

PART I

CHAPTER 1

New Mexico Territory - 1849

(Near present-day Prescott)

Cassidy McCandless held the hand of her little brother, Matthew, as they stood on the front porch of the cabin in the pre-dawn light watching their father prepare to ride away towards town.

The war with Mexico was over.

Santa Anna and his armies had withdrawn and the American settlers in the area could finally take a free breath. News travels fast even as far out in the frontier as the McCandless ranch. The talk was of Mexican Cession selling all of the land north of the Gila River to the United States.

Grover McCandless needed news and supplies, he had told them before he departed. He also needed a drink of whiskey and some adult company. He felt it safe enough to leave his children to tend the homestead for a few short days while he made the daylong trip to town. Cool Water was a small town that had only recently grown up around what had been an old Mexican village.

At first, there had been a trading post. It grew into a dry goods/supply store supporting a cavalry encampment. As the name implied, the town had a set of cool, clean wells that didn't run dry in the drought season. A stable, hotel, church, and of course, a saloon soon followed. The U.S. Cavalry had set up a camp to protect the American traders and settlers in the area. They had maintained a presence there during the Mexican-American War and thereafter. They continued to protect the settlers and travellers heading for the Territory and on to California.

Grover could make the trip more quickly traveling alone on horseback with a packhorse. It took much longer when he and his small family had made the trip in with the wagon and team. This time he wanted to make the trip quickly before the spring rains.

"Now keep that Colt and the rifle loaded and ready, Cassidy, and keep a close watch on your brother," Grover told her as he finished lacing closed his saddlebags. "Stay in close to the cabin until I get back. Shouldn't be more than a few days. I know

you will take care of this ranch just like I taught you.”

“Yes, Papa, I will. We’ll be fine here. Please hurry back,” she requested, bracing herself. She stiffened her spine and pushed down her trepidation.

Grover came back up on the porch, kneeled down and looked his small son in the eye and told him, “You mind your sister and don’t give her any trouble.”

With a dramatic sigh and a long-suffering voice, Matthew replied, “Yes Papa, I’ll be good.”

Grover McCandless drew them both into his arms and held them close. He loved his children deeply and reverently. They were among the few remainders of his wife, whom he missed with a deep and abiding pain. Matthew was a young imp but Cassidy, who looked so much like her mother, was his pride.

Slow to pull himself away, he gazed down at his children, sorry to leave them behind this time. He took one long, loving look at them and straightened his back. Setting his cowboy-style hat on his head, Grover shrugged into his coat and stepped back off the porch to the horses. Deep in thought about how the new Territory might and would affect his little piece of heaven, he checked the fittings on Maggie, the packhorse.

First light was just beginning to glow pale orange over the eastern mountain range across the valley, as he swung up on Belle. Grover took another fond look at what remained of his family.

Kicking up a cloud of dust, he loped out the opening in the low stone wall surrounding the cabin and outbuildings. Cassidy and Matthew watched from the porch and waved their hands in farewell. In the cool air of that early spring morning, Cassidy and Matthew watched their father ride away, his form diminishing in the distance among the rolling hills and low evergreens.

Ever since their mother, Mary Faith, had taken sick and died of a fever in the winter almost two years ago, Cassidy had been left in charge of the homestead and taking care of Matthew. A heavy burden for a 16 year old, but people tended to grow up fast in the Territory if they grew up at all. She and Matthew also helped their father take care of and run the ranch. Cassidy was a quick study and swift to absorb all he could teach her. Matthew was young but also quick on the uptake, when he put his mind to it.

After their father disappeared in the distance, Cassidy felt a familiar tightness grip her chest and a nagging concern settle in. It was the same feeling she had whenever he had to leave them alone to hunt or round up their cattle. It was worse when he went to town without them and would be away for a few days. Appearing fragile but being of tough stock and solid character, she raised her chin despite her concerns. She squared

her shoulders, settling herself in to watch over the ranch until their father's return.

The country was beautiful. Hues of pinks, oranges, reds, beiges and purples made up the landscape. Greens of the cottonwoods along the rivers and streams and evergreens on the mountain slopes punctuated the kaleidoscope of colors. It's grandeur could leave one breathless but it could be harsh and unforgiving and leave the unsuspecting with nasty scars. Made worse by the Mexican-American conflict, anything could and usually did happen even when one grew up here and knew how to avoid the inherent risks of living so far west in the Territory.

Just a few years ago, a very dry summer caused most of the streams to go dry. Much of the wild game either died or moved elsewhere, forcing a starving mountain lion to risk coming in close to take one of the sows. Cassidy had come across the barnyard early in the morning to begin the chores. She had surprised the big cat as it prepared to pounce on one of the pigs rooting behind the horse shed. Her scream brought her father running. He shot it just as the lion turned a hungry gaze on Cassidy, the slower more obtainable prey.

On another occasion, the family received news that the Preacher's son had been killed while out hunting. His horse had returned without him. A search party had looked for days, but his remains weren't found for many months when a cavalry patrol happened through the area. From what they could tell, his horse had tripped going down a slope and thrown the young man. Apparently, he had broken his leg and couldn't make it back after his horse ran off. They identified him by his rifle and leather game pouch carved with his initials.

Worsening the natural dangers of the lands had been first the conflict between the Apache and Mexicans, and then the Mexican-American War with troops from both sides scavenging through the area. As yet, no open conflict had developed between the United States and the Apache. Grover had brought back that news from one of his trips to town. However, tensions were mounting he said, brought about by more and more settlers moving into the Territory and taking traditional Indian lands.

Fighting to push aside the unusual sense of foreboding, Cassidy turned to go back into the cabin to start the morning chores. She took one last deep breath and said a silent prayer for her father's safe and rapid return. All she could do was keep a close eye on the precocious Matthew and keep the place running until she caught sight of her father once again approaching the homestead.

"Well, there he goes and before you know it, he'll be coming back along the track," she told her little brother. "But in the meantime there is always much to be done. We'll just keep ourselves busy, prepare for the coming planting and calving season, and there Papa will be. Now you go get the Bible, sit down at the table and practice your reading aloud to me while I get breakfast."

Screwing up his little face, he complained, "Awwww Cassidy, do I have to? Can't it wait til later? It looks like it's gonna be such a nice day out. Can't I go out and play til you're ready?"

Grinning, she reached out and tousled Matthew's curly blond hair and said in a tone that brooked no argument, "No, you need to start now on your reading. The day's are getting longer so you can play outside after supper."

Cassidy knew if she gave in even once, she would never get his attention back. His face fell at her response but on dragging feet, he went to fetch the Bible.

Cassidy set about preparing breakfast. Thereafter, she thought to herself, on to the usual chores. They were running quite low on flour, sugar, coffee and tea but she knew she could make do until their father could return and replenish their staples. Pushing stray tendrils of wavy gold hair from her face for the fourth time, she stopped to rebraid her thick lock. She adjusted the apron over her skirt and stirred up the fire in their mother's cherished cast iron stove sitting opposite side the fireplace.

"Yes Grover, I will go west with you as long as we can fit that stove in the wagon," Mary Faith had told her husband years ago. Both of his children had Mary Faith's same beautiful green eyes, golden hair and happy disposition. He had smiled his love and affection into his young son's eyes while bouncing him on his knee.

Cassidy had mixed memories of the long trip out on the Santa Fe and Independence Trail to what was then Santa Fe de Nueve Mexico. Five years ago, the family had come from Missouri in a covered wagon, just one of many. She fondly recalled the shine of that stove their mother had insisted on bringing. Less fondly, she remembered the endless days of walking, or bouncing in the wagon through ice, snow, cold, rain, heat and worst of all, mud. The McCandless family had come west as some of the earliest part of President Polk's westward expansion.

Up on the shelf above and to the side of the stove next to the canisters, sat the remainder of her mother's china set. Two porcelain teacups and saucers, with delicate pink damask roses trailing around the rims on ivy vines, survived the journey west.

Cassidy reached out and lovingly traced her finger around the rim of one of the teacups as she had seen her mother do countless times. Mama had told her often that though they were leaving civilization and all the proprieties of the east behind, they could bring a small part of it along with them. "After all, we *are* civilized so we must act so," her mother had insisted.

After breakfast and feeding the horses, cattle, pigs, chickens, and sheep, as their Papa had taught them, Cassidy worked with Matthew on his lessons. She taught him reading, writing and sums using the family Bible and small slates with bits of chalk, just as her mother had taught her. She and Matthew sat side by side at the plank table in the

common area of the cabin across from the open door.

Having been a carpenter in Missouri, their father had hand-hewed that table from one of the cottonwood trees growing down by the stream. He had fashioned the cabin with hand tools from the same wood. In fact, Grover McCandless had crafted all of their furnishings. Two rocking chairs and a bench seat sat near the fireplace where the family usually spent their long winter evenings.

Cassidy could not stop herself from glancing out the door left open for the breeze. She kept a wary eye out for any visitors, welcome or otherwise. Satisfied with Matthew's progress, she decided, "Let's finish up the sums for today Matthew, and go work on the garden, after we have something to eat." She could tell from Matthew's squirming on the bench his attention had reached its limit.

"Can we practice with the rifle again today?" Matthew asked as he quickly jumped up, anxious to get outside and run around.

"Well, let's get some other things done around here first and then we'll see," she promised.

"Yeeee haaa," he hollered, taking that as a *yes* and darting out the door.

"Wash up at the well while you are out there then come back in to eat," she called to him with laughter in her voice.

After their mid-day meal, Cassidy sent Matthew outside to start on the garden work. "Now you get busy right away and stay busy 'til I get out there to help," she told him, trying her best to be stern. She knew full well that he would find a number of other things that were immensely more interesting to do "first" and that she would probably do the gardening on her own.

"Yes, Cassidy, I will," came his solemn reply just before he darted out the door. Cassidy could hear the door to the shed open followed by the sounds of rummaging around. She smiled to herself and turned back to the tasks at hand.

Cassidy cleaned up after their small meal and walked outside across the deep covered porch. As expected, Matthew was not in the garden. Shaking her head in amusement, she could hear him singing songs and talking out loud down by the creek, probably trying to catch frogs.

Their father had chosen the homestead well. He had situated the cabin in one of the arms of a range of mesas below the higher mountains running north/south. The location took advantage of the breezes in the summer but afforded some protection from the winter winds. The cabin was close enough to the stream for convenience but far enough that high water wouldn't reach it.

Sited at the foot of low hills, neither a horse nor a person on foot could scramble through the boulders and loose rock and approach from the rear. And certainly not without being heard. The view from the porch allowed them to see anyone coming from the north and west. Visitors coming from the south would have to pick their way with care through the many rocky pools and streams of the water table perched on the plateau below the mesas. They would be visible a long way off from the homestead.

Her father had taught her to keep a loaded rifle and Colt pistol along with ammunition at the ready at all times. This afternoon, she double-checked both the rifle and the pistol. The rifle she left on the mantle above the fireplace but decided to settle the pistol in her skirt pocket before going out.

Both parents, being exceptionally progressive in their thought and actions, believed their children needed to know all that was required for survival in the Territory. That included basic survival and ranching, in addition to home keeping. Cassidy, being the older child and very close to her parents, particularly her father, was the recipient of all the knowledge and skills they could impart.

It had been a long and arduous trip from Missouri and if Grover hadn't known how to hunt and watch for trouble, they wouldn't have survived. As a result, he taught Cassidy how to load, fire and care for weapons. Young though he was, Matthew could fire the pistol if his father stood with arms around him supporting his arms and hands. Cassidy was quite a good shot with the pistol but the rifle was large and heavy. She could hit where she aimed, though, if she could prop it on a boulder or the like to hold it steady.

Following the sound of Matthew's voice, she could not help but revel in the beautiful azure skies. Large white puffy clouds dotted the skies and moved in and out overhead. It was not yet the season for soaking rains. The weather gifted them with a beautiful warm spell nestled between the cold winter with dry snows and the rainy season. This area of what was now called the New Mexico Territory provided four mild and distinct seasons and sat on the boundary between the high snow country and the heat of the desert.

"Papa has chosen a good spell of weather to go to the trading post," Cassidy spoke out loud to herself. "I really hope the weather holds and he gets back quickly." She knew the weather could be unpredictable this time of year. The spring winds could kick up at any time making travelling difficult.

Spying Matthew skipping stones in the deeper pool of the stream shaded by the cottonwoods and willows. Satisfied he was as safely occupied as he could be, she turned back up the slope to do the gardening herself. The storeroom contained only a few dried berries collected last summer, and some wrinkled potatoes. She was looking forward to all of the fresh vegetables the garden would produce if the weather favored a good

growing season and harvest.

The afternoon grew warm as she weeded and worked the soil under the bright warm sun, surprising for so early in the season. Wiping the sweat from her face with a soft deerskin cloth, Cassidy reflected on the buckskin shirts she was fashioning out of hides from the family's last hunting trip. Last year, their father had started taking them hunting with him on both his day trips and overnight trips. It had been a mild summer last year and the winter had been snowy making it easy to track the well-fed herds of mule deer and antelope. She had shot her first deer this year with his help and that of a handy boulder.

She and her father had laughed as they considered what her mother's reaction would have been to Cassidy wearing men's pants and shirts on the hunting trips.

"Cassidy, my girl," he had addressed her, "it would just be too difficult for you to ride quickly and move through the brush unheard in women's skirts. Put on these old clothes of mine and I will have to make my apologies to your mother when next we meet in Heaven."

"Yes, Papa," she replied, relieved to rid herself of cumbersome skirts. "It will make it easier. We won't be going near the McAllister's place on this trip, will we? "

"No, daughter, I don't believe so. Are you worrying about seeing that young Mr. Peter McAllister?" Shaking himself out of his usual introspection and taking a good look at her, he lowered his brows in consideration.

His daughter was a pretty young girl and held the promise of becoming a beautiful woman. He made a mental note to pay closer attention to her and make sure she had the womanly things she needed. All of that in addition to what he could teach her about survival in the Territory and running a ranch.

Unaware of her father's regard, Cassidy had replied, "No, not really. I haven't seen them in ever so long and it would be nice to visit. I imagine the twins and Elizabeth are growing up. Caleb and Kyle must be 12 years old by now," she calculated. "And Elizabeth is the same age as Matthew, so 7 years old now."

The McAllisters were the nearest family and homestead to the McCandless property, having the next parcel to the north. Many miles and some rough country separated the cabins. The McAllisters had come west in the same wagon train as the McCandless family and they had all become fast friends. They travelled with each other in the wagon train over the long and arduous journey. Helping one another survive the elements, they even fended off an Indian attack. Thereafter, the families had decided to stake claims alongside each other and had often called upon one another for help.

Cassidy always enjoyed the visits. Peter was a year older than she. She hadn't

seen the eldest son, Denny, since shortly after the families arrived. She recalled him as a dark, brooding and enigmatic character with a propensity for fighting. The story the McCandless family heard was that he had left home some years ago after one especially nasty disagreement with his father that nearly came to blows.

Musing to herself as she worked in the garden, Cassidy hoped the Shepherds would like those shirts she had made. Papa had taken two of the first buckskin shirts with him this trip to see if he could sell them to the Shepherds. They owned the dry goods store in Cool Water. If they liked them, then with the proceeds maybe he could bring back some additional goods such as cloth and yarn. She enjoyed the natural colors of the fibers she was working with from their own few sheep and was looking forward to an enlarged selection.

Moreover, she was pleased to have learned the skinning, tanning, and working of hides from the Apache women when they came through the area. Mama of course had taught her sewing, knitting, mending and other "hand work." All those skills had come in quite handy and making shirts had been both entertaining and she hoped, rewarding.

The sun rode high in the sky while she worked the garden and evening approached while she pondered life without their mother. Cassidy had assumed the usual cooking, cleaning, and elementary education functions that had been her mother's. Her father, in keeping with he and his wife's philosophy, had also taught her how to run, maintain, and if needed defend, the ranch.

Breaking out of her own thoughts, she called out to her little brother. "Matthew, Matthew, it's time to come clean up and start dinner." She took her tools to the shed beside the paddock where the three remaining horses were. "Matthew, Matthew," she called again.

"Here I am, Cassidy. Look at this arrowhead I found down by the stream," he yelled as he ran up the slope from the stream and across the yard. With gleaming eyes and puffed up chest, he displayed the findings in grubby little hands.

"Very nice," she replied with a smile hiding her sudden concern from his innocent eyes. "Take me now and show me where you found it."

Just beyond the barn and down the short slope was the main stream flowing out of the hills. It ran past the homestead, feeding the pools to the south. Matthew took Cassidy's hand and pulled her along at a run coming to a stop amongst some small boulders beside the stream.

"Right here, right here is where I found it just sitting right on top of the mud," Matthew proclaimed.

“Well maybe it washed out of the hills in the last snowmelt,” she considered cautiously.

“No, no,” he cried in denial. “It wasn’t here yesterday. I was down here picking up sticks for the kindling and I didn’t see it. It’s new. Do you think the Apaches are here? Do you think so?” he asked, bouncing up and down in anticipation and excitement. Matthew loved to run with the Apache children.

Cassidy gave him a smile and replied, “Well, perhaps they are. We’ll have to keep a lookout for them.” Inwardly though, she was unhappy and felt for the reassuring weight of the pistol in her skirt pocket.

Ever since their arrival on the homestead, the family had had a very good relationship with the local Indians. The Apache and Yavapai always stopped at the springs to water their horses on the way north. Her father prepared a steer and jerked beef with them. In return, the family had been taught much about life in this area. Cassidy knew her father had always admired their way of life.

The Apache men made her mother nervous, though she and Cassidy spent time among the women. They learned how to work and tan hides, how and when to plant particular crops and other things useful for survival in the area.

Until last year, Cassidy had enjoyed spending time among the People. During their last visit, rather than seeing a little girl, they saw a young woman. The men looked at her with much interest. She could not put a name to the discomfort she felt; unaware of what a lovely young woman she was becoming. At the time, she had been very glad Papa was with them. Today however, with him gone, she missed her mother’s warm presence and was alarmed. Cassidy hoped the Indians had not yet come this far north, at least not until Papa returned.

Last fall before the first snows began, the entire family had made the trip to Cool Water. All three of them noticed the increased Cavalry presence. When their father had returned to the Shepherd’s hotel, he told of much talk of tensions with the Apache and Yavapai. More and more settlers came every year taking the best lands for themselves.

“There is much talk of bandits and ruffians attacking and robbing homesteads in the area,” he told them. “We haven’t seen anything though. Could be because we are a ways out of the way,” he said half to himself, failing to see the instant concern in both sets of green eyes.

“Ah well,” he smiled at them, emerging from his inner introspection, “I am sure we’ll be fine.”

Coming back to the present, Cassidy smiled warmly down at Matthew and towed him back towards the cabin. “Let’s go wash and get some dinner going,” she told

him, all the while her eyes scanned the horizon for any sign of movement. After drawing up some water from the outside well and washing up, Cassidy picked up the rifle from the mantle, double and triple checked it and set it in the middle of the table.

After dinner, evening feedings and chores, the pair sat out on the front porch. Matthew played with stones and other small found treasures while Cassidy worked on another buckskin shirt until the light and warmth of the day faded.

Setting her work aside, she caught Matthew up in a big hug. "Off to bed now little brother," she directed.

"Awww, don't you think I can stay up a little later without Papa here? C'mon let me stay up," he begged. Cassidy laughed and insisted nevertheless.

"If you go to bed now, we can do some target practice in the morning instead of practicing reading, but only if you go now." Bargaining, she held up her hands in front of her when he leaped up and jumped around, excited by the thought of firing the weapons.

"After all," she reasoned, "we need to use the chalk sparingly 'til Papa gets back."

Cassidy used the truth as her excuse to swap reading for target practice so as not to share her concerns over the Apache and/or Yavapai coming to the homestead while their father was away. It also helped that Matthew very much liked to fire the weapons and was quite good at hitting rocks and branches. Even at the young age of 7, he was quite an accurate shot.

"But not too much until Papa gets back with more ammunition," she cautioned.

They laughed and played tickle, and when his last burst of energy was spent, Cassidy steered him into the house and helped him get ready for bed. They said their prayers together and she tucked him into the trundle bed in the curtained-off alcove beside the fireplace.

With the thought of the fresh arrowhead find weighing on her mind, Cassidy lit a candle just as the last of the purple and orange sunset came in through the two front windows and door. Target practice would probably be a very good thing to do tomorrow, she thought, attempting to reassure herself.

Feeling her spirits lifted a bit by planning some target practice, she quietly hummed to herself. Crossing the room, she quietly lifted the hinged door in the floor. Their father had sited the cabin over top of a bubbling spring and had lined it with stones, creating an indoor well. The well cooled the house in the summer when the hinged door was open, and also saved them from going outside for water in bad weather or the event of some kind of an attack. She drew water up and set the batter for

morning breakfast. When she was finished, she closed and latched the windows and doors and headed off to bed herself.