

# Victor M. Alvarez – Excerpts from Kill Slade - A John Slade Western

- 1 -

*December, 1881, Blanco, Texas*

**T**hey rode in from the east in the cold dead of night, and topped a ridge overlooking what appeared to be a horse ranch with a bunkhouse, barn and a larger family house. They reined in their horses to a stop. They were professional bounty hunters; without a word they knew the drill.

The Hatcher brothers stared silently into the darkness, down into the valley below, as the cold wind blew and howled onto their upturned faces, as if in grave anticipation of what was to come.

They saw a small gaslight lamp that hung by the entrance to the large house just barely lighting the area. They didn't see any lights coming from inside the house, nor the bunkhouse.

They only used hand gestures that directed each other to go here and there. Again no words were necessary. They were assured that the ex-Texas Ranger was living at the cabin with his wife by the Mexican farmer who led them there. And also – according to the farmer – there were no hired hands on the property. Thereby accomplishing unfettered, what they were there to do.

That Mexican farmer, whose weathered face was as craggy as the landscape had been in Emilio's cantina *that* night, as he overheard two *Americano*'s talking about an ex - Texas Ranger who he knew was a bounty hunter, that lived just outside of town. He was sure that was the one to whom they were referring.

So, building up enough courage he gulped down the last of his whiskey, and after using his shirt-sleeve to wipe it across his mouth, he approached them – ever hopeful he'll make some money with his information.

Assuring the *Americano*'s he knew who they were asking about, he was immediately hired to lead them to the cabin – after the promise of a five dollar gold piece for his trouble.

One of the brothers, Willis Hatcher, the older of the two, a tall bulky man with grey steely eyes, turned slightly toward his younger brother with a hint of a smile. The brother Jerry Hatcher, a smaller version of his brother with deep blue eyes just smiled back. They knew that tonight was going to be easy pickings. They were unafraid, immune to fear, a product of the war and the type of life they have set out for themselves.

These were men who had hunted and been hunted by professionals and rank amateurs alike, and they were still alive. Both had been shot once or twice and survived. And they bore the scars of that, as did their souls. Everywhere they went, death and destruction were left behind as a grim remainder. They were determined men. But that wasn't always so. After the war, three of them, the Hatcher brothers and a cousin, named Calvin West, came out of the Confederate Army barely alive – their minds destroyed by all that death and war had to offer. Unable to find any type of decent employment, they turned to the only profession worth their salt – bounty hunting.

But life was hard in the beginning.

They were a band of twelve desperados, who made a bloody rep' for themselves through cunning and savage determination. They persevered to the point that no one got in their way. If anyone interfered with them, they were killed for their efforts. But now it was just the two brothers, and the other members of the gang. It was Calvin West who had been shot and killed in a card game, over a month ago – by the same man they had been tracking, and now planning on killing tonight.

Their intended victim was a man named John Slade, who was an experienced ex-Texas Ranger and a legend in Southern Texas. The word was that Slade rode with Leander McNelly's Rangers down in the Nueces Strip and crossing into Mexico getting involved in a heated gunfight where he was seriously shot. Then later he turned to bounty hunting to make a living. They needed to be extra careful, making sure nothing went wrong.

The night was dark, with only the moon occasionally obscured by scudding clouds. They worked better at night, and they liked it that way. Before them the valley was wide and spacious and level to some extent.

Dismounting, they led the horses to a clump of trees and tied them up.

Then in the distance, wolves howled loud and clear. Above the howl the Mexican farmer, Tuco Sanchez, took it upon himself to say, "Senor, my five pesos por favor," to the older of the two *Americano's*.

The two bounty hunters stared stony eyed at the farmer al-most forgetting he was still there. Their eyes revealed a surly confidence. Willis Hatcher flipped back his coat, reached into his vest and pulled out a thin gold coin and without looking at it, flipped it toward the Mexican who failed to catch it in mid-air. He clawed the ground and after a few seconds found it, and slipped it into his trouser pocket. He had no horse and had rode double with one of the *Americano's*, as he now ran back the way they'd come, quickly making the sign of the cross across his chest, while thanking *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, they hadn't killed him!

Once the Mexican was gone, the two brothers drew their Colt single action peacemakers, checked the loads and without a word, started walking down the ridge toward the cabin.

\* \* \*

They say you can't live in the past that the future always looks brighter since worry and rumination are the foes of the present. He'd listened to those whose ideas at most made no sense till something caused a dramatic change in their own lives.

He knew the feeling, and his life would never be the same.

He still clings to *her* vision and feels her presence just before he wakes. And when he does, his memories of her come with a flood gate of tears, and at the same time, of hatred and revenge. They had come at night like most wild animals do, looking for him. And they found him alright – alongside his wife Emily.

He was always an extremely light sleeper, which saved his life once or twice. So, the moment he knew something was wrong, was when he was woken by the sounds of his bedroom door slowly opening – the rusty door hinges gave them away. He saw them then, silhouetted against the light of the full moon that shone through the bedroom's only window; two of them with their guns drawn. But he was too slow to react.

"Emily!" he cried out, momentarily halting, dazed, confused and taken by surprise. His gunbelt was hanging from the bedpost on the other side of the bed – left there just before their love making – too far for him to reach, draw and defend Emily and himself.

Suddenly a shot rang out. "No!" Slade cried out.

The man on the right was the first to shoot as Slade tried to cover his wife with his own body. But again, it was too late. She woke up almost in a sitting position as the bullet entered her forehead, dead before the impact of the slug threw her onto her back, with him on top of her.

A few seconds may have passed, or less, he had no way of knowing, when he heard one of the two killers shout out just before he fired his gun once again, "This is for our cousin, lawman!"

John Slade quickly glanced over at his pistols, *if only I could reach my gun's*, the thought raced through his mind, and just as he tried reaching for them over his wife's body, his tranquil bedroom was turned into a bedlam of horror as the intruders fired their guns several times more as John Slade's body shook with the impact of the heavy caliber bullets. The loud deep booming of the gunshots reverberated off the walls in the small confine of the bedroom, as slug after slug found their marks.

Then, slowly Slade's right eye opened momentarily, and through the dim light, he saw the killers backing away out of the cabin; as he slowly started losing consciousness and with pain shooting through his entire body, he struggled to rise.

But the pain was too intense.

Bleeding profusely from his wounds and unable to attempt getting up on his elbows once again, he slumped back on top of Emily, crying with his wife's name dying on his lips as blood oozed from his mouth and nose.

With a great effort of will, he tried to focus for just a second on his wife. Suddenly, the pain was gone, as his mind fell into that motionless black void.