

# The Hangin J's

Bud Morris

John Jackson and Jack Johnson were survivors of the Union's Vicksburg Campaign. Their reorganized regiment, the 34<sup>th</sup> Indiana Veteran Volunteer Infantry was later deployed to blockade duty at the Port of Los Brazos de Santiago as the Civil War wound down. General Lee had surrendered a month before the Union's young Colonel Barrett ordered an attack on the Confederates guarding the cotton that awaited shipment from Brownsville, Texas.

Jackson and Johnson were captured together in the poorly conceived Union foray, which turned out to be the last battle of the Civil War. The Confederate commander, Colonel Ford, paroled the many Union prisoners he had captured within a couple of weeks.

The two disgusted soldiers mustered out of the army as soon as they were released. They purchased a couple of outstanding Texas mares and traveled together from Brownsville to the Pecos River. They more or less followed the Pecos most of the way to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where they hired on as amateur cowboys at a small cattle ranch. They quickly developed into proficient cow hands.

Each of the military buddies had married an accomplished young Hispanic woman by the time they pooled their resources and set out to establish their own ranch. The two couples eventually homesteaded side-by-side on the south edge of the Colorado border, a bit north of the ancient town of Questa, New Mexico. They built their headquarters and buildings on their combined 320 acres of titled "Homestead" land, and grazed their stock on thousands of additional government acres traditionally assimilated on a first-come, first-served basis. They called their ranch the "Hangin J's," their brand being a horizontal bar with two "J"s hanging down from it. The overall effect looked like two side-by-side capital "J"s with their exaggerated top-caps joined.

Things went well for the Hangin J's ranch. The men were able to purchase a nice herd of long-horned cattle at a good price from a Colorado rancher whose wife insisted on going back east after their only child died. Johnson loved to work with the cattle, but Jackson was more interested in horses. When the ranch began generating a significant amount of cash, he was able to purchase an outstanding stallion that had belonged to a gun-slick who had been hanged for murder by the tough little town town of Questa. It was throwing excellent colts from the offspring of the mares that the ranchers had brought with them from Texas.

The Johnsons had a four-year-old son and another child on the way, and the Jacksons had a two-year-old daughter when disaster struck at the Hangin J's spread. A Kiowa cow hand who they had hired became quite ill about two weeks after visiting his village. The ranchers' wives had moved him into the house where they could nurse him, when he broke out with small pox. The two soldiers immediately inoculated themselves and their families by the process of variolation. They simply collected some pus from some pock lesions on the Indian by knife-point, and introduced the pus under the skin of their family members with the same blade.

The crude vaccinations infected the men and children with a milder form of the disease. Neither the ranchers nor Johnson's son, James, became terribly sick, but Jackson's daughter, Janie, ended up with a

moderately pock-marked face. The ranchers' wives had been heavily exposed for over a week before the disease was identified, and both of the young mothers died of smallpox.

Both Jackson and Johnson had been deeply in love with their wives, and neither man had any inclination to remarry. As time went on, Johnson spent more and more time out on the range, while Jackson stayed closer to home to care for the children and the horses. When James was six years old, Johnson sent him back east for the rancher's parents to oversee his education. The boy ran away "To go back to Dad" shortly after his thirteenth birthday, and had not been heard of by his family since.

Jackson undertook the education of his daughter himself, and she was an avid learner. Attending church was difficult from the ranch, but the good man did not neglect his daughter's spiritual needs. They spent many happy and profitable hours pouring over the Bible together. Janie considered the Lord her closest friend.

By the time Janie was sixteen years old she had developed into a shapely but modest young woman. She had never been particularly conscious of her pock-marked face until her dad began taking her to a few social gatherings in town. She really enjoyed their occasional visits to church, but her figure elicited enough jealousy from the girls her own age that she rarely attended a party without hearing a catty remark about her face. The humble teenager was essentially unaware of her personal intrigue, and her self-esteem was deteriorating to the point that she disliked showing her face in town, except for church.

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Janie took a break from her gardening and her many household duties on her seventeenth birthday. She had never felt more carefree as she rode out the gate of the Hangin J's headquarters. The steel-grey mare under her wanted to run, and it suited the lithe young cowgirl just fine.

"Go for it, Whinny," she urged as she leaned forward and gave the mare her head.

Janie gloried in the mare's speed and action as she let her run along the lane towards Questa. This was one of the finest mares the Hangin J's had ever produced, and Janie had gentled her since birth. She hadn't actually needed to break the mare. She had gotten her used to a pony bit and a bit of weight on her back long before she was grown. When it was time to break her she had just climbed astride and started training her. The horse had enjoyed it every bit as much as Janie had. Now, at four-years-old, she was an excellent cutting and roping horse.

After a fast half-mile, Janie tugged the mare into an easy canter, and then down to a brisk walk. As they approached the ford across Kiowa Creek she heard a cow bawling in distress. Riding upstream towards the sound, she soon found the cow mired up to its belly in a narrow strand of quick sand. The experienced cowgirl shook out a loop and tossed it over the distressed beast's horns. Snubbing her rope around her saddle horn, she backed the mare, slowly easing the cow to firmer footing. Just as the cow regained her footing Janie snapped her rope to loosen it, and set the animal free. Whinny had pulled the rescue off perfectly.

Janie continued her aimless ride down the lane for several more miles. She was approaching the Hangin J's southern border when she met an uncouth-looking hombre with tied down guns. The man blocked Janie's pathway with his horse and held up a hand to stop the young cowgirl.

"I'm foreman of the Yoke Ranch across the Rio Grande from the Hangin J's", he began. "That mare yer ridin' belongs ta us. You guys had no right ta brand 'er."

"No way," Janie answered. "She's out of our best stallion and a foal of one of the mares my dad brought up here from Texas. She has the typical looks and conformation of the Hangin J's stock."

"She's ars, 'n' Ah'll jest take 'er now," the gun slick asserted, reaching out to grasp Whinny's reigns just below the bit.

Janie kneed her powerfully built mare sharply towards the stranger, and Whinny struck his horse so hard with her shoulder that it was knocked to its knees. Wheeling her mount, Janie took off for the Hangin J's headquarters with all the speed Whinny could muster. As she stretched the distance between herself and the grungy stranger, he fired several angry shots in her general direction.

"Thanks for helping me get away from that creep, Lord," Janie murmured half aloud when the stranger gave up the chase. She went straight home and found her dad in the kitchen baking her a birthday cake. "Jack 'll be home for supper at six," he told the girl. "We'll all discuss this together after we've eaten."

The family sat down to dinner together at about dusk. Janie's dad discussed the generalities of how the ranch was doing with Jack during the meal. Jack mentioned that the unusually hot weather seemed to be driving a lot of the cattle into the shade of the draws, where they were harder to keep watch over. John finally brought out a slightly over-baked chocolate cake, which he served to the tune of Happy Birthday and whipped cream.

When Janie could keep silent no longer, she divulged the details of her confrontation with the strange rider. Both men became deadly serious.

"Maybe those missin' cows aren't in the draws after all," John mused.

"Yeh," Jack answered. "I wonder if that "Yoke" brand won't be a cinch-ring adjustment to the Hangin J's. All they'd have to do is drop two lines down to the tips of the 'Js' and our brand would look like an ox yoke."

"You mean they're rustling our stock?" Janie asked.

"Could be," both men answered in unison. "That guy made it rather plain that they even wanted our horses," Jack added.

"All this reminds me of your birthday present," John remarked. "We went together to get you these," he added as he pulled a set of S&W 32 rim fire six shooters in beautifully tooled leather holsters out of a feed sack under his chair. The matching double action hand guns were factory engraved and fitted with fancily checkered ivory grips.

“We weren’t expecting you to ever need them, but now I think maybe you’d better start wearing them whenever you go outside, at least for a while,” Jack advised.

“Thank you, Dad; thank you, Uncle Jack,” Janie squealed as she hugged each of them in turn. “I can hardly wait to try them out.”

“There’s a case of ammo for them in the pantry,” John added. “You can ride and shoot a rifle as well as any cowpoke I know, but with what you just told us, you’d best start practicing with these first thing come tomorrow morning.”

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The following morning found Janie and her dad setting up targets against the bank of a creek. “Hold it straight out to your side like this,” Dad instructed the girl. “Look sideways along your arm and aim it just like you would a rifle.”

Janie had a steady arm. She followed her dad’s instructions, and had no problem hitting the targets they had set up. After a few minutes she holstered the guns. She did not like the feel of their weight hanging from her slender waist, and resolved not to wear them any more than whenever the men pestered her into doing it.

The man and his daughter were walking back to the house when they noticed a young stranger riding into the Hangin’ J compound. He was clean-cut, neatly dressed in well-worn clothes, and wore a single gun, as most cowhands did, but his was holstered butt-forward on his left side as some gunmen preferred. He had chestnut-colored hair combed neatly back and held in place with a decoratively beaded Indian headband. It curled a tantalizing bit at the edges, which were cut straight slightly above the shoulders.

“Howdy,” the man expressed with a winning smile. “Name’s Jim. Any chance you guys are hiring these days?”

“Might be,” John answered slowly as he looked the stranger over from head to foot. “Come in and sit a spell.”

The rider dismounted and ground-hitched his horse. He patted it affectionately on the shoulder before turning to accompany John and Janie through the door.

The men proceeded to the kitchen table where Janie produced three cups of strong black range coffee.

“What kind of a job are you looking for?” John asked after a bit of friendly small talk.

“I’m an experienced cow hand,” Jim responded, “but I like working with good horses the best. I’ve been hearing about the Hangin’ J’s horses ever since I left Wyoming, so I came down to see if I could get work here.

"We're a small enough outfit that all the hands are expected to do whatever's necessary anywhere on the ranch," John told him. "You can start by mucking out the stables today if you want to, but my partner will have to agree to it before we actually hire anyone."

Jim accepted the day's work cheerfully, and Mr. Jackson took him to the barn to show him what was expected of him. He sat about the task like he knew what he was doing, so "Mr. John," as the hands called him, left the stranger hard at it. Janie took him a sandwich and some cookies just before she and her dad sat down to lunch.

"How's he doing?" Dad asked when she returned.

"The horses like him," she reported. "They're watching him with their ears pricked forward, but they aren't acting upset or uneasy. He doesn't look like he's straining himself any," she continued, "but he's accomplished a lot more than I could have done in the time he's been at it. I think he'd be an excellent man, around horses, at least."

"Jack will want to watch him work the cattle for a bit before we commit to hiring him," Dad replied, "but I'm betting he'll like him. This kid talks well and seems to be a genuine gentleman."

Jim finished mucking the stables that afternoon. He was invited to eat with the family that evening so "Mr. Jack" could get acquainted with him.

"He feels just like family," Jack volunteered when the new hand went out to the bunk house. "I'm hoping he's as good with the cattle as he is with the horses."

Any questions about Jim's ability as a cowhand were put to rest the first day he worked with Mr. Jack. He was an excellent rider, threw an awesome loop, and just plain had a lot of cow sense. It almost seemed that he could out-guess the next move of whatever cow or bull he was working with before the beast itself knew what it would be doing.

"You're hired if you still want the job," the ranchers told Jim that evening, after they had discussed Janie's recent scare. Janie was in complete agreement with their judgment.

"That incident probably won't lead to anything further," Jim mused, "but I'm ready if it does. Let me assure you that I'll do everything I can for the brand."

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Jack, John, and Jim spent the next few days searching for more of the Hangin J's cattle. They found surprising few in the draws, and all of the men were becoming more and more convinced that well over a thousand head had been rustled from the Hangin J's holdings.

"You know," Jim mused on the ride home after another unproductive day of combing the washes, "All of these draws start as shallow washes somewhere along Sleeping Ute Mountain, generally to the west of our graze. If the cattle were really in the draws, any rustlers would just drive them up the washes into the forested land on the mountain. Since everyone knows that the mountain is sacred to the Utes, no

one would be likely to go up there very far. The cattle could be held in the forest until their altered brands were healed, and then slipped across the Rio Grande at night to some of the graze on the other side of the river.”

“That sounds pretty much the way it’s got to be,” the partners agreed. “The other side of the mountain actually stretches nearly to the Rio Grande. We ought to check out the mountain soon as we can.”

Early the next morning the three men followed one of the larger draws up the climbs of Sleeping Ute Mountain. It seemed to them that most of the draws petered out on or near the smoother northwestern slope that leveled out quite close to the Rio Grande. As they started down that side of the mountain, they ran across a clearing containing a small holding pen. Jim drew up his horse in the trees to look over the set-up. John stopped his mound beside him, but Jack rode on into the clearing towards a deserted-looking little shanty on the far side of the pen.

“Whoa, stay out of sight!” Jim called softly to the careless man. The rancher wheeled his horse back towards the trees just as a rifle cracked. Jack made it well back into the forest before falling from his mount. John pulled the unconscious man’s shirt up for a look, and turned a pasty green. Jim dressed the chest wound below the injured rancher’s collar bone with his cravat while John stepped into the trees and lost his lunch.

When the wound was dressed, Jim swung up behind the saddle of his big gelding. John boosted his partner up into the saddle so Jim could hold him between his arms as he rode. “I’ll take him home if you’ll go to Questa for the doctor,” Jim suggested. John nodded his agreement as he removed the bridle from his partner’s horse and sent the faithful beast home with a sharp swat on the rump.

Jack was more dead than alive when Jim rode through the gate of the Hangin J’s compound. His call for help brought Janie to the front porch just as he reached the house. Janie helped carry the unconscious man to his bed. Jim lit a lantern and helped her strip the rancher and get him into his night clothes. They re-dressed the wound, sealing it with clean lard-smearred strips from an old pillow case. Janie pulled a chair up to the bedside and prepared to sit out the night with her patient. When Jim went out to take care of his horse, he found Mr. Jack’s beast waiting at the barn. Jim joined Janie at the patient’s bedside after the animals had been cared for.

Jim and Janie talked in subdued voices throughout most of the night. Jim told her that he had been captured by the Cheyenne on his way out west on the Oregon Trail when he was thirteen years old. He had been forced to live as the son of a childless Indian couple for over three years. His adoptive Indian father had been a cruel former Cheyenne Dog Soldier. When Jim was rescued by an Indian agent at age sixteen, he had found a job wrangling cattle on a Wyoming ranch. A couple of years later, just as he was becoming a proficient cow puncher, some traveling Cheyenne recognized him at the ranch. He had left the area to avoid trouble for his employer, and had wandered down to New Mexico looking for a job with horses.

Jack’s condition was not noticeably different come morning. Janie finally found her bleary-eyed way to the kitchen to start her daily tasks while Jim went out to care for the horses. John arrived about mid-morning with the doctor, whom he had spent the night sobering up.

The doctor thumped around on the patient’s chest, finally rolling a piece of paper into a cone and listening to the patient’s breathing with the smaller end in his ear. “He may rally for a day or two,” the

doctor finally announced, "but I doubt that he'll live more than three or four days at best." He injected a dose of laudanum and left a bottle of foul-smelling medicine to ease the patient's pain. He charged two dollars for his services, including the medicine.

True to the doctor's prediction, Mr. Jack rallied the next day. By mid-afternoon, while John was sitting with him, he was conscious enough to talk for a few minutes.

"Bring me a piece of paper and some ink," the good man requested of his partner. He took the paper and painfully scribbled out a will in which he left everything to Janie. "She's all I've got since I lost James," he reminisced. "She's been as good as a daughter to me, John," he added as he signed the will.

"You sign this too, as a witness," Jack urged his partner. "Please give it to Janie after I'm gone," he instructed. And if she takes it too hard, remind her that I died trusting in Christ for my salvation. It will be well with my soul." Then he coughed, and was gone.

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Jim seemed to take the death of Mr. Jack every bit as hard as Mr. John and Janie did. Tears streamed down his cheeks as the pine box containing the remains was lowered into the grave. That evening Janie walked dejectedly out to the barn to weep off some of her grief. As she slipped through the door she heard Jim praying softly in the loft.

"Lord," he wept, "I'm sorry. I thought I'd have more time than I did. Now he's gone, Lord, and there's nothing I can do about it. Be with me, Lord. My heart's breaking and I need your comfort."

Tears coursed down the girl's face as she climbed the ladder and knelt by her new friend's side. He took her hand as they wept together. Finally they stood, smiled at each other, and left the barn by separate exits without needing to say a word. Both of them felt immensely comforted by the incident.

The next day John called his daughter into the ranch office and gave her Uncle Jack's will. "Here's mine too, Honey," he almost whispered. "I wrote it out when you were ten years old. Hide these in a safe fireproof place where no thief can find them. They'll insure that if anything ever happens to me this whole spread will be yours." He gave the young woman a quick hug, and left the room with tears brimming in his eyes.

Janie wasted no time hiding the wills. She put them in a square metal cookie tin with a tight lid, and hid them in a hollowed out space behind a loose block in a dark corner of storm cellar. It was where she had hidden her cherished treasures when she was a little girl, and no one had ever found her hideaway.

The next morning Janie announced that she wanted to go into town for kitchen supplies. "You can't go alone with what's happening," her dad insisted, "and I need to stay home and watch the horses. They're about all we've got left, you know."

"We're all but out of flour and potatoes, and I used the last of the coffee this morning, Dad," the young woman replied.

"If we're out of coffee, I guess I could send Jim with you," Dad replied as his face crinkled into a smile.

Jim brought the buckboard up to the front porch. Janie came down the steps in a skirt, and he took her arm to help her climb into the seat. The touch of his hand sent a completely unexpected shiver through her body and lit her face with a rosy blush. As he climbed into the seat beside her and took up the reins she realized what a handsome man he really was.

"You're looking mighty pretty this morning," he said admiringly, "but don't you think you ought to be wearing your guns?"

"How could I wear a gun belt over a skirt?" she asked, looking into his eyes. "*Maybe he was teasing her.*"

"Now that's a problem I've never faced," he replied with a grin. "Maybe you should get a pocket derringer," he said more seriously as he slapped the reins to start the team."

"I'm a Christian," she retorted pointedly as they rode through the gate. "I don't want to shoot anyone."

"I love the Lord too," the young man replied earnestly, "but these guys are playing for real. They've already killed Mr. Jack, and they've actually shot at you. If I'd been on the ball I could have shot that guy instead of standing there yelling at Mr. Johnson to take cover. Your uncle would still be alive if I hadn't been such an idiot."

"It wasn't your fault," Janie assured him, "and he wasn't really my uncle," she added, tearing up a bit. "He was just my dad's best friend, and he helped raise me." It was then that she noticed a tearful glitter in his eyes too. He squeezed her hand for an ecstatic moment as he gazed at her face. Then he dropped it like a hot potato.

The rest of the trip was endured in uneasily silence. "My face turned him off, Lord," she agonized as they approached Questa, "but I think I love him anyway."

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Jim parked the buckboard in front of the dry-goods store and politely helped Janie down from her seat. He seemed distracted, like a barrier had come between them. It was then that she noticed how carefully he watched the boardwalk and the street, almost as if he half expected to meet up with something or someone dreadful.

Get what you need, and wait inside for me he instructed her so earnestly that she wasn't even miffed by his bossiness. After she was safely in the store, he stepped up the street to the gunsmith's shop. "Have you got a sweet little derringer that would really stop an assailant?" he asked.

"I got some 22's," the gunsmith answered, "but they wouldn't stop no one afore they could shoot back. How 'bout this little 32? It's small 'nough fer a sleeve gun, 'n' you could cross-cut yer bullets ta make 'em expand when they hit."

"It's not for me, it's for a woman," Jim answered curtly, "but let's see it."

The small gun was pretty much what Jim had in mind for Janie. He purchased it on the spot. It came in a small unmarked box. The cowboy slipped into the ladies clothing store and got the clerk to gift wrap it for him. She did a nice job, and placed the package in a larger box to protect it on the trip home. She charged him fifty cents because he would not let her in on what woman his gift was for.

Janie took quite a while at the dry-goods store. She purchased at least a month's worth of supplies, including a lot of canned goods. She was helping Jim load the last of her purchases when she heard a passerby accost Jim.

"Well, well, if it ain't Injun Jim," the angry assailant shouted. "Yer the one thet tole all them lies 'bout me back ta Wyoming."

As Janie stepped around the wagon she saw the grungy thug that had confronted her on the Hangin J's graze. "Those weren't lies, Taggart," Jim answered evenly. "I watched you sell whiskey to the Indians for three years. Every time you came around you got them drunk, and then you incited them to attack some nearby settler or rancher's place. They came away with their victims' scalps and horses, and you came away with their money and cattle and stuff. I was just a kid, but when the Indian agent rescued me, I told him what was going on."

"Well, now yer gonna pay fer ut," the insanely angry man shouted. "Draw!"

Janie thought the thug was drawing lethally fast, but Jim's draw was so much faster that the scufflaw threw up his hands and stepped back a step as Jim's gun came out. "Unbuckle your gun belt and let it fall to the ground," Jim ordered the man authoritatively. Then, stepping in, he cuffed the jerk across the face with his opened hand. "Get on your horse and ride out, Taggart," Jim ordered. "I'm warning you now. If I ever see you in this area again I'll kill you on the spot."

The trembling man turned and ran for his horse. He mounted up and took the road south out of Questa at a gallop.

"That's the man that shot at me," the pale girl told Jim as he helped her into the wagon.

"I'd have killed him if I had known that," he replied as his face turned hard.

"Somehow I'm glad you didn't," Janie answered. There was little other conversation on the way home. Jim was struggling to get control of himself, and Janie was agonizing over the pock marks on her face.

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Jim came into the house at breakfast time to give Janie his present. Janie urged him to sit down and eat with her dad and herself. As they finished off their coffee, Jim addressed the girl. "I've got a present for you, Hon," he said as he pulled the beautifully wrapped gift out of its outer box. Her heart jumped with hope at the term of endearment, but she really wasn't sure she had even heard him correctly.

"It's a beautiful package," the girl said as he set it before her.

“The package is part of the gift,” her father commented, “but the wrapping’s nothing without what’s inside the box. You’ve got to open it,” he grinned as he stepped out of the room to give the kids a moment of privacy.

“This beats those six guns all to pieces,” she confessed to Jim while her dad was out of the room. “I want to go outside and try it out.”

“Bring your six guns too,” Jim urged her. “I want to show you how to use them correctly.”

“I can hit pretty well with them at fairly close range,” she said defensively.

“Please bring them, Janie,” he urged. “Your life might depend on it.”

“I’ll get them now,” she conceded as her mind flashed back to the difference between what her dad had shown her and what she had seen Jim do.

“Forget the sights,” Jim instructed Janie. “They’re great for target practice, but you can’t use them in a defensive draw. Just cock the gun with your thumb as you draw it, and point it like you would point your finger as you pull the trigger. And don’t quit shooting until your assailant drops his gun,” he added as an afterthought.

“I hate this,” Janie gritted out as she tried a quick draw, “But it works,” she grinned as her target disintegrated before her eyes.

“All decent men hate it,” Jim reflected, “But whoever is shooting at you will not be a decent man. Out here where there is little law and order, you may be the only one around to defend yourself. Janie, please don’t let some evil person snuff out your life just because he is evil. If you don’t stop him, he’ll not only get you, but he’ll put his next victim in the same predicament he put you in.”

“I’ll think on it,” Janie promised. “Meanwhile, how do I use the derringer?”

“The same way you use the six guns,” Jim replied. “Only derringers are so short that they are too inaccurate to use on anything except very close targets. Carry it as your last resort.”

“Thanks for the lesson, Jim,” Janie said genuinely as they started out for their respective duties. “I’ll practice all I can for a while.” She wished he’d give her a friendly hug or something, but he had seen her face.

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Janie was filling the upstairs lanterns the following morning when her reverie was broken by the sound of gunfire from behind the house. Running to the window, she saw her dad shooting it out with Taggart. Dad was in the sideways stance he had taught Janie, and Taggart was emptying his gun into the older man. Janie jerked her rifle from her closet and returned to the window to find that Dad was down, still firing as Taggart was trying to reload. As she drew a bead on Taggart, the outlaw suddenly stretched on his toes, and fell forward without moving.

As Janie's eyes took in the scene, the barn doors swung open and the best of the Hangin J's horses were being driven out of the building before two strange riders. Janie's rifle spoke twice, and both riders dropped from their horses. Janie strapped on her gun belt and rushed downstairs and out to her dad. He was literally full of holes and had no pulse. She checked on Taggart next. He was shot through the right eye and was very dead. *"Good for Dad! Taggart won't be forcing anyone into any compromising predicaments anymore."*

Suddenly the two riders that Janie had plugged were up and running on foot. "Hold it!" Janie yelled, firing a warning shot over their heads. They stopped, raising their hands.

"You two pick up that body and carry it to the house," Janie ordered.

"Lady, we're shot. I've got a busted arm and he's shot through the leg. We can't pick him up," one of the horse thieves argued.

"You'll have a bullet in your gut if you don't move it," Janie threatened, motioning them towards the body with one of her six guns.

The men picked up Mr. Johnson's body and carried it toward the house. Janie shot at their feet whenever they let it drag on the ground. When they had the body properly laid out on the rancher's bed, Janie marched them to the root cellar and locked them securely in it. She hitched Whinny to Taggart's body and dragged it out of the compound.

When the bodies were taken care of, Janie anxiously checked around the compound for Jim. When she entered the bunk house where he slept she found a note on the table:

Mr. John,

I think what we saw on the mountain was just the outlaws' hideout. They probably hold the cattle in some meadow nestled in the trees closer to the river, with a stream running through it. That way they'd have a temporary supply of grass and plenty of water to sustain the stock.

I doubt that the Yoke ranch exists. They likely just registered a brand that will vanish after your cattle are butchered.

I am on my way to see if I can find your herd before it's too late.

"Injun" Jim

Fear gripped the young woman's heart. *"She had lost Uncle Jack and Dad. What if she lost Jim too?"*

Janie saddled Whinny in record time. She had no intention of riding across the grasslands to Sleeping Ute Mountain in plain sight. Instead, she rode directly towards the river, arriving there in the middle of the afternoon. She turned south under cover of the trees along the river bank, noting where the quicksands lay as she rode downstream. She was approaching the western slopes of the Sleeping Ute at dusk when she heard cattle bawling—lots of them.

Janie rode cautiously onward until the trees along the river began to merge with the forest sweeping off the mountain. Suddenly she was almost among the cattle, which were milling in the gathering darkness as a dozen or so riders bunched them for a night crossing. She dismounted, placing her hand on Whinny's nose to stifle any nickers. As she watched by moonlight, an Indian canoe drifted down to the crossing, and a large Hispanic man with a leather satchel leapt ashore, easily within Janie's hearing.

A single rider broke from the herd and rode over to the newcomer.

"That you, Mex?" the rider asked as he dismounted.

"Si Señor," came the answer from the moonlight-speckled darkness.

"You got the money?"

"Si, twelve thousand dolares."

"We agreed on fifteen thousand, Mex."

"You will get the other three thousand tomorrow when the herd is counted," Mex replied.

"It's now or never," the rider countered angrily.

"Si?" the big Mexican questioned sarcastically. "And you will do what with twelve hundred head of rustled cattle and no grass left? You will take them back to the Hangin J's, no?"

Suddenly the rider buried a punch in the Mexican's paunch. Mex responded by knocking the smaller man to the ground. In an instant they were rolling around on the ground wrestling, slugging, kicking, and gouging at one another's eyes. The Mexican finally managed to get his knife out and was stabbing the rider repeatedly when Jim suddenly materialized from the shadows. Lying on the ground, he Indianed up to the fighting men and grabbed the satchel. He wormed his way back into the trees without being detected.

"This way, Jim," Janie whispered as loud as she dared. "I've got Whinny here."

Suddenly "Injin" Jim was beside her, mounting the horse. "Get on behind me he whispered," grabbing her hand and dragging her up behind him.

Janie expected Jim to jump the horse away as fast as he could, but he turned it gently in the darkness and walked it soundlessly out of the area instead. Hardly daring to breathe lest any noise would draw a shot in their direction, she wrapped her arms around Jim's waist and buried her face in his back, trusting him to get her home safely. After a half-hour's ride Jim stepped the mare up to a brisk walk over the grasslands towards home.

Jim finally broke the silence. "Good thing you called me when you did," he murmured. "I saw someone riding my horse, so they probably have someone waiting to knife me in the back when I get back to where I left him."

"Jim," she answered huskily, "They tried to get all our best horses this morning. Taggart killed Dad, but Dad's last shot took him in the eye. He's dead too, and I've got two slightly injured horse thieves locked in the root cellar.

"Sorry about your dad, Honey," He said tenderly. "I know you're going to miss him an awful lot."

This time she knew she had heard him correctly.

\* \* \*

Jim and Janie arrived home just as the sun was peaking over the Sangre de Christo Mountains. They were both dead tired, but neither of them was sleepy. After drinking a pot of coffee together, Jim went out to the shop to build a box for Mr. John while Janie rode into town to ask the preacher to come at noon. Enough townspeople came to help Jim and the preacher lower the coffin into the grave after a comforting homily on the saving grace of God.

The sheriff arrived in a buckboard just before the service. He took Taggart's body and Janie's captives back to Questa after it was over. The destiny of horse thieves in the West, where a man's life often depended on his horse, was taken for granted. If convicted at trial, they would surely be hanged.

Janie was so emotionally drained that evening that she was even too numb to mourn for her dad. But try as she would, she could not suppress something bouncing around in the back of her mind about Jim. Somehow she couldn't quite put her finger on it. She tossed and turned for several hours, only getting brief snatches of restless sleep. She finally got up and lit a lantern. Grabbing a pencil and a piece of paper, she started jotting down what she knew about Jim, one item at a time. And then it came to her:

Jim and James are variations of the same name.

Jim was definitely a Christian.

*Uncle Jack's son, James, was raised as a Christian, at least until he was six.*

Jim made sure he learned to handle cattle and guns like a real western man.

*James probably felt rejected by his father when he was sent back east.*

Jim came out west at age thirteen.

*James ran away to go back to his dad at age thirteen.*

Jim was captured by the Indians on his way out west.

*James disappeared when he tried to go back to his Dad*

Jim was hurt more than most new employees would have been by Jack's death.

*James would have been terribly hurt by Uncle Jack's death.*

Jim came clear across Colorado specifically to get a job at the Hangin J's Ranch.

The conclusion was obvious. Jim was Uncle Jack's long lost son. Come to think of it, they even looked a mite alike.

Janie invited Jim in for breakfast the next morning. He seemed preoccupied, even nervous. As they finished off the coffee, he finally spoke. "I guess I'll have to leave now?" he stated in a questioning way.

"James Jackson," she retorted, rising to confront him. "Half this spread is yours, and you talk of leaving? Even if we didn't get our cattle back, we've still got the horses."

"You figured me out," Jim grinned as he rose to face her, "but Uncle John told me that Dad left his part of the Hangin J's to you."

"That was just because you waited too long to tell him who you were, Jim. He mourned for you from the day you disappeared until the day of his death. And by the way, I burned that will in the stove this

morning. If we look through his stuff we'll probably find one with your name on it. Either way, you are still his only heir."

"Actually, we didn't lose the cattle," Jim pointed out, "we just sold them kind of cheap. There really were twelve thousand dollars in that satchel, and the bad guys don't have the slightest idea where it went."

"What do you think they'll do now?" Janie asked him.

"Mex killed Taggart's right hand man last night," Jim replied. "Without their leadership, I think that Taggart's rustlers will disband, and Mex's riders will drive the cattle to some shady buyer, maybe down Texas way."

"Then maybe we can relax a bit," Janie mused.

"Hold on a minute, Janie," he answered earnestly, his wind coming in short breaths, "I made the mistake of not leveling with Dad until it was too late. I'm not going to make the same mistake with you. Honey, I love you with all of my heart. I can't live without you!"

"But what about my face?" she asked with quivering lips as a tear started down her cheek. He reached out and wiped at it with his finger.

"What do you mean?" he asked as he traced his finger on down the side of her face.

"The pocks." She said, as if it explained everything.

"Janie," he said, taking hold of her by the shoulders. "You have a stunningly beautiful face. I've never even noticed any pocks. It's like the bow on top of a beautiful package. It adds to your beauty, but it's the whole package that's beautiful. You have the most beautiful body I've ever seen. You also have the sweetest personality I've have ever met up with, and you are the most precious soul God ever made. I want everything you are Honey-- body, and soul, and spirit. Will you marry me?"

Looking up at his face through her tears, Janie locked her fingers around his neck and pulled his head down to hers. When their lips met, they locked into a passionate kiss. She finally pulled away. "Can it be today?" She asked.