



Crow Feather

A ROUGH RIVER WESTERN



ALLEN RUSSELL



Crow Feather is the story of a young mixed-breed cattle rancher struggling to prosper in the Wyoming high country. In addition to being the sole heir to the vast Eagle's Nest Ranch lying in the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains, Hardin is a blood relative to Two Winds, legendary leader of the few remaining Cheyenne Dog Soldiers. Also by Allen Russel: *BUFFALO GRASS RIDER - Episode One: The Lonesome Wind*; *BUFFALO GRASS RIDER - Episode Two: Blood on the Rosebud*; *Buffalo Grass Rider - Episode Three: Rough River Gold*; *MULE: True Life Tall Tales About The Life And times Of A Country Boy From Smith County, Tennessee*; and *Cowboy Christmas Tales*.

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Your free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

With dawn still hours away, the sleeping Blackfoot encampment was quiet. Hardin lay shivering in the dark when he became aware of a shadowy figure approaching. When the figure drew near, Hardin realized it was an Indian with a rifle in his hand. This Indian seemed different from his Blackfoot captors, but Hardin was sick and cold, and he wasn't thinking clearly.

Expecting more punishment, Hardin remained quiet as the Indian stood over him, watching and listening. After just a moment, another man slipped out of the shadows and joined the Indian. Satisfied all was safe, he knelt down beside Hardin and cut the rawhide tether that bound him to the stake. Finally free, Hardin felt himself being picked up by two strong arms and he heard his grandfather's voice.

"I got you, son," Joe Locke whispered, "just be quiet, you're alright now."

The warrior with Joe was the mighty Two Winds, Chief of the nearly extinct, Cheyenne Dog Clan.

They whisked Hardin out of the camp to where Egan Short and several Cheyenne warriors waited for them on the timbered ridge above. The boy was wrapped in a blanket and handed up to Egan on horseback.

"Egan, take this boy and head west," Joe Locke said. "Don't stop until you get to the river. We'll catch up with you there."

"What are you gonna do?" Egan asked.

"I'm going to kill every damn one of those devils down there. When we're done, we'll follow you." Joe took his old friend by the hand. "Egan, I'm depending on you to get my grandson away from here and keep him safe."

"Nobody will hurt this little boy," Egan said. "They'd have to kill me first, and they'll play hell getting that done."

"We'll be right behind you," Joe said. "Now get going."

Egan put the spurs to his horse and thundered off into the night.

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Chapter One: Hardin and Spook

The dim light of predawn crept into the high country as a battle-scared old mule deer cautiously picked his way along an ancient game trail. The big buck had walked this path many times over the seasons of his life, but this morning was different. His heightened instincts were telling him imminent danger was afoot in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. The buck froze when he caught sight of several dark figures moving toward him through the trees. Scenting sweat-stained buckskins permeated by the smoke of countless campfires, his nose told him they were red men. When the sound of their approaching horses reached his ears, the old buck turned from the trail and evaporated into the dark timber.

The slow moving and secretive war party was made up of mostly young agency-jumping Indians desperate to win some glory in battle. Unfortunately for them, the time for glory was gone and it wasn't coming back.

So far, this raid had been little more than a weary horseback ride. They were cold, hungry, and ready to go home. The only thing keeping them from it was fear of swift retribution from their leader.

The Indian at the head of this little column of renegades was a brutal Blackfoot warrior named Bloody Hand. In his early thirties and small of stature, Bloody Hand was in the mountains on a quest for vengeance.

Unlike most of the few remaining free Indians, Bloody Hand spent his life spreading death and destruction wherever he went. In addition to despising all white men, he was obsessed with taking revenge on a mixed-blood Cheyenne he knew as Crow Feather.

Bloody Hand knew the man he sought frequented this part of the Bighorn Mountains in the fall of the year. He hoped to catch the mixed-blood with his guard down and without the protection of the white men that usually surrounded him.

Just after sunrise, Bloody Hand caught the scent of rising smoke. Holding up his hand for silence, he halted his pony and pointed to the camp down below.

It was peaceful, but unusually cold as dawn broke in the Bighorns. Two cowboys had spent the night high up in an area known as Lost Chinaman Park. The heavy frost from the night before began to soften as the sun rose above the mountain to the east and flooded the park with light.

The pristine mountain air was adrift with the scent of wood smoke and the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee as the cowboys huddled near the warmth of the campfire. The high-country solitude was broken only by the crackling of aspen limbs being consumed in the fire and an occasional bawl of a lonesome calf looking for his mother.

The men at the campfire were Hardin Locke and Spook Stillwell. They were in the mountains to begin the annual process of moving cattle out of the high country.

The cows had been grazing the lush grasses and wild flowers of the mountain meadows all summer, but soon the high country would be covered with six feet of snow and the temperature would plummet far below zero. It was time for the cows to go down to the valley for the winter.

In his thirties, Hardin stood just over six feet tall with a lean build and was clean shaven. His skin was tanned from the high-country sunshine. From a distance, his long black hair made him appear to be an Indian, but his narrow face and pale blue eyes were indications of the English and Irish blood in his family tree.

Spook was Hardin's saddle partner and his best friend. A couple inches taller than Hardin and built like a fence post, Spook had sandy colored hair that he wore down below his collar and a big mustache that curled up at the corners when he smiled. Despite the heavy Remington revolver hanging at his side, Spook was easy going and usually had a grin on his face.

The cowpuncher's peaceful morning was interrupted by a grumbling snort from Hardin's big buckskin horse.

"Wonder what's got Buck on the prod," Hardin asked as he got to his feet.

"Lion, most likely," Spook said, "Damn things are getting thick up here."

Placing his hand to his brow, Hardin scanned the ridgeline that was holding the buckskin's attention. "I don't think..." Hardin paused for only a moment after spotting the Indians. "Saddle your horse," he said grabbing his rig, "We got to go."

Spook grumbled, "Saddle my horse, we ain't had breakfast yet."

Hardin was already moving toward the exceedingly nervous buckskin stud when he said, "If you wait for breakfast, it'll likely be your last."

Without any more words, Hardin tossed the saddle up on the horse's back and reached under for the cinch.

Now on full alert, the big horse stared up at the ridgeline above their camp. His ears searched for the slightest hint of sound to confirm what his eyes had already told him. Clouds of vapor billowed from his nostrils as he tested the morning thermals. In his own way, the buckskin was warning Hardin something was bad wrong.

"What's got you so stirred up?" Spook asked, as he started to pack his gear.

Hardin was already horse back, "Forget that stuff and get mounted."

Following Hardin's gaze, Spook finally spotted the Blackfoot raiding party and swore, "Oh, hell."

Dropping his cup, Spook grabbed his saddle and went for his horse. After another quick glance at the ridgeline, Spook threw the rig on his mount and tightened the cinch. He pulled the bridle up without bothering with the chinstrap, shoved his Winchester in the scabbard and swung up in the saddle.

The Indians, realizing they were discovered, began whooping and hollering, and started down the ridge.

Spook was already headed down the well-worn cattle trail toward the timber when he realized Hardin wasn't behind him. Pulling up short, he spun his horse around and yelled at his partner, "Come on, Hardin. There ain't time for any of that!"

"Go on," Hardin shouted as he pulled his Winchester, "I'll be right behind you!"

Hardin knew the cold-blooded killer that was likely leading the band of renegades. This wouldn't be the first time he faced this Indian. He was hoping for a clear shot and a chance to finally kill Bloody Hand before having to turn tail and run.

Hardin had his hands full holding Buck steady. The big buckskin could hear the fading sounds of Spook's horse crashing away and he was ready to run.

Pouring through the trees like an oncoming avalanche, the raiding party stood out in stark contrast to the gray-green of the lodgepole pines. Hardin could plainly see their war paint and feathers and the brightly colored blankets covering each pony's back. The horses were decorated with lightning bolts and hailstones. Each horse was marked with a red handprint.

He heard the report from the Indians' rifles as they drew ever nearer. In spite of the bullets rattling through the timber around him, Hardin worked the lever on his Winchester and held his ground. He was searching for Bloody Hand but the thick trees and running horses were making it difficult to spot him.

The milling cattle scattered when the first mounted warriors broke out into the open park. Finding a target, Hardin stood in his stirrups and fired three quick shots. Two of the Indians went down, but neither of them was Bloody Hand.

Out of time and still holding his rifle, Hardin pulled Buck around and gave him his head. Bypassing the cattle trail that wound its way across the slope, Hardin plunged straight down through the thick timber toward the creek.

Leaning back on the cantle as the big buckskin took to the timber, Hardin was nearly on Buck's rump with his feet in the stirrups high up on the horse's shoulders. At times Buck was sliding more than running down the steep incline. Rocks, dirt, and downed logs rolled along with them as they made their headlong descent.

Most of the Indians wisely took the safer cattle trail planning to head Hardin off at the bottom. Over his shoulder, Hardin could hear several riders attempting to follow his reckless path down through the blow-downs. A couple of them must have been unhorsed as there were limbs cracking and ponies squealing on the slope behind him.

When the timber ran out at the bottom, Hardin suddenly found himself on a rock ledge several feet above the swirling waters of the creek. Buck hesitated only for a moment before abandoning their precarious perch and plunging into the icy pool.

Waiting just downstream, Spook pulled his pistol and fired two shots at the warriors coming down the cattle trail. Spray was flying as Buck regained his footing and started down the creek.

“Head for Gunsight!” Hardin yelled as he went by. Firing one more shot, Spook pulled his horse around and followed him.

Breaking out of the trees on Grizzly Flats, they turned south and rode for the safety of the cabin at Gunsight Pass, still five miles away.

Most of the Indians made it down off the slope and were close behind. The sounds of their yelling and taunting echoed off the surrounding peaks as Hardin and Spook made for the sanctuary.

The cabin came into view as Hardin thundered through the gap at Gunsight Pass. His long black hair was flowing in the wind as he laid out low to the big horse’s neck.

With his nostrils flared wide open and his neck stretched out, Buck was processing huge volumes of air in order to squeeze out the limited oxygen of the high country. The big buckskin spent his entire life running the ridges in the Bighorns and thin air wasn’t a problem for him. Those low-country Indian ponies didn’t have a prayer of catching him.

With the war cries of the raiders fading behind, Hardin glanced over his shoulder and saw his partner falling back. Spook’s horse must have been injured coming off the mountain and he was slowing down.

It was obvious Spook wasn’t going to make the cabin before the Indians caught him. Dirt and grass was flying as Hardin brought the big buckskin to a sliding halt and pulled him around. Hardin put him back up in the wind and charged right at the Blackfoot.

“Keep going!” he yelled when he passed Spook.

“Keep going!” Spook yelled over his shoulder, “Who the devil do you think you are?”

Still gripping his Winchester, Hardin dropped the reins across the pommel and began firing into the rapidly approaching savages.

This time he found Bloody Hand.

When his sights settled on the Indian, Hardin touched the trigger. At the report of the rifle, the Indian and his horse went down hard. Hardin was mentally celebrating as Bloody Hand was snatched under his mount in a tumbling, tangled mass of man and horseflesh.

The remaining Indians were uncertain what to do with Bloody Hand out of the fight. Three more of them were shot off their horses as Hardin bore down. The young renegades couldn't decide if they should keep closing on the deadly rifleman or cut and run. Thinking their leader dead, some of them pulled up.

Hardin was within fifty yards of the confused Indians when his rifle's hammer fell on an empty chamber. Pulling the big horse around, he sprinted for the cabin. As soon as he turned his back on the Indians, the yelling started up and the deadly chase was on again.

Upon reaching the cabin, Hardin and Spook bailed off their horses and led the animals inside. There was a corral where they normally put the horses, but in their current situation, that wasn't an option.

Hardin knew these Indians would try to steal their mounts at the very least, and if they couldn't do that, they'd shoot them from the trees. He had no intention of letting the Indians get Buck. If he and Spook were left there on foot, they were likely done for.

The Indians wisely halted their pursuit at the edge of the clearing. Their lathered and heaving ponies were worn-out and in desperate need of a breather. After dismounting, a few of them began firing from the shelter of the surrounding timber.

With its foot-thick log walls, solid pine shutters, and a thick-planked door, the Indians' bullets were having little effect on the fortress-like cabin. It was stocked with food and ammunition, so Hardin and Spook were safe for the time being. Things were crowded with the two horses, but it was a lot better than being out in the open.

Built on the edge of a large mountain clearing, the cabin butted up against a vertical rock face over sixty feet high. There was no

approach from the rear and the trail coming from down below passed right by the front door. Anyone approaching from the sides or the front would be seen before they could get close. That made the cabin easy to defend, but the boys couldn't leave without being spotted.

"We're safe for now," Spook said, peering out at the empty clearing. "What do we do to get out of here?"

"It'll be a day or two before the boys at the ranch will start to worry about us, so I suppose we're on our own."

"Just like a bunch of dad-gum Indians to interrupt my breakfast," Spook complained.

"We're lucky they didn't mess up our whole day."

"Yeah, it's a good thing Buck was paying attention."

"There were close to twenty renegades with Bloody Hand," Hardin said. "I figure there's about fifteen or so left. With Bloody Hand finally dead, they won't hang around here long."

Spook seemed surprised as he turned to Hardin, "Bloody Hand is dead?"

"Yeah...I dropped him right after I turned around."

"Well, it's about..." Spook was interrupted by the sound of yelling Indians and running horses. He turned back to the window and shouldered his rifle, "Here they come."

A Blackfoot warrior started across the clearing, yelling at the top of his lungs and firing his rifle. Hardin let him get close and poked the muzzle of his Winchester out the shutter. Just as Hardin took up the slack in the trigger, Spook's Winchester roared. The Blackfoot dropped his rifle as he was driven off the back of his horse.

"He won't be trying that again." Spook said.

Hardin's hatred for the Blackfoot went back many years. He never went looking for them, but he was never sorry for a chance to kill a few of them. Allowing his temper to overcome his good judgment, Hardin opened the door and stepped outside.

"Alright, you cowards!" he yelled at the trees across the clearing. "You send this one to prove his courage. Now show me what the rest of you got."

The reply to Hardin's challenge came in the form of a bullet thudding into the wall over his head. Just as the report of the rifle reached Hardin's ears, four more enraged Blackfoot emerged from the trees on horseback and charged the cabin. Bullets splintered the door as Hardin ducked back inside and slammed it shut.

Spook sighted down his rifle barrel and drew a bead on the approaching Indians, "That was a fine idea. Just insult the hell out of 'em."

"Maybe if you'd stop jawing at me and start shooting at them, we could get out of here," Hardin said.

Spook dropped two of the Blackfoot before the remaining warriors abandoned their dead companions and retreated back to the cover of the trees.

"We got to do something," Spook said, slipping fresh cartridges into his rifle. "They don't act like they're leaving. We can't just sit here and wait for them devils to come up with a plan."

"When it gets dark, they'll probably try to burn us out," Hardin said, "We may have to make a run for it, but they're bound to be watching the trail. How's your horse?"

"It's just a muscle pull. He was too cold and stiff to make that run without warming up a little. I think he'll be alright if we can take it easy, but I don't think he could stand a full gallop all the way to the ranch."

"We don't have to risk it just yet. It won't be dark for a while."

Things were quiet as they stood watching the empty clearing. Several minutes had passed when Hardin thought he heard a distant rumble, "What the heck was that?"

Spook grinned, "My damn empty stomach. In case you forgot, we ain't had anything to eat since last night."

"I'd say that's way down on our list of things to worry about."

"Maybe so," Spook replied, "but it ain't like we're going anywhere for a spell. As long as we're stuck in here, let's fix something to eat."

The fact that Spook was hungry came as no surprise. Hardin had never known anyone who could eat like his partner. Spook usually ate enough for two people, but never gained a pound.

Leaving his post at the window, Hardin began checking the contents of the cupboard.

“We got flour, sugar, coffee, and beans.”

“No time for beans, but coffee and biscuits would be good.”

“We’ll need water for that,” Hardin said.

“The water bucket’s empty and my canteen’s back there on the mountain.”

“Mine’s about empty too,” Hardin said after checking his canteen. “These horses need water. I’ll try and get to the spring.”

A small trickle of spring water ran down the face of the rock behind the cabin. The little pool at the base provided a steady supply of fresh water.

Hardin picked up the empty bucket, walked to the rear wall and pulled up a small trapdoor built into the floor. It opened to a crawlspace and a small opening in the rear of the foundation. Aside from the front door, it was the only other exit from the cabin and was intended for use only in desperate situations.

The pool of water was only a dozen feet from the west wall, but Hardin would be fully exposed if the Blackfoot were watching that side of the cabin.

“If you get your ass shot off, make sure you get the water back here before you go toes up,” Spook said.

Hardin smiled. “If I get as far as the water, I just might keep going.”

Once outside, Hardin was on his hands and knees as he peeked around the corner of the cabin. Sensing no immediate threat, he crept to the edge of the pool and dipped the bucket into the water. A ricochet bullet careening off the rock above his head told Hardin he’d been spotted and it was time to go. Getting to his feet, he sprinted behind the wall and slipped into the security of the crawlspace.

Spook was returning the Indians' fire from the window as Hardin came up through the floor and dropped the trapdoor behind him.

Things were strangely quiet outside as morning turned into afternoon. The stifling heat from the high-country sun on the roof, as well as the close proximity of the horses and the piles of fresh manure, made the closed-up cabin almost unbearable.

Spook pulled off his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead, "It's getting pretty damn miserable in here with these horses."

"You'll be glad they're here when we make a run for the ranch."

"Let's quit talking about it and just do it. I ain't scared of them damn Indians."

"You could end up afoot."

"Better afoot out there than smothering to death in here," Spook said.

"We'll try and sneak by them in the dark to work our way down to the ranch."

"Do we stand any chance at all of doing that?"

"Probably not," Hardin admitted.

"That's what I admire most about you," Spook said, "always looking on the bright side."

"You asked."

"You could have lied, just to make me feel better."

Spook paused when he heard a distant voice calling Hardin's name. Quickly moving to the shuttered window, they were surprised to find the voice belonged to Bloody Hand. The renegade was battered and bruised, but very much alive. Mounted on a painted pony, he was yelling insults from the ridgeline high above the cabin.

"Can you see, you cannot kill me, mixed-blood?" he shouted. "The day will come when I, Bloody Hand, will kill you and the tall one!"

"Tall one my ass," Spook mumbled, "You know, Hardin, for a dead man, that Indian sure is mouthy."

Ignoring his partner, Hardin swung the shutter open and shouted, "I'd rather be mixed with anything than a dog-eating Blackfoot!"

The remaining members of the raiding party began cursing and yelling threats at Hardin after hearing that insult.

"Today's as good a day as any!" Hardin taunted, "Why don't you cowards quit yelling about it and come on down here? Let's settle this once and for all!"

"You are a brave man with so many friends to help you!" Bloody Hand shouted. "But hear me now, Mixed Blood, that time is coming, it is coming!"

With that, Bloody Hand and his followers turned their ponies and, still yelling insults, rode over the pass.

"What's he talking about?" Hardin asked. "Who's he think is in here with us?"

"Yonder comes what he's talking about," Spook said, watching the clearing from the window, "More Indians, at least a dozen of 'em."

Hardin turned back and spotted a band of mounted warriors rapidly approaching from below. "Take it easy," he said. "It's the Cheyenne, Two Winds is with them."

The Cheyenne Chief, Two Winds, was a highly regarded old warrior and Hardin's great uncle. The sister of Two Winds had been Joe Locke's wife and Hardin's grandmother. Being there on the day Hardin was born, and after seeing the infant boy's thick black hair, Two Winds named him Crow Feather.

"The Blackfoot dogs are gone," Two Winds said as he rode up. "They stole three horses from us last night, we have been tracking them."

"Uncle," Hardin said, "it's good to see you."

"We found one of our horses shot dead a few miles back," Two Winds said.

"Shot dead," Hardin repeated.

Not satisfied with Hardin's reaction, Two Winds leaned in the saddle and said, "Right between the eyes. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"It is really good to see you," Hardin said.

When Spook led the horses outside, big blue-bottle flies began buzzing in and out of the cabin door, seeking the fresh manure.

“Do all white men sleep with their horses,” Two Winds asked, noticing the smell.

All the Cheyenne warriors laughed.

Hardin smiled at the old man. “If the Cheyenne slept with their ponies, perhaps they wouldn’t be chasing the Blackfoot thieves now.”

The warriors sat in strained silence, waiting to see what Two Winds would do. The old man thought for a moment and began to chuckle. The chuckle turned into a hardy laugh and they all joined in. “Your words are true,” he said.

“Get down and rest,” Hardin said.

Two Winds brushed the offer aside with a wave of his hand, “No time, we will continue to chase the Blackfoot thieves out of our country.”

“Good luck to you,” Hardin said. “Thank you for saving our hair. It would have been a bad night if Bloody Hand had stayed around here.”

As the gathered Cheyenne began falling in line to leave, Hardin recognized one of them. “Three Toes, my good friend, it’s always good to see you.”

Three Toes was one of the few remaining members of the Dog Soldier Society. Not everyone knew it, but Hardin owed his life to the legendary warrior.

Three Toes pulled up and spoke to Hardin, “How are you, little brother?”

“I’m a lot better, now that you’re here.”

“Crow Feather, keep your eyes open,” Three Toes warned. “If I get the chance, I will kill Bloody Hand and bring you his scalp. If I do not find him, I fear he will be back. Someday his hatred will kill you, if you do not kill him first.”

“I think I’ll kill him one day,” Hardin said.

“I wish you’d do it soon,” Spook said. “I’m tired of looking over my shoulder for that bunch of killers.”

“Be well, Crow Feather,” Two Winds said. With that, the old warrior turned his horse and followed the others up the trail. “You still owe me a horse,” he added over his shoulder.

When they were gone, Spook turned to Hardin, “What do we do now?”

“Let’s go to the ranch and get the boys. We’ll need more men to get those cows back together and down off that mountain. If those Blackfoot get away from Two Winds, we may need more guns.”

Chapter Two: The Eagle's Nest

The Eagle's Nest Ranch was forty-five thousand acres of high country splendor clinging to the slopes of the Bighorns. The mountain meadows with their lush grasses and wildflowers were traversed by the occasional tiny tumbling streams of snowmelt water from the high country. The dark timber consisted of spruce, aspen, and lodgepole pine.

Made from logs with a stone foundation and a big fireplace, the main house sat at six thousand feet. There was a full-length front porch looking out over the valley floor. The bunkhouse as well as the barns and outbuildings were built from sawn lumber weathered to a soft gray by the dry mountain air.

Down in the valley below the house, the horse herd grazed the lush green grasses of Indian summer, but the leaves on the willows growing along the creek were turning yellow indicating the inevitable change of seasons was underway.

Born and raised on the Eagle's Nest, Hardin was a hunter, but he never killed anything around the ranch house. The animals in the valley were all completely safe and they seemed to know it. Hardin lost his mother at an early age. He could remember she would never allow anyone to hunt or shoot anything in the valley. She loved the wildlife, so he carried on that tradition in her memory.

Hardin and Spook rode over the ridge above the house and stopped just to take in the scene. Hardin pulled his hat off and wiped his brow.

"I never get tired of the view from up here."

"Yeah, me neither," Spook replied.

Spook was three years younger than Hardin and not quite as hotheaded, Spook had been named by his abusive father who was a Kansas dirt farmer and a heavy drinker. Spook's mother died on Halloween, the same night Spook was born. Unable to bear the blame for his mother's death any longer, Spook left home at thirteen,

wandered into the Bighorns, and went to work for Joe Locke. Hardin and Spook had been as close as brothers ever since.

The solitude of the valley was interrupted by the distant clanging of the iron ring hanging on the porch as the cook announced it was time for supper. After negotiating the steep slope, the two of them put their horses in the upper pasture and walked down to the main house. Hardin's old dog was lying on the porch enjoying the last rays of sun and wagging her tail in welcome.

"Hey, dog," Hardin said as he reached down and scratched her ears. She stayed outside during the day, but Hardin would let her in after dark to curl up by the wood stove and spend the night.

The cook looked up from his work when they walked in the kitchen, "You boys are just in time."

At a shade past seventy, Egan Short was the oldest hand working on the Eagle's Nest. He did the cooking and stayed close to the ranch most of the time. He wasn't a big man, but he had been a top hand in his prime. Even at his advanced age, Egan was still a couple dippers more than a bucketful.

"I didn't hear any cattle coming off that mountain," he said.

"We had some trouble," Hardin replied.

"What kind of trouble?"

"Bloody Hand jumped us at sunup in the Chinaman. He had twenty warriors with him."

"Blackfoot," Egan repeated, "How'd you get away from twenty of them devils?"

"We managed to kill five or six of 'em while they chased us to the cabin at Gunsight," Hardin said, "Two Winds showed up and ran 'em off this afternoon."

Protecting his hands with a dish towel, Egan lifted a steaming pot from the stove and headed toward the table with it.

"That damn Indian is getting bolder all the time," Egan warned, "You're gonna have to kill that red devil soon or he'll be showing up on the front porch one day."

A big roughshod and redheaded cowboy was sitting at the end of the table. His name was Turk Mitchell.

“I’ll be happy to kill that redskin,” Turk said.

The other two men seated across from Turk where Antonio Delle Castillo de Vaca and Hooker Tom.

Antonio was a handsome twenty-year-old from old Mexico and a ladies’ man of the first order. The cowboys called him Dell for short. He only stood about five-seven, but he was tough, and he loved to laugh. In spite of possessing a fiery temper, Dell preferred to romance the ladies than do anything else.

Hooker Tom was a huge, but soft-spoken, mulatto man in his fifties. He was six-foot-four with rock-hard muscular arms, broad shoulders, and a deep baritone voice that echoed from his massive chest. He had flecks of gray in his hair and a short beard to match. Hooker Tom never made a big show of being tough, but this quiet mountain-of-a-man was a force to be reckoned with.

Hooker Tom was born into slavery as the offspring of his slave mother and her white master. As a young child, he was separated from his mother and sold to a man named Hooker in Louisiana. He became known as Hooker’s Tom. When he was just a teenager, he escaped slavery and arrived at the Eagle’s Nest half-starved and ragged. With his newfound freedom, he dropped the possessive, and simply became Hooker Tom.

Under Joe Locke’s influence and care, the boy learned to read and write. He grew up to understand there was great strength in being gentle and kind. Joe taught him God didn’t care about his mixed bloodlines, only the kind of man Hooker Tom would become.

After sitting down to supper, Hardin speared a piece of meat with his fork and pointed it at the boys sitting around him. “All of us are going up to Lost Chinaman Park in the morning and get those cows headed this way. It shouldn’t take more than two days to get it done.”

“I’ll put some grub together, since you’ll be out overnight,” Egan said.

Hooker Tom looked at Hardin and gave an amused nod at Spook. The lanky cowboy was ladling gravy over a huge pile of mashed potatoes. It was next to several biscuits and the two deer steaks he speared off the meat platter as it went by.

“Spook, are you gonna eat all of that?” Hardin asked, “or are you gonna take some of it with you tomorrow?”

“We didn’t get any breakfast, thanks to Bloody Hand, and I’m hungry.”

“Leave the boy alone,” Egan said. “He knows good cooking and where to get it.”

The sounds of clinking glasses and the scratch of silverware on heavy china plates filled the room for a short time as the boys finished their meal.

“Thanks for supper,” Hardin finally said, wiping his chin with a napkin.

Spook was sopping the last of the gravy off his plate with a biscuit, “Yeah, Egan, thanks. That was the first good meal I’ve had in three days.”

“You’re welcome, son. Did you get enough?”

“Did he get enough,” Turk repeated. “He ate everything but the silverware.”

They all had a good laugh as Spook flashed a big grin and shoved the last of the biscuit in under his mustache.

“How many cows are up on the Chinaman?” Hooker Tom asked after things quieted down.

“I figure close to five hundred head,” Hardin said.

Spook grunted. “They’re scattered to hell and gone with all that shooting and yelling the Indians did.”

“They won’t go far,” Hardin said. “We should make the climb and be there by ten. With any luck, we’ll be home by dark, day after tomorrow.”

“That only leaves the herd up on top of the Beaver Slide to gather,” Spook said.

“We’ll need to get them the first part of next week,” Hardin said. “If we were to get an early snowstorm, we could lose a lot of those calves.”

“I don’t like the Beaver Slide,” Dell said.

Spook grinned, “How in hell would you know that, you never been up there.”

“Yeah, but I hear de’ stories.”

Hooker Tom smiled, “It’s just another mountain.”

“The boy’s right,” Egan said. “It can be hell coming off there in the snow. I’ve seen pack-mules and cattle slide down that mountain for miles.”

“*No tengo gusto de esa montana*,” Dell said quietly.

“In English,” Hardin prompted.

“I really don’ like that mountain.”

Hooker Tom placed his hand on Dell’s shoulder, “Just stick with me, kid, you’ll be all right.”

“Let’s worry about the Beaver Slide next week,” Hardin said. “Get some rest, boys. I’ll see you all in the morning.”

Hardin got up and went to his bedroom. Egan lived in the spare bedroom of the main house. The others retired to the bunkhouse.

Outside, a huge silver moon was rising in a sky full of stars. Unknown to the men of Eagle’s Nest, they were being watched.

High on the ridge above the ranch house, a killer stood vigil. He lay quiet as one by one the lamps in the bunkhouse were extinguished.

This killer was familiar with the Eagle’s Nest and the mountains surrounding the ranch, but it had been years since he had been in this part of Wyoming. He was roaming the high country of Montana, until he began to encounter more and more white men digging in the ground. With the abundance of gold-seekers, game was scarce, and he grew weary of being shot at.

Sensing bitter cold weather coming, he brought his family south to better cover. Game was plentiful and the thick timber of the Bighorns would provide more protection from the howling winter winds.

When he got to the top of the next ridge, he paused long enough to lift his muzzle up to the heavens and let go with a low primordial howl that grew in volume until it could be heard all up and down the valley.

It was his way of telling the world he was the undisputed king of these mountains. A big grizzly could make him step aside, but the silvertips were extremely rare in the Bighorns.

“What kind of devil is that?” Dell asked from under the covers.

Hooker Tom answered him from somewhere in the darkened bunkhouse. “That’s the voice of true wilderness.”

“There’s no other sound like it,” Spook said, “makes a man’s blood run cold.”

Over in the main house, Hardin’s dog was whining in the kitchen, glad to be safe inside.

The old wolf made the climb to Lost Chinaman Park in a little over two hours. As he approached the abandoned campsite he sensed the men from the night before were gone. Continuing on, he began to catch the scent of scattered cows. His eyesight was superb in the dark. After a few minutes, he found what he was seeking.

A full-sized cow was too dangerous to pull down by himself. He was too wise for that kind of careless stunt. Spying a late spring calf grazing some distance from its mother, he dropped to the ground and began to sneak up on the calf.

When the big canine made his move, the startled cattle scattered into the trees, but it was too late for the calf.

This wolf didn’t know or care these cows belonged to a white man. They were no different than the deer and elk that roamed the mountains. They were slower and dumber than the elk and deer but, as far as he was concerned, they were meat for his mate and their growing pups.

Smelling the fresh kill, the female and her two remaining offspring joined him in the darkness. There had been five pups in early spring, but only two hardy young males were still alive.

After a good feed, the wolf clan stretched out under the thick boughs of a Ponderosa Pine for a good night’s sleep. The big male was cautious, moving his family up the slope over three hundred yards before they bedded down. He wanted plenty of room between them and the carcass in case a black bear or a lion smelled the kill.

The big lobo was never fully relaxed. Even in his sleep, his nose was always working. If even one molecule of scent from an enemy was drawn into his nostril, a danger signal would be instantly flashed

to his brain. His life depended on always being aware of his surroundings.

The night wind rustled the branches over his head with a cold breeze, a foretaste of what winter would bring. Tonight, the wolf could rest. He was the most dangerous thing in residence in Lost Chinaman Park.



Crow Feather is the story of a young mixed-breed cattle rancher struggling to prosper in the Wyoming high country. In addition to being the sole heir to the vast Eagle's Nest Ranch lying in the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains, Hardin is a blood relative to Two Winds, legendary leader of the few remaining Cheyenne Dog Soldiers. Also by Allen Russel: *BUFFALO GRASS RIDER - Episode One: The Lonesome Wind*; *BUFFALO GRASS RIDER - Episode Two: Blood on the Rosebud*; *Buffalo Grass Rider - Episode Three: Rough River Gold*; *MULE: True Life Tall Tales About The Life And times Of A Country Boy From Smith County, Tennessee*; and *Cowboy Christmas Tales*.

Crow Feather

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