



CHAPTER ONE

The drifter had long legs and appeared splinter thin, even though he was wrapped in what looked like a black slicker that made him appear larger. Hat pulled low to protect his face from the maddening gusts, the stranger was almost invisible. He was covered from head to toe in the gray-brown sand and loam that made up the central to lower Rio Grande Basin of Southwest Texas.

He was seated and lashed to a Juniper tree, perhaps to keep himself from being blown across the open plains like an aimless piece of sagebrush. Between a pair of knots that held him to the Juniper, a copper cow bell was strung. It danced on the teeth of the biting wind in a never-ending summon that drew the two cattlemen to his location. They figured a stray was fighting to survive the storm just as hard as they were.

Gus McIntyre and his partner, Toots, were shocked when they rode up on the pile of sand and saw size 13 boots sticking out at one end. They didn't know what it was or what to expect. The bell's relentless chatter unveiled no secrets. Was the sandman dead or alive? What was he doing out here in the middle of nowhere during the worst storm of 1877? The temperature was dropping, and the gusts were so bad the Circle H hands had to tie down their Stetsons to keep them from being ripped from their heads and carried somewhere south into Mexico.

Fifteen-year-old McIntyre was mounted on his trusty Appaloosa, Racer, and Toots was seated on a supply wagon pulled by two stallions whose eyes were shielded by blinders to protect them from the harsh wind and dust. Few Texas cattlemen traveled the plains without blinders, an indispensable piece of tact during the spring and winter months when windstorms were unpredictable and struck with cyclonic

power. The two had been fighting the storm for hours. They stopped only when they realized a human was beneath the mound of sand and loam.

“You there,” Toots called out. “Do you need help?”

Of course, the voice of the long-time trail cook at the Circle H Ranch could not be heard over the howling torrent. Only the shrill call of the cow bell broke through the roar of the relentless wind. No movement came from the sand-covered cowboy.

Gus dismounted and lowered the bandana that covered his nose and mouth. “Let me see what’s going on here,” Gus shouted as he tied Racer to the wagon and pulled his rifle from the scabbard behind his saddle. He cautiously strolled to where the boots pointed toward a gray-brown sky. He kept his Winchester at the ready.

“Be careful, boy!” Toots called out.

“Hey, what are you doing out here in this storm?” Gus shouted.

There was no response.

He kicked one of the boots and said, “Hey you!”

The other boot moved ever so slightly, but that was all. Gus looked at his partner for a suggestion, but nothing could be heard above the din. Toots, a 250-pound black man who was old enough to be Gus’ grandfather, climbed down from the wagon and walked toward the Juniper.

“Ain’t likin’ anything about this, boy,” he shouted. “What do we have here?”

“I’ve no idea, but I detected some movement when I kicked his boot. I don’t know if he is alive or dead to tell you the truth.”

“If he ain’t dead, he should be,” Toots replied. “Anyone out here in this storm without a horse has to be a fool and deserves to die.”

“Nobody deserves to die like this,” Gus said, shaking his head at his partner. “What do you want to do?”

“Well, that dang cow bell got us here. I reckon we might as well find out what all the racket is about,” the cook said.

Toots and the kid had become unlikely friends more than eighteen months ago when Gus was orphaned in the Black Hills of the Dakota Territory. The teen and his father, Jamie, had been traveling from their Illinois farm to Deadwood, where they hoped to strike it rich in the gold fields. Those plans were shattered when the duo was attacked by outlaws and Eongus James McIntyre Sr. was murdered.

Gus escaped and wandered the wilderness for days before coming upon the Circle H cattle drive that was escorting one hundred head of Texas Longhorns to the burgeoning settlement located in the middle of what was arguably the most lawless territory west of the Mississippi River. Toots took the lad under his wing, with the approval of trail boss Walter Hamilton, owner of the Circle H Ranch. Over the last year, the Hamiltons had practically adopted the teenager, who turned out to be an able and reliable ranch hand. Gus and Toots frequently teamed up to fulfill whatever tasks were assigned by their boss.

“Give me that rifle,” Toots shouted and pulled the Winchester from Gus’ hands. “And stand back some just in case this guy decides to wake up and start shooting.”

With Gus out of the line of fire, Toots stood to the side of the Juniper and slipped the business end of the rifle under the back of the stranger’s dust-caked hat. When the hat tumbled to the dirt, Gus grabbed it before it could take flight in the wind. He banged it against his leg to remove some of the dirt and sand that coated it.

When he looked back at his partner, the cowboy’s head began to slowly move. As if waking from a long sleep, his eyes opened, and his mouth moved. No sound could be heard above the pounding of the gale and the clanging of the bell. The man’s gray hair was pulled into two pigtails, Indian style, and his sunken eyes cried out for help.

“I’ll be damned,” Toots said. “I didn’t expect that.”

The giant black man took a knee and began to clear sand from the man’s bound body. From beneath a heavy brow and high cheekbones, blue eyes watched as dirt-crusted lips moved in a silent pantomime.

“There is no way of telling how long he has been out here. Go! Get the canteen from the wagon. I’ll untie him and see if we can get him up and moving,” Toots instructed.

Gus fought his way through the wind and returned with a canteen. The cowboy’s head had slumped to the side again and he looked half-dead. He jerked to life when Toots poured water across his forehead, washing waves of dust from the stranger’s face. His lips moved silently again while a weak and weary hand reached for the life-giving canteen. Toots’ massive black hand encircled the cowboy’s and placed it at his side.

“Take it easy, old-timer,” the cook said. “We’ve got plenty of water and we’re here to help you.”

Toots placed the canteen against the man's lips and let some of the cool water trickle down his throat. The stranger gulped too fast and convulsed. He spewed water and dirt into the air. When the coughing stopped, the cowboy's head slumped again to the side, and he lost consciousness. Toots poured some of the water into the palm of his gigantic hand, tipped the man's head back and let some of the fluid meander into the man's mouth. He swallowed normally but did not awaken.

"Gus, we've got to find some shelter from this wind and dust if there is any hope of him making it out of this god-forsaken dust bowl alive," Toots said. "I think he's barely hanging on. We got here in a nick of time, thanks to that cow bell."

The cook tossed the bell to the teenager, slipped his massive arms under the stricken cowboy and stood, the back of his 6-foot-4 frame braced against the wind.

"Clear a spot for him in the back of the wagon, and then head over to those trees and see if you can find us any cover until this storm blows over. I've got enough canvass to construct a makeshift tent, but it won't be easy in this wind. Look for a natural shield against the storm."

Gus pulled his bandana back up over his nose and mouth and jogged quickly to the back of the wagon. He moved some bags of oats and flour to one side so Toots could lay the stranger down in the bed of the wagon. Then, he climbed back aboard the big Appaloosa and raced toward the only outcropping of green within eyesight.

By the time Toots arrived with the wagon, he had already found the ideal spot and began collecting rocks and timbers to make a shelter. Using a fallen tree as the main buttress against the wind, the two cattlemen rigged the canvas between wind-swept trees to provide some respite from the incessant windstorm.

As daylight turned to night, Toots started a small campfire and had bacon and trail bread sizzling in no time. They took turns caring for the unconscious stranger, making sure he got tiny sips of water at regular intervals.

"I think he was tied to that tree for a couple days," Toots said. "If we can get him re-hydrated, he might have a chance of making it. Either way it's going to be touch-and-go. He's no spring chicken."

“He must be a tough old cuss, though,” Gus replied. “Can you imagine being tied to that tree for days in this storm? The amount of dust he’s swallowed would have killed a lesser man.”

“I think you’re right,” Toots replied with worry in his eyes.



CHAPTER TWO

Gus and Toots started for San Angela, Texas just after the Thanksgiving celebration, which was one of the grandest the Hamiltons had hosted at the Circle H Ranch in almost seventy-five years. The Hamiltons always had lots for which to be thankful, and they had been celebrating the harvest season ever since they stepped foot in Southwest Texas.

Walter Hamilton III was the third in a long line of patriarchs to oversee the operation of the Circle H. His grandfather homesteaded the property at the turn of the century and fought constant battles against Mexican loyalists and marauding Apaches to turn the land into a thriving cattle operation. His uncle, Clayton Hamilton, fought alongside Sam Houston in the first Texas Army that defeated Mexico's General Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto in 1836. The victory avenged the death of a handful of brave Americans who were massacred at the Alamo and won Texas its freedom.

So, as long as the Hamiltons could remember, Thanksgiving was a special time. And they didn't need a proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 to declare it an annual observance. They'd been doing it since Walter was a wee boy.

This year was special, though, thanks to Gus McIntyre. An ancient Apache chief, named *Tatonga*, had come to the young cowhand's aid when he was wounded in a dust-up with rustlers. Besides caring for the teenager's injury, *Chief Tatonga* enlisted a small band of his people to assist McIntyre in driving thirty head of missing cattle back to the Circle H Ranch.

The Hamiltons celebrated the return of Gus and the strays with a feast that forged a friendship between the one-time enemies. Walter and *Tatonga* became friends, as did his wife, Gertrude, with the

women of the nomadic tribe. They formed a partnership, so to speak, as neighbors and ranching families.

Without hesitation, Gert invited the natives and their families to return for Thanksgiving. The celebration lasted for five days. The Indians roasted deer and elk for the feast. At the same time, the ovens and spits of their hosts were laden with turkey and wild boar. By the time the celebration came to an end, everyone at the Circle H was surprised with the comradery that had grown between the groups, despite language obstacles.

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Smiles stretched across the faces of Walter and Junior when Gert and Gus slowly climbed the steps of the main house at the Circle H Ranch after bidding farewell to their new friends. Both were dressed in buckskins, compliments of Black Dog's wife, Singing Dove. Both looked more hostile than civilized with smudges of campfire ashes on their faces and their hair wind-blown.

It was evident in their stride as they approached the sprawling porch of the big house, the two were tired. But the delight in their voices and the twinkle in their eyes made it easily apparent their hearts were filled with joy.

"It's about time you two came back to civilization," Junior said with a smile as the pair sauntered up the steps. "We certainly haven't seen much of you today."

"It's good to be home," Gert said as she leaned into the outstretched arms of her mammoth husband and sighed. "I'm bone tired, but don't know when I have ever been happier."

Gus felt the same way but was hesitant to express himself. While he felt at home at the Circle H, he didn't want to overstep and damage the relationship he had worked hard to build with the Hamiltons. They had become his new family.

"I just want to thank you all for allowing my friends to come and enjoy this most important of holidays," he said. "This was the finest Thanksgiving I've ever experienced. I don't know how I'll ever repay your kindness."

"What exactly do you mean *your* friends?" Walter boomed. "You might have brought *Tatonga* and his people to our doorstep, but it didn't take long for all of us to become friends. Why I've hardly had time to whisper in Gert's ear since Singing Dove and the rest of our new neighbors showed up."

Gert banged an elbow into her husband's ribcage and placed another hand over his belly. "Oh, you stop now, mister. It doesn't feel to me like you missed me too much. Are you sure you didn't swallow a whole side of venison over the last few days."

Walter laughed and said, "I might have. I don't know how they cooked their deer meat or what they use to make it so flavorful, but I couldn't get enough of it."

"Talk nice to me, boss man," Gert said with a chuckle, "and I'll share all my Apache secrets with you."

"Those baked onions, sweet potatoes and apples were like nothing I'd ever tasted," Junior said. "I hope you got the secret to those, too."

"Don't worry, Junior," Walter replied. "I have a feeling your mom has lots of surprises in store for us."

"What do we have to do to get one of those buckskin outfits the two of you are wearing?" Junior asked. "Are they as comfortable as they look?"

Simultaneously, Gert and Gus answered: "You have no idea."

Everyone laughed until Gert added, "Oh, and you should feel the moccasins!"

"Really?" the Hamilton men replied in unison.

"Really!" she said, wiggling her toes inside the beaded doeskin that covered her feet.

"All joking aside, this was the biggest feast we've had since I have been part of this family," Junior said. "We have to thank Gus for making it happen in the first place. I know you endured a lot at the hands of our rogue ranch hand, Clint. But you proved yourself out there in the Texas wilderness and returned with a sizeable herd and brought us new friends to boot. I'm proud to have you as part of the Circle H family."

Gus smiled modestly and hung his head, uncertain about what to say. Gert intervened and wrapped an arm around his shoulders and said, "We're all proud of you, Gus."

Walter wrapped up everyone's sentiments by saying, "The Hamiltons have been fighting Apaches for three generations. I never thought I would see the day we would break bread with a bunch of savages. But I learned they aren't savages at all; they're not much different than the rest of us. They're a strong people who are trying to provide for their families, just like we are."

“And for that I owe you a debt of gratitude, young Mr. McIntyre. I don’t know what the future holds for you, but you’ll always have a home here at the Circle H Ranch.”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be,” the teen said with a sheepish smile. “I feel like I belong here.”

“Well get a good night of rest, because tomorrow you and Toots are heading to San Angela for supplies. Our neighbors just about ate us out of house and home. The cupboard is bare, and it needs replenished before this winter storm arrives.”

“What storm?” Gus asked.

“I can feel it in my bones,” Walter replied. “Your friend, the chief, said he could, too. The weather is about to change. The temperature is going to drop. The winds generally come out of the northwest this time of the year and they are going to be nasty. Make sure you dress for cold weather.”

“Sure thing, boss.” Gus replied before turning and heading to the bunkhouse. “Again, thank you all for your kindness.”

“We’ll have a shopping list ready for you and Toots first thing in the morning,” the missus said. “Sleep well, Gus.”