

In This Western Land - Book I

by

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Book I

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Chapter I

Wagon Hut, Mill Town

Hanging particles in the air caused the horizon sky to glow red one morning in the West. Awash with the hues of dawn was Mill Town, a small town lying just a couple of miles from the US Cavalry Post which was slightly infamous for allowing a single, certain buckskin mustang to rob them of a great number of their mounts a while back.

It was 5 am.

All but one house of the town showed some sign of life as yet, with most folks still in bed. That single house was Wagon Hut, home of the Adams family, a big wooden cabin on Python Street. One of its ground floor windows, looking out at its backyard, was wide open, shutters well back against the plank walls of the building, and a patchwork blanket was hanging to air over the sill. Light clouds of dust billowed out of the room in frequent gusts, traces of feather down floating out with it. There came the muffled sound of pillows being plumped, a mattress buffeted and shaken. In time the noise died away, and a girl with deep red-brown, fairly wavy locks put her head through the window; she gazed around at the stillness of the square yard that was edged by wooden constructions of different sorts. Wagon Hut, long and tall, took up all of one side of the square. The side to the girl's left was a line of small wooden sheds, one storing food for the house, the another animal feed and, in the third, with an underground cellar, ice. Opposite these sheds stood the Red Shack, a sort of a hayloft like the house completely taking up one margin of the yard on its own. It had a bare earth floor, no front, and a wooden roof sloping down towards the yard, and held up by long, thin-pillar-like stakes. Inside it stood a small buckboard wagon, among a variety of agricultural machines.

The girl's eyes wandered from the left side of the yard, across to the right, acknowledging the silence, the peace. Nothing moved save the morning flies, whizzing lazily on delicate, shiny wings.

All of a sudden a quiet sound, like a husky chuckle, caught her attention. Her gaze instantly flickered over to the fourth side of the yard, facing the house. There stood two stables, with a gate in-between which lead out of the yard. Over the bottom half of each stable's Dutch door, a furry head stuck out. One head gave a low bellow, the other whickered softly.

The girl smiled, taking up the blanket from her window sill and placing it back neatly on her bed. She crossed lightly over to a coat hanger that hung beside her room door. Excitement sparkled in her eyes as she unhooked a rather worn looking long leather jacket and put it quickly on. Then she left the room, stepping quietly along the corridor, over the house's old wooden floorboards, so as not to wake her parents, who had planned to have a long lie-in after a long busy day of work.

When she crossed the kitchen, which was on the way out the house, the girl found her older brother, Paul Adams, at the dinner table, sitting comfortably with a book and a mug of coffee.

Paul noticed his younger sister's movement as she went past from over the top of his book,

and he looked up.

'Morning, Jenni!' he said cheerfully and loudly, with a nod of the head. 'Up early too?'

Jenni put a finger to her lips before nodding, smiling as she began buttoning up her jacket.

'Yes, Paul,' she said. 'Pa and Ma are still asleep. I'm just off to check on the animals.'

'Without breakfast?' asked her brother, gesturing with a finger to, standing on the kitchen table next to a cast iron pan, a plateful of sausages he had obviously just cooked up for the family.

Jenni smiled. 'I won't be long, only an hour or so.'

'They'll get cold!' frowned her brother, fingering something in his hand that before Jenni had not noticed. It was a letter. He kept glancing at it in a preoccupied manner, turned it over to look at its back, again and again, even though there were, clearly, no words there.

Suddenly Paul tossed the letter casually to one side, and pushed a clean china plate over to Jenni.

'And if you don't eat them,' he said, a firm note rising in his voice. 'Benny with find a way to get them before you have time to. Better now than never, Jenni Adams.'

'I guess you're right,' Jenni said, taking up the plate and putting one of the sausages on it, as well as some well-washed lettuce leaves kindly given to them by their elderly neighbour, Mrs Clarence, the previous day. She sat down heavily at the table beside her brother and began to eat. 'It's just I want to check on Michigin as soon as possible, to see if he hasn't damaged his leg again after he got frightened by the gunshot, and slammed it against the stable manger.'

'Yea-ah, sorry about the gun. Pesky foxes - after the hens,' Paul gave a wry frown. 'And 'course then there's Hannah . . .'

'She is pregnant,' said Jenni, with an excited smile. 'And the calf is due any time soon.'

‘How many calves has she had again?’ Paul asked, rather distantly. He was peering over at the letter lying near the salt and pepper shakers in the middle of the table. He reached over and propped it against the salt.

Jenni glanced at the letter with a puzzled look. She wondered what it was and why her brother kept glancing and fiddling with it, but she did not ask of it and instead resumed their talk, answering his question.

‘Three so far; this will be the fourth; and although I must say that I have loved the calves Hannah’s had before, I have high hopes that this one will be something of a special kind. Perhaps it will be female, we’ve only ever had males.’

Paul nodded slowly. ‘Yup.’

Jenni gave her brother an enquiring look. He seemed to be acting oddly that morning, it seemed like something was on his mind.

But, she shrugged her curiosity off, got up from the table without a word, and cleared the dishes away. ‘Well!’ she said, picking three soft apples from a wooden basket in one of the kitchen corners. She stuffed two into her coat pockets, taking a bite into the third. ‘I’ll be about the yard if you or anyone else needs me. You’re going out too, aren’t you?’

‘Yup, later’ he replied, standing up briskly and taking the plates from his sister to wash them at the sink. ‘I’m going to the General Store to buy a new blade for the axe and some groceries. Father also asked me to check out the new tack in Harvey’s Woodhouse; maybe we’ll consider getting a new saddle for your little pony.’

‘I’d like that!’ said Jenni with an eager smile. ‘And so would Michigan. Last time I rode him, his saddle was a bit too tight. He’s getting bigger you know, Paul. He’s not the same little pony you bought me last winter.’

‘I’ll say!’ said her brother, folding the dishcloth he had just used for the dishes and placing it neatly on the wooden table-top. ‘Little fleetfoot! He’s a great runner too, faster than before, I know that! Er, until recently, that is. Bother the gun scaring ’im . . .’

Above their heads, the two of them could hear someone walking across the landing.

“Father’s up,” Paul said. “You’d better get Huron ready. Give him extra oats for breakfast, he’s going to have a long day today. Father plans to give him a warmup before the end of leave.”

Jenni heard her father coming down the stairs for breakfast, nodded and left the kitchen. She dashed outside and just about skipped across the yard towards the stables.

The same bellow she had heard from her bedroom window greeted her as she neared the stable on the left. Jenni rubbed the pink, velvety nuzzle of the large beast that stuck its head over the door and took out one of the rosy apples from her pockets.

“Morning, Hannah,” Jenni said, affectionately stroking her cow’s soft ears and scruffing up the little amount of hair on it’s head. “How are you feeling today? Good?”

Out of a slightly tipped head the cow’s warm brown eyes looked quizzically at her owner’s face, and her lower jaw chewed the gift apple carefully into a cud. Hannah had lived on the Adams’ small homestead all her life. In fact she had been born there. When Jenni was ten years old she offered to take full responsibility of the Hannah the calf and her parents agreed, so long as she didn’t attach herself to the animal in case things went badly and they would have to sell her - that time was when financial difficulties kept cropping up for the family. Luckily, they never did sell Hannah, who became Jenni’s own. Hannah was an excellent milker. She had produced three fine bull calves, two of which had become meat for the family, big, fat animals held in the admiration of all the Mill Town folk. They were also fattening Hannah’s third and most recent offspring, another bull, now over a year old. When was big enough, he would be “taken to the shed” and his meat would last Jenni and her family the whole winter. Because of this fate, he did not have a proper name, usually being referred to merely as “The Calf”, although he was sometimes called “The Mont”.

There came loud snort from the stable to Jenni’s right, and she quickly looked over her shoulder to it. Michigan, her small buckskin horse, with white socks on his fore-feet and a rump marked like an appaloosa’s (only these were Bend-Or spots), was stretching his neck out over the bottom half of his Dutch door, trying to reach her. His black muzzle, with a white star on it, twitched furiously. His brown eyes could not be seen under a massive, thick and black forelock.

“Hello to you too, boy,” said Jenni. She opened his stable door and walked in, peering

down at his right foreleg which had been hurt countless times in the last month - by being rammed by a fence post, stuck in a rabbit hole and twisted when slipping in mud, among other things. Every accident had left him limping slightly. Was it the same after banging against the manger?

Michigan, however, was fine; he backed away to give her room, trotting four paces with hooves lifted well up. He appeared to feel no discomfort when moving in the least.

'Looking good!' said Jenni, bending down and running her hands over the stallion's leg, while Michigan nibbled at her coat playfully. 'Only walking for now, but you'll be able to have a good gallop around in a day or two. How would you like that?'

As if understanding her words, Michigan swung his head around to look at his leather saddle and bridle, hanging at the back of the stable, and lightly blanketed with dust and specks of hay seed. He snorted in a lively way, bobbing his head. He had not been ridden for a few days.

'Jenni!' came Paul's voice suddenly from the house - it had a strained note to it. 'Are you tacking up Huron yet? Pa's leaving earlier . . .'

'I'll see you later, Mich,' said Jenni, rubbing affectionately the nose of her horse, before hurrying out to prepare her father's.

Chapter II

On The Hilly Pasture

It was quarter past six when, after having a quick breakfast, mounting Huron and saying goodbye to his family, Sergeant Adams made his way out of Mill Town, aiming to have a ride in the Grey Hills, a rough piece of mountainous country. There he would exercise Huron, as well as himself, preparing them both for their return to duty at the local cavalry fort in a few days time.

From the yard gate, Jenni and her mother, Anne Adams, watched him go down the street, swaying on the back of big, brown, short-maned Huron. He turned around, and waved. They waved

back.

“Four more,” sighed Mrs Adams, referring to her husband’s remaining days on Leave. She time and again wished he wasn’t a soldier of the US Cavalry - time and again she feared he would be killed by an Indian, or shot by his own men (as sometimes happened to soldiers), or by himself, if his gun back-fired, or . . . Her list of worries went on and on.

Jenni nodded silently. She looked down and began fiddling with her apron strings; a thing she tended to do when she was nervous or worried.

“The Morrisises will be here in a couple of hours,” said Mrs Adams, once her husband had disappeared into the distance. She turned to Jenni. “Are you going with Paul today?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” answered Jenni, and stopped fiddling. “Paul told me the town has been pretty rough lately; ever since the new settlers from the South came - don’t know why. But I don’t think it’s safe to go yet.”

“Oh, dear,” her mother said, turning towards the house sadly . . . now she had Paul to worry about.

“Will he bring his gun with him, just in case?” asked her mother.

Jenni nodded as they strolled across the yard. They looked over at the Red Shack, where Paul was readying the buckboard wagon in preparation for the Morris’ arrival. The two Morris brothers - who lived on a homestead not far outside Mill Town - owned a number of draft horses which they hired out to people in need of one. At the expense of the United States Army, Paul used a horse once a month to drive provisions to the local US Cavalry fort. As a job perk, his family was allowed to use the hired draft for a few days before and after the monthly delivery.

Mrs Adams called to her eldest: “Will you take your gun, Paul?”

“Sure will!” replied Paul, giving his anxious-faced mother a comforting smile and a thumbs up.

“Mother?” Jenni said they reached the house door, and she opened the door.

“Yes, dear?”

'If it's okay with you,' Jenni said, 'after chores I was considering taking Hannah's bull and Mich up to that nice hilly bit of pasture belonging to Buckbone Ranch which Mr Crow the owner said we could use sometimes - it's not too far from here. The one Father used to graze the goats on last summer. It would be great for the bullock to eat something other than the hay and Mich will like the adventure. Maybe even Ivy could come!'

Again, her mother looked worried. 'Maybe not Ivy, dear,' she said softly. 'I mean, I don't like listening to rumours; but I have heard that there were a few Sioux Indians sighted by the Buckbone Ranchers recently, and I don't like the idea of even you going too far on your own.'

There seemed to be a lot of trouble in and out of town lately.

'What if we took a gun?' grinned Jenni.

Not a mile from Mill Town and one hour later, Jenni shouldered the rather large rifle and made her way slowly up a grassy hill, the big bull calf walking steadily behind her, with Michigan on a very long rope held by Jenni's little sister Ivy bringing up the rear of the small expedition party. The going was easy. They reached the top of the hill. With their backs to where Mill Town lay, they faced northwards a kind of valley; below their hill stretched a plain of lush green pasture land, on the other side of which lay another hill, a longer rise of land topped with what was known as the Fleewood Forest. It was a beautiful view, and the wind which blew towards the west, tousling the girls' hair and Michigan's black mane, was wonderfully refreshing.

Jenni placed her weapon down and, using a mallet out of the bag she had taken with her, hammered a thick stake of iron into the ground. Then she hooked the end of the bullock's long tethering chain onto the notch in the iron. She took off her leather jacket, for despite the wind she was hot after the climb.

'There you go,' said Jenni to the bull, patting his stomach gently. 'Enjoy.'

Meanwhile, Ivy, who had red hair like her older sister (although of a brighter shade), had slumped onto the ground, quite tired out after the walk; her little legs could never keep up with her Jenni's quick pace. It was a big hill and she had never climbed it before. 'Ouch,' she said, still holding Mich's rope, as she pulled off one of her brown boots and checked inside it.

'I've caught some stones on the way up!'

'Sorry, Ivy,' said Jenni, double-checking that the stake was safely in and then taking Mich's rope from Ivy, so that her sister could empty her boots without worrying about him. The little buckskin was tugging excitedly, seeming keen to move off to find a good bit of grazing pasture or a place to roll. 'That was probably the calf and I, kicking them in accidentally, on the way up.'

'Are there really Indians around here?' inquired Ivy, squeezing a small hand into one shoe to dislodge a big pebble. 'Will they cause trouble?'

Jenni steadied Michigan. 'I don't know really,' she said, pausing for a moment to tie the buckskin's rope to another metal peg. 'Like Mother said, that was a rumour. But we are still to be on our guard, anyway. Got that?'

'But how close to the town might they come?' Ivy suddenly looked up, squinting anxiously at her sister.

'Don't worry,' smiled Jenni. 'Now look . . . ' With Mich safely tethered, she went over to stand beside Ivy. Jenni gestured to the trees which peppered the hill opposite theirs. 'That's the Fleewood. Redskins have never come any further than far, far behind those pines. They're careful, you see, because the land between us and the trees belongs to Buckbone Ranch.'

Ivy looked a bit more relaxed. 'Well, they'd be scared of our gun, though, wouldn't they? I'm mean they wouldn't dare hurt us if they knew we had one, would they?'

It was Jenni's turn to look a bit anxious. 'Well . . . they have guns themselves.'

'Oh . . .'

'But really, Ivy, they've never come past those trees. Honest. And even if they did, we've got a gun, we've got Mich for a fast getaway; there's the Buckbone Ranch not far away. And I'm sure we won't get hurt. Okay?' Jenni bent over and squeezed her little sister's shoulders affectionately.

Ivy smiled. 'Okay!'

Jenni returned the smile and straightened herself. Suddenly she bent over again, pointing at the trees, and whispering excitedly: 'Hey look, Ivy! . . . Wild horses!'

Ivy had shied just a bit at Jenni's hushed voice, thinking for a second that Indians had been spotted. But then she saw the two lovely animals coming out of the Fleewood, and she smiled in delight.

The two horses were stallions. One was a fairly stocky, coloured white and golden buckskin - a tovero paint, being more white than colour - with a dark mane and tail; he strode out first, the leader. The second stallion, also stocky with a biggish head, was a bay, a light and dusty blood red with black points and light markings on his lower legs and face. They both looked like strapping beasts, horses of authority, and they moved with such a confidence down the Fleewood hill into the small valley, it was as if they owned the country on which they now marched. However, they were newcomers. Jenni was quite sure of that.

'I've seen some horse herds around here, on the odd occasion,' she said. 'Like Redskins, they're wary of the Ranch, so they never stay for long. But I've not seen those two before.'

'Look, that bay's acting funny,' giggled Ivy. Sure enough the large-headed Blood-red seemed very strange a character. He had started moving at an extremely bouncy trot, and was carrying his head low to the ground. At odd occasions, he flicked his nose to touch first his right leg, then his left, in turns.

'Hehee! And look at Mich, Jenni!' Ivy laughed.

Michigan had spotted the two stallions. He stood very stiff, watching them from under his massive forelock, blowing great gusts of breath through his nostrils. He looked very alert. Abruptly, he gave a loud whicker, stretching his nose towards the strange horses, to which Jenni and Ivy turned again.

They were surprised to see not two, but three stallions. Another had come down from the woods. He was a dark, dark horse, lighter in build than the first two, and blackish bay in colour with white markings on his legs and face; and he also walked with authority. He went sauntering up to the Tovero and the Blood-red, neck arched splendidly with nose almost between his forelegs.

The Tovero and Blood-red had stopped to acknowledge the dark one. They, like him, arched

their necks, bobbing their heads. Then, after a minute or so, all three banded close together, sniffing.

Suddenly, the Blood-red thrust backwards with a push of his forelegs. He reared, shaking his head and neighing furiously. He looked both crazy and comical. He twisted around mid-rear, kicked with his back legs, and he was off up the forested hill at a thundering gallop. The Tovero and the Black Bay instantly started after him, at a stately trot. But within a few seconds, they were running too, cantering with the odd galloping burst. Ivy and Jenni watched sadly as the three horses disappeared into the Fleewood.

'Lovely!' said Ivy. 'Will they come back?'

'Maybe,' replied Jenni.

Michigan gave a hollow, sighing snort; and while Jenni settled herself on the grass, back-to-back with Ivy, to check for gun bullets in the pouch she had brought, and Ivy continued her search for pebbles in her shoe, Mich kept his steady, alert gaze upon the woods for a few minutes more.

Ivy managed to extract the last pebble from her shoe. She studied it, before chucking it to one side.

The pebble hit the ground very near 'The Mont' calf, who stood grazing. The young bull's short black pelt bristled in fright as the stone bounced towards the surest side of the hill, and - as Ivy watched - slowed, before suddenly, unexpectedly, it disappeared over what seemed to be an edge. There was a tapping sound as it rolled down, down, down. At length, a distant and irregular clackety-clack could be heard, as if the pebble was bounding off larger rocks.

I wonder if it has reached the bottom of the hill yet? Ivy thought, smiling in amusement she pulled herself slowly towards the edge.

The bull looked at her curiously, and Michigan whinnied, a glimmer of his bright-eyed stare showing through the dense hair that covered them. Ivy grinned at them both, reaching the edge over which the pebble had gone. It was not far, just a few metres.

What an edge!

Ivy had not expected such a drop. What obviously had once been a gentle, grassy slope had weathered, and fallen away over time, leaving a fairly steep, rugged side, bare earth with rocks jutting out of it. There had been an earthfall. Ivy nervously clutched at the grass, gazing down on clumps of yellowing vegetation and dying trees, leaning with roots half-exposed after the landslide and lying almost ten metres down at the foot of what was now a cliff. There were also tumbleweeds scattered about . . . except to one side, where a large amount of them were piled. Rather unnaturally.

Ivy heard a soft noise. Some soil had crumbled off the edge of the cliff. She shuffled backwards a bit, meaning to tell her sister about her startling discovery. But a flash of movement and colour caught her eye. Hanging, folded, on one of the twisted branches of the tipping trees . . . and flapping in the wind . . . was a large piece of fabric. Beige and aqua blue, woven, decorated with bright geometric patterns of various colours . . .

It was an Indian's saddlecloth.

'Neeyheehergh!' Michigan gave a strained sounding, neigh-snort.

That very second, Ivy lurched forwards and downwards over the cliff edge - with the cliff edge - the ground completely crumbled beneath her. With a yell and with soil and grass, like the pebble she rolled and plummeted down the slope.

Chapter III

The Letter

Jimbo and Alfie Morris - more commonly known as the Morris Brothers - were both tanned, narrow-faced and quiet men, who walked with shoulders hunched, chins tilted down, looking around from under their thick eyebrows. Their arrival at Wagon Hut was announced by Benny, Jenni's dog, who paced back and forth along the closed yard gate, barking. Paul heard the wavering neighs of Bush and Crackerjack, the Morris' personal horses, followed by a very loud bray.

Bray? Paul frowned and strode out of the Red Shack, pushing the letter (which he had again been studying, on-and-off) into one of the pockets of his brown checked shirt.

Jimbo Morris was opening the gate, flinging an arm towards Benny to ward the dog off. He looked up as Paul approached. 'Howdy. Nice mornin'.

'Yup,' nodded Paul. 'Got Violet?'

'Er, no . . .' Jimbo rubbed his jaw in an obviously awkward way. 'No . . . Violet's not available.'

'Lost her to Redskins?' Paul was grinning, standing with hands in pockets. Not very long ago, the Morris' old home, a new settlement called Billy's O, was ransacked by Native Indians, and every draft horse they owned had either got loose or was claimed as a war winning by the attackers. But however devastating the event had been for the Morris Brothers, Paul was sure it had changed them for the good in some way. For now they were better horsemen; whereas before the Indian attack, they would shamelessly underfeed and overwork their horses. Their big Brabant stallion (Roc) which Paul had frequently used before Violet, had always been in terrible condition.

'No,' said Jimbo, looking somewhat hurt at Paul's dig. 'She's ill. With colic. Bad hay. We've got a donkey for you.'

Paul stared at Jimbo. 'A donkey!' he managed at last. 'How's that going to pull the wagon?'

'It's a big donkey!' replied Jimbo hastily. 'He's the biggest one we've got. He's strong, honest.'

'Let's have a look at 'im then,' muttered Paul, and he followed Jimbo over to where Bush and Crackerjack were standing outside the yard.

Alfie Morris, on Crackerjack, greeting Paul with a tip of his hat. "Hey, Paul. Say, why d'you bother using our horses when you've got that Michigan?"

Paul returned the greeting. "Not cart-horse material just yet, and he's Jenni's. Besides, he's close to lame at the moment. So where's this donkey that Jimbo says is gonna pull my wagon?"

"Here." Alfie coaxed a fair-sized, large-eared, large-eyed grey animal from behind his horse. "He was a burro once - wild, but was tamed and trained for carts. I think you'll find him strong enough to pull. We call him Brawn."

"Howdy, Brawn," grunted Paul, going over to meet his new work animal. Brawn was almost as tall as Michigan. His eyes, big and brown, stared critically at Paul through a dense fringe of hair. "Well, I guess we'd better try him."

As they led Brawn through the gate towards the buckboard, the letter fell from Paul's pocket. Jimbo picked it up, and flicked off the red yard dust that had stuck to it.

"Hey, Paul, ye dropped this . . . it's from Stoker?" Jimbo, reading the return address, sounded surprised.

"Yeah, Mr Stoker, the gunsmith," said Paul, thrusting the mail back into his pocket. "Why?"

"He sent us a letter too," chimed Alfie. He was backing Brawn into the wagon shafts. "You know he's organizing a wild horse roundup, and wants us to come along?"

"Oh, so that's what he's probably asked me to," Paul looked down at his pocket.

"Why haven't you opened it?" asked Alfie.

Paul grinned wryly, placing the leather collar over Brawn's head to fit it snugly around the donkey's neck. "Because it's from Stoker, and father says he's trouble. I was thinking about throwing the letter away without reading it."

"Guess we shouldn't have agreed to go, then," grimaced Jimbo. "Hey, Alfie,

maybe we should refuse -

'Are you kidding?' cried Alfie. 'I've never helped in a roundup before. It's gonna be fun. I'm not missing it. We don't get enough fun around Mill Town.'

Brawn was now harnessed to the wagon. The three men stood back, gazing at the large grey donkey, who stood gazing right back at them, in silence.

'He looks swell, don't you think . . . ? And you should go to that roundup, Paul,' said Alfie after a few seconds.

'I'll ask my Pa,' replied Paul simply, and said nothing more of the subject.

* * *

Driving through the quiet streets of Mill Town, Paul was alert all the time, anxious that Brawn might get excited, or suddenly have a stubborn tantrum, at some point, as he had heard was typical of donkeys. But his new work animal was reasonably calm, trotting along easily, almost cheerfully, and took Paul to the front of Mr McStanley's General Store with hardly any trouble at all.

Paul pulled the wagon brake. He jumped off the driving seat, picked up a basket and a nosebag from under it, before walking over to Brawn's head.

'Ah, you're not so bad, are you, lad?' Paul rubbed the donkey's nose and patted his shoulder.

Brawn looked up at his hirer, twisting his lower jaw to one side in what looked like a wry smile.

Paul chuckled. He placed the nosebag strap over Brawn's ears. 'Eat quietly until I get back.'

A small number of people, awake since the wee hours, were walking the street, or driving their carts, on one errand or another. Paul greeted a few folk he knew; some veteran Cavalry men; four young boys who helped with the Adams's harvest. As he stepped onto the veranda outside the store, he tipped his hat politely to a large band of strange, dark-skinned men loitering there. They were newcomers to the town, Southerners, to be sure. They all stared at Paul coldly - all except one, an old man who gave him the faintest of nods.

Paul shrugged to himself. Strangers tended to act reservedly. He guessed that these people had come for the harvest season, looking for work on the many small farms outside town.

Striding with grocery basket swinging, Paul got a shock as he entered the store; for at the counter, talking to Mr McStanley the manager, stood none other than Mr Riley Stoker, the wealthy town gunsmith, himself.

Both blonde-haired Mr Stoker and grey-headed Mr McStanley looked up at the jingling of the shop bell as Paul opened the door.

"Paul," smiled Mr McStanley. "Good morning! I'll be with you in just a minute. Riley, that was three coils of rope? I'm afraid I haven't many."

"Make it four, thanks," his customer replied in a deep, husky, breezy voice. "Don't worry, I can get some more from a friend." Dressed in quality leather hat, jacket and pants, he glanced over his shoulder at Paul, who ducked behind a row of shelves bearing canned food.

Mr McStanley was heard to disappear into a store room, stumping down wooden stairs. Mr Stoker had begun humming softly.

Paul made his way towards where the axe blades were displayed and looked at each one in turn, checking their weight and quality. There were seven in all. The German brand, Dunn, looked best; light, but not too light, and sharp. Easy to handle. He heard Mr McStanley's voice ring out from the store room: "Hey, Riley, I've got five coils of rope in all. How about I throw you in a fifth, discounted?"

"Sounds good to me," came Stoker's cheery reply.

Paul chose the Dunn and moved on to gather groceries, taking his time. He wanted to avoid

talking to Stoker if he could help it.

Mumbled voices from the counter, followed by the ding! of the cash register. Then the shop bell rang. Paul smiled as he placed a fifth and final can of meat into the basket, before walking to the counter. Stoker had been avoided.

Suddenly the door bell rang and:

'Hey, Mr McStanley! Sorry, Mr Stan, sir, I - ah - eheh - forgot to ask for two of your largest sacks of oats!'

Paul's head snapped around. Stoker was stomping back into the store.

'Oh, well I'll get them for you, Riley,' said Mr McStanley, going into the cellar. 'Could you wait a moment or two, Paul?'

'Sure thing.' Paul tried to sound as composed as possible.

Mr Stoker leaned on the counter. He grinned, just a trace triumphantly, at Paul, who decided grimly that the wealthy gunsmith had actually meant to forget those oats.

'Mornin', sonny,' said the rich gunsmith, holding out a hairy hand to shake Paul's. 'Name's Stoker. Call me Riley. You're Sargent Adams' boy?'

Paul took off his hat and shook, smiling a wry smile; 'Hello, sir. I'm Paul Adams.' He put his fingers to his pocket, aware that the letter might be sticking out. It was. And Riley Stoker must have seen it, because he grinned in a knowing way. But he said nothing about it.

But just you wait, thought Paul.

'I know your father pretty well, Paul,' said Riley. 'We did some horse rustling when we were younger, down south, at an old farm.'

Paul nodded coolly. 'He told me.'

There was a short and very awkward silence.

'So, you've . . . heard about the roundup I'm organizing? For this weekend . . . ?' Stoker asked.

Here we go, thought Paul. 'Yup,' he said.

'You commin'?'

'A-a-a-a-ah . . . I don't kno-o-o-w,' said Paul, keeping his voice calm and his answer drawn out. He stood with hands in pockets, confident, and stubborn. 'Thanks for the offer. But I've got a bit of work to do at home, with the harvest an' all. You know . . . ' That was his diplomatic answer; a true one too, although it was half his reason for not going. He glanced up at Riley, expecting to receive some look, maybe a nod, of understanding.

But there was no trace of empathy on the rich man's face. In fact, he looked indignant, and annoyed. Mr Stoker turned slightly on his heel and stared straight ahead at the cork noticeboard which hung on the wall behind the shop counter, his expression fixed, taut.

'I see,' he said, in a voice that sounded both daunting and unpleasant.

Paul was not going to be intimidated by it.

'I might come next year. It's on next year, right?'

'Oh, yes! Of course it is on next year,' sniffed Riley. 'But ya know, this being my first roundup - my first, ya know? Well, I was hoping the son of my closest friend would do me the honours of coming along, since your father can't come himself.'

Closest friend? That was a first! As far as Paul knew, his father and Riley Stoker were not even on speaking terms. Paul laughed inside.

Mr McStanley came over. 'I've put the oats on your wagon, Riley.'

'Thank you,' said Mr Stoker, in a coarse way. 'You'll try to come to the roundup, McStanley?'

'Wouldn't miss it for the world, Riley!'

Mr Stoker tipped his hat to the store manager. 'Then I'll see you this weekend. Good

day, Stanley. He glared for an instant at Paul. . . . Gooday, Paul. He loudly exited the store.

Paul touched the brim of his hat. Gooday;

O-h-h-h, so he's got a chip on the shoulder about you not going, I'd guess, said the store manager (as Paul had expected him to), working away at the register. Why don't you?

With all due respect, sir, I'd rather not talk about, if that's alright, smiled Paul.

Fine with me, shrugged McStanley, taking Paul's money. But it'll be the best roundup in a long while, what with two herds of mustangs having settled just outside town, yes, siree!

Paul laughed and picked up the basket of payed groceries. I'll see you later, Mr McStanley.

You too, Paul!

Bang!

They both jumped, at what sounded like a rifle going off. Paul rushed to the shop door, closely followed by McStanley.

Careering headlong down the street on a rose gray mare, a man in tattered clothing came shouting, holding a rifle aloft. He brought his sturdy, wide-eyed animal to a rough halt which raised dust, right in the middle of the road in front of the General Store.

Yany able-bodied men get on and follow me! he shouted to the twenty people who had hastily gathered at the cry of the gunshot. There be Indians on the Buckbone pastureland! They've passed the Fleewood!

For a heartbeat, Paul froze from head to toe. Then he began pushing wildly through the crowd, heading for his wagon. He snatched the Kentucky rifle from under the blanket lying on the driver's seat.

Jenni and Ivy . . . !

End of Part One

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