

# ***APACHE BRIDE***

## **CHAPTER 1**

The lone horseman raced across the dusty plains in a blast of searing heat. A cloud of golden dust, shaken loose from the dry earth, left a trail behind the galloping horse. The only visible inhabitants of the vast open countryside were the coiled up rattlesnakes seeking shade beneath the desert dwelling plants. But it was the unseen inhabitants which caused the rider's haste.

The man's eyes warily scanned the mountain cliffs. The rider, aware he was being watched like a hawk eyeing its prey, felt a cold shiver snake down his spine.

Several stone-faced Apache braves, obscured from view by the craggy cliffs, stared out from their vantage points. Their deerskin pants and moccasins concealed them against the muted colors of the terrain.

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The town's few business establishments lined the main street. The western facades of the wooden structures offered hitching posts for their patrons' convenience. At this hour of the

afternoon, most people had already concluded their errands and were now heading home.

Women in long sweeping skirts bent their bonnets into the gusty afternoon breeze. The men strolled about town with a purpose in their step as their jingling spurs gently scraped the ground. The hats and clothes of the rugged men bore the collection of the day's dust.

Oblivious to their meager surroundings, children chased one another, happy to be free from hoes, plows, and daily chores, if only for a spell.

Two middle-aged, well-dressed women with puffy, sour faces paused on the porch of the General Store. Their expensive dresses appeared out-of-place in the dusty environment.

Arlene, the eldest of the matronly women, clutched the arm of her wealthy counterpart. "Look there," she mumbled under her breath. Her companion, Suzette, followed Arlene's gaze.

"Lawd, the mole has come out of her hole!" remarked Suzette, ripe for gossip.

The women's eyes were fixated on Anne Mitchum, an attractive woman of thirty-three. Anne cut a striking figure in her simple cotton shirt and long skirt.

Anne caught the scrutinizing gazes of the two gossip women eying her. Gathering her

swishing skirt in one hand, Anne thrust out her chin and marched into the bank.

Arlene shook her head and sneered. "I don't know why that woman bothers going in there. God knows she can't possibly have any money."

Suzette snickered. "I'm sure her husband will drink it all away . . . as usual." The two women chuckled and hustled down the road.

Anne entered the small bank and glanced about to find she was alone except for the bank teller who peered at her from behind the barred window.

"Nice to see you, Mrs. Mitchum," the teller greeted Anne politely.

Anne approached the counter. "It'd be nicer, Mr. Barstow, if it t'was money I was a'putting in instead of a'takin' out."

The teller's indifferent expression never changed. He'd been through this before. "How much this time, Mrs. Mitchum?"

"We'll be a'needin' twenty dollars."

The teller obliged Anne, but shook his head reluctantly as he did so. "Your balance is getting mighty low, Mrs. Mitchum. You'd better tell that husband of yours he'll be needing to make a deposit 'fore long."

"Just when my husband makes a deposit, Mr. Barstow, ain't nobody's business but our

own.”

The teller counted out the requested money. Anne took the cash and gave the man a none-too-friendly parting glance as she left. She closed the door behind her in a swirl of choking dust. The teller scoffed and muttered to himself, “Good day to you, too!”

Anne paused on the porch to count the money. Satisfied, the attractive woman climbed aboard a splintering worn out wagon and adjusted her skirt.

Her son, Weston, an active child full-of-the-devil at nine-years-old, lingered on the porch. His eyes were locked on a girl half his age. The girl’s attention was absorbed on the chocolates she popped into her mouth while her mother stood beside her chatting with another woman.

Weston approached the girl and stretched out his hand in a hungry gesture. The young girl noticed the wanting look on the lad’s face. She hesitated, and then stretched out her hand, offering the candy.

Just as Weston’s fingers reached the chocolate, the girl snatched away the hand holding the precious chocolate. Weston watched the girl pop the chocolate into her mouth. The selfish girl smiled at Weston, revealing a gooey mess coating her teeth.

The lad's face grew red with anger. Weston lashed out, yanking the girl's pigtail.

The child wailed loudly, but the girl's mother was so absorbed in her conversation that she failed to notice what had transpired. Happy with the punishment he had doled out, Weston grinned and leapt from the porch.

"Cindy, let's go," called Anne.

Her daughter, a sixteen-year-old beauty with golden tresses surrounding a flawless face, stood gazing at a store window behind which a lovely dress was displayed. It was Cindy's own reflection, however, which pleased her.

Weston climbed onto the wagon and took a seat behind Anne. "Quit gawking at your ugly face!" he hollered at his sister. "It ain't a'gonna change none!"

Cindy spun about and glared at her younger sibling. Thrusting her nose in the air, the teenage siren strutted toward the wagon with an exaggerated snobbish gait. As she climbed aboard and took her seat beside Anne, Cindy scolded, "Mother, I do wish you'd discipline your son."

Anne ignored her daughter's suggestion and gently shook the reins. The horse-drawn wagon pulled away from the bank and started down the dusty road. As they reached the edge of town, the lone rider and horse galloped past

them.

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Sheriff Frank sat slouched in a wooden chair propped against a wall of his office. In his hand he held a pocket knife, carving something not yet identifiable. Two lazy bums sporting deputy badges rested in their wooden chairs. Their hats were pulled down over their grimy mustached faces.

The Sheriff glanced up as the sound of pounding hooves drew near. He stared at the door, anticipating it to burst open any moment. Seconds later the door flew open, flooding the room with sunlight.

The lone rider entered on a gust of wind. His face and clothes were caked with dust. The man rushed over to a barrel of water and helped himself to a tin mug of the cool drink. The weary scout gulped down the water and smeared a dirty sleeve across his cracked lips.

The Sheriff stared at the man, waiting for him to catch his breath. His hand holding the knife was frozen, poised in mid-air.

The rider wagged a finger at the Sheriff and gasped, "Sheriff, you better get a posse in on this one. Them Indians are going wild back there. I found . . . ." The man hesitated and

shook his head, unable to go on.

The deputies suddenly came to life, wide-eyed and alert. The Sheriff stared at the scout. "Well? Speak up, man," prodded the Sheriff. "There's only one thing I ain't, and that's a mind-reader."

The rider held the interest of the three men. Glancing at the faces staring at him, he explained, "Sheriff, I found that stage coach we was a'waiting on. And it wasn't them bandit brothers that done 'um in like we thought."

The Sheriff's eyes narrowed. "You ain't saying them Apaches done 'um in?"

The rider leaned across the Sheriff's desk. "Sheriff, that's exactly what I'm saying."

"How you figure?" asked the Sheriff, searching for more proof.

"It don't take much figuring to know who done it when there's an arrow pierced in a man's back."

"Shot in the back, huh?" asked the Sheriff, resuming his carving, but lost in thought.

"Back, front, side, any way you say. Them Indians are getting wilder by the minute!"

The Sheriff scratched his oily head. "Now what in tarnation do them red skins want?" he asked himself aloud. "We done gave them everything they asked for just to keep peace in these here parts."

The rider gave the Sheriff a guilty, sideways glance that seemed to encompass all of the white man's failings and shortcomings. "Yeah, but there's just one problem. Once we gave them everything, we took it all back."

"They're savages, man. Used to living in the wild," the Sheriff said. "They don't need all that land just to set up a couple of wikiups."

The rider reluctantly pressed his lips together in silence, though he didn't agree one iota with the lawman's logic. He knew there was a foe out there more deadly than the Sheriff realized, and it was the white man who had driven the enemy to that point.