



## Chapter 9: The Hassayampa Flood

*Jason Bartholomew Shear*

Prescott is Territorial Capital again and the town is bustling and booming. At the post office, I file my land patent for fourteen dollars. Then me and James Grant spend our gold money at the saloons along Montezuma Street. We drink whiskey, gamble, and enjoy restaurant food and dancing women. We even frequent the saloons along Granite Street that lodge Chinese women on their way to California.

James ends up marrying a widow twice his age. She owns the Prescott Pine Hotel where me and James each have a room. When we first entered the boardinghouse, the widow took ahold of my lanky diffident friend and smothered him with motherly attentions. “Why Mister,” she squeezed his biceps, “Let Mama put some meat on those bones.” James fell smitten over this woman, the first one to ever pay him a mind, and he proposed marriage to her within the week.

While in Prescott I buy me a new wagon, one hundred head of cattle, and five horses. To make Mattie smile, I buy her cameo brooches, a lacquered rosewood jewelry box, and reams of cloth and lace.

With gold in my pockets and the homestead officially mine, I hire Russel and Stanly Buckholtz, young brothers who came west working for Mr. Gunther Peabody on the California Wagon Train. They cowboyed for a rancher outside of Yuma and brought his cattle to Prescott where they ended up working for room and board at Huckaby's Livery Stables. Now that James got hitched and moved into the boardinghouse, I figure the Buckholtz brothers can help me run the livestock to my farm and stay on as hired hands at least for the year. I'm planning to build an extra room to Mattie's house and need help to sell the livestock in town and plant animal fodder and cash crops. I've been considering this idea Mattie read about in her Harper's periodical. Beekeeping. Certainly, there's cash to be had in selling honey to the shops in Wickenburg Town and other parts of the county.

At the Palace Saloon on Park Street, I come across Jose Gonzalez who had been working on a ranch near Prescott until the owner sold his cattle to the Bar Double H and headed south to Tucson. Gonzalez is desperate for work, any odd job he tells me. I talk about my farm and Jose asks me to hire him and his wife. "My señora is a good cook and midwife," he says. "We can make our own adobe house on your farm."

Jose seems to be a hard worker and his English is far better than my Spanish so I offer him a job even before I meet his señora. On the street outside Randal's Hardware, Jose introduces me to his wife who is sitting with a toddler and baby and selling steaming tomalleys that prove to be quite tasty. The señora is a stalky woman, scrupulously clean, and she wears a low-neck camisa that reveals heavy breasts. *She'll make a good wet nurse for Mattie*, I'm

thinking. I'm hoping that my Rib will need one soon after my return, now that she is strong and fit.

In early November I arrive at my homestead with livestock, a wagon full of lumber and purchases, and all my newly hired hands. Before they build their adobe house, the Gonzalez family lives in a canvas tent near the corrals. The Buckholtz brothers stay in the bunkhouse by the barn along with David, Pedro, and the old vaquero.

"These are the best days of my life," I whisper to Mattie shortly after my return. I'm not angry that she sent Juanita away. I see no reason to interfere with her decision and it feels like divine providence that I came across Mr. and Mrs. Gonzalez like I did. Besides, my eagerness to start a family consumes any agitation I might otherwise feel.

Mattie's so pleased with my safe return and my many gifts, which she sets around the house for everyone to see, that she willingly accepts my favors at night. She's not so distant when I take her, like she was before. Her mind is more with me and this makes me feel certain that I'll soon be planting my seed in her fertile womb.

### *Miss Mattie Bachman*

In the late summer of 1877 Jason receives a wire at the Wickenburg Post informing him that his official land patent has arrived in Prescott. I'm still without child.

"You need a rest from me for a while," Jason suggests when we're alone in bed. "It'll do you good if I head back to Prescott to get my land patent signed, stamped, and sealed by the federal government. I want David to come along this time. Heard about untouched gold in the pine forests of Cheno Valley. You'll be safe with our vaqueros and wranglers and with Mrs. Gonzalez here to help you along. We'll be gone no more than a month."

I politely give him my blessing and keep my peace. It's not that I really have any choice in the matter. A woman can't rope and tether a man from his ambitions and intentions. Not men like Jason and David or my uncle Willie. And besides, Jason is right. I can use the break from his nightly favors. A woman can take only so much of a man and his desires. My body needs a rest and I want to focus on the things I love doing like gardening, tending my animals, and writing in my Lady Pioneer Diary. I haven't had any ditties come to mind since Jason returned with all this yearning to make us a child.

After Jason and David ride off in the early morning, I wonder who I will miss more, now that I've grown accustomed to David's company. I can talk to David about spiritual matters that Cousin Constance imbued in my childhood mind. Things like divine grace and providence and Satan's powerful influence over the mortal hearts of men.

Jason rarely speaks about spiritual matters. He has no Bible and he says praying is for womenfolk to do. I have a Bible in my cedar hope chest, from Cousin Constance, but I've rarely read it since moving onto the frontier. My uncle preferred that I read him stories and poems from Harpers because he wasn't a religious man. Truthfully, the only religion in Jason's house occurs when I recite grace at supper *For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly grateful, Amen*. I had felt content with this quiet manner of life until David came along and rekindled my spirit for the Lord and awoke the hymns of my heart.

About a month after Jason and David have left for Prescott, toward the end of summer, a storm rolls into the valley and begins pelting the desert with torrential rains. Usually, I don't mind the summer cloudbursts. They're not like the cold drizzle of San Francisco which lasts for weeks at a time and consumes everything including one's disposition. In the desert, rain assaults the earth quickly, overnight at most, and nourishes my gardens, fills the rain barrels, and

processes the air like a pan of gold. After a rainstorm, the desert wafts its eau de cologne, mostly the sweet medicinal aroma of creosote and sage. From the shelter of my L-shaped porch, I like watching the rain muddy the yard and fill the gullies that surge down into the Hassayampa. And I love hearing the pitter patter on the pinewood rooftop.

But this storm is unusually long lasting. After two days the unending downpour and dark skies bring me melancholy, as Cousin Constance would call my gloomy moods. On the porch, I spend hours rocking in my chair thinking about Jason and worrying about his ride home from Prescott. I battle to put him out of my mind so I won't get a bad premonition, like I had before my uncle's murder. I do not want to know Jason's fate. I want to believe that he'll stay with me all of my life. It does no good to think about bad things anyway. It does no good to worry and fret.

On the third morning of the downpour, Mrs. Gonzalez slips on the porch steps as she carries a steaming coffee pot to her adobe hut. The coffee scalds her legs quite badly and she breaks her ankle. Through the pouring rain, the old vaquero helps Jose carry the large señora to the adobe hut as she wails in agony. I give her Dr. Wizard's remedy to stop the pain and her husband rides through the storm to a neighboring homestead for a Mexican curandero. At the same time, the Buckholtz brothers and Pedro set off to check on the levees and dams up the river.

"Three days of downpour is a mighty long time," Russel exclaims. "The dam up by Walnut Creek is bound to crack. I fear homesteaders have neglected checking some of the levees."

Until Jose returns, the old vaquero stays with Mrs. Gonzalez and her two young children in the adobe hut. I hazard walking through the rain, from time to time, to check on her and apply a creosote and aloe poultice to soothe her burns.

For most of the day I am sitting on the porch, listening to the howling storm, and watching rainwater stream off the eaves. Darkness and disturbance permeate the air and my thoughts are as turbulent as the desert washes rushing into the Hassayampa. I kept wishing Jason and David were here to secure the animals and the farm before the angry river washes everything away. But not even Jason's dogs lie on the porch. Jason took them on his trip to Prescott to do some hunting along the way.

At one point in the late afternoon, as lighting flashes and thunder cracks, I stop the creaking of my rocker on the pinewood planks because a thunderous eruption is coming from the northwest where the river enters our farmland. I stand with my hands clasping my pounding heart. What I see keeps me from breathing.

Nearly a hundred yards away a wall of muddy water taller than the house charges toward the corrals while devouring mesquite trees, fencing, my gardens, and everything else in its path. I can't see anyone fleeing from the adobe hut and I'm paralyzed with fear.

"Mrs. Gonzalez!" I scream in confusion. They will all die and I can't do anything about it. I cannot run to their hut because the river will swallow me too.

Not knowing what to do, I bolt inside the house, then back to the yard below the porch in the torrents of rain, then, as far and as fast as I can, I run away from the house and up the nearest slope of the eastern hills. All the while the wind is wailing like a 1000 screech-owls and howling coyotes.

Halfway up the hillside, I stop in my tracks. Through the dark and relentless rains, I glance back at the river. "Señora Gonzalez!" I scream again as I watch the Hassayampa bury everything in its wake. There is no hope for anyone. Not the old vaquero, not Mrs. Gonzalez and her small children. And the milk cow and the horse in the stables are all dead I fear. My head

spins with the question *Why didn't someone move the livestock?* But I know why. Because no one expected a flood to reach the corrals and barn.

Behind the wall of crashing water, the river swells and spreads over the land.

I shamble a few more steps up the muddy slope near the grave of my stillborn baby. In my haste I slip and fall but quickly pull myself up because I have no time to catch my breath. The rushing river is at my feet, running up my legs, pulling at me, wanting me to die.

Finally, I collapse onto the sodden earth in the heavy rain and wait for the river to pass by or take me with it. Either way, I'm exhausted and cannot flee any farther. When the water covers my legs up to my waist, it begins to retreat but the rains never stop pelting me and the slippery earth. I clear my muddy face with my apron and nervously peer at the brown eddies and furrows surrounding the house and covering the L-shaped porch. The barn stands against the Hassayampa ravaging the land but the adobe house of the Gonzalez family is nowhere in sight.

Could it be possible? I'm thinking, shielding my ears from the cacophony. Have they survived the flood? Poor Mrs. Gonzalez couldn't, I'm certain, because of her broken ankle. She's helpless to save herself or her small children.

Shivering, I pull my skirts around my waist and maneuver through the strong current along the river's edge for a better glimpse of where the adobe hut ought to be. It seems to me, I keep thinking, that the river waited until Jason and David weren't around to rescue me. The river wanted me alone, all to itself. I begin crying harder than I think possible and through my tears and the rain, I see the barn swaying in the unyielding current.

I rub my eyes. When I open them what I see swells my drenched spirit with hope. Mrs. Gonzalez, it appears, has made her way to the top of the barn. However, I begin fearing that at

any moment the roof will break apart and plunge the poor, wounded señora into the ferocious river. And she will die a horrible death.

As quickly as possible, I wade and swim back to my house. The muddy river is covering the floors inside, burying Jason's bear and lion rugs, ruining his pine slab floors and the bottom of my cedar hope chest. But I have no time to worry about what's inside. Although, I do think about Uncle Willie's autobiography and assure myself that it sits at the top of everything else and isn't damaged. I'm positive the river is now receding and that there won't be another wall of water crashing down the valley.

I grab Jason's fifty-foot hemp rope hanging from a post, sling it over my shoulder, then knock everything off the pinewood table and drag it outside the front door. I manage to set the table afloat on the river. I push it along then hop aboard as the current catches hold and sweeps me toward the barn. My own survival is uncertain but I must try to save the others.

While lying on my belly I paddle with my hands through the swift currents until the table pounds against the wall boards below the barn roof. Peering through the loft window, I gasp at the sight of the old brown saddle horse. It has somehow trapped its head between lumber posts in the stables and to my horror, its brown eyes are wide open with panic. It is dead, I'm thinking, it must be dead.

Mrs. Gonzalez is on the other side of the roof and I can no longer see her. "Señora Gonzalez, can you hear me," I holler through the gushing rain and above the thunderous river. I yell and yell until my throat pains me like a scorpion sting.

"Si, Señora Mattie," comes a faint but familiar voice. "*Estoy aqui.*"

For a moment I remain on the floating table beating up and down as the surging river plugs it against the barn. I've never felt so helpless and unable to think about what to do, except



maybe for when I was a small child who just lost her family in a Kansas tornado. But of course, I don't remember that incident; I only remember my uncle telling me what had happened. Now, I'm living perhaps that same kind of fear and helplessness. Somehow then, and now, I must push myself to stay alive, remain calm, and summon the courage and strength to help Mrs. Gonzales and myself get out of this calamitous deluge. I think about little Mattie Johnston, daughter of Conrad and Frederika, surviving the tornado and enduring a year of captivity. I did not die then and I will not die now! My mind holds this thought and a burst of courage grasps me. I wobble to my knees and secure the rope over my shoulder. With one swift jump, I land on the roof and crawl toward Mrs. Gonzalez while feeling each piece of lumber quiver beneath me. But the boards are miraculously holding together.

At the top of the roof slope, through sheets of rain, I see the drenched and bruised Mrs. Gonzalez in tattered clothes. With torment on her face, she pleads for my help.

"I'm here, Señora," I yell, lying flat and easing myself toward the Mexican woman who is precariously near the edge of the roof. "Grab my hand," I shout, stretching my arm as far as it'll extend.

Mrs. Gonzalez slowly reaches for me. As she catches hold of my hand, she begs, "No, no, no me. Save my baby." She points to the flat roof of the adobe hut, now visible to me for the first time since I saw it covered by the flood. It lies some forty feet away.

I grasp the woman's hand as tightly as possible and pull her from the roof's edge to a more secure position on the wobbling timbers. While doing so, I spot a movement on the adobe roof. "My God Jehovah!" I yell when I see the Gonzalez child holding herself in fear, crying for her mama.

“Help my little Rosita,” Señora Gonzalez pleads as she struggles up the roof with my help.

I’m feeling stunned once again and completely defenseless. How can I possibly help the child when I can’t even save myself and Señora? When the boards of the roof are wavering and about to break asunder at any moment? And the flat roof of the adobe hut will soon crumble and collapse, I have no doubt, and the river will wash away the stranded child.

I make it to my feet, trying to keep my balance in an impossible situation in the face of disaster. I loop the end of the rope with a knot and toss it to the child in a heave ho. But I miss Rosita and the loop falls under the swift muddy river.

The lumber beneath my feet is wavering as I try to keep steady and reel back the rope. I toss it again and again as quickly as possible. I’m not target shooting with my derringer while Jason’s standing at my side saying *Take your time Mattie darlin’. You’ll hit the tin can if you remain steady.*

Suddenly, as if Jason himself is actually with me in spirit, bolstering my aim, the rope lands on the adobe roof near the crying child. *Almost dead-on spot. Remarkable!* I can really hear Jason say. But it is Señora shouting for her baby girl. Her niña Rosita.

“Tell your baby to put the rope around her waist,” I holler through the storm at the panic-stricken woman beside me.

Mrs. Gonzalez screams to her child in Spanish.

The barn roof jolts, knocking me on my seat. I steady myself and rise up while fearing that the adobe hut’s about to disintegrate into the raging river.

The child crawls into the loop and tightly grasps the rope.

While prone on the barn roof, I brace myself and tug the rope with Mrs. Gonzalez helping. The child hits the water and goes under for an instant--a shocking sight, but she quickly bobs to the surface and we pull the rope until Rosita reaches the barn roof and falls into the arms of her mother.

I sigh in exasperation and shake my head because I know that the rescue, if anything, is only partly over. Now we three must make it back to the pinewood table and I must paddle us safely to shore. Just when I'm finding some confidence and feeling Jason's spirit pushing me onward, the barn roof jolts and breaks apart beneath us.

Señora, the child, and I grab one another and tightly huddle as the boards we are lying on hold together and miraculously become our raft heaving us downstream away from the farm.

I hear only clashing thunder as I embrace the child and woman with one arm and grip onto the lumber with my free hand. We shiver from cold and fear, and because we are drenched like drowned ferrets. I desperately want to plug my ears from nature's deafening fury, but I dare not move or I'll lose hold of the others and we'll all tumble to our deaths.

Our raft careens downstream for what could be ten minutes or an hour, I can't tell. Nor can I see anything because I've tightly affixed my face to the pinewood and when I do look up, the rain and splashing waters leave me blind.

Then, all at once, I hear another booming crack and the lumber beneath us breaks apart and I tumble underwater. With all the strength left in me, I fight against the surging river heaving me downstream and dragging me under. Time and time again, I struggle to the surface, gasping for air each time. All the while, I keep thinking about Rosita who is the same age I was when the Kansas tornado killed my family. As soon as my head darts above the surface, I look desperately for the little girl, or her body, but see no one.

At last, I catch sight of the riverbank and I'm able to clamber ashore where I shake my sopping hair from my face and plop onto the muddy earth. With what little life that remains in me, I buttress myself up and sweep my sight up and down the river, but I don't see Rosita or her mother nor any of the lumber from the raft.

Then suddenly I hear the little girl wailing so loudly I'd think she could push back the river. I look along the bank and see, twenty feet downstream, little Rosita in the arms of her mother. I climb to my feet, amble to where they lie in the mud, and fall to my knees before them. We all embrace and gasp from shear exhaustion.

"The old vaquero help my Rosita onto the roof," Mrs. Gonzalez stammers between her breaths, as if she must tell her story now in case she doesn't make it. In case she dies after all. And then I see that her leg is badly bleeding where she had scalded it that morning, so very long ago, and her ankle is swollen twice its normal size, perhaps rebroken, and in truth, I'm fearing that she may die after all, from her injuries.

"Oh, Mrs. Gonzalez," I sob. "We made it. We didn't let the river take us under."

"Then he help me catch the corral," Señora continues. She hasn't finished the story she must tell me. "I see the old man one last time. The river take him, Miss Mattie. My baby dead too. The river take my baby from my arms. I cannot keep hold of my baby. But God was good. He gave me my Rosita and he keep me to take care of Jose."

"Shhh," I quiet the woman, rubbing her arm for warmth while the child lies cuddled between us. I carefully cover Señora's leg and ankle with her tattered dress because I don't want her to see her injuries and fall in to a state of shock. "Rest now," I whisper as I think about the old vaquero. He's gone, I know. The river took him and the poor helpless baby. I picture the old

man and baby as I had seen them both this morning, so very, very, long ago. Then my thoughts blur and fade away into the clamoring river.

Russel Buckholz and Pedro wake me from a deep slumber. I shakily sit up and try to steady my spinning mind and aching muscles. Have I drunk pineapple cider? I'm thinking. Or did I take a Brandreth pill to prevent sudden death from a dizzy spell?

"Miss Mattie," I hear Buckholz utter. "We're here now and you're safe. So is the señora and her daughter. We're here to take you back to the farm. What remains of it."

As Russel helps me to my feet, I rub my eyes and try to focus in the light. The sun has broken through departing clouds in the western sky and the light is swathing me and the horse Pedro helps me to mount. From all around I feel the light spreading, burning away clouds, and calming me. I am overjoyed the rains have subsided, the flood has passed, and I lived through the torrents and torments of the raging Hassayampa.