

COYOTE SONG

JIM KJELGAARD

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Coyote Song

Date of first publication: 1969

Author: Jim Kjelgaard (1910-1959)

Date first posted: Sep. 23, 2023

Date last updated: Sep. 23, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230935

This eBook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Greg Weeks, Pat McCoy & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpcanada.net>

COYOTE SONG

By Jim Kjelgaard

Illustrated by Robert Mac Lean

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY

NEW YORK

[Transcriber note: Due to copyright considerations, the illustrations are not included in this eBook.]

Copyright © 1969 by Edna Kjelgaard

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 68-27820

Printed in the United States of America
by The Cornwall Press, Inc., Cornwall, N. Y.

To Dorothy Bryan for her prodigious efforts on these ten years of books, the rapport she achieved in her collaboration. We are grateful.

Contents

1. <i>Dusty and Nan</i>	<u>1</u>
2. <i>The Indian</i>	<u>15</u>
3. <i>The Hunter</i>	<u>33</u>
4. <i>The Awakening</i>	<u>47</u>
5. <i>The Watcher</i>	<u>59</u>
6. <i>The Den</i>	<u>73</u>
7. <i>Miguel</i>	<u>87</u>
8. <i>Flash Flood</i>	<u>102</u>
9. <i>The Flight Bird</i>	<u>118</u>
10. <i>Fugitive</i>	<u>133</u>
11. <i>Battle for Life</i>	<u>146</u>
12. <i>The Cub</i>	<u>164</u>

The characters and situations in this book are wholly fictional and imaginative: they do not portray and are not intended to portray any actual persons or parties.

COYOTE SONG

1: Dusty and Nan

Dusty fell in with the lion when it came down from the cloud-stabbing mountains north of the desert.

The dust-colored coyote was prowling a line of mesquite trees that flanked a dry wash—a river bed that flows sand most of the year and water only during the rainy season. Dusty was hungry. He was not particular about what he ate so long as it was something. There seemed to be nothing.

A blazing sun ruled a cloudless sky. The shade of the mesquites trapped a chamber of air so heavy and oppressive that it seemed to have solid substance and to move before and close in behind Dusty as he padded through it. His gaunt flanks heaved and his pointed ears were flat against his head. His tongue dangled like that of a heavily-panting dog.

In the open desert, the heat was more intense. Even the rock lizards were lying on the shady side of boulders. Summer was here in all its ferocity.

Dusty felt the heat, but not in the same way that humans would. Two years and four months ago, six miles from the line of mesquites along which he now hunted, he had been born in a desert den. He knew no life except the desert, but he knew all about that. He had never followed the example of some animals that live in the desert during the autumn and winter months but climb to the cool heights when blazing summer comes.

This was a matter of individual choice and had nothing to do with any migratory impulse or instinct common to his breed. Some coyotes did summer in the mountains. Dusty merely happened to prefer the desert and he remained there the year around.

Far more than heritage, or natural adaptability to conditions and circumstances, Dusty was not uncomfortably hot because of his wise attitude. A human would fume about the heat that was here and worry about that which was to come. Dusty accepted the discomfort of the moment for what it was and never worried about what might be.

He halted close to the trunk of a centuries-old mesquite. He was about four feet from the end of his slim muzzle to the tip of his tail, and thirteen

inches of this length consisted of bushy tail. He stood twenty inches high at the shoulder and weighed twenty-four pounds. His light yellow eyes were slanting, and aglow with intelligence, cunning, and a certain aura that many men have attempted to describe, but none ever have—or ever will—capture in words.

Dusty came of an ancient race. The Aztecs bowed before various coyote gods. Other Indians declared that the coyote was created first and man afterwards. They considered the coyote good luck, good medicine, and endowed with mystic properties. The white man waged a war of merciless extermination, killing coyotes with traps, guns, poison and every other lethal device human ingenuity can contrive. But rather than send the coyote down the trail to oblivion, as they had the passenger pigeon, the heath hen, the great auk, and so many others, white men found an opponent worthy of their brain.

Countless thousands of coyotes died it is true. But others not only lived and learned but fought back. Formerly confined to an area west of the Mississippi, coyotes successfully invaded the eastern states.

Standing perfectly still, Dusty faced the hot north wind so his fur would not ripple and closed his mouth so his tongue would not loll. He blended so perfectly with the gray tree trunk and the parched earth about it that only the keenest eye could have detected him and known him for what he was.

He considered the situation he faced.

Ordinarily, while the summer heat held sway, he preferred to hunt at night. It was not that he hesitated to venture forth by day, but the jack rabbits, pack rats, gophers, desert cottontails, and other small creatures that furnished most of his food, moved more freely during the cooler night and so made hunting easier.

Last night, sheerly by chance, his hunting had taken him near the house of Harry—known throughout the area as Hairy—Gunston. This character earned his living as a guard at a nearby convict camp, wherein the favorite dream of most of the prisoners centered about Hairy being lost on the desert without a canteen and ninety-four miles from the nearest water. Hairy's hobby was raising and training man-hunting hounds, with which he delighted in tracking down any prisoner who escaped from the camp; a foolish thing to do, since there was no place they could go except into the desert.

Of Hairy's two current hounds, one was a medium-sized bloodhound-bluetick cross that excelled at hunting men but would rather hunt coyotes. That hound had managed to get on Dusty's trail when he ventured too near Hairy Gunston's house, and the coyote had not been able to lose him until well after daylight. Nor had Nan, a young female who frequently hunted with Dusty, been present to lure the dog onto her own trail and thus give Dusty some relief.

As a consequence, instead of feasting on a jack rabbit, as he had hoped, Dusty had eaten nothing.

In spite of the heat, he was not thirsty. Desert-bred, Dusty drank twice a day, following his hunt and again early in the morning. This morning, after finally losing the hound, he had quenched his thirst at a water hole. But getting a drink never presented a problem with him.

To an inexperienced eye, it looked as though the dry wash had flowed nothing except sand for a thousand years. Dusty knew better. The rains that fell in July, again in December, and occasionally in between, were sometimes passing showers and sometimes furious cloudbursts. If the former, the wash ran a trickle. In the latter event, often in a matter of minutes, the wash became host to a roaring flood that filled it from bank to bank.

Trickle or torrent, the summer sun destroyed every trace of surface water. But at varying depths beneath the wash there was a hard layer of solid rock with uneven contours. Water, seeping through the sand, was always trapped and always remained where the sub-surface rock formation was bowl-shaped.

Dusty preferred to quench his thirst at water holes, for the simple reason that he did not have to work for any drink he might get there. However, if the water holes dried, as they sometimes did, he had only to seek out any wash, pace along it until he smelled trapped water, and dig down to it.

A good hunter, he was seldom hungry. Now his belly ached for food and relieving that ache would not be easy. In the heat of the day, nothing that did not have to stir was inclined to move and the fierce sun had already burned out the scent of wild creatures that had already sought the coolest places they could find.

Dusty had come to the mesquite trees with the hope that a helpless squab or two would be floundering beneath them. Slipshod homemakers, the wild doves that made their homes in the mesquites built their nests so carelessly

that squabs and eggs were always falling out. Dusty and Nan could often pick up a satisfying meal simply by wandering wherever wild doves nested.

The perverse luck that had begun when Hairy Gunston's hound took his trail, continued. Squabs of different ages were in the nests, some listlessly quiet in the heat and some with bills agape so their parents could stuff them with pigeon milk, but none had fallen. Nor had any crested quail, jack rabbit—or anything else that Dusty could catch—chosen to spend this hot day in the shade of the mesquites.

The coyote went on, again letting his tongue loll as he paced forward. Unlike a human being, there was no frustration, anger, or self-pity, because he had failed to accomplish what he had set out to do. Since there was no food here, he would look elsewhere.

Twenty yards from the mesquite, he halted again.

Three bucks, mule deer that would battle each other furiously when the mating season arrived but lived together in complete harmony until it did, were moving toward the line of mesquites. Dusty drooled. Venison was the finest possible eating, and from time to time he and Nan overtook a fawn or pulled down a full-grown deer that had been wounded by a hunter's bullet. It was suicide for one coyote to attack a healthy adult deer.

Born with the large bump of curiosity that is possessed by all intelligent creatures, Dusty sat down and waited for the bucks to arrive. They came out of the scrub and cactus, three old-timers that, like Dusty and Nan, had not followed most of their kind into the cool mountains simply because they preferred to stay in the desert. Their antlers, now merely grotesque, velvet-sheathed knobs, still gave promise of magnificent trophies to be. They moved listlessly into the shade of a mesquite and stood switching their tails.

When Dusty went on, realizing the futility of attack, each of the three gave him an indifferent glance and continued to switch their tails. They were not afraid of coyotes.

Dusty left the wash and went into the desert. It was barren land, given over exclusively to desert growth. Cacti, from the many-needled cholla to the multiarmed saguaro, brooded under the scorching sun. Here and there were the whiplike wands of an ocotillo. Greasewood stood unmoving, despite the wind, and it seemed oddly as though it did so purposely, because moving in such heat was too much effort. Isolated palo verde trees held their green needles and thorned branches aloft.

Dusty entered a range of low knolls that gave way to bleak and rocky hills whose color on the sunny side matched that of the sun. On the shady side, their hues varied from pale blue to deep purple, and seemed to be filled with moving shadows. Although they were covered with scrub so dense that, in places, it was almost impenetrable, and cut by washes and canyons of varying depth, the hills seemed to be masses of solid rock and they looked strangely forlorn and naked because there were few leafy trees.

Beyond the rocky hills were mountains whose height began at about six thousand feet and rose to twice that. The lower levels were covered with piñon pine and juniper, the higher reaches with forests of majestic ponderosa pine. The tallest peaks, upon which snow lay until mid-June and fell again in early September, and where fierce winds raged all summer long, were treeless and rocky as any of the desert hills.

Suddenly, Dusty's nose told him that, only a little distance ahead, a single cock quail was spending the heat of the day beneath a dense sprig of greasewood. Silent as a shadow, the coyote began his stalk. He could not see the quail, but he knew exactly where it lay because his nose told him as much as his eyes ever did. When he was near enough, he sprang.

The quail, however, was a wary veteran who had not lived to be as old as he was by permitting himself the luxury of carelessness. As Dusty sprang, he rose, and the leaping coyote's jaws closed only on a few belly feathers.

Dusty ejected the feathers with his tongue, and the hot wind sent them rolling gently over the ground until they lodged in a clump of cholla. Again, the coyote felt neither anger nor frustration because he had missed. He could survive at all only if he looked forward to what would be. He continued to course the scrub.

Aside from a Gila Monster, that stood in the mouth of a rock crevice and gaped poison jaws as he passed, Dusty found nothing at all. A mile and a half from the mesquite trees, near the foot of a deep wash that sloped from one of the rocky hills, he halted again.

The hot wind, blowing straight down the wash, carried to his nostrils the scent of an old acquaintance. It was a big cougar, but there was something puzzling about his presence in the desert at this time of year.

The lion, a male, followed the deer herds upon which he lived. Since most deer went up to the mountains in summer and were driven back down by snow in winter, the cougar had always spent his summers in the

mountains and his winters on the desert. Thus Dusty's perplexity; the lion should not be here now.

Dusty could not know that, this summer, the people who determine such policies had decided that there must be a drastic reduction in the number of lions that were preying on deer—or on cattle and sheep, if deer proved too hard to catch. A noted hunter with top-notch hounds had been commissioned to do the job of decimating the lions and this veteran had come back into the desert because he was smart enough to sense that he would die if he stayed in the mountains.

He came nearer, his scent strengthening as he did so. Dusty strained his nostrils into the wind, searching every little gust and eddy as he tried to determine if any danger accompanied the stranger. Finding none, he relaxed and waited. . . .

Presently, the lion appeared. He weighed almost two hundred pounds, but he gave the impression of being small because he had lost half his tail in some long past battle or accident. He walked with a hint of a limp, for a hunter's slug was imbedded in his right shoulder. But, after recovering from the initial wound, he had lost none of his speed and strength. He was a renowned hunter in the prime of life.

Coming opposite Dusty, he stopped, turned his head, and stared intently at the coyote. Calmly, Dusty returned the stare. The lion had no love for him and he none for the lion, but, although he was no match for the bigger beast, Dusty was not afraid of him because, in a race, the lion could not catch him.

The lion walked on, not at all afraid to show himself in the full light of day because, while the blasting heat poured down, no human being in his right mind would enter the desert. Certainly no hunter would hunt there. The lion could afford to be unconcerned about his own safety just now because he was safe—for the time being.

Dusty fell in a hundred yards behind the lion and matched his pace to that of the larger animal. He had no special reason to like his fellow predator, but he had failed in his own hunting, so he hadn't the least objection to letting the cougar work for him.

The lion struck straight toward a water hole that was much frequented by deer and occasionally visited by desert sheep and wild burros. Dusty kept his distance. Sooner or later, the lion would make a kill because, eventually, he always killed, and a hungry belly was easier to bear if one was assured that it would be filled.

Dusty stopped to sniff at the tracks of a human being. He identified the scent as that of Joe Watson, a young Indian who lived all alone in a little adobe hut that was built far back in the cactus. Joe earned a living by hunting semiprecious stones which he polished and sold at the nearest store. Sometimes he worked them into brooches, belts, and other ornaments and sold those. Occasionally, he did odd jobs for whoever would give him work.

The lion, too dull-nosed to detect the scent, passed without stopping.

Dusty hurried to catch up. Keeping the same distance from his host, he sat patiently on a low ridge while the cougar surveyed the water hole. The lion used his eyes rather than his nose to find game. Plainly marked by towering cottonwoods and lush green grass that seemed almost startlingly-spectacular in an otherwise barren and scorched area, the water hole was a bubbling spring in a shallow basin. Mosquito fish, one of the unsolved mysteries of the desert insofar as they appear in isolated water holes that may be miles from any other water, swam in it and a few doves were drinking from it. But there was nothing worth the lion's time.

Thwarted here, he turned toward the same mesquites up which Dusty had traveled earlier. He knew his desert and had long since become an expert in his particular type of hunting. If there were no deer at the water hole, there should be some in the shade.

He saw the three bucks from the rim of the wash, and Dusty sat with his tail curled about his rear legs to witness a master stalk by a master stalker. The lion seemed suddenly to be devoid of shape and form. He became a bit of the desert itself, but a bit that had somehow acquired the power of locomotion. The three bucks, still switching lazy tails in the shade, were never aware of their danger until the lion was near enough to make his rush. Then it was too late.

After a charge that, for a few yards, was faster than the deer could travel, the lion leaped on the nearest buck and anchored his quarry with four taloned paws. The terrified deer plunged a very short distance. Then the lion brought his terrible jaws into play and it was over.

Dusty moved to within twenty-five feet. The sun went down in a blaze of gold and the short desert twilight came. It changed to deep night.

Ten minutes afterwards, the gorged lion scratched a few sticks over what remained of the buck, laid a few more sticks on top of these to mark the spoils as his, and moved on. As soon as the lion had gone far enough, Dusty

leaped forward and took his place on top of the dead buck. He sent a coyote yell rolling into the spaces and listened and scented.

Out in the darkness, a fox padded around and around Dusty and the lion's kill. The coyote watched him sharply, following every move, but he was not afraid. The fox, eager for a share of the booty, was no match for a coyote. But if he were not carefully watched, he might rush in, grab a mouthful, and escape with it.

Dusty yelled again, then became tensely alert.

The fox had melted away as quietly as one of the night shadows, but something else had come. It was a desert bobcat, twenty pounds of ripping talons, slicing fangs, unbridled fury.

The fox had posed no special problem, but the bobcat would, if he was hungry enough to fight for the buck. Dusty and Nan together could handle him, but the cat could work fearful damage on Dusty alone. The coyote prepared to defend his plunder.

There came a rush of padded paws and Nan, responding to Dusty's call, was beside her friend.

2: *The Indian*

When Joe Watson awakened, the early-rising summer sun was still two hours below the eastern horizon. For a few minutes he lay quietly on his sheepskin-covered pallet, pondering the fact that the sun would presently shine on his eighteenth birthday.

The pallet was a six inch high rectangle of earth, smoothed and leveled and held in place by stakes of saguaro wood. For a while Joe had tried a cot. Some white people, whom he thought were connected with welfare work, had brought it to him and said that it was not fitting for a human being to sleep on the ground.

Joe had tried his best. It was not wise to defy the wishes of these white people, who had everything, owned everything, and knew everything. But, try as he would, he had not been able to sleep on such a thing and after a week, he had taken it out. The cot was now behind his house, where it served as a roosting place for Joe's five chickens.

He had not told any white person about this because he did not care to make any of them angry, but only after rebuilding his earthen pallet had he again enjoyed sound sleep. It was entirely true that the earth talked to him, even while he slept, and how could he hear what it said if he were isolated from it on four steel legs and a steel spring?

He rose slowly, for it was sensible to do everything slowly unless there was a reason for speed. But lithe muscles and a supple, youthful body said plainly that he could move fast if he must. All his life Joe had worked with his hands. Only once in his life had he gone anywhere except on his own two legs or the back of a pony. Keeping active had kept him in superb condition.

He took a match from a box and lighted a kerosene lamp, and its soft glow illuminated the interior of his house. There was a wooden chair, a wooden table that served for dining and as a workbench, two wooden cabinets for food and other stores, and a wood-burning stove. Despite the heat that had lingered outside all night long, the house was cool.

Ten by twelve in area, its walls were eighteen inches thick. They were made of adobe brick. There were only two small windows, so placed that they received none of the morning sun in summer but all of it in winter. The roof was fashioned of mesquite beams, interlaced with saguaro wood, upon which was laid a thick layer of adobe.

Unless wilfully destroyed, the house would last two hundred and fifty years. The secret of its construction was almost a lost art; few people knew it and Joe Watson was one of the few. It was a heritage from his grandfather, who, in turn, had learned it from desert-dwelling ancestors who had been taught by experience how to be comfortable in the desert. It was designed to keep the heat of the summer sun out and the heat of the winter fire in, and it served both purposes admirably. This was one of the few old ways that remained to Joe Watson.

He came of the Papagoes, peaceful farmers who had fought fiercely when attacked by roving Apaches, but never fought except in self-defense. They much preferred to till the land, and they were one of the very few western Indian tribes that welcomed the white man rather than fought him.

Joe Watson had no memorable wars to inspire him and no reason to suppose that, one day, his tribe would be in the ascendancy. It had never been dominant. Even his tribal language had degenerated to a pidgin mixture of Papago and English; Joe's grandfather had understood with difficulty when Joe spoke what he thought was the Papago tongue.

Joe spoke—and preferred to speak—English. He had no great proficiency in its use, partly because he had never gone to school and partly because it had not been necessary to acquire an extensive vocabulary. He remembered every tiny detail of an incident that had occurred three years ago.

He had been walking to the store with some polished stones and some ornaments that his grandfather had finished when a tourist, whose expensive car bore an eastern license, drew up beside him.

“You Injun?” the driver asked in an exaggerated accent.

Joe answered, naturally, “Me Papago.”

Whereupon the delighted tourist took a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet, waved it under Joe's nose, and indicated the tray of ornaments and stones.

“You sell'um?” he asked.

Joe stood bewildered. Never before had such a thing happened to him. He said and did nothing because he did not know what to do or say.

The tourist, evidently certain that at last he had met a complete aborigine, repeated his question, “You sell ’um?”

“I sell ’em,” Joe replied.

He handed over the entire trayful of ornaments—for which he’d hoped the storekeeper would pay him five dollars—and took the twenty-dollar bill in exchange. He did not know, but had understood since, that the tourist hoped to buy only an exquisite turquoise bracelet, for which he’d have had to pay at least thirty dollars at any trading post.

The tourist went on his way, sure that he’d had one of the rarest bargains of his life—and he had. But the incident remained as one of the highest points in Joe’s life.

One of the lowest had come about nearly a year ago, just after his grandfather died and the world turned dark. An earnest young man—and Joe was never sure whether he represented the State, the Government, or the Welfare—came to see him. The young man talked about a better standard of living, and said that it was the Indian’s responsibility to help himself. Would Joe take a job if the young man found him one? Impressed by the other’s eloquence, and still mourning his grandfather, Joe said he would.

After a long and thoroughly tiresome train ride, he had found himself in a West Coast city. His job was to load filled boxes into freight cars. The boxes were heavy and the white man in charge was always calling for more speed. Joe did not mind that. His life had conditioned him to heavy labor. Neither did he mind the fact that his only possible companions were other exiled Indians. He preferred them to the whites, with whom he could not mingle with any sense of ease, anyway.

The pay was good, far more money than Joe had ever earned before, and the living was high. It would have worked out wonderfully had it not been for the restrictions.

Joe left his boardinghouse at six o’clock every morning and walked to work. Even if it were not silly to spend the fare demanded by the street car line for transporting him, since when had a Papago quailed at walking a mere three miles? Besides, this walk was the only part of his whole stay in the city that he really enjoyed.

He reported for work at seven o’clock. From seven to five, with an hour’s break for lunch, he carried filled boxes from the warehouse into the

insatiable maws of endless freight cars. But it was neither the heavy work nor the foreman's ceaseless urging that discouraged Joe. It was the four walls that hemmed him in.

For three endless months he bore it. Then, without bothering to collect a week's pay that was due, and forgetting completely to tell anyone at all that he was quitting, he started back to his beloved desert. He needed thirty-six days to walk a distance that the train had carried him in less than that many hours.

But at last he was home and he hadn't the least doubt that he wanted to stay home. White men might, and did, call him shiftless and say that he had quit a good job to return to a hand-to-mouth existence. Nevertheless, four walls from which he could not escape into the limitless desert were still unbearable.

Joe placed a piece of newspaper—cheap tinder since white men were always throwing newspapers away—in his stove and laid a handful of kindling on top. He lighted the paper, and when the kindling blazed, added chunks of mesquite wood. While the stove heated, Joe went outside to draw a pailful of water from his hand-dug well.

A horse came out of the darkness and blew softly through its nostrils. Joe rubbed its forehead and the horse followed him to the well.

The horse, a scrawny little bay, was one of nine that Joe owned. The biggest weighed scarcely seven hundred pounds and not one was good for much of anything except packing in firewood. White men from some official bureau or other had often lectured Joe severely for keeping so many horses, saying that all they did was drain money from a man who was already hard-pressed to support himself, but such reasoning was past the young Indian's understanding.

If it was true that his horses were of little use, it was certainly true that they were not a drain. Desert-bred for generations, they supported themselves on desert growth where one of the white man's pampered horses would have died from thirst or starvation in a week. Far more important, the horses were another link with the past. Joe could not remember his Indian name—he wasn't sure he'd ever had one—but he did know that there had been a time when his people measured their wealth and social standing by the number of horses they owned. He would keep even more if he could.

The little horse, by far the most amiable and tamest of the nine, stood blowing softly while Joe lowered his bucket. He drew it up full of water and

turned back to his house.

White men often teased him, and sometimes openly insulted him, about his home. He was an Indian, they said, and he had chosen to live so far back in the cactus because the dark deeds of Indians must always be hidden from civilized eyes. Joe grinned when they teased and backed away when they insulted him. He never really understood.

Long ago, in this area—or so half-remembered legend had it—rivers had flowed freely, even during the hottest months, and grass had grown belly-high to a pony wherever there was water. Nothing had been lacking in the way of food or drink for man or beast. Then the white man came.

First he brought immense herds of cattle, far more than the range could support, and they ate the grass down to its roots. The merciless sun burned out the roots, but still the white man was not satisfied. He built dams to impound such water as still flowed, thus creating huge lakes in the desert. Where the white man could not build dams, he drilled wells. But he did not know that even water isn't inexhaustible. He remained so greedy, and so careless, that the water table dropped steadily. Now, when sinking a well, he often had to drill four hundred or more feet before he could even hope to find as much water as he wanted.

When Joe came home from the West Coast, it was, of course, unthinkable to return to the house where he had lived with his grandfather. A man had died in that house, and the spirit of Joe's grandfather would naturally resent anyone else occupying his home. But Joe knew other places.

He had chosen his new home site, not because it was isolated, but because he had discovered a nearby subterranean stream that flowed steadily. He had had to dig only twelve feet before finding as much water as he could ever use, but he had never tried to explain that to any white man. They would not understand or believe if he did, Joe felt, since it seemed to him that they liked to do everything in the hardest possible way.

The little horse left Joe at the door of his house and turned back to join its fellows. The five chickens, roosting on the discarded cot, clucked in mild alarm when they heard the door close, then went back to sleep.

Joe prepared his breakfast. He put a skillet on top of the hot stove, scooped a spoonful of lard into it, and mixed tortillas—thin pieces of unleavened bread—while the lard was melting. Then he broke two eggs into the skillet, fried the tortillas beside them, and washed his breakfast down with well water.

After that, Joe prepared to go into the desert. The blue jeans and faded shirt he already wore, along with strong shoes and heavy socks, were all the clothing he needed. Nor would he want another drink before returning to his house. If he drank in the morning, he could go without water until night, if it were necessary. A pebble, placed in the mouth, was usually enough to keep his tongue moist. Should the pangs of thirst become too acute, he could always break open a barrel cactus and suck its juicy pulp. A prospector's hammer, blunt on one end but ax-edged on the other, and a flour sack tucked in his belt, completed his outfit.

The warm wind blew full in his face when he left his house, but he did not flinch before it. Nor would he hesitate if he must fare forth at blazing noon. However, only necessity could drive him out at such a time. One had but to observe the desert fox, the coyote, the jack rabbit, in order to learn that it is the best part of wisdom to work during the coolest summer hours and rest throughout the hottest ones.

Although the four points of the compass had been open to his father's people, only three remained to Joe. Leaving his house, he could go north, south, or west. There was no law that forbade his traveling toward the east, but personal disinclination did. The convict camp lay there. Joe had never asked, or tried to understand, why white men made prisoners of some of their own kind. But he remembered his own sense of confinement in that West Coast city and he felt that these captives must be as resentful as he had become. It was easier not to think of them if he did not go near the camp.

This morning, Joe chose to head west. There was a mesa—a flat-topped hill—where once a mighty forest had grown. The forest had long since disappeared, and the land surrounding the mesa had eroded into canyons and washes, but Joe never failed to find as much petrified wood as he could carry on the mesa.

Petrified wood—once-living trees turned to stone—was one of his most dependable sources of income. The storekeeper would always buy as much as Joe brought in, paying a penny each for lesser specimens, a nickel or a dime for better ones, and a rare fifty cents for large pieces with good color and with the wood grain and growth rings showing clearly.

It was not what Joe wanted out of life and not what he had planned for himself. The skill and artistry that had been in his grandfather's hands now belonged to him, but their situations were very different. His grandfather could afford to spend a month, or six months, perfecting a single piece of jewelry because money meant nothing to him. In the competitive world Joe

faced, he could do far better selling polished stones than hand-made jewelry—until he could afford the expensive tools and instruments that would enable him to work much faster. But some day he would have the needed tools . . . there was no hurry.

The sun rose, bursting out of the eastern sky in fifty different shades that varied from pale yellow to deep crimson. Joe observed his mesa. It rose perhaps three hundred yards above the surrounding desert, and from a distance, its summit seemed as smooth as a graded lawn. He did not know, nor did he care, that at one time, ages ago, the entire desert had been on this level. Rains, washing away perhaps a thirty-second of an inch some years and as little as a fiftieth part of that in others, had eroded the soft soil and left only the sturdy granite mesa as it had been.

Joe climbed, stopping twice to rest on the way up. He was not breathless, despite the sheer slope, but wise ones rested before their breath was spent. He gained the summit of the mesa and looked about.

Where a great forest had once bent to the wind, scrub now grew and boulders reared their gray backs. The trees, breaking as they fell or being broken throughout the years, were not whole trunks or even parts of trunks. Joe had never found a piece of petrified wood weighing more than four pounds. Finding any took patience, but Joe was born to patience and he had acquired experience in the search.

He used the sharp edge of his prospector's hammer to scrape in the dirt beside a boulder and turned up three pieces of petrified wood. Unhurriedly, he took the flour sack from his belt and laid each specimen in, rather than drop it in. The wood was very hard, but it might break if carelessly handled and the bigger pieces brought more money. With grave deliberation he went on scraping, sifting the dirt thoroughly as he turned it.

The wood was not on top, where any casual eye could see it, and probably that explained why no white man had yet found this cache. Joe did not understand the geological reasons for the mesa's being, but he did know why the wood was covered. The desert was swept by winds, sometimes so fierce that the cloud of dust they bore aloft obscured the sun itself. Although most of the land had eroded down, enough had blown back up to bury the forest.

Two hours later, with nearly as much petrified wood as he cared to carry, Joe straightened and glanced southward. All of the shimmering, sun-scorched distance had once been Indian country, with only natural

landmarks. Now there was a clearly defined border, with the United States to the north and Mexico to the south.

Turning to complete his collection for the day, Joe sank the blade of his hammer on the lee side of another boulder. This was nearly always the best sort of place to dig. Dust that had swirled over and eventually dropped on the mesa had to some extent been diverted by the boulders, so that the petrified wood was not buried as deeply on the lee side.

Joe's hammer struck stone. He knew at once, by the feel and sound, that this was not petrified wood. Carefully, he scraped all around it and lifted out a rock half the size of his fist, but almost as heavy as the heaviest piece of petrified wood he had ever found. Streaks of imbedded gold shone dull yellow in the gray stone.

Joe regarded his find thoughtfully, not at all excited and not frantic with sudden joy. It was nothing to show to any white man, but certainly it was nothing to leave here. He knew its value and he would take it along, saying nothing to anyone, until he himself had decided which was the best way to dispose of it.

Even more carefully, he excavated the same hole and drew out more nuggets. Not one was as big as the first, but when the little pocket was exhausted, Joe estimated that he had three thousand dollars' worth of gold. He removed some of the petrified wood, replaced it with nuggets, slung the sack over his shoulder, and started home.

The day was hot, and growing hotter, and Joe set his pace accordingly. His nine horses, switching their tails beneath a group of palo verde trees, glanced indifferently at him as he approached. His five chickens were scratching listlessly in the shade of the house itself. Joe opened the door and went in.

He closed the door behind him and left the windows closed, for not even summer heat could penetrate eighteen inches of adobe, if there was no opening through which it might enter. Joe set his sack beside the table, took a drink of water, washed his face and hands, and lay down on the pallet.

It was the wise way, the desert way, to move as little as possible while the heat was most intense. Joe went to sleep and did not wake up until after four o'clock. The sun was still hot and would remain so for several hours. Now was not the time to start a cooking fire. But there was other work he could do.

Joe arranged his booty of the morning in two separate piles on the table—the petrified wood in one, the smaller heap of nuggets in another. The nuggets represented more money than he had hoped to have for years, enough to buy the finest set of tools, but he remained unexcited. If he would keep the full worth for himself, as he intended doing, he must await the right opportunity to dispose of the gold. Meanwhile, he was not in need.

He started cleaning the petrified wood with a piece of soft sheepskin, brushing away every particle of dirt and sand and then polishing each specimen until it glowed. The storekeeper wanted them that way. Joe was half finished when twilight came.

He rose, disturbing nothing on the table, and started a fire. He opened a can of chili con carne, emptied it into a pot, and was in the act of stirring it when the door opened and Hairy Gunston came in. Behind Hairy, his two hounds waited outside.

Startled, Joe knew better than to show it. Not more than three times a year did he have visitors—and usually they had the grace to knock before entering. Joe continued to stir his chili and he did not turn around until Hairy spoke.

“Were you out today, Joe?”

“Yeh.”

Joe turned to face his visitor, who was dressed in blue jeans, a cotton shirt, and cowboy boots. A bullet-filled belt encircled his waist and the grip of a revolver protruded from a holster. A tall, lean bullwhip of a man, the head guard’s black hair needed cutting and he could do with a shave. Although his hatchet face was turned toward Joe, his agate eyes were fixed on the table.

“Happen to see one of our flight birds?” he asked.

“Saw nobody.”

“Let me know if you do.”

“Yeh.”

Hairy left with his hounds. Joe sat down to eat, but it was an uneasy meal. Almost he wished he’d left the nuggets where he found them. Well, he hadn’t—but he did not have the remotest intention of surrendering them.

When night fell, Joe put the nuggets back in the flour sack, slung it over his shoulder, and left his house. He made a swift way through the night to a

limestone bluff and climbed part way up. He slowed his pace until, as he approached a spire on the face of the bluff, he was barely moving.

Behind the spire was a hole through which a man might wriggle, and behind the hole was a roomy cavern. But the subdued buzzing that came from the cavern, and rose to an angry pitch when Joe slung his sack within, was reason enough for caution. To Joe's knowledge, nobody except himself knew of this cavern. Should anyone find it, the huge swarm of bees already in possession would not lightly accept an invasion of their home.

Walking back to his house, Joe remained anxious. It seemed to him that he had invited trouble. Then, in the distance, he heard Dusty summon Nan to the lion-killed buck and he was again at peace.

Coyotes meant good luck, according to the Indian tradition.

3: The Hunter

Hairy Gunston, senior guard at Coyotito Prison Camp, had an instinct sharper than the keenest nose on the best hound he had ever owned. He'd been born with it, just as a hound is born with its nose, and it consisted of an ability not only to see what the men in his charge were doing but to divine what they were going to do.

That is why he knew that Miguel Torres was planning to become a flight bird, an escapee, and he thought that Miguel would make his attempt today. He hoped so. Nine long weeks had passed since he'd taken his hounds and run a flight bird down, as he was sure he'd run Miguel down.

There were perhaps half a dozen men among the hundred and forty prisoners with whom Hairy would never have dared take such a chance. They were the elite because they were the crafty and intelligent. If any or all of them got away, the senior guard was by no means certain that he could bring them back again. All the rest fitted one or another of a very few patterns.

Thirty-eight-year-old Miguel Torres, serving four years for robbery, had a Mexican name but he was not a Mexican national. However, intermingling across the border was much freer and easier than it was popularly supposed to be. Miguel had both friends and relatives in Mexico who would not only be happy to help him but would consider it a privilege to help any one of their blood who was fleeing from the "money-mad imperialists" to the north.

It followed, therefore, that Miguel would head for the border. Because he was not intelligent enough to think of anything else, he would also consider speed the prime requisite. Rather than try hiding his trail, he'd choose the shortest route.

That would take him west for some three miles. Then he'd turn south, passing within a quarter mile of the mud shack where the young Indian lived all alone. From there, it was twenty-one miles to the border.

The plan was even clearer in Hairy's mind than it was in Miguel's. In the summertime, work crews went out from the prison at five o'clock and

stayed until eleven. Then there was a four-hour break . . . and back to work from three to six.

Miguel would not try to escape from the compound at night. It was too well-guarded by men who shot too straight. Nor would he make his break when going out with a work crew. He'd choose the eleven o'clock lay-off, if he got a chance—and Hairy intended to see that he got one.

Miguel would have no opportunity to get a canteen and he'd escape when the day's heat was climbing to a peak. His first thought would be to put as much distance as possible between the camp and himself . . . and for an hour or so he'd do pretty well. Then he'd slow down. His throat would become dry as a sun-parched board. His tongue would turn to a burning piece of rope in his mouth, and he would not know where to find the water holes.

Some time tonight, somewhere in the desert and many miles this side of the border, Hairy would find Miguel and bring him back, as he had brought so many others. Not by any means, however, had all been returned to the prison camp. Some were in locked wards with other violently insane men. Others, perhaps luckier, were in their graves.

Hairy got up at four o'clock and fed his two hounds. They couldn't eat later in the day if they were going to run the following night. One of the dogs, a big, heavy-jowled amiable bloodhound named Turkey, wagged his tail at Hairy and began to gobble his meal. The second, the crossbreed aptly named Diablo, never wagged his tail at anybody and came only when commanded.

Hairy chained Diablo to his kennel. With a keen nose for a man's track but a passion for coyotes, Diablo might decide to go coyote hunting on his own and run himself out before night. The hound's mania for coyotes was annoying, but it was a habit that Hairy had been unable to break. Nevertheless, Diablo had made it possible to inaugurate a very efficient system of man hunting.

Gentle by nature, bloodhounds want only to find their man and never to tear him apart. Usually, they are kept on leash when trailing. More than one free-running bloodhound has been killed by the very men they found. Others have been stolen by them. Hairy knew of one enterprising flight bird who had made friends with a pursuing bloodhound, took him along, and later, after obligingly demonstrating the dog's man-hunting talents, had sold him to a sheriff more than four hundred miles from the scene of the initial encounter of convict and dog.

Diablo was different. Savage as a jungle tiger, he could run free. When he found his man, and if the man kept running, Diablo worked him over until he stopped. Then he watched. He would not attack a motionless man, but, more than once, following behind with the leashed Turkey, Hairy had come upon a prostrate and savagely-slashed escapee who dared not make the faintest move lest Diablo fall upon him again.

Hairy got in his pickup truck and drove the three quarters of a mile to his place of employment. He breakfasted at the guard's mess, then went in to report.

John Evans, camp superintendent, was a clear-eyed, graying man who had given his life to the penal service. Fair-minded, earnestly interested in rehabilitation rather than revenge, he knew the many wrongs of the prison system and had personally set a number of them right. At the same time, he was a realist. Hard as flint and merciless as a rattlesnake, Hairy Gunston represented no influence for reform. But none of Coyotito's inmates were there because they had led exemplary lives. Most of them could not be handled with kid gloves.

Hairy was an evil—but he must be accepted as a necessary evil, even while he must be respected for his very real knowledge of, and talents with, rebellious men.

John Evans greeted him pleasantly. "Good morning, Harry."

"Good morning, John. Anything special?"

"Nothing." The superintendent shrugged slightly. "Besides, you know better than to ask. What are you going to do?"

Hairy frowned. "I think I'd better go out with young Mackley. He needs a lot of breaking in before he'll ever be a guard—and you'd better assign him a soft gang. How about number six?"

"It's all right with me."

Hairy went into the compound where the various work gangs were assembling. The most vicious and crafty, nine men who had murdered before and would happily do so again, if it served their ends, moved off first under the supervision of lazy-looking but lightning-fast and experienced Tom Dormsted. Hairy went to meet young Billy Mackley. He looked him over from a distance.

Twenty-two years old and four months a guard, Billy still strongly resembled a high-school sophomore. Easygoing and not too bright, Hairy

guessed that he had become a guard because he preferred relatively light work and an assured pension at the end of twenty-five years, to the uncertain responsibilities of working harder for a correspondingly larger reward. He was naive as a quail chick.

He said as Hairy came near, “Good morning, Hairy.”

“Hi, Billy. I’m going out with you this morning on number six.”

Billy replied disinterestedly, “Oh!”

The work gang came forward, fifteen men whose crimes ranged from assault to homicide. But their greatest crime, Hairy thought as he watched them assemble, was stupidity. They were twice stupid, once for doing what they did and again for getting caught at it. Still, such men were always caught.

Outwardly, they varied from wizened little Beamis Henry to hulking, dark-complexioned Miguel Torres. They were still astonishingly alike. These men were grouped because of similar temperaments, personalities, and intelligence quotients.

“Cigarette, Beely?” Miguel Torres wheedled.

“Sure, Miguel.”

Billy took a cigarette from a pack and flipped it to Miguel. Hairy walked over, snatched the cigarette from Miguel’s hand, shredded it between his fingers, and turned contemptuously to his younger companion.

“That’s against rules!”

“Shucks, Hairy, where’s the harm?”

“Get these men moving!”

“All right,” Billy said sullenly.

He led the fifteen prisoners out of the compound toward the quarry where they were to labor. Hairy followed, his eyes still contemptuous. Young Mackley did not merely look like a baby, he decided. He was a baby. One day, when he found out what even these smoldering morons could do, he might wake up. On the other hand, that might be so late that he would never wake up. He wouldn’t be the first easygoing guard to be carried feet first from a group of apparently harmless prisoners.

The group reached the quarry and the convicts began their day’s labor. Nobody worked fast but none idled. The only thing they had to look forward

to was the eleven o'clock lay-off, and to an idle man, eleven o'clock would never come. Small Beamis Henry, official water boy because of his lack of size, passed among them with bucket and dipper.

Outwardly, all was as it had been in the past and would be in the future, but Hairy retained his inward feeling that Miguel Torres would break today. The senior guard looked at Billy Mackley, sitting in the doubtful shade of a palo verde with his hat over his eyes and his buckshot-spouting shotgun on the ground beside him, and grimaced. In his own mind, Billy was not guarding convicts. He was merely supervising a group of people and thankful he could rest while they labored.

At quarter past ten, Hairy approached him. "Think you can handle things?"

"Sure," Billy answered indifferently.

"I'm going in. Stay awake now."

"I will."

Hairy returned to the compound, checked his shotgun in at the armory, and made his way to John Evans' office.

"I'm afraid that kid's in for trouble," he reported. "He hasn't the least idea of what he's really doing and I can't seem to tell him."

John Evans said thoughtfully, "Most guards must be initiated the hard way. He'll wake up if he does get into a mess."

"He will if he lives through it."

Hairy drank from the water cooler, picked up a magazine, and sat down to thumb through it. He glanced covertly at the wall clock and watched its hands creep around to eleven. Fifteen minutes later, pale and shaken, Billy Mackley entered the office.

"I've lost a man," he said huskily.

"So?" John Evans had seen too many men lost to be unduly perturbed by another. "Who is he?"

"Miguel T-Torres," Billy quavered. "He was with us when we left the quarry, but he was missing when we came in."

"Want to take care of it, Hairy?" John Evans asked quietly.

"Right away."

Hairy rose and left to get his pickup. It had worked out exactly as he thought it would, with Billy Mackley getting the blame and Hairy the chase. However, there was no hurry.

Let Torres run through the heat of the day, and long before nightfall he would be wishing he was back in the compound. But he wouldn't dare come back. Within the next dozen or so hours, Miguel Torres would learn, far more forcefully than compound life had ever taught him, just what it means to be a convict.

Hairy slept until twilight. Then he prepared and ate a hearty meal, stuck a couple of packs of cigarettes in his pocket, buckled his gun belt on, filled a canteen, and inserted fresh batteries in a multicelled torch. Canteen and torch on the seat beside him, his two hounds balancing in the pickup's body, he drove for three miles, stopping where Miguel Torres should have turned south.

He had an idea, one with which he'd long been playing. Joe Watson, that crackpot of an Indian who lived back in the scrub, was not openly the enemy of any white man; but Hairy hadn't the least doubt that the reason behind this was because he dared not be. Secretly, the fellow would do anything he could to cause trouble and aiding or abetting a flight bird would certainly do just that. Hairy thought that the young Indian had already helped more than one escapee and he might be sheltering Miguel Torres right now.

Since he'd have to return to the pickup if Miguel was not at Joe's, Hairy left his canteen and torch on the seat. Hounds at heel, he made a silent way to Joe's hut and entered without knocking.

His first glance told him that Joe was both alone and bothered. It also took in the little heap of nuggets on the table. His heart beat fast, but he knew better than to reveal the throbbing excitement that pounded through him.

Needing to live, and having to buy a living with his own work, Hairy had no desire for any job other than the one he already held. By every natural instinct he was a hunter, but he never could be interested in small game—and men were the biggest of all. He had, however, long cherished a bright dream of wealth, enough to release him from such odious tasks as reporting to work every morning and free him for more interesting efforts. He saw here the possibility of his dream coming true.

The little pile of nuggets, although certainly worth having, was not great wealth. But Hairy saw beyond this to a conclusion that added up as surely as

two and two make four.

Joe Watson, who did nothing except roam the desert with his prospector's hammer, had obviously made a real strike. It was a foregone conclusion that he would tell no white man about it. He would do exactly what Hairy's eyes told him he was already doing, bring his nuggets in a few at a time and cache them until he found a way to dispose of them secretly.

Hairy decided instantly that he would locate Joe's cache, strike and take both Indian and loot for himself—but he must not be crude about it.

Returning to his pickup, he chained the savage Diablo to it, slung the canteen over his shoulder, and caught up his torch. It would take him longer this way, and reaching a man that Diablo did not first reach was hardly exciting. But in view of what he had just learned, he could afford both to take his time and to relinquish his sport.

The leashed Turkey pacing beside him, he struck southward. Forty-five minutes later, Turkey, who had been allowed to fill his nostrils with the aroma of a shirt Miguel had left behind at the compound, struck scent. Two and a half hours after that, they found the escaped convict.

He lay in a copse of greasewood, wild-eyed and terror-stricken, but too spent to go further. Turkey wagged a cordial way up to him and licked his face. Miguel's manner changed to that of a trapped animal dumbly pleading for mercy.

Hairy said softly, "Well, Miguel?"

The fugitive gasped. Hairy unscrewed the cap of his canteen. He lifted Miguel to a sitting position, cradled the other's head against his own shoulder, and allowed him a sip. It was an unheard-of thing for the senior guard to do. All previous flight birds who had run into the desert without water, had walked out of it without any from the succoring hand of Hairy. Miguel reached desperately for the canteen. Hairy moved it out of reach.

"Not too much at once," he chided. "You can make yourself very sick."

He allowed the convict another sip, and another, and finally, a great, satisfying draught. Miguel buried his face in his hands and sobbed aloud.

"I understand," Hairy soothed. "It must have been terrible, but be glad I found you. If I had not, you would die."

Miguel's sobs changed to strangled gasps as he fought for control of himself.

“Have a cigarette.”

Hairy extended one. Hands shaking, Miguel put it between his lips. The guard lighted it and Miguel gulped puffs. He became calmer.

“You aren’t going to die,” Hairy assured him, “and I hope you aren’t going to believe all the bad things you may have heard about me. I’m your friend.”

Miguel flashed him a look of dumb gratitude.

“I think you might have run away because the work was too hard for you,” Hairy went on. “I’ll get you easier work.”

“You will?” Miguel asked huskily.

“I promise, perhaps in the kitchen. Would you like that?”

Miguel answered, “I like that.”

“Let us go back now,” said Hairy. “We’ll walk very slowly so it will be easy for you. And remember, I’m your friend.”

“I remember,” Miguel promised.

Hairy gave himself a figurative pat on the back, Miguel would be under restrictions because of his attempted escape. But time was not as important as caution, and, now that the senior guard knew it was there, Joe Watson could not dispose of his gold without Hairy’s hearing of it. Meanwhile, the Indian would be steadily adding to the cache.

The next time Miguel ran away—and there would be a next time—he would be found in Joe Watson’s mud hut. Then it would be Joe, a criminal by virtue of having sheltered another criminal, who would run into the desert. And it would be the senior guard who would track him there.

Hairy asked nothing more to make even an Indian talk.

4: *The Awakening*

High on a dust-colored ledge, Dusty lay full length, head raised. His tail was straight behind him, his rear paws were curled beneath his body, his front ones extending before him. His yellow eyes were open and his nose pointed squarely into the little breeze that swirled up from the desert floor. Except for his ears, that were flat against his head rather than erect, he lay somewhat as a small, furry dog might.

There was, however, a subtle difference. A dog, with no enemies to fear, would have lain lazily and carelessly because it would make no difference if someone saw him. To Dusty, this could mean the difference between life and death.

He had chosen his resting place carefully, neglecting nothing at all that might be in his favor. His reclining body fitted the contours of the ledge upon which he lay, and blended so perfectly with its color that he seemed to be part of it. He faced the breeze in such a fashion that his fur rippled not at all. The flattened ears, that would have presented sharp outlines if they were erect, provided the final touch of camouflage. Hiding himself was an art he had sucked in with his mother's milk. Dangerous experience had made him a master artist.

For the present, he was not especially concerned about anything at all and delighted with everything. The breeze, cool even at ten o'clock in the morning, furnished evidence enough that the furnace heat of summer was behind. It was the shift from hot to cool weather, the desert's great awakening.

It began shortly after the first of September, when the days remained hot as July but the nights turned delightfully cool. With the coming of autumn, the days also cooled noticeably. Now, in mid-October, the frightful heat was ended until mid-May and the most glorious time of the desert year was ahead. The wonderful winters more than atoned for the burning summers.

A mocking bird, saucily perched on a wind-swayed limb of a palo verde tree, burst into full song. Dusty blinked, interested in the bird and its song only because both were present. Although they nested while summer was at

its height, even the mockingbirds did not sing then. Throughout the cool spring and autumn they sang all day long and sometimes all night, too. When winter left a rime of frost on the cactus and sometimes even dusted snow over the summits of the rocky hills, the mockingbirds flew south to warmer climates.

Dusty would not miss them, or even notice their absence. The vanguard of the great bird migration was already down from the cool north. Ducks and a few long-necked geese swam on the water holes and stock tanks. Soon the deer and antelope would be down from the heights, driven by encroaching snow. Herds of wild burros and wild horses would come also. The javelina that stayed on the desert all summer long would be joined by those wild boars that had gone into the heights. The desert came alive in winter as it never did in summer.

Dusty opened his mouth just far enough to let his tongue loll. He was not panting—there was not enough heat to make him pant—but expressing utter contentment. The lean time, the summer, was gone. Until the heat came again, no good hunter would lack for anything.

Still in full-throated song, the mockingbird winged away. Dusty watched him go and saw him light in a dry wash three hundred yards away. He hunted small birds only when desperate for food. Besides being hard to catch, half a dozen were needed just to blunt the edge of a healthy appetite.

The wind swept in a bit lower. Without seeming to move, Dusty lowered his head two inches, the better to read the story it brought him. He sniffed deeply.

Just beyond the dry wash into which the mockingbird had gone, a man was walking. His scent identified him as Joe Watson. Flour sack in his belt and prospector's hammer in hand, the young Indian was again searching for semiprecious stones that he might polish and sell.

Dusty did not move. Joe Watson was an acquaintance of long standing—but not a friend because no man was a friend of the coyote. Dusty knew only that Joe Watson was less harmful than some humans. He carried no gun, set no traps, scattered no poison, and owned no dog. But he must be watched for, no matter how long a man walked in peace, he might at any second turn to war.

Dusty was not afraid because he was confident of his own abilities. He was still a gangling cub when his wise mother had taught him all about the steel trap that invariably lies near a tempting bait. She had taught him, too,

the evils of poison, so that he never ate unless he knew exactly what he was eating. From his mother and father he learned the ways of man, and the incredible distances at which man can kill.

The rest, Dusty had taught himself. He might have raided Joe Watson's poultry any night he cared to do so, and killed all five of Joe's sleepy chickens, but he scrupulously avoided such raids. He never went near the flocks of stinking sheep that grazed in the mountains all summer and in the desert all winter. Dusty would live in peace with any man who kept the peace with him.

Nan was another of his calibre. Wiser than most coyotes, both had adapted themselves to the life they found. They went along with the tide of civilization because they knew they could not fight it. As a result, when other coyotes died, Dusty and Nan lived.

The only mated pair of coyotes remaining in the area they ranged, they were considered relatively unimportant by the men living there. Automatically, unless they did something very stupid, they were relatively safe. Hairy Gunston's hound, Diablo, was the only creature that consistently hunted either one of the pair, and neither feared him. Sometimes, when he wanted to be amused, Dusty even lured Diablo into a chase.

Dusty laid his head on his outstretched paws and slept. His black nose, still in the prevailing wind, remained awake and questing, however. This morning, he had dined well, for the parents of most late-winter and spring-born creatures were forsaking their young to renew an interest in each other. A fat young javelina boar, cocksure in his youthful arrogance, had practically stumbled over Dusty as he lay ambushed in a dry wash.

The foolish but courageous young boar had defended himself as best he could, but the kill had been easy. Neither Dusty nor Nan hesitated to attack the biggest javelina, if they could separate it from the herd. No javelina was a match for a coyote. But no coyote was a match for a herd of javelina.

Dusty's nose told him of a bobcat that was sneaking along the base of the ledge. The cat turned at right angles and struck off across the desert. Presently, five crested quail, flushed by the bobcat, took startled wing, skimmed the tops of the scrub, and rose to descend on the ledge within two feet of the reclining coyote. Wide-awake now, Dusty did not twitch a muscle. He might have had one of the quail, perhaps two, if he took one with his jaws and pinned another with his paws, but he was not hungry and he never killed for the sake of killing.

For a few seconds the quail bobbed nervously, looking back into the desert and toward the bobcat. Then one of them discovered Dusty and cackled a warning. Crying querulously, the five birds launched themselves from the ledge and sailed back into the desert.

An hour later, Dusty raised his head. He had parted from Nan yesterday morning and hadn't seen her since. Nor had he heard her call. There was nothing unusual about each of them going a separate way. Sometimes the pair did not cross trails for a week or more. Nan's failure to call meant only that she had not found enough food for two. But of late, strange urgings and longings had troubled Dusty. He missed his mate when she was not beside him, and rather than wait until chance brought them together, he was increasingly tempted to go find her.

He did not follow the urge, however, because the mating season was still in its earliest stages. Yet that time was soon to come when Dusty must know where Nan was during every hour of the day and night.

The sun stood at high noon, slanted toward the west, and, when it did, it shone directly on the ledge. The temperature rose accordingly, so that the breeze became warm rather than cool. But it was a pleasant warmth and not the oppressive heat that had been.

Dusty rose and slithered beneath the shade of a projecting shelf of rock. When the sun shone full on the ledge, its color changed from the hue of dust to a dazzling white. But, although the color of the rock altered, Dusty's fur did not. He knew he was no longer camouflaged because he felt it. However, beneath the rock shelf he was again hidden. Nose still in the wind, he finished his nap. . . .

Late afternoon shadows were lengthening before Dusty rose again. For a moment he stood quietly, still sluggish from the enormous meal he'd eaten the previous night. But because he had gorged, he was thirsty sooner than usual. Hunger was bearable, Dusty could go for a week without eating, if he must, but water was indispensable. He padded down the ledge to a shallow wash, and down the wash to the desert floor.

Before emerging from the wash into the open desert, where he might be seen, he stood for a full thirty seconds and brought all his senses into play. Raising his ears the better to listen, he looked from side to side and his nostrils twitched constantly as he searched the wind.

Having satisfied himself that nothing threatened, Dusty came out of the concealing wash and struck across the desert. His head was low, tail curved

against his rear. Lithe muscles rippled, as he set himself to a trot that looked slow but would have left a trotting horse behind. Nose always to the wind, he kept a straight line and such perfect rhythm that his speed neither increased nor decreased to the smallest degree. He could maintain such a pace for as long as necessary. . . .

Twenty minutes later, he came to the water hole.

It was another spring that emerged from the base of a low hill, and, depending on the rainfall, it was either a mere seepage or bank full. Bordered by the usual cottonwoods and surrounded by the lush green grass that always grows wherever there is water, it was a favorite haunt of cottontail rabbits that lay in their parched burrows by day and crept out to eat the grass at night. When Dusty arrived, the water hole was in the possession of another desert dweller.

It was a buck, one of two that had survived the lion's rush while summer still reigned. His branching antlers, now scraped free of clinging velvet, gleamed like polished mahogany. His neck was swollen, his nostrils distended, his eyes flamed. In the rut, looking for a fight with anything at all, the buck was a deadly dangerous creature.

Dusty sat down, curled his tail around his rear legs, and coolly appraised the situation. The buck swung threatening antlers, snorted, and angrily scraped the earth with his right front hoof. He looked at Dusty with mad eyes.

Dusty returned his gaze, not bothering to glance to either side or behind him because he already knew exactly what was there. He considered the situation. Having come to the water hole for a drink, he was not minded to leave without one. However, he hadn't the slightest intention of getting hurt. He sought a solution to the problem. Then a strong gust of wind quartered in and it was solved.

The wind told Dusty that Nan had left whatever grounds over which she'd been hunting and sheer chance had brought her to this same water hole. A coyote grin framed Dusty's jaws. Imps of mischief frolicked in his eyes. When his nose told him Nan was very near, he sprang forward.

The buck was upon him with an angry rush, hooking with pointed antlers and chopping with knife-sharp front hoofs. Suddenly, Dusty was not where he had been. Apparently he had avoided death by inches, but he had slipped to one side and ten feet farther back in the scrub.

The buck snorted his fury and rushed again. A second time, to all outward appearances, Dusty escaped death by half the width of a hair. But, once more, he was farther from the water hole. The buck charged furiously.

Always seeming a certain victim but always managing to escape, Dusty danced farther back into the scrub. Presently, the buck gave a mighty sidewise lunge and bawled angrily. Nan, having drunk her fill, had come in from the side and nipped his flank.

While the buck gave his full attention to Nan, Dusty trotted to the water hole and drank. He licked his chops, then raced out to slice the buck's flank.

Immediately, the buck turned on Dusty. As soon as he did, Nan leaped in from the other side. Dusty danced happily back, enjoying this sport, now that it had become sport. For a few minutes, attacking from alternate sides when the buck whirled on one or the other, Nan and Dusty had their fun.

Then, as though at a given signal, both coyotes streaked into the scrub and left the frustrated buck angrily ripping a mesquite bush. For a few minutes they raced for the sheer joy of running, and now the need for caution was much less. Night had fallen while they engaged the buck and night is a cloak of safety for all wild things.

Dusty halted abruptly, wheeled, danced on all four feet, and wagged appeasingly to his mate. Nan gazed haughtily over his head, pretending to ignore him. When he was near enough, she gave a quick little forward leap and bit him on the nose. Then her tail began to wag. They sniffed noses, affectionately licked each other's faces, and were off, moving side by side.

Both had found good hunting and neither was especially hungry. Rather than merely look for something to eat, they could afford to indulge gourmets' appetites. They trotted steadily until they came to a knoll that overlooked the garbage dump of Coyotito Prison Camp.

Neither would have come near the place by day, but neither feared it at night and no end of delightful surprises might be found there. They sat on the knoll and waited patiently for what they knew was coming. It came.

Hairy Gunston had fulfilled every promise made to Miguel Torres. Now a flunkey in the prison kitchen, his less than exalted position bothered Miguel not at all. Anything was better than work in the quarry. The kitchen was paradise. Its help had first choice of food, were cool in summer and warm in winter, and they could do much of their work sitting down.

As Miguel wheeled the day's accumulation of garbage to the dump, no guard accompanied him. None was necessary. Not for anything that anyone

might offer would he run into the desert again.

As soon as Miguel had emptied his load and started back to the compound, Dusty and Nan rushed forward to compete with the various foxes, badgers, rodents, and even deer, that had also located a bonanza in the garbage dump of Coyotito Prison Camp.

5: *The Watcher*

An hour and ten minutes before the sun rose to high noon, Joe Watson turned toward one of the rocky desert hills. Towering over the scrub-covered knolls and knobs, in turn the hill was dwarfed by mountains that could be seen from its summit and seemed to be immediately behind it. Their apparent nearness was a deception. The desert air was so clear that what was actually thirty miles away often seemed to be no more than three.

Joe climbed slowly, and, again, it was not that he was incapable of greater speed but simply that he had no wish to go fast. He thought again of his grandfather, the wise and kindly patriarch who had given him a home after his parents died.

Robust for most of his eighty-three years, the old man failed rapidly when the decline set in. For almost all his last year of life, he was so infirm that Joe had to carry him inside to his bed every evening and outside to sit in the sun every morning.

Regardless of where he was, he was so feeble that his world must be restricted to that which he could see from wherever he sat or lay. But, although he might have looked at the distant horizon whenever he chose to do so, he gave every second to scrutinizing whatever was within reach of his two arms.

He had traveled much, he told Joe and such of his tribesmen as still came to visit him, and at one time had thought he had seen much, but not until age and infirmity made it impossible to travel at all did he realize that he had not really seen anything. A man did not see when he hurried along on the back of a horse or even on his own two feet. He merely looked, and, even so, he had no time for looking at anything save the most obvious objects. The old man had discovered that one might devote many years to studying any two square yards of desert and still not see all of it.

White men who heard him say this snickered behind his back, and indicated in their own peculiar sign language that the old man had taken leave of his senses, but no Indian laughed. They recognized the wisdom and truth in what the ancient one said and they did not pity him. Rather, they

respected the age-bequeathed wisdom and patience that enabled him to do as he was doing during his final days.

Joe, still young and with all the restlessness that must torment the young, had tried sitting still and observing only that which was within reach of his two hands. He found it irksome, and never could sit without moving for a full day. At the same time, however, he taught himself some of the value of the old man's words.

For indeed there was value, and, in part, it was a practical worth that had been revealed many times. White men walked determinedly through the desert, and, in large measure, weighed the success or failure of their expedition by the number of miles they traveled. But more than once, while sitting quietly and watching the hues of the desert change as the shadows shifted with the sun, Joe had located an entire pocket of crystals, vein of turquoise, or something else that he could collect and sell. At some time during the day, although often it was for only a few brief moments, everything in the desert reflected its true color.

Far more valuable, understanding and practicing his grandfather's lesson had brought Joe almost a complete oneness with this desolate land that he loved so dearly. The quail, the doves, the deer, the rock lizards, were little alarmed by a man who sat perfectly still. Many times, all these creatures and others had gone unconcernedly about their business while Joe sat a few yards away—or even a few feet.

The young Indian reached the summit of the hill and, at once, felt as though some invisible shackles had been stricken from him. He had never resisted the white man, or even thought of resisting him, but he had learned that white must be white and Indian must be Indian. There was no common meeting ground or true identification of one with the other—and the white men seemed supreme.

Never in summer, but often in winter, Joe met them riding or walking in the desert—all kinds, from chattering children to sedate elders. They usually waved or shouted to him and went on. Joe had never felt consciously oppressed or persecuted, but he was always somewhat ill at ease when white people were present.

Now, because nobody except he himself ever bothered to climb these rocky hills, he could feel completely free.

He looked north, toward the high mountains whose cloud-stabbing summits already bore a cloak of snow, then lowered humble eyes to the

ground. White men had impressed their Christianity upon him and, in great measure, he had accepted it because it was so reasonable and so sensible. But he had never been able to accept in full what he believed was the white man's notion that God was in the far-off sky and there only. In Joe's opinion, He was also in the mountains, in the snow that lay on the mountains, the bleak hills, the night wind, the summer sun, the cactus, the rocks, and everything else that existed. Joe had never voiced such thoughts because he did not care to be labeled a heathen, but he could not help thinking them.

When he finally sat down, he chose a resting place with as much care as Dusty had exercised when selecting a spot in which to doze. There was no need for shade because the autumn day was cool enough, but he settled on the shady side of a tumbled nest of boulders, knowing that he would be better camouflaged there. He rested his back against another boulder and began his vigil.

He looked first, and at length, at that which was nearest. The endless rocks and boulders, which seemed monotonously alike to the hasty glance of a casual observer, were not at all similar. There was no standard or geometric pattern, but a million shapes and forms that might very well represent the million living creatures which, since time began, had paused briefly on this hill and gone their way.

A great boulder, that on superficial inspection seemed to be merely a boulder that had eroded in a peculiar manner, on close scrutiny became a racing horse with a warrior bending over its back. He bore a lance in his hand. There were women, children, deer, antelope, Gila monsters, and numerous unnamable things that had lived in the dawn of time but had survived only as half-forgotten legends and myths. In the nearby rocks, Joe read the history of the desert.

At the same time, he knew a little frustration. In his final months, his grandfather had looked only at that which he could touch with his two hands. He had further declared that, if he lived many years, he could not even hope to see all that was there. But either because he was a superior being or else because infirmity had granted him insight not given to other people, the old man had scaled peaks of patience that Joe was unable to climb.

His grandfather had never looked at the horizon. Joe could not help looking.

He raised his eyes now, and the peace that had enveloped him when he reached the summit of the rocky hill deepened and strengthened. The hill

upon which he sat was a small place. But when he looked across the desert and saw the numerous similar hills, his sense of well-being grew in proportion to the aggregate area represented by all the summits. For all his wealth, knowledge, and power, the white man had not yet bent everything to his will. Nor would he ever. No human power could possibly compress all the hills into one little niche and then explain the whole thing by some glib formula. There would always be complete freedom for those who would find it.

Joe lowered his eyes to a valley slanting off from the one he had left when he climbed. Most such valleys were wide. Often it was three or four miles between the bordering hills and the valleys were cut by washes and canyons and spotted with ridges and knolls.

This valley was unique because it was narrow. No more than fifty yards across, any experienced desert man would know it as a death trap. Although the desert remained parched for much of the year, the rains, when they came, were sometimes veritable cloudbursts. With little vegetation to hold water, every small rut and tiny ditch became a miniature torrent that hurled its over-load into the valleys and washes. In a very short time, frequently within minutes, washes that had contained only sand were spilling water over both banks.

Narrow, and certain to receive all the drainage from an entire range of hills that enclosed both sides, in times of heavy rains the valley Joe inspected would be doubly hazardous. Its gouged-out floor, whereupon lay boulders that had been tumbled about by the force of rushing water, proved that it had already been host to more than one snarling flood.

Joe fixed his eyes on the little coyote who was halfway up the opposite slope, and whose motion had attracted his eyes in the first place. She was Nan, Dusty's mate, and Joe recognized her at once. Dusty and Nan were masters of desert lore, but so was Joe Watson. A dozen or more times, his presence never suspected, he had sat as he was now sitting and watched one or the other. At least five times he had seen them together.

If he had carried a rifle, and felt the inclination, Joe could have killed both coyotes long ago. However, farthest from his thoughts was the idea of killing anything at all. The old ways of his tribe were so long gone that even the legends had become garbled, but they were not dead. He who was hungry had a right to kill. But he who was not hungry, and killed anyhow, would one day know great need. Since Joe bought most of his food at the

store, a dependable source of supply, he would not lightly kill even rattlesnakes.

Nothing could have forced him to kill a coyote. He'd have starved first. To him, coyotes were not ordinary animals but mystic creatures, endowed with supernatural powers. They were at the same time an Indian's totem and his luck. The hell Joe had learned about when studying Christianity sounded evil enough, but its torments were mild compared to what lay in store for Joe if he killed, or even hurt, a coyote.

Nan crawled into a roomy burrow beneath a boulder and almost instantly came out again. She stood uncertainly, studying the terrain about her and apparently oblivious to everything else. Joe understood.

Not in the immediate future but surely within the next six or seven weeks, Nan would become a mother. Joe knew, from her anxiety to find a safe den for cubs to be, that she would be a good mother. But her uncertainty told him that she would also be inexperienced.

Nan quartered down the hill, ducking into but lingering only briefly in a half dozen potential dens that failed to meet her rigid standards. She reared with both front paws on a boulder, looked steadily at the valley's floor, then trotted directly to a pile of tumbled boulders that flash floods had heaped together.

Joe felt a rising anxiety. As Nan trotted on, he read her story as easily as a white man might read his newspaper. Not yet two years old, Nan could have had no experience with flash floods because, during the past two years of sparse rainfall, there hadn't been any. She did want a safe den and would settle for nothing else, yet she disappeared into what was evidently a cave or cleft beneath the flood-tumbled boulders.

Joe breathed a silent prayer. "Careful, little sister! That is not the place!"

His anxiety mounted. The boulders beneath which Nan had disappeared, and which interested her as a possible den more than any other place, since she was staying so long, would be ideal for her purposes only if the forthcoming rains were scant. If they were heavy, Nan and her cubs would be squarely in the path of the flash flood that was sure to surge down this narrow valley.

"Leave, little sister!" Joe implored silently. "Go away from there!"

But five full minutes elapsed before Nan came out, and then she lingered for another two minutes. Obviously, she was impressed with what she had

found. When she left, she gave a great leap that carried her far up the hill and stopped again to look back before trotting on.

Joe sat silently until she disappeared. It could mean bad medicine if Nan knew she had been seen. When he finally rose to walk in a direction exactly opposite to that taken by the coyote, Joe's heart was troubled and his mind perplexed. If Nan had found her nursery, and evidently she had, he saw the gravest potential danger for both the mother and her babies.

Of course he could frighten her away. He had only to leave his own scent near the pile of boulders. But who was he to do such a thing?

Although his eyes saw peril, what had Nan's seen? What spirit beyond Joe's understanding had guided her to that pile of rocks? If Joe interfered, might his very interference, well-meant though it was, bring about the tragedy he hoped to avoid? It was entirely possible that frightening Nan from the den of her choice would send her to one even more perilous.

There was nothing Joe could do. The powers that ruled the desert, and the creatures of the desert, were far beyond his understanding. Certainly they were past his interference.

The young Indian made a mental note to stay away from the low hill and he was reasonably certain that no other human would venture near it. White men did not like to climb hills and the valley that interested Nan was so narrow, rock-strewn, and rugged, that Joe himself would hesitate before going into it.

More than a mile and a half away from the narrow valley, Joe stopped to gather fragments of quartz. Some were dazzling white, some glowing pink, and all were common enough. But they'd appeal to tourists. There were five hundred of them in the fall and winter months for every one in summertime, and they thought they were seeing the desert if they sped along its paved roads in their cars and stopped at every interesting store and trading post.

Indolent in summer but frisky enough in fall and winter, Joe's nine horses tossed their heads, hoisted tails over their backs, and galloped into the scrub when they saw him coming. Joe gave them only a passing glance. He had no need for horses at present and would catch some easily enough when he needed them. Even in cool weather, his horses must drink at a water hole and the water holes were few.

Joe's five chickens were scurrying around to catch and eat the fat grasshoppers that always descended out of nowhere when autumn came.

Gathering the three eggs his chickens had laid, Joe went into the house to polish his fragments of quartz.

It never even occurred to him, as he labored over the stones for which the storekeeper would pay him less than a dollar, that a dazzling fortune lay hidden little more than a stone's throw away. Joe hadn't been near the cave since he had tossed his little sack of nuggets into it, and the bees that buzzed forth to steal nectar from winter-blooming flowers told him that no one else had discovered it.

The nuggets were not important and a dollar was enough. Let the gold stay where it was until he decided what might best be done with it. He had time and he wanted for nothing.

Joe returned the polished fragments to his sack, slung the sack over his shoulder, walked down the path to the black-topped highway, and started walking toward the store. He was halfway there when Hairy Gunston's pickup halted beside him. Hairy leaned out of the window.

"Hello, Joe."

" 'Lo."

"Were you out today?" Hairy inquired.

"Yeh."

"Find anything good?"

"No."

Hairy put his pickup in gear and went on down the road. Joe continued toward the store. He recalled his forebodings of trouble to come the night Hairy had burst into his house and seen the pile of nuggets. Nothing noticeable had happened since, but Joe was unable to rid himself of a feeling that something would happen.

Since that night, Hairy had either stopped the young Indian on the road or come to his house every second or third day—and always unexpectedly. He was, Joe thought, as much a bird of prey as the desert shrike, that impales its still-living victims on thorns until it is hungry enough to eat. But he was also a white man who had never even started the lessons that Joe began learning at the feet of his mother's father.

The nuggets could stay in their cave forever before Hairy Gunston would ever have them.

6: *The Den*

Dusty was both puzzled and worried. Something strange, and wholly beyond his understanding, had happened and was still happening to the fun-loving Nan. Rather than present a solution to the enigma, passing time merely intensified it.

It had started almost a month ago. Never far from his mate these days, Dusty had set out to course a jack rabbit. Nan crouched in a copse of greasewood and waited.

The pair frequently resorted to such cooperative hunting, and almost invariably with success. Dusty would follow the rabbit's scent just fast enough to keep it moving. Knowing that Dusty trailed him, but unaware of Nan's ambush, sooner or later the jack would venture within reach of her ready jaws. Then both coyotes would eat.

The mid-February night, fine and frosty, was so marvellous for running that Dusty was somewhat disappointed at the shortness of the chase. Less than five minutes after he took its trail, the rabbit blundered squarely into the motionless Nan. The result, as always, was one less jack.

Nan was holding it by the back, front and rear quarters dangling on the ground, when Dusty wagged happily up to share the booty. Then came the explosion!

The unsuspecting Dusty was still ten feet from his mate when Nan dropped the rabbit and sprang to attack him. Snarling continuously and furiously, she scored Dusty with punishing teeth. She struck so fast and often that her snapping jaws seemed to blend into one continuous sound.

The astounded Dusty yelped a protest and leaped backwards. But not until she had driven him forty feet away was Nan satisfied to halt her attack. She snarled a final warning and returned to devour the entire jack rabbit herself.

The thunderstruck Dusty waited until she had finished. Then, very cautiously and prepared to leap away at any second, he padded gingerly

forward to see if he could discern the reason behind this fury that his once-gentle mate had become.

Ears flattened, tail wagging, and doing everything else he could think of that might appease, Dusty dropped to his belly and crawled the final ten feet. The well-fed Nan favored him with a haughtily contemptuous glance—one that would have been familiar to any experienced human husband but was wholly foreign to the bewildered coyote—and curled up to sleep.

It was very puzzling. Before now, whenever they had engaged in any cooperative hunt, Dusty usually did the trailing while Nan laid the ambush. When she made a kill, it was not extraordinary for her to repel Dusty with a few well-placed nips and force him to wait until she devoured the choice parts. But never before had she attacked so viciously and never had she refused to share any part of the kill for which both had worked.

Leaving Nan asleep, Dusty wandered off to catch a rabbit for himself. He did not go very far—these days he never wanted to be far from Nan. Running down a jack rabbit was considerably more difficult than merely running one into an ambushed mate. But jacks were plentiful, Dusty knew how to hunt, and presently he caught his own dinner. He forgot Nan's attack.

Believing his troubles were over, he discovered that they were just beginning. Formerly, he had been the more aggressive and bolder of the pair. Now Nan became undisputed ruler of the coyote team.

The new situation was such a complete reversal of the old that Dusty could not understand that either. Far from helpless, as was illustrated by the efficient manner in which she could chastise her mate, Nan still seemed to need him. It was a time to be together, so, even though Dusty must surrender his leadership to follow her, together they would be.

Nan's actions became increasingly more confusing. The following night, Dusty brought down another javelina and promptly invited her to the feast. Nan accepted the invitation, lying contentedly beside her mate as both fed.

However, when the main course was finished and Dusty thought of the tempting desserts that might be had at the garbage dump of Coyotito Prison Camp, Nan not only refused to follow him but turned stubbornly in the opposite direction. Nor would she pay the slightest attention to his entreatings whines and soft little yelps as, in every way he knew, he described for her the delights she was spurning.

Nan, in fact, had not only forsaken most of their former hunting grounds but limited herself to a relatively tiny area. She, too, was not without her

worries and most of them stemmed from her inexperience. Although Dusty hadn't the least idea of what was going to happen, Nan knew perfectly well that she was about to become a mother for the first time.

In addition, Nan took her responsibilities very seriously. She had hunted long and hard for exactly the right nursery and felt she had finally found it beneath the pile of flood-tumbled boulders in the narrow valley. After heaping the boulders, the ebbing waters had gnawed hungrily at the soft earth beneath them and chewed out a spacious cavern.

To Nan, nothing could have been more suitable. The boulders, settling in the wake of the flood, had become so tightly wedged that not even another flood would move them again. But they had settled in such a fashion that the entrance to the cavern was just big enough to admit one coyote. It followed that one coyote could defend that entrance against any predator who might have notions about filling his belly with baby coyotes.

The cavern was roomy, dry, and already filled with a desirable accumulation of palo verde needles, cottonwood leaves, and other trash that could be fashioned into a nest.

Nan had indeed found her nursery. Because she was so young, so worried, and so burdened with the fearful responsibilities she was about to assume, she dared not venture more than a short run from it. Her babies would be safe in the den she had chosen; they must not be born elsewhere.

Dusty did not understand, but he was fiercely determined to stay with Nan. Beside her, he patrolled the area to which she restricted herself—she refused to venture more than a quarter mile from her chosen nursery. It was a curious way to behave and one for which he had little liking, but it was not his to choose.

For a few days, save for Nan's restlessness and her insistence on staying within easy reach of the den, the moments were normal. Therefore, they were automatically good and well-filled. But this ideal state of affairs was doomed to an abrupt termination.

Game was not scarce, but with two coyotes steadily hunting a small area, the fools and blunderers were swiftly eliminated. Some of the more wary moved out of hunting range and what remained was not easy to catch. Dusty and Nan continued to eat well because they were good hunters. Ten days after Nan's first attack, Dusty came again on the little herd of javelina that had so generously furnished the previous feast of wild pork.

There were nine javelina remaining. They were led by a sour-tempered old boar with one broken tusk. Second in command was an equally quarrelsome old sow. The rest of the herd consisted of four three-months-old babies, the recent litter; and three yearlings—two boars and a sow, that came of the preceding litter. The two young boars blew through their nostrils and gnashed their tusks. It was their way of expressing their own potency and threatening their sire, but, as yet, neither dared threaten him openly. Their sister was a born coquette, who went to great lengths to lure every footloose male boar and thus added to family troubles.

As soon as Dusty encountered the herd, the javelina forgot their own differences to rally against a common foe.

The four babies huddled behind their mother. The three yearlings gathered in the center, with the old boar at the far end. They gnashed wicked tusks and grunted defiance. It might have been an impregnable line—one that even a wolf or lion might have hesitated to attack—except that one of the young boars decided that this was a splendid opportunity to win his spurs. He charged Dusty, running at surprising speed for all his short legs, and chose exactly the place where he intended to strike this brash coyote.

As he had with the buck at the water hole, Dusty let him come. Then, just as it seemed inevitable that he must meet the charge, he stepped to one side. Running full speed and carried by his own momentum, the javelina sped past. Dusty darted in, set his teeth in the arrogant youngster's shoulder, and flipped him end over end. There was a terrified squeal, a few more snaps of Dusty's jaws, and it was over in less than a minute.

Dusty turned away, prepared to run but looking back over his shoulder. Most times, the death squeal of any member of a javelina herd was enough to bring the survivors charging furiously to either rescue or revenge. This young boar, however, had been eyeing his father's place of command, and the old herd leader saw his untimely demise as somewhat of a disguised blessing. He champed his tusks and snorted, then fell upon the rest of his family and drove them in the opposite direction.

Dusty trotted to the fallen javelina, made ready to battle anything that might contest his right to it, and sent a soft call into the night air. A short time after, Nan was beside him. Again they lay side by side to feast royally, with no family spats.

The next night, Dusty coursed another jack rabbit into the ambushed Nan's jaws and watched her eat it. He himself, not especially hungry, was in

a mood for play. Nan finished her meal, started walking off, and Dusty left her.

He flashed into the scrub at right angles to the course she had chosen, as though he intended to go his own way. But as soon as he was out of sight, he circled, turned back to intercept his mate, and crouched quietly beside a sprig of greasewood. When Nan came past, he leaped out at her.

It was a happy game they often played, and always before it had ended in a joyous rough and tumble as they rolled over and over, biting playfully while they frolicked. This time, the outraged snarl that rippled from Nan's throat indicated anything except frolic. She threw herself on Dusty and her teeth met through his ear. In quick succession, she slashed his muzzle and shoulder.

Too shocked even to move for a moment, Dusty finally roused himself and sought safety in ignominious flight. Rather than let him go, Nan raced behind her mate, keeping pace and slashing at his rear quarters. Five hundred yards farther on, Dusty threw himself down, turned on his back, waved all four paws in the air, and yelped his complete submission.

Since then, nothing he could do was right. If he so much as snapped at a buzzing fly, Nan interpreted it as another affront to her dignity and acted accordingly.

He no longer dared even go near her, and must be poised for constant flight. When they lay up during the day, Dusty chose a bed a safe distance from Nan's and prudently laid out an escape route, should one be necessary. Often it was. As her time drew near, Nan no longer needed a reason to attack him, but would whirl and slash whenever she felt like it. While traveling at night, Dusty followed a safe twenty lengths behind Nan. When he coursed a jack rabbit into her ambush, he never tried to share it. If he caught food for himself, and Nan came near, he hastily abandoned his dinner to her.

It was all very troublesome and nerve-racking. But, even though the dove of peace that had cooed over their domestic tranquillity had been ousted by the eagle of war, Dusty still sensed that his mate needed him and he would not leave her.

The biting winds of winter gave way to the zephyrs of spring. Still, the nights remained cool and the days pleasant. The furnace heat of summer was still many weeks away and it could be dealt with when it arrived.

The Ides of March, the days of fate, were ushered somberly in beneath a canopy of ominous black clouds. They might and might not portend rain,

although rain was sorely needed. The normal winter rains had been little more than perfunctory drizzles that barely filled the water holes and encouraged just enough forage to provide a meager livelihood for the various herbivores.

This night, while the wan, sad light of a thin crescent moon sprayed so gently over the desert that even the sharp-angled boulders looked soft and alluring, Dusty paced his usual discreet distance behind Nan. She traveled fast and in a straight line. Clearly, she had a specific destination in mind. Dusty had no idea of where she was going, but he definitely had no intention of trying to stop her. There had been too many recent and painful lessons concerning the wisdom of minding one's own business.

Nan came to the rim of a hill and dipped into a narrow, rocky valley. Dusty was puzzled, for he himself never would have ventured into a place so barren. There was no game, for there was nothing game might eat. Even gophers and rattlesnakes shunned this valley. But Dusty followed without complaint because, in due course, he would know Nan's reason for coming here.

Since discovering it, she had not visited the cave beneath the flood-tumbled boulders. Little Nan understood fully the wisdom of avoiding her nursery until it was needed. The desert was filled with badgers, bobcats, foxes, and various other furred and feathered creatures that were not only curious about everything but always tried to satisfy their curiosity. If they knew a coyote was making regular visits to the den, they'd want to know why, and most of them were not averse to eating baby coyotes.

Nan ducked into the den. A safe twenty paces away, Dusty sat down and waited for her to come out. When she did not appear, he cut the distance between them by half and again waited. His nose told him Nan was in the cave, but he hadn't the faintest idea as to why she was staying there.

Dusty moved a bit nearer, but almost as soon as he rose, Nan's ferocious snarl rippled forth. Dusty beat a hasty retreat. He didn't know why his mate wanted to stay where she was, but obviously she had her own reasons. Even more clearly, she did not want him near.

Rising at intervals to circle nervously, but never going closer than twenty paces, Dusty waited all night long. Dawn assailed the black night with its first faint shafts of gray . . . and darkness retreated as the day grew stronger. The rising sun spilled more gold over the desert hills than all the mines in the world will ever produce. Dusty heard a faint cry.

He sat still, cocking his head from side to side. The cry was repeated. Very faint and weak, not unlike the mewl of a newborn kitten, it was a very startling sound and one Dusty had never heard before. At the same time, he could not help feeling a certain fascination. Joe Watson spoke more truly than he knew when he ascribed magic powers to coyotes. Certainly, there had been magic in the cave last night.

Dusty trotted forward, so absorbed in this new thing that he forgot all about Nan's warning to stay away. She hurled herself out and on him. Bristled and snarling, this time she meant to kill.

Again, Dusty did the only thing he could do. He fled from his wrathful mate. But, although he fully expected her to be snapping at his heels, when he risked a fleeting backward glance, he saw her slinking into the cave. More bewildered than ever, he halted and sat down.

All day Dusty waited. . . . When night came again, he started to worry.

Nan had eaten nothing last night and there was not the slightest indication that she intended to hunt tonight. As though he had arrived at a sudden decision, Dusty raced full speed to the top of the rocky hill. He kept on running until he was beyond the limited circle in which he and Nan had hunted for so many nights. Jack rabbits were plentiful out there, and, since they'd been little disturbed, they were correspondingly easier to catch.

A big jack rabbit dangling from his jaws, Dusty raced back to the cave. At Nan's warning growl, he dropped his game and fled. He stopped a safe distance away and turned to see his mate, the jack rabbit in her jaws, disappearing inside the cave.

More bewildered than ever, Dusty beat a nervous little dance with his front paws.

7: *Miguel*

Young Billy Mackley, probably the most naive rookie guard ever to serve at Coyotito Prison Camp, was no master of mathematics. But he had learned to add two and two, and come up with the right answer, in the earliest grades of elementary school. It was an interesting process and one that, of late, had furnished considerable food for thought.

Billy possessed certain other talents that, in their way, were as valuable to him as Hairy Gunston's inborn ability to foretell what a prisoner would do was to Hairy. When his final school record was tabulated, Billy, thirty-fifth in a graduating class of more than seven hundred, had been approached by an astounded teacher of English and had been informed, with serious respect underneath the jest, "Billy, you can't be as simple as you look!"

If it was a left-handed compliment, it was nevertheless true. Nor was Billy's English teacher the only one that was fooled by an external appearance that was gullibility personified. Hairy Gunston had been similarly deceived—at least to some extent. Billy had become a prison guard partly because he wanted steady work and an assured pension, but largely because he was sincerely interested in and wanted to make a career of penology. The place to start, in Billy's opinion, was at the bottom.

Billy further possessed a near-passionate faith in all human beings. It was a curse and, at the same time, a blessing. Without it, Billy never could have gone into prison work. He knew his own limitations and understood that his abilities were not sufficiently spacious to reform the world. But he earnestly hoped that, somehow, he could help reform some of the men who were wasting their lives in prison and send them back to society as useful citizens. His chief trouble lay in the fact that, although he tried to be very realistic about everything, he trusted everybody.

He had not only trusted but had been ready to fling himself at the feet of all experienced guards. The renowned Hairy Gunston, whose methods and exploits had provided subject matter for an entire chapter in one of the books on penology Billy had read, might have been—and for some months was—Billy's idol.

The attempted escape of Miguel Torres shocked Billy almost to the point of considering himself unfit for the career he had chosen and resigning. However, even though his eyes were very innocent, they were very wide open. The morning after Miguel's escape, Billy escorted a sullen, muttering crew to their work in the quarry. Perhaps because even the men he supervised regarded him as a harmless child, they talked, and what they talked about was Hairy Gunston. At present, there were eight men among the inmates of Coyotito Prison Camp who had run into the desert and been brought back by Hairy.

Formerly, Billy would have indignantly refused to believe—or even listen to—a single word against the senior guard. But two and two still added up to four. Hairy Gunston had voluntarily gone out with Billy's crew. He had been overzealous in warning the younger guard to stay alert, and he had gone back to the compound a half hour before the crew was to quit.

That was Billy's first two, and within itself it would have meant nothing. The second, however, provided the whole sum.

Now that it couldn't possibly do any harm, every man on the crew freely admitted that Miguel had been talking about escape. Of course, if they'd taken him seriously, they would have done their duty as conscientious prisoners and reported him. Just the same, Miguel had talked. Billy seemed to be the only person who had experienced intimate contacts with Miguel and yet hadn't heard even an echo of what he was talking about.

Also, even if the eight prisoners brought back by Hairy had presented their own case in the best possible light and Hairy's in the worst, their stories were too remarkably similar to be shrugged off. Obviously, their fellow prisoners believed them.

Although it provided an additional shock—Billy had honestly thought that all guards were dedicated men, sincerely interested in the rehabilitation of the prisoners they supervised—the sum still added up. Hairy Gunston was a hunter of men, a sadistic brute whose ethics were on a level with those of the most depraved inmate in Coyotito Prison Camp.

Billy's calculations were temporarily shaken when, rather than a half-dead lunatic, Miguel Torres was brought back in good health and as happy as any prisoner can be. But, once more, Billy resorted to fundamental arithmetic. Overpowering evidence pointed to the fact that Hairy had no more compassion for Miguel, or any other prisoner, than he had for a mosquito that he might crush with his hand. Something else was in the wind, and Billy decided that Hairy had found a use for Miguel.

He said nothing to anybody because he hadn't a shred of proof. There were times when he himself wondered if he was right. However, there was a certain way to find out. Sooner or later, whatever plans Hairy had in mind, providing he had any, would come to light. Billy would watch and wait.

One April night, just after being relieved of compound duty, his present assignment, Billy was thinking of nothing special save that he was hungry. This was not unusual, although the guard's mess served good and ample meals. Billy was always hungry. He made his way to the kitchen, found it empty, and prowled into a pantry to see what he could scavenge.

He was still in the pantry when Miguel Torres, returning from his nightly chore of emptying the garbage, entered the kitchen. A moment later, Hairy Gunston came in and started talking with Miguel.

Billy never moved.

All things considered, Hairy Gunston could not have been more satisfied with the course events were taking. He had, he felt, played every card exactly right. Now he was as certain of his future as he was that the sun would rise tomorrow—and his future would be every bit as golden as the rising sun at its most glorious. He no longer had the faintest doubt that Joe Watson had discovered a gold mine.

Hairy based this conclusion on various premises, chief among them being the nuggets that he himself had seen on Joe's table. To be sure, he hadn't seen any since, but that fitted the picture perfectly. Joe Watson would never dazzle anyone with his brilliance, but he was smart enough not to bring any more nuggets to his house, now that he knew they were discovered. It had to be a mine, Hairy felt. If Joe had found only a small pocket of nuggets, would he have bothered to hide them?

Nor had the Indian disposed of any of his wealth. Hairy could be very sure of this because he had not neglected a single angle. Although it was only twenty-two miles to the Mexican border, it was another fifteen to the first town of consequence. That meant, at the minimum, a full day's trip either way. In addition, even if the wildest luck was on his side, Joe would need at least a day to make the proper contacts and sell his gold. Hairy had checked him closely enough to know without a doubt that Joe had not been away from his house for even two consecutive days.

Certainly, he had not tried to interest any local buyer in his gold. Elijah Binns, the store and trading post keeper, was Joe's only intimate local

contact. He was also garrulous. The sight of even one sizable nugget would send Elijah into such happy hysterics that everyone would know all about it a couple of hours afterwards.

It followed, therefore, that Joe was caching his nuggets in the desert. Which is exactly what Hairy had thought he would do.

He had played it right, he told himself again as he parked the pickup beside his house and got out. Admittedly, the nuggets on Joe's table had been a temptation, but only a fool would have yielded to it. Probably it would have been simple for Hairy to force Joe to disclose the location of both mine and cache that night, but the senior guard was personally acquainted with quite a few inmates of Coyotito Prison Camp who had planned more cleverly. Unfortunately, even Indians had rights and the courts bent backwards to uphold them.

The amiable Turkey wagged over to have his ears scratched. Diablo, sullen as usual, rolled smoldering eyes and disdained even to get up. Hairy looked almost fondly at the vicious crossbreed. He had no more love for Diablo than Diablo admitted for him, but the hound was an indispensable part of his future plans.

Hairy let himself into his house, prepared and ate a meal. He rarely ate at the guards' mess. After that, he sat down to review his plans. They were even more foolproof than he'd thought possible, he decided. Patience and wise planning were about to yield the usual dividends. There were no mistakes.

John Evans, Coyotito's Superintendent, had looked quizzically at him when he brought Miguel back. He had overtaken his man in the desert, Hairy explained, but the fellow was so near spent that just getting him out alive was no small task. Hairy had first taken him to his own house for food and rest. Miguel had endured a dreadful ordeal.

Miguel himself eagerly corroborated everything Hairy said. Hairy's assertion that it would be well to transfer Miguel to easier work, perhaps to the kitchen, had brought a glow of pleasure to Miguel's eyes—and deepening astonishment to Evans. However, the Superintendent agreed to the transfer and a guard was called to lead Miguel away.

As soon as he was out of hearing, Hairy talked further with Evans. Although not an especially dangerous man, he said, Miguel was a very unstable one. While Hairy thought it most unlikely that Miguel would try to escape again in the near future, he did yearn for freedom and Evans must not

forget that the man was limited in both imagination and intelligence. Therefore, although it was unnecessary to keep him under maximum security, he must always be watched—not so much now, but in six months or so, Hairy opined, Miguel would forget his ordeal. If he tried to escape a second time, it would be then. However, Hairy would bring him back again, so Evans needn't worry.

It was a strategy that worked even more smoothly than Hairy had hoped it would. As far as Evans was concerned, all the senior guard wanted was to implant in the Superintendent's mind the thought that Miguel probably would try a second escape but there was no reason to worry if he did. Hairy would bring him back. But in returning Miguel in such fine shape, Hairy knew that he had also given Evans reason to wonder about other flight birds whom Hairy had run down and brought back considerably the worse for wear.

Hairy lighted a cigarette and read his own thoughts in the thin blue cloud of smoke that floated away from it.

He'd never had any doubts concerning his absolute mastery of Miguel. The man was a clod, a lump of clay that somehow had been granted life, and whoever knew how could play upon him as a master musician played his violin. Having listened to other flight birds returned by the senior guard—and Hairy knew they had good reason to talk—he must have expected all the torments of hell. Instead, he had been kindly, almost gently, received. That alone would have made him his captor's eternal slave, but, since then, Hairy had supplied him with cigarettes, preferential treatment, and had even interceded in Miguel's behalf when some other guard would have punished him.

Hairy tamped his cigarette out in an ash tray and again, more hastily, went over his plans. There were no flaws, he decided. He could act, and the time for action was at hand. He looked at the clock, that read five minutes past seven, and lay down to sleep. Miguel's last chore of the day was wheeling the garbage out. He returned to the kitchen at about ten minutes past twelve.

Hairy awoke at eleven-thirty, drove to the camp, and identified himself to the guard at the gate. He entered, stood in the shadows outside the kitchen until Miguel returned, and slipped inside behind him.

“Hello, Miguel,” he said companionably.

“Ullo.” Miguel looked up, then quickly averted his eyes.

“How have they been treating you?” Hairy went on.

“Aw right.”

“Smoke?”

Hairy took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, placed one between his own lips, and extended one to Miguel. He lighted both and puffed silently. Then, “How much more do you have to serve, Miguel?” he asked.

“Eighteen months,” Miguel sighed.

“Long while,” Hairy commented.

Miguel nodded dumbly. Hairy waited a moment . . . then exploded his bombshell.

“How would you like to get out of here, Miguel?”

Miguel looked incredulously at Hairy, his eyes wide and shocked, as though he had not understood. He tried to speak and could not.

“Soon,” Hairy added.

“But—” Miguel began. He lapsed into a machine-gun sputter of Spanish. Tears flooded both eyes and he returned to English. “You fool me?” he asked huskily.

“Have I ever lied to you?” Hairy demanded.

Miguel shook his head. “No.”

“I am not lying now,” Hairy assured him. “You have a good record here and we notice such things. Now we need help. You help us and you’ll be free of Coyotito. What do you say?”

Miguel answered doubtfully, “I wish no trouble.”

“You’ll have none,” Hairy promised. “You need do nothing but follow some simple directions and,” he shrugged, “you shall have freedom.”

“What must I do?” Miguel breathed.

“There’s an Indian living back in the scrub,” Hairy told him. “His name is Watson, Joe Watson. I have reason to think— Let’s say only that he’s been doing things he shouldn’t. I must find out, but I must have a witness if an arrest is necessary. You will be the witness. Understand?”

“Si.” Miguel nodded.

“Two nights from now, when you return from emptying the garbage, you are not to come back to the kitchen,” Hairy directed. “You are to go to my pickup. There will be a tarpaulin in the body and you must hide beneath it. I will drive out of the compound as though I do not know you are there. Afterwards, I’ll show you the path to the Indian’s place. You are to go to his house, knock, enter, and say you escaped from Coyotito. That is all.”

Miguel asked dubiously, “That all?”

“All,” Hairy assured him. “The Indian has no gun and you do not face the slightest danger. Will you do it?”

“I do it!” Miguel exclaimed. “I do that much!”

“Remember, two nights from this one. Now you had better go to your bed, Miguel.”

After Miguel had gone, Hairy lighted another cigarette and watched the blue smoke rise. It had worked, as he had known it would. Miguel was his, pliable clay to mould as he saw fit, and it made little difference what happened after he was in Joe Watson’s house.

If Miguel blurted out the whole story, as he very probably would, Joe Watson would certainly take to the desert. If Miguel acted his part and said nothing, Hairy would arrest Joe for harboring an escaped prisoner, then he would see that the Indian was given an opportunity to escape into the desert. That’s all Hairy wanted or needed. After Diablo had worked Joe Watson over, and after Hairy had finished what Diablo had started, Joe would talk. Then it probably would be a good idea to shoot both the Indian and Miguel and report to the Superintendent that he had shot in self-defense.

Hairy was immersed in these thoughts when Billy Mackley walked slowly out of the pantry. Hairy looked at him, shocked—but managing to conceal it. He said coolly, “Hello, Billy.”

“Hello, Harry.”

“What are you doing here?”

Billy answered, “Listening.”

“So? And what did you hear?”

“Everything.”

Hairy laughed. “It must have been interesting.”

“It was,” Billy declared.

“Why don’t you go to Evans?” Hairy inquired.

“I think I will.”

“A good idea,” Hairy urged. “Tell him all you know and all you suspect. Then I’ll go to him and accuse you of lying. Whose word do you think he’ll accept?”

“Yours,” Billy replied calmly.

“Right the first time, Junior,” Hairy scoffed. “Or do you think Miguel will talk?”

“No.”

“Then forget all about it,” Hairy advised. “Children meddle too much.”

“Perhaps,” Billy said, “and perhaps not.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just this,” Billy’s eyes met Hairy’s and the youngster did not flinch. “I’ve seen that young Indian around here and he seems harmless. It had better be as you said it is. If the Indian isn’t actually in trouble, but you plan on making some for him—or anyone else—I’m going to Evans and everyone else I can reach and I’ll put your neck in a noose, if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

Hairy smiled approvingly. His manner was that of a counselor, a wise and experienced craftsman who sees a talented youngster who might benefit by an older man’s knowledge.

“You’re O.K., Billy,” he declared, “and there’s nothing at all wrong with your eyes. You’re the only guard in the whole darn bunch who’s seen for himself that something is up. I think there will be a better job for you.”

“Go on.”

Hairy said ruefully, “I can’t take you in on it now, there are certain things that must be as they are. But after this whole business is washed up, I’ll be glad to show you step by step exactly what was done. How does that sound?”

“Good enough.” Billy’s eyes were less hostile.

“Then that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

It would be an even better idea, Hairy decided, not to shoot Miguel at all but just leave him in the desert. He could then come back to Coyotito, say he needed help, and choose Billy Mackley as his aide in the hunt for the fugitive.

Fearing capture, Miguel Torres—or so the world would think—would shoot Billy Mackley.

8: *Flash Flood*

Dusty came to the brink of the steep hill overlooking Nan's den and halted. He dropped the crested quail he had been carrying in his jaws, but as soon as it fell to the ground he covered it with a protecting forepaw. The coyote snapped his jaws open and shut to rid them of the taste of feathers.

He might have plucked the quail, and, had he been hunting for himself, he would have stripped it of feathers immediately after catching it. But nowadays there was no time for ceremony or anything else except hunting and brief snatches of sleep.

Gaunt from hunting all night and most of the day, and allotting himself no more than bare subsistence rations, Dusty looked anxiously toward the den and thoroughly tested each little breeze that swirled out of the narrow valley. There was no valid reason for such anxiety. In the month that had elapsed since Nan took possession of her nursery, the only alien creatures that had been even near it consisted of four desert bighorns that wanted to get from the summit of one rocky hill to the next and chose the valley as the quickest crossing. All unsuspecting of anything in their path, they fled in wild haste when the furious Nan rushed them.

There had been no trespassers since and there were none now, but Dusty's tension mounted rather than eased. He knew how to deal with tangible enemies, but not with the unseen and only dimly sensed threat that seemed poised in the background and ready to strike. Dusty retrieved his quail and started down the slope.

He chose a careful way among the boulders but followed no path because, except where Nan left the nursery to pick up one of her mate's offerings and immediately returned to the den, there were no paths. Dusty had been careful not to make any.

Sometimes he came in from one side, sometimes the other, or he traveled up from the mouth of the valley or down from its head. At no time had he walked twice in exactly the same tracks. In spite of all precautions, however, an enemy of which he was unaware might be aware of him, and paths leading to a den were tantamount to signs pointing it out. Dusty would not

betray his mate and cub. He had long since learned that little Nan, a mother for the first time, had given birth to only one cub.

Dusty had not yet seen his son. Nan would not let him come near the den nor had she brought her baby out for more than a few minutes at a time. When anything at all appeared, or even when she thought it might appear, she hastily tumbled her cub back into his hidden nursery. Although Dusty knew he would not hurt the baby, evidently Nan did not. Until such time as she saw fit to introduce father and son, her mate's only reason for being was to see that she did not lack food.

Far from a scarcity, there had been a superabundance at the beginning and there was enough at present. That was changing, however.

Nan's appetite was never wholly satisfied these days, and, even though he was a highly skilled hunter, Dusty found it necessary to range farther and farther from the den in order to supply her. The sparse winter rains, drizzles that did little more than wet the dust, were responsible in part. When the rains did not fall, the vegetation suffered. As a consequence, the various grass and seed eaters that provided most of Dusty's food found it necessary to scatter. Although both cottontails and jack rabbits were inclined to congregate on the green grass that always grows around water holes, Dusty had raided those few rich hunting grounds so often that there was a scarcity even there. Deer were almost the only herbivores that still came openly to the various oases, and, although Dusty had schemed endlessly to catch a deer, he had not yet hit upon a way to do so.

In spite of the fact that it was late afternoon in mid-April, the sea of gray clouds that stretched from horizon to horizon kept the sun from breaking through. Therefore, although the weather should have been warm at that time and season, it was cool and still. Another storm was gathering.

Dusty read no other threat in the ominous clouds and quiet air, and he was not in the least concerned at the prospect of rain. He lived by bending to the elements, and he was no more worried about the forthcoming rain than he was by the summer's sun or winter's frost.

Still he knew—even though he could not identify it—that something was not as it should be and that worried him greatly. He liked to know his enemies, since only by knowing could he outfight or outwit them. Then he came in sight of the den, and, for a moment, he was so thoroughly astounded that he forgot everything else.

There were three well-established depots, all on the lee side of boulders, where he might leave any offerings he brought. The nearest was fifteen yards from the den, the farthest about twenty, and Dusty could approach any of the three, providing he dropped his food and retreated at once. If he lingered, or went one step beyond, Nan was sure to rush from the den and drive him away.

Now, for the first time since his own cub days, Dusty was so disconcerted that he dropped the quail he was carrying and merely stared in wide-eyed wonder. Always before, when he came, both Nan and the cub had been in the den. Now, Nan lay a little in front and a little to one side of the entrance. The cub, baby teeth sunk in his mother's right forepaw, had all four of his own paws braced and was enthusiastically tugging backwards.

About the size of a month-old cocker puppy, the cub looked far more like a woolly lamb than an adult coyote. The only baby Nan must feed, and she herself well-fed by Dusty, he was butter-fat. Still in the throes of learning what his legs were for, and with little sense of coordination, he opened tiny jaws to get a better grip on his mother's paw. In so doing, he forgot that his own paws were braced backwards and he sat down suddenly on his well protected rear. He remained in a sitting position and blinked owlishly at Nan.

The entranced Dusty cast a wary glance at his mate, who lay alert but not hostile, and ventured slowly nearer. . . . He was within a yard when the cub turned suddenly and faced him, almost falling over his own paws as he did so.

There was no fear, the cub was too young to know the meaning of fear, but only a mighty curiosity. Balancing unsteadily, seeming astonished to discover that the population of the whole world did not consist exclusively of his mother and himself, the cub inspected his father. Then he galloped forward, stopped so short that he tumbled end over end, rolled to a stop against Dusty's paw, and at once began to chew it.

Perplexed, Dusty held perfectly still. The cub chewed happily away. Although he was too young to take any food except his mother's milk, his baby teeth were needle-sharp. When they fastened on one of his father's toes, they hurt.

Dusty whined, pulled away, and the cub promptly fell on his chin. Unhurt, he rose and, for a moment, sat blinking. He had had a new toy and suddenly it was gone. Spying Dusty's paw, six inches in front of his nose, he pounced happily forward.

Dusty backed warily. His son, although very intriguing, was also very lethal and there was nothing Dusty could do about it. Never once did it occur to him to nip this brash youngster, as Nan nipped him when he overstepped proper and respectful bounds.

Dusty could only retreat. Determined eyes fixed on his father's paw, the cub pursued as Dusty backed. Finally, his mother came to the rescue. When he insisted on repeatedly lunging at his father, the cub eventually exceeded by a few inches what Nan considered a safe distance from the den.

She rose and Dusty watched, ready to whirl and race away should she indicate in any way at all that he was unwelcome. But rather than attack, Nan greeted him with a wag of her tail, took the cub in her jaws, carried him back to the den, and dropped him on the rocky ground at the entrance. The cub rolled over and struggled to his feet.

He balanced precariously, and, as soon as he found a footing, he turned on his mother and growled at her. Naturally headstrong, he was also a spoiled baby whose every wish had been promptly gratified—so far. Since he saw no reason why Nan should do anything except cater to him, he resented interference with his play.

Dusty curled up to watch, making sure he maintained a discreet distance between his son and himself. The cub was truly fascinating and his father's pride showed plainly, but since Nan had the situation so admirably in hand, it was all right with Dusty if she kept it. He would be happy to provide as long as she was willing to supervise what, at best, was a little demon.

Anxious Nan, who had never before let the cub out of her sight or ventured more than a couple of feet from him, had obviously accepted Dusty back into her unreserved good graces and full confidence. She glanced at him to make sure he was watching the cub, then paced over to retrieve the quail he had brought.

She dropped it near the baby. Tail curled around her rear legs, neck arched and ears pricked forward, she lost herself in noting the reaction of her son to this, his introduction to the world in which he must live. The quail was the first game of any kind he had even seen. Everything else Nan had eaten in the entrance to her den, blocking the narrow passageway with her own body so her son could not come near.

The astonished cub stared at the quail for a full thirty seconds. His black nose wobbled as he stretched his neck as far as he could and his body with it so that, rather than a fat cub, he seemed twice his normal length and almost

gaunt. He sniffed at a wing feather, and when the feather tickled his nose he drew back hastily. Although he was stubborn, even at this tender age, he showed the inherited wisdom of his parents. The quail was wholly new, a completely unknown quantity. Therefore it was to be approached with caution.

The cub plumped his rear on the ground and his head swiveled in all directions as he studied the bird from every conceivable angle. He rose to walk cautiously all around it, then circled a second time and sat down on the opposite side. Again he stretched himself to the greatest possible length and sniffed, then nerved himself to grasp a wing feather.

The quail rolled toward him. Not expecting such a sneak attack, the cub tumbled hastily backwards. But when he recovered, he was facing the quail and ready to act as circumstances indicated.

Although neither forgot to remain alert for outside danger, Dusty and Nan kept intent eyes on this play that was so much more than play. It was the cub's kindergarten, his initial encounter with one of the desert dwellers that would supply his food. Having taken this first step, his parents would teach him how to hunt. Doubtless his first game would be beetles and grasshoppers.

It would be a long while before the cub was even a reasonably skilled hunter. Like all youngsters, he must have his schooling. But failing any grade did not mean that he could simply go back and take the course over. It meant death.

Presently, deciding that the cub had had enough for his first lesson, Nan strode to the quail, pinned it down with her front paws, and began stripping the feathers off with her teeth. The baby squalled in indignation at being deprived of a plaything, then became interested in a downy feather that swirled about near his nose. He took the feather in his mouth, where it promptly lodged in his teeth, whereupon he worked his jaws continuously to rid himself of the annoyance.

It was time to hunt again and Dusty glided away. He did so reluctantly, casting numerous backward glances, for, even though he could still sense no threat, he retained a strong feeling that great danger was near. But until he was able to pin it down, there was nothing he could do about it—and Nan must have more food. On the crest of the hill, Dusty halted and turned for one final inspection.

The narrow valley was serene, but the sky was troubled and the surging clouds more restless. Ugly streaks of deep black were draped across the gray background, like ominous mouths uttering dire threats. The strengthening wind was blowing in sharp spurts and gusts. But it still meant no more than an approaching storm to the coyote.

When Dusty finally started across the top of the hill, he struck and maintained his distance-eating trot. Although he remained anxious and worried, now that he could no longer see the den, there was no reason to linger. He must trust Nan to keep herself and the cub safe, while he made a kill and returned to them as soon as possible. Nor did he hesitate. He had come this way so many times that he knew everything about the hill-top, and there was no game on it. His destination was a water hole more than three miles away. . . .

When he finally reached it, instead of showing himself on the carpet of grass that surrounded the water, he hid in the scrub. An hour of daylight remained, and the rabbits that still fed here would not venture out of the scrub until night gave them a cloak of safety. However, seven deer that had already been to water were now cropping the grass. Dusty gave them one brief glance and ignored them.

As the feeding deer moved close to a patch of scrub, the lion, the same one that Dusty had followed on various previous occasions, rose out of it so suddenly and unexpectedly that even the coyote started in surprise. Six of the seven terror-stricken deer fled wildly. The lion crouched over and prepared to feed upon the fat doe he had pulled down.

Dusty slunk away. There was food for the taking as soon as the lion left, but the lion was a leisurely diner and, even after he gorged himself, he probably would lie up near the remains of the doe. Nor was it likely that rabbits or anything else would venture onto the grass as long as he remained. The deer was something for Dusty to remember. Even if he could take none to his mate, he could at least fill his own belly the next time he came this way.

Anxious to return to his family, the coyote must have game and soon. But it was nearly midnight before a racing cottontail, fleeing from a pursuing gray fox, literally blundered into his jaws. Dusty snapped it up and started homeward.

Two minutes later, the rains began.

The first onslaught of the storm was a hurried pattering of oversized drops that splashed into the parched desert and kicked up little dust devils wherever they fell. Then the clouds opened and the rain fell in sheets. The thirsty desert, too long with too little water, suddenly received too much. Staghorn, ocotillo, and other slender-branched cacti drooped toward the earth. Rivulets streamed down the solid saguaro and barrel cactus.

Drenched fur making him seal-sleek, Dusty gripped the luckless cottontail firmly and ran full speed. He must reach Nan and the cub, and he needn't be concerned about the path he took because the rain would wipe out all tracks.

A snarling little torrent was already foaming down the narrow valley when Dusty reached it. He leaped the flood, and, for the first time since his mate had established herself there, he entered the den.

Silent and watchful—and very frightened—Nan was at the extreme rear, standing just out of the inch of water that had already poured into her nursery. She had placed the shivering cub on a higher and still-dry stone that jutted out of the cave's rearmost wall. She was tensely alert, as though the flood were an enemy that, somehow, she could fight.

Dusty dropped his hard-won rabbit on the sodden floor and made his way to Nan's side. His hackles rose. He bared his teeth. The peril he had sensed was full upon them and he would fight it if he could. But like his mate, who was facing her first flash flood, he was both bewildered and frightened. This was no enemy that would yield to slashing fangs.

The water in the den deepened so swiftly that, thirty seconds after Dusty arrived, both he and Nan were standing in it. The snarl of the flood that churned down the valley obscured all other sounds.

Dusty and Nan remained side by side, trembling before this awful thing that was upon them but not daring to go out and face it. The den had been chosen because it was safe; it might still be safe. Water crept two inches up their legs, then three, and the inborn sense that had come to their aid so many times before helped them again.

Nan plucked the cub from its perch, took a firm grip, and squeezed through the narrow opening. Dusty followed.

A great wall of water whose advance was marked by angry white ripples bore down upon them and swept them from their feet. Dusty crowded in beside his mate as the flood overwhelmed them. He gulped a lung full of

water, but, even though he might have fought his own way clear, he battled to stay with Nan.

Despite the meager diet to which he had restricted himself recently, he was still the stronger of the pair. Constant hunting had kept him iron-hard. Nan, who for the past month had ventured no more than a few feet from the den, was correspondingly flabby and, in addition, she carried the cub.

They broke the surface together, and Dusty remained beside his mate as the current whisked them down the valley. Fighting for every breath, the battered Nan held her head as high as she could in order to keep the cub out of water.

Then they were out of the narrow valley, in a broader wash. Here, the flood, with more room, had less force. Dusty shot in front of his mate and she turned wearily to avoid him. He kept ahead, forcing her to move toward the bank. He felt gravel beneath his paws and strove desperately to stand upright. Ten feet farther on, he succeeded.

The exhausted Nan swept against him and, for a moment, stayed helplessly there, her strength almost spent. Then she, too, found a footing, struggled toward the bank, reached it, and still gripping the wriggling cub, collapsed. Dusty danced desperately in front of her, coaxing her to come farther. With a final effort, she crawled ten feet up the bank and fell a second time.

The whimpering cub, at last free of his mother's jaws, crawled close to her body and sought the comfort he had always found there. Keeping an anxious eye on the rising water, Dusty dropped beside his mate and tried to comfort her.

Twenty minutes later, the cloudburst stopped as abruptly as it had started. Pale stars peeped furtively through the clouds and a thin moon showed. But another twenty minutes passed before Nan was able to move.

Catching up the cub, which she would not trust even to Dusty, she followed slowly as he led the way up the hill. Now that the den was uninhabitable, they couldn't possibly stay here, for there was no shelter. They must find another den, or a cove of scrub, any place at all where Nan and the precious cub might hide.

Dusty went on through the night, increasing his pace as his mate regained strength, but at no time traveling faster than a slow walk. He knew a place, a fissure high on a rocky hill, where Nan and the cub might rest

until a better den was located. But it was a long way off and she still moved slowly. . . .

An hour and a half after they started for the fissure, Dusty stopped.

Some time after the rain ceased, Joe Watson had come this way. Dusty's nose told him that the Indian had been running, and the fear smell was in his tracks. But he was not here now and the way seemed safe enough.

Dusty was about to go on when there was a sudden rush in the night and Diablo charged him.

9: *The Flight Bird*

Hairy Gunston, who had only scathing contempt for whoever believed in luck, wondered this night if he was not at least partly wrong. Born to the desert, he, too, could read weather signs and the storm that was brewing seemed to have been concocted especially for him.

The very fact that it was an off-season storm, spring rains were rare, was reason enough to believe that it would be short and furious, rather than the three-day rain that might be expected in both the normal winter and summer rainy seasons. Doubtless it would fill the dips and washes, and there would be many flash floods, but without continuing rain to keep them filled, the floods would run off as quickly as they appeared.

True, it would also fill the water holes and the hidden, shaded basins where water always gathered and remained for some days following every rain. Beyond any doubt, Joe Watson knew all the dependable water holes and most of the temporary tanks where water might be found, but Hairy had realized from the first that the Indian would be very different from the usual inexperienced panic-stricken flight bird. The senior guard intended to make that difference an asset rather than a liability.

He would report, when he returned to Coyotito, that Joe had laid a very clever trail, and one very hard to follow. For this very reason, Hairy had considered it wise, at the start, to ignore Miguel Torres, who would be easy to take later, and concentrate on catching the Indian. It was a foregone conclusion that he would catch the Indian.

Neither Joe Watson—nor any other human—could hide from Hairy's hounds, and a wet desert, where scent held so much better than it ever did on a dry one, would make the hounds' task that much easier. After Diablo worked Joe over, and Hairy arrived on the scene, a lake full of water would do the Indian no good, if he couldn't reach it, and Hairy would make sure he could not.

After Joe had revealed the location of both mine and cache—and he would reveal them—he would die from exposure, aided and abetted by a little expert strangulation. Bringing about the death of the Indian would

complicate Hairy's mission no end, and force him to return to the prison camp for help, rather than go right on and bring Miguel back.

Hairy would dig a grave for Joe. He'd even mark it and urge John Evans to send somebody with a pack mule to bring the Indian's body back for decent burial. Evans might and might not comply. Joe had no known relatives. He would have to be reinterred at public expense, since he hadn't any money, either—and he was already buried decently. Why not let him rest in peace? If it was thought best to bring him back, there would be no marks except those left by Diablo. Joe Watson, the poor devil, hadn't known any better than to resist Diablo and everyone knew how Hairy had trained his hound.

But Hairy would declare that he was still in great need of help. Miguel Torres, after this much time in the desert, would be in no condition to walk out. He must be found soon, if he was to be found alive. However, since Hairy could not promise where they'd find him, and since the uncertain water supply would make either horses or mules a burden, it would be suggested that it was far better to go after him on foot. Two men could carry enough water for their own needs.

Two men could also bring Miguel out, and healthy young Billy Mackley would be the senior guard's choice of an assistant. Unfortunately, and quite unexpectedly, they would find Miguel holed up in the rocks. Their first intimation that they were even near him would be the shot that killed Billy Mackley. It would then become Hairy's sorrowful duty to storm the fugitive's fortress and poor Miguel would be killed in the ensuing battle.

Hairy's plan appeared foolproof, with the single and very positive exception that, regardless of other circumstances, three dead men were at least two too many, so Hairy would never again be trusted as a prison camp guard or placed in official charge of men. But after this, he'd never want to be.

The scraping of a chain was heard through the screen door as the surly Diablo, fastened to his kennel, crawled inside and lay down. Hairy looked thoughtfully at the ancient Winchester that he had resurrected from a back closet. He picked the rifle up and inspected it.

It had belonged to Hairy's father, and had been the finest of firearms in its day, but its day was long past. The old rifle had seen so much use and had been fired so many times that, for all practical purposes, it was no longer a rifle but a smoothbore. Thus, it had been discarded, but it was exactly the sort of firearm that a poverty-stricken Indian might hide around his house.

Miguel, naturally, would be reported to have argued Joe Watson into giving it to him.

Hairy slipped five cartridges into the magazine, levered one into the rifle, and went out on his porch. He pointed the old rifle at the ground, fired five times, and carefully retrieved all five empty shells and put them in his pocket. The shots, in this land where somebody was always shooting at something, would rouse nobody's curiosity. If they did, Hairy would say that he had been shooting at a coyote.

Going inside, Hairy wiped the old rifle carefully with a damp cloth—only Miguel's fingerprints must be found on it. Still holding the rifle with the damp cloth, he went out and slipped it beneath the tarpaulin that lay in the back of his truck.

Hairy ate his evening meal, slept until half past nine, and rose to fill a gallon canteen with ice water. He laid his light, first-aid kit, five packs of cigarettes, and his big revolver on the table and locked the door behind him when he went out.

The ugly Diablo disdained even to look out from his kennel door, but the gentle Turkey edged up beside his master and begged humbly for a caress. Hairy let his dangling hand tickle the big bloodhound's ears. A few splashes of rain blew wetly against his cheeks and the threatening clouds rolled and twisted in the throes of a great upheaval.

The storm would break soon, certainly it would spend its force and be over long before tomorrow morning's roll call at Coyotito. Hairy asked nothing more.

He got in his pickup, rolled the window up to shut out the gusty wind, lighted a cigarette, then lowered the window. At a moderate speed, he drove toward Coyotito Prison Camp, knowing as he did so exactly what he would find there and that it would be another point in his favor.

Men in prison were men apart, but, regardless of the vast differences that existed otherwise, they shared one thing in common. Although their bodies were confined, nobody had yet found a way to shackle their dreams and the shining dream of every prisoner, from the dullest to the brightest, was freedom. Everything else was embodied in that, for when they were free, all the rest of their dreams would automatically come true. Hope might flicker as a very low flame under ordinary circumstances, but when a storm was in the making, it leaped and brightened. Every prisoner knew that storms cover tracks.

Therefore, the guards on normal duty at Coyotito would be especially alert tonight and there would be extra guards. John Evans would spend the night in his office, hoping there would be no break but knowing he must be ready. Hairy nodded his satisfaction, seeing the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that he had started to assemble when he brought Miguel safely back from the desert falling perfectly into place. He'd told Evans then that Miguel probably would try another break after six months or so, and Evans did not forget anything he heard.

Hairy swung in at the main gate of the camp and stopped. He spoke through the open window to young Billy Mackley.

“It's O.K., Billy.”

“Go ahead in, Harry.”

He had done that exactly right too, Hairy told himself as he drove into the compound and parked in the shadows near the kitchen. Billy Mackley, alone among the guards, knew that, when Hairy drove out, Miguel Torres would be hidden beneath the tarpaulin. But Billy dared not question Hairy, at least not yet, and it ill befitted a senior guard to enter into a lengthy discussion with a raw rookie. Hairy rolled up the truck windows, for it would be raining soon. Unostentatiously, he walked across the compound to Evans' office. He knew that Billy Mackley was watching, but he wanted him to watch. Great plans were under way, he had told the youngster when Billy overheard his conversation with Miguel. So what was Hairy doing now if not ironing out final details with John Evans himself?

Evans, beguiling the long night hours with some of his endless paper work, glanced up from his desk and nodded. “Good evening, Harry.”

“Good evening, John. I thought it would be a good idea if I stuck around for a while.”

Evans replied, “It might at that. The weather's apt to blow up something besides rain.”

“It could,” Hairy agreed.

The two said nothing more, but, as Hairy seated himself and picked up a magazine, he reflected that it would be superfluous to ask Evans if he had taken extra precautions this night. Conversely, Coyotito's Superintendent seemed almost visibly relieved as he returned to his paper work. The guard who had admitted Hairy would let other guards know that the senior guard was here. Within fifteen minutes, all the prisoners would know, and any who had been harboring the wrong ideas would think them over very carefully.

The mere presence of Hairy Gunston meant another wall of security around Coyotito Prison Camp.

Miguel Torres, who shared a barrackslike dormitory with some forty other prisoners, slept so badly that twice during the night the men who occupied cots on either side awakened and cursed him.

Miguel, who finished his work after midnight and did not have to get up with the day work crews, was grateful when his dormitory mates rose and grumbled off to their day's toil.

Unable to sleep any more, Miguel lay on his cot and stared at the steel-barred windows. He knew, far better than any man could tell him, that the bars over the windows and the steel fence that surrounded the compound could be taken away and he would never try to flee Coyotito Prison Camp. A thousand times, in memory, he had lived all over again the indescribable torment he had endured on his one and only attempt to escape.

Freedom remained a bright and shining lamp. It was a light he yearned after, but now he did not expect to reach it ahead of time. The months of his sentence that remained stretched out like an eternity. Still, it was far better to stay in Coyotito forever than to risk the hell of the desert a second time.

Now Miguel was very troubled and very frightened, and as the hours that must elapse until his midnight emptying of the garbage winged past, his anxiety and fear mounted accordingly. He wished desperately that there was something he might do, or someone to whom he might turn, so that he would not have to hide beneath the tarpaulin in Hairy Gunston's pickup when he returned from emptying the garbage. But there was no avenue open, as far as he could see, no one he dared approach.

More than any other being in the world, or any natural or supernatural force, Miguel feared Hairy Gunston. It was entirely true that the guard had followed him into the desert, and that Miguel would have died if he had not done so. It was equally true that Hairy had had him transferred to an easier job and given him preferential treatment. But it would have been far better to have died in the desert than to have seen what Miguel had seen.

He had planned his flight very well, he thought. Although there had been no maps, a dozen men among Coyotito's inmates knew the shortest way to the border and they had been happy to coach Miguel. He had known in advance that he would suffer thirst, but the most excruciating thirst he could imagine was a puny price to pay for his freedom. That's what he'd thought

—and that's what he still thought. But even though he remained confident of his own ability to cope with physical distress or problems, he just hadn't known about the devils.

They were no creatures of his imagination, and this Miguel knew very well, for he had beheld them with his own eyes. They had danced around him, fiends with naked skins and horrible faces, and as they danced they had burned his living body with slow fire until he had abandoned all hope.

Then he had watched the devils flee. In their place, Hairy Gunston was offering him water from a canteen.

It was a shock such as Miguel had never known and from which he had not yet recovered. He was sure he had not been deceived about the devils, for he had seen them. Had he awakened to find a *padre*, a priest, giving him water, he would have understood, for everyone knows that devils fear holy men.

Since Hairy Gunston was anything but a holy man, could he have triumphed with anything except evil power? Since there had been so many devils, was not Hairy's capacity for evil greater than all of them combined? With a sudden, convulsive motion, Miguel flung the blanket over his head and cowered beneath it. Much as he feared going with Hairy tonight, he was more afraid not to go.

Miguel got up late, as usual, and went about his work. Although he longed to share his troubles by confiding in somebody, anybody, his fear of Hairy Gunston stifled all such impulses. He sat in a dark corner, where nobody could see his face, and peeled tubs full of potatoes.

When the evening meal was finally served and the kitchen deserted, Miguel's fear became cold terror. He had borne up while others were about him, for, even though he dared not reveal what was in his mind, it had comforted him to suppose that there was someone to listen if he should talk. Now he scrubbed the big pots and kettles with hands that had no life, and grew sick with dread as the merciless clock raced toward midnight.

Suddenly, there was a blessed respite. The sweeping rain, rattling on the roof and streaming down the windows, seemed to wash away his troubles as it washed away the film of dust that coated everything when the sun shone. The world was different when it was raining, for, during a storm, Miguel could see himself running away from Coyotito Prison Camp. Rain meant hope, and as long as he hoped, Miguel could not be completely under the spell of Hairy Gunston.

He gathered up the garbage, put it in his cart, donned a slicker, and set out in the driving rain for his nightly trip to the garbage dump. Billy Mackley, about to go off duty, spoke pleasantly to him and Miguel replied in kind. . . .

When Miguel returned, Billy had left the gate. Guard John Desling, civil enough most of the time but surly because he had to stand in the rain, growled, “Come on! Get the lead out! Think I want to hold this fool gate open all night?”

Miguel entered without speaking. As soon as he had passed through, John Desling closed the gate and crouched in the doubtful shelter offered by the steel posts that supported it. He did not look behind him, for no guard ever had a second glance for Miguel.

Walking unhurriedly to the shed where he kept his cart, Miguel pushed it inside and closed the door. Still soothed by the storm and all it meant, he strode to Hairy Gunston’s pickup, climbed in, and hid himself under the wet tarpaulin. Suddenly it seemed almost a normal thing to do, and hope beat high in Miguel’s heart, while fear was practically forgotten. If one would flee Coyotito Prison Camp, he decided, one could not choose a more auspicious time.

Abruptly the storm ended—and terror returned. Miguel told himself that he must get out at once, but, for some reason, he could not move. Then the car door slammed, the motor coughed into life, the pickup started, and it was too late to leave.

Miguel froze beneath the tarpaulin. Now, all was indeed lost. Whatever he did would be useless. He lay as quietly as possible when Hairy stopped at his house, got his gear and hounds, and returned to the pickup. They sped down the highway, stopped again, and Hairy Gunston pulled the tarpaulin back.

“How is it?” he asked in a friendly voice.

“*Bueno*,” Miguel managed. “Good.”

“Just so you didn’t drown,” Hairy said amiably. “This is where you get out.”

Miguel did not move. “Come on!” Hairy ordered sharply. “Get out!”

As though he were a puppet and Hairy’s voice the string that controlled him, Miguel rose and jumped from the truck. The savage Diablo growled, and Miguel shrank back until the dog was quieted by a blasting command

from Hairy. Turkey sniffed his thigh and Miguel shivered. Devil dogs, he thought, and they can be nothing else because they are commanded by a devil.

Hairy felt beneath the tarpaulin. He drew out the old Winchester, picking it up by the cloth in which it was still wrapped, and pressed it into Miguel's hands.

"The Indian will not harm you," Hairy reassured him "but here is a rifle you may carry, anyway. All you must do is go down this path until you come to the Indian's house. Knock and enter."

"That is all?" Miguel quavered.

"All," Hairy assured him. "Go now."

Clutching the old rifle with both hands but scarcely aware that he held anything, Miguel stumbled down the path. He glanced back once, but a turn in the trail hid Hairy and his truck. Miguel began to run. . . . He came to Joe Watson's house, felt for the door latch, flung the door open, and entered.

Joe's voice rose in the darkness. "What you want?"

"He comes!" Miguel gasped. "There is little time to run!"

"Who comes?"

"The—the evil one!" Miguel panted. "The man from Coyotito! He—he wants you!"

There was a rustle in the darkness, a shadow in the open door, and Joe Watson was gone. Miguel stood aghast, petrified with terror by what he had done but knowing that he had to do it. . . .

Ten minutes later, Hairy Gunston's torch shattered the black interior of Joe's house and trapped Miguel in a cage of light.

"Well?" Hairy demanded.

Miguel whimpered, "I told him. I told him you come," and waited for the end.

Hairy laughed. "So you told him? Where is he?"

"He has run into the desert," Miguel whispered.

"So he has run?" Hairy laughed again. "Well, let's you and me give him a good long run."

Miguel asked incredulously, "You are not angry with me?"

“I am not angry,” Hairy assured him. “Would the Indian have run if he was not guilty? You have done your part well and I shall not forget my promise. But perhaps it will be better if you do not return to Coyotito by yourself?”

“Yes,” Miguel agreed.

“Then come with me. I’ll deputize you and together we will run this Indian down. It will be more to your credit if you help.”

“Yes,” Miguel repeated.

“First we rest,” Hairy said.

An hour later, the senior guard loosed Diablo on Joe Watson’s trail. With the leashed Turkey pointing the way, the cowed Miguel following, Hairy went on to find his golden dream.

10: Fugitive

A few minutes before the rain started, Joe Watson opened his eyes. He lay quietly on his pallet and let the earth speak to him. Of all its many voices, the one immediately before a rain was the most hushed and still, but, within itself, the stillness was so startling that the young Indian could never mistake it and everything it meant.

Sometimes he did err in translating the earth's messages, but he knew in his heart that the errors were wilful and brought about by his own desires. For example, should a warm night occur in midwinter, Joe might convince himself that he heard the earth say the winter's frosty grip was broken and the warm spring sun would shine. Deep down, he realized this was because he yearned so for spring.

Such self-deceptions were foolish, and Joe knew it, but he did not think they caused any great harm. The seasons would run their course regardless of what he or anyone else thought, and always within a day or two of what they were meant to be. Even though the nights through mid-October were cool but not chilly, by the twentieth of that month Joe knew surely that he would need a heating fire. By the twentieth of April, regardless of the preceding weather, he would again need only a cooking fire. It was always the same and Joe had complete faith that it always would be the same. Now, there was no mistaking the hushed whispers of the earth just before a rain. Joe was so familiar with such whispers that he knew to the exact second when the storm would begin—and at that second he heard rain beat on the roof of his house and splash against the windows.

For the most part, this rain was a good thing, but the very fact that it was also violent automatically meant that it would not bring good alone to all desert dwellers. Where violence was, destruction must be.

Joe thought of the little coyote that had found a den in the narrow valley. He had not gone back to or even near that valley, for, although he would be a friend to the coyotes if he could, they had had too many bitter lessons ever to be friends with any human. To venture near would mean to frighten the mother away from her den, and so make an enemy of the spirit that had guided her to it.

Joe murmured softly, “Be strong, Little Sister, and wise in the use of your magic. The rain will try to destroy you tonight.”

After he had sent his message winging to Nan, he could do nothing more. The little coyote was better left to her own resources, and Joe reassured himself with the thought that they were more powerful than any assistance he might render. Interference, however well meant, could bring disaster. Besides, the mother had her mate to help her, and both were endowed with the mystic powers of coyotes. If these could not save them, then they were meant for destruction, anyway.

Nevertheless, Joe could not stifle a rising anxiety. Last summer, when he had spread out his nuggets on the table and Hairy Gunston had burst into his house, he had known that the guard meant to make trouble. But just after throwing his nuggets into the cave, where they still lay, he had heard the coyotes howl and had been reassured. Nobody could bring harm to an Indian protected by the medicine of coyotes. However, even though the wicked man had been rendered harmless by the pair of coyotes, he still plotted. What if the magic animals died in the flood that was sure to snarl down their narrow valley tonight, so they could no longer make medicine in Joe’s behalf?

After a moment, Joe put the disturbing thought firmly behind him. He reminded himself that he must live in the moment—the only moment he could be sure of living—and look for good rather than evil, if he had to probe the future. And was not the good upon him? Despite a certain unavoidable destruction that must come with such a storm, the desert sadly needed rain, so it was far more a blessing than a curse. Lulled by the rhythmic beating of the rain on his roof, Joe went back to sleep.

His slumber, although peaceful, was never the sodden sleep of those who have moved so far from the source of things that they no longer know the earth is their real mother. It continued to talk to Joe, this time in the voice of the rain, but it did not awaken him until a short time after the storm was done.

A little distance down the path that led from his house to the road, an ancient ironwood tree dominated the surrounding scrub. A pair of mockingbirds had nested there for the past four summers. Now, back from the tropical south where they wintered, they had again chosen the same tree and were building a nest for the first of their two summer broods.

The mockingbirds were entirely willing to defend the home of their choice. They never molested Joe. Whatever or whoever lived near the

ironwood could dwell there peacefully, as long as it—or he—did not threaten their nest. But any alien that came near, at any hour of the day or night, was instantly challenged. If it did not go away, it was attacked. Joe had watched the mockingbirds, whose courage was all out of proportion to their robin-sized bodies, give battle to hawks, shrikes, road runners, and even stray dogs and cats. Without exception, depending for their own safety on swift wings and lightning-fast maneuvers, the birds put all enemies to flight.

In the lull that followed the rain, Joe was awakened by the challenge of the male mockingbird. He did not listen for a repetition. He knew a man was coming because other desert dwellers would have lain up during the storm, unless they were forced to move. Also, any desert creatures that did move would not have come near Joe's house. Nor would they have walked on the path.

In the darkness, Joe slipped out of bed and into his clothes. He laced his shoes, found his prospector's hammer, and crouched with his back against a dark wall. He did not care to be silhouetted against a window, in case the man was an enemy. Presently, the door burst open.

“What you want?” Joe demanded.

“He comes!” a strange voice gasped. “There is little time to run!”

“Who comes?”

“The evil one! The man from Coyotito! He wants you!”

Joe breathed a silent thank you to the magic of the coyotes, that had sent this frightened messenger to tell him of an enemy's approach, but he did not speak. A flash flood had swept over the coyotes' den tonight. If the pair were not dead, would an enemy have been permitted to come even near Joe? They had been able only to warn.

Obviously still under a spell, the strange messenger was breathing heavily. The time to leave was before he regained his wits, for he too might be an enemy. In the darkness, Joe slipped past Miguel Torres and through the open door.

As soon as he was outside, he breathed more easily. The house, with its single door, could be a deadly trap. But the desert was vast and the night very black. There were any of a hundred paths Joe might take, and any of a thousand hiding places where no man could find him. Still, he must not flee blindly. He would know his enemy before he ran.

Joe padded quietly to a cactus, a massive saguaro whose many spined arms were clearly defined by day but blended into a single dark mass and cast a very dark shadow at night. Halting in the shadow, Joe stood perfectly still.

He heard the man a moment before he saw him, and there was something coldly terrifying in the very sound. The intruder might have walked quietly—or at least more quietly—but he was not making the least effort to do so. It was as though he was so sure of himself and his own power that he cared nothing about who heard him.

Then the vicious Diablo, scenting Joe, strained to the end of his chain and snarled. Hairy Gunston said roughly, “Heel!” and Joe knew who his enemy was.

He remained still, for although the hound had scented him, evidently Hairy had not seen him, and to run now meant to focus instant attention upon himself. Nor, for a very brief period, was the Indian even sure that he could run. The worst he could imagine was upon him. His heart turned faint at the very hopelessness of his situation. He could run from a man and hide himself so well that he would never be found. But he could never run from Hairy’s hounds.

These dogs needed no visible trail, but only the scent that must cling to all trails, and Joe knew too well how they worked. Two years ago, from the summit of a rocky hill, he had watched a man stumbling across the waste beneath him. He had been on the point of going to his aid when Diablo appeared. Then Hairy had come with the leashed Turkey. No man who had witnessed such a scene as that which followed would ever forget it.

A little wind, warm so soon after the cool breeze that had ushered in the rain, moaned across the desert and plucked at the scrub. The greedy little wind was already drying the sodden earth, and Joe strained for any message it might have for him. But all the wind cared to say was that the sun would rise hot tomorrow and thereafter grow hotter.

Joe turned quietly away from the cactus and walked the first few hundred yards into the desert. Then he started to run. It never even occurred to him that he might possibly seek the help of other white men. In this dire situation, he must follow the Indian’s path.

He knew, even as he began to run, where that path would lead him—if not to safety, then certainly not to the living death of Coyotito Prison Camp.

Nor would he again submit to any of the other “prisons” in which white men insisted on confining themselves.

He ran the ball of his thumb across the razor-sharp blade of his prospector’s hammer and did not flinch or fear. He would need only a split second to draw that blade across his throat and he would do so as soon as Diablo came upon him. He would not be mauled by the dog. Even now, Joe hadn’t a single thought that concerned resisting either Diablo—or Hairy, the white prison guard, either.

He stopped running to walk, and a wonder rose within him. No matter how fast he ran, Diablo could run faster and he would not miss the trail. The hound should have been upon him long ago. But Diablo had not come . . . and the hours passed and he did not come. When Joe faced a hot wind that sprang up just before dawn broke, he knew that the seemingly impossible had come to pass. He was so near the border now that he could cross it in less than a minute and even Hairy Gunston would not dare pursue him into Mexico. However, instead of running into the haven that awaited him, the young Indian halted where he was.

He stood near the head of a long, wide gully enclosed by little low hills. Twenty yards to one side, a limpid pool lay beneath an outjutting ledge. It was a hidden water hole, with no trees and only a few tufts of grass to mark it because desert grass would not flourish beneath the shady ledge. Joe was about to turn aside for a drink when a baby cottontail emerged from the scrub and hopped toward the water. The Indian did not move. The tiny rabbit had as much right to the water as anything else and he was first. It was part of Joe’s inborn courtesy to let him drink in peace.

The little cottontail reached the pool and prepared to drink. Suddenly, and without any warning at all, something else moved. It was a three-foot king snake that had lain in ambush beneath the ledge and blended so perfectly with the dark shadows that neither Joe nor the baby cottontail was aware of him until he struck. The little rabbit squealed his terror. Dragging the snake with him, he rolled from beneath the ledge and flung himself about in a frantic effort to escape.

It was hopeless. The snake’s fangs had gone into and met through the baby’s ear. The serpent had only to wrap sinuous coils around its prey, crush it, and swallow the little rabbit.

Joe watched gravely, not liking this but hesitating to interfere. He was not the ruler of the desert, but merely another creature who shared it with many others. Although he needn’t approve, it was not for him to question or

obstruct. Things always had been so and so they always would be. The tiny rabbit's struggles grew less frantic as his strength ebbed.

The fury that suddenly came to the baby's aid would, under any other circumstances, have been no challenge at all but the mildest and meekest of desert dwellers. Hearing her baby cry, the mother cottontail leaped a full seven feet and raked the serpent with flying claws as she descended. The king snake writhed, then let go of the baby and turned on the mother.

Safely out of reach, she faced him unflinchingly while her baby crawled feebly back into the scrub from which he had come. As soon as she knew he was safe, the mother followed. The disconcerted snake wriggled to a cluster of boulders and disappeared in a crevice.

For another forty seconds Joe did not move. Then he bowed deeply toward the scrub into which the mother cottontail had taken her baby and spoke. "Thank you, Little Sister. I am very grateful."

Joe sat down where he was and crossed his legs. He had just seen the omen, the true sign that pointed the right way for him, and he was indeed grateful that he had not been allowed to continue on the wrong path. The spirits had sent a little cottontail to tell him what he should do.

It was all very clear now. Although he was not an important man, or a wealthy man, or an influential man, nevertheless he was a man. As such, could he be less than a rabbit? If he had wanted to live in Mexico, would he not have gone there after leaving his job—his "prison"—in the city? Had he not chosen his home on the desert because, above all others, it was the home he wanted and loved? He had not thought clearly when he resolved to be dead by his own hand before he would be taken. Nor had he been true to himself and everything in which he believed when he ran. Now he would run no more. The earth had spoken to him through its messenger, a little rabbit.

Let Hairy Gunston imprison him and his body would shrivel and suffer—but his spirit would flourish and grow strong. He would go back and face what must be faced. He would no longer be the prey of his own fear. But he had traveled a long way and he would rest before returning.

Joe slept near the water hole, but not so near that any thirsty creature would be afraid to approach and drink. He woke at noon and drank himself. He would not have to drink again before night, unless the blazing sun made him too thirsty. But there were more water holes along the way, and if he

thirsted greatly and had no water, there was always the water-filled pulp of the barrel cactus.

Joe walked slowly, his heart and mind at peace now. The shadows were blending into the short-lived desert twilight when he halted in astonishment. Looking down a long draw, he thought he saw a bear in this waste where bears never came. Then he knew he was looking at a man, a thirst-crazed man, so spent in fighting the desert that he could no longer walk but must crawl like a bear.

Joe broke a barrel cactus with his prospector's hammer. With a large chunk of the oozing pulp in his hand, he ran to and knelt beside the man, whose staring eyes looked but did not see. He cradled the man's head with his own arm.

“You are all right now,” he said assuringly. “You need not fear.”

He squeezed juice from the cactus pulp into the man's mouth.

11: Battle for Life

Without wasting a second, Dusty raced full speed to meet Diablo. He voiced a sharp little bark as he ran, telling the weary Nan to go as far as she could with the precious cub while he delayed this enemy as long as possible. Right now, Diablo, or almost any other dog that was reasonably fresh, would have no difficulty in overtaking and killing both Nan and her baby.

His warning given, Dusty dared consider nothing except the forthcoming battle. He knew he would need everything his agile body and great skill could offer. Diablo outweighed him, four pounds for one. Lean as an antelope and supple as a bull whip, the hound was an experienced fighter. Entirely capable of breaking Dusty's back with his mighty jaws, he cordially hated all coyotes.

Dusty was aware of all this as he ran forward to join the battle—but he was aware also that the odds were by no means as one-sided as they appeared. The great hounds that are so often pictured in various magazines as they do some hapless coyote to death are dealing with tired animals that have already endured a desperate run, and, even then, the hounds are often injured. Besides being relatively fresh and in superb condition, Dusty was much faster than Diablo.

The hound was a rumbling heavyweight who relied almost wholly on force. The coyote was a featherweight who understood thoroughly the value of footwork, feinting, and striking repeatedly at any weakness in the enemy's defenses until they crumbled. If he tried rough and tumble methods with Diablo, he would be lost, but he had no intention of trying any such tactics.

Diablo, who had trailed so many coyotes without coming near even one, surged grimly ahead. Probably he would not have left Joe Watson's trail to follow even the very fresh scent of a coyote. But he could not resist a coyote that stood in his very path and invited battle. The hound lunged for the kill. He intended to overwhelm Dusty, grab him by the back, and shake him to death.

The encounter was so close that Diablo did snap his jaws on a few of Dusty's guard hairs, but the coyote had slipped to one side, so surprisingly, there was nothing to shake. Before Diablo could whirl to renew the attack, Dusty flitted in and scored the hound's shoulder with slicing teeth.

When the hound whirled, the coyote was dancing on paws so light that they seemed not to touch the earth at all as he regarded this big opponent with appraising eyes. It was not enough merely to meet the attack. He must also, if possible, decide what Diablo intended to do next, because then he could counter more effectively.

Diablo rushed, as Dusty had known he would, and again the latter stood his ground until the great hound's mighty jaws seemed certain to clamp over the little coyote's slender back. It was no error but a planned ruse. Dusty had fought enough battles to understand that anything certain of victory is prone to throw caution away. He flitted aside and darted back in to score Diablo a second time. As he did so he knew that he could not hope to win this battle and understood why.

Even though Diablo was no match for Dusty's speed, he could pivot fast enough to keep the little coyote from striking more than a superficial blow. Since there was no chance to inflict a disabling wound, or even a serious hurt, Dusty could do little more than annoy his enemy. In the meanwhile, the big and powerful hound could take as many slices as Dusty was able to inflict and his ability to strike back would not be even slightly hampered. Yet Dusty had no intention of running.

Ordinarily, he would not have thought of fighting a dog, even if it were only half his size, but now he had no choice. The cub must live, and if his life had to be bought at the cost of the lives of his parents, then the parents must die. If there were to be no future generations of coyotes, then the present had proved false.

Again, dancing on light paws that would take him in any direction as soon as he knew exactly where he must go, Dusty awaited the rush of the hound. It came, but it stopped just short of where the coyote had thought it would halt as Diablo twisted to the right and snapped. His armed jaws closed on the loose skin of Dusty's flank. Had they gone a fraction of an inch farther, the fight would have ended. But just as the hound pivoted to counter his enemy's strategy with a maneuver of his own, Dusty saw the move.

He leaped and wriggled his body while still in the air, so that his paws brushed the earth only a few inches from the place where he had intended to

land. As they did this, he rolled. He felt the sudden pain as Diablo tore a bit of his fur loose, and a bit of skin with it. But the wound was no more serious than the two Dusty had already inflicted on Diablo. Far from being out of the fight, the coyote was not even slightly hampered.

He rose and faced the hound with a warier eye. Diablo had developed his bulldozer method of overwhelming an opponent by force alone simply because he had yet to find an enemy able to resist him. It had never been necessary for him to resort to subtle ways of combat for he always won, anyhow. But he could both learn and adjust.

Dusty, trying to foresee the hound's intentions and so determine his next move, could not do it. But he could understand that Diablo, finally bringing strategy to direct his force, was ten times as dangerous as he had been.

Diablo lunged. Dusty feinted to the left and saw the hound turn with him. Rather than feint again, Dusty danced straight in, scored Diablo's flank—and was safely out of range before the hound could strike back.

Diablo voiced a snarl of intense rage, and when he came again he did so purposefully. The minor cuts Dusty had inflicted on him bled a little and hurt a little, and he was of no mind to be slashed again. He stopped when Dusty dodged, waiting to see what the coyote would do next . . . then he went forward. He intended to finish the fight instantly.

Dusty crouched close to the ground, muzzle lowered to front paws and tail straight behind him. But his spring-steel legs were tensed and ready, and, at exactly the right moment, he launched himself up and over the oncoming hound. Diablo whirled, but not fast enough. Dusty's jaws snapped as he descended and sheared two inches from the end of the hound's thin tail.

Diablo, who had so far confined himself to snarls and growls, now shrieked in pain. He retreated a full six feet, while his yelling echoed in the night. Then he charged fiercely.

Dancing backwards as the enemy came at him, Dusty awaited the right moment to strike. Suddenly, his rear brought up against a saguaro cactus and, in that moment, Diablo was upon him.

Dusty knew that this must be the end. But the fight would not be over as long as he could snap his jaws once more. He flipped on his back, curling his bushy tail between his rear legs and toward his front ones, the better to protect his tender belly. Diablo lowered his great head, boring through Dusty's defenses by sheer strength, and made ready for the death stroke.

Suddenly, for no reason that the coyote could understand, the hound shrieked in agony. With a single convulsive leap, he cleared Dusty's prostrate body and ran. A trail of yelps that diminished with distance floated behind him like a trail of bubbles on a pool of water.

Dusty rolled to his feet and shook himself. Nan, who should have run but hadn't, sniffed solicitously at his wound and licked it with a tender tongue. She had waited her chance, and when Diablo was so thoroughly occupied with her mate that he couldn't possibly turn elsewhere, she had leaped in to strike at the great tendon in his rear leg.

She'd all but severed it, and, even though the hound could run, his speed was the speed of terror. A born bully, he had only a bully's courage. He would stand and fight, and even take punishment, as long as the odds were in his favor. When they changed, as they had changed when Nan entered the battle, his heart turned craven. In the heat of battle, he had forgotten that Nan was even close.

Dusty sniffed his mate's nose and wagged his tail. Side by side, they trotted to the crevice where Nan had hidden her baby. She picked him up.

Still side by side, they went on to the safe new den that Dusty had in mind.

Hairy Gunston, having freed Diablo, knew that he must wait another hour. A hasty or ill-timed move, although it could not now ruin his plans, could force some complication or revision and only the unthinking invited that. Hairy thought of another flight bird who'd escaped just after lights out and whose absence was not even noticed until next morning's roll call.

The convict had stolen a car in which a careless driver had left the keys, and, had he acted moderately, he could have put a long distance between himself and Coyotito. His own fears were his undoing. Even though nobody pursued him, his feverish imagination saw pursuit in everything and he drove accordingly. Two hours after his escape, highway patrolmen arrested him and clapped him in jail, where he was identified the next morning. That man was not arrested for escaping, but for speeding.

Hairy was determined to avoid all errors. Therefore, even though he was impatient to be on the trail, he restrained himself. Doubtless the Indian would know better than to run until he was exhausted, but the very fact that he had run at all proved Joe Watson was frightened. Certainly, in the hour already granted, he would travel fast enough to become tired. Weariness

combined with fright would make him easy prey. He might resist Diablo when the hound overtook him, but he would not fight very hard or for very long.

Hairy sat at Joe Watson's table, lighting one cigarette from the glowing stub of another. Automatically, he offered one to Miguel Torres, who shook his head in dumb refusal and sat silently on the other side of the table. Hairy did not look at his companion again or even think about him. For all practical purposes, Miguel had ceased to be a man and became a robot, a useful tool whose only function was to further Hairy's aims. He could then be discarded as casually as any other tool that has fulfilled its purpose, and he was as incapable of rebellion as Hairy's gun was of refusing to shoot when the guard cocked and aimed it and pulled the trigger.

However, just as the gun needed oil, so Miguel needed its equivalent. Near the end of what seemed an endless hour, Hairy applied some.

"The dog should have overtaken the Indian by now," he said. "We will start soon."

Miguel nodded and whispered, "*Si.*"

"You will continue to be my deputy, my helper," Hairy reminded him. "You will share full credit for bringing this criminal to justice."

Miguel bobbed an assenting head and repeated in a scarcely-audible whisper, "*Si.*"

Hairy glanced at his watch and forced himself to sit still for the few minutes that must elapse until the second hour ticked past. Then he rose, shouldered the canteen, put the first-aid kit in his pocket, and took the light in his hand. With his free hand, he plucked Joe Watson's spare shirt from its hook.

"It is time," he directed. "Come, and bring your rifle."

When he went outside, the cool night air brushed his face like a refreshing bath and seemed to wash away all his anxiety and tension. Waiting was always irksome, he reminded himself as he shifted the cumbersome canteen to a more comfortable position, but waiting was always essential to the successful completion of a mission such as this. Now the waiting was over. All the pieces fitted perfectly into place and he reconstructed a mental image of the situation that must be.

Two hours had passed since the Indian ran from his house, an hour since Diablo had been loosed on his trail. Within the next hour and ten minutes to

an hour and a half, depending on how far Joe Watson had run before the hound caught him, they would find Diablo holding his quarry. If what Diablo had already done was not enough to make the Indian talk, tomorrow's sun and lack of water would be more than sufficient. It was a very familiar recipe, with every ingredient in exactly the right proportion, and there could be only one result. Men might be threatened or even beaten and remain rebellious, but any man who suffered the real agonies of thirst would sell his very soul for one sip of water.

Turkey, chained to a bush in front of Joe Watson's house, rose from the bed he had made near it to roll mournful eyes and wag a thin tail when his master approached. Hairy patted his head and lowered the shirt to his nostrils.

"This is it, Turkey," he said.

The hound's nostrils twitched and his pendulous jowls quivered as he familiarized himself with the scent of the man he was supposed to trail. Once the odor was indelibly printed on his brain, he swung away from Hairy to face in the direction Joe Watson had taken. On the rain-wet earth, the trail was so plain in Turkey's nostrils that it was unnecessary even to lower his nose to the ground.

Hairy discarded the shirt, loosed the chain, and Turkey strained gently toward the trail. He fell back, for he had been taught to match his pace to his master's, and obviously his master wanted to take things slowly. But it was another trail with another man at the end, and Turkey could not rest until he found that man. He set his pace to an exact match of Hairy's and tempered his eagerness with a hound's philosophy. If he kept going, fast or slow, he would eventually reach his goal.

With the chain wrapped about the palm of his hand and gripped firmly in clenched fingers, Hairy gave a fleeting backward glance to make sure Miguel Torres was following. It was a wasted glance, he felt, for the convict would surely follow. He was as much a part of Hairy as Hairy's own shadow was on a sunny day—and he had no more will than a shadow. He wouldn't run.

Without breaking stride, Hairy shifted the canteen a second time. A gallon of water was not a light burden, but, since there was no way to determine how far this trail would take him or how long it would keep him out, a gallon was not too much. He'd be thirsty and both hounds would surely need a drink. Probably he'd even have to give Miguel some water.

Hairy walked almost casually, unworried about anything at all because there was no need to worry—or even to think. All necessary thinking had already been done, so whatever followed would be only a logical result. This was no more than a not unpleasant night stroll in the desert.

Hairy stopped abruptly when Turkey stopped, and knew a sudden surprise because the bloodhound halted so soon. Joe Watson should have run farther than this. Why hadn't he? A moment later, Hairy knew that something was definitely amiss.

Something was coming, something that was making a troubled and noisy way through the desert night. Moving slowly, in order to make no noise, Hairy looped Turkey's chain through his belt. His hand stole to his holster and he drew his gun. He cocked it, made ready to shoot. When the thing was near enough, he snapped the light on. A fierce sound that was not a word but an animal's snarl rolled from his lips.

The light fell upon Diablo, who had run as far as he could as fast as he could and was unable to run any longer. His right rear leg, that Nan had slashed, was drawn stiffly up beneath his body. His jaws gaped and his tongue lolled. When the light enfolded him, he crouched like a beaten puppy.

Hairy snarled a second time. Sheer fury mounted like fire in his brain as he deduced what had happened. Obviously, he had underestimated the Indian and had been outmaneuvered by him. Far from a terror-shriveled victim, Diablo had overtaken a cunning and crafty enemy who knew how to fight back.

The blast of Hairy's gun was so startling that Miguel Torres, standing at his shoulder, gasped and knelt to hold the old rifle in the crook of his arm and cover both ears with his hands. Miguel did not see Diablo melt peacefully down or know that the heavy slug which had shattered his brain was by far the kindest thing that could have happened. The hound was useless, not only for the present but for all the future. A quick death was far more merciful than the end he would surely meet when the sun rose.

Hairy sheathed his gun, lifted the canteen from his shoulder, unscrewed the cap, and drank. Fury mounted like a wind-fanned fire. His careful plans had gone astray, but not by any means had the Indian won the battle. He had taken only the first skirmish. The final decision was yet to be.

Diablo was no more, but the patient Turkey could go on. Nor would he be deceived or thrown off. The human who can hide from a good

bloodhound has yet to be born, and if the trail must be long, then long it would be, Hairy determined.

He would follow Joe Watson into Mexico, if it were necessary, and even as the thought occurred to him, he knew that it probably would be. It no longer mattered, though. He would have revenge and information. Nothing would turn him back.

When he moved again, the canteen bumped his hip. Hairy tore the cumbersome thing from his neck and handed it to Miguel Torres.

“Carry it,” he ordered.

He was not in the least concerned about such an act because he was not even faintly concerned about Miguel. Although he had not analyzed his Indian precisely, he knew his white men. Miguel shivered in following him but he would have been even more terrified not to follow. Never again would he risk the desert and all it could do to a man alone there.

The anxious Turkey happily increased his own pace as Hairy strode determinedly forward. He trotted, then ran, and only when excessive perspiration warned him of the folly of such a move did he drop back to a fast walk. He had only one thought—to catch the Indian—but he would not catch him if he wore himself out first.

Daylight was faint in the sky when he finally halted and drew Turkey to a stop.

“Water,” he said, without looking around. He extended a hand to receive the canteen and, when it was not immediately forthcoming, he grew angry. “Water!” he repeated sharply.

For a moment, entirely because he did not dare look behind him, he faced forward. Then he turned slowly about and gasped. Miguel Torres, who should have been at his shoulder, was nowhere in sight.

Hairy screamed, “Miguel!”

The mocking echoes screamed back, “Miguel! Miguel! Miguel!” and died in the distance, where Miguel Torres, with the canteen on his shoulder and darkness to surround him, had at last found his own courage and slipped away. Hairy’s legs seemed to melt, so that he must exert a supreme effort to keep from falling. He was frightened as he had never known fear, but, at the same time, he knew that he must not surrender. He fought for self-control and analyzed the situation as calmly as he could.

He had been walking for approximately four hours. At a rough estimate, he was thirteen miles from Joe Watson's house. Therefore, he was about nine miles from the border. When the sun became hot, as it would very shortly, every foot would count. It was better to go on than turn back, and a near-desperate hope flamed in his heart. Joe Watson, who certainly knew the water holes, would not go all the way without a drink. Turkey, merely by staying on the Indian's trail, would lead him to water.

Hairy tried not to look at the sun, which was not really a sun but a burning red ball that seemed to spring over the parched desert hills and flame down upon him. There was a dreadful suspicion, which the man tried hard to stifle, that the sun was burning nobody except him. He kept his head bent, so that he would not have to look up, and plodded on.

He was surprised when he stumbled, but he needed a full thirty seconds to understand that he had stumbled over his own dog. At least he thought there was only one dog, but when he looked a second time there were two, then ten, then fifty, then a horde.

All of them looked exactly like Turkey, and all were sitting at the ends of a myriad of chains, that Hairy somehow managed to hold in one hand, and staring appealingly at him. Their jaws gaped. Their tongues lolled. They were completely exhausted. Hairy dropped to his knees and pleaded with the countless dogs.

"Please!" he implored. "Follow the Indian! He will lead us to water!"

Suddenly, all the dogs except Turkey faded before his eyes. Turkey walked to the end of his chain, turned to face him, and bucked like an unbroken horse. The chain was wrenched from his nerveless hand—and even Turkey was gone.

Hairy stared helplessly, unable to account for any part of this and wholly incapable of understanding that the hound, who smelled water he could not see, had fought free and gone to drink. Hairy's fuzzy brain groped with the fact that there was a guard, he thought from Coyotito Prison Camp, whose name he could not remember. Then he could. The guard's name was Gunston, Harry Gunston, and he used hounds to track escaped prisoners into the desert.

Wanting desperately to scream out the horrible injustice of such a thing, Hairy could manage only a croaking gasp. The guard was truly a wicked man, a wholly evil man, if he would subject fellow humans to such torture. Surely, he would be punished.

Hairy lurched on . . . and presently stumbled in the doubtful shade of a rock ledge. Since it was cooler than the burning desert, he lay quietly until the sun moved to that quarter and the heat roused him. He got up to stagger on, and he was already so tormented that he scarcely felt the additional hurt when he fell. He stayed on hands and knees, knowing vaguely that he could not walk and, at the same time, aware that he must not stay here. He started to crawl.

He had a sudden, lucid thought. The favorite dream of most prisoners at Coyotito, somebody whose name he could not remember had told him, centered about Hairy Gunston being lost on the desert without a canteen and ninety-four miles from water.

Just before Hairy Gunston lost consciousness he thought he heard a very gentle voice say, "You are all right now. You need not fear."

He tasted water and knew that he did hear the voice and that it spoke truly.

12: The Cub

When the sun rose, Dusty lay down on the shady side of a rock ledge. At once he got up and shifted his position, the better to read the messages carried by the wind. Finding a sentry post that suited him, he lay down a second time and sighed heavily.

A dozen yards to one side, Nan had been fast asleep for the past ten minutes. Only her nose remained awake, to tell her what was happening. Dusty glanced toward his mate, a creature of remarkable and hitherto unsuspected talents. The fact that she could sleep in apparent unconcern while her son strayed from her side was sufficient proof of that. Yet, if danger threatened, Dusty knew that she would be aware of it first. Where the cub and his welfare were concerned, she seemed to have some sixth sense that was denied her mate.

Dusty looked down into a shallow draw where the cub, no longer a lamblike butterball but an angular young coyote who seemed to consist largely of legs and ears, was happily pouncing on and eating grasshoppers. It was not that he lacked for food. But he was gifted with the appetite of a blast furnace and he cheerfully ate rabbits, quail, grass, flowers, lizards, and everything else he ran across, if it was even remotely edible. The cub had even devoured most of an old leather shoe that some passer-by had thrown down in the desert.

Far from inducing the least ill effects, his fantastically-varied diet gave him the growth of desert grass following a three-days rain and the energy of a whirling dervish. No matter how much he ate, and he was capable of consuming at one meal enough to last his father two days, he was always ready for more as soon as he could find it. In addition, at least as far as Dusty was concerned, he never seemed to sleep.

Dusty sighed again and watched his son, who had already caught and eaten an astronomical number of grasshoppers, spring happily on still another. The grasshoppers had blown in on a favorable south wind and now overran everything. The cub's technique for hunting them was precisely the method he used for hunting everything else—rush it and pounce.

If he caught something, and so far his catches had been restricted to insects of one sort or another, he was smugly pleased with himself. When he failed to make a kill, he raced full speed after the disappearing quarry for as long as he could keep it in sight and nursed injured feelings when he was no longer able to see.

As Dusty well knew, this was scarcely an ideal way to hunt. But although he had tried long and patiently to teach his son the more refined subtleties of stalking, ambush, trailing, the cub could not restrain his bubbling enthusiasm when game was near. Times without number, he had chased quarry that his father might have caught so far away that even a high-powered rifle couldn't have landed a shot within a half mile of it. The family ate only because Dusty—and sometimes Nan, when her mate stayed with the cub—went off to hunt alone.

A desert cottontail scooted out in front of the cub just then and darted away, his bobbing white tail a flag of truce that proclaimed peaceful intentions. As usual, the gawky young coyote galloped in furious pursuit, lost the rabbit in a wash, and sat down to sulk because his quarry was not cooperative.

Properly handled, it would have been a kill. His son's numerous defections worried Dusty. Unless the cub learned to hunt, he could not survive, but Nan never seemed to fret. Wiser than her mate in many ways, she knew that their youngster would outgrow his present talent for awkward blundering and absorb all the lore a coyote must learn.

Dusty knew only that the cub was brazen, fresh, and apparently incapable of learning anything. He dozed for a few minutes but came awake. Nan could sleep while the cub hunted grasshoppers, but the worried father could not.

After another forty-five minutes, still hungry and not at all tired, the cub leaped on a flat boulder and looked all about for new and larger worlds to conquer. His ears were erect, thin muzzle extended, tail drooped in approved coyote fashion. Daylight showed beneath his belly. Perfectly silhouetted against the sky, he was a standing target for anything with eyes to see.

About to go to his son's rescue, Dusty discovered that Nan had already gone. The scrub was thin and the cover sparse, but so well had his mate learned the art of camouflage that even Dusty saw her only as a flitting gray shadow that now appeared and now disappeared. She was still forty feet away when the cub leaped from his dangerously exposed position and padded to his mother.

It was very puzzling. Whenever Dusty escorted him, the cub imitated his father's every slight motion until game was sighted. Then he frightened it. At all other times, the youngster seemed to regard his father as either an interesting plaything or just another feature of the landscape. Nan, however, received his instant and unquestioning obedience. It never occurred to Dusty that there was a reason behind this. Nan had administered all the disciplinary nips, while he had never punished at all.

As Nan escorted her son back toward the ledge, Dusty slipped away to hunt. The cub would be hungry because he was never any other way. In addition, it was better to hunt than to serve as a convenient target for jaws that did not care where they bit and were capable of more than pinches. The cub's jaws had strengthened as his body grew, and whenever he decided to play with his father, he used them with reckless abandon.

Before long, Dusty caught a pack rat that, flitting from one bulky nest in a copse of cholla to an equally massive nest in a second copse, miscalculated by a split second. The coyote gulped down the tasty morsel and went on to find the trail of the cottontail that had fled from his son.

He discovered the rabbit snug against a boulder and evidently considering itself well-hidden, but Dusty did not hunt with his eyes. His nose told him everything he must know. It was simple to sneak behind the boulder, climb it, and jump down. With the cottontail dangling from his jaws, he returned to Nan. The cub, always ready to eat, flung himself upon this manna and started devouring it.

Towards evening Dusty brought a jack rabbit, and, after Nan had eaten what she wanted, the cub gustily tackled the remainder. His father, still hungry, had a sudden inspiration.

Obviously, the cub's appetite would never be satisfied and Dusty needed more than the single pack rat. The garbage dump at Coyotito Prison Camp was the only place he knew where he, Nan, and the cub, might all dine at the same time. Dusty led his family toward it.

The cub, who had never been this way but who managed to find exciting adventure in anything that happened, pranced from his father to his mother and sniffed at everything in between. Even Dusty did not worry too much. They were safe while the friendly night shielded them. They reached the summit of a rise that overlooked Coyotito. As they did so, far across the hills, a lone coyote howled.

At once, so startling close that Dusty leaped in surprise, rose a sound that incorporated all the less desirable elements of an ungreased wagon wheel, a squawking chicken, and a dog with his tail pinched in a vise. The cub, hearing his kinsman howl, suddenly discovered his own voice and began to exercise it.

The noise died in a whimper of pain as Nan whirled to nip her son. Coyotes have every right to howl, but it is a right that should never be exercised when they are too near as many men as lived at Coyotito. Pursuit might not follow—but it also might.

Nan and Dusty took their chastened cub into the shadows and made ready for whatever came.

Towheaded young Sven Nelson, newest rookie guard at Coyotito, relieved Billy Mackley at the gate with the message, “Boss man wants to see you, Billy.”

“Thanks, Nels. Stay awake now.”

“I will.”

Relieved an hour before his shift was ended, Billy made his way through the deserted compound to John Evans’ office. The night was mild, so the door was open. Turkey, Hairy Gunston’s bloodhound, rose from the rug upon which he had been napping and came forward to receive his due caress. Making his own way out of the desert, Turkey had returned to Coyotito and become chief tracker there. No flight bird foolish enough to risk the desert was any longer in danger of being rended by a hound.

John Evans, sitting at his desk, looked up and grinned. “How goes it, Billy?”

“First rate,” Billy assured his superior. “Nels said you want to see me?”

“I do. Did you leave Nels at the gate?”

Billy answered, “He took over.”

“What do you think of him?”

“He has the makings of a top-notch man,” Billy declared seriously. “Of course, he needs experience.”

“Who doesn’t?” Evans asked. “The Board met tonight, Billy, and that’s why I’m here. I called you in to say it has finally come through.”

“What has come through?”

“Your promotion,” Evans told him. “A notch up and a corresponding raise in pay. As of now, you’re night supervisor of Coyotito. I got the phone call fifteen minutes ago. They did think you’re a bit young, but they like the way you get along with the men and they liked even more the way you stood up in Court.”

Billy was suddenly embarrassed. “I was a fool, I guess. I should have come directly to you.”

“You should have,” Evans agreed. “That’s something you didn’t know then, but do know now. However, you were on deck when you were needed. Gunston might easily have killed you for testifying as you did.”

“I know,” Billy admitted.

“And you weren’t afraid?”

“Sure I was afraid. But, darn it all, he tried to railroad Joe Watson and he’s entirely responsible for Miguel Torres’ escape.”

“We’ll pick Miguel up as soon as he sets foot on this side of the border—and he will,” Evans said quietly. His eyes found the bracelet that held Billy’s wrist watch. It was exquisitely fashioned of silver, with a polished turquoise set on either side and the thunderbird emblem embossed in artistic relief. “Wow! You must have expected this raise! That gadget set you back at least seventy-five dollars!”

“I didn’t buy it,” Billy said. “Joe Watson made it for me.”

Evans raised his brows in surprise. “Does Joe do such work?”

“He does now,” Billy said. “It seems he found a little pocket of nuggets a while back, and, evidently, Gunston thought he’d made a real strike. That’s what the whole mess stems from. After the trial, Joe must have decided he could trust some white men. Anyhow, he asked me what he should do with the nuggets. I turned them into cash and he used the money to buy some proper lapidary’s and silversmith’s tools. He has a shop set up in his house and he’ll do all right.”

Evans nodded toward the watch band. “He will if he can make stuff like ___”

He was interrupted by the cub’s attempt to howl. Waiting until the sound faded, he grinned at Billy.

“Coyote,” he observed. “Must be a young one with its parents. Probably making his first raid on our garbage dump. Hope he enjoys himself.”

“Let him prosper,” Billy agreed. “Joe claims they bring luck. He says the coyotes saved his bacon.”

Evans said, “Maybe they did. Who was it wrote— Let me think. Oh yes, I have it, ‘There are more things in Heaven and on earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in thy philosophy?’ ”

“Shakespeare,” answered Billy.

When no pursuit materialized, following his son’s squawking attempt at a coyote call, Dusty led a cautious way back to the garbage dump. The subdued cub, who’d never before been nipped so hard by his mother, forgot his own importance and padded meekly between his parents. He halted with Nan and Dusty when they sat down at a safe distance to await the nightly emptying of the garbage. . . .

A few minutes after it came, the three coyotes went to the feast. The little sounds made by the garbage cart and the man pushing it faded rapidly in the distance. There was no danger there.

Hairy Gunston was anxious to get back to the kitchen so he could finish his chores and go to bed.

THE END



JIM KJELGAARD

JIM KJELGAARD

was born in New York City. Happily enough, he was still in the preschool age when his father decided to move the family to the Pennsylvania mountains. There young Jim grew up among some of the best hunting and fishing in the United States. He commented; “If I had pursued my scholastic duties as diligently as I did deer, trout, grouse, squirrel, etc., I might have had better report cards!”

Jim Kjelgaard worked at various jobs—trapper, teamster, guide, surveyor, factory worker and laborer. When he was in his late twenties he decided to become a full-time writer. He succeeded in his wish. Several hundred of his short stories and articles and quite a few books for young people have been published.

He indicated his favorite hobbies as hunting, fishing, life-long interest in conservation, dogs and questing for new stories. He has described some of these searches in this way: “Story hunts have led me from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Arctic Circle to Mexico City. Stories, like gold, are where you find them. You may discover one three thousand miles from home or, as in *The Spell of the White Sturgeon* and *Hi Jolly!*, right on your own door step.”

Books by Jim Kjelgaard

BIG RED	TRADING JEFF AND
REBEL SIEGE	HIS DOG
FOREST PATROL	DESERT DOG
BUCKSKIN BRIGADE	HAUNT FOX
CHIP, THE DAM	THE OKLAHOMA LAND
BUILDER	RUN
FIRE HUNTER	DUCK-FOOTED
IRISH RED	HOUND
KALAK OF THE ICE	DOUBLE CHALLENGE
A NOSE FOR TROUBLE	SWAMP CAT
SNOW DOG	THE LAND IS BRIGHT
THE STORY OF	RESCUE DOG OF THE
GERONIMO	HIGH PASS
STORMY	HI JOLLY!
COCHISE, CHIEF OF	WOLF BROTHER
WARRIORS	WILDLIFE
TRAILING TROUBLE	CAMERAMAN
THE EXPLORATIONS	ULYSSES AND HIS
OF PERE	WOODLAND ZOO
MARQUETTE	TIGRE
THE SPELL OF THE	FAWN IN THE FOREST
WHITE	AND OTHER
STURGEON	WILD ANIMAL
WILD TREK	STORIES
OUTLAW RED	TWO DOGS AND A
THE LOST WAGON	HORSE
THE COMING OF THE	FURIOUS MOOSE OF
MORMONS	THE WILDERNESS
LION HOUND	DAVE AND HIS DOG,
CRACKER BARREL	MULLIGAN
TRouble	COYOTE SONG
SHOOTER	

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Due to copyright considerations, the illustrations have not been included in this eBook.

The list of illustrations at the beginning of the original book has been removed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Coyote Song* by Jim Kjelgaard]