



LONG TIME GONE



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Long Time Gone is dedicated to my grandson,
Luke. He has the best smile and the sweetest heart
of any little two-year-old boy in the world.





SKULL GULCH, NEW MEXICO TERRITORY
NOVEMBER 1880

Abandoning his sister to save his brother, Justin Boden felt as gutshot as Cole.

He left Heath Kincaid behind to find his little sister, Sadie, feeling as though he were tearing himself in half to make that choice. But he had only minutes to get his big brother home to stop the bleeding and tend his wound. Still, leaving her behind went against everything he knew about caring for his family.

“No.” Cole’s words were slurred. “Sadie.” He drooped forward until he almost lay on his horse’s neck.

Justin gritted his teeth. The outlaw who had gotten a bullet into Cole was tied over his saddle, its reins tied to Cole’s horse. But Sadie was missing. So Justin had to ask if there was more than one villain chasing them.

Justin grabbed the reins out of Cole’s hands and turned up the trail. Leading two horses, one with his wounded brother, trailed by one with the unconscious outlaw, forced Justin forward—the trail was too narrow to look back.

Cole didn't have long. If the gutshot was a bad one, it might already be too late.

Sadie was missing, and if the man they'd taken prisoner wasn't alone, killers might be on her trail—or have her even now. Even King Solomon would have a hard time deciding what to do about this.

Turning his back on Sadie was like cleaving himself in two. But he did it and then pushed hard up the trail for home. Only a few more minutes and he could get Cole inside. If he'd been gutshot—and that was what it looked like—they couldn't save him.

It nearly drove Justin mad to think of it.

The trail twisted and turned. It bent so it went alongside the mountain, then headed up a while until it got so steep it was impossible to climb, then it wound off sideways again to another spot they could climb. It was narrower and steeper with every step until on some of the sideways stretches, one of Justin's booted feet was in a stirrup dangling over a dead drop, while on the other side he could have reached out a hand and brushed the mountainside.

He came to a place the trail had caved off. He sure hoped his horse knew how to walk on tiptoes.

Justin prayed for all he was worth as he passed the narrow spot.

One more steep stretch and finally he skylined himself at the top of the mountain. A gale of wind hit him and warned of cold weather coming in. Northern New Mexico in November could be wretchedly cold or it could be pleasant. It was picking this moment to be nasty. He hung silhouetted against the clouds, then dropped down. He was stunned to see the ranch house right at the bottom of the hill. Oh, he knew the hill all right, covered with heavy woods, steep enough to make a mountain goat faint, but he'd never thought of it as hiding a trail. In his lifetime he'd never used it nor seen Pa use it.

Far below in the ranch yard, someone charged out on horse-

back and galloped for Skull Gulch. Two men had ridden with him besides his family. He'd sent them ahead fast with orders to run for the doctor.

Justin descended quickly, buffeted by a bitter wind that had been blocked on the uphill side of the trail. This downhill side was as steep as the uphill and just as heavily wooded. Justin followed a badly overgrown trail.

John Hightree, the Cimarron Ranch foreman, ran out of the barn. John had been with the ranch since before Justin's birth, and Justin trusted the man with his life.

Justin yelled, "I need help with Cole, and someone bring this varmint we caught inside and leave him tied up." Justin didn't have time now to give their prisoner another thought.

Rosita, their housekeeper, who'd grown up on the CR, stepped out of the house, took everything in at a glance, and got very serious. Considering the amount of blood, that didn't make her a genius.

Justin jumped down and rushed to Cole. His men were at his side, easing Cole off the horse. Together they carried him inside to Ma and Pa's bedroom on the ground floor and stretched him out on the bed.

Blood was everywhere. Too much of it for a man to survive.

Justin was a man of action. He fought for his brother's life by doing something. Moving fast. He had clung hard to the notion that if they could just get Cole home, quit shaking him up, stop the bleeding, and get a doctor's care, he'd make it.

Justin made things happen with the strength of his back. If he laid his hands on something and used every ounce of his muscle, it'd move. Now he wondered if any amount of hard work would save Cole.

Rosita hurried into the room with a basin of steaming water and cloths tucked under her arm. Justin stepped aside for her; it was either that or get run down.

"I sent for the doctor," John said.

"Justin, I need your hands." Rosita ordering him around.

And Justin was supposed to be the boss.

"Where is Sadie?" Rosita was focused completely on Cole, but she had noticed everything. "Why is *mi niña* not with you? Where's Heath?"

"Heath is bringing Sadie." Justin needed to go for Sadie. But it was taking both his and Rosita's hands to care for Cole. And he had an unconscious man in the kitchen with information that could stop a murder.

And he couldn't send someone else to help Heath and Sadie, because he needed John and he didn't know who else he dared trust.

Rosita unfastened a belt Cole had rigged tight around his waist, trying to keep his lifeblood inside.

Two of the hired men came in carrying their prisoner.

For a while it was a fur ball. Helping Rosita tend Cole. Shouting orders to his men to make sure the man was secure. Worrying about Cole. Near frantic about Sadie.

Rosita's orders were louder than Justin's and cut through the rest of the din.

She uncovered the gunshot, gasped, and her lips moved in a quiet prayer as she dipped her cloth in the basin of steaming water. She began washing, and Cole shouted in pain. Justin knew he was completely knocked out, because Cole could take a lot without so much as a groan. This cry of pain would never have escaped had Cole been awake. Rosita hesitated, frowning, her brow furrowed with worry, but she went right back to her doctoring. Justin hoped she didn't do more harm with the scalding water. But in a situation like this, Justin trusted her more than he trusted himself.

The prisoner stirred and groaned, then started struggling against the ropes that bound him.

John had helped carry the outlaw in and now he kept him under control.

Justin couldn't stand the distraction. "There's a solid lock on the cellar door in the kitchen, John. And that trapdoor in the floor is the only way in and out of there."

"Good idea. I'll take him down."

All they needed was for the man to revive, get loose, and bring chaos to the place while all their attention had to be on Cole.

John boosted the man to his feet and dragged him away.

Taut minutes passed as they battled to stop Cole's bleeding.

"He's taken care of, boss." John came in. "I'll stand guard over the desperado."

Justin nodded as John went out again.

Rosita's care of Cole was painstaking. She snapped out orders, and Justin did as he was told as fast as he could move. It was as if he could hear the ticking of the clock—time running out on Cole's life.

Justin remembered so many times Rosita and Ma had cared for all the injuries that stemmed from the harsh conditions of a New Mexico ranch. When it was Justin or Cole or Sadie, the tender care often ended with a kiss and a cookie. Justin knew this was far too serious to end as pleasantly.

"I am not going to fix a tight bandage because the doctor will soon come. I want him to be able to get to the wound without hurting Cole further. But we have to keep pressure on."

"There was another man who rode ahead of me with Alonzo. It's Ramone."

Rosita's head came up. "Ramone? The man who killed your grandfather Chastain all those years ago?"

Justin nodded. "It might not be as we think. I'll tell you everything later."

Rosita washed her blood-soaked hands in the basin and dried

them on a cloth Justin had brought. Then she turned back to Cole just as his eyes blinked open.

“Cole’s awake.”

“Where’s Sadie?” Cole’s voice, weak and so soft it was hard to hear, but his thoughts were clear.

Justin’s gut twisted. “Heath’s got her.” Justin had a feeling that was the absolute truth. And of course he wanted Heath to get her, yet he didn’t want him to *keep* her.

“Go, for heaven’s sake. Get out of here and go help.”

A clatter at the back of the house drew Justin’s attention and diverted Cole’s. He wished it’d be Heath with Sadie.

Wished it, prayed it, but feared it was not. This day was just too deeply stacked with trouble.

Doc Garner burst into the room, and right behind him . . .

Justin almost groaned out loud. He’d hoped for the sweet, wise, skillfully trained Sister Margaret. Instead his stack of trouble just got higher.