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I'LL MEET YOU AT THREE FORKS by David G. Bishop

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Ill meet you at Three Forks

DAVID G. BISHOP

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By

David G. Bishop

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First Edition

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BOOK 1 – ADVENTURES IN THE SHININ' MOUNTAINS

CHAPTER 1: AMBUSHED

The night was ending and the sun had begun its tireless climb up the eastern sky. It would be a while before it crested the peaks of the distant rugged mountains but already, there was enough light so that images among the trees were no longer a blur. A man could see his sights good enough to shoot if he had to. Clinton Jeffries stood a good way back from the creek that wound its way through the serene valley. A shallow mist rose from its slow rippling waters into the cold October morning. He gently stroked the muzzle of the bay mare calming her with soothing whispers "easy girl, it's awlright, shh." This was no time for the horse to whinny.

The traps he'd set the morning before needed to be checked but he had to be careful. Yesterday, he'd seen Indian sign while scouting out new trapping grounds in the valley to the west. The tracks he'd found and the then-cold cook fires told him there were seventeen or eighteen of them, no more than twenty for sure. "Blackfeet," he'd thought, "probably up here after elk...too high for buffalo and the deer started movin' down weeks ago." Pondering this a moment, a new thought reached his mind. "Maybe they're huntin' something else...maybe they're huntin' me."

As he stood in the shadows, his keen blue eyes slowly scanned the trees and openings for movement. Carefully, he listened to the sounds of the morning as they rose above the sluggish gurgling of the stream. He searched for something in the air, anything that might tell him danger was about. Far away, a hawk shrieked calling to its mate, squirrels chattered, and the normal twittering of the birds in the willows lining the creek was like gentle music; everything seemed normal. He dropped the reins of the horse, allowing her to wander and feed. He knew she wouldn't go far but would stay back in the trees where there was still some grass that the frosts had not completely killed. He slowly moved to the stream and proceeded to check the traps.

More than two hours had passed when he at last reached the end of the trap line. Normally, it wouldn't have taken so long but he had been extra careful to move slowly and cover his tracks. "No sense advertising you're about" he thought.

The morning's catch yielded him two fine, fat beaver. After skinning them out, he reset the traps and hid each carcass where only the ants and flies would discover it.

His legs ached as he climbed up the bank from the cold water. It had been seven years since he'd left the farming community in Tennessee and come to the mountains. It seemed like the streams got colder each year or maybe it was because he was just getting older.

Strapping the pelts to his back, he took up his rifle and headed back downstream. Walking on the same side of the creek where he'd left the horse, he decided to move farther back into the woods; it was safer there. He figured to come up from behind the animal, keeping it between him and the brushy little stream. If there were Indians waiting for him, they'd be expecting him to come from where he'd been trapping. Hopefully, coming from this direction he'd be able to spot them first and slip away without being noticed.

He made good time heading back and was careful not to make noise. He'd learned long ago if you expect to keep your hair in this country, you'd best act like an Indian. The course he'd taken through the trees had led him to a natural path that angled sharply away from the creek, so that by now, he was at least two hundred and fifty yards back into the woods. At this point he left the path and again took up a line that ran in the downstream direction and was parallel with the creek. He knew when he finally came even with the place where he'd left the mare he'd have to go some distance back toward the stream to get her. "Better this way than back-trackin' straight down the creek," he thought. "It may take longer but it's safer."

An hour had passed since he'd waded from the cold water. The sun was up full and the air was warming. The walk had driven the pain from his legs, but his buckskins were still wet and cold. He now drew near the place where he must be extra careful. He calculated that the horse could be no further than three hundred yards ahead and perhaps a hundred yards to the right.

He decided he'd leave the pelts here and come back for them when he got the horse. If he had to make a run for it, he couldn't carry them and there was no sense letting those redsticks have them. If everything was safe, he'd be on his way to camp within the hour. A thought suddenly raced across his mind and he silently mouthed the words "probably'd be a damn good idea to pull outta this here part of the country...it's gettin' too crowded for my well bein'."

Quietly, he pushed the pelts under the side of an old fallen pine, checked his rifle to see that it was primed, and set out to find the horse. Moving very slowly, he inspected everything ahead of him. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. He'd gone about a hundred yards from where he stashed the pelts and still he could not see the horse. He knew, though, she wasn't far off. Carefully he crept ahead through the gray, leafless quaking aspen, watching, listening, and straining to make out even the faintest warning. But nothing came. Hell, maybe he was being too careful. The other men in the fur company had always said he was too damn much that way. They'd always made fun of him and accused him of being antsy. The funny thing of it was, though, he was still alive and many of them had gone under.

As his thoughts returned to the present, he saw the horse. She stood about thirty yards ahead of him through the trees. She hadn't wandered far and appeared to be calm, standing there cropping grass. Clint crept closer, all the while surveying the situation. Everything seemed all right, but...sometimes he just got this gut feeling that things weren't right. He had that feeling now but everything looked safe. "Maybe I oughta just belly on back outta here and high-tail it for camp" he thought, "I could come back tomorrow for the horse; she'd be all right here tonight and she shouldn't stray too far...there's plenty of grass and water."

Clint laid there for what seemed like an hour, trying to decide, trying to be smart. It was times like these that made you want to give up trapping and get the hell out of the mountains. Well, the time had come to decide; daylight was wasting. He looked around once more and almost unwillingly, began to creep forward. He moved ahead swiftly in a crouch toward the horse, his eyes constantly searching about him. Still, nothing! As he approached the mare, she raised her head quickly, her body stiffened, and she acted as though she might bolt; but then, his scent came to her and recognizing him, she seemed to relax. Now, he came to a full upright position. Walking quickly up to the horse and grabbing the reins, he thought, "All right, so I am antsy like they say, but it's better to be safe than ... " He barely heard the whir of the arrow before it slammed into his thigh. Two more whistled past his back as he reeled in pain. The air was suddenly filled with what sounded like a million screaming voices from hell. He had hold of the saddle but the horse was terrified. White showed around her eyes and she bawled loudly and started backing away. Clint hung on to the reins and, staggering, managed to swing himself into the saddle. He spurred the horse violently and she charged downstream directly toward the creek.

As if from nowhere, an Indian appeared just ahead of him and off to the right. "Those red bastards were waitin' for me after all" he thought, "but this hoss ain't down yet and I'll sure as hell take some of 'em with me fore I go."

With bow drawn, the Indian steadied his aim on the advancing rider. Clint lowered himself to the horse's back and at the same time cocked the hammer on the big Flintlock gun. Almost simultaneously, the Indian let loose his arrow as Clint touched off the .50 caliber. In the rush of the moment, the arrow went off the mark, narrowly missing the rider. Clint's bullet, though, was right on target and at thirty feet, it caught the warrior square in the chest. A spray of bright crimson filled the air as the ball burst from his back.

As Clint raced by the crumpling body, another Indian leaped from the brush at the side of the stream and rushed toward him, tomahawk in hand. Clint brought the now empty rifle up and swinging it like some monstrous club, hit the Indian square in the face just below the nose. He saw the fine structure of the man's features collapse giving way to the twelve-pound gun and felt the life-taking thump vibrate up through the stock. The man's assault with the hatchet had been cut short but not before he had severely lacerated the mare's shoulder.

More arrows came and Clint swung the horse from side to side dodging them as he galloped away. Behind him he could hear the screaming war hoops intensify as the braves realized their brothers had fallen. Clint knew they'd soon be mounted and after him. All this had happened so damn fast and, except for the initial sting of the shaft, he had been too scared to think about the pain. But now, it washed over him in a wave; his head whirled and he almost passed out. Blood streamed from the wound and he clenched his teeth and spurred the horse harder.

"Damn, the fat's in the fire now "he thought "how in Hell's name am I gonna get outta this mess? This horse is cut bad...she's bleedin' more than me...won't go too much further, I reckon."

Clint chanced a quick look behind him and was surprised to see that the other braves weren't yet mounted and after him. "Musta had their horses ditched far back in the trees," he thought. Another wave of pain shot up his leg. The shaft of the arrow had broken in the turmoil but what was left of it was solidly imbedded two inches above his right knee. "Probably in the bone..." he thought, "...sure as hell hurts."

His mind raced as he steered the mare up onto a long narrow mound that had once been the bank of the stream but which now stood by itself some twenty yards from the water. The course of the river had changed years ago, leaving the bank standing high and dry. A thick row of willows, however, still grew along its base where the river had once been. Off to the left of the mound, stubby sagebrush grew and there were many rocks. "I've gotta git hidden fore they catch up to me" he thought. "It's my only chance; I can't out run 'em and I sure as hell can't out fight 'em....there's too many...and this damn leg don't help matters either."

He'd trapped in this valley for the last two weeks and knew the lay of the land well. Right now, he had to think and think straight. It was becoming harder to concentrate. His leg wouldn't leave him be and for the first time since the arrow hit him, he was beginning to grasp the realization of what was happening. "C'mon, think you fool...where can I hide? How can I ditch these bastards?" The questions came over and over but the answers didn't. "I'd better find a place soon," he thought, "they'll be on me 'fore long, and then...?"

It suddenly came to him, "They'll be expectin' me to high tail it out of here. They won't be expectin' me to hide. Not here! Not this close! It's my only chance." With that, he galloped close to the edge of the mound and threw himself from the saddle toward the willows. The impact of his body crashing into the brush knocked the wind out of him and he struggled to gain his breath. The mare, half out of her head with fear and pain, galloped wildly down the length of the mound and out of sight.

As his head began to clear, he knew he must conceal himself quickly. The Indians would soon be along. He hunkered into the low, dead brush that was growing in and around the base of the willows and tried to blend in as best as possible. An ugly thought began to roll around in his mind, "What if they don't fall for this? What then?" Death would not come easy at the hands of these boys. They knew how to make you hurt real bad before you finally pushed off. He'd once come across what was left of a trapper the Blackfeet had caught and tortured. They had cut off his genitals and then, strip by strip, had skinned him alive; what was left of him was only fit for the buzzards and the insects. Seemed as though Indians had a way of taking you right to death's door and then bringing you back for another round of pain. He couldn't believe anyone was capable of doing what they'd done to the man.

His thoughts suddenly snapped back to the present. "I know they'll catch the horse before too long and then they'll come back lookin'. If they just ride by without spottin' me, I

can be gone before they get back...make it to the creek and lose 'em...maybe."

He hadn't long to wait. The riders screamed their war whoops as they raced toward him. "That horse oughta be easy to track" he thought, "I hope to hell they're so intent on catchin' up that they don't look down here." With his face pressed into the brush, he didn't so much as breathe, when the Indians rode by, their ponies passing within ten feet of him.

Seconds later they were past him and he could hear them galloping away. "Hot damn," he said, "I fooled 'em. I gotta git goin' now." Quickly, he took out his knife and cut off a piece of soft buckskin from the strap of his hunting pouch. He hurriedly wrapped it twice around his leg and about the stub of the arrow protruding from the hole in his leg, tying it off with a square knot. Then, he reached for his rifle. It was gone. "Where the hell....must have lost it when I jumped. Goddamn...ain't got time to hunt for it now." He cast one last look for the old gun that had saved his bacon more than once but it was not to be found.

Gaining his feet, he made for the stream. His leg was throbbing but it held him. "No sense bein' careful to hide my tracks here," he thought, "They'll easily find where I unloaded into those willows and know I made for the creek. They'll find my rifle too, sure as hell...damn."

He stood in the water at the edge of the stream, trying to decide which way to go and how to outsmart them. He had fooled them once; he knew they would not easily be fooled again. This had to be good. Thoughts raced through his head, "Downstream is probably my best bet; the current would carry me faster that way but there isn't much cover below here. Upstream though, there's plenty of beaver dams - lots of downed trees, willows, and snags...thicker'n molasses in some of those places...that's where I'm going." With that, he fought his way upstream through the current to the edge of the far bank. He was careful to stay in the water, thereby leaving no sign for the skillful eyes that would soon be here looking for him.

"The hard part," he thought, "is gonna be gettin' away from this creek and into the backwaters of the beaver ponds without leavin' a trail. They know they got me and they'll be careful to look under every log and rock."

Suddenly, it came to him. He had trapped this very spot four days ago and remembered a place where he had stepped on what appeared to be solid ground only to have it give way under his weight. He had gone into a hole clear up to his crotch. He remembered thinking how these old beaver runs could be damn dangerous and how lucky he was that he didn't nut himself, sinking in like that.

The branches of a river birch hung into the water directly ahead of him. "If I'm careful," he thought "I can climb up those branches and not leave my tracks in the mud. That hole's somewhere just ahead and off to the left. I gotta be careful here." Clint moved slowly, cautiously, applying every bit of skill he had. He had to make absolutely certain that nothing was disturbed; no leaf could be turned, no twig broken. If he made a mistake, it would cost him his life. The bad part was, he had to hurry. He didn't have much time.

At last he saw the place where he'd fallen through the bank. A small channel that had been cut out by a beaver when the water was higher, was now visible and was apparently, what had been the undercut in the bank that he had stepped through. So far, Clint had managed to keep himself out of the mud and not leave any tracks. This he accomplished by painfully slithering from willow pile to willow pile. After each move, he would check his trail to see that nothing betrayed him. Now, he was at the edge of the small channel and had to lower himself into it without leaving footprints in the muddy bottom. Mossy, stagnant water about a foot deep filled the channel. Carefully he knelt and lengthened out over the willows easing himself chest first into the water, much as a beaver would. It smelled foul as he pulled himself along, using the small willows and sticks that lined the channel as handholds.

Floating nearer the place where the bank had given way, he saw there was much more of an undercut than could be seen from above. In fact, there was a hole that went back in under the bank for what appeared to be six or eight feet. This would have to do.

The slimy water continued right on into the hole and he guided himself in. "Hell; I'd rather go in feet first," he thought, "but there ain't no room to turn around in this here ditch. Hope to hell there's enough room in there; I don't like tight places."

Pulling himself further into the hole, Clint discovered that it was actually an old beaver house. The entrance had been tight going in but now he found himself in what seemed like a small room. It smelled of animal, thick with a musklike odor. He crawled up out of the water to a drier place. The available light coming in from the tunnel was scant and he could hardly see a thing. He had bumped his head coming in so he knew the ceiling wasn't very high. He wasn't complaining, though; this was better than trying to make a fight of it out in the open where he would die for sure.

He felt safer now and reached to see if his knife was where it should be. Quietly he slipped the trusty blade from its sheath, holding it at the ready. One thing was for certain, if they tried to take him from this hole, they'd have one hell of a time on their hands and he'd get at least one of them. He suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion roll over his entire being, covering him like a heavy blanket. "Jesus, I'm so tired. I need to rest for a bit. Probably should say a prayer...Lord, if you can hear me, I sure could use a hand right now. I've gone and gotten myself into a sure enough fix. I'd appreciate it if you could....." his eyes closed and without finishing, he drifted off to sleep.

For some time, he dozed in a fitful, twitching, half-sleep. Partly, it was from fatigue. Mostly, it was from shock. Clint awoke then with a bone-chilling shiver, realizing he'd dozed off but he couldn't imagine for how long. The light coming in from the small entrance was much dimmer now. He could only guess that it must be late afternoon; this time of the year the days were short.

"Don't know whether I can last the night in this hole," he thought, "I'm soakin' ass wet and it's so damn cold in here the Injuns won't have to kill me, I'll freeze to death first. Daresn't leave till it's full dark, though."

As he mulled over a plan of escape, he reached down to feel the wound the arrow had made in his leg. Since he hadn't moved much, the bleeding had subsided. Unfortunately, the pain hadn't. For as his hand clumsily groped at the wound, a fiery stinging rushed upward letting him know that it had not gone away. He almost screamed as he quickly drew his hand away.

Always before, he had been able to endure pain fairly well. He remembered the bruises and cuts he'd gotten from fights with Indians; also, when he'd turned in his pelts to the company, near the outpost, there were always drunken trappers, half out of their minds with liquor and spoiling for trouble. He'd been stabbed three times during those go-rounds. And then there was the old she-grizzly that had charged him, clawing his arm and chest clean to the bone. After killing the bear, his compadres had taken an awl, a bone needle and some fine deer sinew, and sewn him up like an old leather sack. All those times he had been able to just grit his teeth and bear it. But this pain was different; it wasn't like it had been before. The others had burned and were festery for a few days and he had ached for a while afterward. But this was deeper, a real no shit, God-awful burning that sunk clear to his marrow; no, by God, clear to his very soul. He wondered if he'd ever be able to walk normal again if he managed to get out of this mess.

During his indulgence to the agony, he was suddenly shocked back to reality. The light from the hole through which he had entered and that which he had been blankly staring at during those waves of pain, suddenly dimmed to the point that nothing was now visible.

"The sun goes down fast, but not that fast," he thought, "Damn! Something must be in front of the hole. No, something is coming in through the hole...they've found me."

His guts were tying up in knots. He again brought the big knife up and braced himself for what was about to come. He would only have one chance and he'd have to make it good.

"Maybe I can kill this red bastard and his friends won't ever know what happened to him," he thought. But the reality was, he knew they'd hunt him down for sure if one of them came up missing.

Now he could hear the breathing and he felt the vibrations of movement coming closer.

"He's almost within arm's length now...I'm gonna take him...just a little closer. Now!"

Clint lunged with all the strength he had left. In the dark, cramped space and in his weakened condition, the blow fell short and his knife stuck into the mud. He'd missed.

Struggling to recover, his hand brushed against the thick hair of his adversary. Suddenly, there was a surprised growl and a snapping of teeth. The fox had been taken completely by surprise and bolted from the small room back out through the opening.

"Holy shit," Clint whispered, "a goddam fox. He musta been usin' this place fer a den. I thought it was an Injun for sure. Why didn't he smell me...must be all this mud and goo I got coverin' me? Holy shit!"

The incident with the fox had again drained the strength from him. Once more, he closed his eyes and drifted off into some kind of half-sleep. His semi-conscious memory was taking him back to the time he had boarded the keel boat on the banks of the Mississippi River. His sister had been there to hug him and tell him goodbye. All that day she had been sniveling and carrying on like an orphaned calf. Every time he had packed another piece of gear in his knapsack, she had started in bawlin' again. Women! He just couldn't figure them out. He did love his sister though; she had been the only family he'd had since his folks died and it now came to him what she was feeling. He had been so excited at the thought of going to the mountains to hunt and trap that he hadn't considered the fact this might be the last time he would ever see her. When he climbed the gangplank of the keel boat, he hadn't been able to turn around to wave goodbye for he knew if he did, she would surely have seen the tears that filled his eyes.

Once again, he was pulled back to consciousness, awaking with a chill; he was freezing cold. The dim light that had previously illuminated the opening to the beaver house had given up to the night. Outside, it was totally black.

"Can't see my hand in front of my face," he whispered to himself. "Sure is dark. Time to get movin'."

He hoped the Indians had gotten tired of looking for him and had left. He knew he couldn't stay here any longer or he'd freeze to death. He inched toward where he remembered the opening of the beaver house to be. Feeling along the walls, he began sliding out. Immediately, his leg reminded him that it was still there but he kept going. Coming out into the night, he paused, listening for any unnatural sound. Behind him somewhere, the river whispered in its timeless, familiar voice. Nothing else moved. Clint's eyes strained to see but the sky was overcast and the night was dark as pitch.

"Appears I'm gonna have to feel my way back to camp," he whispered "this otta be real interestin."

Since he had crawled from the beaver house, he'd remained kneeling; he hadn't tried to stand. Now came the test.

"Hope this damn leg will get me back and then the boys can fix me up."

The boys, Jim Tucker and One-thumb Jack Harris, were two of his best friends. Clint normally didn't trap with others, even friends, but these two had been with him when he first came to the mountains and had taught him the ways of a mountain man. He had willingly let them convince him to come with them to this place. They had said there were "loads of beaver for the takin." They had been right. The trouble was though, there were also a passel of Injuns - and Blackfeet, to boot!

Clint rose slowly from the wet ground testing the leg. The pain was there and as he put more weight on it, it stabbed at him unmercifully. He took a step and almost fell. Not because the leg let him down, but because he was stiff and shivering and the mud was very slippery. Regaining himself, he tried it again. This time he made it. It hurt like hell but he made it; the leg held. His eyes were now beginning to make out obstacles that lay in his path.

He had a good sense of direction, as did most mountain men, and he thought he had a pretty good idea which way it was to camp. He knew it wasn't that far, maybe a mile straight on, as the crow flies.

"Hate like hell to leave a trail straight back to camp," he whispered to himself, "but I'm freezin' to death and I got no choice with this bum leg. If I can get there afore daylight, me and the boys can saddle up and high-tail it outta here before those red devils pick up my sign. If I don't make it before daylight it won't matter anyway, they'll have me."

Clint struggled through the marshy bottom and finally reached the sharp hillside that marked the edge of the stream bed. So far, the leg was supporting him. It hurt and had started bleeding again; he could feel it running warm down to his foot. He stopped for a minute and retied the buckskin bandage he had placed over the wound. Moving slowly up the shallow incline of the hill, he became suddenly aware of something else in the night. It had started to snow.

"Well, that about caps it," he whispered in a disgusted tone. "If this ain't been one helluva day. I get arrow shot, lose my horse and rifle, share a hole with an irate fox, have to stumble my way through the dark with a bunch of heathen devils on my trail, and if that ain't enough, it's gotta snow. Shit!"

The storm had begun with only an occasional flake falling here and there. But now, it was really coming down. One good thing about it though, it was brighter and lightened the ground ahead of him; he could at least see better. Also, with it falling this heavy, it would rapidly cover his trail. Maybe he could get out of this mess after all. It seemed like hours since he'd crawled from the muddy burrow and he supposed he was nearing camp. "Only a hundred or so yards to go," he thought "and I should be there." Moving among the trees was difficult and he couldn't help but make noise. "Best give the signal," he whispered "I'd hate like hell to scare those boys and have 'em shoot me after comin' this far."

With that, he put a cupped hand to his mouth and gave the hoot-hoot of an owl; then, listening for a moment, he continued his limp toward camp. Ahead of him, he could hear anxious shuffling and the click of a rifle's hammer being set to fire.

"That you, ole hoss?" came a whispered voice; it was One-thumb Jack Harris.

"Yeah, it's me and I'm shot up," Clint answered.

"Here, let me help you." Harris came running and threw his shoulder under Clint's arm, helping him into camp. "Hell, when you didn't come in by dark we thought maybe you'd holed up somewheres to ride out this storm. Didn't know you'd had a run in with Injuns."

The camp was well concealed in the hollow of a small hill. A thick stand of heavy pines surrounded it and there was much dead-fall about. Among the pines, the men had constructed a lean-to shelter. Its size was adequate to house them and their possibles and one would almost have to walk right up on it to recognize it for what it was. From a distance, it resembled just another pile of dead fall. Behind it, some forty yards or so, lay a well-hidden pasture. There, a tiny spring trickled from the ground and last summer's grass fed the men's horses.

As Clint ducked in through the dimly lit door, he began to speak, "Them sons-a-bitches jumped me this mornin' over on that small creek where we were scoutin' yesterday. My horse got all cut up and I had to ditch her. When I baled off her, I lost my rifle and damn near broke my neck. I tell ya, it ain't been a good day." He paused only a moment to catch his breath. "We need to pack it in and get shed of this place about as quick as we kin. I don't know how many of 'em there are but they're gonna have our hair if'n we don't."

Attentively, the two men helped him onto a warm buffalo robe that lay next to the glowing coals of a small cook-fire.

"Now calm down ole hoss," Harris said. "We'll get outta here soon as we kin but that's one bad blizzard out there; it might not quit for days. Besides, you look like you couldn't go another step." Motioning to the other man, he continued "Jim, throw a hunk of that jerked meat to this ole' boy; he looks half starved."

Clint caught the meat that Jim Tucker threw to him and took a big bite. When he could again talk, he said "Thanks, Tuck. That tastes real good. I was hungry."

With knapsack in hand, Jim Tucker moved to Clint's side. Taking a closer look at him he asked, "How bad you hit, bud?"

Clint, finishing off the last of the meat, choked out "Pretty bad, I think. Took an arrow just above the knee; I think the head is stuck in the bone. You're gonna have to dig it out, Tuck."

Jim Tucker took out his knife and cut away the crude bandage that had been hastily applied. He then slit Clint's buckskin leggings up from the bottom so he could get a better look. Blood seeped from the wound and he brought forth a clean piece of cloth from the knapsack. He reached for a small jug that sat in the corner. Tipping it, he doused the cloth with water. "This ain't gonna tickle, hoss; lemme wipe it clean and take a closer look." With that, he raised one of the tallow candles and held it close to inspect the wound. "Sure as a cat's got an ass, that arrowhead's stuck square in the bone. It's gonna be a sombitch to get out but if you're figurin' on walkin' again, we're gonna have to do it." With that, he carefully laid the knife blade in the coals of the fire.

Seeming half-dazed, Clint raised himself onto his elbows and leaned his head back. He took a deep breath, looked at the men and said "You'd better get to cuttin', Tuck. Time's a wastin' and them Blackfeet will be here first thing tomorrow." Putting his hand on Clint's chest and pushing him back down, Jim Tucker handed him another large chunk of jerked meat from the knapsack. "Alright Bud," Tucker said "you'd best clamp your teeth around this and get prepared. Shit, I wish we had some whiskey. It'd make this a whole lot easier. Harris, hold this candle close so's I can see what the hell I'm doin'."

This wasn't the first arrow Jim Tucker had removed. When you lived in this country, you had to do some doctorin' now and then; that's just the way it was. It was expected that a man would help another man when needed. They had to take care of each other because nobody else would.

Jim Tucker drew the knife from the fire. Its blade glowed orange in the dim light. "Jesus, I hate doin' this," he said "it always makes my guts feel weak and my balls tighten up and ache real bad." Leaning close with the candle, onethumb Harris softly scolded, "Maybe it does make your balls ache Tuck, but that's all in your mind. He's gettin' the real thing here, all that pain and..." Clint had heard enough, "For Christ's sake, will you two stop all this damn talk and just get on with it. If you keep this up and I'll have to take the damn thing out myself."

With a deft hand, Tucker drew the knife from two directions toward the protruding shaft. Clint felt only the first

deep slice of the searing blade. The pain that had come before was but a shadow of what was pulsating through him now; the leg was screaming at him. His teeth sunk deeper into the jerked meat and his body convulsed. From deep in his throat came the low rumble of words being jammed together. "Ohmy-Gawd.....help me, hel..." His tortured eyes rolled back in his head and a sudden blissful blackness engulfed him.

"Jesus Tuck, he's gone and died on us," Harris cried.

"No, he ain't neither, you damn fool," Tucker scolded, "he just passed out. It'll be easier now." Then, under his breath, Tucker added, "For both of us."

CHAPTER 5: ORDEAL IN THE WATER AND FOND GOODBYES

Winter was a long time going. Clint's confinement to camp during his recovery had about driven him crazy. Once, he had ventured forth with Tucker to search out some elk that had been spotted by one of the camp's hunting parties. His leg had been feeling alright and so he had decided to go along to break the monotony. It was, however, only a matter of minutes in the saddle before his leg let him know he'd made a mistake. The pain forced him to turn back.

Clint rode straight to the lodge and once inside, pulled his britches down to inspect the leg. He found it had turned an ugly dark purple all around the scar. Apparently, it hadn't healed as well as he thought. After that, he stayed close to the lodge and took it easy.

Spring finally arrived and the ice disappeared from the river. But now, it ran wild and muddy. Each day the melting snow from the surrounding mountains forced it ever higher up its banks. Mornings and evenings were still on the cool side but the days were pleasant. Many of the trees and bushes were beginning to bud out, anticipating the coming summer.

Black Elk's camp was preparing to leave the Beaverhead and return to their summer hunting grounds. Each year, at this time, the whole tribe worked together readying themselves for the mass migration. Everyone had a job to do, even the children. Clint was amazed at how quickly they prepared for the trip. It took them less than a day to pack it all up.

Jim Tucker walked up as Clint was putting the last of his belongings into a deerskin parfliech. "Need a hand?" Jim said, smiling.

"Nah," came the reply, "I can handle it." Clint finished tying the flap down on the big leather bag. "What now?" he asked.

"Now, we all sit down to one last, big meal and then it's off to the hills. This here dinner though has a whole lotta religious ceremony tied in with it. You know, sorta like thankin' the Great Spirit fer gettin' em through another winter. They get mighty reverent, they do."

The two white men sat on a buffalo robe that had been spread out for them and watched the women stir the large cooking pots. Chunks of venison, elk, and buffalo had been put in the kettles early that morning. Various roots, herbs, nuts and whatever else they could find had been added to enhance the brew as it cooked through the day. The aroma it gave off made Clint's mouth water; he was ready to eat.

The feast began with the beating of drums and a call to the Great Spirit to bless the people and allow them a safe journey. At the same time, several braves with painted faces performed a ceremonial dance around the cooking pots. The women of the tribe scurried about between the writhing dancers, serving their men. Two women, whom Clint had never seen before, brought large servings of meat to him and Jim. They whispered what sounded like a blessing as they handed it to the two men. Jim answered with a brief thank you in Shoshone and the women went away smiling.

The meal was delicious. Everyone ate until they could eat no more. The drums were now silent and the dancers had retired to claim their share of the tender meat. Groups of people sat around laughing and talking, enjoying each other's company. "It hasn't been a bad winter," they were saying, "and truly, the Great Spirit has been good to us."

Clint leaned back on one elbow and wiped the grease from his beard. "Gawd Jim, that was one fine meal. Can't say as I've ever et one any better. These folks treat us real good. You know, it makes you feel like we're part of a big family." Jim knew what Clint meant and just shook his head in agreement.

"Peers to me as these folks have taken to you too, Clint," Jim said, without looking at his friend. "You been grateful to 'em fer helpin' ya and you've been understanding of their ways. Yes sir, I do believe they've accepted you as one of their own." Clint thought for a moment and then replied, smiling, "Don't appear to me as they had much choice in the matter. You just kinda dumped me in their laps and they couldn't do anythin' else. I am mighty grateful though. I do believe I'd a gone under or worse yet, lost my leg if'n it hadn't a been fer these folks." Jim smiled and shook his head in agreement.

For a long moment, Clint sat thinking about what Jim had just told him. It gave him a good feeling, like he belonged somewhere. He hadn't felt that way in a long time, probably since he'd left the settlements

"Excuse me pard," Clint said standing up, "but nature's callin' and I gotta make a quick trip to the trees."

Hurriedly, he made his way out of what was left of the camp toward a thick grove of trees near the river bank. It was quite a ways downstream from the campsite and he had longago selected it as his private place. He chose it because it afforded him the solitude he desired and also, it was far enough away, that everyone else in camp would not use it. After an Indian camp had been in one place for a while, it got mighty aromatic. There were only so many bushes to go behind and when they got used up, whew.

Clint had just finished his business and was walking from the trees when he heard the commotion. What had before been a friendly, relaxed, get-together had now, suddenly turned into something else. He could hear women screaming and frantic shouts filled the air. Everyone was up and running toward the river.

In an instant, he knew what was wrong; he had seen the children playing near the water when he walked to the trees. Swiftly he cut to his right and fought his way through the thick tangle of willows. The raging river ahead of him churned violently as it fought against the trees and brush that now stood in its path.

Clint reached the edge of, what had before, been the river bank. Here, the trees ended and it was open water ahead of him. He waded into the water up to his chest and stood clinging to a firmly rooted river birch. Carefully, he scanned the swollen river as he heard the cries of the people getting nearer.

The surface of the undulating, muddy mass was an uneven contour of ever-changing hills and valleys, created as it rushed over the rocks and snags that lay below in its belly. In the afternoon's fading light, Clint strained to catch a glimpse of the child he suspected had fallen in. Nothing could he see as he stood in the freezing deluge. The movement of the river was almost mesmorizing as it swirled and churned its way around and past him. "Jesus help me," he said out loud, "if there's a child here help me find him."

Almost before the words had left his lips, he saw the girl's gasping face and delicate arm with its tiny hand rise from the abyss and then go under as quickly. Clint launched himself forward with every ounce of strength he possessed. The river closed around him. Now, he too was engulfed in its power.

"C'mon little one, where are you?" he thought as he fought the current to get in line with where he thought the girl would pass. Suddenly, almost violently, he was struck in the chest by something he could not see. Clint's natural reaction caused him to grab at whatever it was that had almost knocked the wind out of him. His strong hands instantly recognized the small, struggling body as the current pressed her against him. Quickly, he lifted the child above the torrent trying to allow her a needed breath. As he did, the child's weight forced him down and he gasped to gain a lung full of air, before the brown water washed over his face.

Clint strained to hold onto the child as the heaving brown mass forced him ever downstream. Each time he managed to come in contact with the bottom, Clint would push off trying to get closer to the shore. It was impossible to hold the child and make any attempt to swim. She was in a panic scratching and clawing at him; he couldn't believe how strong she was.

Ahead, the river made a wide turn to the left. This meant that the might of the current would force him and the girl even closer to the willow lined shore. The problem was that once it made the lazy arch to the left, the river quickly reversed its path, making a sharp turn back to the right. It was at this point also that it began a narrow trek through a small gap in the low surrounding hills. Eons ago, many large boulders had sloughed off the steep hillsides and rolled into the river. Clint had seen this place on one of his jaunts from camp and had, at the time, thought how rugged the small canyon looked. He knew if they didn't get out before they reached the boulders, they wouldn't get out at all.

Quickly, Clint forced the child away from him, holding only a handful of her thick long hair. Then, with all the strength he possessed, he stroked and kicked to reach the willows. The child, feeling herself being pushed away, fought even harder. Clint felt the stinging pain of her fingernails as they dug into the flesh of his arm. The willows were now going by in a blur. As he surfaced to take a quick breath, Clint's eyes searched the shore for something to grab hold of but there was nothing within his grasp. Twice, he felt his hand dash against pieces of submerged brush but too quickly, they were there and gone.

Through it all, Clint had only been concerned with saving the child's life. Now, the bitter realization that he too may die, suddenly filled his mind. A jolt of panic shot through him and he imagined himself being pulled beneath the surface, losing that last breath, seeing that last light of day disappear as he unwillingly gave in to the murky grave. "No Goddammit, no," he screamed and stroked even harder.

Try as he might though, Clint could not seem to reach the willows. The coldness of the water and the exertion he had expended holding the child came in on him with a crushing force. He was suddenly exhausted, worn out. His resistance to the river and his willingness to survive were gone; he had tried. God, how he had tried. But now, perhaps, it wouldn't be so bad to just let go, just give in. He couldn't think straight now, nothing made sense.

Then, somewhere above the roar of the river came a familiar sound. "Clint! Clint! Grab hold here, quick." The words came to Clint's ears but he couldn't imagine who was saying them. Now, rising from the torrent before him, was a horse - a giant, beautiful horse. And sitting astride the horse was Jim Tucker. This had to be a dream and yet, there he was, big as life.

Jim seemed to be screaming something at him. It was hard to understand. "C'mon you crazy sombitch grab hold a my hand fore ya drown."

Clint could not respond, he was too weak. Jim reached down and snared Clint around the neck and shoulder and then spurred the horse toward shore. The horse in a wild panic scrambled to gain his footing on the slick bottom and stumbled his way back to the willowy shoreline. When they were within the protection of the brush, Jim eased his grip on his friend and let him down.

"Where's the girl?" Clint said, suddenly becoming aware of what was happening.

"Right there in your hand," Jim replied. "Now, let go of her hair and I'll try to help her."

Dismounting, Jim carried the child to dry land. Clint staggered along behind, coughing and still not sure of what was happening. Many of the villagers were now arriving and there was much noise and confusion. Jim wrapped the child in a blanket that someone offered and at the same time shouted something in Shoshone. Several people immediately began to gather grass and dry pieces of sagebrush. From somewhere, a flint and steel were produced and one of the braves hurriedly started a fire.

Clint was soaked and freezing cold as the reality of the situation slowly crept back into his mind. A buffalo robe was wrapped about him and he was escorted to the newly made fire. The girl, crying and shaking violently, was now being calmed by her mother. Gently, she caressed the child, rocking her back and forth and singing quietly in her ear.

The warmth of the fire and the comfort of the heavy robe soon had the child smiling. The villagers were now gathering around Clint smiling and whispering unfamiliar words. Many of them reached out gently touching him about his head and shoulders. From across the fire, the girl's mother looked at him and nodded. Although she said nothing, her eyes told him thank you.

"You all right?" Jim asked, kneeling at Clint's side.

Clint looked at him for a long moment before answering. "Thought I was a goner there for a minute," he replied. "Couldn't believe my eyes when I looked up and saw you there on that horse. You saved my bacon, Jim."

"You saved the girl," Jim quickly put in. "That was a hell of a thing you did."

Then, neither man said anything more. Quietly, they watched the fire, concentrating on the crackling heat and reliving the near brush with death. Tomorrow, this would be but a memory and they would all be on their way to the summer camp. But right now, the weight of it hung on each member of the tribe and especially on the two white men who had become their true friends.

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Clint was busy readying his horse when he heard the cheerful greeting from his friend.

"Mornin' Clint," Jim said as he led his horse into the circle of light given off by the small fire.

"It'll be dawn soon and we'll be on our way. I kin hardly wait to get shed of this damn place. Seems as though we been here forever."

"There, that oughta do it," Clint said tying off the rolled buffalo robe at the back of the saddle. Quickly he took a mental inventory of his belongings, knife, hatchet, possibles sack, shooting pouch, and rifle. Everything seemed in order.

When Jack Harris had been killed by the bear, Jim brought his rifle back to camp and presented it to Clint.

"Here," he'd said, "this'll get you through 'til you git a new one. It ain't much to look at but it shoots plumb center. Besides, I do believe he'd want you to have it."

Now, in the dim light of morning, Clint once more inspected the rifle. The deep scratches from the bear's claws showed through the heavy tallow grease that he'd rubbed into the aged maple stock. Clint had cleaned and re-cleaned the gun a dozen times and had, on occasion, gone away from the camp to fire it. Jim was right, it did shoot center.

"Jim, there's somethin' I been fixin' to tell ya," Clint said, fussing with the saddle cinch. "I won't be goin' with ya to summer camp."

The momentary silence caused by the remark was suddenly broken by Jim's gentle laugh.

"I knew all along you wouldn't be goin'," he laughed. "You ain't the community kind and I figured it was only a matter of time for you lit out."

"You know I'm plumb grateful to these folks and all they done for me," Clint offered, "But, I got this itch to git goin'..." Clint turned then to face his old friend, "you know how it is?"

Jim smiled and shook his head. "Yeah," he said "I know just how it is."

Clint then swung himself up into the saddle. "Jim, I ain't good at sayin' goodbye, so if you would, tell em for me."

"I'll do that my friend," Jim answered. "You take care, now. Keep your eye on the skyline and yer nose to the wind. We'll cross trails again sometime."

Without looking back, Clint spurred the horse up onto the same embankment along which they'd first ridden into the camp so many months before. Upon reaching its crest, he turned the pony to the northeast. Ahead of him, the shadowy mountains stood silhouetted against the morning's dim sky. Through his tears, their outline was a blur.

CHAPTER 7: STORM

The Wind River was beautiful. It sparkled under the morning sun and its bubbling voice mixed with the sounds of the insects and birds. Nature's music filled Clint's ears as he tended to his horses. It had been a long hard ride from the big lake and now it was time for a bath.

First, he led each horse into the stream, giving them each a good wash. Afterward, he washed himself and rinsed out his buckskins. The cold water felt good on his leg, seeming to numb it. The riding had been difficult. No matter which way he shifted in the saddle, he could not get comfortable. Each step the horse had taken had caused him pain. Now, it just felt good to stop and rest.

While his buckskins dried, Clint hunted about through the brush for some berries. On the afternoon before, while riding to his campsite, he'd noticed wild raspberries growing here and there. If they were ripe they'd be mighty tasty. He hadn't eaten anything sweet for God knows how long.

It was because he was used to walking quiet, that Clint was able to come onto the big bear without being seen or heard. It seems that someone besides himself was fixin' to dine on sweet berries. As he stepped around a large thicket of willow, Clint came face to face with the bruin. The animal had apparently been dining on the sweet fruit for some time for his face and chest were spattered with seeds and bright red dripping juice.

Immediately, the bear rose up on its hind legs. There they stood, face to face, a naked man and a messy black bear, staring directly into each other's eyes. Had it not been so frightening, it might have been funny but Clint was not laughing. He'd committed the unthinkable sin - he'd walked out of camp without his rifle. "What the hell do I do now," he thought, grasping for answers. "No knife! No gun! Hell, maybe I oughta just pee on him."

With that, a crazy thought popped into his head and without further consideration, he quickly raised his hands above his head and screamed at the top of his voice. It completely caught the bear off guard and it whirled about and streaked off into the brush. Clint too, spun about and scurried to get his rifle.

"My God," he said, scolding himself, "I ought to be whipped for pullin' a stupid ass trick like that. Could a got myself killed."

"I'll go along with that," came an answering voice. "There for a minute, I thought that bear was gonna have you for dinner. Yer kinda skinny though and whiter'n my uncle's pet goose."

Again, Clint's heart leaped into his throat. Two times in one day was too much. Quickly he turned to face the chuckling voice.

"Sweet Jesus! You nearly scared me to death. Who the hell are you?"

"Name's Larch," came the answer "Theodore Larch, but you can call me Ned, everyone else does." Behind his cheerfulness, the man had the eyes of a hunter. Carefully, he looked Clint over, measuring him up. Apparently satisfied that he posed no threat, he again chuckled and asked, "And who might you be, neighbor?"

"My name's Jeffries, Clint Jeffries and if you'll pardon me a moment, I'll get my clothes on."

"That's probably a good idea," the man laughed, "I think you're scarin' my horse."

As he dressed, Clint looked toward his rifle leaning against the nearby river willow. The man's cautious eye

caught his glance. For a moment, he was still but as he climbed from his horse his deep voice issued forth, "You made one mistake today, neighbor. Don't make another one. I don't want to have to kill you but if you go for that rifle, I'll shoot you where you stand." He paused and then added, "If it was your life I wanted, I could have shot you before. You'd have never known what hit you."

"I guess you're right," Clint answered, considering the man's words. "You'll have to excuse my manners, I ain't used to bein' around people."

The buckskins were cold and clammy as he slid them up over his rump.

"God I hate climbin' into wet clothes," he whispered. "Somehow, it don't seem natural."

Ned Larch had walked past him to the edge of the camp and was now looking back from the direction he'd come. "All right, come on in Lou," he yelled.

Clint stood there watching him and wondering what was going on. In a few moments, he heard horses approaching.

"That there's my wife and her sister," Larch commented, pointing to the oncoming riders. "Didn't want 'em gettin' in the way just in case I had some trouble with you. You understand?"

Clint understood but he didn't answer the question. As the women drew nearer, he could see they were Indian. From the look of their clothing and their accoutrements he guessed them to be Blackfeet. As he studied them, so too did they study him. Their intense stare led him to suppose they hadn't seen many white men.

Ned Larch walked toward them as they entered the camp. Softly he spoke to them and they both dismounted.

"You speak any Blackfoot, neighbor?" Larch asked.

Then, before Clint could answer, he added, "these girls are Piegans. They live further north than the Blackfeet but they're blood kinfolk to 'em and they speak nearly the same language."

Clint knew a little of the Blackfoot language. Jim had taught him a few phrases and key words when they first started trapping together. During long winter days and at night around the fire, Jim would converse with him in the tongue and make him practice.

"Could save yer hide someday," he'd say. "Might need it if'n you get yourself into a tight pinch."

"No I don't, Ned," Clint answered, not wanting to share that information. "Can't say as I ever learned it."

Satisfied with the answer, Larch again said something to the women and they started unloading the pack animal they had in tow.

"I told 'em to cook us up some food, neighbor. I hope that's all right with you?"

Clint nodded and went about finishing getting dressed.

It didn't take the women long to put together the meal. They spread out a soft buckskin mat and upon it laid out some dried elk meat and some flat bread-like biscuits. From the stream, they took up some water in a pottery bowl and mixed into it what looked like dried, mashed up meat. To this, they added some wild onion and other herbs. Together, it made a kind of watery brown looking soup but it didn't taste half bad. The biscuits were hard enough to break a tooth but when sloshed about in the soup, they softened up and tasted good too.

It still wasn't clear to Clint exactly what Ned Larch wanted. Most people in these parts were careful who they took up with. It wasn't that people, white people that is, weren't friendly and glad to see each other. It's just that one had to be careful. This was a savage land and the men who survived it weren't always honorable. And so, Clint waited, knowing that whatever it was Ned wanted would sooner or later come out.

Before they ate, Ned introduced his wife and her sister. "Neighbor, this here is my wife, Lou." He wrapped his huge arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him. "I call her that cause her Injun name don't make no sense. Besides, I can't say it with just one mouthful of air."

Grinning, he turned his attention to the other woman. "That gal there is my wife's older sister, Storm. Her Injun name is WaNeha-eo. That means Sky with Storm Clouds About. They couldn't a named her better. She's seen some hard times."

The woman lowered her eyes realizing that Larch was talking about her. Ned patted her on the knee and continued to speak. "Yes sir, she's seen some trouble, she has. She married a buck a few years back and he treated her all right. You know, as well as any buck treats his squaw. Then, he found out she couldn't bear him any children. Well, he ups and marries another woman, brings her into the teepee and turns Storm, here, into a slave. She done all the dirty work around the camp while the other woman just laid about breedin' an takin' it easy. When she began to complain, he beat her. The beatin's got to be an everyday thing so she lit out and come to find her sister." Larch paused for a moment and picked up the remaining piece of elk meat that lay on the buckskin mat before him. Popping it into his mouth, he went on. "When her husband found out she'd left, he come to our camp lookin' for her; had blood in his eye, too. He rode right up, jumped off'n his horse, and drug her from our teepee by the hair. Then, he proceeded to beat her with his guirt. I didn't dare step in bein' as how he had five other fellers with him. They don't like me

anyway 'cause I married one of theirs and they'd have taken my hair and not thought twice of it.

Afterward, he tied a leather thong around her neck and made her walk behind his horse all the way back to camp, nigh onto ten miles it was. Wasn't bad enough that he done that but then he led her smack through the middle of the village. Everybody in camp was laughin' at her. She was disgraced in front of her own family.

That night, as a final insult, he decided he was gonna have himself a little bit, so he climbed in under her buffalo robe and set about pokin' her. Only thing he didn't figure on was that she'd hidden a knife in her moccasin when she was fixin' dinner. She did a little pokin' of her own. When she got through, he was stone dead. The other woman in the tent didn't pay any attention to the commotion, as it was a common occurrence. When the other woman had gone to sleep, Storm gathered up what belongin's she had and scooted outta there. Also, before she left, she cut off his balls and stuffed 'em in his mouth.

She rode to our camp again. But this time, when I found out what happened, I thought it best to high tail it out of there. I'm sure when they came lookin' for her, they'd have killed all three of us. Since then, I've done about everything I know to try and lose 'em and I think I've been successful. I don't believe they'll find us now.

I tell you though, it made the hair on the back of my neck raise up a little when I heard you comin' yesterday. You rode within a stone's throw of our camp and I thought at first you were those Injuns."

While listening to the story, Clint casually watched the woman Larch called "Storm." She was taller than most Indian women he'd seen and she was trim; he supposed it was because of the hard work she'd suffered. Though she looked like her sister, she was not as round faced. Both were very pretty but her face was longer and her mouth seemed somewhat drawn down at the corners. She carried a loneliness on her cheek and a sadness in her eyes that seemed to reflect the agonizing heartache and pain that Ned Larch had so vividly described.

"She'll not get close to another man," he thought. And then, in a whisper to himself, he murmured, "what a shame."

The meal was good. Clint thanked the women and moved a few feet backward, taking advantage of some nearby shade.

"Where you headed for now, Ned?" he asked, brushing some loose sand from his britches.

"Don't rightly know. I ain't too familiar with this part of the country. Gotta find someplace though, where game's plentiful and winters are mild. Maybe some special place along the big river. I'll know it when I see it."

For a moment, he paused and looked about, as though that special place might be right there within seeing distance. "I'm not much on trappin' or tryin' to get rich. I just like to hunt and fish and be left alone. Once a year though, when I run outta tobacco and my ball and powder are gettin' scarce, I travel north to the Missouri and trade what furs I've collected; usually, I meet up with some of the company men or sometimes even the French. They're always willin' to take prime fur in exchange for a few of their supplies."

Ned Larch reached down and began taking off his moccasins. Kicking the last one free, he got to his feet and walked to the river's edge. There, he waded in the rippling water, scuffing his toes along the sandy bottom.

"Whew, that feels good." Ned bent over and scooped up some water, washing it over his face and the back of his neck. "And what about you, neighbor?" Ned asked. "Where you headin'?"

"Back to St. Lou I reckon," Clint answered.

With the mention of the word Lou, Larch's wife looked at Clint and smiled.

"Took an arrow in my leg last year, just above the knee. The point's still in there; buried in the bone. It causes me some grief, so I'm gonna find me a doctor that will take it out."

Without turning, Larch began to speak again. "Wouldn't mind taggin' along with you as far as the Missouri, if it's all right. Reckon I could meet up with some parties travelin' to the mountains; maybe do some tradin' with 'em. We could use some supplies."

"It's all right with me" Clint answered, "It's a free country and besides, I could use the company. I think it fair to warn you though, I'm headin' due east to the Platte. I never been that way before and it might be rough goin'." He paused for a moment waiting for some reply. When none came, he went on.

"Anyway, I figured from there I can build a raft or a bull boat and float to St. Lou. It'd be a whole lot easier on my leg ridin' a raft instead of a horse."

Ned Larch nodded his head in agreement. "Sounds good to me, neighbor. Let's get goin'."

By midafternoon of the next day, they had arrived at the confluence of the Wind and Beaver Rivers. Here, they stopped to rest and eat. While Lou gathered wood and built a small fire, Storm caught some trout from the deep riffle where the rivers came together. Clint and Ned tended to the horses, tethering them in a nearby grove of cottonwood trees where there was good grass. "Ned, my leg's kinda stiff from all that ridin'. I think I'll walk on down the river a ways and give it a workout. Maybe it'll loosen up some."

The other agreed, nodding and Clint quietly slipped away through the thick brush. Moving ahead at a slow pace, his keen eyes searched the wooded stream banks, taking in all the sights and sounds of nature's presence. The smell of the cottonwoods filled his nose with a sweet perfume that reminded him of times gone by. Times, when as a boy, he had stalked the white-tailed deer and laid ambush for the wily turkeys that abounded on his father's farm.

"Those were shinin' times," he whispered.

An hour had passed when at last Clint arrived back with the others. Storm was the first to see him coming. And though she quickly dropped her eyes, pretending not to care, Clint could see that she seemed relieved.

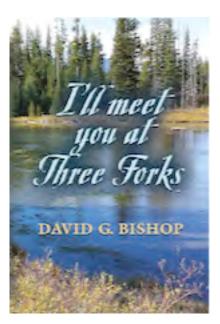
"How's the leg, neighbor?" Larch asked.

"It's sore," Clint answered, bending over to take one of the skewered trout from the fire. "I'll be all right but I think we outta finish up here and high tail it. There's lots of Injun sign about and we'd play hell to make a fight of it against any kinda huntin' party."

Larch listened intently and when he at last spoke, it was to the women. He told them what Clint had said and instructed them to finish up quickly.

As the women struck camp, the men filled what skins and flasks they had with water. There was no telling what lie ahead nor how far the next stream might be. This water would have to see them through.

When they'd finished, they forded the wide stream and rode out of the stony river bottom, up onto the low sage covered hills. Ahead of them lay the vast expanse of the great prairie, stretching out as far as the eye could see. Behind them, the purple hazed mountains loomed large and beautiful. It would be four days before they finally lost sight of them. It would seem like a lifetime before they saw them again.



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