



MOBLEY'S LAW

A Mobley Meadows Novel

Gerald Lane Summers, J.D.

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by

Gerald Lane Summers, J.D.



~~This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or locales is entirely coincidental.~~

Mobley's Law, A Mobley Meadows Novel

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Table of Contents

[Mobley's Law Reviews](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)

[CHAPTER 32](#)

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[CHAPTER 34](#)

[CHAPTER 35](#)

[CHAPTER 36](#)

[CHAPTER 37](#)

[CHAPTER 38](#)

[CHAPTER 39](#)

[CHAPTER 40](#)

[CHAPTER 41](#)

[CHAPTER 42](#)

[CHAPTER 43](#)

[CHAPTER 44](#)

[CHAPTER 45](#)

[CHAPTER 46](#)

[CHAPTER 47](#)

[CHAPTER 48](#)

[CHAPTER 49](#)

[CHAPTER 50](#)

[CHAPTER 51](#)

[A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[Mobley's Law Reviews](#)

Mobley's Law has an average rating of five stars. Here are a few of the readers' comments. Some editing has been done for the purpose of space management.

5.0 out of 5 stars - Truly Amazing Book!

By JR Fitch (Kerrville, Texas) Retired Editor/Publisher: *Imperial Valley Press*.

If an accomplished author of 20, 30, or 50 books had written *Mobley's Law*, I would have said, "well done!" For Gerald Summers to have written this as his first book is amazing.

Summers' publisher compares *Mobley's Law* to *Lonesome Dove*. If they are off, it's not by much. This is a wonderful story, mostly fictional yet full of historical events, characters and interesting factual descriptions of things as they existed in the story's time period.

This is a great read. If you like modern non-traditional westerns, you are in for a treat. If you simply like a good story, I cannot imagine you not liking this one. Lastly, I would be surprised to learn that the last names of the heroine and hero were chosen by coincidence and not by the author's furtive sense of humor. Sweetgrass and Meadows? I am surprised the ending wasn't that they married, started a horse ranch, named it Sweetgrass Meadows, and lived happily ever after. What a treat this book is! A job well done, Mr. Summers!"

5.0 out of 5 stars - A New *Lonesome Dove*?

By B. J. Richard (South Dakota)

A most enjoyable read . . . action, adventure, love, hate, terror, lies & deception sprinkled with a dash of humor. The author's use of historical events makes everything about this tale of frontier Texas feel true. He has developed an assortment of unforgettable characters the likes of which have not been seen in a western since McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*.

5 out of 5 stars - Back to Western Basics.

By Ken Magrini, Ph.d (Temecula, Ca)

Mobley's Law takes you back to the days when it was fun to cheer for the Western Hero. In the story of Mobley, Summers has created a character combination of 'John Wayne' in *True Grit* and Paul Newman in *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*.

Action starts on the first page and continues throughout the novel. Mobley always manages to get the job done in true western fashion and shows us how to be tough and humorous at the same time.

I can't wait until the next *Mobley's Law* novel is available.

5 out of 5 stars - Not Your Father's Western!

By Steven M. Roth (Washington, DC.) Author: *Mandarin Yellow*

So you think you don't like reading westerns. Well, think again. That's what I thought, too, until I read *Mobley's Law* by Gerald Lane Summers, and discovered that this entertaining, intelligent, informative and well-crafted novel is not your father's western. Instead, *Mobley's Law* is a well-written story about memorable characters, that just happens to be set in Texas in the tumultuous years just after the Civil War. *Mobley's Law*, as a "western", transcends the genre in all important respects. It gives us a fast paced, multi-layered plot, richly textured characters who we can (and do) care about, and an extraordinary sense of place.

5.0 out of 5 stars - Move over Louis L'Amour

By David Bishop, Author (Augusta, Ga) Mystery Writer: *The Beholder*, and others.

Saddle up and ride with Judge Mobley Meadows as he dispenses the kind of frontier law we wish we had today: swift, sensible and just. An entertaining read, chock full of the characters you expect in a western, only more alive and likeable. And the women, well, there are no wallflower women in this yarn. They're just like you like 'em: smart, spirited and sexy. For you ladies who like westerns, you'll like the women in this story, so will you menfolk. For everyone who loves westerns, this author, Gerald Summers, is the new leader of the pack. Curl up and be prepared to turn pages. I finished it the first day I got it and I'm eager for a sequel.

5.0 out of 5 stars - What a great surprise—History as it should be taught.

By Larry Williams

Wow, what a surprise, a novel that captures and holds you all the way to the final page. Then you can't believe it's over and want to stand in line to get more. These characters are too real for there not to be a sequel. What a great way to learn a little history and to enjoy a marvelous book. As a student I was not all that interested in history but it wasn't taught in the style of this author, where you learned by enjoying it while doing so. Mr. Summers captured the essence of the law that made our country great and wove it into his story in a way that is understandable by both the story members and readers from all stations of life. Bravo!!!!

5.0 out of 5 stars - The Return of the Western Novel.

By T. A. Feuerborn, Ph.D (Santa Monica, Ca.)

This is a creative return to the roots of the western novel. An entertaining, rambunctious romp through a little-known but amusing corner of Texas history. *Mobley Meadows* is an unforgettable hero. Let's hope there will be more opportunities for Mobley to dispense his inimitable brand of frontier justice.

5.0 out of 5 stars - A Rompin' Ride Through 1870s Texas!

By John Charles Berry, Ph.D - Author: *A Night of Horrors*.

This novel is a rompin', raucous, and sometimes randy ride through the prairies and cities of Texas in the 1870s. Summers recreates, with vivid historical accuracy, the times and places of post-Civil War Texas during the critical transition from Federal occupancy to democratically-elected state government. While the historical setting, rich details of the clothes, carriages, and, yes, the weapons are impressively accurate, they don't over-take the novel but propel it forward with marvelous touches. Summers has a firm grasp of the history, but a much firmer grasp of the plotting, character development, and narrative voice of this wonderful western novel. While you'll find echoes of the modern masters of the genre like McMurtry and L'Amour, Summers' wonderful narrative voice has taken the classic genre to a new and wonderful place. Mobley Meadows, Lydia Sweetgrass, and his marshals are marvelous new characters and you'll thoroughly enjoy them. But I found the narrator of the novel enthralling, compelling, and just darn funny! Summers' narrator is so rich and friendly, you can imagine you're sitting around the campfire and see him winking at you as he lets the yarn unfold before you in all its glory, humor, violence, and love. If you want to have some real fun, pick up *Mobley's Law*, because the only disappointment you'll have is when you turn that last page.

5.0 out of 5 stars - The Western we have been waiting for!!!

By Steven H. Jackson (Sarasota, FL) Author: *Death of a Cure*.

Gerald Summers, an unquestioned equal to Grey and L'Amour, has written a masterful work based upon actual history surrounding events in Texas shortly after the Civil War. The narrative is delivered with skill and accuracy that draws the reader in and doesn't let go! Mr. Summers combines action and adventure with a knowledge of what it was really like to bring law and order to a rough and tumble part of America during an exciting time of exploration and expansion.

The principal character in his book, Judge Mobley Meadows, is a character indeed. Dispatched by Ulysses S. Grant to Texas shortly after the Civil War, this one man has the mission of not only providing law in a lawless and corrupt locale, but also to head off a disaster of tremendous proportions with national consequences. The culmination of the book is Meadow's participation in events that determine whether or not the United States would be thrown back into the Civil War just ended.

Based upon a factual series of events, the fictionalized portrayal of an exciting time in our nation's history is a must read for anyone, western fan or not, looking for a truly great read. Mr. Summers is a great story teller and I eagerly await his next novel.

5.0 out of 5 stars - *Mobley's Law* is a winner.

By Dennis Vanoni (Nampa, Idaho)

Gerald L. Summers creates Mobley Meadows as a judge who needs no courtroom to administer justice. A judge who seeks real justice and is not beyond being a little creative to achieve that goal.

Mobley encounters a cast of characters who bring their own stories to the front as the book builds and the story grows. ~~The villains are evil and the maidens are fair, and sometimes promiscuous.~~ *Mobley Law* is a winner and goes right there with *Open Range*, *Broken Trail*, and *Lonesome Dove*.

5.0 out of 5 stars - Best Western.

By Doug Hocking - (Western Writer)

This is the best western novel I've ever read. I could not put it down. I've read and love L'Amour, Hillerman, Zane Grey and lots of others, but *Mobley's Law* has been one of very few I couldn't put down.

5.0 out of 5 stars - A Great Western History.

Charles Rodenberger (Baird, TX USA)

I enjoyed this novel all the way. I bought the Kindle version and read it in little gulps as I travel around. It gave me a knowledge of history that added to the novels by Elmer Kelton and Henry Chappel that I have read. The characters in this novel were life-like and it will make a great movie. I am looking forward to the sequels.

5.0 out of 5 stars - A date with the devil.

By P. Nipper "Pat Decker Nipper. (San Jose, Ca) Author: *Love on the Lewis and Clark Trail*.

Mobley is being ambushed on the prairie by fifteen rag-tag madmen who fully intend to kill him. The rotten governor of Texas has no use for an honest circuit judge in "his" state. Knowing he's badly outnumbered, Mobley makes his stand. "Come on, boys, you've a date with the Devil and he's knockin' at the door," he says.

From that page on (page 6), I knew I was in for a great ride and I was not disappointed. It's hard to believe this is a first novel, since the author is such a talented story teller. This would make a great gift, Christmas or otherwise, for anybody who loves a colorful and fast-moving story.

5.0 out of 5 stars - Five Stars First Page to Last

By Jack Payne (Fresno, Ca.)

Gerald Summers captured my attention on the first page and refused to release it until I finished the last page-at 4 a.m. On a par with *Lonesome Dove*, this novel features a compelling hero in Mobley Meadows. He is credible, consistent, and competent. He is intuitive in knowing what is going on around him and decisive in action. A worthy adversary, the Governor is a strong and powerful enough villain to challenge Mobley to "rise to the occasion." This is quite simply the best western I have read in years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No novel can be written without the help of others. They may not know they are helping, but they do anyway. In my case, these people have mostly been my close friends, people I grew up with and knew to be extremely intelligent. Others were relatives interested in what I was doing, and who provided extremely valuable encouragement as the work progressed.

My editor, Lesley Kellas Payne of Fresno, California taught me more about writing novels than anyone I have ever met. She deserves much credit for this work.

Terry Feuerborn, Ph.D, now retired from the University of California where he was Director of Patents and Licensing, helped me with astute comments on several occasions. He had the remarkable ability to remember everything he ever read about writing. I did not forget the lessons he provided though at times I pouted a bit at his stinging reviews.

Another was Dr. Carl Hansen, a dedicated reader who, besides being a veterinarian, managed to know when a book was good or bad and did not hesitate to say so. His advice was always sharp and to the point. It was a good thing he lived so far away, for had he been closer, I would surely have chased him down with a switch.

Other friends who pushed me relentlessly were Kenneth Magrini, a materials scientist who loved the story, and Bruce Jensen, the retired CEO of a nationwide carpet company. I have known Bruce since High School and both of these men were great western fans. Bruce put me on to Telemachus Press, and I am thrilled with the relationship.

Bill Wieben, now living in New Zealand, never gave up on me; and once even approached a big shot movie producer named Peter Jackson to take a look. The man was involved at the time in making really big movies, and did not have the time to consider my work. Pity, for I think he would have liked it.

Gaynel Ramsey Rader actually kick-started my last efforts at publication. She introduced me to her son, Rhoades Rader, a successful movie producer, who worked for a time to get the book produced; but in the modern era, Hollywood seems to prefer vampires over westerns. Times may be changing, for I see indications everywhere, including the silver screen. They will be called, "Retr films," I suspect.

DEDICATION

There is only one person to whom I could possibly dedicate this novel and survive: my wife of 40 years, JoAnn Charlene Summers.

We met in College in 1963 and have not been able to keep our hands off of each other ever since. She encouraged me, discouraged me, laughed at some of my work, scowled at times, but ultimately helped me work through the plot so the novel actually began to make sense.

All writers need a foil for their work, someone to tell them when they have gone astray. My lovely wife had a sword, and used it like a machete; but I had to admire her grit in staying up all hours of the night while I regaled her with wonderfully turned words. She may have been asleep, but if she said nothing about it.

PROLOGUE

The late afternoon sun shining through the large Oval Office window produced a strange halo-like glow behind the man in the chair, and to Mobley Meadows demonstrated perfectly the power of President Ulysses S. Grant. Though in shadow, the slight smile on Grant's face was a neutral one as he stood to shake hands. The strength in his grip left no doubt as to who was in command.

Grant was notoriously intelligent, single minded, and looked as if he were born to leadership. His dark piercing eyes, close-set under a low brow, gave him away. Brier-like eyebrows in need of a trim combined with his rumpled suit coat defined him as man who cared little for appearances, and less for those who did.

Mobley had been called to the White House for reasons only the President knew, and Mobley intended to behave in keeping with the significance of the event. He owed much to this man, for little cause, and short of a solicitation of murder, whatever it was he wanted of Mobley, he would get.

"Good morning, Judge Meadows," Grant said as he held Mobley in his grip. "It's good to finally meet you. Your grandfather has had nothing but good things to say about you, and as you know, I have depended upon him for advice for a very long time. He was my right hand man from the start of the war to the end at Appomattox. No finer officer ever lived.

Mobley nodded as he held the grip, allowing the President to break it as he chose. "Yes, Mr. President, Angus Meadows is quite a man. I've known that since I was a little tyke and he was wandering around the backwoods in buckskins. People looked up to him for just about everything, and I certainly would not have gone into the law or become a judge without his help, and I am grateful for whatever he said to you to get you to appoint me to the Federal Circuit Court. I want you to know I intend to live up to your expectations and will conduct myself with all the honor and integrity worth of the position."

The smile on Grant's face warmed slightly, as if he both understood the sincerity of Mobley's statement and at once judged the compliment unnecessary. "Yes, indeed. I believe you will. Now please sit down and have a drink with me. People are constantly abusing my reputation and proclaiming me a heavy drinker, and every now and then I like to prove to myself that it might be true."

Mobley decided right then that he liked this man, who could be so serious and yet so open and honest. Grant did have a reputation as a tippler, but people in the know understood it was mostly hogwash of little note promoted by those who either coveted his success or were sanctimonious stick-in-the-muds.

Mobley sat down in the heavily tufted leather chair conveniently placed in front of the President's desk. It, like most other furniture Mobley had encountered in his life, was too short and low to the ground for him. His knees were always sticking up, making him look gangly and self-conscious. As he wriggled around trying to find a comfortable position, the President's steward appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. He handed Mobley a crystal glass snifter of very old brandy and offered him an open box of cigars from which Mobley selected, and then did the same for President Grant.

Mobley sniffed the length of the cigar, nodded, and then bit off the end. "Cuban, no doubt."

"Indeed it is. The best I can find. Are you an aficionado?"

"No sir, nothing quite like that; but I've been to Cuba and recognize the aroma. It is not hard

tell the difference between those wrapped in Virginia and the Cuban varieties.”

“Indeed.”

A silence fell between the two men as they sipped their brandy, dipped the unlit ends into the liquid for taste, and puffed large clouds of smoke about the room. Finally, the President spoke. “I wish you were going to be here in Washington a bit longer. You remind me so much of your grandfather, I think we could become great friends. But, the fact is, I need you to take up your position and help me get out down in Texas as soon as possible.”

Mobley must have seemed startled, for Grant smiled and put his elbows on the desk. “It’s for nothing untoward or unethical, I assure you, Mobley. What you do in your official capacity is your business, and no one else’s. A Federal Circuit Court Judge cannot be obliged to anyone, even the president; but I do need some eyes and ears down there. Someone I can trust to be both honest and discrete about what he sees. Angus tells me that you fit this bill exactly.”

Mobley nodded. There was no use denying it. He’d always tried to be absolutely honest, but he could not say he’d been all that discrete in his younger years.

President Grant cleared his throat and continued. “Texas is on the verge of falling apart, perhaps to open warfare. But the lies and stories each side are putting out leaves me confused as to what my policy ought to be. The southern states—Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina—have all suffered so much during the war, their young people have no way to make a living. So they’ve been moving in large numbers westward, mostly to Texas. Governor Davis has tried, I think, to maintain control; but his methods have been so harsh his opposition may have been strengthened by it. He claims the place is in a state of rebellion, with secret societies popping up all over and the people resisting the police. Now, he says he cannot recommend the state be allowed to return to self-rule. The first open election since the war will be held later this year, and Davis insists it could be a disaster.

Grant leaned back in his chair, blew a long stream of smoke skyward, and then put the cigar on the large glass ash tray. “He has asked me to cancel the election for now; but if I do that, it could be the final straw and cause the exact thing we are trying to prevent. The state has been re-admitted to the Union, but that was five years ago and former rebels were not allowed to vote. Davis won the election, but this time it is going to be a different matter. Everyone will be at the polls, including freed slaves, Mexicans and former confederate soldiers; and there are lots of them. Davis still has a chance to win, at least that is what he tells me, though I can’t imagine all those old rebels doing such a thing.”

The President paused, leaned back and turned in his chair to stare out the bay window overlooking the White House grounds. The bright afternoon sun had lessened its glare, but still illuminated the room and the President in its odd way.

“Democracy is a messy business,” Grant said softly, as if wishing it were not true.

After a moment of contemplation, he turned back to face Mobley, the vertical lines between his eyebrows clearly in evidence. “But it is the course we have set for ourselves, and I cannot reconcile Davis’s concerns with the political reality we face. At some point we must either accept the outcome or take up arms again. Can you imagine, after the dreadful loss of life we have all suffered during the war, starting it all over again?”

Leaning forward, he put his elbows on the desk. “I’ve made no decision as yet, but will have to do so soon. In the meantime, I would like you to go down there to your circuit as soon as possible, sniff around discretely and tell me what you think. How do the people feel? Is Davis right? Might they rebel again? And what will be the consequences of allowing the governorship to be assumed by a disgruntled confederate with a legislature ready to do his bidding?”

Mobley whistled out his own long, narrow stream of smoke, accompanied by a, “whew,” and stubbed his cigar. He nodded, stood up and extended his hand. “Mr. President, I shall do my best.”

Now, I think I should get out of here before you think up something else for me to do.”

~~Grant stood, laughed and shook Mobley's big hand. “A wise decision. Find out what you can and~~ keep me informed as you go. Don't do anything that might compromise your position or put you in conflict. If you need anything, or have some notion of what I can do to straighten things out, send short and sweet. If it is within my power, I will do it.”

As Mobley turned to the door, the President stopped him.

“One more thing, Mobley. I have something here from your grandfather. He gave it to me just last week, but in light of the task I've just given you, we've both agreed the gift should be yours.”

Grant reached into a drawer of his desk and withdrew a polished mahogany box with ornate inlaid silver scrollwork on the lid. “These are a matched pair of Colonel Colt's latest model cartridge pistols in .45 caliber. They are the first of his presentation models with a four inch rather than the standard six inch barrel, and vary only slightly from those to be issued to the Army later this year. At the moment, they are the only ones in existence and certainly the most beautiful. I have not had a chance to fire them, but am assured they are the finest pistols in the world.”

Mobley looked at the two pistols lying in their form fitted red velvet lined box, and was stunned into silence. They were beautifully engraved on barrel and frame, filigree inlaid with silver and gold. The color was unique, unlike anything he had seen before, black with case hardened streaks on the frame not unlike a Damascus steel sword. The grips were of genuine polished ivory and contrasted perfectly with the shiny black of the metal.

Mobley started to refuse the gift as too extravagant, but was quickly shushed by the President. “You may not realize it, but you are about to go into harm's way. Texas can be as peaceful one day as a mother's breast, and as dangerous as a pit of vipers the next. We have both agreed that you may find yourself in need of the best arms available. I'll brook no argument on this subject. Now get out here.”

CHAPTER 1

The grove of prairie Cottonwood chosen for his afternoon rest had seemed a paradise, cool and green but Mobley soon discovered it alive with critters of every sort determined to deprive him of his sanity. With a quick swipe, he flushed a swarm of flies pestering a sore on his hand, and then tried again to achieve comfort against the largest of the trees. Shortly, ants began to bite, a big spider crawled over his boot and a grizzled beaver stood, dripping wet from the creek, to hiss and growl at him as if he had just walked into the ladies washroom at the Grand Hotel in Boston and asked for directions to the whorehouse.

Mobley snarled back at the old beaver and drove it back into the creek, but knew it would persist in tormenting him until he took hint and abandoned its territory. The thought of a brief respite from the sun, of release from the endless waves of tall grass that distorted time and distance, no longer dominated his mind. All he needed now was that pit of vipers.

Austin in was 200 miles from Dallas; but he'd made good time and could not be far from Waco. His judicial appointment from President Grant required him to report to the Chief Judge for the 11th Circuit Court in Austin, and thereafter to take up his duties as the newest of the nation's U.S. Circuit Court judges. But the prairie had so reminded him of the sea, he'd not been able to resist traveling overland. He could have taken a train from Ft. Smith, but calculated the court could wait.

As he sat up and rubbed his eyes, an odd tingle, not unlike a muscle spasm progressed from his shoulders to his neck. The feeling traveled quickly to encompass his entire head, a welling up as if his nerves were under pressure to explode. Adrenaline shot through his body and a weight fell upon his chest squeezing his breath like a hard punch to the breastbone. He gasped at the effect, sat straight up, both eyes open, searching.

The ground began to shake, dust, pollen puffs and flashing leaves exploded from the Cottonwood grove, lending an odd winter-like patina to the scene before him. A low rumble became louder manifesting itself into the distinct sound of many large animals running hard, stampeding his way. A huge cloud of dust appeared on the northern horizon. "Buffalo?"

Mobley had heard of the Buffalo that had at one time dominated the Texas prairie, but had understood them mostly extinct in East Texas, destroyed by armies of white hunters, soldiers and pioneers.

The cloud seemed to expand and contract before his eyes, a huge yellow amoeba of dust and smoke. A few figures emerged. Definitely, *not buffalo*.

Holy Hades! Mobley scrambled to his feet, waving his hat to clear the air. His throat went dry and tightened ominously. It was a sorry lot of cutthroats, howling madmen in a blind charge accompanied by the noise and smoke of many firearms. In a single blink, they were pouring down the far knoll 200 yards away, a wave of mindless trash hungry for blood. Whatever the grievance, they looked as if this gang had cast its lot for murder, and was in no mood for negotiation.

For a man six foot six inches in height, Mobley was remarkably well coordinated, but he was no cat, capable of popping alert instantly for a run to the nearest tree. Moving rapidly with his buck longing for relief from hours on horseback was not easy, but the situation was clear and like it or not he had to move. More to the point, it was time to *RUN!*

In two giant steps Mobley was upon his horse. Rather than mount in his usual disjointed way, a series of elbows and angles, he'd flopped spread-eagle aboard, squeezing sensitive parts of his anatomy in the

process. He seized the dangling reins and jerked her around to the south. With a wild groping swip he snatched at his pack mule's picket rope, missed, then thought better of the idea. No time to save supplies. He slapped Meteor with the flat of his boots, trying desperately to get her moving and out the draw, away from this camp.

Good riddance to the place. Old Angus had been right. The Texas prairie was no place for the faint of heart, slow of foot, or those prone to pucker in times of stress. He booted Meteor harder, legs splaying outward with the effort. GIDDAP! But move she did not. She was somewhere else, safe in grazing mode, unaware of the mortal danger, content to do no more than munch and fart after a hard day's ride.

The very air now seemed alive, full of electric charge, as if a mean storm was about to crack down on Mobley's head, and still Meteor piddled, ignoring another hard boot. Then, an odd flutter and buzz, like that of a saw mill winding down, or a big hornet about to sting, raised the hair on the back of Mobley's neck.

BOOM! He ducked. *BOOOM! SMACK!* A large caliber bullet howled past, ripping bark and splinters from the old tree, shaking more clouds of dust and silver-backed leaves upon him. A cacophony of explosions followed, echoing down the shallow draw. The pack mule screamed, bounced straight up in the air and bolted westward, heavy pack careening loosely from side to side.

Heeeeeaaaaahhhh huh huh.

Mobley turned his boots outward to engage the spurs he'd almost forgotten, and then stung Meteor hard in the ribs. She reared, twisted in the air, and commenced to buck.

Mobley risked a peek over his shoulder at the oncoming riders. Gobs of slathering sweat flew from the flanks of the charging horses, hooves pounding clouds of dust, running flat-out, galloping careening horses, legs flailing out as they sought purchase on uncertain ground. On their backs, the screaming, hideous looking men, arms full of weaponry produced a continuous rattle of explosions. Poorly aimed shots but definitely directed at Mobley Meadows.

Holy Mother! These men were not just a tad irritable. Bullets whined off rocks, thunked trees and sizzled past his ear as Mobley fought desperately to stay on his terrified horse and put distance between himself and these assassins.

Meteor hunched and bucked around in a full circle, first running away from, then in panic turning back toward the danger, responding to Mobley's own excitement and contradictory rein. Mobley had never been anything but gentle with Meteor and realized that the hard spur had shocked her into active disobedience.

He wrapped his long legs almost completely around the big Appaloosa's belly in an effort to stay seated, but knew if she continued to misbehave, he was doomed. Still, she hunched, bucked, crouched, hopped, and ran in another circle. In desperation, Mobley leaned as far forward as he could, stroked her neck with his hat and waved it alongside her head. It was a trick he'd used before to distract her and lessen the panic.

One last jump, then, haunches squat, chest and head high, Meteor began to move. Chunks of moist black earth and grass flew from her driving hooves. Sparks scattered off the iron of her shoes as they struck the cobbles of the small creek winding through the cottonwood thicket. A covey of quail exploded from the brush directly under Meteor's flashing feet, but she remained under control and held her course as the birds whirred away to the West.

Mobley shrugged his head deep into his chest, white knuckles and fingers clinging to the saddle as the horse broke into a full gallop. In an instant he was up and out of the draw, gaining ground on a short stretch of flat prairie. When that came to an end, he dodged around hillocks and knolls to throw off the aim of his pursuers as he extended his lead.

He'd run close to a mile when he noticed a shallow notch leading down onto a lower plain. He

leaned his horse into the narrow opening and saw the Brazos River valley expand as a great panorama before him, the glint of the river itself threading like a huge snake a mile or so off in the distance, its banks approaches overgrown with brush and trees. For a moment he considered trying to lose himself in the thickets, but river brush here was rough, not unlike the brier of home in Tennessee where even a bear could not move. A man hung up in there would be easy to flush. All they would have to do was circle his hideout with firebrands and wait. He'd keep running. Let the horses decide. His confidence in the Appaloosa was complete.

Meteor pounded flat-out now on smooth bottomland near the river, neck stretched forward, tail standing straight out in the wind. With his lead extending, Mobley had time to study the terrain unfolding before him. Directly ahead, the river had cut a valley several miles wide free of brush and deep ravines. High cliffs stood off to the right. The ground near the cliffs sloped gently in what looked like steps in a balcony for as far as he could see, and the valley opened even more as he angled away from the river. If he kept to the flat land, he should be able to put some distance between himself and his pursuers, but sooner or later he would have to fort up. Everything depended, of course, on how hard his pursuers chose to push.

Looking back, he saw two of the men break away, racing ahead to stay on his heels while the others reined back to keep their horses fresh. There was no choice now. With this tactic they would eventually run him to ground, even with Meteor's speed and endurance. It was decision time. He must head for an opening in the cliff and fort up. If he could find a place with water and rocks to hide behind, he could at least make them pay dearly for his life.

As he drifted back toward the river valley wall and its rugged, rocky cliffs, Mobley saw several small indentations that might do, but he had to be sure. There would be no second chance.

After two miles of hard galloping, Mobley saw what he was looking for. An eroded cut in the cliff wall some fifty yards across, lay directly ahead. Brush and reeds on the plain before it suggested the presence of moisture leaking from the heights. Boulders lay strewn about and an overhang of the cliff face provided shade, which might become an important factor later in the afternoon. It was as good a place as any, and better than most likely to be found on short notice.

Having committed himself and out of immediate danger, Mobley relaxed long enough for fear and excitement to turn into anger. He could feel the change come, a slow building growl that issued from deep in his throat, just as it did when someone was openly contemptuous in his court, or who had chosen unwisely to taunt him for his great height. These swine had run him long enough. It was time for a Tennessee turn about, a little whittlin' an' whuppin' of his own.

Gradually slowing his horse, Mobley allowed the two lead riders to close on him. When they came within two hundred yards, he reined Meteor to a quick sliding stop and dismounted. The animal was blowing hard, but was well disciplined in this particular maneuver. Hooves spread wide, she stood stock still as he yanked his Winchester from the rear mounted saddle scabbard and laid it across the yellow rain gear rolled and tied above the saddle bags.

He whispered softly as he snugged the rifle to his cheek. "Come on boys, you've a date with the Devil and he's a knockin' at the door."

The first round shattered the quiet of the valley as it sped on its way; the empty cartridge careening through the air as Mobley automatically chambered and carefully fired another. A flock of blackbirds rose from the river rushes in a wild flush as the shots echoed from cliff to cliff. Burning black powder smoke, acrid and strangely sweet, wafted into his nose. He knew he had not missed.

Thank you, Angus. One rider lay dead in the grass, his legs twitching. The other's boot had caught in a stirrup. His horse was now bouncing his mortally wounded body across the prairie as it chased the rider-less horse of his partner. Both men likely died thinking they were safe, a hundred yards away from fast moving horses.

Two down, thirteen to go. Time to move. Back into the saddle, legs sweeping a wide arc, Mobley kept his rifle in hand and turned directly for the cliff face. The horse's tension and desire to run vibrated through Mobley's legs, but he held her to a gentle lope. If he could whittle the odds further, he might be able to try another run. Meteor must be allowed to work off some of her heat or she would tire too quickly when the time came. Looking back, Mobley could see the remaining riders, barely visible by their dust on the horizon, and judged they would not attempt to get close just yet. The man knew as well as he that he could not run forever. If they could stay within reasonable range and keep some of their horses fresh, he must eventually face them and shoot it out.

Arriving at the cliff face, Mobley saw with relief a trickle of crystal clear water running out of the draw. It was headed generally south toward the river, but he could not see where it made its entrance into that larger body.

He scanned the small canyon opening, looking for a place to make his fort, distracted for an instant by what he thought a wisp of smoke coming from the top. He studied the cliff for a moment but saw nothing.

Looking farther down the cliff face, he spotted a small recess at the base of the wall, boulders protecting it on three sides. The recess itself, some six feet in width, sloped generally upwards back into the draw. No problem with ricochets. But, if they decided to climb the cliff, he'd be in trouble from the far side.

Mobley turned into the opening, dodged low salty smelling rushes and green moss covered rocks, leaped to the ground and secured the Appaloosa to a clump of brush behind a large boulder. He snatched his spare ammunition from the saddlebag, and then scrambled over the jumble of huge rocks to stand in front of the small recess.

Satisfied he had chosen the best possible site for the coming battle, Mobley settled into the cover. He jerked his matched .45 caliber Colt's pistols from the wide triple wrapped red cummerbund around his waist, checked to make sure the cartridges were flush with the cylinder and would not hang up, then returned them to his sash belt. He thumbed two more shells into the rifle and mentally calculated the shots he would have. Fifteen cartridges were in the special-order, 30 inch barreled Winchester, and twelve total in the two pistols. There would be no room for error if he did not have time to reload.

Watching the riders approach, Mobley adjusted the folding sight on the stock of the rifle to its 200 yard gradient, close to maximum effective range for the new '73 Winchester. At such distance the 44-40 bullet would drop slightly more than two feet. Beyond that, its trajectory would deteriorate so radically only the very best marksman could hope to make a killing shot.

Resting the barrel comfortably on the boulder, he examined his enemies as they loped steadily toward his fort. The chill of impending doom inched up the back of his neck. A bitter metallic taste filled his mouth. Vicious and wild, these men looked as if they had never seen the kindness of a mother. Their clothes were outlandish combinations of weird looking striped pants, breechclouts, and fancy vests. Tall crowned hats bounced hilariously on several heads as they galloped. Some looked white, others dark-Indian or Mexican, he could not tell. Several had bandoliers stretched across partially bare chests. All held shiny new, "Yellow Boy," model 1866 Winchesters and were exceptionally well mounted.

The horses were unmistakably full-blooded Arabians. The distinctive, graceful and delicate form of the classic small headed black stallion lightly controlled by the leader of the bunch left no doubt. The horse did not just lope. It pranced its way forward, head high, tail cocked, straining at the bit as if it had been trained as a pacer. The other Arabians were of varying colors and shades. Whoever these men were, they were very well equipped. Few breeds could match the stamina of a well conditioned Arabian. Meteor might have had trouble keeping in front. Mobley knew then he'd made the right decision, to fort up.

Mobley began the slow process of concentration, of mental cleansing that would allow him focus all of his being on the sights of his rifle, the target held in slight blur. He tracked the leader, eyes focus shifting subtly now between target and sight.

There was something very strange about these men. They looked mostly Indian, Comanche probably, but the Mexican sombreros on some of them did not make sense. They were hundreds of miles from the nearest Mexican settlements and from what he'd heard, large groups of Mexicans were poorly received this far north.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he allowed his breath to escape slowly. Whoever they were, if they were seriously stupid they would keep riding straight in, hoping to get him with a lucky shot.

Come on, boys. Let's see what you've got in them gourds, brains or prairie chips.

It would take fifteen to twenty seconds at full gallop for the riders to cover the ground between his best range to point blank. In that time, he knew he could accurately fire most of the rifle's full magazine. If they came straight at him, deflection would be minimal, his fire effective. If not, he was in big trouble.

The riders neither slowed their approach nor spread out. Confident, whooping and hollering, they began to die as Mobley fired carefully and steadily using the boulder as a rest. There was nothing more dangerous; he recalled his grandfather say, than a good shot with a rifle who does not panic. It had been proven during the late Civil War, as studies revealed that in every battle, the most casualties were inflicted by the steady hand of the individual sharpshooter.

Mobley aimed first at those lagging behind, so as not to alert the front riders to the real danger until it was too late for them to take evasive action. Two fell hard, blood exploding from their naked chests, legs akimbo as they hit the earth, before the leader looked back. He jerked his horse to a sliding stop, then turned and circled away, whacking the black stallion with the barrel of his rifle. The rest began to check rein, but two more fell before they could scatter out of the killing zone.

One of the fallen was mortally wounded but cried out for help as he struggled to get to his feet, blood pouring from the walnut sized hole in his chest. The leader, a pock-faced, dark haired fellow with feathers sprouting from his headband and red paint on his arms and cheeks, was clearly wild with anger. He circled recklessly back to his fallen comrade, casually took aim with a pistol and shot the pleading man through the head.

Bile rose into Mobley's throat, competing with the massive infusion of adrenaline and its immediate after effect for control of his stomach. As he stared at the furious, murderous leader, Mobley's mood returned to anger. He could feel his teeth clench, jaw muscles flexing into tight knots. He would not let these rotten vermin win. His blood seemed to burn as his temper flared. He would fight to his last breath.

Rising boldly from behind the protection of his rock, Mobley raised his arm and gave them his best imitation of a lewd Italian street gesture, arm bent and shoving upward. *"HEY, WHAT'S THE MATTER YA ROTTEN PECKERNECKS? YA LOST YOUR TESTICULARS? COME ON BACK, LET'S PLAY SOME MORE."*

Now the riders whooped and screamed. They galloped back and forth firing wildly, waving their arms, yelling at one another until the feather-haired leader managed to restore order. They gathered for a moment, and then two bare-chested Indians rode off in opposite directions along the cliff base. Obviously, they were looking for ways to get above and fire down on him.

"WELL, FOOT!"

Mobley was still blind with anger, but he could feel it fading away, as it usually did. When very angry, his grandmother, who could never have brought herself to use a profanity, created her own vocabulary. "Oh, FOOT!" she would say, and you knew, if you had a brain, to be somewhere else before she came out with a green hickory switch and striped your bottom. Mobley might have said

something of a more colorful nature, had he thought hard about it, but he had long ago adopted his grandmother Featherheart's method, rather than be judged a nasty mouthed lout by his more prudish colleagues. Except of course, when someone insulted him or his court, then all pretense of following the rules disappeared.

He dropped back behind the rock to replace the expended cartridges in his rifle. He'd pissed the good, but now they were starting to think. The next attack would be coordinated, with men in front and above. As his mind raced, there was only one thing he could think to do. Reduce the odds even more before they all got into position.

Mobley quickly raised the sight on his rifle to 300 yards. The survivors of the first attack were milling around at about that distance, waving their arms and screaming at one another.

"You boys'd better step back a teensy bit," he whispered as he once again snugged his cheek tightly against the rifle stock. "It ain't safe out here."

Carefully gauging the light breeze out of the southwest, he caressed the sensitive trigger of the brand new rifle, allowing the feel of the weapon and the gentle odors of polished wood and gun oil to flow through his senses. Angus Meadows, also an accomplished gunsmith, had delicately filed the sear to reduce the rifle's trigger pull to slightly less than three pounds. Not so light as to be unsafe, but enough to help an average shooter become a dangerous marksman.

Mobley picked out the largest of the group, focused his attention on the man and the sight, and relaxed as best he could. The key to good shooting was to concentrate on the sight picture without thought as to when the weapon would fire. Just start squeezing and let it happen. Like as not, your target would drop like a stone.

The large man stopped moving laterally long enough for Mobley to settle the sight on the center of his chest. A soft straight back stroke on the trigger, a firm recoil, a comforting, *KA-POCK*. It was a long shot, one easily missed, but this time on target. Dust flew from the rider's shirt as the bullet impacted his chest and knocked him to the ground. Mobley levered a new round into the chamber and slipped another into the magazine to replace the one fired.

The remaining riders bolted, like chickens scattering from a fox, running for the safety of great distance. The leader stood in his stirrups yelling, waving wildly for them to come back. Eventually they did. Mobley began to line up on another, but they all started moving erratically. The leader had correctly judged if they kept moving, their chances of being hit were greatly diminished. Mobley elected to hold his fire until a more propitious moment.

He slumped back behind his rock, knees up, the forestock of the rifle resting flush against his sharply straight nose and forehead. Stay calm. Exhaling slowly, he watched his breath turn to mist as it swept past the hot metal of the barrel, then spiral off into nothingness.

Was that to be his fate, to simply disappear on the prairie as if he had never existed? An ephemeral wisp of what once was?

WHACK! Mobley slapped himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand. *Concentrate!* There had to be a way out. General Grant wouldn't be thinking of ephemeral wisps of vapor. He'd be preparing to attack. That's what he'd always done. But Grant had had the advantage of superior numbers. He ground his opposition down until they could fight no more. A grand strategist; but here now, was a classic tactical situation. Mobley was outnumbered eight to one. The enemy held the high ground, about to attack from two different directions. He had three choices: stay where he was, try to run again, or like Grant, *attack*.

Blast that man anyway, Mobley thought. He'd still be in Tennessee if not for Grant, doing real work for real people who appreciated his sense of justice. On the other hand, who could pass up a lifetime appointment? Even if it did come with a few strings? He was just returning a favor, after all, wasn't he, not compromising his judicial position? But, somehow, he'd thought a man in Grant's

position could have come up with a better way to do what he needed to do.

~~Mobley shucked off his buckskin jacket and laid it across the boulder, thinking it might keep the rifle stock from becoming scratched as it recoiled, then wondered why he hadn't thought of it before.~~

Once again he sighted down the barrel, then began to chuckle. A surprise attack? Take out as many as he could as they came, then charge them back. Like Chamberlain's bayonet charge at Gettysburg when he ran out of ammunition. A desperation move. He'd probably not survive, but at least he'd go out in a blaze of glory.

CHAPTER 2

Juan Antonio Lopez was starving. He may have been *number uno* of bandidos, servant of no man feared by all, but he was on his last legs, barely able to walk. Which was why he was sitting, knees hugged to his chest, eyes staring unfocused at the smoldering buffalo chip.

Everything about Juan was dirty, skinny and ragged. His own self-image, that imaginary thing that kept old men looking at girls and old ladies admiring the tight pants of the vaquero, as if they could do anything about it, no longer matched his true state, and he knew it. His cheeks were sunken. He could feel them. His eyes were so hollow they hurt, even when shading them with his hand. And his blood, that precious thing that must be conserved at all costs, now leaked from his gums almost continuously. Worst of all, in his mind, the beautiful curly dark hair that so many women had adored and could not resist fingering, was now pulled back in a tail under a sombrero crawling with prairie lice.

Staring between his closely held knees, Juan licked his lips and wiped his ragged mustache against the thinning wool fabric of his *pantalones*, the flared leather and wool trousers of a proud vaquero, silver conchos running down the stripe of each side.

The rodent sizzled, sputtered, and popped like gunfire over the smoldering chip. Acrid white smoke swirled about, assaulting Juan's eyes and stinging his nose. He closed his eyes, but did not turn away. Alone in his pain, Juan languished in a world far, far away. His own world, of his own making.

He was miserable. Not melancholic. A whore in winter without a favorite man, a vaquero lamenting lost love in soulful song; they, were melancholic. Juan was angry and past desperate. Hatred had become his only motivation, staying alive a moment by moment affair.

Chased out of every prairie town he had come upon, uneasily fed and encouraged to leave by fellow Mexicans who saw him a threat to their precarious lives, Juan had struggled on. He was not welcome in Mexico, and a Mexican was tolerated in this part of Texas only so long as he found another place to stay in his place. For a Mexican like Juan, who refused subservience and carried his guns in open defiance of bigots and their unwritten law, death waited in each new town. So far, a faster man had not appeared, and Juan had managed to escape the many posses out to avenge the drunken *gringos* who had mistaken him for easy prey. He'd lost count of the number, but not the feeling of anger satisfaction as he'd watched them die.

Stroking his bushy, unkempt mustache, Juan sensed a subtle shift in the prairie wind. He opened his eyes and slipped back into reality. The smoke moved away, irritated him no more, but he hated the wind. It never stopped, never left a man alone, at peace with himself. Worse, when it turned humid, as it had for several days, it foretold the coming of towering thunderstorms from which there would be no shelter.

Hurry up, rat. In the last few days, Juan had been reduced to eating prairie grass, the rodent's windfall. When it was gone, he would have nothing but his anger. He'd considered the despicable and probably final act of shooting and eating his horse, but knew a man stranded on the prairie without a horse could not hope to survive.

Hunched over the fire, smoke drifting back up again and around his destitute sombrero, Juan saw that the scrawny prairie dog was crisp, but found his enthusiasm for the meal waning. His thoughts drifted to the other rat in his life, the great General Santa Anna. *Father.* As his famished mind twisted the memory, the old general was responsible for most of his troubles. His anger toward Santa Anna

knew no bounds. He savored it, tasted the bile of it, and took comfort in black thoughts of revenge, gory murder most foul.

Before the animal's tiny legs completely burned away, Juan removed the charred creature from the steaming branch and forced himself to eat, carefully nibbling at the stringy meat. It was not his mother Smythe's kidney pie, but better than eating snake, and the Brazos was not far. *I should be able to catch a possum or raccoon. Anything would be better than eating grass and these damnable prairie dogs.*

Kidney pie? Now, there was a thought for a hungry man. He must be the only Mexican in the world with a taste for kidney pie. His thoughts shifted wistfully to visions of his deceased mother, the Lady Madelein Smythe, whom Santa Anna had seduced, betrayed, and ultimately broken.

Juan found himself fondling the Sharps rifle cradled in his arms. The *bandolero* loosely strung across his chest held a mere ten rounds, but in his mind he was ready. Vengeance would come. That, at least, was worth waiting for.

Juan caressed the smooth, well oiled machine. He might be starving, but he'd never failed to care for the rifle. It was family. The rifle had been given him by a dying old bandit who had ridden with him no more than a month before being killed by soldiers. It had changed Juan's life, turned him into a man of respect. In countless skirmishes along the border, fighting Texas Rangers and troops of the Mexican government, Juan had astonished his *compañeros* with the accuracy of his fire. He had brought down game at incredible distances, providing food where others had failed.

But now, there was no game to be killed at any distance. Something strange was happening on the prairie. The Buffalo were disappearing, as were the antelope. The stinking *gringos* were devastating the land, stripping it of everything that moved. He hated *gringos*.

Juan scraped the last birdlike leg-bone of meat with his teeth, sucking it out of his mouth with a long popping sound, and tossed the remains onto the fire. He did not realize how bad off he had become or how much he had needed food until the gray fuzz of his peripheral vision began to disappear. His thinking cleared, but the reality of his situation left little to celebrate. Juan considered his chance of survival at little better than fifty-fifty. If his horse could make it. The poor beast was skin and bone. He could not last much longer.

"Well, if you die on me, *caballo*, he said, startling himself and spooking the horse with the first words he'd said aloud for days, "I will eat you for sure. But try to hang on, eh? There will be good grass and plenty of water tomorrow."

The small stream wandering off in the shallow gulch to his left must empty into the Brazos. All of the land in this area sloped toward a river of some kind. He gathered himself and stood, clothes hanging loose on his whip-thin body. He tightened his gun belt another notch. If he lost any more weight, he'd be unable to keep his pants up.

Gunfire! Juan stiffened for an instant and ducked. *That was no popping rat.* He'd been hearing it all along, too numb with hunger to track.

Juan's well developed survival instincts took over. He kicked dirt over the burning buffalo chips, grabbed his bony horse's rein and ran half stumbling into a shallow watercourse near his camp. He flopped down in the sand, heart pounding in his ears. The firing had come from beyond the gulch where it steepened and disappeared from sight. Had he been seen? It didn't seem so. Whatever was going on was someone else's trouble.

Rising cautiously to his knees, he whispered, "Maybe we should get out of here, *caballo*. Someone is having a bad day."

All of Juan's instincts told him to run, but something else compelled him to investigate. He had always been curious, about men, their motivations, the sky, almost everything. His mother had instilled in him a sense of wonder of life and nature that had served him well over the years. Now,

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