

## A Little Bird Told Me

An innocuous article in a national magazine triggered the deaths of three men. Describing successful businesses on Indian reservations, it mentioned that, besides a prosperous gambling and hotel business, the Mescalero Apaches also offered elk hunts. John Charles Lawton, III, read the article. His face red with anger, he tossed aside the magazine, crossed a small library filled with books, floor-to-ceiling, and dropped in a banker's chair in front of a glowing computer screen. Pounding a web-site address for hunting and sports gear into his computer, he mumbled over and over, "Damn those stupid Indians! Damn 'em!" Within an hour Lawton ordered over \$20,000 worth of high technology spy equipment, a set of ghillie camouflage, a sniper rifle, a silencer, and airline and rental car reservations for El Paso, Texas.

The horses and pack mules stayed nose-to-tail plodding up switchbacks through the towering pines. Leading three pack mules at the end of the line, Camisa Roja looked past the lead horse to see a window of azure blue sky open up through the trees in front of them.

He liked this group. There wasn't a know-it-all among them, and their physical condition was good enough to hunt in the steep, rugged terrain. White-haired patrician, Marty, immediately in front of him, had been on a reservation hunt years before. It was the first elk hunt for the others. The man at the head of the line was passing into the sunlight on the edge of a high meadow.

"Dr. Josephson, follow the trail toward the cliffs. We'll stop for noon grub by a spring over there."

Josephson raised his arm, waved in the direction he was taking, and like a cavalry officer in a John Wayne western answered, "Yo!"

Riding out of the trees, back straight and whistling *Gary Owen*, Josephson, and then Edwards, the Texas oil man behind him, jerked backwards, and slid to the ground as sonic whistles whined through the trees. Their horses, walled with fear, galloped off down the trail toward the cliffs. The rest of the group, like deer frozen in headlights, stopped in the shadow of the trees, wanting to run, afraid to go forward, unable to backup.

Leaping from his horse, Roja ran toward the front speaking in a low, calm and authoritative voice, "Don't move! Stay back in the shadows!"

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Luis, who rode behind Edwards, growled through clenched teeth as Roja ran by, “They’ve been shot!”

Creeping up to the edge of the meadow, he kneeled behind bushes at the edge of the trail, and peered at the still forms on the ground. Josephson and Edwards had small holes in the middle of their chests. Their lifeless, staring eyes, and mouths locked open in surprise, said there was nothing he could do for them.

An angry, venomous voice echoed against the cliffs. “You boys are gonna die! You’re not gonna murder anymore animals, ever, by damn. That includes you too, Indian! Any man who’d sell his birth right is too stupid to live! If you wanna live a little longer, don’t you boys move. I can kill ya comin’ or goin’.”

Scanning the meadow and the cliffs, Roja couldn’t find the voice’s source, the echo made finding it impossible. He turned to the others. Marty and Luis were off their horses, waiting for him to tell them what to do. Benton was still mounted, trying to decide where to bolt.

“Benton! Get off your horse! Get off your horse, now!” He motioned for Marty to grab the reins. It was too late. As soon as Marty reached for them, Benton whipped his horse forward. It jumped into a run, and thundered past, showering him with pine straw and trail dirt. Benton didn’t make it twenty yards before he too, was slaughtered. Unlike Josephson and Edward’s horses, Benton’s horse turned and ran back past them down the trail. It almost reached the first switchback when a thundering explosion blew, dirt, rocks, bushes and the horse into small pieces.

“Sorry about the horse. Collateral damage. There’re a few more of those little nuggets with trip wires scattered around down there. I have a few right where you are, but I can trigger them all from here if you try to move. Just stay put. You need to think about the price you’re paying for murdering the animals. That was good advice you gave Benton. He should have gotten off his horse.”

Jerking out his radio, Roja pushed the transmit button. “Base! Base! Roja! We’re under fire. A crazy’s at Otero Cliffs! Three men down! Send in the cavalry! Out!” The radio’s response was a numbing crackle of loud static.

Marty flipped open his pocket notebook, and with Luis crept over next to him. Hand trembling, he scribbled a note, putting an index finger to his lips as he finished.

*SOB jamming your radio. Has acoustic antenna. Can hear us.* Luis nodded.

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Roja puffed out his cheeks and blew trying to relax, even as sweat dripped off his chin in the cool, thin air. He motioned for Marty to hand him the pencil and notebook. He wrote: *Stay close to ground. Pull horses behind trees. Don't run. Any ideas B4 I try to get him?*

Luis and Marty wrote back.

*Hi pwr rifle w/silencer. Maybe up in cliffs watching?*

Nodding, he waved toward the ground with the flat of his hand, and mouthed 'stay put'. They pulled the horses up close behind the big trees, and eased their rifles out of their saddle scabbards. Stretching out behind a couple of big pines close to the edge of the meadow, they began scanning the cliffs through their riflescopes.

Several feet above their heads, bark and splinters started blowing off the pines and a couple of small limbs were snipped off at head height where Luis and Marty had stood. The trees behind them again rattled with angry sonic whines. Jerking and dancing around in the wood shower, the horses were hard to hold. It was eerie to see the effects of the bullets, but to hear no thunder from the rifle.

"Just want to keep you boys honest while you consider your sins." A few more bullets impacted the trees, and then stopped. Luis and Marty scanned the meadow. They looked over at Roja who had his binoculars trained on the cliff, a quizzical look on their faces. Waving his hand toward the ground, he motioned them to stay put. He had to think.

Staring at the cliffs, it dawned on him that they were too far away! The shooter's range shouldn't be more than four or five hundred yards at most. At that range, and with the winds up on these ridges, he'd have to be an exceptional shot even with a good sniper scope. He scanned an imaginary five hundred yard arc across the meadow, and identified several candidates for the shooter's location. Studying each one, he eliminated all but two. They were piles of boulders sticking up like sore thumbs above the junipers and grass scattered over the meadow, prime real estate for a shooter wanting to watch where their trail broke from the trees.

Roja studied each boulder pile, but found nothing to suggest the shooter was there. He sat back against the big pine and puffed, sounding like a surfacing whale. Tossing a small stick at Luis and Marty to catch their attention, he pointed to the two boulder piles, made a finger pistol and nodded. They trained their scopes on the boulders. Bullets whistled into the trees once more. *Got cha!* Roja thought. He swung his binoculars toward the boulders, but he saw nothing – no

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barrel, no smoke, and no glint off optics. Marty and Luis looked over at him, shook their heads, and shrugged their shoulders.

“Gettin’ nervous, boys? How ya like being shot at?”

Roja grit his teeth in frustration. Where was that jerk? Swinging his binoculars back and forth between the boulder piles, he was ready to look elsewhere. A small flock of canyon wrens, obviously disturbed, flew out of the junipers next to the closest boulder pile. They fluttered and swooped around and over the boulders, and then headed for the tree line across the meadow. He sat back against the tree grinning, and tossed a pebble at Luis and Marty. He made another finger pistol toward the first boulder pile and nodded. Frowning, they shook their heads, not believing him.

“If you want to save your horses, send ‘em out now, one at a time, nice and slow. I’d sure hate to destroy those good lookin’ animals just because their riders are gonna get what’s coming to ‘em.”

He held his hand out, palm flat, waving it back and forth for Marty and Luis to stay still, and yelled back.

“Okay, okay señor, just give us a minute to get ‘em started.”

First tying the reins for each horse together near their ends, and then looping them over the saddle horns, he pulled off his wide belt, buckled it, and looped it around his saddle horn for something to hold on to without showing his hand on the other side of the saddle.

“Are you sending them out or not? You might buy a little extra time if you send ‘em out now. What are you gonna do?”

“Hold on! Here they come!”

Roja pointed to Luis and nodded. Luis smacked his horse on the rump sending him out of the trees and down the trail toward the cliffs. A few seconds later, Marty sent his out. Running his arm through the belt loop and hanging his foot backwards in the stirrup so he could hang from the side out of sight from the pile of boulders, Roja sent his paint trotting into the bright light right behind Marty’s roan.

“Thank you, gentlemen. Now I’ll give you a few more minutes to say your prayers before I blow you straight to hell! Course if you want to try to run for it out in the open, I’ll give you that option, too. Maybe you’ll get lucky like those animals you sometimes miss.”

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Lawton watched the horses emerge from the trees and trot toward the cliffs. Despising the thought of killing any animal, he was relieved to see the hunters had decided to let the horses live. He saw the beautiful black and white paint slow down on the trail toward the cliffs, and turn to wander out into the meadow. Soon, the other two followed. They stopped to nibble at the soft green grass growing around the junipers, and then moved to a fresh, more inviting patch. He'd give them time to get well out of the way before he blew away their riders.

Hiding under the ghille camouflage that made him look like a pile of dry brush, Lawton smiled as he watched the horses graze. Big animals were such free spirits. Glancing over his equipment, his grin widened. The big silencer on his rifle, the ultra-powerful radio jammer, and the super-sensitive acoustic antenna that practically let him hear his targets breathing were technological marvels. He was going to have a good time knocking off hunting parties until their bloodthirsty killing stopped.

The horses drifted past his boulders and out of his field of view. It was time for a little fun.

Laughing and yelling, he emptied his rifle clip into the trees where the men hid. Limbs were sent winding, leaves fluttered to the ground, and splinters and bark chips covered Luis and Marty hugging the ground, praying, and hoping for deliverance.

“How ya like shooting now boys? It’s fun isn’t it, especially if you’re on the wrong end of the bullet? You fellows just relax, judgment day’s almost here.”

Roja eased off the paint, and keeping it between him and boulders, maneuvered closer to the shooter. Fighting the urge to charge the boulders in a desperate grab for the shooter’s transmitter and rifle, he guided the paint forward until he was within a hundred yards of the boulders. He saw boot soles sticking out of the camouflage cover between three boulders just to the right of the biggest boulder.

“Five more minutes, boys, and then it’s good-by!”

Fifty yards, forty, thirty, twenty. The paint snorted. Roja, with just a large juniper between him and Lawton, froze as the camouflage stirred. A face appeared, looking directly toward him. Roja barely breathed.

“Come on over here old son, come on. I got an apple for ya.”

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The painted snorted again and wandered away from the pile of boulders over to a patch of tall gra'ma grass.

“Well, be that way! Soon as I take care of business, I’ll come hand it to you myself.”

Lawton turned from the paint and yelled toward the tree line. “Two more minutes! That’s all you sorry asses have, two more minutes! I got your passport to hell right here in my hand.”

He jerked around in surprise as his camouflage cover flew off. The cold, black eye of the end of a revolver’s barrel stared at him. A young Indian man stood over him with outstretched hand, and spoke through clinched teeth.

“Gimme that remote, now!”

Giggling, Lawton held up the transmitter, his thumb a quarter of an inch from the red button in the middle, waving it back and forth just out of reach. “Why don’t you take it?”

Roja’s boot was faster than a rattlesnake. The transmitter flew out of Lawton’s hand and landed on a boulder just above their heads. Lawton was on him instantly, a wild man clawing, punching, and kicking. Roja tried to brain him with his revolver, but he couldn’t get enough leverage for a solid swing and missed in their wild tumble of flying arms and legs. Lawton’s fist flashed out of nowhere, solidly connecting on the point of Roja’s jaw. He staggered backwards, fighting the waves of darkness and swirling stars. Lawton didn’t hesitate to lunge up the boulder for the little black box with the red button in the middle. He held it high above his head in triumph. “Say good-by to your hunting buds, you damn, stupid Indian.”

Lawton thumbed the red button and stared over the boulder toward the tree line. Nothing happened.

They had a late lunch at the cliff spring while they waited for the FBI helicopter to arrive.

Luis shook his head at Marty and Roja. “I guess we’re about the luckiest fools living. I can’t believe Mr. Green Jeans over there forgot to turn off his super duper, ultra-powerful, broadband jammer! By the way, Roja, how did you know where he was?”

Roja, rubbing his sore jaw, smiled. “Oh, a little bird told me.”