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Warnings We Do Not Heed

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Indian Head Nickel

One hot July morning, I heard the *yip yip yipping* of Paiute Indians coming from the south fields and nearly threw myself behind a pile of wood like I'd been dropped back with the 7th Cav as a horde of Sioux and Arapaho were charging. But then I got ahold of myself, relieved no one saw my knees buckle, and called over to Little Frankie playing in the barn to run over to the house and warn Mama, Aunt Polly, and Owen about our incoming visitors. Paiutes weren't necessarily unfriendly in these parts, but still two braves riding up the back switch trail was unusual enough to warrant caution. So I grabbed my gun and holster from the peg and hitched the belt around my waist before walking over to the side yard to get a better look.

"Do you see anything more?" Aunt Polly asked joining me in the side yard and handing me the spy glass.

"I can see two braves on pintos riding up the back spur trail," I said. "They're kicking up a good head of dust too. Not full tilt, but they're coming fast and'll be here pretty shortly."

“Lord a mercy,” Aunt Polly exclaimed taking hold of the cross at her neck and making the sign of the cross with her other, “What do you make of it? Will there be trouble?”

“Not sure. I don’t think so. I can see they’re carrying two large baskets strapped between their horses, and it’s got them loaded down pretty solid, but I don’t see them carrying any weapons. Maybe somebody’s chasing them? Though I don’t see anyone else.”

Mama walked outside with Little Frankie and Owen at this point, but I motioned Owen back inside to where the Marlin carbine was hanging above the door frame out of sight.

“Wait there till after the Paiute’s arrive,” I called over to Owen. He nodded and took down the Marlin to chamber a round.

When the Paiutes pulled up less than five minutes later, dragging to a stop in front of the cabin, I stepped forward and spoke, “Hello,” giving the greeting sign for welcome. The older Indian - though neither looked particularly aged past their teenage years - climbed down from his pinto and gave the Paiute greeting for friend in return.

“Hello, friend. I am Saaches.”

“Hello Saaches.”

The other Indian, the younger one, ignored us completely. He swung down off his horse and started untying and unloading the two large woven baskets strapped between -- dragging them over to the nearby soft grass by the wagons. When he finished, he leapt back onto his horse and with a “yip!” took off back the way he’d come.

“Oh my,” Aunt Polly whispered to Mama as we all looked over at Saaches. Saaches waited till the dust settled, then in word and sign said, “The great chief Tawhawai sends greetings to his friend, *Jacob Fitzgerald*, and *Jacob Fitzgerald’s* family from all the

Paiute of the Pa-Roos-Its band. Please accept this gift," and here he gestured to the baskets, "as gratitude for the honor *Jacob Fitzgerald* bestowed upon Chief Tawhawai at the Lackawanna of the Itom Aye River three suns ago." And with that, Saaches remounted, "*yipped!*" and rode off in traditional Indian fashion -- which meant, when the job was done, they left without delay. No further pleasantries required.

"Land sakes!" Aunt Polly said, placing her hands over her heart. "What will happen next?"

Mama ignored her because, well, of the two sisters, Polly was always the more dramatic and Mama apparently not in the mood this morning.

"What a fine and unexpected gift," Mama said lifting the basket lid and discovering peaches inside. "This should keep us in pies and preserves all winter."

Owen looked under the lid of the second basket. "There's a whole bunch of peaches in this one too!" pulling one out and smelling it. "But we'll have to get at them soon. They're dead ripe."

I looked over the gift Saaches claimed was reward for something Pa did three days ago, but I had no way of knowing what it could've been. Pa and Uncle Miles were out country going on two week and we hadn't heard from them yet. But they were due back any day. It didn't really matter though cause soon as I smelled them ripe peaches, I got distracted. Already I was thinking about peach cobbler and peach pie and making peach ice cream - if we had time to make it to town for some rock salt and ice. Which would be nice cause then I could visit Sarah Ann.

"Can I have one?" Little Frankie asked Mama, tugging at her apron.

"Just one," she said smiling down at him, "but that's all for now. You'll want more, but I don't want you getting a stomachache from too much fruit."

"I won't," Frankie promised picking up a peach from the nearest basket.

"Rinse that off as well please, Frankie. There's bound to be trail dirt on them."

"Yes, Mama."

"I'll check the storage shed to see how many fruit jars we have," Aunt Polly said putting herself to work, "And I'm pretty sure we still have two twenty-five-pound drums of sugar in there too. We'll have to use most of it to get this job done."

"While you're looking," Mama added, "check to see how much paraffin we have left to seal the jars. If we have enough, we can make jam as well. Boys," Mama called out, "go fetch some extra wood. We're gonna need maybe half a cord at least. Enough to keep the fire burning hot so we can scald all these peaches."

I grabbed my double bit axe from the shed and started walking out back to the wood pile. Owen and Frankie joined me moments later pulling the two wheeled cart we used to haul wood back and forth.

"Why didn't those Indians have any paint on their faces?" Frankie asked, "Indians always wear paint in the picture books."

"Indians only wear face paint when they go to war," Owen explained to Frankie, "If they'd been wearing war paint, we'd been in some kinda trouble fighting 'em off."

"Really?" Frankie asked, his eyes going wide.

"Owen, don't scare him, please," I said, "He don't know you're joking. You'll give him nightmares." Owen also preferred the dramatic like Aunt Polly. Which he regularly channeled into Shakespearean sonnets or Tennyson poems performed for the family after dinner. But sometimes, like Aunt Polly, he went a little too far.

"Don't worry Frankie," Owen said, "Those Indians who visited today were friendly Indians, sure enough. But they were Paiute and Paiute aren't hostile. Paiute are all tame and mostly farmers living on the reservation nowadays. But if they'd been Comanche! Oh, brother, they would've attacked for sure and you and I would've been scalped! Our fine blond hair cut clean off! And much worse for the women folk."

"Oh, okay," Frankie said moving closer to me and looking around at the woods while Owen smugly smiled. "When are Poppa and Uncle Miles gonna get home?"

"Probably later today or early tomorrow most likely," I replied trying to reassure Frankie with a pat on the shoulder while shooting Owen a look to let him know we'd be having words later. "They're down by the Virgin River where it meets the Muddy and it'll take them a bit of time to drive the mules and wagon back. Especially if their buffalo hunt was successful. Buffalos are big, Frankie. Bigger than even you!" I smiled.

"No one's gonna be bigger than me when I grow up!" Frankie insisted smiling back.

"Not Comanches or anyone! And I'm gonna hunt buffalo with Poppa and Uncle Miles when I'm big too!"

"Of course you are," I said.

Not more than twelve miles south of their homestead, just on the other side of High Water Pass along the Wasatch Mountains, Jacob was growing impatient with his brother, Miles. They were late starting the day because the mules, Sarah and Beezus, were spooked about something and it was up to Miles to get them moving. Normally, the mules were pretty steady, as was his brother. But this morning, both apparently decided to act like it was Sunday morning and a day of rest with nothing better to do. Miles was sitting on a stump sipping chicory root coffee from his tin and staring at the mules. Who were standing in their wagon halters staring right back at him.

"You gonna sit there all day pondering your fate?" Jacob commented, "Or we gonna get the team moving?"

"I was thinking maybe we should re-pack that buffalo meat better," Miles replied glancing over at Jacob. "Wrap the haunches tighter in the tarpaulin and cut a few cypress branches to cover and mask the smell. There's wolves and coyotes around here and I'm sure they can smell all that fresh, bloody meat for miles. And they might be hungry enough to cause trouble since it's been a fairly lean year for them. Plus, I only got maybe ten more shells for the Winchester. Not sure that'll be enough to fight off a pack of hungry wolves if they come callin."

"I thought about that, but it would take too long to re-pack a wagon full of meat at this point. We should just get moving. If we stick to the main trail head and push the mules to travel fast, we should be fine. Home by supper, I reckon."

Miles grunted, "Maybe," but he didn't move. He was holding the lead rein to the mules and humming to them in between sips of his coffee.

"You're gonna get sick if you keep drinking that sludge," Jacob warned. "Or you'll swallow too much chicory root and be sorry when you get stomach cramps."

"I'm good, Jacob. My stomach is cast iron. When was the last time you ever saw me get sick."

"True, but there's always a first time. And this would be a bad time to start. So are you gonna sit around all morning or we gonna get that wagon moving?"

"Ain't up to me. Sarah and Beezus is spooked and I'm letting them see me so they keep calm. Otherwise they're likely to freeze up and then it'll be hell getting them to move for anything short of oblivion. You don't think maybe there's wild Indians around these parts they're smelling, do you?"

“Wild Indians? Hell no. Ain’t been no wild Indians around here going on ten or twenty years. And the Paiute were never really all that hostile in the first place. Most rogue bands we heard about roamed way south down by the Brazos or out west across the plains.”

“Well, Sarah and Beezus are pickin’ up something they ain’t encountered before. And they don’t like it,” Miles said. “I can try to get Sarah moving. If she goes, so will Beezus.”

Miles stood, tossed the dregs of his chicory root coffee into the brush, climbed up onto the buckboard and flipped the tin into the back of the wagon. Picking up the reins, he gently snapped and called out, “Let’s go girls,” and got the mules moving, guiding them toward the High Water Pass trail. Jacob followed along giving loose rein to his own horse for the moment, letting her choose the path of least resistance while he scanned the trail ahead and behind for signs of danger.

Something is out there, he worried, I can feel it. I just can’t tell who or what yet. But it don’t seem good.

Saaches stopped in the middle of the trail because he was having trouble determining where Tannu had disappeared to so quickly. Minutes earlier, having rejoined Tannu on the west side of Badger’s Gap along the Pine forest trail, Tannu spurred his pinto around a bend and disappeared. His horse was still there, the rope tie lead still attached, but no Tannu. Nor could Saaches see any footsteps leading away from the horse into the brush.

“AIIYYEEEE!” Tannu whooped.

“What the...?” Saaches questioned.

"AIIYYYYEEEE!" Tannu yelled dropping down from a tree branch on top of Saaches' horse, Ember, while Saaches was still mounted. But instead of landing the seat, Tannu bounced off Ember's flank and fell to the ground hitting hard. "Woof! Ouch! Oh, that hurt!" Tannu groaned standing back up and rubbing his backside, "I think I broke my tail bone."

"Serves you right," Saaches replied once he settled Ember from bucking and bolting.

"What're you doing!?"

"Before we left, *Woveveh* told me the best way to attack Pawnee Scouts back in the day was to drop down unexpected like from a tree above and land on their horse's backside. Then reach around and cut the Pawnee's throat before they could let go of the rope to their horse. I wanted to see if I could do it."

"Woveveh is a drunken old fool who likes to tell tall tales. And you're an idiot for listening to him. You could've hurt Ember."

"Sorry 'bout that. Is she okay? I figured she'd be strong enough to handle the drop."

"She's fine. But you owe her an apology. She didn't like that."

"Sorry Ember. Sorry I jumped on you. And sorry you have a rider who's a big ol' *wacheechoo*. If I'd landed a little more to the right, I woulda had you cold and cut your throat for sure." Tannu smiled.

"You *ton-to*! No way! Here let me get your horse for you."

Saaches spurred lightly over to Tannu's horse and reached for the loose rein. When he had it in his hand, he "yipped" loudly, spurred Ember and galloped away with both pintos. All the while looking back over his shoulder and laughing as Ember kicked up a cloud of dust.

Watching Saaches ride away with his horse, Tannu laughed thinking, *Kutta baccha! Why didn't I think of that!?*

Big Mike Henshaw whipped the draft horses harder after they faltered again pulling the wagon up the back side toward Tabletop. First the horse on the left, then the one on the right.

"Come on, you sumbitches!" He cursed, "Get up that hill!"

Big Mike was a stubborn and uncaring man who'd been pushing the pair hard for four days straight now. Ever since he and his partner, Red Wade, left Spanish Fork with a dozen canvas sacks of Licton gold coin intended to be shipped east. Which Big Mike and Red Wade summarily decided to divert north for their own purposes. Calling it a severance package if you like.

Red Wade was now riding shotgun because his own horse had faltered and died at the end of the first day. An errant thorn lodged itself into the beast's underside deep under the saddle causing the animal to start bleeding. Which Red hadn't known about despite the animal being prickly, then sluggish all day. Nor would've cared necessarily because he wasn't planning on stopping no how under the circumstances. Still, it was annoying when the horse bled out and died later that night.

"Come on, dammit, you filthy whoring beasts!" Big Mike swore lashing the draft horses forward again.

"You keep hitting them horses that way," Red Wade commented, "and they gonna die on us too. They're pretty tuckered out."

"So?" Big Mike growled.

"I don't rightly care so much," Red Wade continued, "Cept they're the last horses we got and we need 'em to haul this coin. At least over Tabletop. Then we can stash the sacks in one of the caves up there."

It occurred to Big Mike, not for the first time, that if he knew Red Wade's full name, he could curse him properly for being such a know it all. Red did know more than the average cowboy having had some formal schooling, but it sometimes irked Mike not having the same advantages. Not that he really cared. He'd been with Red the longest of anyone -- over a decade now -- and they still shared everything equally. Not many men did that.

In truth, no one knew Red Wade's real name. And Red saw no reason to share -- with Big Mike or anyone. If Mike ever asked, Red would've just made something up. Everyone else would receive a curt, *"not your fucking concern now is it?"* reply. If they kept pushing -- which hadn't happened since Red was young really -- that person might discover it was dangerous to their health and wellbeing to press.

Red Wade's real name was Cornelius Everett Wade Vanderbilt II. Not officially since his father, Cornelius Vanderbilt, never formally recognized him as anything more than a "bastard" -- and his mother "that whore." So Red used "Red" as his common name and "Wade" as his surname to avoid issue, living with his mother till she eventually killed herself and then moving on rather than degrade himself begging from his father and father's family. Understandably, his real name was source of injury and insult.

This became all too apparent to Big Mike one afternoon not long before they decided to steal ten bags of gold coin from their employer after delivering dry goods to Spanish Fork. He and Red were taking their afternoon's refreshment at Hart's Saloon -- drinking tequila and knocking off the trail dust --- when a catholic priest walked into the establishment. Like it was a joke they were about to hear.

"Will you getta look at this *fockin'* guy," Big Mike grunted staring at the priest. "He's wearing a dress and a lady collar."

"It's called a cassock and collarino," Red Wade replied after briefly looking over at the priest. "He's a catholic priest."

"A priest? No shit? Like them guys that say, '*bless me father I've sinned*' and all that bull?"

"That'd be the one."

"What's a priest doing way down here? Spanish Fork already got religion. Hell, the reverend over at Mt. Zion will even dunk you in water if you ask him to."

"It's called baptism."

"Yeah, I know," Big Mike snarled, thinking if he knew Red's full name right now he'd curse him with it. "I know. *Fock! You always gotta be right.* Well, didja know my Ma had me dunked by one of them travelling preachers over in the Brazos when I was young. Which means I get to go to heaven cause I did. That's the rules. Bet you didn't know that!"

"No, Mike, I didn't know that."

"Damn right you didn't. Think this *fockin'* guys here to baptize people in the Brazos too?"

"Couldn't say."

And if the serendipity of the moment weren't already high, the priest recognizing Red Wade sent the whole saloon into orbit. The priest, Father Thomas Flannery, knew Red Wade having grown up a block away from him in the Bowery. They were even in the same class in school for a while before Red was kicked out. For, of all things, because Thomas gave Red his permanent scar on the chin after punching his lip through his

teeth during a schoolyard brawl the two were having. Thomas forget what exactly started the fight, but often sermonized how he was a bit of a street tuff back in the day prone to picking on the "smaller boy" -- always starting fights with others and not letting God into his life. Hurting Red and being sent to a Catholic reform school as a result was the catalyst Father Thomas claimed set him on the path of the good and righteous. He hadn't seen Red since that day, but he never nostalgic-ly forgot him. And he definitely mis-remembered Red as a friend.

"Wade?" Well, I'll be an Irish monkey's uncle! Wade is that you! Jesus, Mary, and Joseph if this isn't a fine thing! To run across a childhood friend way out here!" Father Flannery started walking across the saloon holding a whiskey and his hat, while the half dozen or so cowboys and vaqueros milling about watched with interest. They were all familiar with Red Wade, and his temper, so were curious when the priest called him out by name.

"Wade? It's me, Thomas! Aye and begorrah, but if it isn't Cornelius Everett Wade Van....."

Father Thomas spoke no more because a bullet exploded at that moment -- blowing the priest's brains out the back of his head -- causing further speech to be impossible. The cowboys and mill hands and vaqueros all went silent. But they all had a great deal to say about what happened later. Still, at that moment, everyone kept quiet till Red re-holstered his Colt .45 and the boom of the explosive round stop echoing in their ears.

"Well, shit Red," Big Mike commented, surprised, but able to recover. "I think that might be seven years bad luck for shooting a priest. Him being a friend of yours and all."

"Bad luck for him maybe." Red replied finishing his shot of whiskey. "Well, I suppose that's our cue to be leaving. What do ya' say there, Mike? Shall we go?"

Big Mike liked Red Wade. Not just because he was short and mean, which suited him. Or that he always said what he meant and did what he said despite being a know it all. Big Mike knew a few others like that. But not many failed to comment on Big Mike's size, which Red never did, or try to make Mike feel inferior for not being very smart. Which Red never did intentionally. Plus, Red's anger in life matched Big Mike's own. He was a good partner.

"I don't care if these whorin' beasts do die," Big Mike told Red whipping the draft horses again. "But they's gonna get us where we's going first. Or I'll kill them."

"If they die, we'll be on foot."

"Then we'll be on foot."

And almost to prove his point, both horses stumbled one last time. First the right one dropped, then the left fell. Both trapping the other in the wagon braces, both refusing to rise again.

"Dammit to all hell!" Big Mike yelled. He jumped to the ground, unsheathed his Bowie knife, walked to the lead horse and stabbed her square in the forehead. It was a tremendous blow, with all his weight behind it, piercing the skull and killing the horse nearly instantly. "I told you, you sumbitch!" Then Big Mike spit tobacco juice on the ground while Red Wade shook his head, smiling.

"Well come on then," Red Wade sighed, "Let's find a place to hide the coin. Then we'll walk to the nearest farm or cabin we find and grab two more horses. And a wagon if they have it. Shouldn't take too long. I told ya' what would happen, didn't I?! You should've let up."

"Yeah, well I didn't."

"Yeah, well, if you had, we could've made Pine Gap. Now you got us out here on the trail with our peter's hanging out."

"Wouldn't've changed nothing if I had listened to you."

"Hey, I been meanin' to ask," Miles asked Jacob as they rode the low trail up toward Tabletop. "Exactly what did you say to that Indian chief a couple days ago that made him so happy? I thought he was gonna drop his pipe and kiss you there for a hot minute. It sure weren't over our how successful our buffalo hunt was, I tell you that. There's hardly more than a few thousand buffalo left."

"I told him I didn't care if the federal government had ordered the Dawes Allotment Act to go into effect. As far as I was concerned, their land was their land and I wasn't gonna be no party to taking it from them."

"Yeah? So why'd that make him happy?"

"You remember that surveyor we had come out last year and map all the land we bought."

"Yeah, I do. He cost near twenty dollar. Course I remember."

"Well, he was surveying that finger land abutting off the east main plot. That piece that winds though the little hills like a snake? You know it?"

"Course I do. So?"

"Well, he found signs of old cultivation there, along with some buried Paiute tools, and buffalo skin lodge remnants in the valley. And when he did some checking, he learned the Paiute ancestors used to camp on that land during their spring and summer hunts."

Till they were moved off of course, like the rest of the tribes, after Jefferson's Relocation Act took effect back in the 30's. And they ain't been allowed back since."

"That weren't in the report."

"No, I asked him to keep it out to avoid any legal issues. Seems the government re-districted the land and sold it off to the Associates of Palmer who were gonna use it as part of their Sevier Valley railway system. Some kind of junction pass. But the land was too narrow and out of the way apparently to be a proper junction between spur lines so they sold it off again. The Indian Affairs Council made a bid for the land in Washington but were denied even placing a bid. It was then summarily added by unknown parties to the land we just happened to buy as part of our big land grant purchase last year."

"Okay, I'm with you so far. But that don't explain why the chief was so happy."

"After the buffalo hunt, when the chief invited us back to his lodge, I did some thinking."

"Never a good sign."

"Still and all, I told Chief Tawhawai I wanted to gift him and his tribe those acres back as a gesture of good will."

"You're kidding."

"No. I'm not. It's the right thing to do."

"Says who?"

"Think about it. We ain't gonna develop that land, right? It's too narrow and out of the way."

"Yeah."

"Well, if we ain't gonna use it. Why not put it to some good use and give them back their land."

"Because ain't no way the government's gonna let you deed them that land. You said so yourself."

"That's right, but I don't have to report it to them either. Nor do I need the government's permission to share my land with whomever I choose."

"Okay, but wouldn't we still be paying taxes on the land? Giving them back their land may be the right thing to do, but it don't really save us much if and when the government comes calling for their tribute."

"A few tax dollars is nothing comparted to making allies out of them Paiutes. And happy allies mean good neighbor relations. We learned that the hard way during the Cayuse war, right?"

"Okay, you have a point there, I suppose. But you coulda said sumpin' about it to me first."

"I know. Sorry. It was a spur of the moment thing. Came to me during the buffalo hunt when I was watching them watch us."

"How so?"

"Well, have you considered they ain't even allowed to hunt any more. Nor can they sing their songs or dance their dances cause of the Dawson Act. Hell, they's even expressly forbidden from using bow and arrow that generations of Paiute used before them. I don't know about you, but it seems like they got the short end of that stick. They been stripped of just about everything that makes 'em Indian. If that were us, we'd have fought like hell. And we would've wanted our neighbors to fight with us. With this land gift, now them Paiutes know they have neighbors who care."

Miles was about to say something more but a wolf howled not too far off making the mules jump. *Okay, that sounded like a wolf*, Miles thought, *but I'm pretty sure it weren't.*

"That cain't be no wolf," Jacob said, "Who ever heard of a wolf howling in the middle of the day like that?! You don't suppose someone's having a go at us, do ya?"

"Well, whatever it is, we need to get clear of it. It's spooking the mules."

"I agree. I'm gonna scout ahead a bit. See if I can pick up on whatever is out there. Hand me the Winchester and whatever extra rounds you got left."

"Alright, but don't go too far. That only leaves me with the buffalo gun. That'll be darn near useless if trouble comes a-callin'."

"I hear ya' brother. I won't be long."

Saaches waited for Tannu to catch up on foot. "No more games okay? Truce."

"Alright, truce. Owwww-whuuuuuuuu!!!" Tannu howled letting his wolf call echo off the nearby hills. "Have you heard *Woveveh* imitate the wolf? He's really good. He's teaching me how. You can't tell the difference from the real thing, right? Even better than *Besah* and that's saying something. Owwww-whuuuuuuuu!!!"

"Hey, we better get a move on. We still have a way to go before we get home. And I don't want to miss the feast tonight. If we cut through the dog pass over by Tabletop, we can pick up the main trail head and make a run for home."

"No, let's not go that way. It's too open and chances are we'll run into someone. I've had enough of these *wacheechoo* settlers for one day. Let's take the trail down by the *Itom Aye*.

"Tabletop is faster. I'm going that way."

"Fine."

Jacob had a troubled look when he returned from scouting.

"Did ya' see anything?" Miles asked.

"Yeah. I think we got more'n that wolf call to worry about. I found a couple of dead horses attached to a wagon a couple miles down over to the east by the water. The birds are at it now, but it looks to be a recent kill. Not even a day. Hours I'd even say."

"You think that's what's spookin' the horses?"

"Could be, but I don't think so. I didn't want to get too close and spook the crows or send 'em flying in case someone's about. But it looks like one of the horses had its head split. And some of its flank cut off clean with a big knife. And there were a dozen drag marks off into the brush. I think there's someone about. Maybe they saw us coming up the trail and maybe not. Can't say for sure. But I don't like not knowing. Especially after seeing them poor dead horses."

"So we ride hard up and across Tabletop. If they's on foot, we can out pace 'em."

"Maybe. Or they's fast enough to cut the angle and cross us. Maybe catch up the next time we stop to rest the mules. Which we'll surely have to do before we make the last push up and over Tabletop."

"Then we'll fight off whoever might be around if they come at us."

"No, you said it yourself. All we have is the Winchester with not enough .308 rounds and the single shot buffalo gun. I got a plan though. There's a butte up there near the escarpment after Tabletop at about three o'clock? You know the one I'm talking about?"

"Yeah."

"When we get around this next bend, I'm gonna slide off and head up to that escarpment on foot while you rest the mules. If I'm fast enough, I can hide there and be in place to cover you from the top with no one the wiser. You cross tabletop and head down. If it's wolves trailing us, I'll scatter them back the way they came. But if someone's following us, they'll have to come around that bend and I'll get a good look at 'em for sure. If it's trouble, I'll send out a warning shot. If they're dangerous, well, I'll make sure they ain't for much longer."

"Sounds like a plan," Miles agreed.

Big Mike set the sack he was carrying down on the trail, wiped sweat from his forehead, and spat tobacco juice onto the ground splattering a good dose across Red Wade's boot.

"Hey ya' dern fool! Watch where ya' spittin!" Red Wade growled.

"Whaddidjajuscallme?!"

"I said you're an *idjit*!"

"Shut yer mouth before I shut it fer ya'."

"Like hell ya' will. Spit in my direction again and I'll kick the living shit outta ya. Then I'll make ya' lick the tobacco off'n my boots!"

"You couldn't kick shit." Big Mike started to argue. They were both hot, tired, and more than a bit irritated with each other over the whole horses dying affair. But then they heard a wolf howling. "Hey quiet! Did you just hear that wolf howling?"

"Yeah. And I hear herses comin' our way too. We could use a couple of herses right now, fer sure."

Saaches and Tannu rode over the back ridge of Tabletop down the dog trail to find a very large and dirty *wacheechoo* man standing in the middle of the trail blocking their path. Before they could react, a second *wacheechoo* man - who was dirtier than the first if you could believe that - popped out from a side bush, grabbed the lead rein to Saaches horse and pushed him clean off.

"Now boy," Big Mike called out to Tannu, "you gonna get down off'n that pinto and hand 'er over or is I gonna shoot ya' off?!" The pistol he leveled backed up his demand.

"I'm not your boy," Tannu growled, "And my horse is not yours for the taking."

"Weren't asking," Big Mike replied cocking back the hammer and sending another spat of tobacco juice down the trail at him.

Red Wade pulled Saaches' pinto back several steps, unholstered his own pistol and pointed it at Saaches lying on the ground. "You *injuns* must be some kinda *stoopid*. We's outlaws if ya' haven't figured it out. And we's takin' your *herse's*."

"Climb down, Tannu," Saaches said. "Let them have the horses."

Red Wade cackled. "Why thank ya' very much, boy! You heard 'em, *Injun*. Give it up."

Tannu dismounted and moved over to Saaches.

"Good," Big Mike grunted. "That's a good boy. Now that that's settled. Let's see what else ya' boys got. And jus' so youse understan's, I got no problem shootin' both of ya' dead right where ya' stand. Two more dead injuns don't matter much ta' me."

A round exploded in the dirt at Big Mike's feet along with the sound of a gun blast from the escarpment above them and to the right.

"Now that will be enough of that, gentlemen," Jacob yelled down chambering another round into the Winchester. "Give 'em back their horses and let them go. Or the next round will do some damage."

"Now don't go doin' that, mister," Red Wade yelled up, looking over Jacob. "We's just gettin' our property back is all from these *thievin' injuns*. They stole these *horses* from us a-ways back and left us on foot. We jus' caught up with them is all and is well within our rights to take our *horses* back."

"They didn't steal anything. Those are unshod pintos without halter. No way those were your horses. And you have three seconds to give them back to their rightful owners."

Red Wade glanced at Big Mike, then quickly nodded his head in Jacob's direction. Big Mike spun to his right firing his pistol in the direction Red motioned. Only the hole that opened up in Big Mike's chest from the .308 round Fitz fired testified he wasn't fast enough. Big Mike was knocked back flat. Red Wade started firing simultaneously and had just enough time to aim and get off two rounds. But Fitz shifted sights and put Red Wade down with his next shot.

When the air cleared, and Fitz's ears stopped ringing, he stood up. "You boys okay?"

Tah-hanu stood up from the bush he had dove into. Saaches did the same looking up at Fitz.

"You gonna rob us too?"

"No, boys, I'm not. I been watchin' those men for a bit when you came riding around the bend. Bad timing. They was bad men for sure. Up to no good. I'll have to load them up in the wagon and report this back to the Marshal."

"Well," Saaches said, "We're thankful. You sure saved us."

"If you don't mind repaying the favor so soon, I could use your help. Looks like that one had good enough aim to hit me high up in the leg with his second shot. I don't think I'll be able to walk too far right now. My brother is up the trail some with the wagon. If you catch your pinto and ride after him, tell him I need him back here, I'd appreciate it. It'd save me some pain trying to catch up with him and do me a courtesy."

Saaches turned to Tah-hanu. "You grab the horses and bring them here. Then ride for this man's brother. I'll stay and help him with these ugly *wacheechoo'* s."

Tah-hanu grunted and took off for the pintos while Fitz limped down from the escarpment.

"Thanks son. My name is Fitzgerald."

"Does buffalo meat taste good?" Frankie asked. "I never had none."

"You never had *any*. And it tastes like peaches," Owen replied.

"It do?"

"No, Frankie," I interrupted. "Owen's joshing you. We ain't never had buffalo either, but Uncle Miles says it taste like beef. Just a little sweeter is all."

"When do you think Poppa and Uncle Miles will get back? We been out here all day."

"Soon. Asking a hundred times ain't gonna make it happen faster though."

"I just miss 'em. Poppa said when I get a little bigger, he's gonna take me on the next buffalo hunt."

"That's nice. Here, Frankie, carry my axe. I believe we have enough wood to finish off the cord. Owen, grab that end of the cart and we'll head back."

Frankie, Owen, and I walked out of the woods after a long day and headed back toward home. When we came in sight of the cabin, I noticed Poppa's wagon out front along with two more pintos tied to the back.

Frankie yelled, "Look! It's Poppa's wagon! They're home! And they brought the Indians back!"

"Hand me that axe before you take off running, Frankie. You're liable to fall and cut yourself."

Frankie wasted no time. He handed over the axe and took off at a dead sprint for the cabin yelling, "Poppa! Poppa!"

I figured he couldn't wait to hug Poppa and Uncle Miles and hear all about the buffalo hunt and how Poppa was going to take him along next time. When he grew bigger.

Which, in a few more years, he certainly would be.

As I walked toward the cabin, I thought about the years ahead and looked forward to seeing Frankie grow up and Owen grow less shy. For Aunt Beatrice and Uncle Miles, Momma and Poppa, to retire and enjoy all the years of their sacrifice and labor establishing a homestead. I looked forward to finding my own wife one day and bringing her back to start a family of our own while adding to the brood. Have Owen and Frankie do the same so we had lots of children running around and lots of family to settle the land. It sounded like a nice future. And I looked over at the pintos hoping them Indians would have the same and we'd be friends and neighbors for a long time.

I looked to our cabin, watching Little Frankie run for home, and I felt blessed. Coming out to Utah had been a boon to our family.

The End.

