

I

(2009)

I tried my best not to kill any of 'em. Problem is when you worked for the rendering company you sorta got used to all the killing going on. Then it comes easy.

Don't much like to think about my previous life. For seventy years I did my best to block it out. Seventy years is a long time to try and forget. Had a lotta trouble sleeping cuzza what I did. When I could sleep the bad dreams would come to haunt. So you can imagine how I felt when I opened my eyes and saw a woman sitting next to my hospital bed. She had no clue I'd be coming back around. How could she? I'd been pronounced dead thirty minutes earlier and she was facing the door blowing cigarette smoke into an empty hallway.

"If you don't mind, I'll take one of those smokes," I said to the woman. And with that the poor thing jumped to her feet and dropped her cigarette on the sheet covering me up. Nearly set me ablaze. Stammered and stuttered and kept repeating herself while hunting for that lit butt. Asked me if I knew I'd been pronounced dead. Even asked me if I wanted the priest back in the room.

"No, Ma'am. A smoke is all I want. Far as getting the priest. Probably not a good idea. I gave up on organized religion a long time ago."

"But I don't understand what's happening," she kept saying. "You were dead. Clearly dead. I saw it with my own two eyes. Now you look as healthy as a—"

"Horse?"

"Yes," she said. "And a sound horse at that."

I told her I didn't understand what was happening neither but here I was about to get in one last smoke on the devil's dime. "You are the woman I sent for, ain't you? The one who rescued all them mustangs in Nevada?"

"Yes, I am," she replied. "And I drove over eight hundred miles to get here but you were unconscious by the time I arrived."

I couldn't let that one slip by. "Well, I guess it's a good thing I gotta pass from dying or you would have come all the way for nothing."

"Now-now, Mister Bartell," she said. "I really didn't have a choice in the matter. Did I? They told me you wouldn't tell the priest anything about the horses or what made you do the violent things you did at Potrero Gap."

"That's right, Ma'am. Just kept my mouth shut the past seventy years. Nobody was gonna listen to my side of things, anyways. And the priest sure as heck wasn't gonna do me any favors. You see, I wasn't a good man back then."

I guess those words must have torn her up some cuz she gave me one of those you-poor-wretch smiles and sat back down in the chair and handed me a cigarette. And I'm sure I looked pretty miserable. Like I could kick off again at the snap of the fingers. Maybe it's why she got so eager to hear what I had to say.

"Well, here I am, Mister Bartell. At your service. And please don't call me Ma'am. Call me Annie. Okay?"

“Okay, Annie. Long as you call me Billy.” And with those words exchanged I didn’t waste any more time. Death might fiddle a body a second verse. Lung cancer won’t. “Truth is, Annie, you’re the only person who can stop the mustang roundups still going on here in Montana. If you can stop ‘em in Nevada then you can stop ‘em here, too. So, I figured if you knew about the bad things that went on at Potrero Gap, you could get the President to put an end to it. What went on at Potrero ain’t right. What went on there no creature, two or four-legged should ever have to endure. Sabe?” She nodded her head she understood and I scooted up higher in the bed and pointed to the door. “If you don’t mind shutting that. Best we not let on to anyone about my rebound.”

Annie reached past the end of the bed and closed the door so the night nurse couldn’t hear our voices. She turned back to me and spoke in a whisper. “I’m fully aware of your part in the killings that went on seventy years ago, Billy. I’m aware of more than you may know.”

“I understand,” I said. “But there’s more to it than meets the eye.”

“Oh? And how’s that?” She asked.

“Well, for starters you need to know I never took pleasure in it. But I was seventeen at the time and angry as all get-out. And I made some bad choices. Really bad choices.”

“Fine, Billy,” she said. “I’ll try to remember that and remain impartial and listen to your side of it, if it’ll ease your conscience. But there’s only one thing I can really offer you.”

“And what’s that, Annie?”

“To try and save your Montana mustangs,” she answered.

“If you can save my mustangs,” I said, “that’ll sure give me some peace of mind.” And peace of mind is what I needed.

2
(1932)

There were moments in the boy's life that made him the human being he would later become. Whether the moments had been set in motion as part of a grand scheme or the boy freely chose his destiny within life's random chaos remained unclear until death. What is clear is when the boy's fate changed, so did the fate of the horses. . . .

Snow fell on the hunters as they slept. The last heat from their smoldering campfire radiated tepid from a massive boulder the two huddled against. The man awoke first. He shivered watching smoke ebb in a lazy plume and assumed the late-March storm now fronted miles away. *Or did it?* He rolled over to gaze skyward and watched morning blackness fade to pale indigo. Northeast, Venus flashed but no stars glimmered overhead. Instead, high wispy cirrus clouds stretched from the south as faint glints of red from the sun etched their trailing edges. Reading these signs, the man reasoned the front had passed and the day's weather would be good. He also guessed it to be 6:30 and knew they needed to start moving. He and the boy had a full day planned.

With a sense of uneasiness, the man stretched his frozen arms and legs. He unbuttoned a flap on his bedroll, shook off snow, and slipped on his boots. He crawled to what remained of their fire hoping to revive it but no embers ignited from his clumsy efforts. Frustrated, he slid an iced-over coffee pot to the side and decided to gather kindling. The day's first light played tricks with his equilibrium as he searched for wood and he stumbled. When he fell for a third time, this time to his knees, he wondered why he had not stayed put in the warmth of the bedroll. As he struggled to stand, something caught his eye and he turned to watch their horses stir. He limped to where three mares corralled in a makeshift pen and checked tie downs and draw straps. Everything appeared in order. He punched through a layer of ice in canvas buckets so the horses could draw water. As a precaution, he scanned outside the rope pen but nothing moved or seemed unusual. Again, he felt dizzy, so he knelt on a knee. When he looked back toward the boulder, his son still lay inside the other bedroll with a head cover drawn tight against cold. The boy was snoring.

This child is no hunter, the man told himself. Still, he managed to eke a pensive smile reminiscing the day his own father took him hunting, there, at Stratford Mountain. During that outing he managed to shoot a jackrabbit. Well, it was more like a starved and lame bunny, far from a monumental trophy kill a father could imagine for a son in Bighorn country. Then again, his own boy was a mere ten years old, three years younger than he had been on that first hunt. He knew better than to expect miracles from a ten-year-old. And the more he thought on these things, the more he reminded himself how this hunt had a deeper implication. This outing was about passing along a family tradition. It was about bonding between father and son and making memories lasting a lifetime. But, mostly, it was about spending quality time with the boy while he still had a chance.

He drew a deep sigh and tried distracting himself by peering northeast to the trailing clouds and toward their home in Billings. From twenty miles away, he could see the town's lights. The sun still hung low enough on the horizon the opaque halo would last another minute or two before red and, then, pink and orange washed over it. Watching this sunrise, he realized few remained. The thought left him feeling melancholy and he swallowed hard to keep from tearing up. The boy does not need to know I am dying, he told himself. All the boy needs to know is that I love him.

He tiptoed back to the campfire and lit tinder and small branches, and stoked flames with his breath. A few minutes later, the fire blazed and he set the coffee pot back in its center. He threw in a handful of coffee grounds and while the brew heated, went to relieve himself behind the boulder. When he returned, he shook the boy from a deep sleep. "Wake up. Wake up, Billy," he whispered. "There's something wonderful I want you to see." The boy poked his head out of the bedroll with eyes gunked shut. The man wet his thumbs with his own saliva and wiped the boy's caked eyelids open. He kissed his son on the forehead and patted the boy on the shoulders. "Come on, Billy. Up and at 'em. You have to see this."

The boy moaned as he yawned. He pawed for his cowboy boots at the bottom of the bedroll and slid them over his iced toes. He shivered outside the warmth of the bed and did little to help himself dress. He struggled to fasten a red Pendleton hand-me-down but, with his father's warmer hands, the winter coat soon buttoned with ease. By the time the last button hitched, the boy had become distracted blowing steamy breath high in the air and watching it disappear in a ghostly swirl. His father ignored the shenanigans and concentrated on cinching the drawstring to an oversized Montana cowboy hat.

"There, Billy," he said. "Even old Tom Mix would be proud of you."

The boy slurped some coffee to warm up but the man refused to let him finish and nudged him to keep moving. "We haven't got all day," he said. "Now bring along your new birthday rifle. You never know. Just might come in handy."

The boy seldom questioned his father and snatched the rifle from inside the bedroll. The .30-06 bolt-action Winchester Model 54 had been a father-to-son gift. Many considered the newest deer rifle made by Winchester the most accurate ever manufactured. When the boy's father turned thirteen, the boy's grandfather started a family tradition by bestowing a Winchester upon each of his sons. "That's why I gave your brother a rifle six years ago and why I'm giving you this one now," his father had said. "It's a Bartell tradition. Hopefully, someday you'll do the same for your boy."

They hiked to the far side of the boulder and slid down a short path to a toppled fir. The massive fir had recently fallen; enough greenery remained to conceal them as they peeked through its limbs. The man pointed at something far in the distance and the boy squinted to see the object through morning light. At first, the boy had trouble believing his eyes, so he blinked and blinked again until the object came into focus.

"*It's a wild mustang,*" the boy gushed. "Biggest, whitest horse I've ever seen."

"I'd venture to say it's over sixteen hands. Probably came up south outta Pryor Mountain," the man stated.

Earlier, the horse had climbed out of a brushy thicket and now stood stiff-legged and motionless on a large rock with its front half exposed to the first rays of the sun. Even as father and son continued to watch, the stallion's white chest and shoulders began

capturing flashes of red. The boy whispered to his father how the red resembled the bull's eye red on targets at the shooting range.

"This ain't the shooting range, Billy. This is the real thing. What we came here for. What you prepared for."

"But, Pa, it's a mustang. We don't shoot mustangs."

"The heck we don't. Government pays ten dollars for mustang ears."

"But, Pa—"

"No buts, Billy. If you're gonna take the shot, you'd better hurry up."

The boy tossed a handful of pine needles in the air and watched tailings settle straight down. He knew wind would be less of a factor than drop. With the horse positioned upwind at least a thousand feet, he would have to adjust the aperture two clicks up.

"You may be right, Pa, about hurrying and such, but I think we oughtta wait."

"And why's that?"