

W. Michael Farmer

Hombrecito's Search

A Novel

2007

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Prologue

In 1927 Francisco Fimbres's wife was murdered, and his three-year-old son kidnapped in front of his eyes by bronco Apaches. He was in the Sierra Madres about six miles from a small village called Nácori Chico, in northern Mexico, about one hundred twenty miles south of the New Mexico Bootheel. Over the next three years, Fimbres mounted nine expeditions to find and free his son, and avenge his wife.

The Fimbres tragedy is one piece of the evidence for the presence of bronco Apaches, Geronimo class warriors, living not twenty miles from the United States/Mexico border as late as 1930. In a few known instances, the Sierra Madre Apaches also crossed the border to trade and visit with relatives in Arizona and New Mexico well into the twentieth century. They were fierce shadows on the land, often living next to unsuspecting ranchers and miners in the Sierra Madre, taking what they needed when they needed it, and disappearing.

The Apache wars in the United States lasted about twenty-five years; the Mexicans were at war with the Apaches for about two-hundred-fifty years. The years between 1886 and 1920 were relatively peaceful ones between the Mexicans and the Apaches. During that time the Apaches survived in the Sierra Madre, one of the wildest pieces of real estate in the world, and stayed away from the plains, the llano, and the river valleys, once their favorite raiding grounds.

In the early twentieth century, President Porfirio Díaz was busy trying to "modernize" Mexico. He sold seventy-five percent of its mineral rights to foreign investors; attempted to wipe out the Yaqui Indians; built a network of railroads; and surveyed the vast country. He used the surveys to give the lands peons had used in common for generations to the wealthy families, the hacendados, and to sell land to Mormon ranching and farming families emigrating from the United States. The relative stability between the Mexicans and the Apaches began to change. Foreign investors wanted the timber and the minerals in the rugged mountains. The range of the mountain strongholds of the Apaches grew smaller, their numbers decreased, and violent conflicts with the Mexican population became more numerous and deadly. It was not a new story, but it happened in Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century, rather than in the United States in the last half of the nineteenth century.

With the surrender of Geronimo, the Apaches in Mexico seemed to disappear. Many historians believed they no longer existed; the peons and local ranchers knew better: Woe to

anyone caught traveling by themselves, without a weapon, or after dark in the sierras. The work of Grenville and Neil Goodwin suggests there were relatively few Apaches in the Sierra Madre by 1930. However, a reading of the stories the Mexicans told, and the Goodwins recorded, of Sierra Madre Apache activity around the turn of the century suggests that after Geronimo surrendered, the Apaches might have been at their largest numbers and at the zenith of their power in the Sierra Madre during the first decade of the twentieth century. These stories also suggest that Mexican bandits, Yaqui Indians, Apaches leaving the reservations in Arizona and New Mexico, and a variety of fortune hunters from across the border in the United States joined these Apache bands.

In *Hombrecito's War*, Henry Fountain, also known as Dr. Henry Grace, revealed to his nurse, Roberta Gonzalez, a secret he and his Apache mentor, Yellow Boy, kept for over fifty years. It was a story of hard, bloody retribution brought on the men who murdered Henry's father. After killing these men, Yellow Boy and Henry disappeared into the Sierra Madre in northern Mexico. The year was 1902, sixteen years after Geronimo surrendered to General Miles in Skeleton Canyon, Arizona and eight years before the Mexican revolution began in 1910.

Yellow Boy and Henry spent four years with the Apaches in the Sierra Madre. During this time Henry searched for a kidnapped child, deadly enemies, and a woman's love. His search took nearly fifty years to complete.

1. The Ranch

A rifle barrel's black bore stares at her. The hammer falls, a brilliant flash, no sound. A bullet bursts from the barrel, racing to catch her. Roberta runs, desperate to reach him. He sees death arching toward her. He strains forward with all his strength to shield her. Too late, the bullet's impact thrusts her into his arms. He holds her, listening to her whispers of good-by, feeling her life pump away on his shirt as they spiral into the darkness.

"Ahhhhhhh! No!" Henry jerks awake, heart pounding, covered in sweat. Panting, holding on to the sheets, he stares at the far wall. There are only slanting bars of bright moonlight framed by the window blinds. A wave of relief washes over him. Swinging his feet to cold floor tiles, he sits on the edge of the bed and leans over. Feeling the bile creep up his throat, he rests his elbows on his knees, and holding his head in his hands, he whispers to himself:

"I love you Roberta. I love you, but I should never have kissed you."

Roberta never forgot Henry's first kiss. In the early evening on the day of their return from Mescalero, immersed in their thoughts, they enjoyed a quiet dinner at a corner table in a small cantina. She kept glancing at his scarred, prince-of-the-desert face, her mind playing fresh memories of his unexpected declaration that he loved and needed her, his telling her secrets of his youth, and the heartache she felt at the passing of Yellow Boy. Henry reached to touch her hand often as they talked. His thoughts flitted about like startled sparrows. The passing of his surrogate father for the past fifty years, the old Apache warrior Yellow Boy, and the realization that his heart was given wings by his assistant, best friend, and confidant for twenty years, were surreal, golden epiphanies. From the cantina, he drove her home. Parking on the street, they walked arm-in-arm through the black air lit by dim, yellow streetlights. A cold wind whipped down the street and swirled across her yard. Hand-in-hand, they passed single file through her front gate and up the short walk to her little bungalow just off the square in old Mesilla. Her heart pounded as they stood in the shadows under her dark front stoop. An expectant look passed between them, lightning from a summer storm too far to hear. Henry took her face gently

between his soft, powerful hands, and kissed her. It was a warm, easy kiss, not demanding or overpowering, a kiss that said, "Come, be part of me."

She wrapped her arms around him inside his soft buckskin coat, and laid her head on his shoulder. Her mind whirled in confusion, as feelings that had grown over the course of twenty years were set free. She struggled to keep her longing in check. It was a lost cause. She murmured, "Do . . . do you want to come in . . . for a while?"

They held each other a moment, suspended in a timeless place. He gently pulled her pounding heart closer to his as the wandering wind, in a low moan, swept a small tumbleweed down the middle of the street. He wanted to stay with her, but trembled inside, afraid of what he knew. "More than anything, but I won't tonight."

She looked at him across the black shadows of the night and felt irresistible desire surrounding them like the scent of perfume, pulling them in like warm air rushing from a doorway on a cold day, calling to them like the beauty of a soft glowing sky at daybreak. "Why not tonight?" asked the puzzled look on her face.

Henry's mind fumbled for words. Holding her close, he drew a deep breath and looked in her eyes before letting his thoughts float into the air.

"Roberta, we've been close, even best friends. Yet, in the last three days I'm sure you've realized you hardly know me."

She looked in his eyes and thought: *It's amazing. You can believe you know someone, but really have no idea who or what they were before you met them. Even after being friends for years, you still can be strangers. But, you're no stranger, Henry Grace. I've always known you. It doesn't matter what you tell me about your past.*

"Before I come to you, I want you to know me for the man I truly am, not who you thought I was, not who the rest of the countryside thinks I am. You've learned a lot about me in the last three days, but there're still ghosts and demons you don't know about from my days in Mexico."

He felt her head nod against his chest.

"Until I realized on the road to Mescalero how much I needed and loved you, the only woman I'd ever truly loved was buried in Mexico. She's the reason I never let myself get close to another woman. You need to understand my ghosts and demons before you

decide to have me. It's a paradox, I know. If I didn't truly love you, I'd be in your bed right now, searching for her, but I'd be gone in the morning.

"Wait until you know what happened in those missing years. Then, if you still want me, I'll come to you, and I'll never leave. If there's the slightest doubt in your mind about staying with me after you know my story, I'll leave you alone, but I won't love you less. I'll always love you. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you?"

Roberta felt a little teary, tightness filling her throat. "Yes, I think so." She took a deep breath, let go of her angst, and relaxed. She hugged him. "Take your time. I can wait. I've been waiting for a long time. A little longer won't matter." She leaned back in his arms and looked in his eyes, concern written in hers. "Will it be a long time before you tell me about those days in Mexico?"

"No, it won't be a long time." He kissed her again.

In the days that followed, they were inseparable, but always parted at her front door. Two weeks passed, three. The winter days disappeared into the easy warmth of spring's brilliant blue skies, the dust-filled winds whipping across the deserts. Henry wanted to tell Roberta about his days in Mexico, but could not. He struggled, feeling his way along the dark recesses of his mind, becoming lost, then moving forward, always searching, searching for the courage to tell her what he had learned about himself so many years before. With every sunrise he wandered further along the path of his own darkness, coming closer to the door of his heart, coming closer to telling her what was true about his life.

Roberta began to think that, perhaps, she had misread Henry's intentions. In private, he was loving and attentive, often bringing her flowers, perfume, sweets, or a piece of Navajo or Zuni jewelry. In public, however, he didn't hold her hand, put his arm around her waist or shoulders, or brush her cheek with a little kiss – none of the displays of affection a woman might expect from a man who declared his love for her. Around others, Henry was stiff and formal, even standoffish. She decided to confront him and let the chips fall where they may.

Late one spring evening, they sat side-by-side on her patio glider sipping an expensive Bordeaux. One of Henry's friends gave it to him for "courtin' that there sweet young nurse of yore's." The mellow perfume of honeysuckle growing along the side yard fence filled the air, and new green leaves from the willow tree rustled back and forth in a light breeze whispering down the Rio Grande.

"I have a serious question for you."

Henry smiled. "Oh, yeah? Your serious questions usually turn me into a wind bag, but fire away. I'll answer as best I can."

She drew her legs up under her in the cool night air, modestly pulled her skirt over her knees, snuggled up closer to him, and put an arm around his shoulders. Looking him square in the eye, she took a deep breath and leaped into the breach.

"Well, when we go out together, you won't put your arm around me, hold my hand, kiss me, or tell anyone how you feel about me. When we're alone, you're much more affectionate, you bring me gifts and say you love me. The whole town knows we're dating and is talking about us. Why, old Jack Pardue even gave you this wine because you started taking me out. Are you ashamed to be seen with me?"

Even in the glider's shadows, it was easy to see the wrinkles forming around his smile.

"Culture differences."

"Culture differences? Henry, what in the world does that mean?"

"Well, it means just that. I'm afraid I've hurt your feelings because we were raised in two different worlds. You expect me to court you like some youngster or maybe a tweedy professor from A&M. But, you have to remember, an old-time Apache warrior and Rufus Pike raised me. The Apaches considered it bad form to show affection in public with women they intend to marry, or to get too close even in private. Why, couples usually don't even discuss sex until after they're married.

Roberta raised her brows in surprise and smiled. "Now that is a culture difference!"

Henry nodded. "Unmarried Apache girls won't put up with men being vulgar. They'll get mad and walk away if a suitor even hints at something nasty. If a woman has already known a man, you know, if she's a widow, or divorced and sent back to her family by her husband, it's different. Men, who come to court to her, are free to take any liberties

she'll allow them as long as they're respectful. So, a sign of respect and serious intentions between courting couples is that they don't show affection in public. That's why I'm not affectionate with you when we're out. But, come on, even a blind man can tell how happy I am when you're around. It's because I want you bad enough for my wife that my heart looks cold in public. In fact, it's on fire for you.

"I guess old habits stay around until we choose to throw 'em out. I know I've been acting like I don't love you in public – I hope you know better. I'll try to show folks how I really feel about you when we go out, I promise."

The cicada chorus filled the soft black night as she sipped the Bordeaux, felt its tart sweetness trickle down her throat and moisten her lips. What Henry told her lay gentle on her mind as the glider swung them back and forth for a while.

"So, you're saying you're not affectionate with me in public because you're courting me like I was a virginal and virtuous prospective wife?"

Henry nodded. His smile grew larger. "Yes, ma'am. I reckon I am."

She leaned forward and planted the whisper of a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you, Dr. Grace. I'm proud to be given your cold shoulder in public. Is this a proposal?"

"Well, it might be. Was that kiss a yes?"

"Oh, I'd say it's a definite maybe," she giggled.

Henry put his glass down and wrapped his arms around her, his lips finding hers, his pulse thumping in his ears. He hadn't felt this way about a woman in nearly fifty years.

Roberta's curiosity about Henry's life outside his office was boundless. She went practically everywhere with him – shooting matches, bullfights, restaurants, bars, even his swing band practices. She watched in fascination as Henry shot his ancient 1874 Sharps rifle at shooting matches in the big arroyo northeast of town. The rifle was in immaculate condition, and he used it often. It weighed about ten pounds, used precision vernier sights, had a thirty-two inch barrel, and shot 45-70 caliber cartridges. The bullet was nearly an ounce of lead, and, when fired from the Sharps, was capable of passing through a half-ton buffalo at a thousand yards. The stock was dark, highly polished walnut trimmed with

shiny German silver. Henry had named it Little David because as a boy he had used it to kill big men like David had used his sling to kill Goliath.

Spotting targets for him with his old brass-trimmed telescope, Roberta saw Henry win matches at any range and against any competitor. His accuracy and precision were unbelievable unless they were witnessed personally. However, after hearing the story of his early years, Roberta was not at all surprised at his capability with the old rifle.

Thinking bullfights were savage and cruel, she still crossed the border from El Paso into Juarez to attend a few with Henry. She usually watched him rather than the bull or the matador. Excitement in his eyes flashed as the bigger, stronger animal was out-manuevered and overcome by the faster, weaker one with a simple, deadly weapon made of polished steel.

She enjoyed dinners with him on Saturday evenings at the upscale Hacienda del Sol, where he often played trumpet with an amateur swing band made up of Las Cruces and El Paso professional men – doctors, lawyers, accountants – and professors from New Mexico A&M and Texas Western. Gregarious businessmen, stiff university professors and administrators, well-dressed professionals, reserved scientists and engineers from the Proving Grounds along with their pampered wives, frequented the Hacienda. They all knew Henry. He was the old doctor who enlivened their banal conversations with jokes and tales of the old days. When their own eyes confirmed the rumors that Henry was seriously courting his nurse, they all wondered why the town's most eligible bachelor was suddenly interested in someone with whom he had worked for twenty years. More than a few couples eyed them with envy, wondering how the romantic juices they once felt in their own youthful encounters might feel mixed with the experience and understanding that came with age. Judging from the joy radiating from Henry and Roberta, it was easy to see that romantic life was ageless. They accepted Roberta as though she'd been part of their crowd for years.

Before the trip to Mescalero, Henry often spent Friday evenings partying with young cowboys and the university crowd at the Bar F Bar. To their chagrin, he disappeared from their raucous evenings after Roberta became the center of his life. His lady friends and young drinking buddies often reminisced over the good times with Henry, and wondered if the rumors they had heard about him having a steady lady were true. To their

delight, he joined them late one Friday evening with an attractive Latino lady on his arm. He introduced her around, and bought them all drinks. He and the lady danced a few rounds, appearing to float around the floor as they two-stepped to the beat of easy country swing. During a slow waltz, he held her close and she kept her cheek next to his. When the dance ended he dipped her, and holding her hand, gave them all a little bow before he and the lady bid them adios. The women smiled, and the men frowned as they waved them out the door. It was obvious Henry was no longer playing in fantasyland for female companionship.

The number of days between dust-filled winds steadily increased. Late one afternoon, as he often did, Henry sat with his stocking feet up on his desk, a copy of the Journal of the American Medical Association – JAMA – on his lap, reading glasses perched crookedly at the end of his nose. The JAMA was getting no attention as he stared at the rows of books lining the back of his office.

Roberta, after making her final rounds tidying-up the office, eased into a chair in front of his desk and sighed. “Done!” She pulled the pins holding her hat, tossed it in her lap, and smoothed back toward her French twist a few wayward tendrils of her shiny black hair. “This has been one busy day. Tomorrow’s appointment list looks even longer!” She grinned at him. “I see you’re staring at the books again. What are you dreaming about?”

Henry looked over his glasses with a little sideways grin. “I want to show you around Rufus’s place and tell you a story.”

“Is this the story I’ve been waiting for?”

He nodded. “I thought maybe we could go up there on Saturday. Rufus’s porch was always kind of a security blanket for me, and a place where Rufus and Yellow Boy passed on a lot of wisdom. Maybe telling you my tale up there will help lead me out of the dark tunnel I’ve been wandering in for so many years.”

“You have a date, Dr. Grace! I’ll fix us a picnic basket. I’ve wanted to see Rufus’s place ever since you told me about it.”

“Well, ma’am, you’re going to get your wish.”

“Wonderful!” she murmured.

Saturday came, brought on the wings of a brilliant blue sky. Breezes, soothing and gentle, whimsically drifted across the desert to give the creosotes, mesquites, and yuccas tender little shakes after days of rip-roaring twists from dust-filled winds. The Plymouth bounced along the dusty, rough caliche road behind Tortugas Mountain, leaving a thick, low-lying dust cloud hanging in the still morning air. Henry pointed across the dashboard toward the vertical cliffs on their right.

“There, just to the right of the big rock about halfway up from the road. See it?”

Roberta stared in the direction Henry pointed, but saw little detail in the dark shadows of the Organ Mountains cliffs. She shook her head. “I don’t know what I’m looking for. It’s all just shadow and cliffs to me.” She was practically shouting over the Plymouth’s rumble and creaking groans as they bounced down the washboard road.

Henry boomed back. “It’s okay. We’ll be there in a few minutes. This is slow going, but it’s a lot faster than with a horse or wagon.”

“You told me on the Mescalero trip that Rufus willed the place to you. When did you claim it?”

“It was one of the things my mother pushed me to do before I left for Stanford. She told me that if I didn’t go ahead and make the claim, someone might try to steal it from under me. So, I looked up old George Adams, the attorney who helped Rufus get title to it in the first place. I showed George the will Rufus had me write for him just before he died. Remember, it was on the back of a letter from Sarah Darcy.

“And, just like Rufus told me, Adams took care of everything. Rufus told Buck – you know, Buck Greer, Rufus’s old friend and foreman over on the Van Patten place – that he was heading to Mexico to round-up more wild cattle when we sneaked off to wipe out Jack Stone and Red Tally, the men who killed Daddy. Buck was afraid rustlers might steal the herd while Rufus was gone. So, Buck eventually sold off the cattle when Rufus didn’t come back. Yellow Boy and I were still in Mexico. He left the money, nearly twenty thousand dollars, with George. Combined with the four bags of gold coins Rufus left me

under a post holding up the shack porch, I was wealthy enough to get through medical school and start a practice in Las Cruces without going into debt. I even had some money left to put in the bank.”

Henry turned off the main road on to an even rougher branch crossed by numerous old gullies, large rocks washed down the slopes, and dips through ancient arroyos. Pointed directly toward the cliffs, the road, looking like a piece of manila rope winding through the creosotes, grew steadily steeper. At the end of the road Roberta saw the outlines of a wide gap in the cliffs. It seemed they were half-way up the mountains when the Plymouth, clawing and fish-tailing over the gullies, bounced into the canyon entrance and stopped in a cloud of dust to confront a small, salt weed-colored shack where the road ended.

Behind the shack was an old, weathered outhouse, its door flung back, bleached gray from brilliant sunlight; behind the outhouse, and to the right near the middle of the canyon, was a three-sided lean-to roofed with rusty tin siding and covered on the sides with ancient, rough-cut, boards sanded smooth by sand-filled winds. The canyon sides rose majestically, two or three hundred feet above them in some places, and formed a sharp black notch against the effervescent blue sky. On the left wall, about thirty feet above the shack, piñon bushes tenaciously held their ground on a ledge Roberta knew Henry played on as a boy.

“Not much to see, but it was home and my hiding place for over six years.”

“It’s just like you described it. I want to see everything!”

“Let me put the basket in the porch shade while we walk around for a while. I’ll get the Sharps too. You said you wanted to try it out.”

The edge of the sunlight, defined by the mountain shadows, was still far across the valley to the west, the air in the canyon still cool and very comfortable. Henry left the basket by the shack door. “We should beat the sun back here easy before it hits the porch and starts cooking our lunch. You ready for a little hike?”

“You bet!” She took his arm as he headed for the open gate in the fence on the far side of the lean-to.

They wandered down a smooth path leading back into the canyon. Hundreds of desert wrens and chickadees chirped in the bushes. Piles of head-sized rocks, attacked by green creeping gourd vines and being pushed aside by mesquite and creosotes pushing up

between them were everywhere. The piles of rock were gathered by Rufus and Henry through years of labor. The work made Henry stronger than most men when he was only a teenager, and gave a little reality to Rufus's dreams of building stone fences and a house like Frenchie Rochas had built in Dog Canyon on the eastern side of the Sacramento Mountains. A trickle of water wound its way down a large wash running near the south-side cliffs. After an easy ten-minute stroll winding through dark pine-green creosote bushes, Henry stopped and nodded toward an old mesquite, spreading long jagged limbs with delicate light green leaves and murderous thorns, near the north cliff wall.

"Notice anything unusual about that spot?"

Roberta knew from Henry's stories that it must be near Rufus's storage mine. He kept it hidden, covered with a door camouflaged to look like part of the cliff wall. She stared at the spot for a while before the door's faint, irregular outline began to appear.

"I can just make out the door outline there to the right of the mesquite. It's very well-hidden isn't it?"

She pulled him toward the cliff. Henry smiled. Roberta had to touch and smell everything she saw. The old wooden door, though rarely used, was showing its age. Rufus had made it nearly sixty years before, covering it with chicken wire packed with adobe mud he mixed to match the cliff wall color. Time and the elements were making cracks in the adobe surface. The frame was slightly warped, making the thin crack between the frame and tunnel edge more evident. Nevertheless, it was still nearly impossible to detect from even a few yards away unless one knew where to look.

"Do you want to look inside?"

"May I? I want to see everything up here!" Her enthusiasm made her sound like a child asking for a treat.

Henry knelt to pull the pin holding the door shut. When the pin was free, he gave the door a quick little jerk; it began creaking open on the ancient steel hinges Rufus had made. Light spread across the gloomy darkness as a musty odor and dust floated out to meet them. Roberta's heart thumped. It was the same excitement she felt when, as a teenager, she read Carter's account of opening Tutankhamen's tomb. Now, she too was opening the door to a recently discovered treasure, long buried.

The first things she saw were carpentry tools filling an open wooden box with a broom-handle carrying bar across the top. Tarps were neatly folded and stacked to one side. Several lariats were coiled on top of the tarps. Two pack frames for mules or horses sat side-by-side next to soft-pine apple boxes filled with canned goods and a few pots and pans. A black, crusty Dutch oven and an ancient, blackened coffee pot covered with a veneer of dust, sat staring at her, lonely sentinels in the mine's gloom. Cases of ammunition with *45-70 Government* in faded letters showing through their coating of dust were stacked against the left wall. Two water casks sitting next to the right wall supported an ancient McClelland saddle. Roberta gasped and reflexively jumped back when she saw a large rattlesnake coiled and staring at them from atop the saddle.

"Mercy!" she squeaked.

Henry laughed.

"It's okay. Delgado's nothing to worry about. He's just hunting rats and mice. If I need to get anything, I just take this stick and give him a toss. Rattlers mind their business unless you mess with them. Delgado has taken so many rides to the outside on the end of my stick that I don't think he minds anymore. Besides, if he gets nasty, he'll make a pretty good meal."

"Maybe so, but I don't . . . like . . . snakes! Do you still use this place?"

"Not much. It's the first time I've had it open in a year or two. I gave Charlie Beti, up on the reservation, a pack frame and some ammunition after he started doing guide work for elk hunts, but that's about all in the last three or four years."

Keeping a close watch on the snake, Roberta stepped back to let Henry pin the door shut. Winding past large creosote bushes and occasional yuccas lining the trail, they continued up the path, arm-in-arm, until Henry stopped and nodded toward a pile of stones stacked against the cliff.

"Is that where you buried Rufus?"

Henry puffed out his cheeks and blew. "That's his resting place."

He turned and flipped a thumb toward an ancient post. It was bleached gray from hot, unrelenting sunlight, had long cracks running up and down its length, and stood in a bare spot, surrounded by creosotes, next to a small rock-rimmed fire pit fifteen yards to their right. "Over there's where we tied Oliver Lee after Yellow Boy and I caught him in

the middle of a pee on top of San Augustin Pass. I've kept that post there because it's a true milestone marker to remind me of how close I came to doing something I'd probably regret the rest of my life."

Roberta squeezed his arm and marveled that she knew everything and nothing about Henry. Her heart swelled with delight at the sight or even thought of him. He was kind and caring, loved and admired by everyone she knew. Yet, during the drive to Mescalero and back, she learned that Henry was a remorseless killer at fourteen. Heaven only knew what he did in Mexico while living with Sierra Madre Apaches. "Thank God you didn't commit a cold blooded murder; you'd never have been the man you are today. I'm just so glad you let him go."

"It wouldn't have made any difference whether it was murder or not. If I had truly believed he paid Stone and Tally to murder my daddy, I would have killed him, and he wouldn't have died easy tied to that post."

"I know."

They continued on up the path through thick gra'ma grass and creosotes, passing patches of prickly pear and little groves of piñon with their odor of cedar, until they reached the end of the canyon. A towering wall rose up before them, covered with shadows until it thrust free, high into the bright morning light. On the Mescalero trip, Henry told her of climbing the wall when he was twelve. Now, seeing it for the first time, Roberta was awed by his story as he pointed out the line of hand and toe-holds that, like a string of black pearls, reached from three feet above the ground until they disappeared over the high concave edge over a hundred feet above them.

"Rufus told me he thought the Apaches must have used this canyon in the early days and cut those notches up the cliff there to use as a rabbit-hole get-away if they were ever cornered in here."

"Didn't you tell me you climbed up them several times by the time you were twelve?"

He raised his brows and smiled.

She shuddered. "If I'd been around you then, my hair would have turned white with fright!"

"I doubt it. You'd have been right behind me! Do you still want to shoot Little David?"

"I do! Is this the place?"

Henry waved her attention toward the south wall on the opposite side of the canyon. She saw a dark, narrow side canyon, not much more than a long vertical crack. There were mounds of dirt spaced every fifty yards or so, disappearing down its middle. The mounds were covered with myriad sparkling glints – the remains of hundreds or perhaps thousands of liquor bottle targets used by Henry and Rufus.

"Yes, ma'am, this is it. Here take Little David and settle over there by that old piñon stump. I'll be back as soon as I put out two or three targets."

Walking to the first glittering mound, Henry scratched around in the sand until he found a canvas bag and extracted three dark-amber whiskey bottles. He put one at the second mound, about fifty yards from the stump, another at a hundred yards and the final one far down the little canyon at about four hundred yards. No matter how much she strained and squinted, Roberta couldn't see the far bottle in the dark shadows.

Henry returned to the stump where she waited, trembling with excitement. Her father taught her to shoot his single-shot .22 caliber rifle. She was pretty good with it until she went to college and stopped shooting two or three times a week. The shooting matches she attended with Henry left her fanaticizing about what it must feel like to hit small targets from extraordinary distances. Returning to town after the last match, she asked Henry if she might try shooting the old rifle.

"Well, of course! We'll go out tomorrow after work if you want."

She threw up her hands, "Oh, no, no. No need for that. I just meant that sometime, when you have a spare moment, I'd like to try it. I don't want you to do anything out of the ordinary. I'd just like to shoot Little David so I'll know what's like."

Henry wondered how, for so many years, he overlooked the love of this wonderful woman so interested in every aspect of his life. He decided then that he'd show her Rufus's place, how to shoot the Sharps, and tell her about his years in Mexico without putting it off any longer.

She held out the heavy gun case. He took it, opened a pouch on the side, retrieved a box of 45-70 cartridges, and handed them to her. Although, there were only twenty

cartridges in the box, it was exceptionally heavy. Henry pulled the ten-pound rifle from the case, careful to keep it pointed down range.

“Sit down there by the stump. You can use it to support the business end of this old thunder gun.”

She looked around, saw a bare spot by the stump had obviously been used many times and hesitated.

Henry immediately understood and pulled off his vest. “Here, sit on this. I don’t think you should get those beautiful dress slacks dirty.”

“But – ”

He wrinkled his brow. “Just use it. I’ve sat on it before. Won’t hurt it a bit.”

She spread the vest next to the stump and sat down, awkward and uncertain where she’d land. Henry adjusted the tang sight, dropped the Sharps’ breech to verify it wasn’t loaded, and closed it again before handing it to her. “Okay, let’s find the kind of trigger sensitivity you want. We’ll do some dry fires first. Rest it there on the stump and pull the hammer back.”

Handing the cartridge box back to him, she took the rifle and did as he asked. She had to use her palm to get enough pressure to push the hammer back, but, once started, it quickly snapped into the fully-cocked position.

“Now look through the pinhole on the vernier sight, line up the front sight on the first bottle, there at fifty yards, and squeeze the front trigger.”

She sighted on the target and pulled the trigger. It required a good, strong squeeze before the hammer fell with a resounding snap.

“Good! Pull the hammer back again, only this time, after the hammer’s cocked, pull the rear trigger until you hear a click.” Without much effort, the rear trigger gave a reassuring click. “The sensitivity on the front trigger is a lot less now. It won’t take nearly as much squeeze to trip it. Try it.”

Roberta again formed a sight picture, curled her finger around the front trigger, and started to squeeze. The hammer snapped forward.

“Wow! That’s much easier.”

Henry nodded. “Yes, it is. Do you want it harder or easier to pull?”

“Oh, I think it’s just fine where it is.”

“Okay, good. Pull the hammer half-way back, that’s safety, and drop the breech by pulling down on the trigger guard.”

She sat the hammer to the safety position and pulled down on the trigger guard, fighting the stiff spring holding it in place, until the breech dropped down with a satisfying *thunk*.

“Now look down the barrel and be sure it’s clear.”

It was easy to see the rifling twists disappearing into the bright light at the end of the barrel.

“Okay. All clear.”

He knelt on one knee next to her, gave her some ear plugs, and instructed her how to use them. He opened the box of cartridges, and laid one in her hand. She knew the cartridge would be large, but she was startled at how much larger it looked, and how much heavier it was, than the little .22 caliber cartridges she was used to shooting years before.

“Slide the cartridge into the breech, then close it by pulling the trigger guard back up. You’re almost ready to fire. Now just relax, rest him on that stump, pull the hammer back to full-cock, pull the set-trigger back, get yourself a steady sight picture, and you’re ready to blow that bottle away.”

She tried to relax, but her racing heart made Little David’s front sight wiggle all over the bottle. Taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out, the sight picture on the bottle steadied. She curled her finger around the trigger and began to squeeze ever so lightly. The Sharps’ roar echoed down the canyon and the end of its barrel jumped up three or four inches. Every bone in her body rattled. She felt like someone had struck her shoulder with a baseball bat, but as the smoke cleared, the bottle was gone.

Henry shook his fist at the sky, and gave an elated, “Hey! Ho! Good shot, Roberta! Ready for the hundred yard one?”

“Not me! Your thunder boomer rattled every tooth in my head. My shoulder will be sore for a week. It’s way too much rifle for me. It’s unbelievable that you shot it so much when you were young.”

Henry smiled. “Revenge is a powerful motivator. The power in a shot from that old gun is what I longed to use against the men who murdered my daddy. I guess practicing with it kept me from going crazy when I was gettin’ ready to make war on ’em.

“You ready to walk back and have a little lunch?”

“Si, señor!” She stood, still a little shaky with excitement, her shoulder throbbing and ears ringing. While Henry slid the rifle into its elegant case, she picked up his vest and shook the sand off. Walking arm-in-arm back down the path toward the shack, their spirits reveled in the glory of the day as they joked and talked.

Sitting across from each other cross-legged on the porch, a red-and-white checkerboard tablecloth spread between them, they ate their lunch while they watched the shadows from clouds sail off down the valley toward El Paso. A gentle breeze shook the big green creosote bush by the porch as hawks and an occasional buzzard sailed high in the bright blue above them. Henry told her stories about every feature of the place, and she soaked them up like a dry sponge chasing water.

They sat side-by-side on the porch steps and shared childhood reminiscences for a while before Roberta scooted over next to a porch post and patted her lap.

“Why don't you stretch out and rest your head here while you tell me about Mexico?”

Henry smiled, spread a blanket on a step beside her, twisted to prop his boots up, and leaned back to rest his head on her lap.

“So, you want to hear about my life in the south, eh?”

“You know I do. Don't spare any details either.”

Roberta squinted against the bright mid-day light washing the Mesilla Valley below her. She waited patiently, her heart thumping; it seemed she had waited a lifetime to hear Henry's story. Behind them, a breeze shook the corners of their tablecloth covered with the remains of their first picnic.

Henry's mind reached back fifty years for memories of Mexico. They floated in a jumble before his eyes, crowding together like helium-filled balloons trapped in the hot air under the porch's rusty tin roof. Roberta gently smoothed his short, straight, salt-and-pepper hair and studied his face, browned and wrinkled by years in the sun, scarred by his survival as a child and his fights as a man.

He relaxed, feeling her fingers gently trace the thin scar running down the side of his face. Focusing on the tin porch roof above them, he saw his memories from those days

so long ago drifting together, slowly becoming arranged into the story he had carried for so many years so close to the front of his eyes, yet buried so deep in his heart.

Roberta was startled when Henry at last spoke. He began in a rush with short, staccato-like sentences that punched the air, penetrating the silence of the years, bullets of memory shot at the center of his life.

“I was fourteen. I thought I was a man. I'd already done a lot of living. I was only eight when I saw Daddy's murder. I survived his killers. I survived the desert winter. Rufus and Yellow Boy kept me alive. They helped me grow strong. Rufus taught me to be deadly with a Sharps rifle. Six years after Daddy's murder, there was vengeance. Rufus Pike was like my second father. For the price of his own life, he gave me back my mine. It was a bitter cup. Yellow Boy helped me understand why I drank it. We buried Rufus up yonder in his little mine. We disappeared into the Sierra Madre. In Mexico, I learned... I learned I wasn't a man. I was no hombre. I was a hombrecito, a little man. I didn't know yet what it meant to be a man.”

“What do you mean you were just an hombrecito? Yellow Boy gave you that name when you were a little boy, but you acted like a grown man. You were tough and strong, body and mind. You showed adult skills and courage killing the men who murdered your father. You certainly were a man when you went to Mexico. How can you say you weren't?”

“I can say it because it was true. There was a copy of Herodotus I used to read to Rufus during those years he was training me. Herodotus claimed that the ancient Greeks, the Spartans, didn't consider anyone a man until they were at least thirty, had taken a wife, and drawn blood in battle. In those days, battle meant hand-to-hand combat. Rufus and Yellow Boy taught me warrior skills, and I was confident I was capable of taking care of myself. But I had no wife and I didn't want one. For the Spartans, a man needed a wife for more than overseeing his house and making children to carry on his name. A man needed a wife to demonstrate he was able to care for and protect someone beyond himself. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you?”

“Yes... yes, I believe I do. It's like women feeling they're incomplete unless they have a husband and children. Do you think you were a man when you came back from Mexico?”

Henry puffed and blew out his cheeks, staring at the porch ceiling for a moment. “Yeah, I was – at least as much as I going to be without the piece of me I’d left down there. Are you sure you want to hear this?” His voice was a whisper begging not to be heard.

She leaned over him and kissed his brow. “Every last word. You said I had to know. It’s true. I do have to know.”

“Okay, Señorita Gonzalez. Just remember, you asked for it.”

She nodded, smiling. Henry bit his lower lip for a moment and began.

