

THE TRAILSMAN

No. 381

BOWIE'S KNIFE



**Fargo had better
look sharp.**



JON SHARPE

THIRD SHOT'S THE CHARM.

Fargo's vision was clearing. He turned his head enough to see Dandy going through the doorway and Sully holding a Smith & Wesson on her. The other one, Chester, a thin rail with a rat's face, was watching them.

Fargo whipped into motion. He swooped his right hand to his Colt and pivoted on his boot heels, thumbing back the hammer as he drew. Chester heard him and started to swing around and Fargo fanned a slug into his gut. The impact jolted Chester back a step. Gamely, Chester sought to point his revolver, and Fargo shot him again, square in the center of the sternum.

Over at the door, Sully had spun and snapped off a shot but missed.

Fargo fired as Sully went to take aim, fired as Sully stumbled, fired as Sully pitched forward and the Smith & Wesson clattered to the porch. . . .

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#381
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by
Jon Sharpe



A SIGNET BOOK

SIGNET

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, USA



USA / Canada / UK / Ireland / Australia / New Zealand / India / South Africa / China

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
For more information about the Penguin Group visit penguin.com.

First published by Signet, an imprint of New American Library,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

The first chapter of this book previously appeared in *Texas Tornado*, the three hundred seventy-seventh volume
in this series.

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REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

ISBN 978-1-101-60591-2

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PEARSON

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The Trailsman

Beginnings . . . they bend the tree and they mark the man. Skye Fargo was born when he was eighteen. Terror was his midwife, vengeance his first cry. Killing spawned Skye Fargo, ruthless, cold-blooded murder. Out of the acrid smoke of gunpowder still hanging in the air, he rose, cried out a promise never forgotten.

The Trailsman they began to call him all across the West: searcher, scout, hunter, the man who could see where others only looked, his skills for hire but not his soul, the man who lived each day to the fullest, yet trailed each tomorrow. Skye Fargo, the Trailsman, the seeker who could take the wildness of a land and the wanting of a woman and make them his own.

1861, the Texas border country—to get there is hard enough, to make it out alive even harder.

1

They were one day out of San Gabriel when the *bandidos* struck.

Skye Fargo had called a halt on a low rocky rise. They were in desert country, and were grateful when the heat of the day gave way to the cool of night.

Fargo wasn't expecting trouble. As their guide, it was his job to keep an eye out for hostiles and outlaws, and he'd seen nothing to suggest they were in danger.

A big man, broad at the shoulders and narrow at the hips, Fargo wore garb typical of his profession: buckskins. He was a scout by trade, although that wasn't all he did. He also wore a dusty white hat, a red bandanna, and scuffed boots. Strapped around his waist was a Colt that had seen a lot of use, and propped against the saddle next to him was a Henry rifle.

A coffee cup in his left hand, Fargo was admiring one of the members of their party over the rim.

Lustrous chestnut hair framed a pear-shaped face. She had full, luscious lips, an aquiline nose, and eyes as vivid blue as Fargo's own. Her riding outfit, which included a pleated skirt, complemented her hourglass figure and full bosom. Dandelion Caventry was her name, and just looking at her was enough to set Fargo to twitching below his belt.

"How did you get a handle like Dandelion, anyhow?" he wondered.

"I much prefer Dandy," she said in her Texas twang. "My mother is to blame. Dandelions were her favorite flower as a little girl, so when she had one of her own . . ." Dandy grinned and shrugged.

"Thank God she wasn't fond of horseshit."

Dandy laughed heartily but the man sitting next to her didn't. He was enough like her that it was obvious they were related. He wore a tailored suit and a derby and a perpetual scowl. "You shouldn't use that kind of language in the presence of a lady."

"Horses do, you know," Fargo said.

Dandy tittered.

"That's not the point," the man said angrily. "You're much too crude for my tastes, Mr. Fargo. Much too crude by half."

"Enough, Lester," Dandy said. "I wasn't offended. And I don't need my brother to defend me."

"You shouldn't have to hear that word," Lester insisted.

Fargo shook his head in amusement. "Boy, you have a lot to learn."

"Don't call me that," Lester said. "You're not much older than I am."

"I'm old enough to say shit."

Dandy cackled but her brother became only madder. Balling his fists, Lester Caventry glanced at the two men who sat across the fire from them.

“Are you just going to sit there and let him abuse us? Am I the only one with a shred of decency?”

One of the men had a pale moon of a face and was heavyset. The other was taller with a walrus mustache. Their clothes were store-bought and far less expensive than Lester’s. Each wore a bowler and each wore a revolver that his hand was always near.

“What would you have us do, Mr. Caventry?” asked the one with the moon face. Bushy brows poked from under his bowler like twin hairy caterpillars trying to crawl up his face.

“You can insist that our guide show proper manners to my sister,” Lester said. “What does my father pay you for, anyhow, Mr. Bronack? You, too, Mr. Waxler?”

“Your father,” Bronack said, “is paying us to protect the two of you from any and all threats, and see to it that the knife, if it’s genuine, reaches him safely.”

“He never said we were to protect you from dirty words,” Waxler said.

Fargo snorted.

“You don’t amuse me, Mr. Waxler,” Lester said. “And what could happen to the knife, anyhow?”

“Honestly, brother,” Dandy said. “If it is, in fact, *the* knife, it’s worth a small fortune.”

“Which is what Father is willing to pay for the stupid thing,” Lester said bitterly.

“Don’t start with that again,” Dandy said.

Fargo sighed. Ever since leaving Austin he’d had to put up with their spats. Some brothers and sisters didn’t get along, and these two were always carping. To be fair, Lester did a lot more of it than Dandy. So much, in fact, several times along the way he’d been tempted to bean the sourpuss with a rock.

“I still think you should stand up for my sister’s virtue,” Lester directed his spite at Bronack and Waxler. “Is it too much to ask that those in our company act like gentlemen?” He gave Fargo a pointed glare.

“Honestly, brother,” Dandy said.

Fargo was about to tell Lester that he could take his holier-than-thou attitude and shove it up his ass when the Ovaro raised its head and nickered.

Fargo was instantly alert. His stallion wasn’t prone to skittishness. Something—or someone—was out there. Something—or someone—had agitated it. He probed the desert below the rise but saw only the ink of night.

Without being obvious about it, Fargo shifted his right arm so his hand brushed his Colt. “Bronack, Waxler,” he said quietly.

The pair caught on right away. They didn’t jump up in alarm. They were professionals. Each eased his hand to his six-shooter and slowly gazed about.

“What is it?” Lester asked much too loudly.

“Shut the hell up,” Fargo said. “Don’t move unless I say to. You and your sister, both.”

“Now see here—” Lester began.

“Do as he says,” Dandy intervened. “Father hired him because he’s the best there is at what he does.”

Fargo caught movement to the west and then to the east. Whoever was out there

had the rise hemmed and was closing in. "When I tell you," he said to the Caventrys, "drop on your bellies and stay down until the shooting stops."

"What shooting?" Lester asked in confusion.

A shape rushed out of the night, the glint of a rifle in its hands. A muzzle was thrust toward them and the man shouted in Spanish, "*Nadie se mueva! Les hemos rodeado!*"

Like hell, Fargo thought. He drew as he dived and thumbed off a shot. The slug caught the man high in the chest and sent him crashing to the hard earth.

Half a dozen other shapes materialized. Rifles and pistols cracked and boomed.

Bronack and Waxler sprang to Dandy and Lester to protect them while blasting away.

Fargo saw a figure charge up and fanned two swift shots. He went for the head. Hair and brains spewed out the crown of a sombrero and the figure tumbled.

As quickly as the attack commenced, it fizzled. The rest whirled and bolted, firing a few wild shots. Their footsteps rapidly faded.

Fargo rose into a crouch. "Anyone hit?"

"I'm fine," Dandy said.

"I'm not," Lester said. "I heard one of the bullets go right past my ear."

"Did it crease you?" Dandy asked.

"No, but it scared the daylights out of me."

It was a shame, Fargo reflected, that some people gave birth to jackasses.

Bronack and Waxler straightened. Bronack was unhurt but Waxler had been nicked in the left arm. "It's nothing," he said. "I'll bandage it and be good as new."

Fargo went to the man he'd shot in the head. The grubby clothes, the stubble, the bandoleer with half the loops empty, marked him as surely as if he wore a sign. "*Bandidos.*"

"Here and now?" Lester said. "Wouldn't they have been smarter to attack us in the daytime?"

"They'd have been smart to pick us off from out in the dark," Fargo said. That they hadn't was peculiar. Or maybe the bandits wanted them alive to whittle on. Except for Dandy. They'd undoubtedly put her to a different use.

"We were lucky," Bronack said.

"I can't quite believe it happened," Dandy said. "It was over so fast."

"It happened, all right." Fargo kicked the body. "Here's your proof." He went through the man's pockets but all he found was a folding knife with two blades, one of which was broken. Moving to the other one, he did the same and wound up with a handful of pesos.

"Shouldn't we douse the fire in case they come back?" Lester anxiously asked.

"They won't," Fargo said.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Three guesses." Fargo glanced at Bronack. "Keep them here and keep them quiet."

With that, staying low, Fargo glided down the rise and crouched at the bottom. He could make out some creosote and yucca, and to his left, mesquite. The bandits had fled to the south. He crept after them, careful to stop and listen often. He'd gone maybe a hundred yards when he heard what he'd hoped to hear: the drum of hooves, dwindling. He crept on and came to a wash. An acrid scent tingled his nose. At the bottom lay the stub of a smoldering cigar.

Fargo descended. This was where the bandits had left their mounts. Trying to follow them would be pointless. He couldn't track at night without a torch and they'd see him coming from miles off.

"Damn," Fargo said. He would have liked to show them how he felt about folks trying to kill him.

He took his time returning to the rise. It was nice to be by himself. He was tired of listening to Lester complain about everything under the sun.

Lester was a baby in a man's body. Fargo reckoned it came from being born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Their pa, Stephen Augustus Caventry, was one of the wealthiest hombres in Texas. Hell, he was one of the richest anywhere. A shipping line, a stage line, and other interests had filled his coffers to bursting.

Lester and Dandelion never wanted for anything their whole young lives. It hadn't affected Dandy much but her brother had the mistaken notion that the whole world had been created just for him.

Fargo had seldom met anyone who had their head so far up their own backside.

Another two weeks or so and he would be shed of them. That was how long it should take to reach San Gabriel, get what they came for, and light a shuck for Austin.

It had surprised him, Lester saying they were after a knife. No one had told him. Not Stephen Caventry, who'd offered him a thousand dollars to conduct his grown daughter and son to the border country and back. Not Dandy, who was friendly enough but not as friendly as he'd like. And not Lester, who gave the impression he believed they were on a fool's errand.

Fargo was so deep in thought, he'd let down his guard. The crunch of a foot behind him almost came too late. He started to turn even as a hand fell on his shoulder.

2

Fargo had his Colt out and cocked and whirled in the blink of an eye. He jammed it against the person who had grabbed his arm and he was a whisker's-width from squeezing the trigger when he realized who it was. He barely caught himself in time. "What the hell?"

Dandelion Caventry looked at his Colt and said, "Ouch." She grinned and added, "Are you fixing to shoot me?"

Fargo angrily jerked the six-shooter away and let down the hammer. "Are you trying to get yourself killed? You were supposed to stay with the others."

"I was worried about you. I came to see if you needed help."

Fargo was rattled. It had been close. So very close. "Where are your father's hired guns? Isn't one of them supposed to be keeping an eye on you?"

"Brony and Waxy heard a noise and went to investigate," Dandy said. "And they're bodyguards, not hired guns."

"Brony and Waxy?"

"It's what I like to call them." Dandy smiled and ran a hand through her full mane of hair. "I'm sorry if I startled you."

"You didn't," Fargo lied. "But grabbing me was a damn stupid thing to do."

"I didn't know if there were any bandits about or I'd have just said something."

Fargo could see there was no convincing her she'd made a mistake that might have cost her life. She had an excuse for everything.

"Are they gone?" she asked.

"They appear to be."

Dandy grinned. "That's the most exciting thing that's happened this whole trip."

"Some kinds of excitement I can do without," Fargo said.

"I liked it," Dandy said. "It set my blood to flowing."

"Your body sets mine to flowing."

"Excuse me?" Dandy said.

"You heard me."

Dandy coughed and lost her grin. "I must say, you're forthright about it. As forthright as you are about the language you use."

"I don't beat around the bush, if that's what you mean," Fargo said. Reaching up, he touched a finger to her cheek. "This is the first chance we've had to be alone. We could go off a ways."

"Are you serious?"

"I never joke about tweaking tits," Fargo joked.

“The answer is no.”

“Give it some thought. You might want to, later.”

“I doubt that very much,” Dandy said. “I’m not that sort of girl.”

“The sort who says horseshit?”

Dandy laughed. “Don’t let my brother hear you say that. He’ll have a conniption.”

As if that were his cue, a voice said out of the murk, “Is that you, sis?”

Lester appeared, trailed by Bronack and Waxler.

“Who else would it be, brother-mine,” Dandy teased him. “Unless one of the bandits was female.”

“You shouldn’t have snuck off like you did, ma’am,” Bronack said. “Anything happens to you, your father will blame us.”

“We’re paid to do a job and we wish you’d let us do it,” Waxler said.

Stephen Caventry, as Fargo recollected, was in his sixties and chair-ridden thanks to an accident that cost the use of his legs. Apparently a horse he’d been riding was spooked by a rattlesnake and Caventry had taken a bad fall.

“Oh, posh,” Dandy was saying. “The only danger I was in was from Mr. Fargo, here.” She laughed merrily.

Fargo didn’t find it nearly as humorous. Neither did her bodyguards.

“How’s that again, Miss Caventry?” Bronack said.

“Did he do something he shouldn’t have?” Waxler asked.

“I was joshing.” Dandy poked her brother with an elbow and said, “Come on, Les. I’d like some more of those crackers before we turn in.”

“I just want this whole nonsense to be over,” Lester complained, trailing after her. Fargo took a step but Bronack and Waxler moved to block his path.

“What was that about you and her?” Bronack said.

“We wouldn’t want you to overstep yourself,” Waxler mentioned.

“Is that a fact?” It riled Fargo that the pair were butting in where they had no business butting.

“Mr. Caventry made it quite plain about you,” Bronack said. “We were hired not just to protect his son and daughter from bandits and the like. He also instructed us to protect *her* from *you*.”

“That’s right,” Waxler said. “Mr. Caventry told us you have a reputation where the ladies are concerned.”

“His exact words,” Bronack said, “were that you ‘like to fuck anything in skirts.’”

“Hell,” Fargo said.

“Consider this a friendly warning,” Waxler said.

“If that’s how Caventry thinks,” Fargo said, “why did he hire me?”

Bronack said, “The army considers you the finest scout on the frontier.”

“And you have more bark on you than a redwood, as Mr. Caventry put it,” Waxler said.

Fargo didn’t know whether to be insulted or flattered. He decided to drop it for the time being. “Out of my way. I have coffee to finish.”

The pair parted. They weren’t mad at him; they were simply men doing the job they’d been hired to do.

Fargo didn’t object when they fell in on either side of him.

“I have a question,” Bronack said.

“So long as it’s not about Dandy.”

“It’s about the bandits,” Bronack said.

“They were stupid as stumps,” Fargo said. “But most bandits are.”

“You mentioned them not picking us off,” Waxler brought up. “Were you suggesting they might want to get their hands on Miss Caventry?”

“Makes sense,” Fargo said.

“We were wondering,” Bronack said.

“Perhaps they had another reason,” his partner chimed in.

“Like what?”

“Who’s to say?” Bronack said.

Fargo was puzzled. What in hell could the pair be getting at? Since they were being so talkative, he asked, “What can you tell me about this knife the Caventrys are after?”

“Nothing,” Bronack said.

“You don’t know a thing about it?”

“We know a lot,” Waxler said. “We’re just not supposed to tell you.”

“Mr. Caventry’s orders,” Bronack said.

“Wonderful,” Fargo said. The more he learned, the less he realized Caventry trusted him.

“It’s nothing personal,” Bronack said.

“For me it is.”

Waxler said, “Mr. Caventry told us because we needed to know how valuable it is.”

“Or might be,” Bronack added.

“A knife?” Fargo said.

“There are knives and then there are knives,” Bronack said.

Dandelion and her brother were at the fire, Dandy sipping tea and eating a cracker and beaming in contentment, Lester frowning at the world and everyone in it.

Bronack made Fargo grin by saying under his breath, “Makes you wonder if they have the same father.”

Fargo refilled his battered tin cup with hot coffee and sat across from Dandy so he could take up where he’d left off and admire her body. This time when he peered over the rim, her eyes met his and her cheeks became pink. But she smiled.

Lester cleared his throat. “So you say we’ll reach the town of San Gabriel sometime tomorrow?”

“By noon,” Fargo confirmed. “Although it’s not really a town.”

“Then what is it?”

“A gob of spit on the Texas side of the Rio Grande.” Fargo had ridden through it once.

“I don’t care how big it is,” Lester said. “All I want is to inspect the damn knife and get this over with.”

“Les,” Dandy said, as if scolding him.

“What? I called it a knife, nothing more. And if you ask me, it will be as ordinary as wax. This is a waste of our time.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know Father didn’t need to send me along,” Lester griped. “You’re the expert, not me.”

“Expert?” Fargo prompted, thinking he might learn a little more.

“On antiques,” Dandy said. “I’ve loved old things since I was little. My grandfather’s watch, my grandmother’s silverware and the like fascinated me. They inspired me to collect other old things, and later to become one of the foremost antiques dealers in Texas.”

“What we’re after isn’t all that old,” Lester said as spitefully as he said most everything else. “And what do you know about knives, anyhow?”

“I know enough to be able to determine if it’s from the right time period,” Dandy said. “Beyond that—” She shrugged.

“Marvelous,” Lester grumped. “We might end up paying for a fake.”

“It’s Father’s money to spend as he wants,” Dandy told him.

“No,” Lester said heatedly. “It’s *our* money. Money he’d leave us in his will if he doesn’t spend it on his pet obsession.”

“I wouldn’t call it that,” Dandy said defensively.

“Oh, really?” Lester turned to Fargo. “I leave it to you, sir. What do you call it when someone spends every waking moment thinking and reading and talking about one thing only? What do you call it when that person is willing to spend every dollar they have on it?”

“A lot of people have hobbies,” Dandy said.

“Hobbies?” Lester spat. “The Alamo isn’t a hobby to him, it’s—” He caught himself, and stopped.

“Consarn you,” Dandy said.

“The Alamo?” Fargo said. They’d passed through San Antonio along the way, and Dandy had insisted they stop for the night and then spent hours strolling about the famous site, which the army was using as a quartermaster’s depot, of all things.

Dandy glared at her brother. “Thank you for letting the cat out of the bag.”

Lester didn’t respond.

“My father,” Dandy turned to Fargo, “is a Texan through and through. He loves this state more than anything—”

“Sometimes I suspect he loves it more than us,” Lester interrupted.

“—and he’s a great admirer of those who fought for Texas independence. In particular, at the Alamo. He has a whole room devoted to items of historical importance. For instance, he has a shaving kit that belonged to Travis and a powder horn that might have belonged to Davy Crockett.” She paused. “Now word has reached him that someone has something that would be far and away the most important find ever, short of Crockett’s rifle, Betsy.”

“A knife?” Fargo said, and then it hit him. His amazement must have shown.

“Yes, *that* knife,” Dandy said. “The knife that belonged to Jim Bowie.”

3

Jim Bowie. The man was a legend. “Big Jim Bowie” they’d called him. He’d wielded a knife like few others, a big knife to fit the hand of a big man. A knife some say he invented, or his brother did, or a blacksmith. Whichever the case, legend had it that he had it with him at the Alamo, and when the makeshift fortress fell, the famous knife disappeared.

“You’re serious?” Fargo said.

“Never more so,” Dandelion replied. “Now you can see why we’ve kept it a secret.”

No, Fargo couldn’t. Sure, it was a famous knife. But he couldn’t see why they were being so tight-lipped about it. “Maybe you better explain it to me.”

“Don’t you see? If it’s genuine the knife is priceless. My father isn’t the only one who would like to get his hands on it. To say nothing of the Texas government.” Dandy paused and a worried look came over her. “Certain unscrupulous individuals, if they got wind that it exists, wouldn’t be above trying to steal it out from under us.”

“How much can it be worth?” Fargo asked skeptically.

“Again, if it’s truly Bowie’s, I daresay it would be appraised at half a million dollars or more.”

Fargo was genuinely startled. “You have to be joshing me.”

“It’s Jim Bowie’s *knife*,” Dandy stressed.

“I say let someone else have it,” Lester said.

“Ignore him,” Dandy told Fargo. “As you’ve no doubt noticed, he resents our father spending large sums of money. Money that could one day be ours.”

“It’s not right,” Lester said.

“Who has this knife?” Fargo asked.

“That must remain our secret a while yet,” Dandy said. “We’ll reveal who it is when we get there and not before.”

“Afraid I’ll tell my horse?”

Dandy grinned. “I’m sorry. This is how it must be. It’s not just the money involved. For a true son or daughter of Texas, the knife holds a historical value beyond measure.”

Fargo supposed so. Brave men had died for the cause of Texas liberty, and the Alamo was enshrined in Texas hearts. “Remember the Alamo” had been the battle cry that brought about the defeat of Santa Anna and put Texas on the road to where it was today.

“I don’t expect you to fully understand,” Dandy said. “You’re not a Texan, after

all.”

Lester fidgeted in anger. “I’m a Texan. But no one asks my opinion.”

“You’ll never let it drop, will you?” Dandy said.

“Do you want to hear my side of our argument?” Lester asked Fargo.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t give a damn.”

Lester imitated a beet fresh out of the ground. “I resent that.”

“I don’t give a good damn what you resent, either.”

“You can’t talk to me like that,” Lester said indignantly. “My father hired you, I can fire you.”

“No, Les, you can’t,” Dandy said. “Father wouldn’t want you to. And besides, what good would firing him do? Father paid him in advance. Or have you forgotten?”

“I don’t like being treated as if I’m a no-account,” Lester snapped.

“Then be a man and grow a pair,” Fargo said.

Lester turned to their bodyguards. “Once again you two sit there and do nothing. You’re next to worthless, the pair of you.”

“If he tries to shoot you, we’ll protect you,” Bronack said.

“We can’t protect you from words,” Waxler said.

“He’s *insulting* me,” Lester almost screamed. “At the very least you should make him shut up.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Caventry,” Bronack said. “Last I heard this was a free country.”

“A man can speak his piece however he wants,” Waxler said.

Lester pushed to his feet. “To hell with all of you.” Wheeling, he scooped up his bedroll and went a dozen feet from the fire and knelt to spread it out.

“You must excuse him,” Dandy said.

“Like hell,” Fargo said. He didn’t care for adults who never shed their diapers, and her brother was a ten-year-old in a man’s body.

“Please don’t hold it against him. For my sake, if for no other reason. I’d be grateful.”

Fargo grinned. “*How* grateful?”

“You, sir, sink your teeth into a bone and never let go.”

“I’d like to sink my teeth into something,” Fargo said.

Dandy chuckled, then rose. “I suppose I better turn in too. We have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“I’ll take first watch,” Fargo offered.

“No need,” Bronack said, and motioned at Waxler. “We’ll divide it up and wake you if there’s cause.”

Fargo let them. He’d offered before to help stand guard and they always said it wasn’t necessary. It was what they were being paid for.

Rising, Fargo walked over to the Ovaro. He spread out his own blankets, and with his saddle for a pillow, lay on his back and gazed at the stars.

The night was warm and uncommonly quiet. The coyotes weren’t yipping, for once.

Fargo wasn’t fooled, though. Comanches could be out there. Apaches, too. Then there were the bandits, who might take it into their heads to return.

Presently, he dozed off. He slept lightly. When a fox barked, he stirred. When the throaty cough of a large cat broke the stillness, he sat up.

Waxler was at the fire. "A cougar, you reckon?"

"Jaguar," Fargo said. There was no mistaking the sound, which was more like a roar. They were rare this far north but they did stray up time to time. He stayed awake long enough to be sure it wasn't stalking their horses.

Dawn broke cool and humid.

Fargo was up before the Caventrys and put coffee on. He needed two or three cups to start his day. He also liked to end his days with two or three glasses of whiskey but he'd been bone-dry in that regard since Austin and sorely wanted to wet his throat with red-eye. He recollected San Gabriel had a cantina, thank God.

Waxler stretched and yawned. "I'll be glad to get this over with. I'm a city man at heart."

Not Fargo. Give him the wide-open spaces. The mountains, the plains, the wild places, they were his home. He could take only so much city life. A week or two at the most, and he became so restless he was fit to burst.

Waxler glanced at the sleeping forms of Dandy and Lester, and leaned toward him. "Just so you know. Their father thinks others might have heard about the knife and try to stop us from getting it or try to take it from us if we do."

Fargo appreciated the warning. "How far will these others go to get their hands on it?"

"Mr. Caventry thinks they'd kill. Which is another reason he sent Bronack and me. He'd come himself if not for his legs."

"He should have warned me," Fargo said.

"I wanted to but he said it was best to keep you in the dark. I don't know why, unless he was worried you'd want the knife for yourself."

"I have one," Fargo said. He didn't mention that it was an Arkansas toothpick in an ankle sheath in his boot.

"It's why Bronack and me wondered about those bandits," Waxler went on. "It could be they weren't bandits at all."

Fargo mulled that as he poured his first cup of coffee.

A golden arch blazed the eastern rim of the world. Soon the sun would be up and they could get under way.

Standing, Fargo stepped around to Dandy and nudged her with his boot. "Rise and shine, beautiful."

Dandy slowly raised her head and cracked those lovely eyes of hers. "Morning already?"

"Afraid so." Fargo moved to Lester and did the same, only this time he said, "Rise and shine, Nancy boy."

Lester poked his head out, his hair disheveled. "What did you call me?"

Instead of answering, Fargo reclaimed his seat.

"I thought I asked you to leave him be," Dandy said. "He can't help being how he is."

"Sure he can," Fargo said. "But he doesn't want to."

"I'm right here listening," Lester declared.

"One of us doesn't care," Fargo said.

Dandy let out a sigh. “This is no way to start the day.”

“Tell me about it,” Lester said. “God, I hate being here.”

On that cheerful note they ate breakfast, eggs and bacon courtesy of Dandy. Their packhorse carried enough grub to last them a month.

Fargo was eager to be under way. After what Waxler had confided, he was more concerned than ever that the bandits or whoever the hell they were might come back.

As usual, Dandy and her brother took their sweet time eating. Breakfast was a ritual with them. They ate and talked. It was one of the few times during the day—any day—that Lester was halfway nice. Probably because he wasn’t fully awake yet.

Fargo rarely ate breakfast, himself, when he was on the trail. Too much food made him sluggish, and in the wilds the last thing a man wanted was to be a shade slow on the draw or to not be alert in hostile country.

When Dandy offered him some eggs, though, he accepted. She had a way with a frying pan. She also rode well and never once complained, unlike her brother. For a rich gal, she was a bundle of self-reliance.

Fargo liked that in a woman. He liked how she filled out her riding outfit even more. It had been a couple of weeks since he’d been with a female, and a familiar urge was growing. Maybe that cantina would have a dove or two willing to give him a tumble.

Dandy offered eggs to the bodyguards, as well. Bronack accepted a plate and sat back down.

Waxler came over and held out his hand. “We’re obliged, Miss Caventry,” he said as she spooned a heaping portion out of the pan.

“How many times have I asked you to call me by my first name?” Dandy said good-naturedly. She picked up a fork. “Would you care for some bacon, too? There’s plenty to go around.”

Before Waxler could answer her, his face exploded.

4

The boom of the shot was nearly simultaneous with the burst of blood and brains from Waxler's head. Dead instantly, he pitched forward.

Fargo threw himself at Dandy and shoved her to the ground, covering her with his own body. Twisting, he drew his Colt and blasted a shot at the sombrero-topped man who had shot Waxler. He didn't miss.

Three other bandits materialized and more shots thundered.

Bronack unlimbered his six-gun and returned fire.

As for Lester, he squealed and flung himself flat, covering his head with his hands.

"Let me up!" Dandy protested, bucking against Fargo. "I can help."

"Stay down," he growled, and rolled off her to have a better shot at an attacker taking aim at Bronack's back. He fired first, into the bandit's chest.

Bronack shot another and the man went down.

That left a single *bandido*. He had a pistol but he wasn't much good with it. He snapped two shots at Fargo, and missed.

Fargo clipped the bandit's shoulder and was about to finish him off when a revolver cracked close to him and the top of the bandit's head imitated a geyser.

Silence fell save for the gasps of a bandit who was convulsing.

Bronack went to his partner, rolled Waxler over, and bowed his head. "Damn. He was as good a pard as I've ever had."

Fargo glanced at Dandy.

She had taken a nickel-plated, short-barreled Colt from a handbag she carried and was holding it two-handed, pointed at the bandit whose brains she had blown out.

"Nice shot."

"I've been shooting since I was ten," she replied. "I'm a Texas girl, remember?"

Fargo looked at Lester and didn't hide his disgust. "You can get up now."

"Are you sure they're dead?"

Fargo stepped to the bandit who had been convulsing but was now only twitching. Standing over him, Fargo trained the Colt. "Who hired you?"

The bandit glared.

"*Quien le pago para mater?*" Fargo asked.

"*Bastardo,*" the man gasped.

"You tried to kill us, jackass. What did you expect?"

The man did more glaring.

"*Por que?*" Fargo said. "What were you after?"

The man sucked in a deep breath and said in English, "We were told you carry