

# *Justice at 40 Below*

By Jack L. Singer

## **CHAPTER 1** **Card Game**

His God-given name was just that – given, but not used. Instead, Jacob Bartholomule was only known as Jake B. He was the type of man that you did not ask what the B stood for; he told you. Jake paid the clerk for some jerky and some ammunition for his sharps, his bone-handled 45s, and the derringer he kept hidden under the leg of his pants. Jake had struck it big at the card game at the Big L Saloon. It was not a friendly game; hard feelings were sure to follow. Jake generally kept his thoughts to himself, but when the little easterner accused the big, ugly Texan of cheating, Jake put in his two cents to stop a murder. As the Texan reached for his gun, Jake reached for the Texan's throat. Jake remembered his Dad's advice: "Never hit a man with your hand if there is something else to hit him with. Broken knuckles hurt." With his huge right hand, Jake sealed off the ugly man's windpipe and, with his left hand, brought down the heavy bone pistol grip of his custom-made 45 on the side of the furious, but surprised, Texan's head. The Texan collapsed on the table as blood trickled down the side of his cheek. Jake scooped up

his winnings as the small easterner thanked him over and over again, saying, "I thought he was going to kill me. I left my gun in my room."

Jake just smiled and got up to leave. The easterner yelled, "Is there any way I can repay you?" Jake frowned as he left, turning at the door and saying, "Never leave your gun in your room and get as far away from this spot of Hell as you can. Tex will be a mighty unhappy man when he wakes!" Jake walked slowly to his hotel room, making sure he stayed in the shadows.

Jake had had enough of Tucson, anyway. Too damned hot. He had drifted down to the sweltering desert country last fall out of curiosity. Having been born in a logging camp in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, he could tolerate the cold much better than he could the heat. Pa had always said "You can always put on more clothes but there is only so much you can take off until you are naked."

The next morning Jake paid his debts, saddled his horse, and rode out of town. He had no clear idea of where he was going, but had no desire to kill the Texan, whom he was sure would come looking for him.

Much to Jake's surprise, a few miles out of town a small figure on a horse rode within 100 yards of him. Jake cocked his 45 under his coat, just in case. He recognized the easterner, who introduced himself as he pulled alongside. "Hi, I'm extremely pleased to introduce myself: Howard P. Edgemont, Attorney at Law. Thank you for saving my life last night." Howard P. Edgemont looked like a grinning fool as he extended his hand.

Jake nodded and rode on. At least the little fool had enough sense to get out of town while he was still in one piece. Jake had no idea of what exactly attorneys at law were, but he knew he did not like them. He had heard that attorneys used the law to steal.

The day was getting hot and the country rough. The flat desert had turned into rolling hills, thick with cactus and briers. The thorns on the briers were sharp enough to lance a man right through his leather chaps. Jake figured he would head northwest to Reno, Nevada. He had served under Captain Jesse Lee Reno in the War Between the States. Reno was killed at the Battle of South Mountain in Maryland on September 14th, 1862. Reno had courageously led the charge, retaking the battle-torn hill on that cold, gray, rainy afternoon.

He took a bullet to the throat. The battle was won, but the brave commander lay dead, never to see his beloved Nevada again. Although Jake was just a young foot soldier at the time and had never met the man, he always thought he would visit the town named after him and pay his respects. After that he planned to head north to see Montana. Surprisingly, the little man rode along without talking. At the top of a rise, Jake stopped to make some coffee and eat some jerky. The easterner, who was tagging along, asked if he might gather some wood and join him. Jake just nodded.

“Do you think the Texan will follow us?”

“It’s a good bet,” replied Jake. “I left the table with a fair amount of money.” As he chewed in silence, the hairs on the back of Jake’s neck stood up. He spied a cloud of dust on the distant horizon. The man making that cloud either had to be a fool to ride that hard in the heat or was someone who was close to his prey. Quickly Jake kicked dirt on the fire, cursing himself for showing smoke. With a surprised look on his face, the easterner asked, “What is the matter?”

“Dust in the distance, so unless you want to risk exchanging lead I suggest we ride on.” Jake was beginning to like the little guy. He did not talk too much and did not complain. Jake was sure, however, that the little fool did not know how to keep himself alive.

Jake dug a small hole for the ashes and covered it with dirt. He took a handful of brush and, working in a zigzag manner, scattered the evidence of the camp spot. Mounting up, he headed back on the trail they had come from.

The easterner looked puzzled, but he followed without a word. Three hundred yards down the trail, Jake headed up a rocky shallow where the tracks would be harder to follow. He knew this would be child’s play for an experienced tracker, but, judging by the soft skin of the big Texan, he was not a man used to the rigors of the trail.

Jake and the easterner rode on in silence for four hours, stopping occasionally to see if anyone was following. Around nightfall, Jake picked a rocky ledge to camp, one with a good view of anyone trying to approach them.

He dared not light a fire, so he handed the easterner some jerky, unrolled his bed roll, and made himself comfortable. “You take the first watch; if you fall asleep, I’ll kill you myself,” he mumbled as he

fell into a troubled sleep. Soon after falling asleep, Jake was awakened. "I heard something," announced the easterner. Jake cocked the hammer on his 45 and listened. After a while, he told the greenhorn to get some sleep while he took watch.

The next morning, nothing exciting happened and Jake could not see any evidence of being followed. Knowing that a careless man dies young in the wilderness, Jake skipped a coffee fire, saddled up, and started riding north.

The easterner again followed in silence.