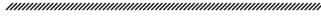


# DUSTY

BUDD NELSON



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*This work is dedicated to my loving  
and wonderful wife Carol,  
without whose indulgence and support  
I could not have finished this book.*



# CHAPTER I

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Red and Alejandro sat their mounts atop one of the rolling sparsely mesquite-studded hills. As they watched the long narrow valley stretched out below them. They had first seen the long white spiral of smoke in the wide clear open sky above, over a mile back. Then the two men had headed this way knowing it had to be from some white man, for no Indian would have a fire of that kind in this vast open area. Both men had worked the “Cross River” ranch of Major Davis for a few years now and knew the area pretty well, at least as well as any other cowhand on the ranch.

What they were watching, was a lone man lounging in front of his high, smoking campfire. It seemed that he was cooking his supper. He appeared to be alone, with only one horse hobbled and grazing on prairie grass nearby and he appeared to be oblivious to them watching him from the low rise. A small stream ran slowly coursing close by and since it was early spring it still had plenty of good water in it. By midsummer, like most, it would be bone dry. There didn’t seem to be anything wrong with what they saw except that they didn’t recognize the man and he was on the Major’s land.

Shannon Wolff had originally come from Missouri a few years back. He was known to everyone as Red due to his carrot red hair and abundance of freckles on fair skin. Red was in his middle twenties, about five feet ten inches tall with a thin build and had come to grips with the handle a long time ago. Alejandro Del La Vega was a seasoned caballero born in the south Texas area that had spent his entire life on the Texas plains. Alejandro was slightly taller than Red with the dark rugged complexion and the gleaming black eyes of a friendly Mexican. He was probably a couple of years older than Red but was not

sure of his actual age, Like most, his parents had not been able to read or write and merely worked their land and raised their children like good Catholics. Both men were good friends and quite comfortable with who they were and where they were. Riding for the brand was their chosen way of life.

After about 20 minutes of observing the lounging lone rider at the highly smoking fire. They looked at each other with looks of finality and uttered their as yet unspoken thoughts.

“Wall Alejandro, I guess we’ll just have to amble on down and get a close up look and see what we kin see.” Over time Red had eventually started to have some slow drawl to his speech. But a real Texan could always tell he had been raised elsewhere, even if not sure exactly where.

“Amigo, I believe it is you are again correct, let us hope the hombre is peaceable. For myself, I was ready for a cup of that fine coffee you brew and some time on the ground. Not to still be sitting on the back of my fine beast here. Not that I would be one to complain, however.”

With this mutual accord, they both nudged the sides of their mounts’ flanks and started descending the gradual slope in a slow approach toward the unknown man’s camp, being sure that, if they were seen, it would not appear to the man at the fire that they had any mischief in mind.

After a short but slow ride down the gradual grassy slope, with both their hands clearly visible on their saddle horns and their reins laced between their fingers. They came to what they thought would be within earshot of the man half sitting/half lying at his campfire. He had still not seemed to move even once in the time they had watched him, either on the top of the slope or while they had ridden closer.

“Howdy, you mind if my compadre and I come on in somewhat closer and get acquainted. We saw your fire, from a ways back, earlier.” It was always for the best out here in the open country to announce one’s self, in advance. Even if you had made no attempt to hide or rush in too quickly and Red would rather that there not be any needless trouble if it could be avoided.

“You’re welcome, come on in. I didn’t think you two were ever going to come down, or finally get close. I’ve seen you for near on to an hour and heard your horse’s for longer than that. Welcome again, come on in get down and sit. There’s hot coffee on the fire, if you’ve got cups.” The lone stranger sounded genuinely friendly and open.

“Gracias, señor, I personally am more than thankful for a cup right now. I believe I could farm in the dust of my own throat.” Alejandro was glad to hear the man sounded as not only friendly, but also seemed to have been fully aware of his surroundings all along. It boded well of his abilities in this part of the country.

“Thanks, mind if we let our horses graze as well, there’s good grass here with the crick still running?” added Red.

“Sure, unsaddle and find a place closer to the fire.” The man however never appeared to look up from his watching the high smoking blaze before him.

With that Alejandro took his Appaloosa gelding and Red took his Paint to care for their horse’s first. Hobbling them in the same area as the buckskin, close in but within reach of the creek and themselves. They placed their gear close to the campfire as if a part of the camp now for the evening.

Both men took tin cups from their saddlebags, and Alejandro poured both of them steaming cups of the coffee. Then they sat down at the camp fire, near the still reclining man staring into it as he continued to sip his own cup of coffee, without making any move to hurry the conversation before the two new arrivals were settled in and ready to ask their questions. The silence was only broken by the sounds of the flowing creek, the slight breeze moving through the limbs of the trees and the crackling of the embers in the warming fire before them all.

After a couple of sips from his cup Red broke the short silence first, “Most folks call me Red, last names Wolff and my compadre here is Alejandro Del La Vega, we both ride for Major Davis. Been out last couple of days scouting how far the beeves have scattered out until we spotted your smoke this afternoon.” With that Red took another drink and added, “Fine cup you brewed. Thanks again.”

Alejandro added before the stranger could even think about speaking, "I agree with my friend, Senor, you do make a fine pot of coffee. I myself can drink what I make, but Red here is a much better cook and yours is even better than his." With that he smiled at his riding companion and at the small joke.

"I thank you both for the compliments, my name's Rhodes, but generally everyone just calls me Dusty." He took a sip out of his cup and then continued. "I suppose it's this Major Davis's land I'm crossing, or I wouldn't have met you two today. He wouldn't be offended by my presence here would he?"

"Nope," Red answered, "so long as you ain't causing no trouble the Major's a real peaceable fellow. The spread's called the Cross River." As he spoke, Red was taking a sidelong closer look at their host without being overly obvious about it, so as not to offend him. This Dusty did not seem to fit any normal western type right off. He seemed quiet and openly friendly, not altogether anything unusual about that. But his clothing seemed to leave much to consider, it defied quick and easy identification into a known simple type. "He's been here ever since before the war was started. Me and Alejandro been here awhile ourselves. The Major's a good fellow to work for. How about you? Are you heading anywhere special?"

"No nothing planned, just drifting at the moment. I like spending time in the wide and lonesome, hope that's okay with this Major of yours. I'll move on if you think it's best though", Dusty reached into his saddlebag close to him and pulled out the makings for a smoke and began rolling one with his hands.

"I am quite sure the Major will be very agreeable senor to your being around. However it would be much more so if you would come to the hacienda soon and allow him the pleasure of meeting you himself. You could even join Red and me, if you wish. We would be happy to introduce you when we head back tomorrow. Or join us there, at your pleasure." Alejandro said.

Dusty looked back at Alejandro with no apparent offense taken and answered him saying "Wouldn't mind riding along with you tomorrow if you're headed back then any way. Like I said just drifting right now and am always ready to meet friendly

folks, who don't mind my being on their land. It seems only right and fair to meet those allowing you to cross their land. Would either one of you like a smoke?"

With Alejandro's customary friendly manner he made an open statement and query. "I would most enjoy one senior and thank you. It does seem though that you are not a cowhand like my friend Red here or me. Yet I would also not believe you to be of any nefarious sort either, if you do not mind my saying so." Gladly taking the fixing's offered across the short distance from Dusty.

"No I don't mind you saying that and you're pretty close to right. I've punched my share of cattle, at one time or another. Some folks think all the ingredients must have got mixed up when they made me. Guess I'm kind of an odd duck to some when they meet me, but I'm just a simple guy who is what he is. I don't try to fit in anyone else's mold." Dusty drew a long puff on his smoke and then slowly exhaled.

Both Red and Alejandro now relaxed somewhat more, but continued to think about what they saw of the man as well as hear his words. He wore a pair of what appeared to be Apache style high topped moccasins, some older Calvary pants with a stripe down the outside of the legs and a buckskin shirt with lacing at the open front and short fringe hanging from the sleeves. His hat now lying to the side was common enough except that it had a rattlesnake hatband and was of nondescript color at this time of day. He was laying against a common enough range saddle except it had been made with a Spanish style horn, his rope seemed to be made of braided leather rather than hemp and he had two rifle scabbards one on each side.

"Well gents I think I'll start some frijoles' and venison if you're hungry? But I'm out of flour to make any stick bread I'm afraid. Hope you don't mind?" Dusty said this as he started to move toward the fire.

"I can supply and start some bread if you want, got just about nough flour for one batch," Red offered. And with that the three started to make their meal, Alejandro going to the stream for more water.

After all three men had eaten their meal and cleaned their individual plates and utensils; they rolled and lit another smoke, casually talking about the day and how long it would take to get back to the ranch house the next day. After a while all of them started stretching onto their out spread bed rolls and placing blankets over themselves in preparation for a night's sleep. In a short time the camp was quiet, with the only sounds being of men turning in their bedrolls.

After about an hour Dusty rolled out of his bedroll silently, to the dark side of the camp. He grabbed his gun belt as he stood and walked into the dark without making a sound. He walked into the night away from the camp's now low fire strapping on the belt as he walked in the opposite direction of the creek, not disturbing the two sleeping men or the horses.

It took him over an hour stealing his way in the dark night between the mesquite trees, prairie bush and open areas of grass to locate the camp of the two Comanche in the distance. After spotting the small smokeless fire hidden in a stand of trees close to the creek Dusty crept ever so slowly toward it and them.

Down on all fours hugging the ground he came close, seeing one of the Indians asleep on the ground and the one sitting on guard dozing at the fire. Dusty slowly turned and inched his way around the camp so he could come up behind the guard. It seemed like forever once he was close, before he could get silently near enough to the sitting Comanche to rise from the ground enough to strike. There was only one chance of success and that was to kill him with total silence and not wake the second man. Reaching up with both hands on either side of the man's head he struck soundless and quick. One hand over his mouth as the other, with his knife in his hand, sliced through the man's throat and jugular vein in one movement his blood gushing from the laceration and spilling over the Indians shirt and leggings. The Comanche's body spasms made just enough noise to stir his sleeping companion.

Dusty immediately let his victim fall to the side and leapt for the remaining one before he could come fully awake and rise up. Burying his knife to the hilt in the center of the man's chest and

twisting it to the right before pulling the long blade out again, then in one swift movement making a slash across his throat as he had the first man's, but this time facing him. The struggling Comanche jerked spasmodically, but his arms fell back to the ground as his life escaped his body.

It took Dusty about an hour to drag the two bodies into a hollow near the trees. He covered them with rocks from the surrounding area, distributing what leaves and limbs as he could find around, so as to make the spot blend in as natural as possible. Then he scattered the remnants of the campfire as if there had never been a camp there.

Once done Dusty walked over to the two Indian ponies, taking their leads while talking to them gently and started walking back toward his own campsite and the two sleeping cowboys.

Around an hour before dawn and before the eastern sky started to have the first hints of the day to come. At that time when the night sky is its darkest, especially when it's a moonless night as it was now. Alejandro awoke and looking around noticed that Dusty was not anywhere in the camp. He then immediately kicked at Red to stir him out of his sleep.

"Red my friend, you up", He asked in a low voice.

"I am now, what's up." Red rolled over on his bedroll to look at Alejandro.

"It is that senor Dusty is not here, all his stuff is, but he is nowhere that I can see him." He had a look of concern, but not of panic. They did not know this Dusty Rhodes well enough yet to not have some suspicion at this behavior.

Both men sat very quietly for what seemed to be forever, watching in all directions and listening for the smallest sound. Hearing nothing but the sounds of the prairie at night, to which both were quite accustomed. Seeing nothing in the by now first graying light of the eastern horizon over the ridgeline at the edge of the narrow valley.

Before the sky started turning pink with light at the approaching sunrise, Dusty appeared walking in from the south leading two Indian ponies by their simple Indian leads. Both men could see he now wore his pistol belt about his waist, which had a

large style knife on the left side of the belt. The knife was as big as a Bowie but not shaped like one either.

“Glad to see both you gents are awake, didn’t want to startle you. But I had some unfinished business to attend to during the night, while you slept.” As he started to hobble the two ponies, close to the other three still there. Then he walked, in the direction of the camp.

Both Red and Alejandro spoke at almost the same instant, almost in unison. “Where did you get those and where are their riders?”

“How about, if we start some coffee and I’ll tell you all about it. I need to go down to the creek and wash up just a mite first.” Then Dusty turned and walked back to the stream, leaving both Red and Alejandro looking at each other with even more questions in their minds.

Red almost spoke as Dusty started walking away, but Alejandro’s hand on his shoulder stopped him. “Compadre’, why don’t you start some coffee? I believe he will tell us what we both wish to know when he returns and we both know my coffee, she is not so good.”

Dusty returned from the stream. Walked around the camp to where his bedroll was and sat down, took off his hat and sat down cross legged on his bedroll. He then took out his makings and rolled himself a smoke, lighting it when it was ready and in his mouth.

After Dusty exhaled his first drag off the smoke he looked at both Red and Alejandro and finally spoke. “I owe you both an explanation. The two Comanche’s who were riding those ponies were actually after me. Yesterday when you saw my smoke, you saw it because I meant for you to. I built that fire hoping you would see it and come this way.”

Red butted in and asked “What are you talking about, you never....”

Dusty stopped his question with “never moved, never looked up. That was on purpose Red. I had to make sure it was you and that you came down and into camp to see who I was.” Dusty took another drag off his smoke and exhaled. “I ran across those

two Comanche a couple of days ago, but then there were five of them. They spotted me ambling along a stream southeast of here and started dogging my trail. Luckily I spotted them before they made for me and got a good lead on them. One of them I got with the Winchester as I stopped on a rise and made a shot, I saw him fall. One of them stopped and made sure he was done for, then he caught back up with his friends a little later.”

“And the other two Senor, you said there were five of them at first”, Alejandro asked?

Dusty nodded to Alejandro, leaned over and put out his smoke on the ground and continued. “I gave them the slip up an arroyo and through some trees finally and doubled around. But it didn’t take them long to back track me and they found me some time later that day. There being four and me having killed one, they still felt the odds were in their favor and rushed me. Lucky for me they did when they did since I was resting a bit I was able to get a second one off his horse with the Winchester again and then another one, before they got close enough to get lucky. Besides as soon as I saw the third one go down I took off out of there like the devil himself was after me.”

Dusty picked up his cup, got to his feet went over and poured himself a cup. He put the pot back on the stone at the fire, raised up and blew steam from his cup before taking his first sip. “You did good Red, Alejandro was joshing you, and your coffee is every bit as good as mine if not better.”

“Thanks, Dusty. So what about those horses,” Red looked still puzzled.

“Well after that the two that were left weren’t quite in such a hurry to catch me. So I lost them again. But instead of just taking off, I circled them and started following them so I would know where they were until yesterday morning. That’s when I saw them spot you two. Now I knew they wouldn’t like the odds, but I couldn’t get to you without them spotting me. So I came down here and started the fire, thinking you would see it and come over to see who was here. With you heading this way, they wouldn’t do anything until last night when we would be asleep.” Dusty stopped to take another sip of his coffee and then

continued. "So after you went to sleep, I got up and went out to find them before they might come in here. It was my fault they found you two and it was my fight to finish. "

"Dang gone Dusty, we would have helped out. We ain't milksops you know." Red was just a little put out.

"Hold on mi amigo, I believe it is that, Dusty thought that he alone could sneak up on them better than three of us making noise in the dark. It is that at least that is my hope and that we were not being left here as bait in the trap for Indian mouse's. This is so Senor." Alejandro left his answer yet question hang in the air.

"It is amigo, I assure you. Now how about we have some breakfast, and head out so I can get acquainted with your Major?" Dusty's tone was straight forward and reassuring.

After Dusty, Red and Alejandro had finished eating their breakfast. They packed their gear, saddled their horses and prepared to leave the night's camp. As Dusty was finished saddling his horse, Red and Alejandro got their first look at the reason it had two rifle scabbards. One was for the Winchester they already knew about, the other was for a shotgun they had not seen. Both had been under his bed roll on either side of where he would have sleeping the night before.

With everything ready, the horses hobbles off and the two Indian ponies leads looped around Dusty's saddle horn, they mounted up and headed back over the rise Red and Alejandro had come down the day before.

As they rode across the open prairie, passing mesquite trees, short stemmed grasses and a few scattered jack rabbits trying to get out of their way. The sky was clear overhead with a few drifting high clouds. The three men talked little, as most men when they rode across the plains you tended to keep your attention on your surroundings more than idle conversation. Sometimes your very life could depend on the smallest distant or near observation as you rode.

A short time before dusk, upon topping another small rise, a broad long valley spread out before them with a small river flowing along through the middle of it. About a mile away was

a substantial ranch house, stables, barns, corrals and some other buildings. Near the house and barns were some taller trees, willows and an oak or two and as they stopped to look Red spoke. “Wall, here we are Amigo, that’s the ranch Dusty, we’ll be there shortly.”

## CHAPTER II

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As Dusty, Red and Alejandro rode into the ranch headquarters it was easy to see that this operation had, for one, been here a while and two was well run. They crossed the wooden bridge over the creek that bisected the valley and ran close to the ranch buildings. There was a large post gateway with a hanging sign from the cross member, emblazoned with the Cross River brand. He could see that the main house was large enough with a porch across the full front of the house and two steps up to it from the ground. There appeared to be a full second floor above the first. Nothing was pretentious, just solid and well maintained. The ranch as a whole bespoke of either some money, or at least a lot of care from constant work and it could be a lot of both.

As they passed the main house and went to tie their horses at the corral on the bunk house side of the barn, a rather tall man with graying hair stepped off the porch of the main house and approached them, with deliberate strides. He was not hurried or panicked in his approach, just targeted on them particularly. All three of them dismounted from their horses as he came their way. As he got close Red was the first to speak.

“Evening Major Davis, how are you today?” Red said, seeing him getting near and knowing his boss’s manner well enough, to see he had questions for them. “We came upon quite a good amount of stock in the southern part of the ranch by yesterday noon time Sir. But then we got a little side tracked you might say.”

“Senor Meijer, it is glad I am to see you. A new amigo met along the trail, we have brought back to the hacienda with us.” Alejandro touched the tip of his broad brimmed sombrero and slowly swung his hand, open palmed down, toward his feet in gracious greeting to his boss.

The major stopped close to his two returning hands.”And I am pleased to see you two back from the southern ranges, but what of these ponies and your new friend. I believe there must be some manner of a story here, if my eyes don’t deceive me these are not of our local herds. Nor do they appear to be wild ones of this area either. They have the look of Comanche ponies with these leads I see on them tied to your friend’s saddle horn.” The Major was eyeing Dusty from head to moccasin clad feet with deliberate scrutiny, yet not offensively. “And you sir I do not believe I have had the pleasure of an introduction as yet. You are not a local or long time ranch hand that I recognize from around here that I know of any way.”

“Sorry, Boss. This here is Dusty and year right there is somewhat of an interesting tale to our meeting him and inviting him to come back with us to the ranch. Dusty Rhodes this is Major Davis, owner of the Cross River Ranch.” Red moved his hand from the Major to Dusty and dropped it back to his side.

“Si señor, the tale she is simple enough. Dusty saw that we were being watched by two Comanche yesterday, who it is he was following. He got us to come to him by making a high smoky campfire. He knew we would come to investigate before the Indians could come down on us to start any trouble. Then while we slept last night at his campfire, Dusty went out alone and snuck up on them, sent them into the great beyond and brought back these fine ponies with him in the bargain.” Alejandro reported a brief version of yesterday’s events. He was not intentionally leaving out anything; he was just telling the story as brief as possible, so his boss would not be uninformed.

“Well my friends, I believe that is probably a good and true, if non-detailed account, of what yesterday was like.” The Major now had a small wry smile on his face. “However I am also sure it leaves quite a bit out, that would be worth the telling as well as the hearing about, just like your introduction of your new companion here. Would you agree, Sergeant Major?” The Major Looked directly at Dusty, now.

There was silence among them all, while Red and Alejandro looked from the major to Dusty and then questioningly to each

other. The Majors use of the name Sergeant Major had them both puzzled and wondering how it related to the man they now knew as Dusty. That name did not seem to fit what they had been told already, or what their guesses would have been about the man they knew so far only as Dusty Rhodes.

“I feel quite certain that you are Sergeant Major Dustin Rhodes, late of General Hood’s Calvary, Confederate States of America, during war of the rebellion. Later scout for the Union Calvary on the northern Great Plains, while a blood brother and I believe brother-in-law to one of the greater Pawnee war chiefs of our more recent time. Then a sometime tracker and/or some say bounty hunter, for a few marshals in and around parts of Texas and New Mexico, sometime after that as well as some miscellaneous shorter and less known occupations and life choices. Are you not Sergeant Major?” Major Davis finished his version of an introduction and then waited for Dusty to reply.

“Yes sir you are correct. I have been at certain times all of those things, and yes also some others you did not mention as well. I did not however think myself to be a person of such note as to be known of and recognizable without specific introduction for cause.” Dusty answered the question in a manner of fact tone. No hint of embracement or agitation apparent. “How would it be that I am so discernable to a man of the Major’s stature in this part of Texas?”

“I personally find it hard to believe that you are not recognized by many without introduction sir. I have friends in some of the general areas where you have lived and worked over time, and think that you are rather known enough in any of those areas to be recognized by sight alone to many people. If you would not mind indulging me a little longer and allowing me further comment to your new found friends, and my trusted men, I think I can show that quite well?” The major awaited Dusty’s response politely.

“Continue sir, I am somewhat interested and you appear to mean no insult by the conversation at all.” Dusty said, reaching for the makings of a smoke.

“First, however possibly not the most assured, is your mount is a buckskin, with a rather conspicuous Spanish saddle horn

on a prairie saddle and very few have a rifle scabbard on either side of the rig. This coupled with a bit less halter and reins.” The major turned from Dusty’s horse to Dusty himself. “Then there is you Sergeant Major. Let us start with those high apache style moccasins, the Calvary with leg stripped trousers, and an open laced buckskin shirt with short fringed sleeves, topped off with a worn but very apparent union Calvary hat. These things are only the easiest observances, by the way.” Here the major took a step closer, but slightly to Dusty’s side and continued. “You wear a very distinctive navy colt on you right and a rather large and interesting knife on your left. Now, if I am not mistaken and if one could and was to make a closer inspection? He would find the pistol grips are carved out of Whale bone and have an intricate scrimshaw design (identical on both sides). Also I believe that the Knife handle could be found to be of an unusual rock with a lacing of rawhide about the handgrip itself as well as the long engraved knife blade. Do I miss much in these observations sir?”

“No sir you are very observant and I expect have been well informed for some reason, that at present escapes me. I also suppose that considering how you have described me, that there are few who would fit that exact visual image. I had until now not given my preference in dress much thought. There was no intent on my part to disguise my identity however. I told your men my name as is usually known.” Dusty commented with any emotion apparently hidden.

“Absolutely none taken sir, and do not take me wrong. You are most welcome here for as long or as often as you would like. I am much honored to make your acquaintance and appreciate your allowing me to speechify for so long, at your expense.” With that the major put his hand forward in full greeting and was pleased when Dusty took it in a hardy shake and continued. “How is it that my two young men found and met you here on the Cross River anyway?”

“As they have said Major I noticed them being followed by a couple of Comanche that I had been following and lured them over to a campfire I had started for the purpose of their safety. I am still a little confused however major, as to how so much

information about me would reach you here and be of enough interest for you to recall it so readily.” This Dusty said with a grin of appreciation coming to his face.

“Does the name Marshall Tibet’s ring a bell, I believe him to be an acquaintance of yours Dusty. He is a friend of mine, as we served during the war together and I hope I can now call you my friend, also.” The major replied.

“Marshall Tibet’s of Hill County, yes sir it does and yes you can as well. Two Bits, does like to go on about the least bit of nothing. Until even an interesting story could put you to sleep before he gets done with the telling.” At that both men began to laugh quite heartily.

“Well my three tired riders, when you finish getting your gear taken care of and you two shows Dusty a place in the bunkhouse to bed down. Why don’t all of you join me in the house for supper, I believe Grits will have everything ready by then.” With that the Major turned and headed back to the ranch house, knowing the invitation would be accepted.

After the Major left, they walked their horses into the corral and took their saddles and gear off putting them temporarily on the top rail of the corral fence. Then Dusty turned the two Indian ponies loose inside the corral fence putting their leads with his gear. When Red, Alejandro and Dusty finished currying and rubbing down their horses. They stowed their tack and gear in the tack room of the barn. Then they showed Dusty the bunkhouse and he got his saddle bags and personal gear put away. The bunk house was a substantial room big enough to accommodate several cowhands. There were double bunks for fourteen men but he could see only six of the bottom ones taken with blankets so he put his gear on the seventh one. In the middle of the room there was also a long table for eating, playing cards and whatever at, for the same large number of men. There was a heat stove in the middle of the room with a couple of the chairs from the table pulled close to it. A hutch stood against the wall at one end near the table with some coat and hat pegs in the wall next to the door. The three of them went outside to the wash stand in front of the bunk house and cleaned the prairie off their faces

and hands, brushed the dust off their pants and walked to the ranch house for supper. Dusty had been introduced to the other hands while they were at the bunk house. All of them seemed to be good men of the usual mixture of cowboys or men hoping to get enough together some day for a little spread of their own, or older cowhands just working for the brand and the major.

Once inside and seated with Major Davis and the meal on the table, the talk went from what Red and Alejandro had seen while they were gone, to some more about their first meeting with Dusty. They told as much of what had occurred of the seeing Dusty's smoke and traveling to him then spending the night and his killing the two Comanche and bringing in the two Indian ponies. Then there was the usual male jovial banter to fill in the gaps. However no one asked any new questions about Dusty's past that would have been considered rude. So finally the meal was ending and all four men went out to the front porch and sat down for an evening smoke.

The night was clear and crisp with the evening breeze. The first hint of a pale moon and multitude of bright white to paler stars lit up the ebony blue night sky in a kaleidoscope of shapes and designs. The only night sounds were of the breeze flowing through the trees and the sleeping stock in the corral mixed with the distant ripple of the creek flowing by. As they were finishing their smokes the quiet of the men was broken.

"Dusty, as you say you are just drifting right now and we will be starting to round up stock for a drive up to the rails in Kansas. Would you consider signing on for the drive and hanging with us for a spell? You would be most welcome." the major eventually asked.

"Yes you should do this *senor*, a place to settle for a while at the least. You could continue to drift later on if you still wish." Alejandro cheerily added before Dusty could speak.

Dusty sat for a few seconds then answered. "That sounds like a fine idea major. But you need to know that there will come a day when I'll most likely be sitting on Buck and he'll turn his head one direction or the other. Then look back at me and I'll just agree with him that it's time to go. But if I start the drive

with you, I'll finish the drive with you that I will give you my word on."

"Good, with that my friends, I think I'll turn in for the night. It's another day tomorrow. Good night and let the good Lord keep you." With that the Major rose from his cane back rocker, opened the door and went inside.

"I'm glad you're staying with us Dusty. We can use good men like you around here." Red said as the door was closed and the lights started to be extinguished in the house. "You can see that Major Davis is a fine man and a good boss to work for."

"Yes, Red I can see that as well. Besides it will be good to stay in one place with men like you, Alejandro and the Major for a while. As much as I like the wide and lonesome, it is always good to spend time with good people too.

With this the three got up and started walking toward the bunkhouse. Dusty made his apology at needing to see a man about a horse (a common humorous comment for a visit to the nearest outhouse) and walked off alone as Red and Alejandro continued on. It was the first time the two close friends had been without Dusty since all three left the campsite, earlier that day.

"I like him Alejandro, but damn who'd a thought." Red said when Dusty was gone.

"Mi amigo, I also am most surprised as well and yes you cannot help but like him, now even admire who he appears to be. Such a life he has lived and the people he has known living it. It is only I wonder why it is he now just drifts, even though truly it is none of my affair." Alejandro added.

"I know but you can't help but wonder, and did the major say blood brother and brother-in-law to a Pawnee War Chief?" Red asked as if trying to remember the conversation when they first saw the major today. As they along with Dusty had returned to the ranch. From their trip to the southern part of the ranches range scouting for cattle. "I wonder what happened to his Pawnee wife and why he left; I wonder a lot right now?"

"That was what he said and Dusty agreed. Amigo, there is only two ways for that to be, si. And to be a blood brother is also something to give one reason to wonder about, it alone would be

story to have heard. An Indian does not give to his being a blood brother lightly from what I have ever heard.” Again the two were alike in their thoughts. As had happened on many an occasion during their time as friends.

No more was said that night between Red and Alejandro as they had come to the bunkhouse and it was time to get to their beds for some much needed sleep. So both men went to their own bunks once inside, undressed and lay down for the night. As the Major had said tomorrow is another day and there would be much work to do.

Dusty walked from the outhouse to the corral where he had put Buck earlier. As he approached the gate he noticed Buck was in one corner with the two Indian ponies. When he opened the gate and closed it behind him Buck wandered over next to him and waited for Dusty to rub his great neck. “I believe we have found a place to stop for a spell old friend, if you agree and you will give those two a couple of fine colts in the bargain.” Buck moved his head up and down with that and then turned his head slightly toward Dusty. “Okay then we are in agreement, we stay here for now, I’ll see you in the morning.”

Dusty turned away from Buck and walked out of the corral closing the gate behind him. Buck walked back over to the two ponies nudging one of them as he got near and stood beside her.

Alejandro heard Dusty come into the bunk house walk to his bed and start to undress before lying down on his bunk. He wondered at why he had been somewhat longer than it took outside for a simple trip to the privy would normally be and he thought he had heard the corral gate open and close twice before Dusty came into the bunk house. But he rolled onto his side facing the wall and went on to try and fall asleep. After all it was not any of his affairs to ask and nothing seemed to be amiss.

Red lay in his bunk quiet, but not asleep yet either. He was not exactly troubled, but still thinking, about the revelations about Dusty. Why was such a man as he seemed to be just drifting in this part of Texas, where outlaws sometimes wreaked havoc and Indians could still be a problem quite often? Shoot it wasn’t that long ago they arrested John Wesley Hardin not that

far from here over in Comanche County and hung his brother and cousins, before Hardin escaped again. What had the whole story about him been in Pawnee Country, how Dusty became a war chiefs' blood-brother and where his Pawnee wife is at now, was she dead, gone or what. He knew it was not any of his business to ask, but he couldn't help but wonder about it. Finally he drifted off to sleep, questions still bouncing around in his thoughts like bees in a field of flowers.

After Dusty had disrobed, lay down on his bunk and closed his eyes completely relaxing in the new surroundings. He drifted off to sleep without any trouble, a man always content in his decisions. No troubled thoughts slowing the welcome rest after an eventful and long day.

Major Davis had stood at his window before going to bed and watched Red and Alejandro walk to the bunk house. He had also seen Dusty go to the corral after relieving himself in the privy and talk to his Buckskin for a few minutes before going back and into the bunk house joining the others for the night. He was glad Dusty had agreed to stay on but wondered about his presence here in this vicinity as well. Only the Major wondered more about all the things Marshall Tibet had told him about the man, many he had not mentioned during their talks earlier that day. Then he turned from the window, turned down his covers on the bed, got undressed and got in for his nights rest, everything would come as it would. He could deal with it as it did, when it did. Tomorrow would be here soon enough without troubling himself with what might or might not happen. The major fell asleep in short order not troubling himself on things that right now did not really matter anyway

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