

# **Greed's Reward**

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## **Chapter One**

Blake Thornton looked around him and couldn't help smiling. He was in his element, enjoying the fresh air, sunshine, and just plain being up on the mountain where he had always loved to be. His family's ranch, at the foot of the mountain, was great and he truly loved everything about it. But there was just something extra special about being up here. Of course, it was always a lot better when he was able to be up here all by himself.

When he was up here alone this way, he was able to escape from all the responsibilities of running a ranch plus a side business. At least for a little while, he could avoid all those decisions that had to be made on a daily basis ... back down there.

Up here, he could just be himself. He could do his own thinking without Reggie or Kirby trying to tell him what to do all the time. Sure, he loved his big sister and his little brother, but sometimes they could be just a little bit overbearing. He laughed as he mentally added bossy to the list, at least where Reggie was concerned.

Of course, he knew that most of the problems he had with his sister and brother were because he was so much different from them. They were both so outgoing and talkative, where he ... well, he just wasn't. Some people thought he was slow, but no one who really knew him thought that. He just liked to take his time and think things through before he did or said anything. And he just plain did not like to talk all the time like most people.

He loved to be alone, especially out in the woods. He felt so much closer to God up here. Sometimes he felt like he could actually feel God's presence in amongst the Ponderosa pines and oaks or hear Him in the whispering of the wind through the tall Ponderosas. As he looked out across the valley below he took a deep breath and let it out slowly with a big smile on his face.

He figured that was at least part of the reason why he had come up with the idea of starting a hunting guide service. They needed it so they could feed some more cash into their struggling ranch operation. The best part was that he'd still be able to enjoy the woods.

He stopped when he came to one of his favorite spots on the mountain. It was a large flat rock next to a small piñon, which just threw enough shade to cover the rock. Without thinking, he stepped over to the rock and slid his backpack to the ground. As he sat on the rock, he was able to lean his back against the tree trunk.

He didn't need to rest. No way! He could hike up here all day long without having to stop except to take a drink of water or eat a lunch. He kept in great shape by going up and down the mountain three or four times a week. It was a different kind of exercise than his regular ranch chores. No, he wasn't like some of the guys he grew up with who were already getting that middle age spread and they were still a couple of years shy of thirty.

No, he wasn't tired. He just wanted to look out over the valley below ... his home for all of his life. Well, except for the two years he'd been gone in the army.

He could see Bear Creek clearly, as it wound its way through the middle of the valley. He could see most of the little town also named Bear Creek. But he couldn't see his ranch which was out of sight below him, at the base of the mountain.

Then he slowly turned his gaze around in a circle as he took in the mountains that surrounded his valley on the other three sides. He never tired of looking at it. Man, there wasn't anything more beautiful anywhere in the

world. And he knew what he was talking about too. He'd been in a lot of foreign places in the army but none of them ever compared to his little piece of Arizona. No sir!

He was just about to get up and head on up the trail which bypassed the old ghost town, when something hit the rock next to his leg and then he heard the unmistakable sound of a rifle shot coming from up above him.

He immediately dropped to the dirt behind the rock as his Ranger training took over. Looking over the rock with his Glock 9mm in his hand, he began to scan the area where the shot came from. He wondered if he'd need his cannon that was in his backpack since the 9mm wouldn't be much good against a rifle of any kind. He usually only carried the rather heavy S&W .500 on his belt when he was guiding a bear or lion hunt but he always had it handy in his backpack.

After about five minutes and no more shots, Blake took his hat off and raised it above the rock, then back down quickly. When no shot rang out, he raised it again but a little more this time and didn't see or hear anything.

He reached around the rock and pulled his backpack over to his side. He was about to reach in it for the big pistol when he distinctly heard a Brown Creeper making its high-pitched 'see-see-see-whee-see-see' sound and it was coming from the area where he was sure the shooter had been.

He knew that bird would not be singing like that if there was a human close to him. So Blake cautiously stood and slung on his backpack, then began making his way up to where he thought the shot had come from.

It didn't take him long to find a place where it looked like the weeds had been stomped down like someone had stood there for a little while. Then he looked around and the sun glinting off something on the ground caught his eye. He stepped over to the edge of the tramped down area and bending over, picked up an empty cartridge case.

He turned the brass around and saw that it was a .30-30 Winchester. Okay, that's what it was but the question now was, who had shot at him and why? Blake knew that whoever had taken that shot from only fifty yards away was either a very bad shot or he hadn't meant to hit him. But why?

Why would anyone around here be taking warning shots at him? Sure, there were a few guys around the valley just mean enough to want to scare him that way, but somehow, he didn't think this was someone he knew. Those guys had plenty of opportunities to mess with him down there without having to come all the way up here.

No, it had to be a stranger, maybe someone passing through. Then he remembered that he'd heard the forest service guys saying that every now and then someone would campout for a while at the old Bear Creek Ghost Town. That's probably what it was.

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Dixie Gordon wasn't usually a worrier. In fact, she even prided herself on being a calm, rational woman who could take care of herself. Hadn't she proved just that for almost four years now, ever since Dan had taken off, leaving her with no way to support their twin babies?

But today, she was worried. She was nervous about what Dan would do now that he had apparently reappeared. Of course, she knew why he'd come back. She'd finally filed for a divorce on the grounds of desertion and her lawyer down in Stillwater told her that he'd found Dan so the papers could be served on him. But that was over a month ago. Why was he just now coming?

All she knew was that her lawyer had told her that Dan had said he was coming up to Bear Creek to see her and his daughters. Ha! Sara and Sheila were four years old and he hadn't bothered to see them in all this time. In fact, he'd left not long after they were born.

No! As she thought about it, she wasn't worried. She was just plain mad! She was so mad at that smooth talking snake of a man she'd made the colossal mistake of marrying five years ago. He was nothing but a low-down skunk but she hadn't been able to see through all his smooth talking until after the girls were born. Then he'd shown his true colors for sure.

She laughed now when she remembered how he'd told her that he'd really tried but he just wasn't father material. Ha! She had news for him. He hadn't been husband material either!

She looked around the big room. This was hers! Her bar! Although naming it The Thirsty Bear had been her mom's idea, she really liked the name.

She'd had a problem at first getting comfortable with the idea that she was running a bar. But she knew her heart was right with the Lord. She just stayed away from the local church so there wouldn't be anyone complaining about her attending.

But she really did love this place, mainly because it wasn't like most bars. No one ever got drunk here, she wouldn't let them. There were never any fights. She wouldn't allow that either. And best of all, most of the families in the valley felt comfortable coming there for supper in the evenings. Some even brought their kids.

Oh, and there were no pool tables or other games that drunks tended to gather around in other bars. When anyone walked into her bar, they would think they'd come into a family restaurant if it wasn't for the bar that was prominent on the back wall in front of the kitchen.

Yes, if there could be such a thing, she had a family oriented bar. That gave her a warm feeling inside. Even at that, she tried to limit the amount of time her four-year olds spent in there. She wanted to shelter them as much as she possibly could.

Dixie began to busy herself doing prep work for supper, since she knew her uncle would be over soon and didn't want him to have to do everything.

She gave him a special smile when she saw him come into the kitchen through the back door a few minutes later. She dearly loved her uncle and his new wife.

Buck and Nellie Freeman had moved up to Bear Creek from Sierra Vista two years ago when Dixie's parents had given her the bar and moved to Sun City to, as they called it, live it up in their retirement. Dixie was an only child and her parents had both been forty when she was born.

Buck was ten years younger than Dixie's mom was and he had retired from the army down at Ft. Huachuca several years ago. He'd said he'd just been bouncing around until he found out Dixie could use some help in her bar, specifically with the cooking. After all, he'd been a cook in the army and she thought he was one of the best.

They had both been a godsend to Dixie. Nellie watched the twins and even kept her house next door clean. She couldn't have been happier with her circumstances until yesterday when her lawyer had phoned to warn her that Dan was coming.

As usual, wherever she was in the bar when Buck came in, he came up to her, then hugged her and kissed her on the cheek. She used to slouch whenever she was next to him since she was the same height that he was. But he'd laughed when he'd caught her doing it and told her that he didn't have a single problem with her being as tall as him.

Once he'd greeted her, he went back into the kitchen to begin his preparations for supper.

They usually had one home style dish as a special each evening to go along with the hamburgers and other sandwiches that were always on the menu. Tonight, Buck was making one of his specialties, Beef Roladen with sauerkraut and fried potatoes.

She grinned to herself. Whenever he served that particular meal, the place would fill up with people from all over the valley. Since there were no real restaurants in town, the two bars and a donut shop that also served coffee were the only places where people could go to eat out, so to speak.

Something she'd learned from her dad and continued doing was to close the actual bar down during supper and only serve beer and soft drinks at the tables. It was a concession to those who didn't drink but still wanted to have a sit-down meal. She was okay with that and it had been a long-time tradition there so her bar patrons didn't complain either. In fact, they usually ate too, which also tended to help keep them sober longer. Therefore, it seemed to work out just fine for all concerned.

The only drawback for Dixie was that it was still a bar so she tried to keep her highly impressionable daughters out of there, even the back area, and the kitchen. However, it did provide fairly well for all five of them. That was all that mattered right now.

Her thoughts turned back to Dan. She'd called his parents who owned a ranch on the other end of the valley. They'd said that he hadn't told them when he was coming either, just that he was coming sometime this week. Well, it was Monday and that left a lot of time for her to worry about what Dan might do.

Knowing Dan, he would probably show up right in the middle of her supper rush, fully aware that she wouldn't be able to think clearly enough to fend off anything he said or did.

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After finding the brass, Blake decided to change his direction slightly and head over to the old ghost town to see if maybe somebody was staying there. He had traveled five miles so far and it was only another mile up there. The fork in the trail was only a hundred yards or so up ahead. He took the left fork to go the ghost town this time.

First though, he slung his backpack off and switched gun belts. With someone shooting a rifle at him, he felt better with his S & W .500 pistol on his hip rather than the much shorter range 9mm.

Of course, one downside to this gun was that it weighed twice as much as the 9mm and the barrel was almost twice as long too. It was a great gun when he did guided hunts for bear or lion, since the state only allowed the guide to carry a handgun. That gun would stop either one of those critters and it sure made him feel much more comfortable.

There was a bend in the trail just before it reached the ghost town and Blake stepped into the bushes on the inside of the bend so he could get a good look at the town without being seen. From there, he could see about half of the old town.

Nothing moved and the old falling-down buildings looked exactly the same as they had every other time he'd been up here. The first time had been when he'd only been about six. His dad had brought him and his eight-year-old sister up there.

Luckily, there was enough manzanita scattered around beneath some taller piñon that he was able to hide behind it until he felt safe enough to venture into the town.

For about five minutes, he watched the buildings for any sign of movement. When he didn't see anything, he decided to go up and get a closer look.

Cautiously, he stepped out of the bushes and began making his way up to the first buildings. It didn't take long for him to see footprints and other signs that someone had been all over the place and recently too.

His first inclination was to start looking for whoever it was so he could give them a piece of his mind about shooting at people. Then common sense prevailed and he decided that it might not be a good idea to do that, especially all by himself. If someone was in one of those old buildings, he could easily pick Blake off any time he was out in the open.

He was just about to head back when he saw a flash of something up toward the other end of the town. He stared at the spot for a long time before he saw it again. He was sure then that he had seen an animal dart across an open area. He kept looking and finally saw it again and this time he knew it was a dog and not a coyote since it was black and white.

He kept watching for a few more minutes without seeing anything else. He decided that whoever was up there was watching him too and he wouldn't be able to get any closer.

So he turned around and headed back down the mountain. After all, he'd accomplished everything that he'd come up the mountain for in the first place. He had a group of three men coming tomorrow to go on a bear hunt and he'd seen plenty of signs of one shortly before he'd been shot at.

But he was going to tell both Chip Green, the resident county deputy and Ross Johnson the forest service cop, or law enforcement officer as they called him. He was sure that at least Ross would be interested since it was more his jurisdiction than Chip's. But he knew that being the only law for miles around the two men worked together as much as possible.

The closer he came to the valley and his ranch, the more the money problems they were having played over and over in his mind. He sure hoped that this bear hunt would be only the first one of many to make up a good fall season. They desperately needed the money.