

WANTED BY THE LAW AND THE LADIES

RENEGADE

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Chapter One

The U.S. Army hangman muttered, "I don't care what the Execution Tables say. I'd best drop this feller an extra couple of feet."

The hangman's tone was detached and professional and the condemned man standing in his stocking feet on the office scale knew the short gray master sergeant was only doing his job. He didn't ask what the hangman meant, either. Lieutenant Richard Walker, R.A., knew he had a muscular neck. As he stared soberly at the weight bar teetering slightly in time with his own pounding heart, he noted, dully, that he'd lost about four pounds since his court-martial. But he still weighed over one-eighty, and his six-foot-four frame was all lean muscle. The last time they'd let him look in a mirror his desert tan had faded slightly and his sun bleached hair was growing in its naturally darker shade of blond. It didn't look like he was going to live long enough to accumulate a real prison pallor. His execution was set for the coming dawn, and it was now about ten in the evening.

If the hangman was detached and polite enough, considering, the same could not be said for Lieutenant Chalmers, the Officer of the Day. His voice was gloating as he asked, from across the room, "Is it true they get a hard-on when the rope snaps their necks, Sergeant?"

The hangman didn't look at the prisoner as he answered, softly, "It happens, sometimes, sir." Then, addressing the prisoner, he added, "If you get a chance Lieutenant Walker, I'd be obliged if you went to the latrine just before we, uh, come for you. I promise you won't feel nothing if you do just like I say, but, for the sake of your, uh, dignity—"

The O.D. cut in, "He ain't no lieutenant, damn it! He's a fucking condemned prisoner with a dishonorable discharge printed on yellow paper!"

The hangman said, "Yes, sir. You can step down now, sir. I'm through examining you."

Dick Walker stepped lightly off the scale to the concrete guardhouse floor and turned to smile pleasantly at his tormentor. But his pale blue eyes stared at the beefy O.D.'s hate-filled face as if Chalmers had been a bug on a pin as he asked, quietly, "What makes you so friendly, George? Can't you find any stray cats to torture tonight?"

Chalmers snapped, "You'll call me sir, prisoner. You've been stripped of any rank that ever entitled you to call me by my first name!"

Walker grinned at the two colored M.P.s guarding the door to the tiny executioner's office and asked, "What are you going to do about it, George? Put me on a week's K.P. for insubordination?"

One of the enlisted men allowed his lips to twitch. The other managed not to smile. The O.D. snapped, "Take this son-of-a-bitch back to his cell and bring me his blanket and any tobacco he might have. We'll see how sassy he feels in the cold gray dawn with that rope around his neck!"

One of the guards opened the door and nodded at Walker. The prisoner followed him out as the other fell in behind him, shotgun at port arms. None of them spoke as the three of them walked the short distance to the cell block. Business had been slow on Death Row of late, and only one other cell was occupied. Like the guards, the other condemned man was black. The 10th Cav was a colored outfit with white officers, stationed on the border to keep an eye on unreconstructed Apaches and the odd government Mexico had these days.

The cell block consisted of a double row of ten prefabricated boiler plate cubicles with steel bar fronts. The only illumination was from a single electric Edison bulb hanging in the middle of the corridor. Its carbon filament cast a fitful light midway between yellow and orange, and the blue-gray steel looked green. The door to Walker's cell had been left open. Lieutenant Chalmers, who missed few bets, had placed him and the other prisoner as far apart as possible to keep them from passing the time in idle conversation as they waited to die. Walker stepped in and turned around as the M.P. in charge closed the door and threw the drop-bolt lock. He said, "I'll hand you the blanket, Corporal Clay. I don't have any tobacco left."

The N.C.O. shook his head and said, "He's likely forgot already, sir. If he says anything, I'll just be a dumb coon who forgets orders a mite. Lieutenant Chalmers don't think much of us dumb coons."

Walker smiled and said, "He's taking a personal interest in me, Corporal. We worked too hard for those stripes to have you lose them over such a petty bit of spite-work. I'll be all right without a blanket."

Clay watched as the prisoner walked over to the steel strap bunk and got the threadbare Army blanket they'd given him to fend off the bitter desert nights. As the prisoner handed it through the bars the black N.C.O. took it. Then, turning to his companion, he said, "Willy, you can see I has the blanket from this cell, can't you?"

The younger colored boy nodded. Corporal Clay snapped, "Then what's holding you up, boy? Go down to the next cell and fetch the lieutenant another blanket, you fool!"

"Uh, won't we git in trouble with that mean officer, Corp?"

"Look here, the man told us to fetch the blanket from this here cell, right? Well, damn it, that's what we's doing! He never said nothing 'bout other blankets now, did he?"

The guard called Willy grinned and stepped into the cell next door. Clay handed Walker a small tobacco pouch and some matches, murmuring, "I wish there was something I could do about this mess, sir."

Walker swallowed the lump in his throat and slipped the forbidden luxuries out of sight, saying, "You're a good man, Clay. But you'll never make sergeant. This man's Army hasn't much use for human beings."

Willy came back with the blanket. Clay handed it in, saying, "I knows about this man's Army, Lieutenant. You wouldn't be in this here fix had you been like most white officers. I'll never understand why you up and let them Mexican prisoners go instead of turning 'em over to the Rurales like you was s'posed to!"

Walker shrugged and said, "The Mexican troopers would have shot those men the minute they crossed the border, Clay. You know the kind of dictator El Presidente Diaz is."

"I knows that and Washington knows that, but your soft heart sure landed you in a fix when them Mexicans you turned loose kilt one of the troopers we sent after 'em!"

"All right, I was stupid," sighed Walker, wearily, adding, "I thought those Mexican rebels would be grateful. Maybe they would have been, if they hadn't been desperate. But it's all water under the bridge, now. I didn't give them enough of a head start. You'd better take that blanket to the O.D. before he has a fit. By the way, if he comes around, I'll hide the other under the bunk. It's so damned dark in here he'll never spot it in the shadows."

Clay laughed and said, "I knew you'd cover for us, Lieutenant. Ain't you always?" Then, in a more sober tone, he said, "They'll be changing the guard soon, sir. I means, I likely won't be on duty when ... Lieutenant Walker, could I shake your hand?"

Walker held his right hand out through the bars and shook good-bye with the man he'd promoted after that set-to they'd been through together the last time the Apaches had jumped the reservation. As Clay turned away, his young friend Willy licked his lips and said, "I'd like to shake, too, suh. I knows the bad things they say 'bout you, but they' ain't that many officers like you in this chicken-shit outfit!"

Walker laughed, shook hands with the last guard, and went back to his bunk as they filed out. He was glad it was too dark for them to have seen his eyes. Now if only he could make it through the night and mount those steps without breaking—

Time is relative. As he rolled a smoke and sat there in the gloom he had no way of telling how many hours he had left. It seemed a million years had gone by before another guard came down the cell block, making his rounds. From the gloom of his dark cell Walker could see the guards had been changed. He didn't know the colored trooper, who glanced in, blank-faced, made a turn at the end of the block, and started back to the card game in the front room. Walker started to ask what time it was, but he decided he didn't really want to know. In one way the night would be long and tedious. In another, it promised to pass too quickly by far. The guard paused to exchange a few words with the other prisoner. They were too far down the block for Walker to hear their words, but one of them laughed. Somehow, he didn't think it likely the other man waiting to hang had been the one who'd done it. He heard the cell-block door slam and, after a while, he heard what sounded like a hurt animal softly whimpering in the shadowy distance. He thought of calling out some words of comfort, but he couldn't think of any. What do you say to a nineteen-year-old private who's going to hang for rape in the morning?

Another million years went by and then, just as he was snuffing out his smoke, Walker heard the cell block door open and the officious sound of booted footsteps. Jesus! Were they coming for him already?

It was Lieutenant Chalmers. He was alone. Walker had just shoved the forbidden blanket out of sight and stood up when Chalmers got to the bars of his cell. The O.D. sniffed and said, "I smell tobacco."

The prisoner shrugged and said, "Guard was just through. He was smoking something. What's up?"

"Just came to see if I could catch you jerking off. Has it occurred to you you'll never get to come again, traitor?"

"Is that why you came to visit me? I didn't know you liked boys, but I'll service you for old times' sake, if you'll just drop your britches and back up to the bars."

"You're a very funny man, Walker. I'll bet you'll laugh fit to bust when they put that rope around your neck and drop you to your just desserts! You're fixing to die, you bastard! You're gonna shit your pants and kick like a rag doll on the end of that fucking rope and—"

"It's that time the Apaches had us pinned down, right?"

"You're a disgrace to the U.S. Army and the white race, Walker."

"Yeah, it has to be that. I never told the colonel how you wet your britches and fainted like a schoolmarm when

we rode into that ambush, but you've never forgiven me for being there, even if I did save your ass."

"Goddamn it, don't try and change the subject by bringing up that time I suffered a sunstroke. You were placed in charge of turning those Mexican rebels over to their own government and you let them go. You were directly responsible for the death of a United States soldier and ... damn it, I still smell tobacco! I'll bet those niggers let you keep some after all!"

"Oh hell, yes, I've been puffing away at a box of Havana Perfectos. I'd have saved you some caviar, but I didn't know you were so fond of me."

Chalmers drew his service revolver and said, "Stand clear, I aim to search your cell" as he fumbled a key into the lock from his belt ring.

Walker turned wearily away and stood facing the blank boiler-plate wall with his back to the O.D. as Chalmers opened the door. Walker could follow his motions from the shadow the armed officer cast on the gray concrete floor. Chalmers dropped to one knee and said, "Ahah! What's this under your bunk?"

Walker didn't answer. There wasn't time. He moved like a big cat on his stockinged feet as the O.D. started to rise, the revolver aimed at the floor for a moment. Walker's left hand came down hard on the O.D.'s forearm, knocking the gun out of his hand, as the prisoner's big right fist exploded against the side of Chalmers' skull!

And then Walker was kneeling atop the sadistic officer, pounding Chalmers' face into ground beef. He hit hard and he hit often, venting his pent-up rage and fear even as his common sense told him the fat prick was dead. Then, as he got control, Walker froze and listened, not breathing.

There wasn't a sound. If the other prisoner had heard anything, he wasn't yelling all that much about it. The wet smacks following the metallic clatter of the fallen gun apparently hadn't carried as far as the guard room.

Working fast, the prisoner stripped. Then he peeled the uniform off his victim's body and hurriedly put it on. The pants were too short, but Chalmers had been heavy-set enough for the tunic to fit well enough. The hat was too large and the boots were a bitch to get on. But Walker didn't intend to stand inspection in the immediate future. A white man was a white man and the black troops of the 10th Cav tended to drop their eyes around officers. It was a wild hope, a crazy hope, but what other hope was there?

Strapping on the pistol belt and O.D. brassard, Walker heaved the body on the bunk and covered it with the forbidden blanket. He went outside and hooked a foot into the cross brace of the bars to haul himself closer to the ceiling. It was a hell of a stretch, even for a man his size, but he managed to touch the Edison bulb with his fingers and, ignoring the heat, twist it loose in the socket.

The cell block was plunged into inky darkness. The other prisoner cried out, "What the fuck?" as Walker dropped off the bars and strode toward the front, making his boots echo importantly, the way his victim's had. The cell-block door opened, outlining a burly black sergeant with a gun in his hand as Walker snapped, "The damned bulb's burned out! I want a man posted by each cell door until I can get it replaced!"

Then he stood in the dark corridor and wondered if anyone could hear his heart as the sergeant of the guard yelled, "Morgan! Riggins! Front and center!"

Followed by two men, the sergeant brushed by Walker, who said, "I'll leave this door open for some light. I want your men by each occupied cell until I get back. You'd best position yourself here in the doorway. Do you have spare bulbs out front, Sergeant?"

"Uh, nossir. The post engineer keeps 'em in his shop. But I could switch bulbs from one of the other rooms we ain't using, sir."

Walker started to object. Then he saw the danger of acting even more unreasonably than the late Lieutenant Chalmers and said, "Very good. I'll wait for you here."

As the sergeant turned away to explore the guardhouse for a spare bulb, Walker turned his back on the men inside the cell block and stepped into the illuminated guard room. Somewhere, someone struck a match and he heard a voice call out, "That white officer looks funny, sir!"

Walker ignored him and kept walking, forcing himself not to run or look back. He knew the guard inside had no way of opening the cell, and he was banking on a colored enlisted man hesitating before voicing his suspicions loud enough to matter. As he opened the outer door he heard the guard call to his comrade, "Come here and have a look, Jonas. This man ain't breathing, 'less I'm blind!"

And then Walker was outside, striding importantly the way an O.D. making his rounds was expected to. He considered bluffing his way through the gate. Then he remembered the low spot in the post fence behind the enlisted men's latrine. It wasn't supposed to be there. But he'd never been on a post where the E.M. hadn't contrived a way to slip off post without fretting the first sergeant about fool things like an overnight pass to town.

He walked to the fence line, accepting a few salutes from passing troopers in the moonlight, and was glad he'd been more easygoing in his day than most officers were supposed to be. In truth, he hadn't been overjoyed when they posted him to the colored 10th Cav, but a soldier goes where he's told and does his job. He hadn't thought his

job included nit picking about the few forbidden joys an enlisted man could afford on the miserly base wages of the moment, and his men had repaid his occasional neglect of the fine print in the book by obeying his important commands to the letter.

As he made his way along the fence line he checked the revolver and saw it was fully loaded. A hurried exploration of the dead officer's pockets showed him he had twenty-eight dollars and change to work with. It was after midnight, but the sky promised at least a few more hours of darkness, whatever time it was. He was six miles north of the border and about a mile and a half from the little railroad town to the east. A man can cover four miles a hour easy. The question, now, was how many hours he had to work with.

As he approached the rancid-smelling latrine a small dark figure came out of it, adjusting its belt. Walker toughed it through by resisting the temptation to turn aside as he saw they were almost on a collision course. The colored trooper spotted the silver bars in the moonlight and brought his hand up for a salute. As they passed, Walker saw the trooper was Willy, the guard who'd been on duty earlier.

The trooper didn't say anything as they passed in opposite directions. But if he'd recognized Willy. There was still time. The boy was small and unarmed.

On the other hand, Willy had shaken his hand, and Walker knew most of his men thought he'd gotten a raw deal. So there were three ways it could go. Willy might not have recognized him. Willy might have known, but could be counted on to keep his mouth shut. Last but not least, Willy might want to be a lance corporal. The smartest thing he could do would be to knock the kid out and see if he had any money on him.

Walker didn't do the smart thing. He stepped into the dark shadows behind the latrine and jumped over the length of wire someone had been good enough to remove from its posts. The troopers using the secret exit for French Leave to Madame Octoroon's had worn a path through the desert scrub. It was easy to follow in the moonlight and wouldn't pick up his footprints, or, rather, his footprints would be lost among all these others. The escaped prisoner walked away at a mile-eating pace, resisting the impulse to run. He wasn't sure just where he was going, for one thing, and he might need some reserve speed before he got there.

He was less than a quarter mile from the post when he heard three revolver shots and a distant cry of "POST NUMBER ONE! SERGEANT OF THE GUARD!"

"That black bastard!" sighed Walker, breaking into a run for the eastern horizon. That fucking Willy had turned him in!

Behind him, the post was coming alive like a hornet's nest disturbed in the darkness. Somewhere a bugle was blowing "Assembly" and there were the sounds of slamming doors and shouted commands. He ran on, wondering how long it would take the colonel to put his pants on and ... Damn! The bugle was sounding "Boots and Saddles"!

All right, they'd mill about for a few minutes before fanning out the patrols. It was dark and they knew he was armed. They'd move out at a walk, slowing down as they approached each clump of brush and trotting their mounts across the open moonlit spaces. They'd send one patrol into town and another for the border. Maybe if he cut north?

There was nothing to the north worth running for. Sunrise would catch him on the open expanse of rolling desert pavement without anything bigger than a tumble-weed to hide behind. His only hope was the slight hope of finding cover, any cover, in town. So he ran on, ignoring the stitch in his side. He was out of condition after the weeks since his arrest, and one leg was starting to knot on him, too. But it was run or hang. So he ran. The pace a mounted patrol set, walking some and trotting some, was just about that of a man on foot running as if the devil were after him, and, since the devil was, he ran better than he should have been able to. He'd reached the outskirts of town before he heard the sounds of following hoofbeats.