

DEAD MAN'S TREASURE

BY PATRICK LINDSAY

Chapter One

Geronimo's Lair

*Sycamore Canyon, Arizona
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I lay on a flat sandstone mesa, my cheek pressed hard against the rock as I squirmed back away from the edge. I was going to have to find a better place to use for a lookout. They had me pinned down where I was right now. Blood dripped from a nasty scrape on my shoulder. An arrow there had ripped my shirt. My ankle throbbed from being twisted when I had fallen in a little cave about five hundred yards north of here.

It was the heat that bothered me the most, though. I wormed my way back another ten feet, then wiped the sweat from eyes. I squinted around me, trying to find a vantage point. I had to see how many of them were down there. I made it to be at least four, and I'd heard a bullet ricochet off that pile of rocks behind me. That meant there was at least one rifle down there amongst 'em.

I pulled myself to my left and forward a little, aiming at a nest of boulders near the edge of the mesa. I left a small trail of blood as I moved, but I made it to the boulders in about ten minutes. I crawled in and settled down among the boulders. That gave me a little shelter from behind, too. I couldn't let 'em get above and behind me. I'm no army veteran or nothin' like that, but I know that surrounded ain't a good way to be.

I peeked out through the boulders and down to the ground in front of me. The mesa dropped down real sharp, with a rocky face in front of me and a stream down below. There were rocks and shrubs along both sides of the stream, with a couple scrawny mesquite trees sticking out here and there. I seemed to be pretty well sheltered by the surrounding rocks, so I settled down and searched the ground below.

My eyes swung from one side to the other. I was hopin' to catch a little move here or there from the corner of my eyes, but these Apaches were too smart. They didn't twitch. I settled down and started looking for something out there that didn't look like it belonged. My eyes settled in on a couple of big rocks, side-by-side and maybe twenty yards downstream. That looked like a real good place to hide.

I looked along the top of the rocks, but saw nothing. My eyes travelled down the side of the near rock. I squinted and wiped the sweat out of my eyes with my sleeve. That, I thought, just might be a moccasin. I lifted my old Winchester '73 and sighted in on that spot. I squeezed 'er off nice and slow.

There was a yelp of pain and I could hear a rifle clatter down amongst them rocks. The foot disappeared. I sighted in on the little notch between the two rocks and fired in there twice. There was another yell, and I saw the Apache scrambling away on his knees. He pushed himself up to one foot and half stood. I dropped him with my fourth shot.

Arrows immediately hit the rocks all around me. I got an idea where a few of 'em was coming from, then crawled away from there. I didn't think they could get any arrows past those boulders, but if they pointed them skywards and dropped some in from above, I'd be in trouble. I crawled over to the other edge of the mesa and peeked down between a couple boulders. Nothing was showing, so I held my fire and took a swaller from the little bit I had left in my canteen.

I took out my knife, ripped off part of a sleeve and tied it around my arm. I figured that would stop the bleeding. I peeked over the edge again. Still nothing. I hoped they wouldn't find my horse. I'd hid him in some rocks in a fissure down below and a couple hundred yards north of here. I couldn't lose that horse. Ol' Attila had carried me through some rough scrapes. Plus, he had the saddlebags from my old partner Cal, with about 100 gold coins in there. That's what had got me in this trouble in the first place.

My name is Cash Hendrick. Actually, the name my Ma gave me when I was born is Cassius. She named me after some Roman guy. I guess he was important and all, but the way I heard it is he stabbed the head man in Rome. I didn't need to be tryin' to live up to that name. Plus, I couldn't even pronounce it until I was seven. Pa just shook his head and called me Cash, so I stuck with that. Kids in school gave me a hard way to go, and I had a lot of fights. After a while, I was the one dishin' out the punches more than I was soaking them up, and they left me alone.

I saw movement at the corner of my eye and turned to see one warrior working his way toward a rocky slope to my left. I drew a bead on him and took him down with the first shot. Two arrows whistled past me, then two more. I pulled back against the rock face behind me and hunkered down. After a minute, the arrows stopped coming. I slid down on to my haunches, wondering if there were only two left out there.

Anyway, Cal was kinda my partner, but we'd parted ways a couple years ago. I'm only twenty-five now, but even two years ago I'd come to see that a man who loves to gamble and drink isn't always good company. Especially not when you're doin' 'em both at the same time. Cal could pile up the money in a poker game sometimes, but he usually lost it all right after. Plus, he had a way of attracting bullets from the folks that lost their money.

I saw no movement below, nor up on the rim above me. I settled down and waited. It was my experience that Apaches could be plumb patient sometimes. First one to move might be dead. I slid down and considered the possibilities.

Cal had come to see me three days ago. I had been walking home from my job at the saloon in town there in Payson. I heard a "Pssst" as I walked past an alley, and there was Cal, laying in the alley and shot up pretty bad. I was pullin' him up to take him to the doc, but he made me listen to his story first.

Cal said he'd won about \$2,000 fair and square in a poker game in Prescott. He'd left the game. He said there'd been no shooting, not until he was leaving town. He'd taken a bullet in the leg on the way out of Prescott and said two soldiers had trailed him for three days.

"Hold on," I said. I couldn't quite make sense of that last part. "You were shot by two soldiers?"

"They was bad-uns," he said. I moved to get him to his feet, but he pushed me away. "Got to finish my story," he said. "Maybe later I'm not gonna be able to tell you. The soldiers were trackin' me better than I'd expected. Plus, I was losin' blood from the gunshot. I plugged it as best I could. Anyway, I couldn't shake 'em, so I went to the Superstition Mountains, went to Sycamore Canyon." He paused and took a long, hard breath.

"Sycamore Canyon?" I asked. I knew where this was going. "You took 'em to Geronimo's Hideout?"

"Yep." He winced as I helped him up to his feet. He threw an arm around my shoulders and took a couple slow steps with me. "The sojers quit follerin' me, too."

"I'll bet they did," I agreed. We took a few more steps to reach the street. I turned him toward the doc's office. "How about the Apaches?"

"Yeah, that was a problem," he allowed. "The Apaches didn't take it too kindly. They taken in after me pretty hard. I had to hole up in a cave I found." He stopped, reached into his shirt pocket and took out a piece of paper. "Take this," he said. "It's a map. I left the saddlebags in a cave, an' crawled out at night. Jump on my horse and I come directly here."

I took the paper and shoved it into my pocket. We got to the door of the doctor's office. Luckily, there was a light still on inside. I hammered at the door until the doc showed up. He didn't waste any time talkin'. He reached around and helped Cal up from the other side. We put him down on a bunk and the doc told me to get lost.

I'd gone home, but when I checked with the doc the next morning, he told me Cal had died during the night. We'd buried him day before yesterday, then I'd come back to look for the saddlebags yesterday. So far, I'm thinkin' that was a poor decision.

A gunshot sounded below, and I snapped right back to the present. I dropped flat on my belly and peered over the edge. I heard two more shots just as I peeked over. There were two Apache warriors with their backs to me, using a couple of Acacia trees for cover. I could have picked 'em both off, easier than a turkey shoot at a Sunday picnic, but something told me I didn't need to be giving away my presence right now.

Still, I thought as I watched, it would help to be rid of the Apaches. I looked around me and saw a stone about half the size of my fist. I picked it up and hefted in my hand. I'm pretty strong, and I'd had a lot of practice as a kid, beanin' rattlesnakes that got into Ma's garden. I got up to my feet slowly and let fly with that rock.

My aim was still good. The rock hit the Apache in the middle of his back. He jumped to the side and half-turned as I dropped back down onto the mesa. Another shot sounded from below and the Apache slumped to the ground. The second warrior whirled around and saw me watching him from the mesa. He took off to my left, dodging through the trees and bush. Two more shots front somewhere out in front of me brought him down.

I pulled back from the edge and crawled back over to the nest of boulders I'd been using for cover before. I could watch better and stay out of sight over there. I waited for a few minutes, hearing just a slight rustle in the underbrush now and then.

I settled down among the boulders and waited. Finally, I saw movement to the front and right side of me. I looked over there and saw a gray pants leg with a stripe running down the side. He came forward, and I saw the blue jacket. A minute later, another one came out of the brush. They both moved slowly, watching the brush in front of them and sweeping the mesa rim

with a glance. I knew they couldn't see me up here. They examined the two dead Apaches and looked around them. "Any sign of the kid with the saddlebags?" one asked the other.

His partner shook his head, and they began walking down the stream bank, rifles up. They looked ready to shoot anything they found out there.

I slumped down into the boulder nest and shook my head. "Good news," I thought sourly. "The army showed up."

I waited until dark, hunkered down in the boulder nest up there on the mesa. I wasn't too worried about the soldiers finding my horse with the saddlebags. I had taken my mustang way back into a draw. You had to come around a sharp corner that didn't look passable to even get back there. I made the water in my canteen last until it was full-on dark with just a little sliver of moon in the sky. Then I eased down off the mesa.

I cat-footed it up the stream toward my horse, eyes and ears alert on the way. I was as wary of more Apaches as I was of the two soldiers. "Bad-uns" was what Cal called them. They'd probably shoot me as soon as look at me for that money. The Apaches, though, were pretty riled up lately, and I wanted no part of them either.

When I reached the draw, I stopped to fill up my canteen in the stream, then took a quick left into the crevasse in front of me. I kept one hand on the wall to my right to guide me, 'cause there wasn't much light to help. When the path took a sharp right, I took out my Colt.45 and kept it ready. I didn't want no unexpected welcoming party when I got to my horse. I eased on up the draw and found Attila just cropping some grass, with no other signs of life around him.

When I reached the stream, I turned right and led Attila along the stream bed. There was a bit of splashing noise, but any animal could do some splashing, and mostly I wanted to cover my tracks. I figured the soldiers had curled up for some sleep, and as long as we weren't loud enough to wake 'em up, I wasn't going to worry. When we got to a spot about a mile downstream, I led Attila up out of the water. It was mostly rocky ground, and we wouldn't leave much sign there. Mostly, I wanted to get shut of that place in a hurry. If I'd known then who was doin' their tracking for them, I'd have been more careful.

It took another hour, what with the poor light, to work my way out of Sycamore Canyon. Once I'd done that, I mounted up and worked my way straight south. I spent so many hours in the saddle I lost count. I was passing through some country that got more and more dry and desert-like, but that was what I wanted. I had in mind a little pool of water surrounded by rocks and a few trees. I was gonna lie low there for a couple days and let all of this pass me by.

After the excitement blew over, I planned to go right back north with this money. There was a piece of land up there I wanted to buy and start me a ranch. I'd done a lot of listening in that saloon, and I'd learned that a lot of folks were coming into the Tonto Basin up there and were doin' real well raising some cattle. I planned to be one of them.

There was a spot up there right under the Mogollon Rim where I wanted to buy, north of the Tonto Basin. Not too far away, though. The grass gets richer as you rise toward the pine trees and the cooler temperatures. I had my eye on about 1,000 acres up there, and I thought I could

probably run about four or five hundred head of cattle. There was a stream running down off the rim that cut through the property. It was perfect, and the two thousand dollars in these saddle bags could more than get me started. I just had to get out of here with my hide intact.

I came up to the water pool I'd been heading for after a couple hours. I came in slow, because there could be other folks bedded down in there, and you don't want to surprise anybody in the dark. I circled around a couple times and didn't see anybody. After a while I rode in, picketed Attila, tossed down the bedroll and got ready for a quick snooze.

First, I walked over and laid down at the edge of the water to splash my face. I'm a big man, at 6 feet and 185 pounds, and for a minute, staring down into the water, I decided I might be a little handsome. I have dark hair and a dark complexion, like my ma. Of course, you have to allow for the fact there wasn't much light from the moon, and there were some ripples in the water, making it a little hard to see. I'm sticking with the handsome story anyway.

It didn't seem like more than a few minutes, but I woke up with a faint gray light showing in the east. I walked down to the edge of the rocks and had a drink of water, then led Attila down to water him. As I led him back up, I looked over the circle of rocks above the water. I couldn't believe what I saw.

It looked like there were three men coming on horseback, with maybe one of them dismounted. I pulled my binoculars from my saddlebag and took a closer look. There were two soldiers following a third man, who was leading his horse and following my trail. They were coming on pretty steady.

I pulled the binoculars down, then raised them up for another look. I didn't want to believe it, but I was pretty sure that was Arizona Bill doing their tracking for them. Comanches had captured Arizona Bill when he was a kid. He'd escaped from them and had done pretty much everything a man can do since then—fought in the war, rode for the pony express, did some sheriffin', but mostly he was a scout for the army. And he was pretty much the best. The bad news, I thought, just kept on comin'.

I put the binoculars down and walked over to a big pile of heavy rocks. I started moving the rocks aside until I'd created a big hole in the middle. Then I walked over and pulled out the sacks of money from the saddlebags. I put them in the hole and piled the rocks back on top. I wiped the sweat away from my eyes and walked back over to take a look at the men coming in. I didn't need the binoculars this time. They had spotted the water hole and Arizona Bill had remounted, riding in the back. The soldiers had their rifles out and they were comin' in fast.

I walked over to my horse and pulled the Winchester from the scabbard, then I pulled out a box of ammunition. I settled down behind a pile of rocks and pulled my canteen next to me. This was gonna get ugly.