

The Long Shot

After Santos' wife died, he stayed drunk for two years and wandered the highways of New Mexico. He expected to die somewhere in the desert, his death a metaphor for what life had become without his woman, but it wasn't his time. Finding odd jobs along the way, he kept from starving and his supply of whisky steady. One evening in a crowded Las Cruces bar, a bodyguard for Max Gutierrez muscled Santos aside to order a beer. Having fought the North Vietnamese, worked on cattle ranches, been a deputy sheriff with a few shoot-outs against bandits and drug runners to his credit, the old man was fearless. He didn't take an insult from anybody. Whipping off his hat, he offered to go a bare knuckles round with the bodyguard twice his size and half his age. Max, delighted and entertained by Santos' brass, stopped the brawl sure to bring unwanted attention and offered him a job as his gardener. For reasons he never quite understood, Santos liked Max and accepted the offer while still glaring at the grinning bodyguard. In the brilliant El Paso sunshine, Santos came back to the land of the living while making flowers bloom around Max's mansion.

Santos soon learned, but chose to ignore, that Max pushed drugs, killed men, and ran extortion rackets. With a mob franchise on both sides of the border, the list of businessmen paying him protection money and mob associates who hated him was long enough to fill a small town telephone directory. Local law enforcement officers and the FBI tried to nail Max for years, but never laid a glove on him. Therefore, groups on both sides of the law were delighted when Santos called 911 to report Max was hanging on the heavy iron-bar gate at his desert mansion compound with a very large bullet hole in the middle of his chest.

Disappearing just before the law arrived, Max's capos told Santos they'd be back in a few months and to take care of the place. Criminal investigation technicians and detectives searched every corner of the compound and swept the desert for hundreds of yards in front of the gate in a search of evidence. They found none.

After the law left, Santos took his usual late afternoon stroll in the cooling desert, the stillness in the rolling sea of creosote bushes and scattered mesquites helping him relax after a hard day's work and being around hard men. Navigating in the fading light by looking back over his shoulder toward the iron-bar gate, he felt the tensions of the day draining away. The setting sun was casting long purple and orange streamers in a royal blue sky when he found big knobby tire tracks at least a half mile from the gate and a hundred yards off a trail used by dirt bikers. The way the bushes were bent over between the tracks spoke of a high clearance pickup. Where it had parked, the truck couldn't be seen from the compound.

Small cowboy boot tracks led from the truck to the top of a low hill. On top of the hill he found some black and red wool threads caught on a mesquite thorn a couple of inches off the ground. Near where he found the threads, new plant life from the August monsoon rains was mashed-down. There was a small, thumb-sized depression in the sand on each side and forward of the flattened plants. Sitting on the plants and keeping his back straight, he saw the gate through the creosote bushes immediately in front of him. Santos puckered his lips and blew, his whistle making no sound. He hadn't known more than three or four men in his entire life capable of hitting Max from that rise.

His curiosity burned hot. Whoever murdered Max was the best shot and had more guts than anyone he knew. No one, but no one, took a shot at a mob boss and expected to live. The need to find and meet the man buzzed in his head. It was his constant companion as he continued to look after the compound.

A week passed, two, three. Santos was reading the Sunday edition of the Albuquerque Journal. The Outdoors Section had an article about the Single Action Shooting Society Founder's Ranch at Edgewood twenty miles east of Albuquerque. Cowboy Action Shooting, CAS as the article called it, contests were held there nearly every month. According to the article, CAS was one of the fastest growing shooting sports in America, and CAS clubs were active all over New Mexico and west Texas. A picture of a long-range shooting contest caught his eye. Several shooters were sitting on blankets, and supporting their ten-pound Sharps or Remington buffalo rifles on a bipod formed by two crossed sticks tied together near the top. The caption said the shooters were hitting targets over 800 yards – nearly half a mile – away. The spread of the sticks on the ground looked close to the distance between the two little depressions he'd seen scouting the rise.

That afternoon, he drove his old truck, held together with fence wire and duct tape, up to New Mexico State University. A pretty student librarian, who used words he had never heard before, helped him “Google” the “internet” for CAS club information. A shooting match was scheduled at Edgewood for the next Sunday.

By the time he found the ranch, men and women dressed in late nineteenth century western wear were blasting away at steel targets of various sizes and ranges. Dressed like Wyatt Earp, a man with a big droopy mustache directed him to the long gun matches. Santos was amazed at the shooters' skill. They consistently hit targets at ranges of several hundred yards. A couple of them even hit a target at six hundred yards.

Watching the shooters, he decided it wasn't likely any of them shot Max. Their boots were too big, their bipods were spread too wide, and they weren't good enough shots. As his old truck rattled and creaked down Interstate 25 on the two hundred mile drive back to El Paso, he kept telling himself he was on the wrong track, but he knew, deep in his gut, he wasn't.

He spent Sundays that fall watching CAS long gun shooting matches all over New Mexico and west Texas. None of the shooters matched what he saw on that little hill a half-mile from the mansion. Concluding he was on a wild goose chase, he decided to attend one more CAS match, the one at Elephant Butte Thanksgiving Sunday, and then call it quits.

Elephant Butte was cold, overcast, and windy, but the shooters had an unusually good first round. Santos had seen them all shoot in previous matches. The cold and wind were seeping into his bones making him hunch his shoulders, shivering in his threadbare denim jacket and stamping his boots to stay warm. He started to leave then decided to stay a few more minutes when a petite middle-aged Indian woman he hadn't seen before walked up.

Dressed in a heavily fringed buckskin coat, she said from under a big flat brimmed hat, “Boys, I'm mighty sorry I'm late. Any chance I can still shoot with ya?”

The shooters, all men, nodded at the Range Officer. Smiling and taking off their hats, they bowed from the waist and waved her forward to take her first round shots.

She grinned, her full moon face showing bright white teeth against her brown skin, and bowed back before stepping forward to toss a red and black wool Pendleton trapper's blanket on the ground in front of her. Sitting on it, she tied together two smooth cedar shafts and used them to support a big 1874 Sharps buffalo rifle handed to her by a short, boney old man with hunting-hawk eyes. She took three sight adjusting shots, and then put every shot needed to qualify for the second round on the same target the others had used. As the match progressed, the targets were moved to longer ranges; she didn't miss the rest of the day. In the last round, she won the match by hitting a target, Santos wasn't even sure he could see it, at eight hundred yards three shots out of three. Her closest competitor shot one for three. Santos watched her make those last shots with his arms crossed, his head making a little conspiratorial nod.

After collecting her trophy, she packed her gear in a high clearance pickup with big knobby tires. Santos took a deep breath, and stepped forward.

"Buenos tardes, Señora. Your shooting today was unbelievable." He stuck out his hand. "I'm Santos Espelan."

She smiled and took his hand in a firm grip.

"Maggie Charlotte."

Santos felt the strength from her powerful shoulders rippling down her arm. She looked him in the eye, and held his hand captive for a moment.

"You was Max Gutierrez's gardener. Heard you been comin' 'round to the matches and watchin'. Sorry I missed ya. We been away a while."

He smiled and nodded. Normally taciturn, his flaming curiosity pushed him to keep the conversation going.

"Yeah, I been gardener fer rich fools and cowboy fer poor ones. Ma'am, I was hopin' I could buy you an' yore husband a cup o' coffee, an' maybe dinner, over to the Aztec Diner."

"Well, I ain't married. That little old man over there's my daddy. He's got other business over in Truth or Consequences an's gonna be busy for a while...but, sure, I'd be glad to have coffee with ya an git outta this here wind. Meet ya over there in a bit."

They sat in a corner booth sipping black coffee and holding their heavy white mugs to warm their hands and eyeing each other over the rims.

"Why you interested in me, Señor Espelan?"

"Cause yore a damn fine shot with that old thunder stick."

"So?"

Santos sat his cup down and looked her straight in the eye.

"My old boss was killed by a big bore gun at the longest range you was shooting today. I figured you might be a candidate fer the shooter."

She didn't blink.

"You tryin' to pin the rose on me fer shootin' Gutierrez? His friends puttin' up a reward or somethin' like that?"

Santos snorted and shook his head.

"Naw. Ain't no friends an' there ain't no reward. I wouldn't want it if there was. I just wanted to meet the man with the cojones to take out Max Gutierrez. If he'd missed,

that old boy'd never a seen the next mornin's light. I figured there musta been a mighty good reason fer taking that there shot, and I's mighty curious 'bout that, too."

She frowned. "Well, why do ya think I did it?"

Santos folded his gnarled hands and leaned forward on his elbows. He spoke in a low smoker's voice she strained to hear. Swallowing down the rest of her coffee, she waved the waitress over for a refill.

"That there is a nice little pile of evidence ya got, and yore pretty clever to sort it all out like ya done. But, it ain't no proof I done it."

He stared at her while the waitress poured the refills, waiting until she left the table.

"If'n you didn't do it, you know who did, don't cha?"

She stuck out her lower lip, looked at the ceiling, and shrugged. Her black marble eyes locked on his.

"Mr. Espelan, let me tell ya a story. There's this pretty young woman left the reservation an' goes down to El Paso. She gets herself a good job at Sears, an' is enjoyin' life. A punk kid wanders through the store one day, buys some fancy shirts, an' asks her to dinner. Like a fool she goes. When she don't pay for her dinner with what he wants, he beats the hell out of her, rapes her, an' kicks her outta his fancy Cadillac twenty miles out'n th' desert halfway down th' War Road to Alamogordo. She makes it back to the res, but, afraid of gittin' her daddy killed 'cause he'd go after th' punk, she tells her family she's been in a car wreck in El Paso. A few years later, she tells her daughter that her daddy was a Fort Bliss soldier killed in Vietnam. She's mighty unhappy 'bout livin' her life tellin' lies, an' she thinks a long time 'bout how to pay that hombre back for wreckin' her life."

Santos listened, frowning in concentration, and smoothing his gray mustache first with a thumb and then with a forefinger.

"That there is a right interestin' story. Does the daughter ever find out who her real daddy was an' why he's her daddy?"

Maggie looked out the window and sighed.

"Yeah. Her gran'pa finds out an' tells her 'cause her mama won't. That child ain't happy with her daddy an' neither is her gran'pa."

"They's purty angry, huh? I'm shore I'd be if'n I's the gran'pa or the daughter an' I'd be a wantin' to set things right."

"I 'spect they was, but no more 'n the gal who had to raise that child by herself. Weren't a man on the res who's interested in her with a baby in her belly that ain't his."

"Yeah, that had to be tough on th' gal an' her family."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence as they eyed each other.

Tapping his fingers on the table and cocking his head to one side, Santos asked, "Who taught you to shoot?"

She smiled.

"Daddy. He used gran'pa's old Sharps – the one I's shootin' today. My daughter listened to her great gran'pa's tales about shootin' it for so long, she started begging him to show her how to shoot it. He told daddy to take it an' teach her. I wanted to learn too, so daddy taught us both."

"Where ya been this fall? This here's the first time I seen ya shoot."

“Been gittin’ my daughter ready fer college an’ workin’ a few extry jobs fer money t’ git her started off right. She’s got a shootin’ team scholarship down to UT El Paso. I took her down there in August ‘bout the time the rains stopped.”

“She shoots in these here cowboy matches, too?”

Maggie nodded.

“Yep. Me an’ her, we got almost as many first place trophies as her gran’pa.”

He sat back staring at her and scratched his whiskers. Looking out the window, he saw dark clouds churning as the sky was clearing off toward the west.

“This gal’s daughter you’s tellin’ me ‘bout, what’d she...think when she found out somebody took care of business with her daddy?”

Maggie’s eyes bored into his.

“She reckoned he got his due, but was kinda sad ‘cause she never even met him. Even if he was a no-good low-life, she still had his blood.”

“Well, what’d her mother think?”

Maggie glanced down at the big white coffee mug before her eyes returned to his.

“She’s, kinda, you know, phillysofical. Th’ low life done a terrible thing to her, but a beautiful thing – her daughter – come out of it. Guess she figured maybe things was ‘bout even. But, she sure didn’t loose no sleep when she found out the skunk was gone.”

Santos nodded. He saw her hands were relaxed and steady. He pulled his tobacco sack and papers out of his vest pocket.

“I’d shore like to meet yore daddy, an’ please, call me Santos, all my friends do.”

Grinning, he rolled his smoke enjoying the smell of the fine cut burley. He purely did enjoy this lady’s company. She was right feisty and stood up for herself. He hadn’t talked to a full-grown woman with any sense or spunk since his wife died.

“Okay...Santos. I’m sure he’d be happy to meet cha’ an’ oughta be along here in a little while. Why’re you so hot to meet my daddy?”

Her voice was teasing, playful. Santos, grinning, kept his eyes on her while he finished rolling one, stuck it in the corner of his mouth, and fished around in his vest pocket for a match.

“Why I think yore daddy’s got more steel in his spine and skill with a thunder boomer than just about any feller I know.”

She smiled at him and then laughed out loud. Santos looked out the window and noticed a bright beam of sunlight pouring from a crack in the black clouds off to the west.

“I got some advice for ya, Santos.”

“Yes ma’am? I’d shore like to hear it.”

“Don’t ever play the game where you gotta guess which shell the pea is under.”

He lit up and took a deep draw, watching the clouds off to the west turning white and puffy. She leaned forward, resting on her elbows, her hands clasped, and head cocked to one side waiting for him to solve the puzzle. He slowly took another couple of puffs watching the mischief dance in her eyes.

“Maggie, is yore grandpa still livin’?”

Her slow nod and sparkling eyes were forever etched in his memory.

“Yes sir, and he’s a spry old bird. I know you’d enjoy meeting him. He still has eyes and nerves like a man half his age. I saw him hit a plank with th’ Sharps at a thousand yards last year.”

His brows went up. Shaking his head, he gave her an *I'll be damned!* smile. He hadn't seen that one coming and didn't care. Life was stirring deep in his center, life he hadn't felt in a long time. He felt like he was a young man again discovering one of the good things in life for the first time.

"You got a mighty interestin' family Maggie. I was wonderin' if I might come visit you sometime. Maybe visit with grandpa, and yore daddy. Most 'specially, though, I'd like to visit with you."

The big smile spreading over her face was all the answer he needed.