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CHAPTER 3

Packing his possessions was the easiest thing for Billy Joe. All he had were the clothes he stood up in, along with a spare pair of old and worn jeans and another shirt. When the clothes he was wearing got too dirty, he took them off and wore the others while he washed the first set. And so on. His real problem was boots. He only had one pair. He kept looking for an old pair of boots he could have as a spare, but so far he hadn't found any in his size. They were either too big, or too small. But he kept looking.

There was one thing Billy Joe did have that he kept a secret from Jess and the other boys. It was a pistol and he kept it hidden inside an old rag, beneath his pillow on his bedroll.

He'd picked up the pistol during the massive gun battle in Drygulch a few months before, when a gang of bandits had taken over the town. He'd taken it from

the Sheriff's gun rack during the fight. After that time, when Pete had been shot dead and the other boys had been almost killed, Billy Joe had vowed he would never go unarmed ever again.

The pistol was a Colt 45 with a revolving chamber that held six bullets. It was loaded now. Billy Joe couldn't see the point in not having a gun if it wasn't loaded. If you pointed a gun at someone it meant they were trying to harm you. An empty gun wouldn't stop them. A loaded gun might.

The reason he kept the pistol secret was because Jess didn't like the boys carrying guns. Jess said that it was people who carried guns who got shot the most. But Jess had been badly shot during that gun battle three months before. A bullet had shattered his left leg and it had taken a long time for the bone to knit and mend. Even then, it hadn't mended properly, Billy Joe could tell by the way Jess limped when he walked fast. And when it rained he suffered bad pain from the ache in his leg. Jess did his best not to show it, but his friend could tell.

'B-Billy Joe?'

Billy Joe's thoughts were interrupted by Shane standing by him, a worried look on his face.

'What's up, Shane?'

'D-do you believe in g-ghosts, Billy Joe?'

Billy Joe frowned, wary. The truth was: yes and no. His mother's people, the Comanche, did, and

sometimes he did. But his Pa had told him there was no such thing as ghosts. 'When you're dead, boy, you're dead, and that's an end of it,' John Ford had told him.

'Sometimes, Shane,' he said. 'Why?'

Shane hesitated, then blurted out, 'I was th-thinkin' about P-Pete.'

'What about him?'

'If he's a g-ghost, he only knows us as bein' here, at the shack. If we go aw-away, h-h-how will he know w-where w-we've gone?'

Gently, Billy Joe laid his hand on Shane's shoulder.

'Pete will know, Shane,' he said. 'They say ghosts stay around the person they care for most, not the place. Wherever you go, Pete will be there with you, watchin' out for you.'

Shane's face brightened up.

'I-is th-that really so, B-Billy Joe?'

Billy Joe nodded.

'That's what I heard tell,' he said.

It wasn't true. Billy Joe hadn't heard that at all. The main thing was to make Shane feel better.

'Well I guess that's my stuff all packed,' said Jess.

He hefted the roll of bundled-up clothing in his hands. By his feet was a small bag with a few personal belongings in it, mementoes of his life before the gang. He'd actually given Billy Joe one of his most precious possessions: the Stetson hat that Billy Joe wore had been given to Jess by his father.

'I'm n-nearly ready,' said Shane. 'I just g-gotta p-pack my books.'

Shane was the only one of the boys who could read. Read properly, that is. Jess and Billy Joe could pick out a word or two, but only words like 'hardware store' and 'livery stable' and other signs they saw posted up around town. Shane could read words on paper and in books. He had four books, all of them dog-eared with worn covers: one was a Bible; one was a book with maps in; one was a story about some backwoods hero: the thinnest book was a story book with pictures that Shane used to read to Andy. It was about a crocodile. None of the boys had ever seen a crocodile, but the pictures sure made it look a fierce creature.

'So, you thought about where we're goin' yet, Jess?' asked Billy Joe.

'Yep, I think I got me an idea,' said Jess. 'Mrs Johnson's sister and her family come out from Chicago about two months ago to start ranchin'. They're called the Ambersons. They got a spread out on the plain. I remember Mrs Johnson tellin' me they're lookin' for hands.'

'I guess they're lookin' for men, not boys,' Billy Joe said doubtfully.

'We are men,' said Jess. 'Small men, maybe, but we can do any job a man can do. Shane and I can ride and we can handle horses cos of us workin' at the livery stable.'

'But . . .' began Billy Joe.

'And I hear the Ambersons are having big trouble getting ranch hands.'

'Where d'you hear that?' asked Billy Joe.

'From Shane,' said Jess.

Billy Joe looked at Shane, who nodded.

'I h-heard it being s-said at the l-livery stable. There's this big cattle rancher out on the range, Colonel M-McVie, and he don't want no one workin' for the Ambersons.'

'Why?' asked Andy.

'B-because his c-cattle graze the range. The Am-Ambersons are p-putting up f-fences on their l-l-land. This M-McVie don't want fences on the r-range. S-says he'll sh-shoot anyone who tries.'

'So, my guess is the Ambersons will be glad to have anyone workin' for 'em,' finished Jess.

Billy Joe thought it over, then he nodded.

'I guess it's worth a try,' he said. 'Where's this ranch of theirs?'

'Near Blue Ridge,' said Jess. 'About fifteen miles outa town.'

'That's a long way,' piped up Andy. 'How we gonna get there? Patch can't walk all that way.'

'I'm pretty sure Mr Pedersen will let us borrow his buckboard and a horse,' said Jess. 'That way we can take all our stuff with us when we go callin' on them.'

'Say the Ambersons don't want us workin' for

them?' asked Billy Joe, still not entirely convinced by the plan. 'That's a long way for us to go just to come back again.'

'They will,' said Jess confidently. 'We're good workers.'



CHAPTER 4

Next morning Jess went to see Mr Pedersen at the livery stable and told him their plight and their plan. The old owner gladly gave Jess a buckboard and an old black mare called Ruby to take the gang out to the Ambersons.

'Keep 'em as long as you like, Jess,' Mr Pedersen told him. 'I wish there was something more I could do for you boys.'

'Lendin' us the buckboard and the horse will be just fine, Mr Pedersen,' said Jess. 'We'll bring it back just as soon as we're settled in at the Ambersons.'

'You spoke to Mrs Johnson abut goin' there?' asked Pedersen . 'It's her sister, after all, and she could put in a good word for you.'

'I know she could, Mr Pedersen, but you know the way we work: we prefer to do our own askin'. That way we don't owe anyone.'

'Ain't nothing wrong in owing anyone, Jess, so long as they're good people,' said Pedersen. 'And this town sure owes you boys for what you did.'

Jess gave a rueful smile.

'Pity the Mayor don't seem to agree with you,' he replied.

'The Mayor!' snorted Pedersen, and he spat onto the ground with distaste. 'How that man gets himself elected I'll never know!' Then a thought obviously struck him, because he said to Jess, 'One more thing before you go.'

With that he went into the hut that served as his office and came back a moment later with a rifle.

'Take this with you,' he said.

Jess shook his head.

'Thank you, Mr Pedersen, but I'm not big on guns.'

'You may not be, but there are plenty of folk who are, and not all of 'em good. There are dangerous people out on the road. And you'll be passing through Indian country to get to Blue Ridge.'

'The Indians ain't givin' no trouble,' said Jess. 'They're peaceful.'

'They're peaceful only at the moment,' insisted Pedersen. 'If things take a turn, then they won't be.' He grinned. 'Anyway, you could always shoot yourself a jack-rabbit with it if you get hungry on the way.'

Jess looked at the rifle in Pedersen's hands doubtfully.

'I don't know, Mr Pedersen . . .' he began.

Pedersen's face took on a firmer expression.

'Jess, you're taking my buggy and my horse,' he said. 'If you run into trouble I could lose them both. Part of the deal is you take this rifle with you to keep you, my old Ruby and the buggy, safe.'

Jess nodded and smiled, and took the rifle.

'OK, Mr Pedersen. I'll do that.'

'Keep it stashed under the front seat so you can grab it up quick if you need to,' advised Pedersen.

'I will,' said Jess. 'But let's hope I don't need to.'

Two hours later the buckboard had been packed with the boys' meagre belongings. Jess was at the reins, with Billy Joe sitting next to him up front. Shane was in the back with Andy and Patch.

'Your job is to make sure Andy and Patch don't do nothin' silly like standin' up near the edge,' Jess told Shane. 'We don't want them fallin' out and breakin' their neck or somethin'.'

'W-will do, Jess,' Shane assured him.

'OK,' said Jess. 'Let's go.' And with that he let off the handbrake, flicked the reins with a softly called 'Yo!' to the old black mare, and the buckboard moved off, jerking and rattling. They were off to start a whole new life.



The horse was strong and they covered the first few miles at a good pace. In the back of the buggy Shane watched Drygulch disappear behind them as the wooden buildings receded into the distance.

Up front, Jess and Billy Joe looked at the vista before them. At first the vast plain beyond Drygulch was desert and scrub: a dusty yellow plain with green plants forcing their way up through the dry, crusted ground, just cactus and brush, but after a few miles it became grassland. To start with, the grass was thin and sparse, but gradually it became a deeper green and thicker – good land for grazing cattle and horses. The road they were on cut a dusty track through the green fields.

Directly ahead, in the far distance many miles further on, the mountains seemed blue, which is how they had come by their name of the Blue Mountains. The lower line of mountains and hills that climbed towards them were known as Blue Ridge.

'They say this is Indian country, but I ain't never seen any out here,' commented Jess. 'Not livin', anyhow. Travellin' and on their way somewheres else, yes. But not stayin'.'

'They're here,' said Billy Joe. 'In the valleys headin' towards Blue Ridge. Least, that's what my Pa told me. But then he lied all the time. Wouldn't surprise me find out he lied about that as well.'

They travelled on and the landscape rolled past

them: grassland, rocks and the distant blue mountains. It was a huge open land beneath an endless sky, with nothing to mark it except the dusty unmade road they were on. In the distance they saw cattle. There were just a few at first, then more and more.

The herd was enormous. The huge beasts, mostly brown in colour, had long sharp horns. They grazed, seemingly unconcerned by the boys in the buckboard as it drove through the herd.

'I s-sure wouldn't l-like to g-get on the end of th-those horns!' commented Shane. 'They'd s-spear someone s-sure as a arrow!'

'So long as nothin' spooks 'em, they're fine,' said Jess. 'Just make sure you keep a tight hold on Patch. We don't want him jumpin' out and barkin'. That'd start a stampede for sure, and that'd be the end of us.'

Jess kept the buckboard moving along at a reasonable pace, the horse trotting and the buckboard rocking and bumping. Billy Joe studied the cattle with a feeling of concern. He'd never been happy around cattle. They were big and strong and they couldn't be controlled. If a dog went mad and started running at you, you stepped out of the way. At the worst, you shot it. If a steer went mad and started running at you, every other steer in the herd joined in. With all that weight and those horns with their sharp pointed tips, you'd either get trampled or run through. Either way, you were dead.

Even against a gunman, you had a chance, because you could try talking your way out of trouble. There was no use trying to talk to a steer.

The buckboard bounced and jerked over the open grassland, until they came to the first of the fences. It was made from wooden fence posts hammered into the ground, with wire strung between them.

'Guess we must be gettin' near the Ambersons' place,' commented Jess.

Billy Joe sighed.

'It sure do seem a pity to fence in somethin' so big and beautiful,' he said.

'It'll never be fenced,' said Jess. 'People can put up fences all right, but the country itself ain't never gonna be fenced in. It'll always be ready to break out.'

In the distance they could see figures near to the fenceline.

'People an' horses,' murmured Billy Joe.

'I count three horses and two people,' said Jess. Then his eyes narrowed. 'No, I'm wrong. It looks like those two are kickin' whoever's laying on the ground.'

'You reckon one of 'em's Mr Amberson?' asked Billy Joe squinting ahead.

Jess frowned.

'Mrs Johnson never said anythin' about her brother-in-law bein' a violent man,' he said. 'I got the impression he was a peaceful kind of fella.'

'Well if he ain't one o' them doin' the kickin', could

be he's the one gettin' kicked,' muttered Billy Joe.

'You could be right,' said Jess, his frown getting fiercer. He flicked the reins and gave a 'Yaah' at Ruby, who picked up speed, taking them faster towards the scene.

