

ONE

Soon after the massacre at Goose Creek, Hanlon's band of killers split up. I believe with most of them, once it had sunk in what they had done, it hit them hard and sickened them as it had already sickened me even as it was happening. Some of them, though not many, thought they had done a damned good job and even bragged about how many innocents they slaughtered and went into great detail about the brutal and sadistic way they had gone about their business. That sickened me even more and I was one of the first to withdraw my services from Hanlon and go my own way. I had thought at the time, my decision to leave would cause John Hanlon to turn his men on me for deserting what he considered to be his private army. He was a very rich man and paid us well to fight for him, but when I joined up I had thought we would be fighting warriors head on not slaughtering defenceless women and children. As far as Hanlon was concerned they were all the same. In his mind, they were all savages and needed to be wiped out for the uncivilised heathens they were. Strangely, he had become as subdued as the rest of us, or most of the rest of us and didn't object when some of the men parted company with him and his army and went their own way. However, he still retained over a dozen of the less conscientious men, those who seemed to derive pleasure out of what they had done, but I never heard of any more massacres attributed to Hanlon after I left.

I had been a mercenary from when I was big enough to hold a gun and shoot it with a certain amount of accuracy and the only way I knew how to get by was by hiring myself out to anybody who wanted to settle a dispute with violence and there were usually plenty of rich men who were happy to hire men like me to do their fighting for them.

During a long, hard life, I came through many battles and range wars virtually unscathed as well as spending four years in the Union Army during the war and I figured I'd been damned lucky to be pushing sixty and still be alive and healthy. However, I began to doubt my luck soon after I met the Star Girls.

Two

It was the year of 1881 and I was on my way to Boulder County in Colorado where I had heard a range war was simmering between two big ranches and they were both hiring. I figured I would join whichever rancher was willing to pay the best price for a skilful gunman such as me. I already had a good reputation, or bad depending on which way you looked at it so I figured I would be able to demand top dollar for my services.

I had been following a river upstream looking for a suitable place to camp overnight, for although there was plenty of daylight left I was reluctant to veer away from the source of water which was flowing in a southerly direction, even though my destination lay to the west. I did not know this particular territory, therefore I had no way of knowing when I would come across water again.

As I advanced upstream, I detected the distant roaring sound of gushing water and after advancing farther, I saw a few hundred yards ahead, a high promontory with water cascading over rocks and plunging down into the river many feet below. From where I sat my horse, the waterfall looked a spectacular sight and would make an ideal place to camp. It would also give me a chance to bathe and wash away the sweat and grime from my body, I couldn't remember the last time I'd had an all over bath. I urged my roan forward and headed for the waterfall. There was plenty of vegetation, trees and thick bushes around which wasn't surprising considering the abundance of water. So it wasn't easy going to make my way around thickets, dense undergrowth and mesquite trees and such as I headed for the cascading water. However, I eventually came within spitting distance of the falls and was about to skirt round a clump of bushes which would bring me to the edge of the water, when I noticed movement on the other side of the thicket. I peered through the leaves and branches and was just about able, to make out what looked like a large animal maybe a deer or a horse, either way I decided to use caution in my approach for if it was a deer I would try and shoot it. I hadn't tasted venison in a long time and it would make a welcome change from beans and flat bread. On the other hand if it was a horse it would mean there was a man or men around which could spell danger especially if they were Indians.

I dismounted and removed my rifle from the scabbard mounted next to my saddle before levering a bullet into the chamber. When I was ready, I used as much stealth as I was able, to skirt the bushes having tied my horse to a sapling growing close by. Peering round the final bush, I saw that sure enough, it was a horse and it had been picketed close to the water's edge where there was plenty of lush grass amongst the other vegetation that grew around. Beyond the horse there were rocks which obscured my view of the lower part of the waterfall and there didn't appear to be anybody around. The horse had been stripped of its saddle and bridle and apart from the picket pin and rope there was no other sign of human presence. I figured whoever he was, he would have a camp close to the water's edge on the other side of the rocks. I thought about calling out but doubted I would be heard over the sound of the water as it plunged into the river from a great height. Therefore, I cautiously rounded the rocks and saw before me the spectacular sight of the cascading water

falling onto rocks and flowing into the river. Furthermore, I was completely taken aback when I saw before me, a far more spectacular sight than the waterfall and one I had been totally unprepared for. What I saw left me awe struck and mesmerised and I became rooted to the spot, enchanted by the vision before me. I stared in disbelief at the naked woman beneath the falls who appeared to be completely unaware of my presence as she bathed beneath the falling water that washed over her long hair. Nothing could have prepared me for what I was seeing that day and to say I was shocked would be an understatement but to say I became bewitched, would be just about the truth. For I knew right then without a shadow of a doubt, I had never in my entire long life, beheld a more beautiful sight. Even some of the pictures I had seen hanging in the magnificent theatres of Chicago would never compare to the spectacle that these old eyes of mine beheld. I had seen naked women before of course, mostly whores and bar girls and the odd widow woman just after the war so I figured I was qualified to compare and to my mind, there was no comparison. Compared to other women, this one was a goddess, she was slim, lithe and tall and with the water cascading over her body, what I saw was a living masterpiece. I could not move and could not tear my eyes from the fascinating sight before me and that was my downfall because I had become so mesmerised, that everything around me faded into the background of my mind. That was until I felt the muzzle of a rifle pressed against the back of my neck and I heard the sweet young voice of a girl with easy, measured tones.

‘Avert your goddamned filthy eyes mister, or I’ll blow your fucking brains out.’

I stiffened and wondered if she would really do it, after all she sounded like little more than a child, but the authoritative and confident way she spoke commanded respect despite her obvious youth and that convinced me she wouldn’t hesitate to put a bullet in me if I so much as spoke in the wrong tone of voice,

‘Alright take it easy kid, I didn’t mean to stare I was taken by surprise when I saw your friend and I was about to turn and walk away.’

‘Yeah right.’ She hissed as she plucked my colt from the holster on my hip. ‘Place the rifle on the ground easy, then turn around.’

I did as she asked and slowly turned to face her. My impression of her had been right, she was a young girl but not as young as I expected. I figured she would be around sixteen possibly younger but she was almost as tall as me and by the way she held the rifle trained on me with the cool confidence and boldness of a mature and skilled gunman changed any thoughts I might have harboured about disarming her. I would not have been capable anyhow for I instantly, recognized that young face, it had been etched on my memory for

over two years and I found myself struck immobile with shock for the second time that day. She must have recognised me also, because her demeanour took on a change when she began to study me and her pretty face twisted into a mask of hatred.

‘You bastard!’ she snarled.

I was totally incapable of moving and was too slow to get out of the way as she suddenly reversed the rifle in her hands and smashed the butt against my temple with more force than belied her tender years. The power behind the blow was hard enough to knock me unconscious, for the next thing I remembered was waking up lying on my side on the ground hogtied with rawhide and whoever had done it had made a damned fine job because the only thing I was capable of moving, was my head which I have to say, was throbbing with intense pain from the rifle blow.

When full awareness came to me, I found I was a few yards away from and facing, a fire. I raised my head as much as I was able and saw two young women sitting side by side on a log on the other side of the fire facing my way and watching me intently. They both sipped at mugs of what I considered to be coffee going by the smell that drifted my way and I suddenly craved a drink of the hot bitter liquid. But neither of them made any move to approach me and I was becoming painfully aware of the rawhide biting into my wrists and ankles for they had removed my boots before tying me up.