

CHAPTER ONE

Her horse had one eye. He was a beautiful animal in every other respect, a rich golden buckskin with a jet black mane and a broad, well-muscled chest. His good eye, the left one, was deep brown, speckled with light discolorations, but where his right eye should have been there was an empty black socket.

“Your horse is near blind,” Jube said. He stood a few feet in front of the animal and its rider.

“He sees what needs to be seen,” the woman said, letting her right hand rest on a revolver stuffed into a holster dangling from her belt. “I asked you a question.”

Jube shifted his weight slightly. He didn’t want to answer that question, at least not yet. He noticed she had a lever-action rifle in a sheath running along the left side of the saddle, passing under her lower leg. “I heard about a woman who rides around with weapons like the ones you’ve got. Word is she kills folks for hire.”

“What’s your point?”

“Are you that woman?” he asked, trying to appear strong without the taint of belligerence.

She took the faded black baseball cap off her head and wiped the sweatband with a rag she had tied to the horn of the saddle, indifferently releasing her grip on the lead line to her pack horse, a stocky paint who drifted toward a manzanita tree to nibble on the leaves.

Jube figured her age as mid-twenties. She wore her auburn hair in a ponytail. High cheekbones, a jutting jawline and a crooked nose might have given her a harsh appearance if it weren't for the big, liquid brown eyes that softened her face.

She sat on her horse with a bold confidence that spoke of a lifetime in the saddle. Her skin was almost as dark as his own, but he was pretty sure she was a white girl baked into brownness by many long rides in the sun. Her patch-covered pea coat looked ancient, probably pre-Breakdown, maybe even from before the Great Virus. He recognized her ornately beaded, shin-high moccasins as Nations-made, but he was sure she wasn't from the Nations.

She dropped the cap back on her head carelessly so it sat at a rakish angle, tipped slightly to the left. "Well, either way, I don't see how it should stop you from telling me where your friend is. If I'm not that killer woman, it couldn't hurt." A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "And if I am her, you damn well better tell me." No smile now. The palm of her hand hovered a couple of inches over the butt of the revolver.

"He's not my friend," Jube said. "I just took his picture."

"Then tell me where I can find him." That hand moved a little closer to the revolver butt.

"If you mean to do him harm, I'm not telling you."

"That's the stand you want to take? For your non-friend?" Her eyes burned, and her body was as still as one of Jube's pictures. The buckskin seemed to understand what was going on, his one eye focused relentlessly on Jube.

"You never know when your time is going to come." He hoped he sounded more philosophical than scared.

The woman's face maintained its ferocity but her eyes now seemed to sparkle rather than burn.

What happened next surprised Jube. She dropped her hand onto her leg and her entire body appeared to relax, a smile breaking onto her dusty face like the sun bursting through storm clouds. She laughed, not mocking or cruel, more of a girlish giggle as if she were genuinely amused.

"Damn, I like a man who can call a bluff." She casually slid off the buckskin, who suddenly cared only about a clump of buffalo grass to his good-eye side.

"Name's Deirdre." She extended her hand as if it was the most normal thing to threaten to kill a man one moment and then want to shake his hand the next.

Her grip was stronger than expected for a woman who couldn't be more than five-two. Calluses pressed against his palm as the tips of his fingers closed on the back of her hand, which was smooth and warm. It'd been a long time since he'd touched a woman. He held the handshake a little longer than was customary.

"Jube," he said, releasing her hand.

"I'm no killer," she explained. "I carry those guns as a deterrent."

He wasn't sure what a deterrent was but he didn't let on because he cared what she thought of him from the moment he touched her. "I understand."

"Sorry about that stunt I pulled," she said sheepishly. "When I realized you thought I was a professional shootist, it seemed like a shortcut to some info. But you saw right through me. I guess I'm not much of an actress." Another laugh—hoarse, generous, loud and charming.

"So, will you tell me where he is?" The question had none of the intimidating tone of her earlier inquiry. Now she was simply a young traveler asking for directions. But she *was* a good actress. She had just convinced him she would gun him down if he didn't tell her what she

wanted to know. She might still be acting.

As if reading his mind, she said, "Damn, now you don't trust me. I screwed that up, didn't I?" She kicked at the dirt.

"What do you want with Carlyle?"

"He's got a mule that's mine."

"He stole that mule?" asked Jube. It didn't seem likely.

"No...well...kinda. We traded. He needed a mule and I needed to move some feed." She waved her hand toward the north. "I got a load of oats waiting for me back there because that son of a bitch stuck me with a pickup wagon that had a broken axel patched together with tar. He had to know it was gonna break down the first time I hit a bump."

"So he cheated you."

"Yes, he did."

Jube toed a rock around in the dirt before he spoke. "Well, I guess I can't blame somebody for wanting to right a wrong. What if he's not prepared to give you satisfaction?"

She sat down on a dried-up cottonwood trunk that lay across the rock-studded earth like a body on a battlefield. "I don't know," she said as her big eyes blinked three times in quick succession, apparently an expression of frustration. "Haven't really thought it out that well, I guess. I just can't stand being ripped off."

"I wouldn't try bluffing him like you bluffed me. That could turn ugly real fast."

"Of course not," she said, her eyes widening as if shocked at the mention of gunplay. "I just want to confront him and see what he says. Maybe he can give me that wagon that's in the picture you took." She pulled a four-by-six photo from her coat pocket and handed it to Jube. "He must have picked that up after we did our trade."

Jube recognized the photo as one he had taken four days earlier. Carlyle, a raw-boned, angular white man, sat on a chestnut mule standing next to the bed of an old pickup truck that had been detached from the cab and turned into a horse-drawn wagon. On the flatbed sat

four children, three boys and a girl, ranging in ages from about seven to around twelve. The photo had a deep fold in the middle, which meant Jube had discarded it as an unsatisfactory print.

"Where'd you get this?" he asked.

"At Sam's Livery in Tucson. I was asking questions about Carlyle. Sam told me about you and your picture taking. Said you threw away some photos. It was Sam who told me you were headed out to Carlyle's place. Anyway, I fished that pic out of the garbage. Hope you don't mind."

He shrugged. "No, I don't mind."

"There's something I don't understand," she said, pinching the tip of her chin with a thumb and forefinger. "If you took photos of them in Tucson, why do you have to cart your whole kit out there to take more?"

"He and his people have a lot of kids." He squatted down to draw lines in the sand with a twig. "Carlyle said he'd make it worth my while if I came to his place and photographed all of them."

"Huh. He's got a soft spot for kids. Wouldn't have supposed that." She stood and stretched, reaching behind to massage her lower back with those strong hands. "It's close to dark. Is it all right if I camp close to you? There's strength in numbers. This is Mountie country, you know."

He did know. He wasn't afraid of them because they'd never given him trouble but he'd heard they liked to grab females. "Sure. We can share the same campfire if you want."

"I appreciate it."

"I've got some alfalfa in my pickup." He gestured toward a truck bed that had long ago been detached from the cab and converted into a wagon, like the one in the picture. "If you want to split a flake between your horses, that'd be fine."

"Decent of you. My pack horse is toting oats if you want to treat your oxen."

“No thanks,” he said, throwing the stick away as he stood up. “I don’t want to spoil them. There’s a little spring right down that slope if you want to water your horses when they’ve cooled down.”

She nodded and stepped towards her animals but then stopped and turned back to face Jube. “One other thing. What’d Carlyle promise you as payment?”

He was hoping she wouldn’t go there but now that she had he thought it best to answer directly, hoping his openness might mitigate the awkwardness of the situation. “That mule.”

Her smile seemed even brighter in the dusky light of the setting sun. “I see. We have a conflict of interest.”

CHAPTER TWO

Jube sat on the overturned water pail he used as a camp chair and stared at the green mess Deirdre had offered him as dinner. After she'd built a campfire in the time it had taken him to unharness his oxen, she pulled a couple of avocados out of a saddle bag, chopped them up into a small wooden bowl, including the skins, and added some gooey stuff out of a jar. She then divided the concoction evenly, insisting he share her calories. She had given him the wooden bowl, eating hers in quick gulps out of a tin cup.

He took a bite. It was bad. The gooey stuff had the texture of phlegm and its tart lemony flavor combined with the hot spices disguised any trace of avocado. He watched her as she sat by the campfire scribbling with what looked like a stubby old-time pencil onto a battered yellow pad. She looked up from her writing and noticed there was still gook in his bowl.

"You don't like my food?" She seemed hurt.

"No, it's good. I just eat slow." He took another small bite and forced a yum-yum grin.

She exploded into laughter. "I'm just messing with you," she said

as the guffaws dissolved into giggles. "I can't make anything anybody else can stomach, that's for sure. In our camp back in SoCal we have a guy, Joe Reno, who can make the same ingredients taste like a bit of heaven. When I make it, it sucks. I always go too heavy on the spices. I just can't help myself." She laughed again. "If you don't want it, I'll finish it."

He handed her the bowl. The green slime was gone in an instant. He'd never seen anyone eat so fast. It was like she breathed it in, as she had her own portion. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and then wrinkled her nose. "You did eat today, didn't you?" she asked, her intense brown eyes beaming genuine concern.

He nodded. "I found a sound can of SpaghettiOs in the ruins of a gas station a couple of weeks ago up at Flagstaff. Opened it this morning for breakfast. It was perfect. Had the sauce and everything. Damn, that was good."

"A can of 21st-century calories?" She shook her head in amazement. "It's rare they're still eatable. It's because you found it up in a cold climate place like Flag. Down in the desert, all the canned food went bad years ago."

She wagged an approving finger at him. "Smart of you to be looking in the gas stations. Some had tiny general stores attached to them. Not many people think of that so they haven't been picked clean by hungry folk like other ruins have." Her brow furrowed. More concern. "So that's all? SpaghettiOs?"

"And four quail eggs."

"SpaghettiOs and quail eggs. Not enough calories." She studied his torso for a moment. He was wearing a fleece-lined deerskin coat, unbuttoned, allowing her to get a good look at his well-defined chest and flat stomach which were covered by a thin T-shirt.

"You've got to maintain muscle mass. That's the key. If you're losing muscle, then you've got to eat more." She sized him up again. "You look all right." She returned her attention to her yellow pad.

"So where's SoCal?" Jube asked.

She struggled for a moment to refocus from her writing to his question. "It's what they used to call southern Pacifica. Part of it is now República land but a good portion is wild." She paused for a moment as she considered what she'd just said. "Untamed is a better word. That's where my people live. I'm a Hussar. You heard of us?"

"Yeah. My brother used to do some trading over in Pacifica. I believe he did business with your tribe. I remember him saying you folks have a reputation for being the best riders."

"We may be. The Vaqueros would have something to say about that. And then there's the Nations." She glanced down at her pad for a moment and then looked up at Jube. "Do you know what Nations means?"

"I thought it was just their name."

"The People of the Nations. You know, like the Apache Nation, Comanche Nation, Hopi Nation, Navajo Nation. For short most people just refer to them as the Nations." The zest in her words showed that sharing the knowledge she had acquired was something she loved. "Did you know that before the Breakdown the Nations were an oppressed people?"

"Really?" He had a hard time believing the powerful Nations hadn't always been a dominant power. He gestured toward her feet. "Those are Nations mocs."

"Good eye. Apache design."

"You know a lot of stuff."

"Self-cultivation," she said boldly. "As I'm traveling I trade for every book I can get my hands on and read them right away. Can you read?"

"My mother taught me the basics," he said, lowering his gaze, a little embarrassed his education was so meager. "To be honest, I don't read that much."

"Yeah, but you learned all that photography stuff. That's

impressive. I love the way different people bring back slivers of the lost technology. The Hussar technician rigged up a TV and DVD player. Powers them off solar panels. We have over fifty DVDs in our—.”

A noise Jube didn't hear or a feeling he was unaware of brought Deirdre to her feet in an instant, her rifle in her hands. She levered a cartridge into the chamber and peered into the darkness.

“Did you hear something?” he asked, a little shocked at her lightning response.

“Maybe.”

“I think it's one of your horses moving around,” he said, reassuring himself as much as her.

“No,” she said. “My horses are hydrating over by the spring. There's something up there on the slope.”

Jube's camp was nestled at the foot of a rugged mountain that reared out of the earth like an island from the sea. This high chaparral region was dotted by many such formations. The one they were camped by stood alone, not part of a range, and was tiny compared to the huge peaks to the east—more of an overgrown hill—but still formidable in its fierce jaggedness and steep inclines. To the west, the plain inclined gradually down into the Sonoran Desert. The spring was on the west side of their camp.

“Could be a Spirit,” she said as she listened carefully. “Danny?” she yelled. A moment later a whinny came from the direction of the flats. “My horse felt it, too.”

Jube chuckled.

“What's so funny?” The steeliness in her voice left no doubt that she was definitely serious about communicating with her horse and feeling spirits.

Jube struggled to come up with an answer that wouldn't offend. He was saved from the moment when she changed the subject.

“What kind of weapons do you have?” she asked as if his answer would determine some action she'd take.

“A rifle and a baseball bat.”

“What kind?”

“Aluminum.”

She gave out an impatient sigh. “I meant what kind of rifle?”

“It’s a muzzleloader.”

She tilted her head as if the labor of figuring out this eccentric was tipping her brain to one side. “A muzzleloader and a baseball bat? You don’t have repeating guns?”

He shook his head. “It’s so hard to get ammo these days.”

“You can make your own cartridges. That’s what I do with my rifle. And my revolver is cap and ball.” She drew her handgun and presented it to him as a visual aid to her argument. “All I need is black powder, which I can make myself, a handful of caps and a few pieces of lead – same principle as your muzzleloader except I can get off more than one shot before I reload.”

Jube took the revolver, and after examining it for a few moments said, “I guess there’re ways to get more firepower but I don’t like guns much anyway. I keep the rifle around for game or to put an animal down who’s suffering.”

“You’re a strange one, Jube.” She took her revolver back and holstered it. “I’ll take the first watch. Get some sleep.” The charming campfire attitude was gone. She was all business now, giving him an order as if orders were something she was used to giving.

“Nervous about the Mounties?” he asked.

“I talked to a young girl over in Bisbee a while back.” She paused. Jube sensed she didn’t like exploring this memory.

“These Arizona Mounties kidnapped her when she was fifteen,” she continued, her voice tightening. “Raped her every day for two years.” She spat out the words. “When they got tired of her, they were getting ready to hack off body parts for the hell of it.”

She tossed him a ferocious look, big eyes blazing, lips taunt with anxiety, face flush with anger. For a scary moment he thought she was

angry with him.

“A República patrol raided the Mountie camp and saved her from losing a hand,” she said, “but the Mounties had already cut out her soul.” Her tone was suddenly soft, almost vulnerable. “She’s a walking corpse now.” The trembling in her voice was so extreme Jube thought she might even cry, but then nonchalantly she said, “So yeah, I’m a tad nervous,” and put her rifle on half cock.

Jube lay stretched out in his pup tent trying to doze off, a tantalizing flood of sleep just behind the dam of conflicted thoughts his mind had constructed.

He couldn’t decide what to do about Deirdre. A logical version of himself was telling him this woman was trouble. The convincing way she had threatened him, the blinding quickness with which she handled her rifle, and the surliness of the order to go to sleep all suggested this was a hard, dangerous woman who could turn a girlish vulnerability on and off to deceive fools like him. And that talk about feeling a spirit was weird. The sooner she went on her way, the better.

Another version of himself couldn’t stop thinking of her as an attractive woman. When he first saw her, she was a dusty, weather-beaten trail rider, but when he touched her hand, she morphed into a full-blooded woman with a shapely body. As he watched her walk around camp, her every move seemed uniquely graceful and when she sat by the fire, her rich auburn hair turned red by the glow of the flames, he began to think of her as beautiful.

Every once in a while, a cold breeze moved across the campsite, passed over Deirdre, collected her scent, penetrated his tent, and deposited in his nostrils a fragrance consisting of sweat and trail dust

which he found surprisingly stimulating.

Soon all his thoughts were about her charm, her skin, her eyes, her hands, her hair, her smile and her smell. When the dam finally broke, flooding his brain with a torrent of sleep, his dream consciousness was utterly dominated by this mysterious stranger.

CHAPTER THREE

As she sat by the dying fire, her Winchester rifle cradled on her lap, Deirdre was preoccupied with the danger posed by the local Mounties. For decades, small towns and tribes had banished hardened criminals into the wilderness. These rough men gathered in isolated mountain ranges and became known as Mounties. This southeast Arizona group was made up predominantly of rapists, some kind of perverse birds of a feather thing. Deirdre was determined to be on keen alert.

Jube's snoring distracted her from her thoughts. She glanced at his compact trail tent. *What sort of man is this?* He was coldly calm when she played the threat. Was he calling her bluff or was he okay with dying? Either way, she found it interesting.

Does he know more about Carlyle's operation than he's letting on? As she reflected on his honest face and spontaneous sincerity, she became convinced he was clueless. Carlyle undoubtedly saw him as a useful dupe.

She liked Jube's look. She guessed his age to be around thirty, maybe a little younger. Clearly of African descent, he possessed a

full head of black, tightly coiled hair poking out from under a beat-up broad-brimmed Panama. His face, long and angular, with a sweeping forehead, projected strength, his gentle eyes and easy smile communicated kindness.

She was in the midst of these thoughts when she heard it—a crackling of branches, something large moving through the brush, too clumsy for a mountain lion or a go-shee. When she heard the faint whisper of a human voice, she knew she didn't have much time.

With his muzzleloader and baseball bat, Jube would be close to worthless in the fight so she had to get him out of the way. She needed him alive to find Carlyle.

She crawled into his tent and shook him by the shoulder. He slowly sat up.

"Okay," he said groggily. "My watch?"

She clapped her hand over his mouth.

"Keep quiet," she whispered, removing her hand. "I'm gonna be leading you out of here to a hiding place."

"A hiding place?"

She covered his mouth again, this time with so much force she thought she might have cut his lip against his teeth. "If you must talk, it has to be the faintest whisper." Her own whisper was barely audible.

Jube nodded. She grabbed his hand, led him out of the tent and took him to a small cave she had noted as an excellent hiding place when she rode into the campsite.

"Sit down," she whispered, "and scoot back into that cave."

In the dark, she could just make out that he was looking around, hesitant. She placed her hands on his shoulders and pressed down. "Sit," she commanded in a whisper.

He obeyed.

"Now scoot back."

He did. She heard him grunt as he banged his head on the ceiling of the tiny cave.

"Stay," she whispered. She made her way to the horses, unhooked Danny and the paint, Blue, from the grazing line, grabbed the headstall and offered Danny the bit. He took it without a sound. Deirdre pulled the bridle over his ears, crossed the split reins over his withers, put her left hand on his neck and vaulted onto his bare back, her rifle in her right hand.

Galloping away from the campsite with Blue following, she didn't care if the intruders heard the sounds of the horses running off. That was part of her plan. When the Mounties saw no one was in the camp, they'd assume both travelers had fled and wouldn't look for Jube.

She rode around the foot of the mountain, Danny moving confidently, the light shed by the quarter moon plenty for any horse with one good eye. Blue peeled off at one point to munch on a patch of grass. That was okay. He would only be in the way.

She came upon a brush-covered slope that looked gradual enough to allow her horse to do some climbing. Hoping she was far enough away from her camp that the Mounties wouldn't hear her ascent, she directed Danny up the hill, crashing through the brush.

She was about three-quarters of the way up when they reached an incline too steep for Danny. Off his back in an instant, she climbed as quickly as she could, sliding back from time to time but never stopping the upward push. Just below the crest, she collapsed with exhaustion, her face and hands covered with scrapes from the brush.

She caught a whiff of a campfire to her left. When she regained her breath, she approached the Mounties' campsite.

"You got that shine?" a man asked, his words slurred. She estimated he was about thirty feet straight ahead, behind a stand of bushes. A sudden breeze coming her way brought the stench of sweat, human waste, burnt meat and alcohol.

Edging forward, she peered into a little clearing from the cover of some redshank. Their campfire was beginning to burn out. A man, thick of stature, dressed entirely in grease-stained deerskins, hulked

over it while trying to sustain the flames with some fresh kindling. His sloppy movements told Deirdre he was drunk.

"You got that shine?" he repeated.

Another man, this one with a close-cropped red beard, walked into the glow of the campfire. He carried a canteen which he handed to Deerskins.

Red Beard squatted next to the fire. "I do believe they ran away. I heard the sound of hooves making it back up the trail."

"Shit." Deerskins took an angry swig on the canteen and then whined, "I was hoping we'd take that little piece alive and have some fun with her." He sounded like a child who didn't get the sweet he hoped for.

"There'll be others," Red Beard said as he stood and moved away from the campfire. "I'm going down. See what they left behind." He picked up a rifle that lay on a bedroll.

"You do that," Deerskins said petulantly.

Red Beard headed out of the camp.

Deirdre counted the bedrolls situated around the campfire. Five. So there were probably three down in her camp, one headed down to join them and one here in their campsite. She had to be efficient if she was going to pull this off.

She moved through the redshank cautiously so that she was approaching Deerskins from the rear. She edged closer. In a squatting position, she felt her cadences in sync and pushed off with her powerful legs. Before he even knew she was there, her Bowie knife had severed his right carotid. She then sliced his throat, curtailing any cry. He gurgled blood as she pulled out the knife and plunged it into his left breast. One down.

Hurrying after Red Beard, she spotted him descending the hill with big strides. Having to tread softly so he wouldn't hear her, she had difficulty catching up. She was concerned he'd reach the camp before she could eliminate him. If he joined his three associates, she'd

be taking on four at once, a situation she hoped to avoid.

He was almost at the foot of the mountain, about fifty yards from her camp, when Fortune smiled. Red Beard sat down on a big rock to catch his breath. There was a depression directly behind him so Deirdre couldn't get the right angle to cut his throat. Her knife penetrated the base of his skull right above the neck. She was hoping the blade entering the brain at that angle would kill him instantly but he let out a faint cry before collapsing to the ground.

"That you, Bishop?" a husky voice called from the direction of her camp.

She sheathed the knife. Her Winchester was on half cock, a round already in the chamber. She thumbed the hammer into full cock position as quietly as possible and advanced.

Two men were ransacking the tents. If they were momentarily concerned about Bishop's little yelp, they'd already forgotten about it. One was a clean-shaven six-footer with broad shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist. The other one was a true giant, over seven-foot-tall, the biggest man Deirdre had ever seen. Probably pushing three hundred pounds, his flowing black beard made him appear even bigger. The third man wasn't in view.

Broad Shoulders looked up, spotted her and reached for a pistol in his belt. It was the last thing he did as her first shot was a direct hit to the middle of his forehead. He went down in a heap. Deirdre levered another cartridge into the chamber, swung the rifle around and expected to take aim at the giant but he was gone from view, weirdly fast for his size.

She paused for just a moment, which was too long. A thick branch from an ironwood tree slammed down on her right forearm. She staggered and fell, firing back toward her attacker with the rifle in her left hand, her right arm now useless. She saw a short man with long blond hair drop the branch, grab his side and dive for cover.

She was struggling to her feet when three hundred pounds of

fury hit her. The seven-footer slammed her to the ground and pinned her arms under his knees. He jerked the rifle from her grip and tossed it aside.

The combination of the body slam and the enormous weight crushing her ribcage had Deirdre gasping for air as his enormous fists repeatedly crashed into her face. She struggled to retain consciousness, panic beginning to take hold. After a few more blows, he wrapped his hands around her neck and began to choke the life out of her. As his strength crushed her windpipe, the panic left, replaced by resignation.

A lifetime of spiritual discipline kicked in. The words she'd repeated so often took over her consciousness, a sort of automatic firewall against philosophical panic.

As children obey their parents, we must obey Fate. Fate brings death to all as an inevitable part of life. Because I see my life as good, I also see my death as good.

As her consciousness began to fade, she felt a profound peace.

Then, suddenly, she could breathe. She sucked in the air and tried to make out what was happening. The giant had something encircling his neck – it was his turn to fight for air. At first, in her woozy confusion, she imagined some kind of constricting snake had grabbed him. Then she realized it was Jube's right arm.

She wriggled violently to get her left hand free but couldn't budge it out from underneath the enormous weight. Jube leveraged the giant's neck, tipping him backwards. Deirdre freed her good arm, grabbed her knife and buried it into the giant's heart. His groan, guttural and desperate, could be heard through Jube's chokehold. And then he was dead.

Deirdre stumbled to her feet.

"I think you better take it easy," Jube said.

"No," she croaked, her voice box damaged. "I gotta get the other one. I landed a round but he was still moving."

She took two steps but her battered brain shut down and she collapsed onto the giant's corpse.