

COTTON'S DEVIL



A Sheriff Cotton Burke Western

Phil Dunlap



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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COTTON'S WAR
COTTON'S LAW
COTTON'S DEVIL

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Chapter 1

New Mexico Territory—1880

The telegram read simply:

COME TO SILVER CITY. NEED HELP. GOING
TO HANG.
THORN MCCANN

That was all. But it was enough.

“I’m not sure why you feel the need to ride all the way to Silver City to try saving the worthless scoundrel that rode into town pretending to be a common gunslinger looking to add you to his list of kills. You know he nearly scared me to death. Remember how long it took for him to tell *you* who he really was? You said yourself you weren’t sure he could be trusted. And you *know* he probably shot and killed Bart Havens, so what makes the man worth saving?” Emily Wagner held out a cup of coffee to Sheriff Cotton Burke. “Even though killing Havens was certainly in *your* best interest.”

Cotton was stuffing a couple of freshly boiled shirts and some socks into one side of a saddlebag. The other side was filled with coffee, some beef jerky, flour, beans, and extra ammunition. Emily leaned on the door frame watching him prepare for his trip to Silver City, to see for himself what bounty hunter Thorn McCann had done to earn him a date with the hangman’s noose. Her expression was a mixture of skepticism and disdain. Whether Cotton believed Thorn deserved to pay the ultimate price for his misdeeds was something else entirely. He was neither judge nor jury, except when faced with the choice to kill or be killed by another’s hand.

“Didn’t say anything about savin’ his, uh, butt.” He brushed a shock of brown hair back from his forehead, took the cup, and raised it to his lips. “Thanks.”

From the perspective of recent events, Thorn had probably been guilty of many crimes, although Cotton couldn’t put his finger on exactly what those crimes were. He had been asked to come to Silver City and see what could be done to save a man’s life, and Cotton Burke was the type of person to honor such a request. Besides, he still had a lot of unanswered questions for McCann concerning the death of Bart Havens. So he’d assigned his deputy, Memphis Jack Stump, the task of keeping Apache Springs safe until he returned. It was a decision he hadn’t made lightly, especially since Jack had a tendency to drink a little too much and spend a little too much time in the bed of a prostitute named Melody, with whom he lived. Other than a touch of irresponsibility from time to time, Jack was a generally dependable friend and a damned good man with a gun. Still, a lot was riding on his ability to take being a deputy as seriously as was needed.

“You still haven’t answered my question: Why are you going?” Emily said, again.

“I’m not sure I got it all worked out in my own mind, but I know I need to go before whatever it is they’re plannin’ on stringin’ him up for puts him in the ground before I get to ask him some questions of my own. I reckon the thing that puzzles me most is why he called on *me* for help. Especially considerin’ the circumstances which brought him here in the first place.”

“I know you want to do right by him, but I’m not convinced he’s an honorable man, nor one deserving of your friendship,” she said with a frown.

“I’ve got plenty of reservations about him, and I’m not goin’ out of anything near to friendship. I

figure any man's due the benefit of the doubt, though. And I'm not entirely satisfied with his story on how Bart Havens died. This could be my last chance to get some answers. I plan to be back in about a week or so. Keep the coffee hot," he said, handing her back the empty cup and leaning over to kiss her. She followed him out the door of his tiny house, to where she had tied her buckboard. The little house was the one extra accommodation the town of Apache Springs afforded its sheriff, even though he chose to spend his nights at Emily Wagner's ranch whenever possible. His house was too small, too confining, and far too lonely. And besides, being away from Emily too long made him damned difficult to be around.

Emily gave him a weak wave and tentative smile as he mounted his mare and rode slowly down the south road out of town. He hadn't felt the need to wake Jack. They'd spoken at length the evening before. Jack had waved off the responsibility handed him, as if being the sole lawman in a town that had seen more than its share of gunplay over the past three months was merely an everyday event. As Cotton passed the jail on his way through town, he glanced over to see his deputy at the desk. The sheriff was shocked, it being barely nine o'clock in the morning, an hour that usually found Memphis Jack still snoring away.

Jack didn't look up as Cotton rode by.

Cotton wasn't making very good time. The day was hot and the terrain difficult. He dared not push his mare too hard lest she fail him at a time and place where help was nonexistent. A few months earlier, a band of renegade Chiricahua Apaches from across the Arizona Territory border had tried to raid a small village and stockade called Fort Tularosa, not far from the trail he now rode. They'd been driven off by a small detachment of buffalo soldiers led by a brave sergeant. But even then the locals were understandably nervous about the possibility of the Indians returning, since the leader of the Apaches was a notorious warrior named Victorio, who was not known to take defeat lightly. This incident weighed on the sheriff's mind, too. One man alone would stand little chance of survival if caught in the open by a band of Indians bent on killing anyone with white skin.

Small raids on local ranches were a reality most endured, though fearfully. Few lives were lost, but the same couldn't be said for any cattle or horses straying from the herds. Some of the renegades raided simply because they were hungry. Most of the ranchers didn't begrudge them a few missing cattle if it staved off open warfare. But Victorio's attacks were an attempt to convince the white settlers they should go back east and leave the Indian lands alone.

Cotton urged his horse down a rocky slope, toward some trees and the likelihood of finding water. He decided to camp by a stream close to where he and the Silver City blacksmith, Bear Hollow Wilson, had once sought shelter from two opposing bunches of men bent on taking Cotton's prisoner from him over three months back. That occasion had given Cotton a new appreciation for mob rule. Well-armed and cautious, he and Wilson had thought they were fully prepared to safely transport and protect their prisoner. Their preparations had proven inadequate, for by happenstance they'd lost him only not in a way Cotton and his temporary deputy could have ever contemplated. Their prisoner, a man named McMasters, had murdered the town marshal of Silver City. Since Cotton had been desperate to get back to Apache Springs to do whatever he could to free Emily Wagner from a gang of ruthless outlaws holding her hostage, and the town had been left without a lawman, he'd volunteered to take the killer to his own jurisdiction for trial. He and Wilson were faced with townsfolk who wanted the killer brought to justice without any trial and the man's own men who wanted him freed. Or so everyone assumed.

After a brief standoff amid volleys of gunfire, McMasters managed to break his bonds and make a dash for freedom toward his own men. But, without warning, one of those men rose up from behind a boulder and blew him into the next century with a twelve-gauge shotgun. The man later explained that

no one wanted there to be any chance that McMasters might escape justice and return to the mines, where he regularly inflicted harsh punishments for minor infractions of his rules, especially when he had been drinking heavily, which was often. Now, camped nearby, the whole incident came back to Cotton as if it were an unsettling nightmare.

When Cotton reined in at the hotel in Silver City, he looked around to see if he could remember where the blacksmith's shop was located. And because his last time in town had been a while ago, he needed to get reacquainted with his surroundings. And he also hoped to say hello to the man who'd volunteered to help haul the killer to Apache Springs for trial: Bear Hollow Wilson. But first, he needed to locate the marshal's office. Since he didn't remember where the law hung out in Silver City and didn't immediately see any sign to indicate a location, he figured to ask one of the locals for whoever had been elected to fill the shoes of the murdered marshal.

He hefted his saddlebags onto his shoulder and strode into the hotel and up to the desk. The same young man he remembered from his last visit was behind the counter, only this time he seemed to be gazing off into nothingness. Cotton figured his distraction meant he must be in love.

"Excuse me, young man, do you know where I can find the law in this town?"

"Uh-huh," the fellow mumbled with his chin in his hands, a distant look in his eyes.

"I wonder if it would be too much trouble for you to tell me, then."

"No trouble at all," said the desk clerk, barely above a whisper, his gaze still locked on some distant visage.

Yep, this kid's in love, Cotton thought. But, since waiting for the smitten youth to awaken from daydreaming of his beloved was not part of Cotton's agenda, he felt it time to make a statement that might be responded to properly. He slammed his fist on the counter. The young man's eyes came open in shock. He began to stammer, clearly flustered by Cotton's action.

"Oh, yes, sir, uh, what was it you wanted? I only have two rooms left and you can have whichever one you want, and if you want dinner the dining room is off to the left, and if—"

"Hold on, sonny, I just asked where I could find the law in this town."

When the kid noticed the sheriff's badge pinned to Cotton's shirt, he became more disoriented than before.

"Oh! Why, yes, the county sheriff is off somewhere chasing rustlers. And the town marshal is, uh, probably in his office, er, the jail, unless he isn't, in which case I'd suggest you try the restaurant next door to the—"

"Son, just direct me to the marshal's office. I really don't have all day to listen to your blathering. Okay?"

"Uh-huh. It's down the street, one block, on the other side. Above the door it says—"

" 'Marshal's Office'?"

"Why, er, yessir, how'd you know?"

"I don't have my head up my butt over some female; that's how I was able to figure it out. Thanks."

Cotton left the lad stammering and fidgeting behind the counter, still trying to gather his wits about him. *Oh, to be seventeen, again*, Cotton thought to himself. As he walked out into the sun-splashed street, one glance and he saw his objective. *Maybe I should have looked around more thoroughly before making it harder on myself*, he thought. Exactly where the boy had indicated, a small, barely visible wooden sign stuck out at ninety degrees from the front of a clapboard-sided building next to a restaurant. As he approached the jail, the door opened and a massive shadow emerged. He broke into a smile as he recognized the man with the Sharps rifle dangling from his hand.

"Bear Hollow Wilson! Good to see you're still here." Cotton stuck out his hand and was

momentarily taken aback as the sun struck the silver badge on the man's chest.

~~“Sheriff Burke! What brings you to Silver City?”~~

“Couple of things, actually. But first, tell me what convinced you to take up a badge.”

“Short and simple: No one else would take it. Scared, I suppose. They offered, I accepted. Besides I needed the money.”

“I can't think of a better man for the job. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Now, what brought you...?”

“Oh, yeah. Well I got a telegram from a fellow named Thorn McCann. Said you had him locked up. Said he was going to get his neck stretched. I wanted to talk to him before that happened.”

“Hmm. Sorry you made the trip for nothin', Sheriff. You're a tad bit late.”

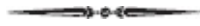
“Oh? Pretty quick trial, wasn't it?”

“Didn't ever get to a trial. Judge wasn't due for another week. Some of the townsfolk was kinda gettin' impatient waitin around, so...”

“So, where is he?”

“He's gone.”

Chapter 2



You already strung him up? Without a trial?”

“Nope. Didn’t hang him. The vigilantes didn’t get to him, either,” Bear Hollow said.

“So where is he?”

“Now that’s a puzzlement. Wish I knew. I came in with his dinner late yesterday evenin’, sometime after dark, and his cell was empty. Musta happened while I was out checkin’ the streets.”

“Someone busted him out?”

“I reckon you couldn’t actually call it ‘busted.’ More like they just sauntered in, unlocked the cell and he walked out. Took his gun with him, too. Right outta my desk drawer. Looks like he got his horse from the stable and rode out of town pretty as you please. No one saw him, so they couldn’t stop him. Don’t imagine anyone was that inclined to tangle with a gunslinger like him even if they had spotted him.”

“Did you get up a posse?”

“Nope. While the folks hereabouts were damned upset with what he’d done, they weren’t all that interested in chasin’ him to hell and gone. So it was up to me, or nobody. The town is my jurisdiction period. And the county sheriff is, as usual, out of town. I’m sure you see my predicament.”

“I reckon. But, tell me, what was it that McCann did that brought on his arrest?”

“He was livin’ high, him and that beautiful gal he took up with right after he arrived. Gamblin’, buyin’ new clothes for the both of them, a new gun, ammunition, finest rooms at the hotel, and meals for himself and the lady. Wasn’t until some of the merchants took the money their newfound benefactor had paid their bills with and tried to deposit it in the bank. That’s when all hell broke loose.”

A wry smile came over Cotton’s face. “Let me guess. Every last cent of it was counterfeit.”

“Right down to what he paid the liveryman for takin’ care of his horse.”

“I reckon I see why everyone was thinkin’ of a necktie party. But unless it could be proven that he did the counterfeiting and that he’d spread it around *knowing* it was worthless, what he did wasn’t a hangin’ offense. That’s where trials come in handy.”

“True enough. But it was hard to make folks understand the finer points of the law when they’d been taken in by a charlatan. Hard on a man’s pride, if you know what I mean.”

“I do, at that. Do you know where I can find the lady? What was her name?”

“Called herself, uh, Eve Smith, as I recollect. And a real looker she was, too.”

“Eve Smith? Black hair, brown eyes, well dressed?”

“That’s the one. She cut a right smart figure.”

“If I was to want a word with the lady, where would I find her?”

“Same boardin’ house you and that other feller stayed in last time you was here. End of the street.”

“Thank you, Marshal Wilson. I’ll be stoppin’ by before I leave town. Still got a couple of things puzzlin’ me.”

* * *

When he got to the end of the street, he saw the lady who owned the boardinghouse out front sweepin’ the porch of dirt and debris brought by the night winds. Along the front of the porch grew a row of sunflowers. He took off his Stetson as he approached.

“Good day, ma’am. Do you remember me? I stayed with you some months back.”

~~Without looking up from her task, she said, “Of course I do. I don’t never forget a voice. Don’t~~
need to see a face, neither. But if you’re lookin’ to stay a night or two, I’m afraid I’m all full up. Some cattlemen just arrived expecting a herd they’re lookin’ to buy. Fellers from Santa Fe, as I recall.”

“No, I’ll not be needin’ a room, but I *would* like to talk to a young lady you have stayin’ with you Miss Eve Smith?”

“Was,” she said, leaning the broom against the wall.

“Was?”

“Was here, ain’t no more.”

“Do you have any idea where I can find her? It’s important.”

“Nope. Can’t say I care, either. Took me for a pretty penny, she did. Her and that scoundrel McCann. She stayed with me only two nights before she moved down to the hotel. Took them, too, as understand it.”

“I take it the money she paid for her room with was bogus.”

“Yep. Good thing she didn’t stay longer or I’d had to haul out my dead husband’s twelve-gauge. Oh, never mind. I’m a softhearted old fool. Truth is I wouldn’ta done no such thing.”

Cotton had to grin at the old lady’s admission of what she figured was a flaw in her personality. He didn’t see it that way, however. He put his Stetson back on and turned to walk away.

“What is it you were wantin’ to see her about, anyway? I see you’ve a badge on your vest, so it must be something havin’ to do with the law.”

“I’m not all that sure, myself. Kinda hopin’ she could give me somethin’ to go on that might help with findin’ Thorn McCann.”

“Can’t tell you nothin’ other than he slipped the noose just in time and made tracks for the freedom trail.”

“Freedom trail?”

“That’s what my old pappy always said meant ‘gettin’ shed of the law.’ ”

Cotton laughed. “Reckon that’s just what he did, at that. Thank you, ma’am.”

He headed back down the dusty street to find Marshal Bear Hollow Wilson.

Chapter 3



Marshal Wilson was at his desk, struggling as he attempted to bite off a piece of jerky. The expression on his face suggested he would just as soon be eating an old shoe.

“Hope that’s not your lunch, Marshal.”

“Yep. Got a *real* tight budget here in Silver City. The council don’t keep marshals around long though. I can’t stay to a budget. As you can see by my size, that ain’t always easy. I’m already a tad over for the month, so...”

“Too bad. I was goin’ to offer to take you to the hotel and buy you a steak, but...”

The marshal stood suddenly, grabbed his floppy-brimmed hat, and tossed the jerky in the wastebasket next to the desk. He grinned broadly as he put his beefy hand on Cotton’s shoulder.

“Best damned offer I’ve had today, Sheriff. Lead the way, my friend.”

Cotton couldn’t resist a chuckle as they wandered out into the street.

“Bet you’re buyin’ me lunch so’s you can try to wheedle some information outta this old blacksmith. Am I right?”

“You couldn’t have hit the target better if you were two feet away.”

It was Bear Hollow’s turn to chuckle. “Well, fire away. I’m yours all the way through dessert.”

After finishing off a thick steak, beans, fried potatoes, fresh bread slathered with butter, and three cups of coffee, they continued their conversation as they awaited two pieces of apple pie.

“Sounds like this Thorn McCann character has been doin’ some pretty fancy dancin’ for quite a spell. Likeable sort, I noticed, though,” Bear Hollow said.

“I think tellin’ a lie where the truth would just get in the way has become a way of life for him. I really don’t know how to figure him. He say anything to you about Apache Springs?”

“No. Just went on and on about how the bad money wasn’t his fault. Didn’t even spot it as phony. Said it was given him by a banker somewhere or other. Don’t remember him sayin’ anything about your town or county for that matter.” Bear’s eyes lit up at seeing the pie that was placed in front of him. A big grin crossed his face as he wasted no time attacking it with his fork.

“So, he didn’t mention his line of work?”

“Well, he did say somethin’ about him bein’ a lawman, but he offered no proof of any such thing. Figured it was a lie aimed at gettin’ him some sympathy and a free pass out of the hoosegow.”

“You called it right. He’s likely the biggest truth twister I’ve ever met.”

“That what he told you, too? That lawman part?”

“Started out sayin’ he was a deputy U.S. marshal, then, when I caught him in that lie, he admitted to bein’ a bounty hunter.”

“So what was it brung him to Apache Springs in the first place?”

“Huntin’ down some poor soul.”

“Did he ever tell you who?”

“Yep. Me.”

Bear stopped mid-bite with a wide-eyed look of surprise.

Ten miles outside of Silver City, a man on horseback sat beside the road watching the Butterfield stagecoach as it left a dusty cloud coming toward him. As the stage approached, the rider sat easy, making certain the driver and shotgun guard didn’t take him for a highwayman. He kept his hands well away from his gun. He removed his hat, ran his forearm across his forehead, then replaced his hat. He

held up his hand. As the stagecoach drew up, the guard, a kid who looked like he couldn't be more than seventeen, pointed the coach gun at him. The horses came to a halt, showering gravel and dirt and raising a dust cloud.

"You got a problem, mister?" the driver said.

"It's awful hot out here for a man on horseback. I got the fare if you could see your way clear to lettin' me tie my mount on the back and ride inside the rest of the way to Apache Springs. That is where you're headed, isn't it?"

"Only got two passengers, so there's plenty of room. Climb aboard, but be quick about it. I got a schedule to maintain."

The man thanked the driver, dismounted, and slipped the horse's reins through one of the straps of the luggage boot. He then opened the door and climbed inside, after being nearly tossed off the step by the driver, true to his word about being in a hurry, slapped the reins of the team and the coach lurched ahead.

The man removed his hat when he found himself in the company of a woman, a strikingly beautiful, dark-haired woman, at that. He made no attempt to announce that he already knew her. The other passenger was a slight, mousy gent in a wool suit that looked uncomfortable for the heat. He sported a thin mustache and wore glasses. In one hand he held a handkerchief with which he mopped at his brow often and also covered his nose and mouth during the times dust swirled through from wind gusts, which were often. On his lap he carried a small, highly polished wooden case with brass fittings. The way he gripped it, the case obviously held something of value. At least to him.

"Good day to you both. Travelin' together?"

The man in the suit shook his head and looked at the floor, as if he was embarrassed at the suggestion of him being in a lady's company.

The lady smiled and said, "My name is Eve Smith. And your name, sir?"

"Why, uh, I'm John Thorn. From Tucson."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Thorn. Lucky the stage came along when it did. You could have been overcome by a heatstroke riding in that blistering sun."

"Yes, ma'am, mighty lucky."

The man in the suit said nothing, just turned his head and began staring out the side window. Eve dropped her eyes and looked away, covering a smirk with a dainty, gloved hand.

The coach rumbled on for two hours with no one saying a word. Occasional glances from John Thorn into the face of Eve Smith, while obvious to any casual observer, raised no flags to the man in the suit. Dust from the coach's wheels continued to fill the cramped interior. Eve rode with a handkerchief covering her mouth much of the time. The men coughed and cleared their throats often. If ever there were a time to imbibe a cool glass of beer, that time was now, thought Thorn. But that was before the driver called out with a panicked voice.

"Injuns! Anyone with a gun, get it out now! We're about to be attacked!"

Thorn drew his .45 and turned to get a view of where the Indians were and how many there might be. He clearly didn't like what he saw. A dozen yelping braves astride paint ponies were taking up the chase even as the driver whipped the team into a run.

In this heat, our team won't last long, Thorn thought. Better we get out and try to make it to cover. We'll have a much better chance of picking some of them off that way than from a rocking, bouncing coach.

Just then a yell came from atop the coach when it took a sudden lurch to the left, careened off the road, and tilted to one side as one of the rear wheels slid into a deep rut, still drawn furiously by the frightened team of six horses. The coach's tenuous hold on remaining upright finally gave way to a

sudden drop into a hole from which it could not recover. One front wheel's spokes shattered as the stage tipped onto its side, dragged through cactus, rocks and brush by frantic horses for a hundred feet before the scraping and grinding came to a halt. Thorn was the first one out the door, which now faced skyward, grabbing Eve's hand as he went. The battered stagecoach lay on its side, the driver's seat sheared from the frame. The mailbag had burst open, strewing letters everywhere. Baggage had likewise been tossed hither and yon. One wheel had splintered its axle from where it hit a large rock before coming to rest. The whole side of the coach had been stripped away by the impact and from being dragged along through a proliferation of desert debris.

"C'mon, you two, get to some cover in those rocks up there before we're overrun," Thorn hollered.

He then jumped to the ground, reaching up to pull Eve to safety. The man in the suit scrambled off as best he could, caught his foot on the door, and tumbled into the ditch. From the front of the coach, Thorn heard a groan. He looked up to see the marauding Apaches racing to reach the stricken stage. He threw a couple of hasty shots their way to slow them down.

"Get up that hill! Mister, help the lady up the incline and both of you drop behind anything that looks substantial enough to stop a bullet. Do it now!" Thorn yelled. He turned to see if he could do anything about the driver and the guard.

The young shotgun guard struggled to free himself from beneath the crumpled forward boot. Thorn grabbed his arm and yanked so hard the boy yelped.

"Sorry, son, but we got to get up that hill before they hit us."

The two of them began a scrambling, stumbling race to the top of the rise. The kid still had a firm grip on the scattergun, but by the way he limped, he was obviously hurt. Thorn had a hold on the kid's shirt and was pulling him nearly every step of the way. As they reached the top, Thorn felt a sharp pain as he took a bullet in the shoulder. He let out an anguished groan and fell forward. He'd nearly made it to the top. It was the kid's turn to try dragging *him* to safety. It was only by the grace of God that they made it to cover before the Indians overran the coach and descended on it like vultures.

Chapter 4



Since McCann wasn't here long enough for you to get anything useful out of him, at least nothin' you can pass on, I reckon I'd best get back to Apache Springs. No sense lollygaggin' around this burg," Cotton said, half-smiling. "Besides, eatin' like this would just make me fat."

"Don't blame you none, Sheriff. I'd do the same, too, if I wasn't gettin' paid to keep myself available to stop the unruly element from gettin' the upper hand. Reckon I'd as soon go back to makin' horseshoes and mendin' tools, truth be told." Bear gave a big, satisfied smile. He was about to say thanks for the meal when a huge man rushed in, panting, gasping for breath. He stopped a couple feet from the marshal, leaned over to put his hands on his knees for support, and struggled to get his words out.

"Marshal, y-you...gotta come...quick...or, or they's..." His big head drooped as his words came with more difficulty.

"What is it, Casper? You're too durn fat to be runnin' around hollerin' like that. Now, what's the problem?"

"Th-the saloon. They's two of 'em. Gonna be a real dustup..."

Bear Hollow pushed his chair back with such force it scooted halfway across the room. He grabbed the Sharps rifle from where he'd leaned it against the wall and stomped through the dining room door toward the lobby. Cotton was close behind.

"What's your plan, Marshal?"

"Wha-what do you mean?"

"You can't go bursting into the saloon without knowin' who's in there, whether there might be more than two, how well armed they are, and what their intentions are," Cotton said.

Bear Hollow slowed down before getting to the batwing doors of the saloon. He stopped and turned to the sheriff. "You're right. You got a lot more experience than me in this kind of situation. What do you suggest?"

Cotton took his badge from his shirt and put it in his pocket. "How about you go around back and come in the rear door. Make sure that cannon is ready to use, just in case. I'll saunter in the front like I'm just off a trail drive, lookin' for a drink and some female company. I can assess the situation better without them knowin' I carry a badge, even if it don't mean spit here in Silver City."

Bear Hollow grunted in agreement as he began to lope down the alley to the back of the building. Cotton gave him a minute and then continued up the steps and through the swinging doors. He looked around inside to see if he could identify the source of the trouble. It didn't take him long. There were two of them, just as the big man had said. One was an old man, scruffy and dirty, with a scraggly beard. The other, young but feisty, was waving a Smith & Wesson .45 around, variously pointing it first at the bartender and then at any of a number of cowboys sitting around the room. The youngster seemed to take particular interest in a man seated at the nearest table, wearing a wide print scarf, with a bowler hat pushed back on his head, and sporting a thick mustache that all but hid his mouth. The man's face said he wasn't afraid. The kid was yelling as if he were angry at every living thing. When Cotton came in, the kid turned the gun his direction.

"What the hell do you want, mister? Can't you see we're doin' business here? Move on."

Cotton held both hands in the air in mock surrender, a look of puzzlement on his face.

"Sorry, son. Didn't know you were even here. I'm lookin' for a drink to parch a powerful thirst

from a long drive. I don't mean to interfere. You can go on about your business."

The kid stared at him for a moment, then jabbed his .45 in Cotton's direction.

"Get your damned drink, then get on your way. I got no patience with interruptions," the kid snapped. He turned his attention back to the bartender and the man in the bowler.

The old man held a Winchester Yellow Boy in both hands, cocked and pointed at the floor, but unmistakably at the ready. The look on his dirty, heavily lined face seemed to find complete agreement in the youth's actions. A toothless grin wrinkled his chapped and sunburned lips.

"Thank you, son," Cotton said, turning to the bartender and pointing toward a bottle of whiskey sitting on the bar top. "Pour me one of those, bartender, if you please."

The bartender, lean and lank, was sweating profusely. His hand shook as he tried in vain to pour whiskey into the small glass without spilling half of it. Cotton remained calm, slowly sipping the amber liquid, hoping to catch a bit of what the fuss was all about. While obviously full of piss and vinegar, the younger of the two men was not a gunslinger. His nervous demeanor also suggested that the last thing he wanted to do was kill someone. His main weapon was his anger and his willingness to demonstrate it. Cotton hoped someone would mention what the problem might be, though. The mouthy kid didn't disappoint him.

Directing his rapidly building anger toward the man with the bowler hat, the kid said, "What the hell made you figure you and your men could just up and steal our horses? You got no right, and we want to be paid for 'em."

"Son, those horses weren't yours in the first place. They had the Campbell brand on 'em plain as day. You shoulda knowed that."

"They had no such brand, and they was on our land, that makes 'em ours. And that's that. Now, fork over a hunnert dollars apiece for all ten, or I'm goin' to put a bullet in you." The kid jabbed his .45 toward the man a couple times for emphasis.

Cotton could see this wasn't going to end well. Whose horses they were wouldn't make a bit of difference if a man died defending his position. The seated man was beginning to get nervous. Sweat ran down his forehead. His hand slid slowly toward his own revolver.

"I wouldn't go for that hogleg if'n I was you, mister," hollered the kid. That's when Cotton decided it was now or never to make his move.

"Son, the gent's got a point. But if you can prove the horses are yours, he *has* to give 'em back or pay you for them, don't he?" Cotton kept one hand on the bar and the other holding his whiskey glass.

"You stay out of this, whoever the hell you are. It ain't none of your business. Now, drink up and move on."

By looking past the old man, Cotton could see Bear Hollow slip silently in the back way. He was carrying his ever-present Sharps carbine. They had the two in a cross fire if it came to that. He hoped it wouldn't.

"I didn't come lookin' for trouble, just a little sip to settle my stomach. But it sounds like you got yourself a hornet's nest. I'd like to help you out if you'd let me. I got some experience in situations like this," Cotton said to the kid.

"How? How the hell you gonna help me? You don't even know me or my pa." He waved the Smith & Wesson in Cotton's general direction once more.

Cotton turned to the man at the table. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted several other men scattered around the room placing their hands on their guns. *One false move by this kid and there's gonna be another Shiloh in here*, he thought.

"Sir, are the horses in question nearby? Might be we could solve this whole problem real quick if they were. We can easily check those brands."

"Like the kid says, it ain't none of your business. Now, shove off. Me and my boys can handle thi

little shit and his old man.” The man in the bowler stood up slowly, scooting his chair back with his legs. ~~His hand fell to his six-gun. But before he could even clear leather,~~ Cotton’s Colt .45 was in his hand, cocked and aiming at the man’s head. They were less than ten feet apart. The man stopped his draw, tossing Cotton a cold, narrow-eyed stare.

“What’s your stake in this, mister?”

“I like to have peace and quiet when I come to a town. You’re spoiling it for me. Now, *answer my question.*” Cotton’s voice had quickly changed from casual observer to the man in charge. This turnabout in attitude didn’t elude the other cowboys that had apparently been behind the man claiming ownership of the remuda.

The man in the bowler looked around at several of the other men. None still had his hand hovering over a six-shooter. Two had sat back down. The man seemed to be getting more and more nervous. He removed his hand from the butt of his gun and wiped at his forehead.

“No, they ain’t nearby. I-I sold ’em...to the army. A-ain’t got ’em no more.”

“So, I’m guessin’ there wasn’t a Campbell brand on ’em, and they likely *did* belong to these fellows. Did I guess right?” Cotton’s eyes narrowed as the man nodded.

“It’s possible...”

Just then Bear Hollow, who had heard every word, spoke up.

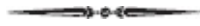
“Sounds like you just admitted to horse stealin’, friend. That’s a neck-stretchin’ offense around here.” He pointed his Sharps at the man, who had now begun to rock back and forth. “I’m thinkin’ yo best cough up a hundred dollars apiece for them horses or plan on meetin’ up with the meanest judge these parts ever saw. He sure does love a hangin’.”

“But, I...”

“And you best unbuckle that gun belt, too, ’cause you’re goin’ to visit my jail until you can find it in your heart to pay what you owe these folks,” Bear Hollow said. He thrust the business end of the Sharps at the man, just to make sure there were no doubts as to his intentions.

Cotton fished out his own badge and pinned it on his shirt. He looked back at the other cowboys, who gave every impression they were preparing to leave town while they still could.

Chapter 5



Pretty clever the way you buffaloeed that fella. What was it made you think the fool kid wouldn't plug you?"

"He wasn't a killer, and I had my doubts whether that old gun would even shoot. It was rusty and he hadn't cocked it, either. He was bluffing. Now, the old man was a different matter altogether. He looked near to the breakin' point. He was the one that worried me."

"Well, by gosh it turned out right and proper. The old fellow and his boy got paid for their horses and I doubt we'll ever see that horse-stealin' scoundrel in these parts again," Bear said with a gleam in his eye. "Thanks to you, Sheriff."

"Just returnin' a favor."

"Just so's you know, I'm obliged. I learned something about gettin' myself out of a tight spot, thanks to you."

Cotton started out into the street to reclaim his mare. He patted the horse on her neck, took the reins, and swung into the saddle. Bear Hollow had followed him outside.

"You plannin' on goin' after that Thorn McCann fella, Sheriff?"

"Only if his tracks lead back in the general direction of Apache Springs. Got no hankerin' to traipse all over the countryside to find a man I don't know for sure did anything wrong. A hunch says so, but..."

"I know what you mean. It's only a hunch. Some fellas got a knack for swayin' folks with an easy way about 'em, real likable sort. He's one of them. Hope you'll drop in next time you're in the area. I think I owe you a meal. Or if you're feelin' generous again, I'll gladly join you in one on you." The marshal gave a gleeful snicker and went back inside to get out of the sun.

Before he left town, Cotton decided to stop at the stage depot. As he strolled down the street, he couldn't help thinking that the description of 'Eve Smith' closely matched Delilah Jones. He began to search his memory for some sense that Thorn and Delilah Jones had been more than casually involved during the Bart Havens affair. She had been employed by Havens, but he'd not noticed any particular alliance with McCann. Had there been a conscious effort to keep it secret? Was it a coincidence or was it planned all along? And how long *had* they known each other? He had no intention of leaving Silver City with questions hanging over his head. He tied the mare to the railing and went inside, ducking under the Butterfield Stage Line sign that had begun to droop on one side from a broken chain.

A short, balding man stood up from behind a counter at his arrival.

"Good day to you, sir. Where is it you're lookin' to travel to? The next stage will be arrivin' in three hours from Las Cruces."

"I'd like a couple of answers, rather than needin' a ticket. When was the last stage out? And where was it headed?"

The man thumbed down the last page in his ledger and, looking over half-frame glasses, said, "Well, sir, the last one left here at six o'clock this morning, going to Albuquerque by way of Apache Springs. Two paid passengers, a man and a woman."

"Can you remember what the man looked like?"

"Businessman, as I recall. Short, rumpled suit, carryin' a wooden case of some sort. Had brass hinges like a gun case."

"And the woman?"

“Hard to forget her. Right smart-lookin’ lady. Dark hair and a smile that could, er—”

“I got the picture. Only the two of them, you say?”

“That’s all. Only sold two tickets.”

“Thanks,” Cotton said over his shoulder as he rejoined his horse.

He was several hours late for any chance of catching up to the coach, and it made little sense to try, especially during the heat of the day such as it was. Best he casually head on back to Apache Springs. Maybe the coach got there and had a layover. *Reckon I’ll just have to wait to find out if the mysterious dark-haired woman is anyone other than Delilah Jones, but I’d stake my reputation it’s her.*

He had a wry smile on his lips as he rode out of town.

The road out of Silver City was an easy ride, at least until he reached the foothills several miles north. A slight breeze kept the day’s heat down to a bearable temperature, and clouds had begun to move in heralding the possibility of a few drops of rain, but well before it reached the ground the dryness of the desert usually sucked up any moisture that didn’t come in the form of a thunderstorm. This day was no different. Cotton felt not a drop of anything other than perhaps some slight perspiration on his forehead.

He reached down and pulled one of his canteens from around the saddle horn, unscrewed the cap, and sipped some of the warm water. Unlikely as it was, Cotton didn’t feel alone. All around him were the calls of birds and the howls of coyotes. A family of Gambel’s quail sauntered in front of him, the taking notice of him just for a moment, hurried on their way into the brush on the other side. A grunt from a javelina, or peccary as they were sometimes known, emanated from off to his right, although he never caught sight of it. He did catch a brief glimpse of a couple of mule deer making their way up a rocky slope in the distance.

With nothing of particular importance to concentrate on, the sudden mental image of Emily popping into his head almost startled him. He’d been away only a short while, not long enough to start missing her any more than he normally did. But somehow he was surprised by his vision of her, almost as if she were in trouble. It was a very strange feeling. He tried to shake it off as nothing. But he couldn’t. A tinge of fear came over him and he urged the mare to increase her pace.

She’s all right; I know she is. Although, I do have a powerful feeling *someone* is in serious trouble. And it feels like it’s not far off. He gave his horse a knee to her sides to add a little incentive to pick up the pace even more.

He’d gone no more than another mile when his fears were realized. Up ahead, lying on its side in a ditch was the stagecoach. And a man was lying in the road. He wasn’t moving. Cotton kicked the mare into a run. As they approached the stricken coach, he reined the horse to a dusty stop. He jumped from the saddle and ran to the man. Dead. A bullet had torn much of his head off. Cotton spun around to check on the stage, or what was left of it, yanked open the door, and peered inside. Empty.

It was obvious that someone had presented a threat to the coach and given chase when the driver tried to elude whatever danger had been thrust upon him. When the racing stage had come to a sharp curve in the road, it appeared to have lost its balance and slid sideways, dropped into the ditch, then turned over on its side, ripping a wheel off and shredding one side. Baggage was scattered everywhere, bags and valises ripped open, not by the force of the crash, but by deliberate intent from whoever had precipitated the attack.

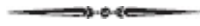
Indians! Damn! And Apaches at that!

He looked around to see if he could pick out where the passengers might have gotten off to, or if they had been taken hostage. He found tracks of four people where it appeared they had made a hasty retreat up a slight incline, but were not followed by the Indian ponies. At least not immediately. The

team of horses pulling the stage had been taken, cut from their traces and led away. *That must have been what gave the passengers time to make their escape*, Cotton thought, or hoped anyway.

Just as he was thinking he should get the body of the dead man into the ground, he was drawn to something that gave solid evidence of his greatest fear. The passengers were *not* out of danger. Gunshots could be heard coming from the other side of the foothills just ahead, foothills that led up the side of a mountain. He swung into the saddle to seek the exact location of the roar of the rifles. It didn't take long to spot smoke from the Indians' weapons being fired into the air, a dead giveaway that they had their quarry trapped and were preparing to go in for the kill.

Chapter 6



Cotton saw his only option placed by fate right in front of him.

He rode like the devil himself was hot on his trail, pushing him straight into a battle he was woefully outgunned for. He dared not ride straight for the Indians, but instead he circled to the east to follow a ridgeline toward where the ground dipped into some trees. As he spotted a small rise, he headed for it, and reined in at its base.

Cotton dismounted, with the intention of climbing the rest of the way up the ridge on foot. He didn't want whoever was on the other side doing all the shooting to spot his silhouette astride a horse. With the sun at such an angle as to make that likely, he hunched over, keeping himself as insignificant as possible against the terrain, slipping and sliding up the tricky incline. When he reached the top, he dropped to one knee, keeping as close as possible to the larger of the boulders around him. He had pulled his field glasses from his saddlebags when he dismounted. He raised them to his eyes, focused on the ring, and shook his head at what he saw. Below were about a dozen screaming Apaches firing at some people who had obviously sought shelter in a slight ravine in a copse of cottonwoods. They were protected by several large boulders that had at some ancient time broken from their brethren at the top of the mountain on the other side of the ravine. The huge hunks of granite and sandstone had come crashing down to land near a stream, thus giving the hapless souls trapped by the marauding Indians almost a fortlike cover from which to defend themselves. It took no more than one quick glance to know that the four people hunkered down were sadly outgunned and outmanned. *More'n likely those folks are from the stage*, Cotton thought.

Cursing under his breath as he returned to his mare, he mounted up and began to follow a narrow trail that he hoped would lead to a position to make a flanking maneuver on the renegades. While the trail did get him to a spot slightly behind the Indians, he could see he would also have to ride like hell straight through their ranks to make it to those trapped in the ravine.

"Nothin's ever easy. I hate situations like this," he muttered, thankful no one could hear him but the mare. He had almost a hundred yards of rocky, cactus-laden ground to cover, and six shots weren't going to give much protection for that great a distance. Racing through a bunch of Apache warriors while trying to shoot would be even more difficult. He urged the horse to a run, hoping to gain as much ground as possible before he was noticed. He had his Colt in his hand, cocked and ready. When one of the renegades saw him and shouted an alert, he began firing at any painted savage within range. He leaned over the mare's neck to make himself a small target, as if, considering the odds, that made any difference. He began yelling, making as much noise as he could in hopes of confusing the enemy, although he didn't hold out a lot of hope of that having much effect.

When he found that fate had allowed him to reach the creek unscathed—for which he was both grateful and surprised—he splashed through the water across to the other side, whirled the mare around, and jumped off, dropping the reins as he raced to the cover of the cottonwoods. He dove behind some tree trunks as several bullets careened off the rocks straight ahead, thwacking off small limbs from the trees behind him. He looked around to get his bearings just as another volley of shots tore through the trees, clipping more branches and thudding into the soft trunks. Realizing his position was untenable, he dove for the dirt, then half-crawled, half-scooted to reach the relative safety of the boulders where the others were huddled together like puppies.

What he found wasn't encouraging. A boy no more than a teenager wielded a twelve-gauge coach

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