

*Western fiction,
webbed together by
intrigue and love*

THE BROKEN COACH

by STEPHEN HOBBS

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A scenic landscape photograph of a valley with red rock formations and green vegetation under a sunset sky. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the scene. The foreground is filled with dense green trees and shrubs, while the middle ground shows rolling hills and red rock formations. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, with some clouds.

Stephen Hobbs

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CHAPTER 1

The woods wore by the passing of time and the constant blowing sand from the desert. The wooden artifacts were not native and showed signs of being manmade. What pieces were visible above the drifting sand gave an indication of a frame mode of transportation, maybe a wagon or a cart of wheels as indicated by a wooden brace with an iron ring attached by blacksmithing.

Now of this find, the West was not old nor was it new. Nathan's age allowed him to know the time of both, and his discovery was intriguing. The stories of lost stagecoaches and people who just vanished in this area are relevant to his wandering the desert. Before sand and time erased the places and stories of those, who ventured into the unknown.

Nathan sipped from his canteen, he scanned around for other pieces not native to this region and saw a distant object of interest. It was metallic and laid within a small group of rocks. Nathan approached in a roundabout way that took him above and behind the piece. From feet away, it appeared to be a keepsake box of silver.

Although tarnished it seemed intact as it laid several yards from the wooden pieces protruding from the desert floor, as if thrown from the wreckage or was it placed and covered by the stones lying close? Either deduction seemed reasonable as Nathan continued to scan the area for other relics.

Since Nathan's life became boring several years ago from early retirement, he had explored the deserts close to his Arizona home in search of what laid before him. He had found other things in the desert but nothing that intrigued him as much as this find. It was almost noon as he spread a canopy of white above to shield himself from the heat of the day. The box still laid amongst the stones.

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The heat was bearable as he finished his noon meal and began to sketch on paper the desert floor before him. The grid paper gave an approximate location of what showed above the sand. As the sun moved across the sky, Nathan shifted himself as his shade lessened under the canopy. He lifted his eyes from the paper just in time to see the movement.

It was a slow, deliberate move as if something or someone was in no hurry to walk in the desert heat. It was as if the object was dancing in the rays of heat pulsating from the sand, as it moved from right to the left, and then disappeared into a small dune of sand, below a protruding boulder. Nathan marked the location on his grid paper with a question mark.

Common for one to see objects in the desert and Nathan assumed this movement to be that of a creature adapted to this harsh environment. He knew this assumption was wrong as he heard a quiet and distant voice singing a ballad of lost love. The song ended abruptly, and Nathan was aware that it was a figment of his own imagination. He also realized the bead of sweat running down his back was suddenly cold.

As the sun continued across the sky, Nathan sat quietly with the only sound being that of graphite on paper. He finished his detail sketch and by connecting the dots realized by the amount of debris this had to be at one time a stagecoach.

As the sun slipped below a mesa, Nathan left his sanctuary of coolness and ventured to a knoll to his right and a board that was protruding from the sand. His interest is the faded lettering painted on the dry, rough plank.

Not knowing the depth of the board in the sand, he left it alone and copied the letters onto the grid paper. The descriptive of a coach line was evident, and before that was the letter D.

Nathan carefully brushed the loose sand at the base of the board to reveal more lettering. He reached the hardness of settled soil and the name *ERFIELD* in faded white followed by *COACH*, marked as a tombstone, this final resting place of a stagecoach.

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Nathan walked to the rise above the wreckage and looked to the east along the green separating the desert from the high mesas. He saw nothing to indicate a route taken by the coach. Could it be possible this was not its intended course? Could this be another saga of the West yet unsolved? Questions flooded his mind as he turned and looked once again at the scattered remnants and he thought of those aboard.

There was neither indication of horses nor any protruding bones to indicate the fates of the passengers or teamsters. Little remained above the drifting sands, nevertheless enough showed to warrant an excavation. Nathan's jeep in the distance beckoned him as the darkness is quick in the desert, and he must go. He knew he would return another time and might partially solve the mystery before him.

He threw his pack on the back of the jeep, looked at the wreckage in the twilight of quietness, and he saw the wind had caused a vortex of sand to swirl around the basin. Strange how the wind can blow there but not here, which is also frequent in the desert, but as the vortex of sand seemed to linger on the horizon, a distinct form took shape.

A large full dress of old appeared, and then just as quickly settled into the sand. At Nathan's distance from the basin, he once again assumed his eyes deceived him. He stood for a moment waiting, and nothing else appeared in the twilight. He started his jeep and began the bumpy trip to the main road. Nathan realized sand could be many colors but not the brilliant blue he just saw in the vortex.

Reaching the main road, Nathan slipped from four-wheel drive to two and enjoyed the coolness of the trip home through his open jeep. A trip filled with questions and anticipation of a future venture into the basin. It was September 10, 1967.

A century before Nathan's discovery, a young woman stood on a river's dock. Sara had packed carefully for the trip. She had a

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one-way ticket to Houston, Texas. From there the journey would be arduous and full of danger. She knew this from the letters received from a remote fort in the Arizona territory. There amid loneliness and days filled with fear, a young Captain waited for the love of his life.

The porter had taken her bags to the steamboats' luggage and freight hold, as she watched with some trepidation, knowing now was the time to either stay or go. She waited nervously, as the ship belched, rumbled and creaked in anticipation of the journey. She was alone on the dock ramp. Her parents refused to allow her to go. They would find the note too late to stop her voyage west.

Sara's mind wandered into the past and slowly evolved into the future as to plans made. She had waited for the one letter of many that read the time was right for her to join her soldier in a distant and unknown hostile land. The porter's call of "ALL ABOARD" brought her back to this moment of decision.

She rushed up the ramp and stood on the port side as to not seen from the dock until the "J. M. WHITE" was away from St. Louis and the only home she had ever known. The boats whistle shrilled in the noonday, as the wash of water over the paddlewheels increased in tempo and became rhythmic in motion. Sara knew she either had made the biggest mistake of her life or was making life more complete.

As the city slowly swept past, Sara wiped a tear from her eye. She knew eventually that she would return, but that time was still unknown. Her parents, she knew they would not understand. Time would heal old wounds. Her mind wandered to David, and she smiled.

She had first met David as a troop of soldiers on a similar boat stopped at St. Louis on its way to Springfield, Illinois. She was at the depot to provide comfort and refreshments to those men in blue returning from the battlefields of the great Civil War. David was a lieutenant at the time and walked with a limp from a wound received at Vicksburg. He was tall and handsome as most young men in uniform. His eyes of blue were more than she could resist. He smiled, and Sara fell in love.

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A year had passed since their first meeting and through correspondence and a few brief visits. David and Sara expressed their love for one another. Now a Captain, David given orders to report to a remote fort in the Arizona territory and hearts were broken at the thought of separation. Three months had passed since their last embrace on the same dock Sara had just left before permission granted for Sara to join him, at the fort in the Arizona territory. Her parents disapproved not of the relationship, but the very idea Sara would leave everything behind to live in the primitive wilds and confines of a fort.

As the city slowly faded from sight, she walked to the stern to catch the last glimpse of home. Through the smoke from the twin stacks, she watched as the old slipped away and the new began, and she sighed deeply.

As the boat slowly churned its way south, Sara finished her lunch in the dining room. She was one of the last, the other being an obese watch salesperson who was still busy at his plate.

Sara cleaned her lips on a napkin, looked outside the boat at its imposing shadow on the muddy water and for a moment in time, she had some regrets. They faded quickly at the thought of David being ever closer to each passing nautical mile.

Her cabin was just to the rear of the dining room, and Sara found her place. The porter made sure of her needs and left her to summon if she needed anything else.

Sara sat quietly on the edge of her bunk and read the last letter she had received from David. He wrote of the loneliness in his heart and the anticipation of her arrival. He omitted the reality of the extreme misery of being in a desert environment and the boredom of a mundane routine of living within adobe walls. Constant fear of some renegade band of Apaches or banditos breaching the weak defenses of the fort, ending dreams not yet fulfilled.

Sara folded the letter, placed, in her handbag, it, and the envelope, and pulled the drawstring firmly in place. She felt alone in the confines of her room and somewhat vulnerable. Dressed in her nightshirt, Sara relaxed to the rocking motion of the boat.

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Making sure the doors locked, she laid down on the uncomfortable mattress and slowly fell asleep, as a thousand miles away a young Captain Wilcox sauntered across the small parade ground to his quarters.

CHAPTER 8

Fort Bowie was southeast of Wilcox, Arizona. The city sits on interstate ten and mostly bypassed by those coming and going. Nathan had retired from the military at a base at Tucson, Arizona some miles west of Wilcox. Wilcox is his original hometown. The town, he knew, not named after a relative of his but instead after General Bolivar Orlando Wilcox. Apparently, no kin to Nathan's adopted great-great grandmother Sara.

On the other hand, was he? Nathan had never thought of that assumption. However, this General's visit to this small town was honor enough to change its name from Maley's Camp to Wilcox.

Nathan's family lineage was within miles of where he now sits in a small adobe style house at the edge of Route 343. His furnishings are sparse but sufficient. Several finds from the desert adorn the walls. Others he has given to the many local museums.

That evening, Nathan sifted through several photo albums to see and separate these pictures of family, according to lineage. His adopted family should be easy to trace as theirs had a beginning somewhere. Nathan's was born of hate and separation over one hundred years ago. He had one clue as to who his first known ancestor was. Bluntly put, he was a half-breed, and his Apache name was Nartana, James in English, and allowed to live at a young age with a Captain and his wife at Fort Bowie.

Nathan had been to Fort Bowie, and nothing left but a remnant of its original self. Have you ever been somewhere, and you feel like it's not the first time? As he walked the long trail to Fort Bowie on every visit, he felt as if he was walking in his own ancient footprints from a time long ago.

Imagine the stigma attached to an Apache much less one of impurity caused by being conceived and born of two different races. Nathan was not angry at his lineage but rather upset that no one cared enough to preserve the very essence of the birth that is the name of the mother and father in the case of his great

grandfather James. Without that information, it was as if James was an alien placed on earth from a distant planet. That thought, he realized, was close to reality.

Nathan's mind was a jumble of arrows all pointing in different directions. To find the answers he wanted to see, he must attempt to run a family genealogy other than his. The task would prove to be daunting and adventurous. A week after leaving the basin, Nathan found himself in the musty, dusty corner of the public library in Deming, New Mexico. He just assumed this would be an excellent place to start, but so far, he had been disappointed. His biggest fear may be coming true.

Nathan sat on the small steps of the little library with nothing accomplished and his mind wandered and wondered to a solution. His adopted great-great grandmother's last name was, as he said earlier, Wilcox and with his thinking of his genealogy intertwining with the surname of Wilcox, he could probably find some answers.

Nathan's great-grandfather's dad who was Apache allegedly killed during a raid into Old Mexico, great-grandfather's age at the time of his father's death unknown, but the remembrance of his father known in part as a child, which was during his eighth summer of life. The Mother was a white captive taken somewhere east of the vast white desert. The family records also indicate his mother traded to a white man for some horses

From what had been told, the adoption of Nathan's great-grandfather was merely a decision by Sara, and therefore, not legally binding. Even so, with Nathan's surname being Girtz, he often wondered where the German lineage came into the family and why.

Nathan was more than one-quarter percent Apache with the other seventy-five percent questionable. He had the features of the Apache people, but he was tall and thinly built which was not typical for his race of individuals.

Nathan's great-grandfather had wed a woman as he was. Half Apache and half white and they had at least five children. The fourth was Nathan's grandfather of which he has photographs, and they share the same features and height, and five children are

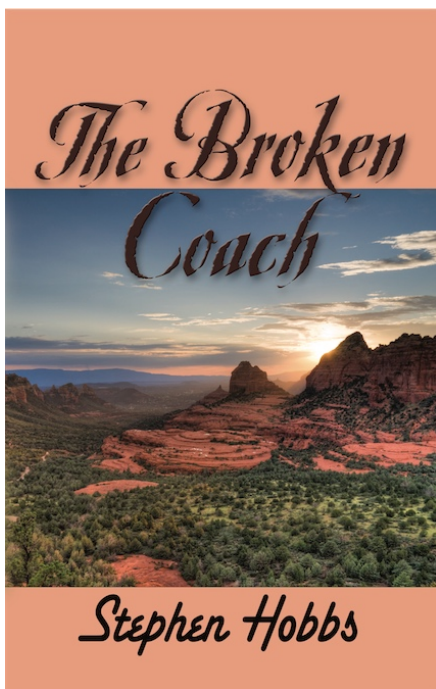
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given the surname of Girtz, somewhat odd, because great-grandfather's given name was James and surname, Wilcox.

His father had also used the surname as his father, as was appropriate, but he knows to give a German name to an Apache was not only wrong but puzzling.

Nathan's decision to look for either the Girtz surname or the Wilcox. Even if he found a reason for either, would that explain the question of the brush and comb found in the wreckage? Then a thought came to him, could the G after the S stand for Girtz. Surely not, because that would be too simple of a solution, then again, maybe the conclusion was that easily explained. Nathan's mind leaped into another question as to who his great-grandfather's adopted mother was beyond her given name of Sara. Maybe that was where the surname of Girtz originated.

With his head rumbling, as well as his stomach, he decided to take a lunch break. Nathan's temporary home in Deming was a motel room for the moment. As he said before, he was traveling to stay busy. As he sat in the drive-thru waiting for another fast meal, he made up his mind to go west to Fort Bowie. If there are no answers there, then the quest might begin somewhere closer to his original hometown of Wilcox, Arizona. It was late November 1967



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