

Run to DANGER

By GERALD L. GUY

www.storiesbyguy.com
Palm Coast, FL

CHAPTER 1

Eongus “Gus” McIntyre knew if he and Clint Waggoner didn’t keep moving they would be goners. They had to stay at least a half-day ahead of their pursuers or they’d be dead by morning. Clint, the self-proclaimed best wrangler at the Circle H Ranch, was finished though. An expert horseman, Clint could ride non-stop for days. On foot, he was helpless, inept and slow.

Robbed of their horses and lucky to be alive, the pair had been running for almost twenty-four hours. Clint could barely put one foot in front of another. Although stopping made little sense, Gus realized he soon would need to surrender to the older man’s pleas. Immediately, his eyes searched the Texas horizon for a safe place to hide, where they both could recuperate overnight.

The problem was twenty-eight-year-old Clint refused to take direction from a greenhorn kid. The fifteen-year-old might have become the boss’ favorite because he outsmarted a few stupid outlaws in Deadwood, but Waggoner considered himself the consummate cowboy. He’d worked at the Circle H for ten years, and he had forgotten more about cattle than the kid would ever know.

Clint was small in stature, but he made up for it with a second-sense when it came to cows. He knew everything about them and wasn’t afraid to share his knowledge. It was how he went about dispensing information that often created turmoil.

Most of the time, Clint displayed bluster instead of brains. He was quick to judge, fast to correct and intolerant of anyone who might question his judgment or actions. Criticize a Waggoner decision and you just might find yourself nursing a blackeye or sore jaw. Clint’s temper was legendary and he had fists like stone. He struck fast and hard, and size was of no concern. Waggoner was afraid of neither man nor beast.

His blood boiled with contempt for Gus McIntyre. He was aware the boy had become a favorite of the Hamiltons, and that made him a target of bully’s ridicule. Gus could do nothing right, as far as Waggoner was concerned. That included finding a way out of the desperate situation they faced being horseless in Texas’ unforgiving No Man’s Land.

What Waggoner failed to recognize was McIntyre was a wilderness rat, a survivor who responded quickly and accurately when placed in desperate situations. Young Gus could find a hiding place when nobody else could. And he knew how to exist undetected in the wild, regardless of the circumstance.

It was the second time in less than an hour Clint had begged the fleet-footed teenager to stop and rest. The cowboy couldn't keep up the non-stop pace. Ambushed and left horseless, the two were running for their lives. As Waggoner leaned against a bolder, trying to slow his pounding heart rate, Gus scoured the countryside for suitable cover.

"Clint, see that hill over yonder?" Gus declared. "It looks to me like there might be a perfect hiding place about three-quarters of the way up. I'm going to take a look while you catch your breath."

"I don't know if that's smart, kid," Clint said in between deep breaths. "Someone might see you."

"You're worn out, Clint. We have to rest if we have any chance of getting out of this mess alive."

"Do what you think is right, but don't say I didn't warn you. If one of those jaspers sees you up there, he'll shoot and knock you off your high horse."

"If we had horses, we wouldn't be in this mess," Gus said. "Just wait here until I get back."

"I ain't going nowhere. The boss told me to watch out for you, and that's what I intend to do," Clint replied with a sneer. "Just make it quick."

Fifteen-year-old Gus was a lanky redhead with green eyes and a constant smile that irritated Clint to no end. He climbed the rocky knoll with the quickness of a mountain goat. When he reached his destination, he was not disappointed. Behind two giant boulders was a tiny indentation in the hillside. It was big enough for the two men to hide and not be seen. There was enough loose brush and branches scattered about to make a small fire and easily conceal their whereabouts.

Excited, the greenhorn rushed back down the hillside to report his findings. But Clint discounted Gus' suggestion again. Gus was shocked.

"I ain't running anymore," Clint said, pulling out his six-shooter to make sure the chamber was fully loaded. "It's time we take a stand against these worthless hombres."

“We won’t need to take a stand,” Gus said. “They’ll have no idea we are up there. We’ll watch them pass through this canyon and over that ridge without being detected.”

“So you say. They’ve been tracking us for two days and we are still three or four days away from the Circle H. I’m running no more.”

“It is your fault they got the drop on us,” Gus retaliated. “We wouldn’t be in this mess if you hadn’t...”

Before Gus could finish the sentence, Clint pointed the business end of his pistol in the kid’s direction, pulled back the hammer and scowled.

“One more word, smart guy, and your running days are over!” he sneered. “Things might have been different if I hadn’t been baby-sitting a snot-nosed kid. You can do what you want, but I’m making my stand over there at the tree line. There’s more cowboy in me than both those rascals put together. They’ll be sorry they done wrong by Clint Waggoner.”

It wasn’t the first time Gus had looked down the barrel of a Colt, and he knew he was at an extreme disadvantage. Arguing with Clint was futile. He was not only a bully, but he was stubborn as a mule.

“Have it your way, Clint. Go find your spot. I’ll head down our backtrail and make sure there are no tracks for them to follow. With a little bit of luck, maybe they’ll head in a different direction.”

“Do what you want, kid,” Clint said, almost laughing. “Hide out and leave the fighting to the only man on this two-bit crew.”

“You’re also the only one with a gun, Clint! When those bandits high-jacked our horses, they took my rifle with them. All I have is this slingshot, and it won’t hold up in a gunfight.”

“Go hide, pretty boy. I’ll do the heavy lifting here, get our horses back and ride tall in the saddle all the way back to the ranch.”

“But...”

Clint drew the Colt again, aimed it at the boy and motioned for him to get out of his sight. “Skedaddle!” he ordered. Clint was the fastest with a gun at the Circle H. Whenever anything went amiss, he always was the first and quickest to draw a firearm.

“I don’t know why you are itching for a gunfight, Clint. I’m going to do my best to send those desperadoes in a different direction. My grandfather used to say: *‘Whenever you’re outgunned, run and fight another day,’*” Gus said.

“I’m tired of listening to you, boy. And your grandfather’s words hold no water here in Texas. Now, get out of my sight.”

Gus turned and took off running in the direction from which the two had come. As usual, he ran like an antelope, a sight that was a wonder even to Waggoner.

When Gus got several miles down the trail, he used his knife to shear off a willow branch and dragged it across the path that led to their location. As the leaves gently brushed the sandy soil, all tracks were obliterated. The outlaws would have to make a choice to go east or west. If he and Clint got lucky, they’d go west and give the pair time to rest and resume their flight home.

Before retreating to his hideout, Gus circled wide to get a look at their pursuers. Two of the four rustlers who had bushwhacked he and Clint were following their trail. Gus assumed the other two stayed with the dozen or so strays he and Clint had been able to round up on the open range of West Texas. He didn’t mind those odds, but both the rustlers were packing pistols and rifles. No matter how good of a shot Clint was, the bull-headed jerk were outgunned.

If they didn’t take the trail west, Gus decided he would have to outsmart the cowpokes, both of whom looked to be in their thirties and the kind of troublemakers who gave West Texas a bad name. He didn’t panic; he just considered his options. That’s what his grandfather always told him to do.

“Calm acceptance of danger allows a man to easily assess his situation and measure his options,” his grandfather had imparted. So, that’s what he did. And before long he had a plan in place that seemed sound and had a good chance of succeeding.

IT WAS CLINT’S fault the pair had been drygulched in the first place. Junior had assigned he and Clint the task of rounding up strays in the spring of 1877. It was a thankless job, because there was no way of knowing where the Circle H steers had wandered. He and Clint had been searching the lower forty acres of the ranch for more than a week and had gathered up a little more than a dozen head. The open range they searched stretched almost to the border, where strays often were wrangled and driven farther south to be sold in Mexico. It generally wasn’t Mexican vaqueros involved in the thievery. It was the saddle tramps and

desperadoes who were the greatest threats to Circle H profits, and Clint had welcomed them into their camp with little regard for safety or the maintenance of the cows they already had rounded up.

The drifters simply sauntered up one night and Clint greeted them with open arms. They said they, too, were hunting strays for the Rocking R's spring roundup and Clint believed them. It was as if they were old friends, not strangers on a similar trail. It made Gus wonder if Clint was in cahoots with the gang. Was the whole rustling of cattle a hoax? Were they all playing him like an ignorant greenhorn? Was Clint friend or foe?

His grandfather always said, "*It is best for a man to face his problems head-on.*" So, that was what Gus planned to do.

There were two heavily-armed men tracking him. He had to cut those odds in half. So, he went to work. He used his knife to cut saplings into sharpened spikes. He also made a spear, just in case he needed to mount some kind of defense.

As twilight approached, Gus set a series of snares along the trail about a mile from the tiny clearing where Clint had chosen to take his stand. His pursuers were mounted. So, Gus had to get the outlaws off their horses in order for his plan to work.

The snares he set were only about four feet apart. Their design was to entangle the legs of the outlaws' horses and scare them enough to dislodge their riders. He set them along the narrowest section of the trail, a spot where the riders would have to travel in single file. He scattered rocks to the right of the narrow path to guide the horses in the direction he wanted. To the left he buried the eight-inch wooden spikes he made from hackberry saplings. Then, he found a nearby thicket where he could hide and await the outlaws' arrival.

In less than an hour, the riders approached Gus' trap. Just in case, the spear lay at his feet and he had plenty of ammunition for his trusty slingshot. Gus held his breath as he watched the first horse step around the first set of snares without triggering a one. The second horseman wasn't so lucky.

One of the snares caught his horse's right rear leg. The minute the sapling snapped upright and tugged at the horse's leg, the mount went into hysterics. The big bay snorted and kicked its hind legs to snap the weak vine encircling it. Then, the steed reared up and began to buck. As planned, the surprised rider went flying. He landed flat on his back, and

one of the spikes impaled his left thigh. Breathless from impact, the toppled outlaw screeched in pain with what breath he had left.

Amidst the commotion, the first rider struggled to keep his horse under control. When he drew his pistol and turned to help his friend, Gus stood with loaded sling. Rarely did the fifteen-year-old miss a close target, and this time was no exception. A rock, about the size of a buckeye, caught the outlaw in the back of his head and sent him toppling out of his saddle and his pistol flying. Unconscious before he hit the ground, the man's leg tangled in one of the snares and his body was dragged across the trail. He lay face down in the dirt with one leg pulled high in the air.

Gus recovered both of the outlaws' pistols and walked casually to where the impaled bandit writhed in pain.

"Help me!" the man begged.

"No can do, partner," Gus replied. "You'd best lie back and repent your sins. I'm afraid this is your last roundup. That stake severed an artery. In two minutes the pain will go away and then you will die. And I'm sorry about that, but you know what the Good Book says about the wages of sin."

"I need a doctor, not a preacher," the outlaw said as signs of life began to fade.

"There are no doctors or nurse maids in this part of the country. Make your peace while you can," Gus advised.

"I'll rest in peace when Clint finds out what you done and settles the score," he replied in a whisper. Then, he laid his head back and was silent.

Just as Gus was turning his attention to the second outlaw, one of the horses sauntered back onto the trail. He grabbed its reins and tied it to a tree before retrieving a rifle from the horse's flank. He also confiscated the rope used to ply the rustler's trade. By the time he stood over his snared victim, the lead rider was beginning to show signs of consciousness. Gus poked the muzzle of the rifle into the fallen desperado's ribs and said, "Roll over and show your face, mister."

The outlaw did as he was ordered, reaching for the sidearm that once hung at his side. All he found was an empty holster.

"Looking for this?" Gus asked, twirling the pistol on his finger and holding it high above the outlaw's head. "I was just warning your dead partner about the wages of sin. It was a waste of my time. You, too, should be more respectful of other people's property."

“Go to hell, kid!” the angry outlaw said, trying to wrestle his leg from the snare.

“I don’t think so,” Gus replied. “But this must be as close to hell as you have experienced in a long time, being outsmarted by a snot-nosed kid and all. That’s what Clint likes to call me. What do you think he would think of me now?”

“When I tell him what you’ve done, he’s going to kill you if I don’t do it first,” the outlaw snarled.

“Your killing days are over, buster, because you have committed the gravest sin of all.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My grandfather always said, *‘Man’s gravest sin is stupidity!’* And you’ve been wallowing in it for way too long. I think I’m going to have to change your outlook on life. Roll back over on you belly, mister.”

“So you can shoot me in the back? No way!”

“Do I look like a back-shooter to you?” Gus replied as he jabbed the muzzle of the rifle into the man’s ribs hard enough to make him yelp.

“You look like a dead man to me, boy!”

“Not today, hombre!” Gus replied with a smile and slammed the butt of the rifle into the man’s forehead.

CHAPTER 2

The next time the outlaw opened his eyes, it was getting dark. He was disoriented, and his head felt like he had been kicked by a mule. It took him a couple seconds to realize he was bound hand and foot and hanging upside down. The kid was sitting next to a small campfire, watching him with a rifle across his knees.

“Let me down, kid,” the outlaw snarled. “I really wasn’t going to kill you. I was just trying to scare you.”

“Guess what, Mr. Outlaw? I don’t scare easy,” Gus replied with a smile.

“I get that,” the outlaw said, trying to loosen the rope that had his hands tied behind his back. Each time he struggled to free his wrists, the rope tightened. He was starting to lose feeling in his fingers. “What do you want?”

“Tell me about your little gang of rustlers, mister, and how Clint fits into this picture?” Gus answered.

“No way!”

Gus didn’t say a word. He pulled a burning stick from the fire and blew out the flame so only a glowing red ember remained. He strolled to where the outlaw was dangling from a tree branch, his head about two feet off the ground.

“Watch what happens when I drop this red-hot stick into the huge anthill you are positioned over, tough guy.”

The outlaw was startled when he looked down and saw he was hanging directly over a giant anthill, something he hadn’t noticed because his eyes were focused on the kid. When Gus pushed the burning ember onto the mound, the ants came alive with activity.

“These are black carpenter ants,” Gus informed. “They’re scavengers that will eat anything, and they look pretty hungry to me. I bet I could throw the hind quarter of one of the Circle H Longhorns on this nest, and all that would be left was the carcass in a couple days. Maybe less.”

The outlaw’s eyes opened wide. Even in the fading light, he could see the insects stirring. He stopped struggling with his bindings, looked straight at Gus and said, “This ain’t fair, boy. I ain’t done nothing to you.”

“That’s not true, and the Good Book says, ‘Thou shalt not lie!’” Gus replied.

“I ain’t laid a finger on you and promise I won’t if you let me down,” the man begged.

“Oh, I’m going to let you down, Mr. Outlaw. You see, I’ve got that rope tied to a big branch over yonder. I’m going to lower you face-first into that anthill. The big-headed blacks will come after you first. They are the workers and have the nastiest bite. Do you think they will go for your eyes or your lips first?”

“This ain’t human boy. What do you want?”

“Two things, Mr. Outlaw. I want answers and I want the truth.”

“You’ve got my attention.”

“Tell me your first name only, because I don’t want this predicament to soil your family’s fine name.”

“Name’s Rory but everyone calls me Slick.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard was it, Slick?” Gus said with a smile and pulled another small stick from his campfire.

“Tell me where your friends took Mr. Hamilton’s cattle,” Gus asked.

“There’s a boxed canyon just this side of the Mexican border. We drive them there, fatten ‘em up a bit and then sell them to the Mexicans every spring.”

“How long has this been going on?” Gus asked.

“Only a couple of years.”

“How many Hamilton head have you sold down there?”

“I don’t know. I never pay much attention. This is open range. There are lots of brands down there.”

“No! No! Remember what I said about the truth, Slick?” Gus said as he walked over to the tree where the rope was anchored and very carefully lowered his prisoner two inches closer to the anthill. Slick was a big man who weight close to two hundred pounds. He yelped as a couple ants took flight.

“They are mostly Circle H brands,” he confessed. “That’s the way Clint wanted it. He said the Hamiltons owed him.”

“You wouldn’t be talking about Clint Waggoner, would you?” Gus asked as he took a seat next to the campfire and looked straight at the helpless outlaw with threatening eyes.

“Yeah, your partner.”

“He isn’t my partner,” Gus replied. “I just had the misfortune of riding with him on this little roundup. I thought y’all were a little too friendly when you walked into camp. What was the plan? What made you think you could pull this off without me finding out?”

“Clint drugged your coffee. When you passed out, we rounded up the strays and headed out. Clint was supposed to tell you it was an ambush. He was supposed to get you good and turned around out here in No Man’s Land. Then, he was going to shoot you. We were supposed to stay close on your trail so we could join up once you were out of the way.”

“How’d that work out?” Gus asked.

Slick didn’t answer. Instead, he spit. A big glob of phlegm landed in the anthill and a few more of the worker ants took flight. That’s when the outlaw began to whine. The nest attacked the spittle. It disappeared beneath an undulating black mass. One ant landed on the outlaw’s cheek and began crawling very slowly toward his eye. Slick shook his head, trying to dislodge the insect from his skin, suddenly moist with sweat. He began to tremble as the ant neared his eyelid.

“Are you just going to sit there?” Rory asked before closing his right eye, hoping to keep the insect from impairing his vision. The ant continued its relentless march. Gus could hear the man’s teeth grinding as its tail bobbed up and down on his closed eye.

That’s when Gus said, “Hold still!”

When he pressed the business end of the rifle against the outlaw’s eye, he said, “I can brush the ant off or put a bullet in your brain. Which would you prefer?”

“The ant. Please! Get the ant off my eye!” Slick said, his voice an octave higher than before.

Gus nudged the ant with the muzzle of the gun and it dropped back down to the mound that seemed to be quieting down.

“Good things happen when you say please, Rory. Now, tell me how many more men there are in this little gang of rustlers Clint has put together.”

“There was five of us – me, Clint, Andy over there, Grady and Festus,” he quickly replied.

“I take it Grady and Festus are guarding the strays at this boxed canyon you told me about?”

“Yeah!” the outlaw replied. “Could you let me down now. I’ve told you all I know.”

“If the shoe was on the other foot, would you let me down?” Gus asked.

“Yes, because this is no way to treat a man. I’d never have done this to you,” Slick said.

Gus picked up another burning ember from his campfire and brought it to within inches of his mouth. He blew the flame out and said, “I think that’s the first time you’ve lied since we started playing this game, Rory. I don’t have much use for liars.”

“Please, don’t stir the ants up again,” the outlaw begged.

“Being you asked so nicely, I won’t. Now, tell me how to find this boxed canyon.”

“Not far from where we waltzed into your camp a few days ago, there is a good size trail that heads south. Follow it until you come to a creek that flows east to west. Follow it east to the canyon where we keep the strays.”

“That sounds easy enough,” Gus said as he stood and kicked dirt over his tiny campfire. Immediately, the campsite was cloaked in darkness. Gus again extended the rifle toward the outlaw, this time letting it rest against his chest.

“Rory, I want you to thank your Maker that I’m a ‘snot-nosed kid.’ Because if I was a hardened criminal like you, I’d probably shoot you where you hang and leave you for the ants. Instead, I’m just going to leave,” Gus said. And he pushed the rifle against the outlaw’s shoulder so his body began to spin.

“Please! Don’t leave me like this,” Rory begged, the spinning causing his head to hurt and his vision to blur.

“Are you still here?”

“Where did you go, kid?”