wrong with you Tiny? Why are you, er, acting so strange, or mopping or whatever it is?”

“Well, I ain’t mopping, I’m kind of, well, er,..uh,, I don’t know what I am, J. I. You know what?” Tiny had the weirdest look on his face while talking that it scared J. I.

“No, I don’t know what, Tiny, why don’t you tell me.” J. I. was feeling that he was about to learn some sad or bad news and was already bracing for it.

“That Juanita girl, well, she wants me to marry up with her. She taught me how to kiss, J. I., and I mean kiss real good. And I really liked it. By golly, in a few minutes after we had been kissing some, she asked me to marry her. I don’t know about all of that. I mean it was fast. I like her and all, but I don’t know about marrying up with her. When you kiss some gal, does that mean you need to marry her, J. I. I am all confused now; do you know what I mean?”

J. I. was stunned with this news. It was something that he did not want to deal with right now but he had an understanding of what Tiny was fighting on the inside, so he did not want to give him bad information, knowing this affair was going way to fast. Something was not right was what J. I. was thinking.

“Tiny, that was to fast. Kissing a girl don’t mean you need to marry her, or even that you would think about it. Something is not quite right with a girl as pretty as Juanita going out with a guy once and then asking him to marry her. And please don’t take what I am saying wrong, Tiny, but girls just don’t do that, I don’t think they do anyway. What did you tell her when she asked you, Tiny? Did you say yes or what?”

“Gosh darn it all, J. I., I was so taken back by what she said, I didn’t know what to say. I think I finally told her I would have to think on it some. She wants me to come by the café today and let her know what my answer is. I told her my home was way off from here and she said that’s ok. Her Pa owns that café and she has to work for him and she said she wanted out of there. She said all the old men in that café pinch her butt and say nasty things to her and she wants out of it. Dang, J. I., she sure is pretty and she sure can kiss. She let me put my hand on her, er, on her, you know....They are so soft and wonderful, J. I., it just plum made me lightheaded. I just don’t know what to do.”

J. I. was in a state of shock, stunned and did not know how to attack this particular problem. One thing J. I. was not too good at was courting, or so he felt, and he certainly could not give directions in that field with any kind of authority. However, this was his buddy and he felt like this was way too fast for anybody. Therefore, he determined that he should be the one to try and put the brakes on this relationship.

“Tiny, I was hoping we would ride around some of the ranches in the territory looking for Black. This town is much bigger than I thought. We can talk with the Sheriff here to see if he knows anyone matching Black description. But, what I am getting at is that we don’t have time for this girl...” Then seeing the downcast look on Tiny’s face made J. I. shift gears, just a little, “ Well, if she is that important to you and you say you don’t want to spend time looking for Black today....but we are deputies looking for a crook, Tiny, so I will leave it up to you. Do we go looking for Black today, Tiny? What do you think?”

“I can’t think about anything except that girl, J. I. She is pretty and I think I would like to marry her. If her Pa is mean to her and makes her work in that café, then maybe she needs me to watch out for her some..... Can you ride around for a day or two looking for Black while I get my thought together on Juanita? Would you be mad at me if I did that?”

J. I. had a sinking feeling. He was thinking that if Tiny had been shot in a gun battle while hunting Black that would have been much easier to explain than a girl asking Tiny to marry. What in the world would Mr. and Mrs. Carter and Jan think of him if Tiny did marry this girl. J. I. had no idea how to handle this problem.

“You need to get to know this girl, Tiny, I mean ask her some questions about why she is determined to marry so quickly. Tell her that your family should really meet any girl that you want to marry before the vows are taken. You would feel much better if your

family could give their blessings to the marriage. Surely she can and will understand that. Maybe she can plan a rail trip back to Las Cruces and meet your family before you do get married. Talk to her and find out if she would be willing to go meet you folks. Try that Tiny, would you please?" J. I. was practically pleading with Tiny now wanting to get this load off his shoulders. Tiny needed advice from his Ma and Pa on this kind of life's stepping stones.

"Yeah, that's a good idea, J. I. I will talk to her about it. I agree with you that things are moving so fast its plum making me dizzy. So you will give me a day or two to visit with her some and then I will either go help you find Black or I will take Juanita back to Las Cruces with me. Is that ok, J. I.?"

For the first time, J. I. was wishing he had not brought Tiny on this trip. Things were taking a turn for the worse but J. I. was at a loss as to what should be done.

"Ok, I will agree to that Tiny, but you need to stay close to the room or go down to the café to eat. I worry about you seeing some old man pinch Juanita on the butt, then you getting into a fight over it and getting into all sorts of trouble. Promise me you will hold your temper if you see something like that,....Well,...Shucks....Oh, I don't know Tiny...I would feel lots better if you would come with me. We could come back early and then go down to the café together...I think that would be best." J. I. was afraid that Tiny would be possessive of Juanita and the hard core gunmen type might not take kindly to Tiny's feelings. J. I. wanted to be around if any trouble started.

Tiny said, "Do you agree to let me stay or not?"

"Well, I am kind of the boss of this outfit, Tiny, and I don't want to sound like your brother Matt, but, yeah, I think you need to go with me. We are being paid to capture an

outlaw, so I think we need to try and track him down, Tiny. That's what I feel. Then we can see Juanita when we get back?

Tiny said, "Yes Sir" and started walking toward the livery stable, shoulder slumped and with a gait that was leaving J. I. far behind. J. I. let him go wondering if he had done the wrong thing and had maybe lost a friend. He thought he would soon get over it though. He hoped he would anyway.

Chapter 24

Juanita Garcia

Juanita Garcia spent the night rolling and tossing. She was not proud of her actions last night. Tiny Carter sure seemed like a nice guy and was such a big teddy bear. He was truly sweet and honest, she could tell right away and she hated to be deceptive but she thought that he was a man she could put her trust in and maybe even one who would help her.

Since her Mom had died her Dad kept her so busy at the café that she had very little time to associate with boys of her age. She was getting mighty tired of the old cowboys and miners trying to pinch and pat her behind each time she brought the food to the tables. It was hard to avoid the men when setting a plate of food on the table. Once, she dumped a plate on a cowboy who ran his hand up her leg while she was serving him. Her Dad had gotten really mad at her and told her that was a small price to pay for having customers and keeping them coming back. His thoughts were that he needed to have good food, plenty of it and a pretty girl or girls serving it. Juanita really filled that bill and probably could have brought in customers even with bad food. However, she thought her dad was going way too far in his efforts to please some of these undisciplined and unsavory men.

When her Mom was alive and working in the café she made sure that none of the customers got too friendly with Juanita. She was good looking herself and a tough old girl. She would put the cowboys in their place pronto. She did not fuss when they pinched her

on the butt, but don't pinch and feel of Juanita. A lot of the cowboys thought that was a pretty fair trade and took her up on it, taking more liberties than they should have. Mr. Garcia thought "business is good."

Juanita had been thinking for some time now about marriage. She could marry a lot of boys her age around Tombstone. She certainly did not have a shortage of guys interested in her, but she did not have time for them. Most of them worked and they could not hang around the café all night waiting on her to get off. And none of the ones she knew had any money. She had decided a long time ago that she could marry for money just as easy as she could for love. She wanted more than a working cowboy or miner could give her and she had vowed that she would keep her eyes open for any opportunity to better herself by means of marriage. She figured if it did not work out, she could get a divorce. Divorce was frowned upon by many people she knew and she would only use it as last resort. But she planned to married for money as soon as she could.

Last night, when the two cowboys came into the café and were waiting for a table, one of the men seated at a table said, "There is Tiny Carter, son of one of the richest ranchers in New Mexico. Wonder what he is doing out here in Tombstone?"

The other man said, "Which one is he?"

"He's the big guy. He rides the biggest horse I have ever seen in my life. He said it was a Clydesdale. It's really on old plow horse I think, but it sure is a beautiful animal. His Pa bought several of them and gave one to Tiny. They call him Tiny 'cause he is so big."

And Juanita looked. And she thought, "Yes, he is big. And his dad is the richest man in New Mexico. And I even like the way he looks and I like the way he smiles. This may

be my night. I will try and make this my night” she said to herself. And she started making immediate plans to met Mr. Tiny.

The night had gone better than she had planned. Apparently, Tiny had never been out with a girl giving Juanita the freedom to do a lot of things that would be of interest to a first time guy. She knew she had opened herself up to an experienced man wondering about her motives, but the more she talked to Tiny the more noticed the inexperience and she knew she was capable of taking advantage of him. He was nice and she even had to lead him into kissing her and on the second kiss had managed to get his hand on her breast. She could feel him get all excited over that and she felt that things were going her way now, for sure.

She also felt she needed to keep Tiny away from J. I. as much as possible until she could get him hooked. She wanted to have Tiny rushed and making quick decision as she figured that would work more in her favor. So, she invited Tiny down to the café to give her an answer on her marriage proposal. She had sold Tiny on the idea that she needed to get away from all the nasty old men coming into the café and had told him her dad did nothing to try and stop them from pinching and feeling her, which of course was true as long as they did not get to coarse with her.

She kept watching the door after opening hours expecting Tiny to show up just anytime. As the day wore on and no Tiny, she was really becoming troubled. But, she did not feel that it was Tiny Carter staying away from her, but the other cowboy accompanying him that was keeping him from her. Tiny had told her the cowboy’s name, but she did not remember, nor did she want to remember him if he was going to mess up her plans.

When the supper customers started arriving she started looking for Tiny again. It was almost dark when the body of a customer literally filled up the doorway. Seems as though he stretched to make himself even taller and spread his shoulders to make himself even wider. He was big.

Juanita saw him. Saw all of him and she was happy. He was by himself. Now she just needed to claim him for her own.

Chapter 25

J. I. Meets Black

1888

When Tiny and Juanita left Tombstone for Benson, J. I. had made up with Tiny to some degree, but Tiny was still a little sore at him. On the day they left Tombstone going out looking for Black, the longer Tiny rode the madder he got. But the time they had visited two area ranches looking for Black, Tiny announced to J. I. that he was going back to Tombstone and he did not care what J. I. had to say or how he felt about it. Juanita was the girl for him and gosh dang it all, he was going to tell her about it. He told J. I., “Don’t you get in my way. I’m going and you ain’t gonna stop me.”

J. I. had backed off, lowered his head because he knew that at this point it was useless to say anything or try anything. Tiny had made up his mind. He wished him the best.

By the time Tiny and Juanita had got around to telling J. I. that Tiny was going back home to introduce Juanita to his family, Tiny had cooled off some, but he still kept a distance from J. I. as if he thought J. I. might try and talk him out of his trip. He did apologize to J. I. for leaving him to search for Black by himself. Of course, he told Tiny not to worry, that he would be ok and that Black was not Tiny’s fight anyway.

Over many weeks of searching for Black, visiting ranches and farms around the Tombstone, Benson, and Fort Huachuca area, people came to know J. I. and none had seen Black or at least they did not admit to knowing Black. J. I. got into habits of riding out a day or two and always returning to Tombstone, renting the same room and eating at the same café. Juanita had been replaced by a cousin that was not nearly as cute in the

face as Juanita but she had a body the made all the men forget Juanita immediately. She learned quickly how to make tips while serving her Uncle's meals.

J. I. enjoyed watching her play the men into giving her huge chunks of change for serving her in the carefree style all of them enjoyed. She seemed to know just how far she could go with each hombre she served. If one became too rough, she would scold him in a good natured way but at the same time the cowboy knew he had been called down. So far it had worked for her.

J. I. had enjoyed his meal this one spring evening, gave a good tip to the new girl, and she asked, "Are you the cowboy that's looking for a Mr. Black? If you are, he was in here last night. He is mean. He slapped me on the butt every time I walked by and he slapped me hard, right here," pointing to her left buttock. "I do not like that man. He is staying at the hotel down the street. He tried to get me to go down there with him last night. That's how I know. But, I did not go and he was mad about it. I told him there were a lot of girls over at the "Birdcage" and for him to go over there and have all the fun he wanted. He said, "But I don't want them, I want you." And I told him to just "want on Buddy". I think that made him mad but I didn't care. Some of the men in here last night said they thought you were asking around about a Mr. Black. I hope you find him. What you want him for?"

"Oh, we have some business we have to take care of. It may be some serious business or we might can work it out easily. We will see. Thank you for letting me know he is in town. I think I will mosey on down that way and see if I can see him. See you later young lady." J. I. started adjusting his gun belt as he walked towards the door, slipping the pistol out of the holster to make sure it was good and loose.

It was getting late in the day, but the sun was still bright and low in the western sky making the shadows long. It was hard for anyone to see walking west. J. I. was walking east and could see very well looking east. He was looking at his long shadow as he walked, kind of intrigued by his own swagger, one that he did not think he had. He was smiling about that and thinking what he was going to say to after his encounter with him. At that moment, from behind him he heard, "I hear you are looking for me, cowboy. What's the deal?"

The hair stood up on the back of J. I. neck. He knew he had made a bad mistake. He had been going to fast and was too eager to find Black. Now Black had worked himself into a favorable position for a gunfight by having the sun to his back, making J. I. face the sun.. He knew when he turned around to address Black that he had to be prepared to fire right away, but he did not want to draw first. He hoped that would talk a little allowing some time to pass before the action started. He took the time while facing away from the voice to adjust his hat downward lower on his forehead giving him some aid from the bright sunshine.

J. I. turned and said, "Is that you, Mr. Black?" Taking the turn good and slow with his hands away from his guns as he spoke. As J. I. imagined, Black was in the center of the street with his long shadow reaching almost to the feet of J. I. This is good thought J. I.. I can almost shoot without looking at the man, just aim in the direction of the long shadow. But he still raised his eyes until he could see the image of the man standing in the bright sunlight and he could also see a man on the roof top with a rifle pointing his way.

"Yes sir, I have been looking for you. I need you to go back to El Paso with me to clear up a little matter back there. Just so you know, I am now a Deputy U. S. Marshall,

working out of the El Paso Texas office, and we are investigating the death of Howard Hedges. You are presently being charged with his death, Mr. Black, so I need to take you back so a court of law can determine if you are guilty or innocent of those charges. As a matter of fact, Mr. Black, I should tell you now that I am placing you under arrest for the murder of Howard Hedges and to all you men standing here in the streets of Tombstone, you are witnesses and you have heard me state the charges against Mr. Black. I am requesting that you surrender peaceably, Mr. Black. You can spend the night in the Tombstone jail and then you and I will head out for El Paso tomorrow. It is a shame you killed him when he caught you in your rustling ways.”

“You got that all wrong. Howard worked for me and he came up to the line shack for his pay. Matter of fact, if you had not come in everything would have been ok and Howard would still be alive today. It’s all your fault it happened,” said Black.

“So he had to draw his gun on you to get his pay? That don’t make any sense. Howard was a good man and he caught you stealing red-handed. I saw you beat him to the draw and him lay his gun down. When I came in you made sure you shot him to shut him up.”

“Well, you are guessing but since you gonna die today, I’ll tell you. Howard was in on the rustling with us. He would tell us the best place to get the biggest herd and keep his hands to a minimum so we would not have any trouble. His Dad had him working for nothing, so he liked to have the money we were paying him. Only thing, since his Dad died he wanted out because he no longer needed our money. Yeah, he had to give in or die. That’s how it worked out anyway.”

J. I. was glad Black had become talkative. It was buying J. I. some time.

J. I. had already figured out that he would need to shoot and move so as not to give the roof top shooter too much of a target. “Well, it’s no need for any more shooting. You give me your guns and we will go on back to El Paso, Mr. Black”.

“Like hell, we will. I ain’t going nowhere, cowboy, and the likes of you will never take me in.” Black had just finished making the statement when he went for his gun. Things went in slow motion for J. I. He remembered all the lessons Pete Brown had given to him about being in a gunfight. Pete had said, “it is not always the fastest draw to win the gun battle, but the slower, sure shot.

Sure enough, Black’s first shot was faster than J. I., but it hit the ground just in front of J. I. grazing his pants leg. J. I.’s first shot was just seconds behind Black’s with the bullet hitting Black high in the left shoulder, spinning him to the left and as he was turning he lifted the gun to get his second shot off which was high and zinged past J. I.’s ear. He felt the heat of the bullet as it passed by him and also heard the zinging sound the shot made. He also heard a rifle shot about the same time as the first shot from Black. He looked up to see the roof top shooter topple from the building. So he had some help from somewhere up the street and he knew whoever fired that shot saved his life. He saw all this without losing his concentration on the happening on the street.

J. I.’s second shot was true, catching Black in the chest, passing through the lungs and heart and Mr. Black dropped immediately. He did not move again. J. I. walked up to him and slipped the gun out of his hand. Just as he had done this, the Sheriff of Tombstone walked up. He said he had witnessed the whole thing and he had shot the roof top shooter because he knew that gave an unfair advantage to Black. J. I. thanked him several times for his help.

J. I. asked the Sheriff to write him an account of the entire event of the evening, including the confession Black made, so he could take it back to the U. S. Marshall in El Paso. He hoped this would proclaim the innocents of himself in any involvement of Howard Hedges death. The Sheriff said certainly the actions of Black also proved to him that Black was guilty or he would have wanted to go back to clear his name. Also, putting a gunman on the roof top was damaging evidence of guilt in the sheriff's eyes.

He provided J. I. was an excellent account of that day's action in the streets of Tombstone. He provided the details of the confession that J. I. would need in a court of law as to J. I. placing Black under arrest and telling Black that he was giving him the opportunity to return to El Paso and tell his side of the story if he was innocent. He repeated the last words of Black telling J. I. that Howard Hedges was in on the rustling, but wanted out of the whole sorry deal. Also, he stated that he "was not going anywhere with you and the likes of you will never take me in." The Sheriff stated it was his belief that Black was guilty as charged by young Deputy Marshall Hall. It was a fair shootout stated the Sheriff, because he personally shot the man on the roof top that was there to shoot J. I. Black had ample opportunity to surrender either to Hall or to him, since he had been on the streets at the time the shooting started.

The local newspaper, The Tombstone Epitaph, also published an article regarding the shootout in the paper the following date and the editor gave an outstanding eyewitness account of the shooting, even saying the U. S. Deputy Marshall gave Black the first shot. He mentioned the aid of the sheriff in shooting the man stationed on the roof. He mentioned the fact that Black was under arrest for the murder of Howard Hedges back in

El Paso. So, between the newspaper and the Sheriff's account of the shooting, J. I. believed he had sufficient means to clear his name with the law and also with the Hedges.

He was now ready to go home, first to marry Jan and then take her to Serria Blanca to start the rest of their lives together

Chapter 26

Mr. and Mrs. J. I. Hall, Jr

1889

Nearly a year after starting building on J. I. and Jan's house they were finally finished and the place was ready for them to move in. They had enjoyed the cozy quarters of the little house that J. I. had lived in by himself and for a time it was a place for Juan and his new bride to live. Juan had moved back to El Paso for a time. However, when J. I. had returned to take over the Rocking B Ranch, Juan had heard about it and asked for his old job back. He and J. I. had become special friends over the years and J. I. thought in time Juan would make an excellent ranch foreman. That was his plans anyway. Right now, J. I. was still Pete's foreman or right hand man, it depended on who Pete was talking to when he told them about J. I. But privately, he assured J. I. that the will had been made and that Nellie Fay and Pete were willing everything over to J. I. upon their demise. He was also named executer of the estate should they become incapacitated in some fashion or another.

Both Nellie Fay and Pete fell in love with Jan as soon as they saw her. They had come to the Carter Ranch for the wedding. They spent several days in El Paso visiting with Sadie. Anne had already married and was starting her own family. Of course, she had time to come by and visit with the Brown's while they were in town.

While the Brown's were visiting in El Paso, Jan and J. I. had moved Jan's dowry via the train up to Serria Blanca and Jose had met them with horses and the wagon to haul her stuff on up to the Rocking B ranch. Jan had gotten used to the ranch and small house

while the Brown were not around. She loved the ranch and loved taking care of the garden and all the flowers that Nellie Fay had planted,

By the time the Brown's returned to the ranch, Jan was feeling completely at home. They had been married a little over a year when the new house was completed and so far no little Hall's were on the way. That fact disappointed Jan, and to a lesser degree, Nellie Fay who was ready to have a baby around to take care of and love, rock and sing to.

J. I. and Jan had been in the house a little over a month and had the interior fixed to their likings. Jan wanted J. I. to invite Pete and Nellie Fay over for dinner one Sunday evening to allow them to see her house in its completed form. They visited back and forth every day anyway but Jan wanted to make it official, a house warming of a sort.

It was during this evening meal when she announced that she had received a letter from her Mother. They were all in good health and she would soon be a grandmother. Tiny and Juanita were expecting a child in a few months. She said she had never seen Tiny so happy as he had been these past few months. She expressed what a precious young lady Juanita was. J. I. slightly lowered his head and smiled, happy that it all turned out so well. Tiny and Juanita had been married shortly after they arrived back to the Carter Ranch after leaving Tombstone. So now they are having a child and he knew Tiny would be beaming with joy.

Jan also announced that she herself was expecting and giving them a rough date for the arrival. Cheers erupted at the table as she had not even told J. I. the good news yet.

The child was born about seven months later, a little girl, Wanda. You would have thought that was the only baby to have ever been born. Both from Nellie Fay and Pete, who pampered and petted the little Wanda and spoiled her something terrible.

About age two, the entire family planned a trip down to El Paso to see the Carter's and let the Carter's see their grand baby girl. They were excited to get to visit with all of them, including Matt and Hazel, Tiny and Juanita and child, and Isaac and his new wife, Lizzie.

Tiny grabbed J. I. and said, "Have you heard what we named our little boy, J. I.?"

J. I. said, "No, I don't guess I have."

"Well, little buddy, we named him Judge. Judge Frank Carter. What do you think about that?" said a beaming Tiny. J. I. happened to look over at Judge, who was presently trying to pick up little Wanda. She was not at all happy about the squeeze he was putting on her. Jan went over to separate the two.

"When he grows up he may hit you for naming him that and don't come crying to me when it happens either.... Well, thanks, Tiny, I appreciate you doing that and I am honored. He is a beautiful baby," as he put his arm up on Tiny's shoulder.

"Hey, did you see my "Wanted for Sheriff" poster, J. I.?" He reached over behind him and picked up a few sheets of poster paper:

Frank "Tiny" Carter

Wanted for Sheriff

A Heavyweight in Law Enforcement

A Full Measure of Justice for All

A vote for Tiny is a big vote for peace

"What you think about that, J. I.? Pretty good, huh? You want that deputies job I offered you a couple of years ago? I need a good man."

“Well, it sounds real good, Tiny, but that sister of yours is just keeping me too busy to be off taking vacations like that. I guess I better turn you down this time.” They both had a good chuckle about that.

Jan visited with Matt and Hazel some, but J. I. completely stayed away from them. He was afraid that he and Matt may still have some issues so it was better to leave well enough alone. They left early in the evening going back to the Hedges Ranch, who Matt and Hazel now ran. Hazel was the business manager and Matt took care of the ranching business, er, doing mainly what Hazel said to do. J. I. had heard Hazel telling Matt some of the things that should be done and Matt was looking sheepishly around to see who all was listening.

J. I. thanked God for favors granted.

The End