

GRIT BUCKSKIN

Chapter One

I'm doffing my Stetson in your direction and nodding my grizzled head in a friendly manner. The name's Grit Buckskin and I got a tale to tell.

Guess I'll start right off by telling you I'm a jailbird. Sure, you wouldn't think it of me now. I'm an upstanding citizen greeted with respect from Colorado to Mississippi but way back then I'd been slung in jail for carrying fake horse shoes across the Mexican Border. Those Mexicans sure loved my horse shoes 'til they split apart after a couple of hard gallops. By then, me and Marlene, I'll fill you in on her later, we'd be well over the border and making more shoes from used newspapers.

So I got caught. A double-crossing, no-good, ditch-hopping, dribble-sucking Sheriff by the name of Sid Claw did a devious duping on me by ordering a half dozen horse shoes - 'cos when I turned up to deliver he slapped his rusty cuffs on me quicker than you could say Chargogagogmanchargogagogcharbunagungagamog, which I couldn't, firstly'cos I'd never heard the word before and second 'cos my mouth was wide open in surprise. It's a lake in Massachusetts, by the way. So I found myself looking at five long years in Creaky Gulch County Jail with Marlene as my only companion - which would have been fine and dandy only you don't yet know she's Texas Longhorn. It's a kinda cow. Brown. Smelly. I won her in a bent cattle raffle back in Little Clunk, Omaha. Just two of us entered, me and the mayor, only I got his ticket and he got mine. He left in a huff, I left on a cow. She's been my side-kick ever since and many's the times I've had to kick her side. And as she was a proven accomplice to the crime (they found hoof-prints) she got slammed behind bars alongside old Grit.

Five long and weary years I spent in that lonesome cell. Each and every day I mended my ways and each and every day I mended my socks. Each and every day I vowed to give up my bad deed doing and get back on the straight and narrow.

So comes the day of my release. I remember it like it was yesterday, because it was yesterday and me and Marlene had scratched the last marker on a wall full of scratches. 1,825 scratches - one for every day of our incarceration - and Sid Claw was spinning the keys around his spindley, pokey fingers and staring his hardest stare through the bars.

"Think you're getting out today, Buckskin?" he snarled, picking corn from his tooth.

"Sure. Five years is up. Paid my duty to society and all that," I snapped back, "1, 825 days!"

Then Claw sniggered, then he giggled then he gurgled slightly, then he snorted like a branded mule. He wiped a little dribble from his unshaven chin and looked me square on.

"1,826 days!"

Marlene looked up in surprise and mooed quizzically.

"Sure, I'm right. You scratched a scratch for every day you was in here, but you failed to take into account that the second year was a leap year. You done one day extra!"

Numbers and stuff don't sit in my head too easily so I glanced at Marlene who was a better counter than me, but she just shrugged like cows do.

"You knew we'd been in longer than we shoulda?" I shot back at him.

Claw snickered again. His pencil thin moustache shivered like a rattle snake in winter.

"Sure!"

I threw myself at the bars.

"You no-good, Hicksville, low-down, son of a ditch cleaner. When I get outa here. I'm gonna...."

He spun the keys again.

"...gonna..."

"Gonna do what?"

I sat back down on the straw-stuffed mattress scaring a family of termites.

"I'm going get on Marlene and clod-hop a lonesome trail far, far from here."

Claw slowly slid the key into the lock and I grabbed for my tattered bag of things. He suddenly removed the key.

"And you ain't gonna get mixed up in no more nefarious high-jinks?"

He was using clever words now and they made my head hurt harder than numbers did.

"No, sir!" I said.

"You know what nefarious high-jinks are, son?"

"No, sir!" I said.

"Bad deeds. You served your time. Now get!"

And with those words he slipped the rusty key into the rustier lock and the clogs creaked round, the door sprang open and I was free and so was my cow.

It sure was a lonesome trail. A long and winding and dusty lonesome trail we was traipsing. Twenty miles outside of Creaky Gulch something odd happened. We was ambling along. Me

straddled across Marlene's chunky girth whistling a tune I couldn't remember the notes to and she stoutly stomping westwards carrying me towards the setting sun.

We was just crossing a watery ford when I hears the sound of a voice of someone. Now we was miles from Anywhere. Anywhere was a small town three miles back and we hadn't seen hide nor hair of any folk for hours. So whose was the voice and where was it coming from?

"Hello?"

There is was again. This was getting weird. I looked back and forth and back and forth and back and forth and back and forth for a fourth time and still my eye didn't land on so much as a one legged scorpion. Strange.

"I say - hello, down there!"

Now that got me thinkin' - down there must means the voice is up there. So I looked up there and up there I saw a young girl sitting in a tree. Maybe ten years old, the girl not the tree - that had been around for years. She was a Miwok Indian, so I guessed from her garb, but she sure didn't sound like one. See Native Americans, they got a different word for each of word of English. It makes my head whirl. It's like it's whole different language. But she was talking *my* language.

"Yes, you. You on the cow. I'm pointing at you now!"

I pulled Marlene over, dismounted and tilted my hat back on my sweating head.

"I see you pointing, I hear you talking, but I don't get what you're doing!"

"Well, I'm not doing anything, of course, I mean, obviously."

I scratched my head and Marlene scratched her butt on the tree.

"Don't shake the tree!" the girl suddenly squawked like a wounded eagle, "Move your cow away and help me down!" She'd got a sharp tongue in her little head.

"Well, I guess if I moved the cow nearer the tree *I could* help you down!" And so saying I shooed Marlene closer to the tree so the little lady could step gracefully onto her back and then disgracefully in a heap on the ground.

"Oh, for goodness sake," Came from the voice from under her patchwork shawl which got all twisted around her head, "Help me out!" And I did. She dusted herself down and as she did I slowly took a packet of pilchards from my saddlebag and nibbled a bit. I was about to offer her some when she said,

"My name is Kolenya - it means Coughing Fish!"

"What?"

"I'm Coughing Fish..."

I spluttered on my pilchard, patted my chest and cleared my throat.

"So am I."

Marlene mooed a disgruntled moo and moved to fresher pastures.

"Well, it's sure nice to meet you Coughing Fish," I said, wiping my sticky fingers on my sticky neckerchief. I doffed my hat and offered her a seat, well, more of a stump really, "You want somethin' to eat?"

"Do you have any oysters?" she asked, unfurling a perfect silk handkerchief and draping it over her little knees. I stared at the mush in the can I'd got from the saddle bag . I stirred it slowly. It made odd noises.

"Or consommé? We always had hors d'oeuvres at school..."

These words were making my head hurt so I decide to switch the talk.

"You sure talk pretty. Where'd you learn to talk like that?"

"Eton, old bean!" she said, brightly.

"You should stop eatin' old beans. You need 'em fresh. No more than six or seven months..."

She slapped her hands together and laughed.

"No, no, you silly thing, Eton School."

I didn't say it out loud, but I was wondering how you eat a school? I guess you start with the door mat.

She jumped in on my thoughts with, "It's a famous school in England."

I looked blankly at her and my eyebrows wiggled a little.

"Oh, for goodness sake, England! Surely, you'd heard of England?"

"Sure, it's the place where folk drink tea outa bowler hats and hunt crickets on horse back and they got a lady called Queen Victoria Station. I ain't dumb. Now do you want some chocolate and onions or not?"

And so I slopped out a hearty dollop of chuck and we sat slurping under the twinkling stars. As the night grew darker Marlene ambled back to the glow of the campfire I'd set up. She nudged me gently in the back and I knew what she was telling me.

"You want a tune, girl?"

Marlene nodded her head and slowly lowered herself beside me. I slide my trusty harmonica for my pocket and started blowing a soulful folk song.

"Do you play any proper instruments?" Coughing Fish suddenly piped up over my piping, "I play seven!"

I stopped, mid-puff, Marlene grunted and I said, "Where'd you learn to play seven instruments?"

Then we both said, "Eton, old bean!"

Coughing Fish clapped her hand in delight and we laughed.

"So, tell me, Buck where are you heading?"

The campfire crackled and the wood popped as I thought about her question. Don't know why I hadn't thought about it before. I didn't know where I was going.

"I'm going that way!" I said, pointing my harmonica westward.

"When are you going to get there?"

"Sometime."

"What are you going to do when you get there?"

"Somethin'."

"How are you going to earn money?"

"Somehow."

"You haven't got a clue, have you?"

I fingered my harmonica, tried a tune and then said, "Nope."

"Right!" she said, leaping to her feet and flapping crumbs from her handkerchief, "I'm coming with you. We're going to have an adventure!"

END OF CHAPTER ONE