

*"He wore the armor... to impress
and intimidate the savages..."*

PROLOGUE

New Spain, 1541

CAPTAIN DON FRANCISCO ALVARADO removed the sweltering metal helmet encasing his head and ran his hand through his sweat-soaked hair. Although there was a slight chill in the air, he was burning up with fever. Luckily, a cool breeze stirred from the mountains above and served to refresh him. At least he felt he would not fall from the high-backed saddle he occupied astride an impressive stallion.

He wore the armor, he supposed, to impress and intimidate the savages who guided him north, but now that the last of them had run off, there was little need. He turned and lashed the helmet to the rear of the saddle and withdrew from a pouch a red woolen cap, which he quickly pulled down over his fair hair.

Although his breath was labored, he still could not help but stare in awe at the country surrounding him. The sky was the brightest of blues, descending to meet the lofty peaks on either side. A seemingly never ending forest of pine and aspen extended up the middle of a broad saddle of land, covering the slopes to the north and south.

He traveled this way out of both necessity and desperation. He had been told by savages days ago that this was a pass through the mountains, and that once over it he

would be able to travel south through the forsaken lands to Spanish settlements. But with each passing moment, he realized that his situation grew more and more precarious.

He was ill. Very ill. It had begun several weeks before when he left Coronado's command with orders to search for gold near two twin peaks to the north. The peaks had been described to the Spanish commander by savages as being a place where gold literally ran down the streams. They were called, he was told, the Wa-ha-to-ya. The mystified Coronado asked his interpreter what the name signified. After a brief discussion, he was told the Wa-ha-to-ya were considered by the savages to be the breasts of the world. Coronado had wryly considered the context of the name, and immediately made a decision. *Huajatolla they shall remain, then*, he had said.

Coronado assembled a party consisting of Alvarado, Mendoza and Escobel, and ordered them to travel to the *Huajatolla* with several newly baptized savages, who were also guides. The priest Santos was also dispatched.

Striking out north from the Spanish encampment, the group traveled through vast stretches of desert, finally sighting the twin peaks after nearly two weeks. By this time, Escobel had been coughing for days, and had developed a raging fever.

They continued their journey, and within two days were encamped on the northeastern side of the *Huajatolla*. Alvarado had been amazed. The peaks rose straight up from the flat, dusty plain before connecting to the range of giant mountains to the west. He thought how aptly they were named.

That night, Escobel coughed up great amounts of blood, and by the next morning was dead. Ground was consecrated near a magnificent cottonwood tree, and the Spaniard was hastily buried.

Alvarado and Mendoza spent much time with the savages, having them draw maps. They learned of a large river

inside. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that it was large enough to provide shelter, so he painfully dragged himself back to his horse and removed his weapons and valuables. His sword was largely ceremonial, but could be used effectively in a confrontation. The musket, of course, was an implement of destruction that gave the Spanish superiority over the savage hordes. And his knife, actually a keen, double-edged, foot-long dagger of forged steel with an ornamental brass handle, was both useful and deadly. Lastly, he grabbed his armored helmet, thinking it might be useful to frighten any savages who might find him.

He slowly carried the armor and weapons into the depression, then unsteadily returned to the stallion. He wrapped its reins around a tree branch but failed to notice when it pulled away and began heading east as Alvarado lurched toward the entrance to the shelter.

Once inside, he collapsed into a fitful sleep. When he awoke, he realized with finality that he was going to die here in this foreign, godless land. He finally managed to prop his head up on the helmet and opened his eyes to view the landscape outside the small cave. Across the valley, groves of quaking aspen seemed to make the mountainside move, and Alvarado thought he had never seen anything as beautiful. He thought of his home in Castile, of his beautiful wife Therese, and their two boys. They would never know what happened, he thought sadly. But then they would never know the beauty of this, his final resting place.

A bright shaft of sunlight suddenly pierced the depression as the sun lowered in the western sky. As it bathed his face in brilliance, he began to pray aloud, tears streaming down his cheeks. An hour later, his voice was still.

"...Herold's Crossing was no longer just a piece of hard, nearly uninhabitable ground—it was their home."

CHAPTER ONE

JAKE HEROLD STOOD in the doorway of the trading post that had, over the years, assumed his name. A man used to backbreaking labor, Jake seemed totally at ease as he slapped the dust from his low-crowned hat and jammed it on his head. He squinted his eyes in the bright noonday sun and continued to look toward the horizon.

His calm demeanor belied the racing of his heart as he made his decision, reached inside the building and, with one swift motion, lifted and cocked the double-barreled shotgun.

His gaze was riveted on the three riders approaching from the southeast at a quick gallop. For the past minute, he had watched the tiny riders grow ever larger until he realized they were not men of the *Cucharas*. They were in a hurry, and in the foothills country of southern Colorado, speed generally meant trouble.

The ramshackle collection of split-pine buildings known as Herold's Crossing had become an important trade center to the people of the lower Cucharas Valley, providing respite for travelers and supplies for the locals. Had Herold been a less headstrong man, it also might have

made easy pickings for the *bandidos* and outlaws who frequented the nearby Santa Fe Trail. In the early years, some had tried. The small graveyard a mile up Crow Hill attested to their failures. Herold was, of necessity, a careful man.

As the riders approached, he glanced at the sky behind them and noticed that the plume of smoke he'd been watching for the past hour had begun to dissipate. The fire, most likely at the Gorner or Fontineau spreads, must have either burned out or been put out. He wondered what these riders had to do with it.

"John. Stephen. Grab your arms!" he yelled.

His two sons looked up from their work, dropped the rigging they were repairing, and came running from the north side of the pine building. John, a sandy-haired brick of a boy who at 15 already exhibited the exceptional strength of his father, took up a Henry rifle that had been covered by an oil soaked tarp in the back of a wagon. Stephen, the smaller of the two although older by two years, disappeared into the barn and came running back out, hurriedly strapping on the belt that holstered his father's Navy Colt.

Herold pointed toward the corner of the porch, behind a stack of nail kegs.

"Johnny, set up there.

"Steve, you take cover behind the livery door."

While Stephen raced to the adjacent building, Herold turned quietly, finding Libby and Amos standing at his side.

"Lib, I don't know what we got here. Trouble, most likely," he said.

Her eyes showed the same determination he'd seen 18 years before when they'd arrived at this crossing of the Cucharas River. These days, however, her resolve was tempered by the years, their three sons, and the fact that Herold's Crossing was no longer just a piece of hard, nearly uninhabitable ground—it was their home.

She touched Amos, who had just turned thirteen, on the

shoulder and they disappeared inside the tiny store.

The riders spread out as they approached, a preventative and nearly automatic action throughout the West that served to provide scattered targets for enemy fire.

Herold scanned the three riders as they slowed their advance. He recognized them from the descriptions spread by lawmen and soldiers. He'd been right. Trouble.

"*Garcias*," he whispered to himself.

The center and far left riders slowed their lathered horses while the rider to the right circled outward toward the compound's corrals. All wore filthy *serapes*, covered with trail dust and grease. The gray broadcloth pants of the center rider were ripped above the right knee and soaked with blood. Caked blood also coated his dun horse's right rear flank. Flies swarmed around the blood, causing the horse to continually switch its tail to brush the wound.

Two riders sported several days' growth of beard and full, grimy moustaches. The other was but a boy, a few light hairs sprouting above his upper lip. One rider was hatless while the other two wore the broadbrimmed hats favored by the *vaqueros* to the south. They were obviously kin.

Herold strode purposefully to the front of the porch as the riders to either side stopped, and the center rider entered the large clearing that stretched out before the compound.

Herold held the shotgun loosely in the crook of his elbow, his right index finger poised on the forward trigger. He stared directly into the eyes of the man who stopped twenty yards away.

"We need food. Medicine," said the rider in a thick Spanish accent. He sat erect in the saddle, controlling the pain his wounded leg must have caused him.

Herold continued to stare at him. Then his eyes fell to the wounded horse and a sheathed rifle attached to a newly-made saddle.

A tic began in the muscles of his cheek as he refocused

his steely glare with incredible intensity, and watched the rider carefully rub his unshaven jaw in reaction. Finally, he slowly said, "Gorner's. You been to the Gorner's."

"Eh?" said the rider, confused and wary.

"You're sittin' on Jed Gorner's saddle and carryin' his rifle. And from the look of your leg and your horse's rump, you ran through some wire he strung up a coupla weeks ago—trying to keep his cattle penned up. Only people in these parts with wire are the Gorners."

The horseman looked nervously around to ensure his companions were spread out behind him. His shifty eyes took in the scene, calculating, adjusting to various distances.

"I know nothing about Gorners or wire," he finally said. "We need supplies and medicine. You will sell to us. We will pay."

"I don't accept blood money from murderin' thieves, *Garcia*."

The rider's dark eyes momentarily opened wide, affirming the identification. He controlled his surprise and offered Herold only a flat stare in reply.

"Oh, yeah, word travels. Las Cruces, Santa Fe, even Canon City. You boys cut a wider swath than most the past coupla years. There's talk that the Gov'nor finally put a bounty on your heads."

Garcia's glittering black eyes were blazing.

"You will sell us supplies, or we will take them," he sneered.

Herold nearly chuckled at the outlaw's bravado. It was time to end the game.

"Nah. You won't."

The rider shifted the reins to his left hand and pulled the serape up over the saddle's pommel, exposing a holstered Colt. His hand went slowly past the pistol and expertly pulled a leather thong from over the butt of the sheathed rifle.

Herold's shotgun had imperceptibly moved up and was pointed directly at the rider's chest.

"Try it, and there'll be pieces of you hanging from the willows yonder."

The dark rider smiled as his hand pulled back from the rifle.

"I, too know things. Jake Herold is a dangerous *bombre*, it is said. Yct, I find only a man who talks of *wire* and boys," he smirked. "Interesting."

He sat silently for a few moments. The dun snorted and reared its head a couple of times, and finally pawed the ground.

The outlaw seemed to make a decision. Herold noticed a quick hand signal. The other adult rider, situated to the right, suddenly pulled back his serape, palmed his pistol and fired twice in the general direction of Stephen, entrenched behind the livery door.

Herold's shotgun instinctively switched to the second rider, his finger tightening on the shotgun's trigger. At that movement, the man before him quickly whipped his rifle from its scabbard. With lightning speed he cocked the repeater and was leveling it at Herold when the window of the trading post exploded outward. Shattered glass erupted over the porch. The shot fired from inside the building struck the dark rider in the shoulder, throwing him backward and nearly off his mount. He screamed in agony as his terrified horse leaped skyward, spinning clockwise all the while, and lit out at a full gallop away from the flying glass.

Garcia grabbed for the saddle's pommel with his good arm and allowed his rifle to clatter to the ground as he clung in wild desperation to the rampaging horse. In an instant, the dun was galloping away from the courtyard, out of control. The other riders had already turned their mounts, and followed in a flash. Herold and John dashed into the courtyard, each firing at the fleeing riders, more as