

Excerpt

From

**The Blacksmith** and the *Shepherd's Daughter*

## Chapter 2

The snow melt in the New Mexico southwest had been in earnest up until about two weeks before. Flooding had receded, but even now the *Little Black Creek* levels were high - - water was flowing rapidly, with deep pools and white water eddies.

Buzz Calder let Mrs. Grumps pick and slosh her way over slippery rock, through patches of snow and thick underbrush as they trekked toward the beaver dam. They stopped a couple of times where openings allowed them to view the river.

Sarge kept busy scouting the area ahead of them, returning occasionally to prod them on ... snuffing up the air, then running off to explore some more.

The distance wasn't far -- had he walked it would have taken Calder no more than a half hour, but neither he, nor Mrs. Grumps had been out on the trail all spring. They both needed the change of pace. "Besides," Buzz vocalized to himself, "living within that corral was, no doubt, making the old gal even grumpier." She had even tried to nip his shoulder when he threw a saddle on her -- the damned old lady!

Buzz Calder loved this rugged country. It was wild and fresh, even primitive; nothing like his past life as an attorney in Kansas City, Missouri, arguing over activities of miscreants or slave ownership -- always sitting at a desk, or poring over case law. Fortunately, his dad was a local gunsmith; Buzz had spent many an afternoon or weekend working the forge, pounding, rolling metals into shape or quenching. It took four stressful years agonizing over the

decision, but the day he exchanged his suit and tie for a leather apron he felt liberated.

As it happened, his dad decided the gunsmithing business would increase closer to the Santa Fe trail and the frontier. He moved to the booming town of Council Grove, Kansas, right on the trail -- and offered Buzz a partnership. The younger Calder tried it for six months, but independence and the lure of the untamed west won the argument in his head. He said adieu and joined a west-bound wagon train.



The *Little Black* was actually a small offshoot or tributary of the *Gila River*, taking a different route through the Black Mountain Range, and then rejoining its mother river as it rushed to join the mighty *Colorado*.

The *Gila* itself was one of the longest rivers in the West, originating above 10,000 feet in the Mogollon Mountains of New Mexico, with its confluence in Arizona with the *Colorado River*, a journey of almost seven hundred miles.

In the dozen years the blacksmith had lived in Warm Springs he had never made the trek to the southern end of the *Little Black*; he had, however, seen three or four of the steaming hot springs for which the village was named. They were far downstream from today's goal.

The beaver dam lay just around the next twist of the river. It was much more than a small flotilla of logs engineered into place by an ambitious family of large, furry rodents with huge teeth. The drop from the top of the logjam to the foamy water below was a full ten feet -- maybe more. The roar of the white water below the dam was deafening, drowning out human voices completely. Buzz simply followed the excited shepherd as he guided the mule around the bend. He expected to see the youngsters fishing in the pools above the dam.

He dismounted and dropped the mule's reins. She seemed content to forage among the new crop of shoots springing up while he scoured the ground above the dam. Fresh animal tracks of every description abounded -- both predator and

game, large and small -- but no human boot prints. After five minutes of searching, Buzz straightened and pursed his lips.

“Let’s look below the dam, kids,” Buzz said quietly to his two companions. “Perhaps they’re trying their luck down below the white water.”

As the blacksmith re-mounted, he tapped his index finger on his rifle butt, hanging within reach in its scabbard next to his left knee. A modicum of anxiety crept into his mind. He tried to shake it, but as he followed the river’s slight jog to the left where the fallen timbers of the dam came into full view, he grew more worried. He urged Mrs. Grumps into a trot.

There were no signs of the youngsters.

“Go find them, Sarge! Go on!” Calder almost whispered the words to the shepherd. The dog cocked his head and ran downstream a few hundred yards and barked. Then he returned a few yards and sat. Buzz had seen him do this before, but in the pursuit of a stray calf or cow, never for tracking or corralling a missing person.

Whilst easing his rifle from its scabbard, Buzz leaned forward and spoke softly, “Okay, girl, let’s go see what he’s talking about.” He pressed the mule’s flanks with his knees, urging her on.

Sarge waited for his master, then bounded down the trail once again, stopping where he had previously stopped. Buzz saw immediately the shepherd’s find: the ground had been trampled by horses’ hooves -- at least two, probably more, he surmised, and all unshod.

Sarge scouted the area nearby. There was blood puddled under an aspen tree below the dam. Close by was Jimmy’s brown leather duckbill hat, with a few sprinkles of blood on it, laying atop a whittled but battered wooden fishing pole. Calder found the other fishing pole further down the embankment.

Navajo? Mescalero? Chiricahua?

Calder was devastated! His young friends wounded and kidnapped! His best guess was the Mescalero, a nomadic

division of the Apache Tribe, living for only a short time at any one place before moving on.

The village hadn't been troubled by Indians for five years or more. Whoever these raiders were, they probably came down to water their horses, stumbled upon the young pair; then, after a brief, bloody struggle, had overpowered them. Calder surmised that like most youngsters these two carried jack knives, but no other weapons; nothing to face an adult Apache warrior.

Calder envisioned the youngsters putting up a brave fight - the warriors being impressed, made the snap decision to take them along.

Should he track them or head back to town for help? Sarge made the decision for him -- the dog seemed to understand that Buzz approved his first discovery, so the shepherd continued along the river, following the freshly made horse tracks, sniffing at the droplets of blood as he went. Buzz shook his head. "Damn, dog! Where are you leading me?"

As if on cue, Sarge turned to look back for a moment, then continued on at a trot. Buzz urged Mrs. Grumps to follow, keeping his rifle across the pommel. Part of his brain told him, 'Go back! Go back! Get help!' -- but another inner voice said, 'There's no time to lose! Get those kids back, now!'

He continued on -- determined -- following the tracks downward and eastward along the *Little Black*.