

COTTON'S LAW



A Sheriff Cotton Burke Western

Phil Dunlap



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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PHIL DUNLAP

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COTTON'S WAR
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LAW



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Good friends all. Thank you.

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Chapter 1



Apache Springs, New Mexico Territory—1880

Contrary to popular belief, a dark, soundless night may not always be a comfort. The roar of the big-bore rifle echoed off the rocks a scant two seconds after the bullet splintered the front door of the Apache Springs jail, barely missing Deputy Memphis Jack Stump's head as he leaned over to pick something up off the floor. The hunk of lead then slammed into the back wall, knocking a one-inch hole nearly all the way through.

"Sonofabitch!" Jack yelled as he crashed to the floor with a bone-jarring thud. His heart was pounding like a stamp mill. He scrambled to untangle himself from the overturned chair. Hugging the floor in an effort to stay low, he gingerly reached up to retrieve his Remington .44 from atop the desk where he had removed the cylinder for cleaning.

"Damned lucky I dropped that cleaning cloth," he muttered aloud, sweat breaking out on his forehead. He was also happy the door had been made of solid wood, with no glass to make the shooter's aim more certain. He'd been shot at before, but never when doing a simple task in a closed room. The shock of it had him both rattled and furious at the same time.

With hasty fingers, he slipped the cylinder back into the gun's frame, loaded it from his gun belt, and cocked it in readiness. Whatever might come next, he had no idea. Knowing that someone had just tried to kill him—and would want to know if he had succeeded—kept him on high alert. He waited. And waited. Dead silence. He scooted to the front of the office, carefully reached for the oil lantern on the wall, and blew out the flame. *The lamplight must have given him a perfect target, Jack thought. He only had to aim three feet right of the window and he would have had me cold.*

He crawled on his elbows to the door, in preparation to yank it open and make a swift exit to the cover of a solid oak deacon's bench sitting under the porch overhang. He figured it would give him a safe haven to determine where the shot had come from. Maybe even get lucky enough to return fire. But no shots followed. He listened for the telltale noise of a horse galloping away to assure the shooter's escape. Several more minutes passed. He heard only the emptiness of the night, that hush that falls over the land when something terrible has happened and nature itself has gone into hiding.

Unwilling to wait longer, he threw open the door and dashed outside, throwing himself behind the bench. Peeking over the top, he realized that the probable source of the shot was from somewhere among the house-size boulders a thousand feet east of town. There was a wide gap between the two buildings straight across the street, left vacant when a fire had destroyed the home of the town's first minister. It was never rebuilt.

After several minutes of searching the darkness for any sign of movement up in the rocks and any

follow-up shot, Memphis Jack eased from his position behind the bench and moved farther back into the shadows. He didn't wish to give anyone a clear target as, hunched over, he made his way around the side of the building to the alley, then trotted several hundred feet in the dark to a place where he could safely race across the street. His aim was to get himself in position to rush the rocks. He maneuvered alongside the hardware store where the road turned slightly, which gave him natural cover for a sprint across to the side of the bank building. His eyes had finally adjusted to the darkness, and he could make out several clusters of crates and boxes of trash set out behind stores. No sign of a single person, however.

It was a few minutes after midnight on a Wednesday. He didn't really expect to find anyone wandering the streets, other than possibly a straggler from the town's only saloon sleeping off a drunk in a doorway. While he *hoped* to find someone who might have heard the shot and noticed where it had come from, he came away empty-handed. Directly in back of the saloon, a high wooden stockade fence enclosed an area of several hundred square feet. That fence gave Jack cover to make for the cluster of boulders that rose up the side of the mountain. He cursed as he stumbled over a bucket someone had left in his path. He flattened himself against the wall to await any response from the shooter, who must now know where he was. A minute, maybe two, passed before he dared move deeper into the darkness.

Memphis Jack broke into a hard run toward the nearest of the rocks from where he figured the shot had emanated. He dropped to a crouch as soon as he was certain he was protected sufficiently to scan his surroundings. Making his way around and between boulder after boulder, his Remington held forward and cocked, he swiveled his head in nearly constant motion hoping to catch a glimpse of movement that would give away the shooter's position. Glad for a sudden glimpse of light from a quarter moon peeking from behind a cloud, he slipped around the largest and highest rock, only to jump at the sound of something skittering away. By instinct, he fired toward the sound. He held his breath as he awaited an answering shot. Nothing. It was clear he was alone. He shook his head at the probability that he'd merely scared the hell out of a desert rat. But he was now convinced that whoever had taken a shot at him was long gone. He paused before heading back to the jail, turning every few steps to check his back trail.

When he got to the jail, he locked and barred the door behind him and relit the oil lamp. He set the swivel chair behind the desk upright and pulled his handkerchief from his pocket. He nervously wiped at his sweaty brow and sighed deeply. He stared at the hole in the door and then turned to the place in the back wall where the bullet had imbedded itself. He took out his pocketknife and stepped to the wall. He dug out the bullet and whistled.

If that sucker had hit me, it would have left a hole big enough to stuff a squirrel in, he thought. Shaking his head, he went to the desk, took hold of two corners, and gave it a hard tug. The massive walnut desk scooted noisily around to a ninety-degree angle from the way it had been. He pushed the chair around behind it and sat. Looking at the door, then at the rear wall, he could tell his chair was far enough back. Now, if anybody tried that shot with the expectation of hitting whoever might be sitting behind the desk, they'd be sorely disappointed. Unless, of course, their weapon could shoot around corners.

After pondering the situation for several minutes, Memphis Jack got up, pulled a shotgun from the rack, loaded it with buckshot, and tucked it under his arm. He blew out the lamp on the wall and locked the door behind him. He stayed close to the buildings as he made his way along the boardwalk toward the small house the town had provided for its sheriff. Jack and his consort, Melody, had been allowed to live in it until Sheriff Cotton Burke was healed up after his confrontation with the Cruz

gang, during which he had been seriously wounded. Jack had stepped in and saved the sheriff from certain death by ~~killing one of the outlaws before he could get to the wounded lawman and finish the job.~~

Jack was now heading to Melody's bed. His near brush with death had him wide awake, so he was taking no chances on giving the shooter another chance at him. When he pushed open the door to the small clapboard house, hurriedly slipping inside, he was greeted by Melody, already in one of her well-known snits.

"Where have you been, Jack? I've been waiting up for over an hour."

"Sorry, Melody, I was otherwise occupied."

"What could have been more important to you than coming home to me?" She leaned on the doorway to the bedroom, pulling back her filmy robe to reveal her ample charms. Her invitation was clear as she subtly raised one eyebrow.

"Nothing much. Just wrestlin' with a question. That's all." Jack leaned the shotgun against the table and unbuckled his gun belt, letting it drop onto the nearest chair.

"A question? That's what kept you away? A damned question? What question was important enough that you let me sit here all alone twiddling my thumbs?"

"Just wondering why someone wanted to kill me, that's all." He plopped onto the couch and leaned back with a sigh.

"What! Someone tried to kill you? Who?"

"Don't know. I'll look into it in the morning."

"Then how do you know someone wanted you dead?"

"The bullet that tore through the door to the jail, missing me by inches. That's how."

"Damn! I'll bet it was someone aiming for that scoundrel Cotton Burke. I'd bet that's who it was. It's time we got the hell out of this dreadful collection of run-down buildings and folks with no backbone. What do you say, honey? You finally ready to pack up and git?"

"Uh-huh. We'll talk about it later. Time for bed, Melody." Jack yawned and fell onto the deep feather mattress. Twenty minutes later, he was still wide awake.

Chapter 2



Catron County Sheriff Cotton Burke slapped the reins across the rump of the dapple-gray gelding pulling the buckboard. Beside him sat Emily Wagner, owner of the Wagner ranch and the love of his life. Since he'd been staying at her ranch for the past four weeks recovering from a gunshot wound to his deputy, Memphis Jack, had been left in charge of keeping the peace in Apache Springs. But Cotton was completely healed now—or at least *he* thought so—and growing anxious to return to the job to which he'd been elected. Although Emily had tried in her gentle way to persuade him to remain on the ranch longer to be certain he'd not have a relapse, Cotton wasn't the type to sit around on the porch in the evening, listening to the crickets, and chatting idly about this and that. Notwithstanding, he was deeply conflicted about his situation as every minute he spent with Emily was like heaven on earth to him. Returning to the world of risking his life had been made more difficult by each day he spent at her ranch.

Emily's husband had been shot down and killed during a bank robbery almost three years back, an innocent victim of the treachery of a ruthless gang headed by the notorious Virgil Cruz. Vanzano Cruz, Virgil's brother, had fallen to Cotton's deadly accuracy with a gun. Much later, Virgil had also met the same fate. With her husband dead, and the ranch now her responsibility, Emily had accepted the challenge when most folks figured she'd move back to St. Louis, where she'd lived before her marriage. But Emily wasn't a quitter. In addition to her beauty, Cotton was also attracted to her spirit. He'd been fascinated by her even before her husband died, and now he was free to let her know of his interest. But he'd been reticent to be too forward, desiring instead the easier road of letting things take care of themselves.

Defensive to the point of righteous indignation whenever someone broached the subject of the two of them getting together, he had tried to keep his feelings from spilling out, as, at the mere sight of her, his knees felt weak. His eyes told the story he felt compelled to keep to himself. The simple act of watching as she went about her daily routine caused his heart to beat faster and laid his soul open for anyone to see.

And her offer to nurse him back to health during his convalescence had eased his shyness, and he had slowly revealed his long-standing interest in her. Her answer to his revelation was "What took you so long?"

"Will you be okay driving back to the ranch alone?" he said, knowing full well she'd done it twice weekly ever since her husband's death. He'd always been protective of her, but now, beginning to verbalize his feelings better, he often let slip his concerns for her safety, especially after her abduction by the Cruz gang. She had more than once expressed disdain for a man who hovers over a woman like a prison warden. That comment always drew him back into his shell for a time. But only temporarily.

His overall desire to see her never again experience such a frightening encounter led him to ignore her admonitions and forge ahead as her defender-in-waiting, whether she saw it as necessary or not.

“Yes, my overprotective love, I shall, as always, be just fine.”

“Just makin’ certain.”

“After I drop you off at the jail, I’m going to the dry goods store for some things. Do you need anything?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Well, I’m going to get you a couple of new shirts, anyway. Since you have only two, the one with the frayed cuffs and the other with the stitched-up bullet hole. A pair of socks wouldn’t hurt, either. Shall I pick you up at the jail in about two hours?”

Cotton scratched his head. He needed to get back to the job of being sheriff, but he didn’t know how to tell her. He’d been thinking of moving back into his little house and sending Jack and Melody off to the hotel. He’d need to get the town council’s permission for such an expenditure first, however. And he wasn’t that all-fired certain of their response.

“Uh, no. I should go to the livery and pick up my horse, that is if she still recognizes me. I’ll, uh, ride out later.”

Emily had been aware that this day would come, but that didn’t stop her from giving him a disappointed pout. She sat silently for a moment and then slapped the reins to move the horse on down the street. Cotton walked to the jail glancing back at her three or four times.

When he stepped up on the boardwalk, he saw the hole in the door. He put his hand on the butt of his Colt as he slowly stepped aside and eased open the door. He found Jack sitting at the rearranged desk, flipping through a stack of wanted dodgers. He looked up at Cotton’s entrance.

“Whooee! If it ain’t my old friend, Cotton Burke. You *are* a sight for sore eyes. I’m real happy you’re able to sit up and take nourishment, pard. If you’re lookin’ to come back to work, I’ll bet I can find a chore or two that won’t stress you too much.” Jack leaned back in the swivel chair, laced his fingers behind his head, and grinned from ear to ear.

“Why, yes, Deputy, I do believe I am able to do a few *small* jobs, provided they can be done from an easy chair. Like that one you’re sittin’ in.”

“Good, very good. Glad you’re back, in that case.”

“Not happy enough to ride out to the Wagner place on occasion to make sure I was gettin’ along okay. Twice, in four long weeks, wasn’t it?”

“I been right busy here, keepin’ the peace in this hellhole you call Apache Springs, so I wasn’t able to tear myself away all that often. You understand.”

“Uh-huh. A certain whore named Melody comes to mind.”

“Why, Cotton, you really *do* understand.”

“What I *don’t* understand is that hole in the door. You screw up cleanin’ your hogleg, or were you too drunk to know what you were shootin’ at?”

“Now, that hurts, Cotton, that really hurts. How could I do somethin’ so reckless, especially since anything I do could end up tarnishin’ *your* fine reputation? We wouldn’t want that, now, would we?”

“Just give me a straight answer, Jack. Who put the hole in the damned door?”

Jack suddenly got serious. He sat forward, leaning on his elbows.

“I wish I knew. One thing for sure, it come too close to blowin’ my brains all over this dismal office. You could easily be lookin’ down on my cold corpse in front of the undertaker’s.”

“Damn! When did this happen?”

“Last night. It was almost midnight, and I was cleaning my gun. All of a sudden a bullet the size of

a fist blew all the way through the office. It buried itself in the back wall. I didn't hear the shot for a couple of seconds after the damned thing went whizzin' by. I had just bent down to retrieve my cleanin' rag when it happened. I tried to find where the shot came from, but in the dark, that proved impossible."

Cotton looked at the hole in the back wall and, as Jack had, judged the trajectory to be from up in the rocks outside of town.

"Any chance it could have been an accident? Someone out blowin' off steam? Maybe a stray bullet?"

"Is that really what you think? A bullet fired from a long distance off makes a perfect path across this very desk right where I was sitting a second before, and it could have been an accident?"

"No, I reckon it couldn't. Someone fully intended to kill one of us. Maybe the question should be which one? And why?"

Jack quickly adopted an all-too-familiar attitude. "Since we're talkin' attempted murder, I don't reckon I considered that I might have been the target. Me bein' the friendly one an' all. *Damn!* What was it that made you think it might be someone other than you?"

"Don't be a smartass. It'd likely be best if I stay in town tonight. I need to tell Emily before she leaves. Then, you and I are going to take a ride out to those rocks and see if we can find something that might point us in the direction of an assassin." Jack was scratching his head as Cotton left to find Emily and give her the news. He knew she'd try to convince him to let his deputy handle things awhile longer, but he knew Cotton wouldn't do that. Even though he hated leaving her alone.

Cotton caught up to Emily as she came out of the general store. She had her arms loaded with packages wrapped in brown paper. His first concern was that she had done more than replace his two shirts and, as he'd seen her do before, gotten carried away with finding other things she considered her wardrobe woefully lacking in. He took the packages from her and loaded them in the buckboard.

"Did you find out that Jack is capable of taking care of the town without you?"

"Quite the contrary, Emily, I found out that someone tried to kill him, or possibly me, depending on who the shooter thought was in the jail last night."

"Mercy! What happened?"

"A shot was fired through the front door, barely missing Jack's thick skull. I'm going to have to try picking up the shooter's trail. Don't know when I'll get back to the ranch. If it's too late, I'll stay here in town."

Emily looked disappointed, but he could tell her concern was for the safety of both him and Jack. She knew he was doing what he had to do. She took his hand as he helped her into the seat. She reached over and pulled two of the brown paper-wrapped packages off the top of the pile and handed them to him.

"Okay. Here, take these so you will look halfway decent when you catch the vermin that would do such a thing. Stay safe." She bent down and gave him a kiss before settling back for the long ride home. He watched as she drove off, raising a small dust cloud behind the one-horse conveyance.

He went back into the jail, to find Jack making certain they had ammunition for a pair of shotguns and some extra bullets for their revolvers.

Chapter 3



The day had turned into another hot one. Clear skies with nary a hint of breeze. They tied their horses to a nearby cottonwood and began their trek up through the rocks. Weaving in and around the monstrous boulders, each took a different dusty trail, slowly, methodically searching for any sign of someone having been up there recently.

They'd been at it for nearly two hours when, near the top, where a smaller flat-topped rock jutted away from the rest, Cotton found what he was looking for.

"Jack, it looks like he might have been hunkered down behind this one. It'd be a perfect spot to steady a big-bore rifle."

Jack eased his way to the top beside Cotton. He nodded as he said, "You're right. There's a powder burn on the rock surface. He was waitin' for the right opportunity. Still don't tell us who it was, though."

Cotton bent down to check the ground, a mixture of fine sand and gravel worn away from some of the sandstone that also permeated the area. Boot prints with one heel showing more wear than the other indicated there'd been but a single shooter. He also found a couple of cigarillo butts stomped on in the dirt. The biggest clue, however, was the .50-caliber brass cartridge of a type commonly used in the Sharps buffalo rifle. Cotton held it up. Jack took it and turned it over and over.

"Bring anyone to mind, Jack?"

"Nope. I haven't seen anything like this since the buffalo hunters killed off all their prey and had to resort to bringing down jackrabbits."

"I'm going to backtrack this fella as far as I can."

"I'm right there with you, Sheriff."

They began following the boot prints up and over the first hill, then down a slight drop into a narrow gouge in the ground. Water had cut a swash that wandered through the rocks to finally end up joining the creek at the edge of Apache Springs. During the rainy season, water gushed between the rocks, wearing them down slowly over the centuries. The prints followed the water's course to where they found where the shooter had tied his horse.

"Left his mount here. The animal probably stood for a little more'n an hour, I'd say," Jack said, bending down to feel how deep into the ground the prints went. "This ground is pretty soft, and slightly wet. But the prints aren't deep, so I'd say he rode a smaller horse, maybe a pony."

Cotton nodded.

"Let's get on back. I'm thinkin' we need to enlist the aid of a professional at tracking."

"You're thinkin' Henry Coyote, aren't you?"

"Who else?"

“Course Henry rides a pony, you know. What if he’s our man?”

“Now, why in hell would Henry Coyote want to take a shot at you?”

Jack thought about that for a moment. He squinted from the bright sun bouncing off the white rock.

“Well, if he got me out of the way, you’d have to come back to town and take up sheriffin’ again.

That way, you’d be too far to call on in case Emily had a need, and she’d be forced to rely on Henry, once again.”

“Jack, sometimes I think that imagination of yours has slipped over the side of a steep cliff. The whole idea of Henry Coyote being our culprit is preposterous. Forget it.”

“Just sayin’ he’s the only one around here that rides a pony.”

“No, there’s another.”

“Who?”

“The man that took a shot at you.”

Whitey Granville reined in in front of the shabby cabin deep in the piney forest above Cedar City, a nearly abandoned mining town that had seen a steep decline in population after the last mine failed. His pony was lathered from the long, hot ride. It was nearing sundown as he tied his mount to a crude rail. A water trough was near enough for the animal to get a drink while Whitey went inside.

Two oil lanterns lit the inside of the single room. There were no windows. A potbellied stove sat in the center of the space, with a small pile of splintered wood stacked nearby, just in case the nights turned chilly. A man leaned on a long, wide plank held up at either end by an empty whiskey barrel. In front of him sat a glass and a half-empty bottle.

“’Bout time, Whitey. What kept you?”

“Forty miles of hard ridin’ and a bunch of Indians on the prowl. I had to lay low for a spell till they decided to move on south. Got another glass?”

The man took a glass from behind him and set it in front of Whitey, who quickly snatched up the bottle and poured the glass full to the rim with the pale brown liquid. He raised the glass and took the entire contents down in one gulp.

“Did you kill that bastard? The one I paid you five hundred dollars for?”

“Don’t know fer sure. Couldn’t wait around to find out. If he was sittin’ at the desk, as I’m certain he was, then my shot likely took his head clean off. He sure as hell didn’t return fire.”

“I’m not payin’ you for guesses, you idiot. I need to be sure. Damn!”

“You could ride back into Apache Springs and see for yourself. Don’t no one know you there, do they?” Whitey said.

The man stared at Whitey with anger growing in his eyes. He shot a hand across the makeshift bar and grabbed Whitey by the collar, yanking him halfway across the plank.

“You dumb sonofabitch! I didn’t shell out my hard-earned greenbacks for the job to get done halfway. Now, you get back on that mount of yours and bring me proof that the man I sent you to kill is dead. You hear me? I’m headin’ for Las Vegas. That’s where you’ll find me, at the Saloon #1. And don’t fail me again or I’ll kill *you*, instead.”

“Y-yessir. N-no need for that. I-I’ll just be on my way.” Whitey’s eyes were wide as he found himself being stared down by the very face of evil, a look that, gun or no gun, could take a man’s life as easily as any hunk of lead. He dropped the glass, which shattered as it rolled off the tabletop and hit the stone floor. He was out the door and back in the saddle in about twenty seconds flat.

As the sun sank low on the horizon, a warm red glow washed across the little cabin and the tall, well-dressed man leaning in the doorway. A wry smile swept across his chiseled face. He liked the

feeling he got putting the fear of a bullet in Whitey, and others before him, especially since he had never been known to carry a gun.

Cotton mounted up at the livery stable. Jack stood nearby.

“What do you want me to do while you’re gone?” Jack asked.

“You might spend some time doin’ what you do best. Go over to the saloon, down a couple whiskeys, and listen for anything that could be useful in findin’ this coward.”

“Ain’t had much time for drinkin’ lately, what with all the crime needin’ tendin’ to around here. Mighta forgot how.”

“Try hard to remember,” Cotton said as he spurred his mare to a trot straight out of town in the direction of the Wagner ranch.

Jack stomped off toward the jail, grumbling to himself about so-called friends that can’t seem to ever let a man forget his past mistakes. Truth be told, Jack wasn’t all that good at forgiving himself for that night in Gonzales ten years back when he got drunk and shot up the town, ending the life of an innocent man sitting too close to a second-story window. Cotton was the sheriff there, then, and Jack had been his deputy. After the incident, Cotton told Jack to get out of town and never come back or he’d be sure he was hanged for his stupidity. Not long after that—primarily because of Jack’s bad behavior—Cotton was voted out of office, and he began to wander from New Mexico to Texas to Colorado to Arizona and back, hiring out his gun to towns that needed a man who wasn’t afraid to shoot when it became necessary. And Cotton could surely shoot with the best of them. As soon as Cotton had left Gonzales, Jack had snuck back into town and stayed.

After coming to Apache Springs, ostensibly to help an aging sheriff cope with a gang of owlhoots bent on turning it into another Abilene or Dodge City, Cotton was asked to run for sheriff at the end of the old man’s term. He did and won, much to his surprise. He’d finally found a place to settle down after running from the Gonzales affair, in which Jack played the major role. While nothing could seem to keep Jack from the gambling tables and the whiskey and Melody, he still carried the scar of destroying not only his own career as a lawman, but that of a friend, also. Now Cotton appeared to be giving him a second chance. He wasn’t all that certain he was up to the task.

As he strolled into the saloon, he looked around, searching the myriad of faces, looking for anyone who could be the midnight shooter. He walked to the bar and ordered a beer.

Chapter 4



When Cotton rode into the yard at the Wagner ranch, Emily came running out to greet him. She had a dish towel in her hand and an apron tied around her slim waist. Her smile lit up the evening.

“Cotton, you’re safe. I’m so relieved you changed your mind about staying in town. C’mon in and have some supper.”

Cotton followed her inside. Three of her cowboys were seated around the table, savagely attacking some steaks and boiled potatoes. He took one of the empty seats. The cowboys muttered mouthful acknowledgments of his presence but shied away from any formal greeting that might take them away from their ravenous attack on the victuals. Emily placed a plate with a still-sizzling steak in front of him, along with a cup of coffee. She sat down next to him, gave him a nudge with her elbow, and showed him a coy grin. His face turned almost as red as the bowl of beets that sat across the table.

“So, did you catch the man who took a shot at Jack?” she asked.

“No. I’m afraid not. In fact, I came out tonight to ask if you could see yourself clear to lending me one of your hands for a few days.”

“Certainly. Who do you want?” She looked around the table, expecting him to pick one of those in the room.

“Henry Coyote.”

“Henry? Why Henry?”

“Best tracker I know. I need someone who can follow whatever trail this ambusher might have left. The man appears better at coverin’ his route than I am at followin’ it. So—”

“So, you need an Apache.”

“Seems so.”

“In the mornin’ soon enough?”

“Just right.”

A couple of the cowboys started coughing as if they’d choked on something. Cotton knew Emily had made no pretense of her relationship with the sheriff, but her ranch hands still found the affair a tad naughty.

Henry Coyote squatted on the front porch of the Wagner ranch house at dawn. When Cotton emerged stretching and pulling up his suspenders, the Indian grunted a greeting, at least that’s what Cotton interpreted it as. The two of them had been friends for some time, especially since it was Henry who killed the man guarding Emily after her kidnapping by the Cruz gang. And it was Henry who brought her to safety and helped set in motion the downfall of a vicious bunch of cutthroats.

“What sheriff need with Apache?”

“I need your expert tracking skills, my friend. Someone took a shot at Jack night before last while he was at his desk in the jail. Nearly killed him. I need to find whoever did that and bring him in to answer for it. You willin’ to help out?”

“Always ready to help a friend. When we go?”

“Soon as you gather up your pony and that Spencer of yours. Meet you by the gate.”

Henry was on his feet and bounding off the porch before Cotton could open the door to say good-bye to Emily.

Cotton and Henry pulled up in front of the jail, remaining on their mounts. Cotton called out to Jack but got no answer. He dismounted and went inside. There was no Jack to be found. Cotton’s frown gave away his dark thoughts as to where he figured Jack was: still tangled up in Melody’s sheets. He motioned for Henry to dismount and come inside while he went to find his deputy.

“Wait here, Henry. I’ll be right back.”

Cotton wasted no time making tracks for the house at the end of the street, just around the bend. When he got there, he knocked on the door, then turned the handle and went in. He called out to Jack, and again was greeted by silence. After a couple minutes, he heard a shuffling and a yawn coming from the area of the bedroom. When he peeped in the door, Melody screeched something about bad manners and being sheriff didn’t give him the right to barge into a woman’s bedroom without an invitation.

He backed out, embarrassed at her scolding. He waited in the living room, hat in hand.

“Sorry, Melody. I’m lookin’ for Jack. He should be at the jail, but he isn’t. I just came from there. Do you know where he is?”

Melody stepped from the bedroom, half-naked, making no attempt to keep her robe closed. Considering the occupation she’d been in for the past dozen years or so, he wasn’t shocked by her lack of propriety. She walked to a chair and plopped down, reaching for a cigarillo that lay on the tiny end table. She stuck the thing in her mouth, struck a sulfur, and lit the end. She blew smoke his way as she scowled at him like a mother lion about to slap down one of her cubs.

“What makes you think I keep track of Jack all day and all night?”

“I didn’t come here for a fight, Melody. I just want to know if you’ve seen Jack, and if so, where can I find him?”

She took a drag on her smoke, held it a moment, then blew another cloud into the room. She glanced away for a second before answering.

“He crawled out of bed early this morning. Said something about following up on a rumor he’d heard at the saloon. That’s all I know. Now, you get the hell out of here and leave a lady to her—”

“Yeah, I know. I’m leaving. If you see Jack, tell him I’m lookin’ for him.” He let the door close only partially behind him. His long strides took him to the jail and the waiting Apache in only a couple minutes. When he walked in, he found Jack talking to Henry.

“Hey, Cotton, ol’ friend. Where you been?”

“Very funny, Jack. I been spendin’ the past several minutes getting berated by your whore.”

“I figured.”

“So, what’s this rumor you’ve heard?”

“A fella that just got off the stage this mornin’ let it slip—over a couple too many drinks, I might add—that there’s a new bank goin’ to open in the old stone Miners Union building. Says some wealthy dude from Fort Worth plans to attract a lot of the cattle money here by offering loans at a lower rate

than the Apache Springs bank can compete with.”

“That’d likely drive Darnell Givins out of business.”

“That’s what I figured. Could be that’s why he’s doin’ it. Apparently there’s some bad blood between the man and someone here in town. Could be Darnell, but the fella didn’t give any name. I gather it goes back a spell, at least that’s the word floatin’ around.”

“You hear a name for this character?”

“Yep, and you ain’t goin’ to like it.” Jack raised one eyebrow and gave Cotton a look.

“Well, spit it out. I’m growin’ older by the minute. At this rate, I’ll have gray hair before you get around to spillin’ what you know.” Cotton crossed his arms, giving Jack a squint suggesting his impatience.

“Bart Havens.” Jack waited for Cotton to explode. That didn’t happen, but the sheriff *did* begin rubbing his chin and frowning as he walked to the door and looked out.

“You’re right about one thing, Jack. I don’t like it.”

“But there ain’t a damned thing you can do about it, right? He does it all legal-like, don’t he? Kind like before?”

“Since he’s probably lookin’ to square things with me, I reckon we’ll get a chance to find out.”

Chapter 5



The last time Bart Havens and Cotton crossed paths, Havens had paid several lowlife gunmen to try running the lawman out of town. Two tried, both paying the ultimate sacrifice for their inadequate knowledge of Cotton Burke's skills with a Colt. The others skittered out of town like cockroaches before a fire. Cotton couldn't help wondering if it wasn't starting all over again. Until he found out differently, he would operate on the assumption that Havens was somehow involved in the attempt on Jack's life.

As Cotton and Henry rode up into the hills and the boulder field where Cotton and Jack had found evidence of the shooter the day before, Henry Coyote quickly locked on to subtle signs that had been overlooked by the sheriff and his deputy. Cotton saw a knowing look creep across the Apache's face.

"You already know something I don't, Henry. Ready to share your insights?"

"Don't know insights, but know plenty about man with big gun."

"Such as—"

"Small man, no higher than me. Not heavy, skin and bones. Need lay heavy gun on rock to steady. Give off smell of sickness, cough up blood. There, on rock."

"Consumption? A lunger?"

"Uh-huh." Henry bent down to trace the outline of the man's boot print. He stood and took the reins of his pony, leading him through the rocks farther uphill. Cotton followed right behind the wily Apache.

On the down slope of the smallest of the hills, they both mounted up, and with Henry taking the lead, they rode across the desert to the northeast. Cotton knew he had the best tracker in the area; all he had to do was settle in and let Henry find the shooter. Until then, his mind wandered to when he and Bart Havens had first crossed paths, and the treachery that followed. It didn't take him long to dredge up those tragic past events. He'd tried, and failed, to forget them. He still struggled with why he hadn't killed Havens when he'd had the chance.

After about three hours of seemingly aimless wandering, Henry pulled up and pointed to a far-off shanty sitting in a copse of trees atop a rise about a mile and a half away.

"He go there."

Cotton nodded but said nothing. He turned in the saddle and began picking through his saddlebags. He pulled out his field glasses. He raised them and sighted through the lenses, adjusting for distance and focus. He scanned the area around the shanty before finally speaking.

"I don't see any sign of anyone. But we'll approach carefully just the same. You ride out in a wide circle to the left. I'll do the same to the right. Give a call if you spot anything or anyone."

Henry said nothing as he kned his pony to a walk to carry out the sheriff's plan. Cotton did the

same, pulling his Winchester from its saddle scabbard just in case. If this shooter had a rifle that could shoot accurately at long distances, he might just be sighting down on the two of them at that very instant. By separating, he figured to cut the chances of both of them getting cut down.

The closer he got to the shanty, the more intensely Cotton scanned the area. About a hundred yards away, he dismounted, dropped the mare's reins, and proceeded on foot, staying as low as possible and using as much brush as he could find for added cover.

He pulled up twenty-five yards short of the ramshackle building, cocked the rifle, and carried it aimed forward and ready. He moved slowly, looking left and right, listening for any sign of life. He heard nothing but the buzz of bees around the yellow brittlebush scattered over the landscape, and the occasional screech of a circling hawk as it zeroed in on its kill. He decided to call out.

"Hello, the cabin. If there's anybody in there, now would be a good time to come out, before I give the place some ventilation, the lead kind."

Hearing no response, he figured he'd put a bullet through the door for good measure. It certainly wouldn't reduce the property value any. The roar of his Winchester elicited no response except a cloud of smoke. No sound came from within.

"Henry, you see anything?"

The Indian slipped from the back of the building, looking cautiously around the corner. He looked at Cotton sheepishly with his hands in the air.

"I see nothing but bullet that go by. Miss me by this much." Henry held up his hands to indicate a distance of about a foot. It was Cotton's turn to look sheepish.

"Sorry. I didn't realize you were out back. Shouldn't have squeezed off a shot in the first place."

"It okay. Maybe miss by more than I say." Henry broke into a wide grin.

They both walked to the door of the cabin. Cotton kicked it in and shoved inside, looking left and right. Henry pushed by him, sniffed the air, and grunted. They went back outside, where the odor of stale smoke and rotting wood wasn't so prevalent.

"Man with big gun come here. Meet other man who make smoke. Wear perfume, like white squaw. *This man amazes me more every time I'm with him,* Cotton thought.

"Any idea how long ago they left?"

"No. But go different directions."

"Can you tell which way the shooter went?"

"Maybe back to Apache Springs."

"He might be trying to get another shot at Jack . . . or me. I'd better make tracks to assure that doesn't happen. With what you've told me about him, he should be easy to spot."

"What about other man?"

"You follow him as far as you can without attracting attention. Maybe we can get an idea of what he's up to if we know where he hangs out. Come back to town as soon as you know anything. But do not confront him or let him know you are following him."

Henry Coyote gave a nod, mounted up, and spun his pony around in the opposite direction of Apache Springs. Cotton watched as the Indian picked up the trail, locking on to it like a hound dog.

Cotton went straight to the jail as soon as he got back. Jack wasn't there, but he probably wouldn't be hard to find. Cotton crossed the street, stomped onto the boardwalk, and pushed through the swinging doors to the saloon. Along one side of the narrow room, at the end of the bar, leaned Jack. He was chatting with Melody, talking and laughing like they'd just met for the first time. When he saw Cotton, Jack broke off his conversation and walked toward the sheriff.

“What’d you find?”

~~“We tracked the shooter to a vacant shanty above Cedar City. He met up with some other owlhoot.~~

They split up with each goin’ in a different direction.”

“How do you know all that?”

“I was with Henry Coyote, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Dumb question.”

“Yeah.”

“Where do we go from here?” Jack said, ignoring the fact that Melody had gone to the back room with the bartender.

“We keep our eyes open for a skinny ‘lunger’ with a big gun.”

“You sayin’ he’s got that consumption, like Doc Holliday?”

“That’s what Henry says. Pretty uncanny what all the Indian picks up on.”

“That’s for sure.”

“I figure the man was headed back this way for the same reason he came in the first place: to kill someone. I’m the likely target, given that Bart Havens could be involved, but that doesn’t mean you couldn’t attract some stray lead, so stay alert.” Cotton turned and walked out of the saloon and down the street to the bank. He had an itch that needed scratching and he figured the bank president was just the person to see about it.

“You’re thinkin’ that rumor about Havens might be true?” Jack asked, as he followed Cotton through the batwings, then peeling off to go back inside.

“I’ve seen it before.”

When he reached the Apache Springs Bank and Loan, Cotton saw Darnell Givins sitting at his desk, thumbing through a newspaper. He pushed through a low swinging gate and sat down in front of the president.

“Mornin’, Sheriff. What can I do for you?” Givins said.

“Heard a rumor, and I wondered if maybe you’d heard the same.”

“I try hard to ignore rumors, Sheriff. Usually nothing more than nonsense.”

“If this one’s true, it could spell trouble for you, me, and the whole town.”

“Okay, I’m listening. What is it?”

“You ever heard of a man named Bart Havens?”

“The town killer? Who hasn’t? What’s this got to do with me?” Givins said, his face turning ashen.

“I hear he may be fixin’ to start up some competition for your bank.”

The stricken look that came over Givins was unmistakable. He drew his handkerchief from his coat pocket and began mopping his suddenly moistened brow. He obviously hadn’t heard that particular rumor, and it wasn’t sitting well.

“I pray you’re wrong, Sheriff. I certainly do.”

Chapter 6



“Where you goin’, Melody?” Jack asked as he watched her gathering her belongings and stuffing them in several bags and a trunk.

“I’m taking a little trip back to Gonzales. Got some business I need to clear up. I plan to be back in a couple weeks. You can live without me for that long, can’t you, honey?” She smiled coyly and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“I’ll make do. What kind of business you got?”

“I’ll tell you all about it when I get back.”

“Sounds pretty secretive.”

“No, no secret. Just don’t want to put a hex on my deal, that’s all. Don’t fret. I promise I’ll be back soon. Don’t forget, I need you as much as you need me,” she said, fastening the last strap on her trunk and scooting it across the floor to the door. “How about hauling that over to the stage office for me?”

Jack bent over to lift the trunk. His eyes got wide as he straightened up instantly.

“What the hell you got in there, gold bars?”

“No, just some of my—”

“Yeah, I know, your women’s *necessities*. I’ll have someone from the stage line bring a cart over.” Jack left the house rubbing his sore back and muttering something about “women” and “necessities.” He didn’t understand either one.

As he was passing by the bank on his way to the stage office, Jack saw Cotton emerge with a serious look on his face.

“Hey, Cotton, what’s got you lookin’ like you was snakebit?”

“I told Givins about Bart Havens and the rumor about a new bank starting up. He’s the one who looked snakebit. I couldn’t get a straight answer out of him about what he would do if the rumor turned out to be true. I got the impression he couldn’t cover the withdrawals if many folks made a switch to another bank.”

“That’s not something the folks around here would take well,” Jack said. “A failed bank could make for some pretty temperamental outbursts, and that usually means someone gets hurt.”

“You don’t have to remind me. Let’s get back to the jail.” Cotton looked up and down the street as they made their way back to the sheriff’s office.

Jack was chattering about something, but Cotton wasn’t hearing any of it. He was lost in the past and his last encounter with Bart Havens. That experience had left him with a bad feeling about what Havens might be capable of should their paths ever cross again.

It all started about five years back, in another town, but with similar circumstances. The town was named Benbow Creek, named appropriately after the town’s only Civil War hero, a colonel who died

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