

Chapter One



endure — vi **1:** to continue in the same state:
LAST 2: to remain firm under suffering or
misfortune without yielding. vt **1:** to undergo (as a
hardship) esp. without giving in : **SUFFER 2:**
tolerate, permit



The warm desert sand felt good under Mouse's bare feet as he walked in the early morning. The fine grit rubbed between his broad toes, spilling over his toenails and the tops of his feet. Dust rose with each step in small cloudy puffs that clung to Mouse's dark skin giving him grayish socks beneath his brown trousers. His steps made regular, faint scrunching sounds in the sand and lizards and small mammals froze, waiting until he passed.



Grains of the fine sand occasionally stuck between Mouse's toes, but each step pushed it out. Mouse had a pair of white man's shoes slung over one shoulder, the tied laces served as a built-in handle, but it was better in the early summer morning to walk in the warm sand with no shoes, even if it did stick between his toes. The shoes might be needed later, however, so he kept them. They had been given to him by the Mormons in St. Thomas, Nevada.

The Mormons gave Mouse the shoes; the long sleeved, collarless shirt he wore buttoned all the way to the top, and also the brown trousers which covered his legs. He believed the Mormons gave him these things because they wanted him to come to church with them and become a Mormon. In 1896, the Mormons were always trying to get the Southern Paiutes to join their church. Mouse would take everything they wanted to give, but he would never become a Mormon.

He stopped and squinted into the sun over his back-trail. The lines crinkling out from the corners of black eyes deepened as he surveyed the ground. His steps had left hollows in the sand and he could see his track weaving through the pale, pungent sagebrush on the gradual slope behind him. The Mojave Desert air was clear and sharp. Not a cloud showed in the deep blue sky. Mouse knew there would be no wind today to blow dust and cover the regular depressions left by his feet. Even a white man sheriff should be able to follow that track, Mouse thought.

He turned and continued northwest up the slope toward the jagged red peaks in the distance; his steps scrunch, scrunching in a steady cadence. In four hours the fiery summer sun would turn the sand scalding hot and even his heavily calloused feet would feel the heat. Already, larger desert dwellers like the coyote and kit fox had taken shelter. Blistering July days were for resting and sleeping while the cool nights were for hunting and traveling.



Mouse knew this, but he also knew the white man sheriff, John Currie, would be after him this day. Three nights ago he had broken a small window in Bunker's General Store in St. Thomas in order to take a broad-bladed hunting knife and sheath from a front display. It was not the first time he had taken things from the small general store, but it was the first time he had broken a window, and it was the first time someone had seen him.

Mouse saw the woman who witnessed him breaking the window. He knew she raced home and told her husband, who told someone else, who told someone else, until by noon the next day, everyone was aware of the incident. By the following day, Mouse knew the Mormons in the town had gotten word to Sheriff John Currie who spent most of his time in other parts of Southern Nevada. The Mormons had left Mouse alone, knowing that the sheriff would come to St. Thomas this day and he would take care of the Southern Paiute.

Sheriff John Currie would come from wherever he had been and he would arrest Mouse for stealing the knife; arrest him and lock him in jail. Mouse knew this and it was not good. He had been in jail before and he didn't like it.

St. Thomas, where the Muddy and Virgin rivers met before trickling some twenty miles south to add their meager splashes to the Colorado River, had a tiny jail made from quarried stones. There were two windowless cells in the jail and a wooden door that stayed closed until the prisoners were fed twice a day; morning and night. The door had a tiny window with thick iron bars that let in air and enough light during the day so a man could pass the time counting the rocks mortised together in his stone home.

Each cell had a flat place in one corner on which to sleep, a blanket to roll up in and a small metal pot to use as a toilet. The gagging stench that rose from the dirt floor, however, belied the pots.



It was used much more often than the dented metal containers. In summer, the St. Thomas jail was like the vast stone structures built near Ely, Nevada, to make charcoal. Hot enough to make wood smolder, the immense ovens were airless to prevent flames from consuming the wood. Men in the St. Thomas jail smoldered but never burst into flames; not as long as they were inside.

Although Mouse thought it was a foul place, he also knew it was nothing he couldn't stand, as he had already endured it for two days, sitting out a sentence for taking and eating a tomato. But Mouse knew he would be locked up for many days for breaking the window and taking this knife; too many days for a Southern Paiute who loved the freedom of life.

The white man's law seemed a strange thing to Mouse. He had been arrested in St. Thomas for taking food; the tomato. His punishment, decided by the sheriff, was to sit in a place, the jail, where the people who had had him arrested were forced to feed him food the same as that which he had taken.

Mouse said the law made no sense.

"Why has the law not punished the men who stole Southern Paiute land?" he asked Sheriff John Currie. "Should they not be locked up in this small jail to smell the rot of confinement as the stone walls slowly closed around them?"

Mouse said the white man's law was crazy. Like the white man himself, who had no business intruding and interfering into the lives of the Southern Paiutes, or the Nuwuvi, the People, as they call themselves. Sheriff John Currie said Mouse was a rotten renegade redskin who would someday push him too far, and he would lock Mouse up for good; lock him up or kill him.

Stupid white man sheriff would have to catch him first.

Mouse was carrying the knife from Bunker's store in a brown, coarse hemp sack in which he carried all his belongings. The sack



had once been used to carry salt from an ancient mine near the Virgin River. As he walked, he hefted the sack with one hand and felt the hardness of the knife through its thick, rough material. He had been looking at the knife in the display case for several days and he had wanted it badly, but it cost \$2.50, more than a working month's wages. He hadn't worked in many days, and he didn't plan to. He was glad he had taken this good knife, the best of all the knives displayed in the case.

Mouse reasoned that the whites had stolen the lands of the People, and for this, he would take what he wanted from the whites. He would trade one thing for another, until he was satisfied. It was the way things should be.

As Mouse worked his way up the slope, he stepped on a thorn from a tiny desert cholla cactus. The sharp lance buried itself deep in the skin of his second toe on the tender inner side next to his big toe. Mouse stopped to pull it out. He checked his back trail again then knelt and tugged the thorn from his foot. A small drop of very red blood followed the tiny spear from his toe and Mouse carefully wiped the blood onto an index finger then licked the salty blood from the finger. It was moisture, life in the Mojave Desert. The small clean spot on his foot would last for only one step. Then it would be as before.

Mouse liked to think of himself as a thorn in the toe of the white man. A thorn that could not easily be pulled out and one that would cause much bleeding. If nothing else, Mouse thought that if he could dig deeply enough into the flesh of the white man, they would think twice about taking any more Nuwuvi land.

Mouse had left St. Thomas through the middle of town. He had been carefully obvious and many had seen him leave. At least one would tell John Currie which way he had gone. Again Mouse looked back over his trail. He knew in his mind the sheriff wouldn't be



coming for some time, but keeping one eye to his back was a habit of the heart; a good habit for a man like Mouse.

Mouse had heavy black hair that hung down either side of his round face. The strands of his hair were coarse, oily and beautifully shiny. He chopped his hair off square, midway against his strong neck. Sometimes he wore a folded strip of cloth tied around his hair and head. The cloth was red once, but now it was dirty black from the sweat and grime it had absorbed from Mouse's hair and forehead. It was in the hemp sack with the many things Mouse needed to live.

Mouse was a member of the Moapa Band of Southern Paiutes. His people had lived in Southern Nevada for centuries. The People believe their birthplace was on the 11,918-foot Mt. Charleston that rises tall and commanding above the Las Vegas Valley southwest of St. Thomas. Before the whites invaded and stole their land, all of Southern Nevada had been the home of the People. They lived by harvesting wild seeds and grains, growing crops in villages located close to rivers, killing wild game on the desert and catching razor-backed sucker, bonytail chub, and Colorado squawfish in the waters by their homes.

Yearly, Southern Paiutes traveled north to harvest nuts from the dusty, sweet pinion pines that studded the northern hills. The nuts were succulent and played an important part in the life of the People.

Mouse was born in 1877 in a small, dome shelter on the newly formed Moapa Indian Reservation on a portion of the Muddy River Valley. The Nuwuvi had been pushed to reservations because the encroaching whites wanted their rich and fruitful homelands on the river bottoms. By the time Mouse was born, some whites were even stealing, planting and running cattle on the little bits of reservation land that held a promise for tomorrow.

He was the sixth child in his family. Only Mouse and one sister survived childhood. Three sisters were killed by measles carried to



the Southern Paiutes by Mormon brothers and sisters and one died from the flu in a rugged desert winter.

When his mother had been ready to give birth to Mouse, she sent for help from the other women in the band. Before they could arrive, however, Mouse slipped screaming into the world. His mother told the other women that the boy baby came out so quickly, he was like a little desert mouse scampering from her body. Mouse was never called anything else.

The mahogany skin of his body was darkly rich and smooth with tight, tight pores. He was nineteen years old when he broke the window and stole the knife and although his face had the same smooth skin and tight pores as the rest of his body, it also bore the tiny wrinkles and grooves that would become deep lines and ruts in another 20 years. Just as repeated spring runoffs cut sharp crags and canyons in the barren hills of the Mojave Desert, Mouse's few years had begun to erode the youth from his skin. He bore their passage on his face; at the corners of his eyes and around his mouth.

Mouse's eyes were wide spaced and looked at the world squarely, with truth. His nose was broad and his chin strong. His mouth was a thin-lipped slash across his face that had the curves of a tiny smile built into the slim corners.

He was not a bad man, just a man who believed strongly in his convictions. It also deeply mattered to him that he was a Southern Paiute and that John Currie, who was the law, was white. Mouse had felt the abuse from the whites and he had experienced the degradation they heaped upon the Southern Paiutes even as they stole the People's land. He resented that the whites had taken the land that was once the domain of the Nuwuvi and he had felt the helplessness of being overwhelmed and outnumbered.

But Mouse was also at odds with authority, any authority. Had he lived before the time of the white invasion in Southern Nevada, he



would still have had trouble. Had his tribe decided, “This is what is good for us all,” Mouse would have questioned, “Yes, but is it good for Mouse?” It was his nature. There have always been such people. Perhaps they make the tribe strong.

He stood and scratched his foot back and forth in the sand. It was warmer now. The rising sun had begun cooking the air, turning it into a thick molten porridge that would cover the desert with a heavy, oppressive heat. Walking, even breathing would become difficult. He took a deep breath and tasted the air. His senses told him it would be very hot and windless today, an uncomfortable day to travel in the desert.

Mouse knew people, mostly white people, had died traveling in the heat of a day like this. There were no springs, no streams in the desert where he was going and with no water, people died. Even the sheriff would know this.

Perhaps John Currie would not come today, Mouse thought. When he arrived in town, perhaps he would tell the Mormons in St. Thomas he had traveled enough for one day and he would chase Mouse tomorrow. It was too hot today to be out running down one Southern Paiute who had stolen a knife.

Mouse looked far behind him at St. Thomas by the river. The tiny buildings in the green oasis of river willows and cottonwood trees wavered and rippled as the bands of heat rising from the desert sand tried to fool his eyes. Mouse looked at the city and in his heart, the heart that always looked over his shoulder, he knew John Currie would not wait until tomorrow. He knew the sheriff would ride into town, check with the Mormons in St. Thomas and then ride out after him.

This is good, Mouse thought. If the white man sheriff waited another day, the trail Mouse had carefully laid down might be blown away and John Currie would not know where to go. This way, he



would see his trail and follow it, and Mouse would lead him like he led a horse to water. *Or away from water*, he said to himself and roared with laughter deep inside his chest, although his face never changed and no sound broke from his lips. A desert dweller, he was as frugal with his expression as he was with water. John Currie, would go exactly where Mouse wanted him to go. This was a good thing.

Mouse turned and continued up the slope. He moved not with the exaggerated heel-toe, heel-toe step of the white man, but with the slight heel-toe, side-to-side rocking motion of all Nuwuvi; it keeps them in touch with the powers and rhythms of the earth. In a moment he reached the summit of the ridge that formed the western side of the river valley where St. Thomas stood. Without another backward glance, he quickly crossed over the top, moving from the sight and sphere of the white man, into the domain of Mouse, the Southern Paiute. His steps scrunch, scrunched in the warm sand.