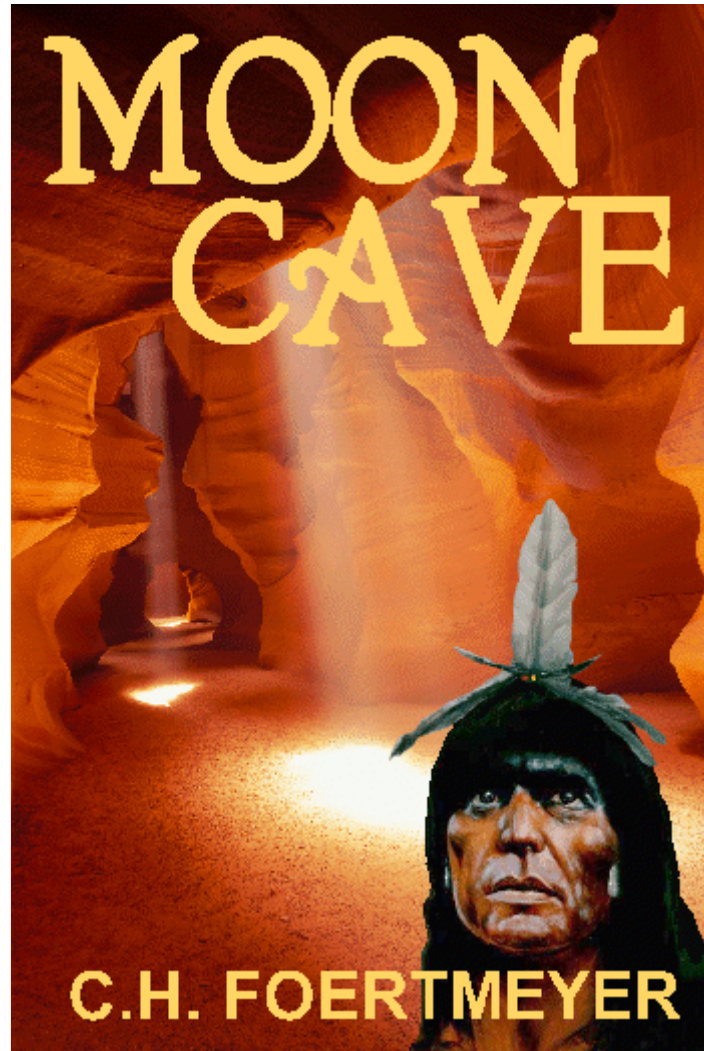


Moon Cave



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Moon Cave

C.H. Foertmeyer

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*This book is dedicated to my brother, John,
because one day he and I will go to New Mexico
and look for Moon Cave. I found it once and
I think I can find it again.*

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Foreword

There are those who say that no one can go back in time and change history as we know it today. How do we know that history as we know it today is not the result of just such a trip to the past? How would we know? How *could* we know?

Moon Cave is the story of an ancient American Indian ceremony gone awry, altering history not once, but twice. But—These two changes in the course of history were just the major changes. It could easily be argued that many changes were made that became lost in the transitions from one reality to another. Normally, the only history that we are aware of, that has led to the only present we know, is the course history followed after the *last* altering action was performed. - *Normally*.

Many people believe that nightmares foretell impending tragedy; predictions of the future—premonitions. Actually, it is just as likely that nightmares are snapshots back into our altered pasts; images from a past that once was, but is no longer.

What do I believe?—I'm just a storyteller. It was once said by someone far wiser than me, that the saddest individuals are those who live for a future that can never be. Perhaps that is because it once was to be. You decide...I'm just a storyteller.

C.H. Foertmeyer

CHAPTER ONE

The Hunting Trip

"I don't know, Denny. There may be more deer now than there used to be, but they sure seem smaller than they used to."

Denny looked at Scott and smiled.

"It's just your imagination, Scott. They're no smaller than they ever were," Denny replied, patting his friend on the shoulder and laughing. "These desert mulies were never any bigger than a minute."

Scott shook his head and replied, "Maybe-but I still think they're smaller than they were the first time we came up here."

Scott Franklin and Denny Miller had been best friends since childhood and ever since they had turned sixteen they had been making the sixty mile trip from their home in Chatsworth to the Huevos to hunt deer every November. This was their eleventh trip to the New Mexico highlands, a trip that was planned to last five days.

Denny looked around and picked out a good rock to sit on and sat down facing the east slope of the narrow canyon, which was still completely shaded from the early morning sunlight. He and Scott had learned early on to hunt the west slope in the morning to benefit from the warmth of the sun. Huevos mornings in November were bitter cold if you chose to set up in the shade on the east slopes of the canyons and the deer seemed to know that fact, too. Regardless of comfort, the hunting was always better on the west slopes in the morning.

Scott plopped down on another rock nearby and looked to the east slope of the canyon and quickly spotted a small herd of deer working their way up the slope in single-file progression toward the top.

"Look," Scott said to Denny, pointing out the small troop of deer.

"Yeah, I see them," Denny answered.

There were four doe following a good size buck up the east slope, across the canyon and probably five or six hundred yards away. These deer were for watching, not hunting, as they were far too far out of range for either man's gun. Both Denny and Scott preferred brush hunting with their thirty caliber brush guns; Denny's a Winchester and Scott carrying a Marlin. Cross canyon hunting was challenging, but both men preferred the challenge of the stalk rather than the challenge of a long shot. They were

not stand hunters either, waiting in a tree for a hapless deer to walk by. They were hunters, not shooters, and always went after their deer by tracking and stalking; moving in silently for the shot that would produce venison for the upcoming winter.

Scott watched the lead buck make his way up the far slope, weaving his way around boulders and scrub pines. Just ahead of the buck Scott noticed a small black patch on the side of the canyon, darker than any other area on the slope. As he focused on this black spot, trying to discern what it might be, the buck reached the spot and vanished into it, followed first by the lead doe and then one by one the remainder of the small herd.

"Did you see that?" Scott asked abruptly, turning to face Denny.

"See what?" Denny asked.

"The deer. They just vanished," Scott stated, excitedly.

"Where?"

"Right into that dark spot over there," Scott replied, pointing to the place where the deer had disappeared.

Denny stared hard at the canyon wall and finally spotted the dark spot Scott was referring to.

"You mean the big rock over there?" Denny asked. "They probably went behind it."

"If it *is* a rock it isn't big enough for the whole herd to be behind, but I don't think it's a rock at all. I think it's a cave and I think they all went into it," Scott suggested, trying to make some sense out of what he had seen.

"Deer don't go into caves, dummy. Bear go into caves and puma go into caves, but deer don't," Denny stated.

"Okay then, where'd they go?"

"Like I said, behind the rock. Just wait a few minutes and they'll move off from behind it. You'll see."

Scott kept his eye on the spot and waited while Denny snickered and shook his head. A full five minutes went by before Scott had finally had enough waiting. He stood up and looked at Denny.

"Come on, Denny. We're going over there. I want to check that out. That's a cave and I'm telling you those deer went into it. Come on," Scott ordered, as he started down the slope toward the canyon floor. "If that *is* a cave I want to find out why those deer would go into it. Like you said, deer don't go into caves, and you're right about that-usually anyway."

"Oh come on, Scott. It'll take an hour or more to get over there and we'll have wasted the whole morning on a wild goose chase. We've got hunting to do," Denny pleaded.

Either Scott didn't hear Denny or he just didn't care. He was now a good fifty yards on down the slope and still going.

"Jeez," Denny uttered to himself. "I don't know why I put up with that jerk," he mumbled, half smiling as he said it. But he did know why. Scott was what made life interesting for him. Scott was his best friend and he trusted him completely and unquestionably. Scott was a good guy in every way and not only that, he was fun to be around. He also made life very interesting with his perquacky imagination that knew no bounds. Scott was Scott.

By the time Denny reached the floor of the canyon Scott was busy pushing on a dead tree trying to rock it loose from its dead roots and hopefully, fall it across the Río Hondo.

"Need some help?" Denny asked, laughing at Scott's struggle with the dead pine. "You forgot about the river didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did, but I figure if I get this old tree rocking enough it'll give it up and fall across so we can cross on it."

"Well let me throw a shoulder in there and I'll give you a hand since you're so dang set on going up to that rock."

"It's a cave, and thanks, I can use the help here," Scott laughed.

The two friends began rocking the old pine back and forth until they heard a hollow cracking sound beneath the ground around the tree's trunk. They let the tree rock back one more time and then they gave it all they had, pushing and grunting until they felt it give way. The tree slowly tipped toward the river and then fell across, the top of the tree snapping off and washing down the stream leaving a three-foot gap between the end of the trunk and the far shore.

They watched in silence at first, hoping the river hadn't enough strength to wash their bridge away, and when it held fast in its place they let out a whoop that echoed throughout the canyon.

Scott looked at Denny and smiled.

"You first," he said, trying to catch his breath as he spoke.

Denny looked back at Scott with a questioning glare.

"Your idea-your lead," Denny stated.

"Fine. I'll go first, but you hold on tight."

Scott took his climbing rope from his backpack and tied it securely around his waist. Denny took the other end and looped it once around a nearby tree and readied himself to let out the line as Scott needed it.

"Wish me luck," Scott said, as he stepped onto the fallen tree.

"Luck," Denny replied, and Scott started across.

This was something that the two young men had done many times before, sometimes without incident, and then there were the other times. There had been occasions in the past when one or the other, or both, had gone into the water. Today would be a very bad day for that to happen though as it would cost them hours while they built a fire and dried out their clothes. It was just too cold this particular morning to continue in wet clothing. If they were to try they knew well they would succumb to hypothermia in a matter of hours.

The Río Hondo in and of itself wasn't the real threat. It was fast, but survivable, as it pooled frequently enough to afford escape. And with the climbing rope secured to them it wouldn't be the river that would claim either of them. It would be the cold that would be the enemy if either man went into the water.

Scott carefully worked his way across the fallen timber until he reached the end of the trunk. He now had a three-foot leap to make to the safety of the far shore. Scott tested his footing and mentally measured his jump. He threw his arms back and then forward as he lunged for the shore.

"Ha!" he yelled, as he landed soundly on the gravelly shore. He looked back across at Denny and smiled a large smile. "Made it!" he yelled, across the din of the river.

Denny waved to him and unloosed the rope from the anchor tree and tied the end securely around his own waist while Scott began looping his end around a stout tree on his side of the river. When Denny was ready, Scott took up the slack and Denny started across. He was about halfway to safety when suddenly, the tree began to move slowly downstream. The initial jerk as it dislodged caused Denny to lose his balance and their worst nightmare had become reality.

Scott saw it coming, but had no time to warn Denny before the log moved. He gripped the rope as tight as he could and braced his foot against the trunk of the anchor tree. As Denny began washing downstream the tree absorbed the pull on the rope, and just as planned, Denny swung to

the near shore when the slack had been taken up. As he reached shore Scott tied his end off to the tree and ran to Denny's aid.

Scott covered the distance between them in a matter of less than a minute and he helped Denny out of the water a mere three minutes after he had gone in. Regardless of how fast the rescue had taken place, the damage had already been done and Denny was already beginning to shiver heavily.

"Come on, Denny. I'll get you a fire started. You start getting out of those wet clothes," Scott ordered.

Denny looked up at his buddy and smiled.

"You and your dang cave," he stuttered, shivering more heavily now.

Scott smiled back at Denny and immediately began gathering tinder for the fire. In a matter of less than ten minutes he had a good fire roaring on the shore of the Río Hondo and was putting together a makeshift rack of tree limbs to drape Denny's clothes over to dry. Denny sat buck naked as close to the fire as he could get and slowly began to warm himself.

When Scott finished his rack he hung Denny's clothing up to dry and then retrieved a flannel shirt from his own pack and tossed it to Denny.

"Here-For Christ's sake put that on," he told Denny. "You look like a beached whale sitting there."

"I feel like a beached whale; beached in Alaska. Thanks," Denny replied, still shivering, but less profusely now. "and-don't catch my clothes on fire, man. You hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear ya," Scott laughed.

Although the air was cold this time of year, it was also very dry, and that, in combination with Scott's fire, had Denny's clothes all dried out and ready to wear within three hours time. Denny's Wolverines were the last items to dry thoroughly, but his boots finally reached a satisfactory state and he pulled them on and laced them up snugly.

"Ready," Denny stated.

"Okay. I'll snuff out the fire and we'll get going," Scott said, starting to kick dirt and gravel on the fire. "I figure it's about an hour up to the spot we saw the deer disappear into."

The Huevos is an area comprised of many steep canyons of scrub pine, mostly piñon pine, and salt bush, with a sprinkling of ocotillo and prickly pear here and there. Denny and Scott now faced a very steep climb up to their

destination and the going would be slow and dangerous. The danger lay in the loose footing that was universal throughout the canyons of the Huevos. One wrong step and the climber would find himself plummeting downhill with no way to stop save colliding with a large rock or tree trunk. Needless to say, *that* could be fatal.

As far as Denny was concerned this was just another wild goose chase he had again allowed Scott to talk him into, and it probably wouldn't be the last. As much alike as the two friends were, this was probably the one greatest difference between them. Scott was the adventurer, always looking for excitement around every corner, while Denny was content to simply go hunting or fishing. Scott usually found a way to turn every trip to the Huevos into some sort of an adventure and it was now clear to Denny that Scott had managed to do it again on this trip. He had already taken a plunge into the Río Hondo and now they were scaling an almost nonnegotiable mountainside in search of what Scott believed to be a cave. And why? Because Scott thought he had seen five deer go into it. Denny would have been far happier to be sitting where they belonged on the other side of the canyon in the warmth and comfort of the sunlight.

They slowly and cautiously made their way up the slope, sliding back two steps for every three or four they took upward. The going was perilous and painstakingly slow, but eventually Scott stopped and stared at the ground, looking first one way and then the other.

"What's up?" Denny asked, through gasps for air. "Why'd we stop?"

"Tracks," Scott replied, flatly.

"Your deer tracks?"

"No-They appear to be moccasin tracks," Scott informed Denny.

"Moccasin tracks?" Denny questioned, moving around Scott to where he could see what Scott was seeing. "Huh-They do look like moccasin tracks."

"Yeah, maybe while we were down at the river drying you out someone followed those deer up here," Scott offered in explanation.

"Yeah, and wiped out the deer tracks in doing so," Denny replied, trying to reason it out himself. "They are traveling uphill, like the deer were."

Scott studied the tracks a moment longer and then said, "So, let's see where they go."

Scott angled onto the trail the deer, and now the moccasin tracks, were following and headed upward again. Denny fell in behind him without a word.

Now that they were actually on a trail the going got easier as the trail angled up and across the face of the slope and the footing was much firmer underfoot. Also, much to their approval, the sun had finally made its way far enough up into the sky to begin warming the east slope they were traveling on. The warmth was welcomed almost as much as the more easily traveled trail.

As they followed the apparently well-used trail Scott continued to wonder over the moccasin tracks and the lack of deer tracks. He knew what he had seen from across the canyon and he knew what he had *not* seen as well.

"Are there still Indians around here?" Scott asked Denny, stopping on the trail and breaking the silence of the hike.

"Not that I know of. I've never seen any on any of our trips up here before."

"Then how do you explain these tracks?"

Denny thought for a moment and replied, "I don't have a clue, Scott. Maybe it's a group of those hunters that dress like ancient history and hunt with black powder and all. I don't know."

"Huh-Could be, I guess," Scott replied. "Maybe they were following the deer we saw up to the cave, too."

Scott began up the trail again, still studying the moccasin tracks and trying to determine how many sets of tracks there were. The only conclusion he could come to was that the group contained more than two people. How many there were for sure he couldn't determine.

Another twenty minutes of climbing brought them to a point in the trail where the trail ran dead into a giant boulder and then circumnavigated it to the right. The men followed the trail around to the right and as they rounded the boulder the entrance to the cave they had been seeking came into view.

"Look!" Scott yelled to Denny. "There it is!"

About fifty yards on up the trail was a black opening in the side of the slope. From where they stood it appeared to be about ten feet wide and perhaps seven feet tall. The trail at their feet appeared to go straight into the opening and nowhere else. It did not seem to continue around or beyond the cave entrance.

"Looks like this trail was made to go to the cave," Scott speculated.

"By who I wonder?" Denny asked. "I think it might be more interesting to follow it back to its source."

"Maybe we will-after we have a look in the cave."

Scott thought about that for a moment and then added, "Or-maybe the cave is the source."

"That's a dumb idea," Denny retorted.

"Why dumb? Maybe the people that made these tracks live in the cave and the trail was made by them going out to hunt and gather; get water."

"Sheesh-Dream on dummy. No one lives in caves anymore, not even Indians," Denny said, mocking Scott's idea.

"You have a better explanation?" Scott asked.

"No, but I'm sure we'll find a better explanation in the cave. Go on-let's have a look in there."

Scott took three steps toward the cave and then stopped dead in his tracks.

"Whoa!" he said, stopping Denny in his tracks as well.

"What?" Denny asked.

"Do you have a flashlight with you?" Scott asked.

"Nope-It's back at camp."

"Me neither. How are we going to see in there?" Scott asked, not really expecting Denny to have an answer.

"Maybe we can make a torch," Denny answered.

"Out of what?"

"I don't know. Let's cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, let's just get up there and have a look see."

Denny and Scott covered the ground between themselves and the cave in a matter of only a few minutes. They stopped at the opening and stared into the darkness of the hole. It was Denny who came up with an idea first.

"Give me your climbing rope," Denny said, holding out his open hand.

"What for?"

"Just give it to me," Denny demanded.

Although this was Scott's *expedition*, it was Denny who was now the most intrigued by the cave and its contents. Scott handed Denny his rope and Denny quickly tied it firmly around his waist.

"I'm going to feel my way in. You brace the rope around the big rock over there and get ready to hold on if I should fall down a hole or something," Denny explained.

"Are you crazy? You just might fall down a hole. You don't know," Scott offered, trying to warn Denny of the danger he might encounter.

"I'll be careful and I'll take it slow and easy. You just be ready to pull me out of there or at least hold onto me while I climb out."

Scott could see that there was no talking Denny out of this and so he did as Denny had instructed and wrapped his

end of the rope around the rock, taking up the slack and bracing himself.

"Okay. Ready," Scott said, frowning at Denny.

"Okay-Here I go," Denny replied.

Scott watched as Denny slowly entered the blackness of the cave and disappeared. He fed out the rope ever so slowly as Denny needed it until Denny had gone about twenty feet or so into the cave. Then, the rope stopped moving and went slack.

He must have come to the end of the cave, Scott thought to himself. "Hey Denny!" he yelled into the opening.

There was no response.

"Denny!" Scott yelled again, and he listened to only silence.

Scott gave the rope a tug, but there was no resistance. He began reeling it in, effortlessly, and finally the looped end of the rope emerged from the cave, dragging along the ground, empty.

"Hey, dumb ass! This ain't funny! Come out of there!" Scott yelled, as he walked to the opening. "Come on, Denny! This isn't funny!"

There was no reply from within and Scott was beginning to get worried, although his strongest emotion right now was that of anger. After a few more minutes of silence from within the cave Scott's fear for Denny's safety outweighed his anger over being the brunt of this tasteless joke, if that's what it was, and he began debating whether or not he should go in after his friend. His common sense told him to hold his ground, but his loyalty to Denny urged him on. He waited and called to Denny every few minutes until nearly a half an hour had elapsed.

"Okay! That's it, Denny! I'm leaving and I'm going to bring back the sheriff and a search party! If this is some sort of dumb joke you better give it up now!"

There came no reply from within the cave. Scott waited another five minutes and then bolted down the trail as fast as was safely possible. He knew now this was no joke. Denny would not have allowed it to go this far if it were. As Scott ran down the trail the only image that came to mind was that of Denny stepping off an unseen ledge in the cave and slipping out of the looped rope. He only hoped that the fall hadn't been from too high up and that perhaps Denny was merely unconscious and could be saved if he got back with help soon enough.

He picked up his pace as much as was safely possible. His Jeep was probably about two hours away if he didn't

have any trouble crossing the river and his first move would be to try to raise some help on channel 9 on his CB radio. That was a long shot as far out in the desert as he was, but worth a try. Right now, he felt as if time was definitely not on his side; or Denny's.

CHAPTER TWO

Lost in Time

Denny looked back over his shoulder and could see Scott standing outside the cave entrance holding the other end of his lifeline. He had gone only about twenty feet into the cave before he noticed a glow of what appeared to be firelight glimmering on the right wall of the cave. He stopped to let his eyes adjust to the dim light and worked the lever action of his Winchester, loading a round into its chamber. *If there's firelight in here*, he thought, *then I'm not alone in here*. He then reached down to snug up his rope, which seemed to have gone loose around his waist.

"What the...?" he whispered, not finding the rope.

He felt on the ground around his feet, but the rope seemed to be gone completely. He turned and looked out through the entrance of the cave and Scott appeared to have gone as well. He looked back at the wall where he had seen the glimmer of firelight and the wall was solid blackness now.

"What the hell is going on here?" he asked aloud, and then thought, *This is freaky*.

Denny started walking toward the opening, cautiously at first, and then he started jogging toward the outside. As he broke free of the dark of the cave and stood outside he noticed that he was standing in about three inches of snow, snow that hadn't been there just three minutes ago when he had gone into the cave. He called out to Scott, but there came no reply; only the echo of his own voice.

Denny looked down at his rifle and received another shock more puzzling than the three inches of snow he was now standing in. His modern-day Winchester he had been carrying when he entered the cave was now an 1866 Winchester Yellow Boy. The next revelation came swiftly on the heels of the discovery of his rifle's transformation. He was dressed all in buckskins and was wearing elk skin moccasins instead of his Wolverine boots. The one change he could appreciate was the heavy bear fur coat he had on as he was beginning to notice that the temperature was one hell of a lot lower than when he had ventured into that accursed cave.

The cold and the need to move to keep warm outweighed his immediate fears of what was happening to him as a result of going into the cave. He had no more idea of how that could have changed anything than he understood how nuclear fusion worked, but it seemed that the cave was the

cause-somehow. At least the land looked all the same and he headed straight down toward the Río Hondo. If he could get across the river okay and get back to Scott's Jeep, perhaps he could take the time to figure the rest out in the warmth of the Jeep. His main concern with that thought was that with Scott missing, maybe the Jeep would be missing as well.

Denny dismissed that thought as crazy, but what wasn't crazy right now? He trudged on down the east face of the canyon, slipping and sliding in the snow and shivering from the bitter cold. He could never remember it ever being this cold up here in November before.

As Denny reached the Hondo he caught his first break. The river was frozen solid. Crossing the Hondo would not be the problem he had feared it would be. In this cold, had he fallen in he would have been a goner in a matter of an hour or so. But, despite everything else that seemed to be going awry, fortune had smiled on him at this juncture and he skated his way across the frozen river at a point where it pooled and had frozen into a smooth, flat sheet of ice.

Scaling the west slope of the canyon in the snow was no easy task and it took every bit of gumption Denny had to see the challenge through. He was so numb and cold and in so much pain that it would have been far easier to just lie down and sleep than to go on, but that would have been his final rest and he knew it well. He forged on and up and over the brink. Scott's car would now be only a matter of a quarter of a mile away across flat terrain. He made the final trek to where Scott's Jeep should have been. He dropped to his knees and stared in disbelief. Not only was the Jeep not there, but the road they had driven in on was gone as well.

At first Denny thought he had steered the wrong course and had gotten lost, but he knew better in the final analysis. He knew this country like the back of his hand and he knew he was exactly where he ought to be. He hunkered down against the trunk of a piñon pine, sitting on the cold snow. He had no matches or lighter to start a fire with and he knew he was miles from Chatsworth or any other shelter of any kind. He thought briefly about trying to make it back to the cave for its relative warmth and shelter, but that idea frightened him more than freezing to death right here where he was. He closed his eyes and prayed for deliverance from both the cold and the nightmare he now found himself in. He knew he should get up and start moving, but he was powerless to do so. *Too tired. Too cold.*

Must rest, he thought, and then he fell asleep. He was powerless not to.

When Denny next opened his eyes he was lying on his back staring up at a curved ceiling of thatched twigs and dried mud. It was warm and there was the smell of wood smoke in the air and he could see smoke rising and exiting through a hole in the center of the ceiling. He looked down toward his chest and saw that he was covered by a heavy fur blanket. He glanced around the small dome shaped room and realized that he was alone. He pushed back the blanket and crawled toward the fur flap, which appeared to be covering the entrance to this place. Denny slowly pushed aside the flap and peered out into the frozen landscape. There were about twenty hogans visible forming what appeared to be an Indian village inhabited by dozens of native Indians engaged in various activities and daily chores.

It was obvious to him that no one was watching him closely or guarding him and Denny wasn't sure if he should stay put in the hogan or try to slip out and run. *Run to where?* he thought, and let the flap fall back into place. Denny moved over to the small, smoldering fire and sat down to think about his situation. He realized that he should be dead as he thought back to having fallen asleep against the tree trunk. He should by all rights have frozen to death. He had obviously been rescued by these Indians—but why?

He thought about his clothing. Old buckskins had replaced his modern clothing and a fur coat had taken the place of his modern one of fabric and down. He thought about his elk skin moccasins, which had replaced his Wolverine boots and then he thought about his rifle. Denny looked around the hogan frantically searching for his rifle. He pulled back the edge of the heavy fur blanket he had been sleeping under and there it was; his Winchester Yellow Boy. Again he realized that something of his had been changed from modern to old, but not antique. Even though the 1866 Yellow Boy was by all rights over a hundred and thirty years old, it was actually nearly brand new. It showed no signs of heavy use and very little wear and tear.

Confused by all that had taken place and was still taking place, Denny worked the action of the rifle discovering that a round was still chambered and the magazine was still full. *Well, apparently they trust me*, he thought. *They've left me unguarded and fully armed, but why wouldn't they? I'm no threat to them.*

That thought got Denny thinking again about how all of his modern possessions had been replaced with nineteenth century items and that still confused him. He hadn't been carrying a wallet, but he suddenly remembered that he had a few coins in his pocket when he and Scott had left on the trip. He slid his hand down to his pants leg and quickly discovered that he had no pockets in the buckskins he was now wearing, but he did discover a small leather pouch hanging from his belt. He loosed the pouch from his belt and opened it, tipping it upside down above his open hand. What fell into the palm of his hand both amazed and frightened him. He was staring at a nearly brand new silver 1873 quarter dollar piece and three shiny 1873 Indian head pennies.

"1873?" Denny mumbled to himself, questioning his own eyes. "What the...?"

He hadn't had much time to think about all that had been happening to him after going into the cave, what with survival being his top priority at the time. But now, he was starting to get the picture. His clothes, his boots, his rifle and now his coins had all been replaced with items available in the 1870's. Nothing from later than that period had survived his journey into the cave. *Could I actually be in 1873?* he wondered, as he stared again at the coins. *If so, why would these Indians bother to save me and leave me unattended and armed?*

Denny's thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the flap to his hogan.

"Ah-You are awake," the Indian said, crawling into the hogan with Denny. "This is good."

Denny was dumbfounded by the appearance of the young Indian buck. He was dressed all in traditional Indian garb, which appeared to be authentic. *And why not, Denny thought, if this is 1873?*

"Hi," Denny replied. "You speak English," he said, stating the obvious.

"Yes, I have learned English-at the mission when I was a young boy," the Indian stated, smiling.

"What's your name?" Denny asked, smiling back a weak smile.

"Na-non-ga-What is your name?" he asked.

"I'm Denny, Denny Miller."

"And how did you, Denny Miller, come to meet Ta-ton-ka?"

"Ta-ton-ka?" Denny asked, confused at the question.

Na-non-ga pointed to the stone charm hanging around Denny's neck.

"Ta-ton-ka's charm. Ta-ton-ka made that. How did you come by it?"

Denny took the stone charm into his fingers and looked at it closely. The nylon string that had once held it around his neck was gone, replaced by some sort of leather lanyard, but the charm itself had survived his trip into the cave. He thought back to the day he had found it lying on the ground on one of his and Scott's first trips to the Huevos.

"It was many years ago," Denny answered. "Perhaps as many as ten. Where is Ta-ton-ka now?"

"He has passed on to our Fathers," Na-non-ga answered. "But tell me of your meeting."

Denny thought for a minute and realized that perhaps the only reason he was now sitting in the warmth of this hogan was because of the charm he had been wearing when found by these Indians. He thought for a minute, searching for a story, and then began.

"I was a young man then. Maybe seventeen years. I was out hunting deer with my friend, Scott. We had just descended into the Canyon del Río Hondo and were about to get a drink from the river when we spotted an Indian brave crossing the river on a log upstream from us. He had not noticed us yet when the log shifted and he was tossed into the frigid waters. Scott grabbed his climbing rope from his pack and threw it out into the water as the brave approached, fighting the cold waters for his survival. He saw Scott's rope and grabbed onto it as he went by and Scott and I pulled him to shore. We built a fire to dry his clothing and warm him up and we gave him some hard tack to eat as that was all we had available for food at the time. When he was ready to travel he gave me this charm as a token of his appreciation and I've worn it with pride ever since."

Denny paused and studied Na-non-ga's face. Na-non-ga was deep in thought, obviously scrutinizing his story. Had he said too much? Maybe the tribe didn't even live here ten years ago. Denny nervously awaited Na-non-ga's reply.

"It is a good story, Denny Miller. I do not remember Ta-ton-ka ever telling it, but it is a good story," Na-non-ga declared, again.

"He was probably too embarrassed about what had happened to want to tell the story," Denny suggested, thinking Na-non-ga had doubts about his "good story".

Na-non-ga smiled and replied, "I would not tell such a story either if it had happened to me," and then he laughed at the thought. "You stay here and rest and warm yourself,

Denny Miller. I will have a squaw bring you some hot food," Na-non-ga smiled. "You are welcome to stay as long as you need."

"I won't be in the way here?" Denny asked. "I don't want to impose."

"No, you will not be in the way. I live here alone."

"You're not married then?" Denny asked.

"No. I have no time for a wife now. There will be time for that when life is easier for us. Now I must keep the tribe moving to good hunting grounds and keep my people out of the way of the white man, who grows like weeds in my land. But now, you rest and get back your strength. We can talk of all this later."

"Thanks, Na-non-ga, but before you go can you answer a stupid question for me? Where is the nearest white settlement?"

"Very far from here. Five day's travel on horseback, but there is a white man's ranch that is closer, only two day's travel to the west. You were lost then when we found you?"

"No, only bewildered, but after my horse threw me and ran off, the snow started falling and I lost my bearings completely. I continued on foot, but all my provisions were on my horse and I finally had to rest. Had you not come along it would have been a very long rest. Thank you, Na-non-ga."

Na-non-ga nodded and then turned and left Denny to the warmth of the fire and the solitude of the hogan. Denny lay back and folded his hands behind his head. Before he had time to think a single thought he had fallen fast asleep. When next he opened his eyes there was a rabbit roasting on a spit above his fire, which had been refreshed as he had slept. He rolled over and carefully removed the spit from its supports. He took a big bite of the rabbit meat and sighed. His mind was now on the ranch Na-non-ga had mentioned. He suspected, but could not be completely sure, that the ranch was more than likely Caleb Monroe's ranch, his former home in another time.

Denny's grandfather had purchased Rancho Valle in 1924 when Caleb Monroe had finally passed away at age eighty-seven. He had parceled out the ranchlands and had sold the parcels to developers, but had kept the ranch house for his own. Denny's father had inherited it and had raised his family there until Denny was grown. Then, he decided to move closer to the center of town and to his business, so he sold the property to Denny.

Denny took another bite of meat and then lay back down thinking that it sure would be nice if Na-non-ga would loan him a horse. If he was going to try to make the trip to Rancho Valle, and he knew he would have to make the trip, he would definitely need a horse. He'd ask when Na-non-ga returned, but in the mean time he had a rabbit to finish and another nap to take.

Denny was awakened by Na-non-ga entering his hogan. He had no idea how long he had dozed, his belly full of rabbit and perfectly comfortable in the warm dwelling he had been provided. He blinked his eyes and tried to shake off his sleep's stupor.

Na-non-ga seated himself on the floor and smiled at Denny.

"We are moving our camp south today," he informed Denny. "The hunting here has grown poor and the worst of the winter is upon us. You are welcome to travel with us if you would like, Denny Miller."

"Thank you, Na-non-ga, but I have business to attend to at that ranch you mentioned. I was hoping to borrow a horse and some provisions so that I might get there without freezing to death along the way."

Na-non-ga laughed.

"Ha-You have already visited the god of the ice and snows once. I think that you should not go there again. I have already placed a horse outside the hogan. You will find warm blankets, flint, water, and pemmican on him to see you through your journey. I thought that you might choose to go back to your people," Na-non-ga said, smiling a sad sort of little smile.

"Thank you, Na-non-ga. And this ranch you spoke of is to the west?" Denny asked, wanting to confirm his information.

"Yes, two day's travel. Ride toward the Mountain of the Horse and you will come to it before you reach the mountain. Come, I will show you."

Na-non-ga led Denny outside and around to the back of the hogan. He pointed to a large mountain on the western horizon.

"There is the Mountain of the Horse. You see? Ride always toward it and you will come to the white man's ranch in two days," he explained to Denny.

"Thanks, Na-non-ga. I guess there's no time like the present to get started. Thanks again for saving my life and for all you've done for me."

"Thank you for saving Ta-ton-ka. He was my father's brother. We enjoyed many years with him because of what you did. Go in peace, my friend."

Denny turned to the horse and then turned back.

"Na-non-ga. Do you know what year this is?" Denny asked, then held his breath.

"The last time I heard a white man speak of that he said it was 1873. That was in the last winter I believe," Na-non-ga informed him.

Denny was silent for a minute and then replied, "Thanks. That's what I thought." He gave it a little more thought and came to the conclusion that it must now be 1874. That made perfect sense as the coins in his pouch seemed new enough to have been minted a mere year ago.

Na-non-ga turned and walked away. Denny took down a blanket from the horse and wrapped it tightly around himself and then mounted the pinto he had been loaned. He gave the mare a light kick in the slats and then rode off toward what he hoped he would find to be Caleb Monroe's ranch. If he were really residing in the year 1874 now, he knew he was too early to find Chatsworth already built and thriving. Caleb had come first and the townsfolk had followed.

CHAPTER THREE

Denny's New Life

"Well-Here goes nothing," Denny commented to himself, as he struck the hilt of his Green River knife against the flint. It was a nice knife, but he wished he had his old Buck hunter back right about now. It had a large metal cap for striking with and producing a good spark. But, what he really wished for was a box of matches and some Boy Scout water. He'd seen fires started with flint and steel on outdoor shows and the like, but he'd never really tried it himself.

He was now a day's ride away from Na-non-ga and his tribe and a day's ride from the ranch; in the middle of nowhere, and it was cold. Without a fire he wasn't sure if the three blankets that Na-non-ga had given him would be enough to keep him alive.

Denny struck the hilt against the flint repeatedly, producing sparks that shot down into the dead and dried, moss-like growth he had gathered. He was growing evermore fearful with each strike that produced nothing. His hands were numb and aching from the effort and he seriously considered just getting back on his paint and trying to ride straight through to the ranch. He couldn't quite decide which would be better, freezing to death right here or falling down some ravine as he rode in the blackness of the llano. The thick clouds that had moved in and were blocking the light of the moon were both a blessing and a curse. They made travel virtually impossible in the nearly lightless desert, but they did help hold down some heat that on a clear night would have escaped to where it would do Denny no good at all. As cold as it already was he was thankful for that little blessing.

Just as Denny was about to opt for the midnight ride he saw a small orange glow in his tender, then a small stream of white smoke rose from the moss. He quickly bent down close to the smoldering tender and blew gently on it. Slowly, the orange glow grew in diameter and then a small flame appeared. He quickly fed the tiny flame more dried moss and the flame grew steadily. He added some small twigs and to his delight he had the beginnings of a nice fire. When he had the blaze going strong he danced around it like an Indian warrior celebrating a grand victory, whooping and hollering in the still night air. At this moment all the anxiety of being trapped in a long ago time had drained

from him. He felt victorious and worthy of this bitter land. Then-reality came creeping back in.

Suddenly, Denny realized that his roaring fire would be a beacon to any marauding Indian bands that might be in the area. Na-non-ga had befriended him by virtue of his possession of a charm that had been made by Na-non-ga's uncle. Perhaps the next band of Indians that happened along might never have heard of Ta-ton-ka. *That* was definitely something to be concerned about and Denny pulled a few of the larger pieces of wood from his fire in an effort to reduce its size. *No sense in advertising myself*, he thought, and settled in as close to the remaining blaze as he could. He pulled some pemmican from the small pouch Na-non-ga had provided him with and he began his first meal on the llano.

Having eaten his fill of the fatty pemmican, Denny wrapped himself in two of his blankets and snuggled in beneath the lean-to he had fashioned from the third blanket, tied over two short mesquites and anchored to the ground with heavy rocks. It wasn't the Ritz, but it kept the prevailing west winds from his back. His belly full of pemmican, the smell of wood smoke in his nostrils, and the relative warmth of his shelter all contributed to his falling fast asleep quite quickly. Morning was upon him in a heartbeat as he opened his eyes to the sun peeking over a low mesa to the east.

Cripes-morning already? was Denny's first conscious thought, as he pulled his blankets tight around his neck. *And just when I was getting cozy.* Denny looked quickly to where he had tied his paint to a stout mesquite and sighed in relief that she was still there. He felt sorry that he had no food to give her and that there was no browse for her to feed on here, but she could eat her fill when they reached the ranch this evening. He had shared his water with her, pouring a little at a time from the bladder into his cupped hand and letting her lick it up. He realized it was just a taste, but again, she could drink her fill tonight.

He stood and dropped his blankets to the ground and walked over to his horse. He stroked her gently on the neck and whispered to her that only one day's ride remained between where they were and food and water. Denny was starting to gain an appreciation for this horse. Where he came from a horse was just that: a horse. Out here he was learning that his horse was his lifeline. She was all that connected him to civilization. Lose your horse and you lose your life. It was as black and white as that. He poured a

little more water into the palm of his hand and the paint eagerly lapped it up. "Good girl," he whispered in her ear. The paint nickered back her appreciation.

Denny went about gathering up his blankets and rolling them into a bundle. He smothered the remaining coals of his fire, slung his Yellow Boy over his shoulder, and untied his horse. "Time to get going," he said to the paint, and mounted her, surveying the surrounding horizons and locating the Mountain of the Horse he headed west.

It was a calm morning with no wind to rustle things up, so the appearance of a cloud of dust off to Denny's right perplexed him at first. Then, as if he had lived here all his life it came to him. *Riders?* he thought, questioning himself and what he was seeing. He looked quickly about realizing that there was nowhere to hide out here. He decided that perhaps the best way to go unnoticed out here on the llano was to remain motionless. He halted his paint and they stood there frozen in place as Denny kept a close eye on the approaching dust cloud.

As the cloud drew closer it wasn't long before Denny was able to make out five riders approaching him. His first instinct was to make a run for it, but five experienced riders would have no trouble running him down no matter how fast his paint might be. He remained fixed in place, and prayed.

The riders closed in to within fifty yards when suddenly they reined in their horses and began approaching at a walk. Denny could now see that they were indeed Indians and for some reason they had not just charged in and scalped him, or worse. When the five Indians were a mere twenty yards away, Denny removed his Yellow Boy from his shoulder and held it in plain sight across the withers of his paint. It was a gesture that caused the Indians to stop their approach completely.

After what amounted to a one minute stand-off, one of the five began walking his horse toward Denny while the others remained where they were. When the advance Indian reached no more than five yards distance from Denny he held up his hand and said, "Hi."

What the hell? Denny thought. *Hi?*

Denny motioned for the Indian to come a little closer and then he returned the friendly gesture, saying, "Hi. What can I do for you?"

"We are looking for our people. Have you seen an Indian village in these parts?"

Denny was shocked. This Indian's English was nearly perfect, a far cry from Na-non-ga's English.

"Where do you come from?" Denny asked, perplexed by the Indian's mastery of English.

"The reservation near Chatsworth," the Indian answered. "We are looking for a village of Mescal. It should be in these parts somewhere. Have you seen it?"

"Yes, yes I have," Denny answered. "It's a day's ride in that direction," he added, pointing the way. "But, they were preparing to move south when I left them."

"You were at their village?" the Indian asked, seemingly confused.

"Yes I was," Denny replied.

"Then you are a friend of the Mescal?"

"Yes, I am a friend of Na-non-ga."

"We have heard of Na-non-ga. He was a great chief," the Indian replied.

"Was?" Denny asked.

"Is a great chief I mean, of course," the Indian stammered.

"Well, if you hurry you may catch him before he heads south or gets too far away anyway."

"Thank you," the Indian replied, and turned his horse back to his companions and the five rode off to the east.

Denny watched them go, thinking how strange the Indian had seemed. His near perfect English, his thinking Na-non-ga was either dead or no longer a chief, and... Then it hit Denny square in the face. He had said that they were from the reservation near Chatsworth. There was no Chatsworth in 1874 and the reservation dated back to the early 1880's, not 1874.

Maybe I'm not back in 1874 after all, Denny thought. Maybe it's Na-non-ga and his tribe that are living in the past. Maybe they are just renegades from the reservation that refuse to live like the white man wants them to.

Denny's mind was now totally a frazzle. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Who was real, these Indians or Na-non-ga? *But, then what about my clothes and my rifle and the coins and all?* he wondered.

"Well, we won't get any answers standing here," he said to his paint, and gave her a gentle kick. They headed once again in the direction of the Mountain of the Horse, and hopefully, Caleb's ranch.

As Denny rode west and the Mountain of the Horse drew nearer, it began to take on definition and he soon recognized it from before all this began. The Mountain of the Horse in his original time was Horse Tooth Mountain and that gave him the bearings to find Chatsworth if he should so choose, and-if it was there. He knew well that

Chatsworth lay at the foot of the south slope of the mountain. He had grown up there and knew the lay of the land around Chatsworth well. Denny angled his paint slightly to the southwest and headed for town. He'd try that first and if need be he'd then go to Caleb's. It might mean another night on the llano, but he had survived one night already and he was sure he could survive another. He was sure the paint could also.

Denny rode steadily to the southwest until Horse Tooth Mountain loomed large ahead. He knew what should lie just over the next rise and as he crested the last remaining barrier between himself and Chatsworth he pulled the paint up and stared at an empty valley. Chatsworth was not there and now he knew that he was truly back in 1874 or at least back to sometime before Chatsworth was founded. He turned the paint to the northwest and started for Caleb's ranch. From where he was now he knew the way well and he also knew that he could still get there before dark. He had made good time today.

The ride to Rancho Valle was uneventful, but full of wonder for Denny. He had ridden first to the area that would one day be the road from Chatsworth to the ranch. What he found was two wagon ruts on what appeared to be a very little used roadway, probably Caleb's way to and from the ranch when he needed to go to Santa Fe for supplies. Gone, or not yet erected were the telephone poles, fences, and billboards that would eventually line the highway. Denny was seeing his home for the first time as it looked long before he was born; before civilization marked the land with its ugly trappings.

Denny followed the wagon ruts, taking in the pristine beauty of the untainted land until he spotted before him a small ranch consisting of a small frame house, a barn, and a corral. He pulled the paint up just as the sun was dropping to the horizon.

"There it is," he said to her. "We better hurry on in before sundown. I don't know how Caleb will take to a stranger riding up after dark." He gave the mare a gentle kick and trotted her into the ranch yard pulling up short of the house.

"Hello the house!" Denny yelled, thinking back to western movies he'd seen as a child. He knew you didn't just walk up to the door and knock. *That* could get you shot. Denny patiently awaited a response from within.

"Hello the house! Is anyone home?" he yelled, after another minute or two.

"I heard you the first time," a scratchy voice said from behind him.

Denny turned on his mare's back and looked to the doorway of the barn. The first thing he noticed was the large bore of the buffalo gun pointed straight at his chest. Then, the man holding it came into focus.

"State your business," the man demanded, in a no nonsense tone of voice and keeping the muzzle trained on Denny's chest.

"Just looking for a hot meal and some feed for my paint," Denny replied, smiling a nervous smile. "Sure would appreciate it if you'd lower that canon there also, sir."

The wiry little man did not lower the rifle and slowly approached Denny without speaking a word. Finally, when he was about five feet away he spoke.

"Just hand me that Yellow Boy slowly-and butt first-and then we'll discuss your meal," he ordered.

Denny did as the man had instructed, slowly handing his Winchester down to him.

"Now hand me down that Green River."

"My knife?" Denny asked.

"I knew a man once named McCoy who could hit a fly on a barn door at ten paces with one of those. Hand it down, son."

Again, Denny did as he was told, but as he did so he told the man, "Okay, but my name's not McCoy and there'd be no worried flies around here on my account."

The man cracked a small smile for the first time since confronting Denny and said, "Why don't you climb on down from there and take your horse to the barn. You'll find some hay and oats out there for her. When you've finished come on inside the house and we'll see to your needs. By the way, what name do you go by?"

"Denny Miller," Denny answered, as he climbed down from his mount. "And you might be?"

"Name's Caleb, Caleb Monroe. So what brings you all the way out here, Mr. Miller? Don't get many visitors out here. What's your business?"

"Just traveling and looking for work," Denny replied, trying to ease Caleb's mind about his sudden appearance at his ranch. "I spotted your wagon ruts and followed them in hoping to maybe find a ranch where I could hire on for a spell."

"Well, I could use the help, that's for certain, but I can't pay nothin'," Caleb answered.

"I don't require any pay, sir. Just one good meal a day for my horse and me and a place for us to bed down where it's warm."

Caleb studied Denny's face and then replied, "Well, you go take care of your horse for now. I was just fixin' to start some supper for myself anyway, so you come join me when you've seen to the paint and then we'll talk."

"Yes, sir," Denny said, and then turned and led the mare to the barn. As he reached the barn door he looked back over his shoulder and saw Caleb limping quite noticeably up the front steps to the plank porch at the front of the house. Denny smiled and thought to himself, *Looks like he could use a little help around here.* But despite the obvious handicap, Denny knew that Caleb was one tough customer. Denny knew that because Denny knew what even Caleb didn't yet know, that he would build up one of the largest and most successful ranches in this part of the country before he passed away. To look at it now though, no one would ever guess.

With the paint now bedded down, fed, and watered, Denny walked to the little ranch house and knocked on the door.

"Come on in, Mr. Miller," came the raspy voice through the door.

Denny entered to see Caleb standing in front of a crude cook stove. He noticed right away that both his Yellow Boy and Caleb's buffalo gun were leaning in one corner of the one room house. Denny took that to mean that he had probably gained Caleb's confidence. What Denny also noticed was the strange familiarity of the room he had entered.

This is the "first room", he thought to himself. *This is where the whole ranch house started just like Scott and I thought.*

The room wasn't the same as he knew it, containing the kitchen and sleeping quarters all in the one room, but he did recognize it, right down to the stone fireplace on the east wall. His eyes were quickly drawn to the corner where he knew that Caleb had built a secret compartment beneath three sliding floorboards. Denny had found the secret compartment in his home shortly after buying the house from his dad. It had appeared as though the secret compartment had gone undisturbed since Caleb and passed away in 1924. *That hiding place could come in handy,* he thought. *if Caleb has built it already.* Denny was onto a plan, but his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Caleb's voice.

"Well-Have a seat at the table. There's nothin' fancy here so don't count on much. I've got pinto beans and bacon. I used to have corn bread with it until the cornmeal ran out, but the beans and bacon should fill you up okay."

"That'll be fine, Mr. Monroe," Denny answered, pulling up to the table one of the two chairs in the room.

"Please, call me Caleb. Okay to call you Denny?"

"Sure, please do. So-How long have you been here, Caleb?" Denny asked, trying to strike up a conversation.

Caleb looked over his shoulder from the cook stove and replied, "Six years now off and on, explorin' and mappin'. I came out here in '72 to stay though, and staked out my claim to this land."

"Why here, Caleb? There's no town or anything out here."

"There will be. I'm on a direct line between Albuquerque and Tucson. I figure a railroad will come right through here and this is just about two water stops distance from Albuquerque. I figure there'll be a town rise up in the valley sometime in the not too distant future, and a rail station for shippin' my livestock."

"Yeah, maybe, but why take a chance on a maybe? What if that doesn't happen?"

"Oh, it'll happen," Caleb stated. "And as to why I'm takin' the chance, that's easy. This is some of the best grazin' land in these parts, and there's plenty of it. I scouted and mapped the whole area and this is the best place to be. Now that they've joined the two coasts together with rail they'll start feedin' out rail all over the country. It's just a matter of time before they connect all the bigger towns. Just give 'em time. It's only been five years since they hooked the two oceans together. They'll be gettin' around to me soon enough."

"Well, Caleb, you may be right," Denny smiled, knowing full well that he was. But still, it was cool getting a *pre-history* lesson from the man who literally gave birth to his hometown.

"Of course I'm right, Denny. Now, let's eat before it gets cold."

The two men sat down at the crude dining table and indulged themselves in pinto beans and bacon, a sort of soup or stew of Caleb's own creation. Halfway through his first bowl Denny came up with an idea.

"Say, Caleb. You said you mapped out this whole region?"

"Yep, sure did, from Horse Tooth Mountain all the way over to and includin' what I call the Huevos. I named it

that and also the mountain. Figure I got the right, bein' the first one here and all," Caleb explained.

"I understand the mountain's name 'cause it looks like a big horse tooth, but why Huevos?" Denny wanted to know.

"Ever been there? It's two day's ride to the east. Well, if you have you may remember all those egg-shaped boulders everywhere in that area. Huevos means eggs in Spanish. That's why. Huevos sounded better to me than just plain *eggs*."

"Huh-So where are the maps? I'd like to have a look at them if you don't mind," Denny said, finishing his first bowl of Caleb's bean stew. "They might help me get familiar with this area if I'm going to be staying on here."

"I'll get them out after supper, Denny, but we haven't discussed your stayin' on here yet that I recall," Caleb said, bluntly.

Denny just smiled and filled his bowl with a second helping. He was really surprised how good something so simple could taste.

Denny finished first and after Caleb had eaten his fill he cleared the table and walked over to the corner of the room. He knelt down and pushed on a floorboard and then lifted it and two other planks from the floor. He reached into the floor space and retrieved a metal strongbox that Denny recognized immediately, and carried it to the table.

Caleb smiled at Denny and said, "Now we'll have a look at my maps."

Denny smiled back at Caleb, but his mind wasn't on the maps. He was beginning to formulate the seeds of an idea, an idea that might just get him back home, *if* he could get Caleb to agree to let him stay on for awhile.

When Caleb finished showing Denny his maps of the area he folded them up neatly, placed them back in the strongbox and placed the strongbox beneath the floor. He then looked at Denny and said, "So, you say you'll work for room and board for you and your horse?"

"That's what I said, Caleb. Room and board," Denny replied.

"Okay then-you're hired. Tomorrow we start fencin' in the pastureland down by the Hoppe River. That's the best of the pastureland and I want to get it fenced before I have the first of my cattle driven in. You all right with that?"

"Sure. I've never done any fencing, but I'll learn," Denny admitted. "Have you got the wire and all we'll need here?"

"Yep, rode into Santa Fe last month and bought it and had a haulin' company bring it out. We'll have to cut some

mesquite posts, but I've already started that. I've got about half of what we'll need stacked in the barn," Caleb informed Denny.

"Good, then we'll start in the morning," Denny said. "Ah-Where do I bunk, Caleb? I'm pretty worn out from my travel and I'd like to hit the hay if you don't mind."

"Sure, get some rest. You'll find a tack room in the barn. You can bunk down there real cozy. There's a cot in there and a stove and you'll find a log pile behind the barn. It ain't the Belvedere, but it should be comfortable enough," Caleb laughed.

"It'll sure beat sleeping on the llano," Denny laughed back, and then turned for the door.

"We eat at sunup, so don't oversleep," Caleb said, as Denny went outside into the dim light of the encroaching night.

Denny crossed the short distance to the barn and lit a lantern as his paint nickered a greeting to him. His new life in 1874 had begun and for better or for worse he was now a ranch hand on the Rancho Valle working for the man who had built his home one hundred and thirty years ago-or as it stood now, just the year before last.

Morning came much too soon as far as Denny was concerned. Sunup found him headed for the house for breakfast with Caleb. He was dying for eggs, but he hadn't seen any chickens around the barn so he seriously doubted he'd be getting his wish. As it turned out, he was right. Breakfast consisted of last night's leftovers of pinto beans and bacon. It was hardy and it was filling, but Denny hoped there would be more variety in the days to come.

"That was really good, Caleb," Denny commented, after finishing his breakfast. "Rather familiar, but good. So, when do we hit the trail out to the river pasture?"

"There's no big rush, Denny. This time of year the sun has to thaw out the ground a little before we go diggin' post holes. We'll leave shortly. The wagon is already loaded and ready to go."

Caleb handed Denny a wooden pail.

"Here, take this around to the pump and fetch me some water to clean these dishes. We'll be gone a while. Don't want to leave them here a mess for the mice to feed on."

"Gone a while?" Denny asked, taken aback by Caleb's statement and thinking about his plan to bring Scott to his rescue-maybe. No, he hadn't put his plan into effect yet, but he would, and who knew when Scott would arrive back here in 1874 after finding the letters? He knew he was presuming a lot, but he had to be in a location where Scott

could find him if he came looking. *If he could* come looking.

Denny had given this a lot of thought last night as he lay on his cot in the tack room listening to the fire crackle in the old potbelly stove. His newly contrived plan was to write Scott a letter or two letting him know he was safe and what had happened to him. He would then hide the letters in the strongbox under the floor in the first room. Denny figured they would go unnoticed there over the years until Scott would one day find them. There was always the possibility that Caleb would find them, but he doubted that Caleb looked in there all that often and he figured they really didn't have to go unnoticed by Caleb all that long. *As soon as I put them in there, he reasoned, they'll be there in 2004 as well, by the mere act of me doing it now.* It was unconventional thinking, of course, but then again his whole situation was unconventional.

"Yep, we'll be gone a while," Caleb repeated. "The river pasture is too far away to come and go daily. It would be a waste of time. That's why I built a line shack out on the Hoppe last summer."

Denny thought back to his former existence in 2004. The Hoppe, down where Caleb was talking about was now in a suburb of Chatsworth known as Cloverdale. He'd have to be sure to point that out in his first letter.

Denny fetched the water Caleb wanted and Caleb did the dishes and was finally ready to head out to the Hoppe. Outside, the wagon was loaded down with barbed wire, fence posts, and provisions for the long stay at the line shack. Just how long, Denny had no idea.

The work went along nicely for the most part, with a few bad weather days slowing them down from time to time, but the fence was going up. Denny was fine as long as it was daylight and they were working, but the evenings were dead boring for a city boy of the twenty-first century. No TV, no radio, no CD's, and no computer made Denny's nights-a nightmare. He was so sick of the line shack at the end of three weeks when their provisions finally ran out that he could almost scream. Caleb's announcement that they would have to travel to Santa Fe to restock was both a blessing and a curse to Denny's ears.

"Maybe I should stay back at the ranch and keep an eye on things," were the first words out of Denny's mouth.

It wasn't that he didn't relish the idea of going to town, any town, but what about Scott? If he were in Santa Fe when Scott showed up-how would Scott ever find him?

Caleb frowned.

"I was kinda hopin' for your company along the way," Caleb said. "That can be a dangerous trip to Santa Fe these days, what with that Na-non-ga on the warpath."

"Na-non-ga?" Denny replied, showing surprise.

"Yep, he's been troublesome east of here lately, hittin' a few ranchers over around Luna."

"I know Na-non-ga, Caleb. I talked to him just before I came here. His tribe has moved south following the game so I don't think you'll have to worry about him. Just in case, though," Denny said, taking the charm from around his neck and handing it to Caleb. "Take this charm and wear it. Na-non-ga's uncle, Ta-ton-ka made it. If you run into Na-non-ga just tell him you're a friend of Denny Miller's. He'll believe you when he sees the charm."

"Well I'll be danged," Caleb responded. "I think you're gonna come in handy around here after all. You really know this Na-non-ga?"

"Yep, sure do," Denny smiled.

Caleb shook his head and handed the charm back to Denny.

"You keep the charm," he replied. "I can't take a man's good luck from him. Wouldn't be right. If I run into Na-non-ga I'll just mention your name and hope that's enough. Besides, like you said, he's headed south."

It was finally decided that Denny would stay and watch after the ranch while Caleb went to Santa Fe for supplies. This pleased Denny greatly because it would give him a chance to put his plan into action. He had a letter to write, and the sooner the better.