

Ranch Hands by Karen Harbert

CHAPTER ONE

My brother and I had finally arrived for the summer at a real, working ranch. Our Uncle Alex MacLeod and Aunt Jennifer drove us over from San Diego to the Thomas ranch in southern Arizona. Waaay southern, like fifty miles south of Tucson, and just a little more than twenty miles north of the Mexican border. When our parents had approved our summer here, they had a long phone conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Thomas: Bevin and Deb, they've told us to call them.

Mom and Dad are definitely not helicopter parents; they let me get involved in a situation here late last year with an outfit that took in teens in some kind of trouble, for a wilderness camping experience. Supposedly to teach them responsibility, but in fact, keeping them prisoner, abusing them and using them for forced labor. The Thomases had volunteered their ranch as the headquarters for the rescue operation, where Uncle Alex and the American FBI had been standing by to cover me. The FBI guy had wired me up with every possible miniature gadget, so they knew where I was every minute and could listen to everything that went on anywhere around me. My smart-ass little brother, Jamie, thought he was being really funny when he said, "Yeah, if you toot out there in the wilderness, we'll hear it all the way back here." Afterwards Bev and Deb and their son, Alan, took in Tonio, one of the other boys from that awful camp.

So, anyway, our parents: We live in eastern Canada, not far from Toronto, so we really don't know much about conditions this far south. I'm old enough now to start paying attention to the news and it's all full of talk about the 'invasion' of illegal immigrants, so they were kind of concerned about the supposed criminals pouring across the border.

"Mr. and Mrs. Crawford, take a look at the map of our area. There are no major roads in this area that lead to the cities; the terrain between our place and the border is incredibly rugged. The people who want to come here would have a terrible time trying to get further north where they might find work and shelter, and the smugglers who prey on them don't want to risk their own lives trying to take them through this area."

The four of us, Alan, Tonio, Jamie and I shared the ranch bunkhouse. Last time we were here, Jamie had claimed the upper bunk. This time we'd been given permission to bring our dog, Frodo, with us. He had shared Jamie's bed since he was a puppy, so Jamie took the bottom bunk. There were two more bunks across the room and there were small windows by each bunk so we could see out on a moonlit night, and often hear coyotes singing and owls hooting. It was set up as a kind of rough guest house with its own kitchen, a phone that was an extension of the main house phone, and even wi-fi.

Uncle Alex and Aunt Jennifer went back to California. That first night, when Jamie and I, and Alan and Tonio, were in the bunkhouse we must have talked half the night.

Tonio wanted to hear all about how his friend, DeJuan, was doing. DeJuan was one of the other boys we helped get away from that awful camp and we took him back to San Diego with us.

“Aunt Jennifer’s boss and his wife are adopting him. We all got together and went out for dinner when we were over there....”

“And he’s got a girlfriend!” Jamie crowed. “They brought her along to dinner. She’s going to be a nurse.”

“Good, she can patch you up when you get tossed from another horse,” Tonio told him.

“You didn’t tell him...” Jamie complained.

“I did, but I never told him about the wilderness camp four years ago.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“As long as you stay out of trouble while we’re here. I don’t want to get sent home because you do something dumb.”

The wilderness summer camp up home in Algonquin Park had been a valuable experience. That was where we learned how to survive with only what we had on us, or could scrounge from our surroundings. We learned how to make fishing gear out of paper clips, safety pins, bootlaces, and a branch we had broken from a tree. We even demonstrated it to Uncle Alex and Aunt Jennifer on our pond up home. We also learned how to make a fire using a ‘bow drill’ process that could take a lot of time and wear your arms out, but we were learning survival techniques.

The part of that experience I was threatening Jamie with was our first full day at camp when they gave us shovels and instructions and told us to dig our latrine trenches so we didn’t foul the ground around us, for us, and for the next people who came through our area.

Jamie dug his in a patch of poison ivy. Enough said, unless he makes me tell more about it.

So, when I helped get Tonio and DeJuan and almost a dozen other boys out of that camp, it was by building a fire behind the sadistic old wagon master’s tent to smoke him out and tie him up. Jamie and Alan knew about that part. They were part of the cavalry charge to the rescue – led by Uncle Alex, Royal Canadian Mounted Police Superintendent Alexander MacLeod. Aunt Jennifer, I should add, is a manager in the child abuse program in San Diego. We all got involved in it because her boss asked her to follow up on an investigation into the ‘troubled youth’ industry, where kids are put into these so-called ‘character-building’ programs. They concocted an entire scheme that infiltrated me into that place and they recorded it all.

In the morning, after not enough sleep, we woke up to the sound of a loud bell ringing from the main house.

“Aw, Geez,” Tonio muttered. “C’mon, Alan, we overslept and we’ve got to go feed the livestock. You two,” meaning Jamie and me, “don’t have to come out to work with us, but it would sure help.”

"No, you're probably as tired as we are," I said as I pulled on my jeans and yesterday's shirt. Time to unpack my stuff later.

Jamie groaned, but started pulling on his clothes too.

I followed Alan and Tonio to the corrals. Bevin had filled a cart with bales of hay; Tonio towed it to the first large paddock and started tossing flakes over the fence.

"You can fill the water troughs." He pointed to the odd 'farm hydrant' I assumed it operated like a pump and started pumping; Alan saw me, and with a laugh said, "Uh, uh, Stewart, they'll die of thirst while you're doing that. You just pick the handle up and hold it up until the trough is full."

Jamie came down to the corrals a few minutes later, yawning, with Frodo on leash at his heel. I was nervous about our dog; he was a purebred Cardigan Welsh Corgi, a champion show dog up home, and here in the States. They were traditional cattle herding dogs in their native Wales, but most of our show dogs spend their lives without ever seeing livestock. If Frodo started to chase or harass these cattle, we'd have to send him home. That is, if he didn't do something stupid enough to get hurt or killed. He was our dog, but Jamie had done most of his training, and show ring handling, and it was Jamie's bed he slept on.

I breathed a sigh of relief when Frodo showed interest in the cattle, but when Jamie told him, "Leave them alone," Frodo obeyed.

"You can't keep him on a leash all summer," Bevin told him. "Take it off and let's see if he acts responsibly. If it looks like he's going to be a problem, we can send him home before he gets hurt."

It took us about an hour to finish the chores. Frodo stuck close to us, mostly. He went around the outside of the stock enclosures, sniffing all the new and strange odors, and occasionally marking a fence post.

When we finished feeding the cattle, we went to the barn. The cows had all been pretty indifferent to us; they were only interested in the food. The horses were far more sociable; there were several friendly nickers, and noses poked over the stall doors looking for a rub as well as a meal.

Frodo investigated every corner of the barn, but kept out of the way of all of the large animals. When Jamie or I called him, he came right away, and by the time we were finished with the cattle, and then the horses, and walked up to the house for breakfast, Bevin said, "He'll do."

Breakfast had never seemed this good before; we were already tired from more than an hour's work. Bevin told us, "You always take care of your animals before yourselves; they can't take care of themselves and they depend on us."

Jamie had polished off a second plate of scrambled eggs with ham. When he finally pushed back his plate, he began, "Mr. Thomas..."

"Bevin, Jamie; you boys have been working as hard as the rest of us this morning."

"Okay. Bevin, can you help us teach Frodo to be a herding dog?"

"Jamie, I have no idea of how to train a herding dog. You saw Alan on Mitzi last year. That cutting horse is our herding dog. We've never had a dog on the ranch, not

because we don't like dogs, but because we never thought we had a job for one. Your uncle told us that your dog's brother learned to herd sheep up in Canada; you should ask him about teaching him to be a herding dog. If he behaves himself around the livestock, they may be able to give you some tips.

Mrs. Thomas, 'Deb,' had been up as early as the rest of us, cooking the eggs and ham, and baking cornbread. I thought maybe I had a skill that would be useful. "Deb, I wasn't much good this morning when I didn't know how to work the water hydrant, but I can help you in the kitchen. I don't think that being a chef is really the career I want, but cooking was one of the things I had to learn in order to infiltrate that youth camp. It was really useful and I want to help where I can."

"Stewart, that's a wonderful offer. I'll be more than happy to have your help with meals. That will leave the other three to do the washing up."

That got me a surreptitious stink-eye from Jamie.

Over the next few days we settled into a routine. I joined the other boys to start the daily feeding chores, but then went up to the house to help Deb with breakfast, and later, supper. Lunch was sort of everyone for himself; there were sandwich fixings always available, sometimes potato salad or pasta salad, especially when Deb discovered that I could mix those up as quickly as she could. We agreed that I could experiment with some of the recipes Aunt Jennifer had given to me, and try some of Deb's own, with her guidance.

"Stewart," she said, "you may not consider being a chef as your ultimate career goal, but even if you go into politics, if you ever find yourself unemployed, a good cook can always find a job."

I wasn't at all sure of my future career path – politics was certainly part of my family's background – but Deb was right: a good cook could almost always find employment – and as political careers went, a backup job was good insurance.

The Thomases were also not helicopter parents. Alan and Tonio were free to ride out and explore the country within a couple hours of the ranch. The rules were that they always had to stick together and always carry at least one phone. After the morning chores were done we would now join them.

"When I was growing up here, there were no cell phones; we had to rely on our good sense. Don't let the fact that you may be able to call for help make you careless; phones can get lost and there are pockets of no coverage at all."

"I know," Jamie piped up. "I found the phone that Uncle Alex dropped when we rode out to rescue Tonio and the other guys."

"Yeah, but you only found it because the phone was ringing," I pointed out. "If a horse had stepped on it, it wouldn't have worked at all."

"There's another thing," Bev said. "Alan and Tonio have learned how to shoot, and how to care for guns. Has your father, or your uncle, given you any instructions in handling firearms?"

"Uncle Alex gave us some practice with a pellet gun after they had a herd of pecorinas..."

"They're javelinas," I told him, "or peccaries, officially."

"Okay. So, anyway, he gave both of us some lessons and target practice, so I can learn to shoot along with Stewart. And Uncle Alex told us never to point a gun at anything we don't intend to shoot," Jamie said.

"When we were at his place in Alberta, his hunting rifles and ammunition had to be kept locked up. That's the law up home," I added.

"Things aren't as strict here," Bev said. "But we still have to store our guns safely, keep them from falling into the hands of children, or anyone else who shouldn't have access to them. If you two are interested, I'll ask your parents if I can give you some instruction."

"I am," I said. "I really am. Uncle Alex said I was getting old enough to learn to shoot, and to go hunting with him."

"I'm almost as old as you are, and I want to learn too," Jamie complained.

"I wouldn't do this for one and leave the other out," Bev said. "Let's call your parents some night and find out what they say."

"Yay!" Jamie cheered.

Our first couple of days we spent our free afternoons getting acquainted with the ranch, and the horses. Part of my undercover training had been learning to harness a wagon horse and I learned on their American Saddlebred, Breezy, trained for harness, and also as a saddle horse. She was a really different horse from the other ranch horses. She was a pretty, shiny, shade of gold, somewhere between palomino and chestnut. She carried her head high, not like the working ranch horses who all held their heads low. Alan had explained to us that it was because of the work they did as cutting and roping horses, so they didn't get in the way of the rider.

Breezy and I had developed a kind of a bond during that adventure, so she'd be my horse for the summer. I had my own horse now, up at Uncle Alex's place in Alberta so I was getting to be a pretty good rider, and by now, fairly comfortable around horses. Jamie was still the one with the real knack for it; he could ride pretty much any horse. Almost. He got tossed off of Aunt Jennifer's tricky mare when he challenged me to a race and she bucked him off.

Jamie had briefly ridden a couple of the horses, Breezy, for one, and the old Belgian cart horse that had also been liberated from that infamous camp, and now proudly pulled the Thomas's buckboard in the Tucson Rodeo Parade; neither of which were the right one for his summer horse. Alan and Tonio were helping to figure out a horse that would suit him.

"You should pick one that does something you'd like to learn to do. Bravo is Dad's roping horse; he can chase a calf at top speed, and when the rope settles around it, he can stop on a dime and give you back change. The appaloosa mare is Mom's barrel racer. She's all speed and quick, sharp turns. You saw Mitzi in action last year as a cutting horse; like Dad said, she's our herding dog. There are several other horses that are kind of all-purpose, so you can try out as many as you want till you find the right one."

"I'd love to learn how to do what you did on Mitzi; that was so cool. Can you teach me?"

"Maybe, but Dad can teach you better. Okay, let's saddle Mitzi for you so you can get to know each other." He brought out the striking brown and white pinto mare we'd watched in action last fall, and helped Jamie saddle her.

That day we rode around the different corrals, paddocks and pastures. The differences were a matter of size; pastures were large enough that grass could grow so the cattle or horses could graze. Paddocks were smaller and had grass if there hadn't been too many animals eating and trampling it. When one of those areas had been grazed down to the ground, Alan told us, they moved the stock to a different area. All of these areas were still inside of the perimeter ranch fences, so the valuable cattle were never in danger of getting out on the public highway.

Alan and Tonio introduced us to the different cattle breeds bred on the ranch. "The cows can all be penned together if we need to, as long as there aren't any bulls in with them, 'cause we always have to know who both parents are, and not cross-breed them. That's why Dad's breeding stock is so much in demand. Those red cows are Santa Gertrudis. They were developed in Texas about a hundred years ago because they're hardy and better suited to the sub-tropical and semi-arid climate, and they're resistant to ticks that carry diseases, especially the Longhorn tick. Enough of them on a cow or a steer can suck so much blood that the animal will die." Alan was a walking encyclopedia of facts about the ranch, and the heritage breeds they were producing.

"Do they just bother Longhorns?" Jamie asked.

"No, their name is actually long-horned ticks, or Asian ticks because they came here from Asia.,,"

Jamie pointed to another small group of cows. "Look at those guys! They look like Oreo cookies."

"They're Belted Galloways. They're from Scotland; they do well in harsh climates and terrain and rough grazing on coarse grasses. That's kind of like around here where we can get really hot summers, and sometimes freezing in the winter."

Tonio introduced the next different-looking animals. "Those cows are called Welsh Blacks. They're another breed that came here from somewhere else. They're s'posed to be one of the oldest in Britain, going back to pre-Roman times."

"Frodo's a Cardigan Welsh Corgi," Jamie told him. "That means they're from the same place, and Cardigans were old-time cattle herding dogs. So maybe Frodo can learn to be a herding dog."

"Sure, maybe," Tonio said. "Anyway, they're called a dual-purpose breed 'cause they give high-quality meat and milk, and they also do well in this kind of climate."

"Hey, I recognize those," Jamie boasted as we passed the end of one enclosure, and went on to the next. "They're Herefords; they're on all the ranches up home. Why are those special?"

"They're easy-keepers," Alan answered. "They're hardy, and fertile, and produce superior beef. They survive in almost any conditions, so their market demand is high."

Dad always has buyers for Hereford calves; the ones he doesn't sell to other ranchers as breeding stock, he can sell for beef, and he always donates one or two for a 4-H project. Tonio and I have our own 4-H calves this year; usually those are young steers so we can show how well we can raise an animal to reach its best market potential. In the case of steers, of course, that's beef, but this year we have different projects. Since Dad raises our cattle to be breeding stock for other ranchers, this year we have a young bull and heifer, both Welsh Blacks, and their parents aren't closely related. We can raise them as a future breeding pair, or they can go to different ranches. When we finally exhibit them at the fair, then they go up for auction. With steers, their value is usually calculated in dollars per pound; with our breeding calves it will be a whole new ballgame. We're kind of in new territory."

"When will you do that?"

"It's next month. You'll still be here to cheer for us."

"How many different breeds of cattle are there?" I asked.

"Dad says about a thousand all over the world, but about fifty are the best-known breeds."

"Why so many?" I wondered.

"It's like, why do we have so many herding breeds, or sporting breeds?" Jamie answered. "Cause there are so many different kinds of land, and brush, and mountains, and different animals to herd. Remember when our friend Brynn's Mom told us the same thing about all of their Sporting breeds? Different kinds of coat for different places where they hunt. Fast dogs and slow ones depending on how old or slow the hunter is. Dogs that find the birds, and dogs that retrieve them."

Jamie had always been more involved with Frodo as a show dog, and it sounded like he'd been seriously studying some of the things that I had always taken for granted. Well, good to see him start to take anything seriously – he'd always been kind of a dare-devil. Maybe he was learning some responsibility so just maybe I could relax and enjoy our summer here.

A few days later we rode out past all of the enclosures until we were on open desert. 'High desert,' it was called; we were at almost 5,000 feet above sea level. That was almost double the elevation at the property Aunt Jennifer and Uncle Alex had in Tucson, so it wasn't as hot in summer, and they could usually expect snow in winter. It was a nice summer day and we were just ambling along, when Tonio stopped his horse and held up his hand. "Look!" He pointed to an open plain to our south. We all looked, and saw a small herd of pronghorns, probably no more than half a dozen. They stopped what they were doing and looked at us, curious, but not frightened. But then something did startle them and they took off.

Jamie noticed it first. "They're not running, they're bouncing!"

Sure enough, they didn't run, exactly, they bounded through the air, touched the ground briefly, then sprang forward until the next bounce.

"Here, watch through these." Alan passed me his binoculars. "You should have your own; we'll see if Dad has an extra pair."

Jamie had his ever-present camera out and was clicking non-stop. What I saw through the binoculars, and later, when we downloaded his photos, was that at top speed, all four feet hit the ground at the same time, then pushed off together again for another long bounce.

"That's such a strange way of moving," I told Alan. "Is that really efficient?"

"They're the fastest land animal in the Western Hemisphere," he answered.

Just then Jamie yelled, "Hey, look! Look up! That's what scared them."

We all looked up, unsure of what we were looking for, and Jamie yelled again, "It's a drone! Remember when Uncle Alex told us about the time their friend crashed a drone into a plane that was flying at them?"

By the time we figured out where we were supposed to look, it had scooted out of sight; we had to wait to see that on Jamie's photo sequence as well.

We rode south and east, following a ribbon of trees that seemed to hint at water near the surface, although there wasn't any that we could see when we rode under them. Alan said it was a wash that sometimes had water if there had been heavy rain. The landscape was pretty barren; the winters were too cold for the majestic Saguaro cactus, and equally too cold for the nasty cholla (pronounced choy-a) with its deceptive soft and furry 'teddy-bear' appearance. There was prickly pear that grew close to the ground here, where as Alan told us, they often had snow in winter. There were scrubby native grasses, not enough to keep cattle alive, but mostly we rode on hard-packed desert dirt and sand. Aside from the screen of trees, we could see for a mile or more in any direction before the view was broken by rocky hills and sometimes small mountains.

We turned around after about two miles. Another mile would have taken us to the site of that 'troubled youth' camp that we'd helped Tonio and DeJuan escape from. We didn't particularly want to go any closer to that awful place, even though we were sure there was no longer any trace of it.

When we got back we unsaddled and sponged the sweat and saddle marks from the horses' backs, and turned them out in a nice, grassy paddock so they could graze until time to come in for the evening feeding. We all headed to the ranch house kitchen for the sandwich fixings that were always available.

"How'd you like Mitzi?" Alan asked between bites.

"She's nice to ride; I'd really like to learn how to ride her to carve out a cow."

Tonio snorted. "It's *cut* out a cow, *gringo*. We don't *carve* them until they get to the table."

Jamie took the correction without a sarcastic comeback, which gave me more confidence that this summer might really be a success.

Deb came into the kitchen while we were talking. "Tonio, you didn't know the difference just last year! Jamie, let's ask Bev about giving you some riding lessons on a cutting horse. The principle is that the rider points the horse at one animal that is to be separated out for any reason. Once you show the horse which animal you want, all you

have to do is sit still until you get it penned, and then lift your reins, and that turns the horse off. It's an exhilarating experience; I've done it, just to learn how, and it's amazing to just watch one of these horses do its job."

"How do you train them?" Jamie's curiosity was never-ending, and I often learned as much as he did from his questions.

"Aren't we lucky to live in the days of the internet? There are some good online videos of cutting horse training that you boys can watch when you're supposed to be going to sleep. There's wi-fi in the bunkhouse, and Alan has a laptop. Watch a couple of the videos. It may turn out to be boring to watch, but to train a good horse to be good at a job takes time, and patience. Just like training one of your dogs."

"Stewart and I have our laptop too," Jamie said. "I'm going to download the pictures we took today. There was a herd of antelopes..."

"They're pronghorns," Tonio pointed out.

"Okay, so I've got some really neat photos of them standing still, and then bouncing away from us when something scared them. Look! I caught what scared them; it was a drone flying over them."

Bevin walked into the kitchen just then and started putting together a sandwich of his own.

"Here's just the man to answer your questions," Deb said. "Bev, Jamie wants to learn to ride a cutting horse, and he asked about how they were trained."

"Well, learning how to train a horse for a specialist's job isn't something easily taught in a summer, but we can certainly work on your learning to ride one. I understand you've already been dumped from one horse..."

Jamie gave me a real stink-eye at that.

"...so if you hit the ground again, you know how to bounce. Some day, after breakfast, let's have a lesson."

"Oh, cool, thanks! Do you want to see my pictures from our ride today? We saw a herd of pronghorns."

"Yes, I'd love to see them. Let me finish building my sandwich, and dig into this pasta salad. Stewart, is this your doing?"

I told him it was, and I was glad he had noticed.

He put together a double-decker sandwich of roast beef, tomatoes, lettuce and bread & butter pickles, put a heaping scoop of pasta salad on his plate, and said, "Okay, play the movie."

"I didn't do a movie. They're just still pictures."

"Just a figure of speech. Let's see what you got."

Jamie ran the series of photos on the laptop, and when he did it quickly, it was almost like watching a video. "Here's the herd; we're watching them and they're watching us, and then all of a sudden they start bouncing away, so I looked up, and look what scared them."

The next few frames showed the drone maneuvering over the pastures and paddocks, and the pronghorns bounding away across the open desert on the other side of the fencing. I saw Bevin scowl; he asked Jamie to play that sequence again, and then told us. "I can't think of any legitimate business that thing would have flying over our property. Boys, be sure you let me know any time you see one of those again, and Jamie, I'd like to copy those photos to my own computer."

Jamie was thrilled, and forwarded them right away. Deb and Tonio exchanged glances, and then looked at me. I met their eyes, and nodded. I guessed that they thought there might be something suspicious about that drone flight, and maybe we'd leave the younger boys in the dark for now.

At breakfast in the morning Bevin said, "Stewart, Alan mentioned yesterday that maybe you should also have a pair of binoculars when you're all riding out. Take mine along with you, and between you two spotters and Jamie's camera, you should be able to catch any further incursions into our airspace." He made it sound almost like a military operation, and Jamie and Alan ate it up.

Tonio asked, "What can I do to help?" As one of the boys rescued from that awful 'troubled youth' camp, he was still a bit unsure of his status – employee or family member – on the ranch. He had been living with an aged grandmother, and an aunt, after his parents were deported. He had been arrested for stealing food to help feed his family.

"Tonio, I count on you to help keep all of you boys safe. You have the unfortunate advantage of your 'street-smart' knowledge to know when something doesn't look right. If there's something going on, you're the most likely to notice it. If you need anything to help you, just let me know,"

Bevin had made us all feel confident in our roles as watchmen for the ranch. I paid attention and admired his tact.

A few days later we were going to ride out again after we cleaned out the horses' stalls. This time we planned to stay out longer and eat our lunch somewhere along the way. I made up sandwiches while the other three boys cleaned the breakfast dishes, loaded the dishwasher, and washed and dried the cooking pans. Not without some grumbling from Jamie about my cushy job. When that was done we all went down to the barn, opened the outside stall doors to the corrals, and then mucked out the stalls.

There was a huge manure pile a bit further east of the barn. Alan told us, "One time a summer storm soaked it, and I don't remember why we were so busy that Dad forgot to turn it, but it started smoking a few days later, and then there were some actual little bits of flame, and it was a real pain to put it out. He had to use the tractor to knock it down and spread it around. Now we make sure to spread it around every few days.

When it gets to the point where it's good for fertilizer he spreads it around in the pastures."

"Wow! I'd like to have seen a burning pile of sh...

"Jamie! You know you're not allowed to say that word."

"I didn't say it. But it still would've been cool to see."

When the stalls were cleaned we got the horses out and saddled them. "Jamie!" Alan shouted. "Do you still want to ride Mitzi, or try another horse?"

"I want to get to know her; your Dad said he'd try to teach me to ride her when she was cutting cows."

Ah, well, Jamie was probably never going to find his future as a cowboy, but he was insatiably curious and always up for a challenge.

We rode east this time, toward the site of that troubled-youth encampment. Tonio and I talked about it first. "I'd like to see that area again, just to see if it's all grown over now, or if there's still evidence that it was there."

"I'm okay with it, *amigo*, you got us out of there, after all. Too bad DeJuan can't be here with us."

"Not if you'd heard him talk about the horses. DeJuan is definitely a city boy."

The route to that site was a little more than three miles; Bevin looked it up on Google Earth and then entered the coordinates into his GPS and handed it to me. "But don't forget the basics; watch your landmarks, and always look back along your trail, because things look different when you're coming than when you're going."

"Yeah," Jamie told him. "Uncle Alex showed us how to do that out in the desert. He had us look back along our route, and told me to take pictures when we looked back. He said you don't get lost going in when following a trail; you get lost when you try to find your way back again."

"Your uncle is wise; always check your back-trail so you know what it looks like. Take your phones, and let us know when to expect you back, before we have to send out a search party."

We didn't really need the GPS guidance to take us there; I remembered the landmarks only too well. We reached the line of cottonwood trees that bordered the meager stream and decided it would be a good place to have our sandwiches and water the horses. We moved under the trees, and I was leading the way because I had been the one to first escape from that camp and then lead the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (family joke) back to the site. As soon as we got to the little stream I stopped. "Hey, Alan, look at all these tracks. Can you tell what they are?"

Jamie had ridden up beside me, but also stopped before interfering with the scene. "Are they wild horses?"

“No, those are cattle, a bunch of them, and we don’t have lots of cattle out here on the open range; there’s not enough for them to eat. Let’s back off a few feet, and Jamie, I’ll hold your horse while you take a bunch of pictures of those prints.”

Jamie dismounted and moved closer to the stream bed on foot. He took a bunch of photos, and if there’s one thing Jamie is really good at, it’s photography.

When he was done, Alan moved us all back to a safe distance away, where our horses wouldn’t add their prints to the mix. “Okay, you guys, look at this.” He poured part of one of his water bottles on the ground, and then moved his horse forward until he could get it to place a foot on the damp ground. “Jamie, take a picture of this print, and then compare it to the others you got.”

Jamie did, and then scrolled through the first group of pictures till he got to the horse print. “Hey, look, they’re like, opposite! The horse’s prints have the fat part on the front of their feet; the cattle’s feet have the fat part at the back.”

A kind of quick-and-dirty description of the difference, but we could all see it.

“Look closer,” Alan said. “Cattle actually have cloven hooves. We need to show these to Dad. Maybe we shouldn’t hang around here too long. Let’s move upstream far enough to water the horses without messing up anything, and start back. We can eat our sandwiches on the way back.”

“Why upstream?” Jamie asked.

“Why? ‘Cause cows poop all over, even when they’re eating and drinking, so you don’t want to drink anything from downstream of where they’ve been.”

We each had our sandwiches in our saddlebags and our own water bottles. Alan now had one less water bottle, so I asked him if he had enough.

“Yeah, I’m okay unless we have a haboob and we’re cut off from civilization.”

“What’s a haboob?” That was Jamie again, but as long as he was asking all the questions, I was learning the answers too.

“It’s a ginormous desert sandstorm, like big enough they can see it from the space station. They get ‘em mostly around Phoenix where so much land has been cleared for farming. The wind just picks up the dust into a huge wall, kinda like a flash flood of dust. They can get up to a mile high, and if you’re in one, you can’t see anything. We got caught in one once when Dad was hauling the horse trailer. We really couldn’t even see the car in front of us, so Dad pulled off at an exit and we just waited it out in somebody’s parking lot.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like that’s going to happen and I still know the way back. I’ll bet Tonio does too.”

We reached a spot that Alan told us was far enough away from where the cattle had been so we could let the horses have a drink. “We still don’t want to drink it ourselves.”

Jamie said, “When Uncle Alex took us to a desert stream in California he told us: You don’t want to drink this water without boiling it or adding purification tablets, unless

of course you're lost in the desert and in danger of dying. In that case, tank up, and see your doctor when you get home."

"Yeah, that's true too; now, I kinda just think we should move on outta here and go back home ourselves."

That sounded like really good advice. We got out our sandwiches, mounted up again, and ate as we rode.