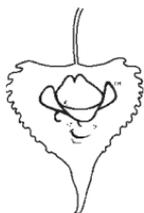


CHAPTER ONE

The Duck and the Coyote





“Wilder, I want to tell you a story,” Papa Milam said to his grandson sitting next to him.

The pair sat and stared into the black night of the grass trap pasture, their legs dangling off the pickup bed into the dark that surrounded them. They were almost invisible to each other, just two voices surrounded by silence. They were stiff and sore, hands swollen and puffy like winter wool gloves from the digging. Wilder’s body felt like a wrecked car, but his mind was sharp.

“When I came back from the war in Europe my thoughts were all twisted around—like when a barbed-wire fence is stretched real tight. And then a bull or something runs through it, and the tension breaks and it snaps and the wire wraps all around itself and everything and gets all twisted up in a big knot.

“Well, I was back here at the ranch and it had been dry for a long time, like it is now,

and all I did was work every day for Dad. I didn't hunt or fish or go to town. I just worked. That next spring a big rain came and broke the drought, and it must have rained about ten inches on the dry ground in a few days. All the ponds and cow tanks filled up and overflowed, and it kind of lifted me a little.

“In that big tank in the Lower Upton pasture, I noticed a pair of mallard ducks one day. They don't usually stop here to nest, but every day I saw them there. I got to where I would go and check on them and throw chicken scratch out onto the water. They never came close to me, but when I would go back a ways in the pasture they would come and eat the corn or milo.

“One day the green-headed drake was gone, and I knew that meant the hen had set up shop with a nest of eggs. She was on her own out here in the wilderness, and I felt scared for her because I had really come to like seeing them and I think it gave me hope for the first time. I didn't look for the nest in the bunch grass and mesquites around the pond, but I figured it was close. I started carrying my rifle, the .270 I gave you, in the pickup so I could shoot any coyotes or coons or whatever I might happen to see looking for those eggs as well. But it had quit raining and the pond was going down

faster than I expected it to. The ground sucked the water up faster than usual since it had been completely dry before that big rain. I gathered all the cattle in the pasture and moved them to the Mesa pasture just to keep the cows out of the water and away from that nest of eggs. Dad said that was silly, to shut down a pasture for a nest of duck eggs, but he went along with it.

“And then one day it happened—there was a line of six fuzzy tiny ducks out there in the tank behind that little hen. I guess I had seen ducks all my life but never really noticed them before. She was as brave and true as any mother I have ever seen, human or animal. Together they seemed like the prettiest things in all creation, and even though I hadn’t done anything really, I was as proud of them as I was of every cow and horse on the place. I can’t explain it, but I was.

“But the pond was shrinking. Fast. I looked up in an encyclopedia at the house that mallards need five to six weeks before they can fly. I didn’t think they were going to make it, but there wasn’t anything for me to do. I got to watching them every day. I would sit about 50 yards off at the corner of the dam and watch them feed and swim and talk to their mother. She would do a little whisper call when a hawk or falcon came by overhead, and then they all swam like little motor boats to the shade of that

big native elm that grows on the north side. The one that is still there.

“I realized one day that I wasn’t the only one watching the shrinking pond and the growing ducks. A coyote was too. I first saw her sitting under that elm, sitting straight up on her rump like a dog with its ears up, just watching those ducks. It was a female and she had a thinning spring coat that was real dark. Not black like wolf, but darker than most coyotes. I thought to shoot her at first, but I couldn’t bring myself to shoot a gun, and especially not at a living thing. I had been raised with it, but since the war I had had enough. So I would throw rocks at her and scare her off.

“Each day I watched the pond shrink, and most days I saw the coyote or its tracks circling the pond. It made my stomach sick. I watched and hoped and prayed for rain like I never had before. The hen and those chicks just needed a few more weeks and they could be gone and safe.

“But it never rained. The pond wasn’t 20 feet across now, maybe two feet deep in the middle. I hadn’t seen the coyote for a few days, and kept my fingers crossed.

“It was just into July and it was about 100 degrees, and I went to check my ducks around lunchtime and the pond was clear of ducks. It wasn’t much more than a big mud puddle now.

My heart sank into my stomach. As I circled the pond, coming close for the first time in weeks, I saw something move under the black shade of the elm. It was the dark female coyote. She began to move off from me, but she moved slow and was only about 30 yards from me when I saw her. It looked like something was wrong with her.

“When she got out from under the tree I knew what it was. She was bloated from gorging herself on my ducks. Our eyes locked and she looked like a scolded pup. There was a pile of feathers at my feet, and I saw the hen’s long brown wing feathers in the mess. That coyote had waited until the pond was gone, watching just like me, and then she butchered every single duck during the night. That fine little hen could have flown away, but she stayed and fought to the death for her young.

“Well, I saw red and knew I would have my vengeance. It was just like the war again. I sprinted to the pickup that was back behind the dam. I started the truck and raced to the top side of the pond where I knew I could cover the coyote’s retreat. I saw her trying to lope off, but she was slow and I knew I would take her easily. Her abdomen swollen from the feast, she now looked more like an old cow carrying twins than a sleek-coated coyote. I

grabbed the .270 and jacked in a shell and laid the rifle across the red hot hood of the pickup. My skin sizzled but I didn't mind as I found my rest and gathered the dog in my crosshairs.

"I can still see it in slow motion. She was about 150 yards out in the sand sage, and I picked a window and fired. The bullet made a little poof when it hit her in the flank, and she snapped back at the wound with her mouth as the slug simultaneously spun her around and laid her on the ground for the last time. I shot her again to make sure.

"I drove up to her with my heart racing as if it was the first thing I had ever killed. She was a mess from the two big rounds. She was dead. I threw her in the pickup bed and drove to the south fence line that faces the river and tied her upside down by the feet on the top wire of the barbed-wire fence as a warning to other coyotes."

Papa paused. He shifted his seat on the hard steel pickup bed. Wilder gulped but didn't look up at him. After a minute Papa continued, "Wilder, I've had 50 years to think about that. But now I want to ask you, who was in the wrong, me or the coyote?"

