

Because of a Dog

by Donald L. Robertson, ...

Published: 2016



Table of Contents

Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 6

* * * * *

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Locales and public names are sometimes used for atmospheric purposes. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, or events, is completely coincidental.



Chapter 1

NOLAN PARKER STEPPED out of the Mustang City Land Office into the cool, peaceful Colorado morning. He watched the young boy and his white mutt playing in the alley across the street. The two were wrestling for a stick the boy had been throwing. Nolan smiled, thinking about the fun times he'd had with his dog when he was a kid. The boy finally wrestled the stick free, leaned back, and hurled it as hard as he could. The stick arced high, and the dog raced into the street to catch it before it hit the ground.

Three men on horseback rode down the middle of the street toward Nolan, the alley, and the dog. Gravity took over and dragged the stick down into the center of the dusty small-town street. It bounced once, the dog right behind it, and collided with the leading horse's left front fetlock. The horse reared, almost unseating its rider. The dog, still focused on catching the tumbling stick and taking it to his owner, dove at the feet of the horse.

Nolan was enjoying the spectacle, right up to the point the man on the horse pulled his gun, cursing, and shot the dog.

"Whitey!" the boy yelled, as he dashed out to protect his furry friend.

Before Nolan even realized he was going to do it, he was racing toward the confusion in the middle of Mustang City's main street. The dog was rolling on the ground, while the boy was trying to reach it, and the man on the horse was yelling, "Get outta my way, boy. I'm gonna kill that mangy mutt."

The other two riders, busy trying to control their jumpy mustangs, did not notice what Nolan was doing until he had reached the shooter's right side. At that point, the man, who had been concentrating on the dog, turned to see Nolan almost on top of him. "What the—"

Nolan slammed into the side of the horse, grabbed the gunman by his open sheepskin jacket, and threw him into the dirt street. The gunman hit the ground, rolled, and tried to bring his six-gun to bear on Nolan. Nolan took two steps, aimed the point of his right boot, and kicked with all the strength in his long legs. The boot slammed into the Colt, hitting the trigger guard and the gunman's finger. The momentum of the kick twisted the gun up and to the right, momentarily locking the man's finger inside the trigger guard. The man let out a yell as the six-gun almost took his finger off, then sailed out of his hand, leaving him with a finger pointing off at an acute angle.

"Get him, boys!" the gunman yelled.

Nolan wheeled around to face the other two horsemen, who had calmed their mounts down and were now spurring them toward him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a woman racing from one of the buildings and into the street toward the boy and his dog, whose white fur was turning red with blood. *How many times*

have I told you to stop gettin' involved with other people's problems? Nolan unlimbered his .45 Colt Peacemaker. The two riders reined hard on their mounts, stopping within feet of Nolan, the boy, and the woman.

The gunman on the ground was moaning and holding his hand, the broken finger pointing skyward.

Nolan kept the cowboys covered with his six-gun. "Ma'am, is this your son?"

"Yes, he is. He was just playing with Whitey. He meant no harm."

The few buildings in town had vomited their occupants at the sound of the single gunshot.

"Ma'am, is the dog still alive?" Nolan said, not taking his eyes off the cowboys.

"Yes."

"Can you pick him up, and get him to the doc? This town does have a doctor, doesn't it?"

"Yes, on both counts." She turned to the boy, and said, "Come on, Rocky, let's get Whitey to Doc now."

"He's bleeding awfully bad, Ma."

She gave Rocky a sad smile and said, "I know he is, but Doc Nelson is good. Maybe he can save him, if we're quick about it." She scooped up the dog, blood staining her white blouse, and with Rocky in tow, ran toward a clapboard building with an outside stairway. She dashed up the stairs.

"Get up," Nolan said to the gunman.

Between moans, the gunman said, "You're a dead man. You'll never get out of this country alive."

Nolan, still watching the cowboys, said, "You speak awfully big for a man who goes around shooting defenseless dogs."

Using his good hand to push off the ground, the injured man stood. Nolan motioned him over next to the two riders.

"Now, you boys can tell me your names," Nolan said.

"I'm Grady Sadler," the injured man said, as if Nolan should know him.

"How about you two?"

The first cowboy moved his chew of tobacco to his left cheek, spit, and said, "Buster Pitts. Mister, you've got to know you're in a heap of trouble."

Nolan motioned to the second one.

"Folks call me Tom Stewart." The cowboy gave Nolan a hard look. "What's yore name?"

"Name's Nolan Parker."

At the mention of Nolan's name, Buster spit again, looked at Nolan for a long moment, then said, "You the Nolan Parker from down around Fort Griffin way?"

Nolan watched Tom give Buster a questioning look, then replied, "I've been in Fort Griffin. You boys cooled down enough for me to holster this six-gun?" He watched the two men relax in their saddles.

"Reckon so," Buster said.

"Good. Now, why don't you tie up your horses, and, since I'm guessing this dog-shooter is one of your crew, escort him up to the doctor's office."

The two men rode over to the hitching rail in front of the land office, swung down from their saddles, tied their horses, and walked back to Sadler. He was

standing in front of Nolan, still clutching his right hand. On the way over, Tom bent to pick up Sadler's gun.

"I'd do that mighty easy," Nolan said.

The cowboy looked at Nolan and picked up the gun with his thumb and forefinger. He started to hand it back to Sadler.

"No," Nolan said. "I reckon young Sadler here can't control his temper. You just stick that six-gun in your belt, and give it to him later." Nolan directed his next question to the red-faced Sadler. "Now tell me why a grown man would want to shoot a boy's dog."

Sadler glared at Nolan. "Mister, I need to get to the doctor. I don't need to be explaining myself to some old, no-account drifter."

Nolan smiled without humor. "I asked you a question, boy. You need to learn a little respect for your elders." He turned to the two cowboys. "You men don't look like hired guns to me. Why would you be riding for a man who would shoot a boy's dog?"

A crowd had gathered around the four men. Nolan noticed a tall, gangly man standing in front of the rest. The man's shoulders were starting to droop with age, but his eyes were clear and sharp. The Winchester he carried in his left hand showed plenty of use. His hair, slipping out from under his hat, was graying and contrasted with the black hat.

Buster spoke up. "Grub's good, and so's the pay. Didn't take time to ask about the folks I'd be workin' for."

Nolan nodded. "Next time, you might take the time to ask around." He looked back at Sadler. "Last time I'm gonna ask you. Why'd you shoot the boy's dog?"

Sadler grumbled. "He scared my horse. Anyway, I don't like dogs."

Nolan shook his head. "Don't meet too many people who don't like dogs. Mostly those kind of folks ain't worth knowing. Come on, let's get you to the doc."

The crowd opened a space as the four men headed to the doctor's office. When Nolan walked in, the doctor was working on Whitey. Rocky hovered close by, his mom's arm around his shoulders. The doc looked up at Grady Sadler, distaste showing in his face. "Sit down over there, and wait your turn."

Sadler started to say something, thought better of it, and sat. The two cowboys had taken their hats off when they came into the room and stood uncomfortably rolling their hat brims.

Doc Nelson turned to them and said, "What are you two boys doing still working for this outfit?" He nodded his head toward Sadler. Buster started to say something, but Doc Nelson interrupted, "It doesn't matter. Why don't you two get out of here. This office isn't big enough for a crowd."

The two men looked at Sadler. "Go on. I'll meet you in the saloon. Doc, my hand's hurtin' almighty bad."

"I'll get to you when I'm finished. I'd rather work on Whitey here than you. Now shut up, and let me work."

The doc continued to work on Whitey as he said to Nolan, "You sure put yourself out there for a dog, Mister."

"My name's Nolan Parker, Doc. I reckon I like dogs more than I like most people."

The doc squinted at Nolan over his half-glasses. "Well, it looks like you probably saved him. I saw it all. Grady would have shot him again if it hadn't been for you. I don't think that boy has a kind bone in his body."

"I'm sittin' right here, Doc. I can hear you, and I ain't no boy. I'm twenty-two."

"I don't care if you hear me or not. You're a blasted mean man, and, I'll tell you right out, if you don't straighten up your ways you'll never make it to twenty-three."

The doc turned his attention back to Whitey, worked for a few more minutes, then said to Rocky. "Son, your dog is mighty lucky. That bullet hit him high. It missed all the vitals and his spine. You'll need to take good care of him. He'll be laid up for a while, but as long as he doesn't get an infection, he'll be just fine."

The woman's eyes flooded for a moment, then she said, "Thank you, Dr. Nelson. You have no idea what Whitey means to Rocky."

"I imagine I do, Mrs. Williams. I was a boy with a dog once myself."

"How much do I owe you?"

"Mrs. Williams, I'll be needing a new white shirt soon. Maybe you could make me one."

The lady smiled, lighting up her face, the corners of her eyes crinkling. "I'd be happy to, thank you. When you're ready, come over, and I'll take your measurements." She squeezed her son's shoulder. "Rocky, what do you say to Dr. Nelson?"

The boy looked from his bloody white dog up into the face of the doc. "I'm mighty grateful, Dr. Nelson. I know you have trash that needs to be emptied. I ain't got—"

"Don't have," his mother corrected.

"I don't have any money, but I'd sure like to help for a while, if that's all right with you."

The doctor took off his spectacles, wiping them on the front of his white shirt. "Rocky, that'd be a big help. Thank you." He then extended his hand and shook Rocky's.

Mrs. Williams turned to Nolan. "I haven't thanked you, nor have I introduced myself. This is my son, Rocky, and I'm Melinda Williams." She patted Whitey on his head. "And this is Whitey, whose life you saved today. I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am. Rocky could have been killed out there." She turned for a moment and gave Grady Sadler a withering look, then extended her hand to Nolan.

It was a firm handshake, from a small, soft hand. She gave Nolan a warm, direct look. He took in her brown hair, pulled back in a tight bun. Dark eyebrows arched above her intelligent brown eyes. He liked the effect of her high cheekbones, giving her a regal appearance. He held her hand a moment longer than the handshake warranted, then, realizing he was holding the hand of a married woman, he released it.

"Name's Nolan Parker, and it weren't nothing, ma'am. Couldn't see a jackass kill a dog or harm the button here."

At that moment, Rocky stuck out his hand, "Thank you, sir. I'm much obliged."

Nolan noticed Rocky's strong chin, much like his mother's, and said, "Glad to help, Button." He reached over and scratched Whitey behind his ears. "Take good care of your dog."

"Okay, everybody's met and had their thanks and greetings. Now, would you get this dog out of my office? I do have another patient to take care of. Get over here, Grady."

Nolan scooped up the dog and headed out the door. "Just tell me where you want him, ma'am."

"Thank you, Mr. Parker. Please, take him across the street to the dress shop. We live behind the shop. He has a bed there."

As the door closed, Nolan heard Doc Nelson say, "Why, Grady, that finger isn't broken, it's just out of place. Let me straighten it for you."

The scream coming from Doc Nelson's office stopped people in the street.

Chapter 2

THREE PEOPLE AND the dog trooped across the Mustang City street and through the dress shop into the Williams' home. "Right here, Mr. Parker," Mrs. Williams said, pointing to a dog bed next to the back door.

Nolan laid Whitey on his bed, dusted off his hands, and headed for the front door.

"Mr. Parker?" Mrs. Williams said. "Thank you, again."

"No bother, ma'am. Glad to help." Nolan turned to leave.

"Mr. Parker?"

Nolan turned back. "Yes, ma'am?"

"How long are you in town for?"

"Ma'am, I'm gonna be leavin' pretty soon. I came here to look at some land that might be for sale. But I decided against it, so I'll be pulling out in a couple of days."

"Do you have a place to stay?"

"Ma'am?" Nolan said, his thick eyebrows rising, surprised she would be so forward in front of her son.

Her consternation was immediately obvious. Her faced turned a bright pink, and she said, "Oh. No, I mean, I was just asking—Mr. Parker, Rocky and I have a room that we rent. It is currently vacant. I thought you might need a room for your stay. Meals are included."

Rocky, who had been standing at his mother's side, spoke up. "She's a real good cook, Mr. Parker. Everybody says so."

Nolan looked down at Rocky, laughed, and said, "I bet she is, Button." Then he looked up at Mrs. Williams. "No, ma'am, I don't have a place to stay. I'd be much obliged to stay here. Sorry, the question kinda caught me by surprise. Are you sure your husband won't mind?"

"Mr. Parker, my husband has been dead for seven years. He was killed in a stampede."

"Sorry, ma'am. I didn't know."

“Of course you didn’t. But would you please stop calling me ma’am? I feel old enough as it is. Please call me Melinda or Mel. That’s what my friends call me.”

“Thanks, Melinda. Call me Nolan. I’ve got some things to do. What time is supper?”

“Supper is at five thirty sharp. We’ll see you then.”

Nolan nodded to Melinda and exited the dress shop. He turned to his left and crossed the street. His horse was still tied in front of the land office. He patted him on the neck, untied him, and led him over to the stable.

“Howdy,” a man said as he walked out of the stable. “Can I help you?”

“Need to put Duke up overnight. I’d like him to be well taken care of. He’ll be pleased to get some oats and corn, if you have ’em.”

“I do. I’m Lester Campbell. Everybody calls me Les. Saw what you did to Grady. Been a long time comin’. But if you’re gonna stay around these parts, you best keep your eyes open. Them Sadlers—they ride for Lon Tomson—can be mighty mean.”

Nolan led Duke into the stall and removed the saddle, saddlebags, and bridle. “I’m Nolan Parker.” He picked up a brush and started brushing Duke.

“I can do that.”

“No, I try to take care of him at least as well as he takes care of me.” When Nolan was finished he tossed the brush to Les. “What’ll I owe you for a night’s stay?”

“Let me see...” Les looked up at the rafters, his forehead wrinkled, as he calculated the amount. “Two bits a day, plus a nickel for the oats and corn, makes it thirty cents, every time.”

Nolan pulled out two bits and a nickel and handed it to the man, nodded, then headed for the saloon. He was dry. It had been a long trip for nothing. He’d been looking to make a new start with his own spread. Years had passed while he worked to save up enough money. Too many horses broken and too many cattle drives had taken a toll on his forty-year-old body. His sandy brown hair had white streaks through it. The sun had baked his strong, handsome face till it looked like brown, dried-out leather, with cracks and creases running from the corners of his eyes and mouth. Time had not been easy on him, but a word of complaint never crossed his lips.

He pushed through the swinging doors and stood for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light. A bar to his right ran almost the full length of the saloon. Scattered tables and chairs made up the space to his left. He’d seen his share of saloons, and they all seemed to look the same. Nolan noticed the tall old-timer he had seen in the street sitting at one of the tables, his Winchester lying across the tabletop. Nolan nodded to him and started for the bar.

“Mister, if you ain’t perticular about who ya drink with, I’d be obliged if you’d join me,” the old man said.

Nolan turned toward the man’s table. “Thanks.”

The old man moved the muzzle of the Winchester aside as Nolan pulled up a chair and tossed his beat-up black hat on the table. “Name’s Nolan Parker.”

“Cletus Shamrock, and don’t go makin’ no cracks about me bein’ lucky. What ya drinking?”

“Sarsaparilla.”

“Mighty strong. Think you can handle it?”

Cletus yelled to the bartender, “Bring this gent a sarsaparilla and me another beer.”

The bartender nodded his acknowledgment.

“So, what you doin’ in town? Saw you comin’ out of the land office. You plannin’ on buying land?”

Nolan stared at the salty old man. He’d tell most people to mind their own business, but he’d taken a liking to Cletus. “Planned on buying the Crawford place and running some cattle. Friend of mine had heard it was for sale. So I headed on up here to take a look. Wasn’t enough water for the number of head I wanted to run. Didn’t much like the looks of the grass either.”

“Heh, heh, right smart eye, young feller,” Cletus said. He scratched his head hard with both hands. “Had a bath last month. Still makes my head itch. Anyway, that piece of property’s been bought and sold at least three times since I’ve been here. It ain’t worth the wind it’d take to blow it to Texas. You still in the market?”

“Depends on what you got,” Nolan said, his interest piqued.

“I’m lookin’ fer a partner—”

Nolan shook his head. Partnering up with someone was not what he was looking for. He liked working alone.

“Hear me out before you go flyin’ off the handle. You got any money?”

Nolan laughed at Cletus’s directness.

“You can laugh. I ain’t got time to go pussyfootin’ around the question. You got money or not?”

“Well, Cletus, I wouldn’t be out here lookin’ for land if I didn’t.”

“Good. I saw how fast you shucked that Colt of yours. You any good with it once you get it out?”

“I’ve been known to hit something at least once out of five times.”

“How ’bout your rifle, you hit anything with your rifle?”

“About the same.”

Cletus leaned forward in his chair. He looked to his right and then his left, and in a conspiratorial tone, said, “Here’s the deal. Lon Tomson owns the ranch south of me. For the past year, he’s been ridin’ me to sell out to him.

“I’ve got about fifty thousand acres. Only have a couple of boys workin’ for me. Everybody else’s been run off. It has good grass and plenty of water. The water comes from several natural springs. They form creeks. The creeks flow water out into the prairie. Those creeks never leave my land.

“You come in with me and I’ll make it fifty-fifty. We’ll draw up a paper that says if anything happens to the other, the property and cattle go to the remaining owner. How’s that sound to you?”

Before Nolan could answer, the sound of horses pulling up in front of the saloon got their attention. A big man in his early forties marched into the saloon, four cowboys behind him. One of them followed him closely to his right, his gun low and tied down.

“That’s Lon Tomson,” Cletus said to Nolan. “He owns the Slash Bar.”

Tomson wheeled at the sound of his name. “Shamrock. You’re just the man I want to see.” He turned to his men. “Get a drink at the bar.” He swaggered over to

the table, pulled out a chair, and sat down, uninvited, ignoring Nolan. He said to Cletus, "You ready to accept my offer?"

"What makes you think anything's changed?" Cletus said.

"I know you're short of money. This is shaping up to be a hard winter. If it pans out the way it's lookin', you're done for. You may be a lot of things, but stupid you ain't. Now take my offer, and we'll be done with it."

The bartender brought Nolan his sarsaparilla and Cletus another beer. The cowboys were laughing amongst themselves. Cletus picked up his beer and took a long swallow, then wiped the foam from his thick, mostly gray mustache.

"Lon, you've always been a hard man. But you used to be fair. I'll be danged if I even recognize you anymore.

"No, I'm not accepting your offer, not now, not ever. And while we're talking about it, I'd like you to meet Nolan Parker."

Lon Tomson gave Nolan a quick glance and a dismissive nod, then turned back to Cletus.

Cletus continued, "My new partner."

This time Tomson whipped around and stared at Nolan. At that moment, the batwing doors flew open, and Grady Sadler walked in with Buster and Tom. "Mr. Tomson, what you doin' sittin' with that man? That's Nolan Parker. He's the killer from Fort Griffin. Look what he done to me." Grady held up his right hand, wrapped in white gauze.

Lon Tomson leaped to his feet, his chair flying backward and falling to the floor. He turned to Nolan. "Did you shoot one of my cowhands?"

Nolan raised his cold green eyes to Tomson. "No, I just taught him a little respect for life."

Lon looked to Grady for an explanation. "It weren't nothing, Mr. Tomson. That filthy white cur of Old Lady Williams's boy spooked my horse, and I shot him. Then, all of a sudden, Parker's all over me."

Lon Tomson looked at Tom Stewart and Buster Pitts. "What'd you do?"

Both men looked Tomson straight in the eye, and Buster said, "Parker shucked that forty-five so fast we didn't have a chance to do nothin'."

"You ain't dead."

"No, sir, we ain't," Buster said, "and we don't aim to be."

"You're fired."

Nolan looked over to Cletus. "We're partners?"

"You bet."

Nolan looked over his shoulder to Tom and Buster. "What's he paying you fellows?"

"Thirty-five and found," Buster said.

"You want a job?"

Buster glanced at Tom, and he nodded to Buster. "Yes, sir. Seems we're out of work."

"You're hired. You can meet us at the ranch. You know where it is?"

The two men nodded and turned to leave the saloon.

"Those horses are mine," Tomson said. His face looked like he was going to explode.

Nolan watched the man. This was a man who was used to getting his way. His face was as red as the setting sun on the Staked Plains. Nolan could see the man was having a hard time containing himself. He knew he'd made a powerful enemy in Tomson, not because Nolan had hurt his gunman, but because the man had lost face. He'd want revenge.

"You boys go down to the stable," Nolan said, "and tell Les to rent you out a pair of good horses. I'll pay him later."

The two cowboys went outside and unsaddled their horses. They could be heard chuckling as they carried their gear toward the stable.

The men at the bar were silent, waiting. Lon Tomson's jaw was clenched, the muscles balled up like a grapefruit. "This is your last chance, Shamrock. You take my offer or it's off the table, and I'll see you ruined."

"Bigger men than you have tried, Lon. My advice to you is to take your men and head back to your ranch. There's enough land for us both—"

"Your land has more water than any land around. I need it in order to expand, and by all that's holy, I'll have it." Tomson glared at Nolan. "Gunfighter, don't mess with me. There's plenty of canyons in these mountains where a man could disappear."

Lon Tomson shoved Sadler toward the door and motioned for his men to follow him. Leather squeaked as the men mounted their horses. The sounds of galloping horses and the smell of Colorado dust blew through the batwing doors.

Nolan wiped off the mouth of the sarsaparilla bottle and brought it to his lips. "In this town, it's sure hard for a man to drink his sarsaparilla without being interrupted." He took a long swig from the bottle, set it on the table, and said, "We've got to get one thing settled before I shake on this deal."

Cletus gave Nolan a hard look. "What's on your mind?"

"There's only one boss. I know you've owned this land for many a year, so you may not be able to handle it. But when it comes to fighting problems, I'm the boss. If that don't set with you, I'll be on my way."

Cletus took another swig of his beer and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He contemplated Nolan for a long moment. "Nolan, I ain't one who takes orders from another person, especially when it has to do with my own ranch. But to save my—our—ranch, I'll give it a try."

Nolan shook his head. "There's no try, Cletus. I won't go into this deal unless you agree. I need free rein until this is over."

"All right, dang it. I want to save this ranch." Cletus thrust his hand out across the table. "Deal?"

Nolan grasped his hand. "Deal."

Nolan and Cletus walked out of the land office a short time later, each with a copy of the new partnership, with one left on file. "So what's the plan?" Nolan said.

"I reckon you'd like to see what you bought."

The two men had stopped on the boardwalk, feeling the cold wind of autumn whistling down out of the mountains. Nolan buttoned his sheepskin coat and turned the collar up around his neck.

"You got room for me at the ranch?"

“Yep, if you don’t mind sleepin’ in the bunkhouse. The ranch house only has one bedroom.”

“Fine with me. Maybe we can add on in the spring.”

The old man hacked and spit. “If we’re still around come spring. Lon Tomson’s a hard man. He usually gets what he wants.”

“We’ll see.” Nolan started across the street to the livery. “Gotta get my horse. Then, I need to stop at Mrs. Williams’s place for a minute.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

The two men crossed the street to the livery. Lester was mucking out the stalls when they walked into the barn. “About time you did some real work,” Cletus said as he pulled out his tobacco plug and took a bite.

Lester continued with his shovel. “Ain’t you goin’ back to your ranch soon? You ought to be devilin’ your cows instead of me.”

Cletus held out the plug of tobacco to Lester. “Chew?”

Lester took the plug, pulled out his knife, sliced off a piece, and handed it back to Cletus. “Thanks.”

Nolan pulled money out of his pocket. “How much I owe you for the two horses?”

Lester pulled at his chin. “Any idea how long you’ll need ’em?”

Nolan shook his head. “No idea.”

“Well, how ’bout you pay me fifteen dollars, and we’ll settle up for the rest when you bring ’em back.”

Nolan handed Lester the money and walked back to Duke. He smoothed the saddle blanket across Duke’s back, while the other two men argued, and followed it with the saddle. Duke stood patiently chewing hay. Once Duke was saddled and ready, Nolan led him out of the barn. “Be seeing you, Lester.”

“You leaving town?” Lester said.

Before Nolan had a chance to respond, Cletus spit a brown stream of tobacco juice and said, “Yes, he’s leavin’ town. He’s got his horse, don’t he? Lester, that’s about the dumbest dad-blamed question I ever did hear.”

Lester shook his head and went back to cleaning the stalls.

Nolan led Duke to the dress shop and tied him to the hitching post. He and Cletus walked inside. Both men removed their hats as Melinda came into the shop from the back. “Hello, Melinda,” Nolan said. “I wanted to let you know I’ll not be staying.”

Her eyebrows went up, and she said, “Are you leaving for good?”

Nolan smiled. “No. You know Cletus?”

“Yes,” Melinda said. “We’ve been friends for a long time. How are you, Cletus?”

Cletus grinned, looked around for somewhere to spit and thought better of it. “Just fine, Mel. How’s Whitey?”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Whitey’s doing very well. He’s resting now. Rocky’s back there with him.”

“Melinda,” Nolan said, “I’m real glad Whitey’s doing good. I wanted to let you know, Cletus and I have partnered up on his ranch.”

“That’s interesting news, Nolan. I hope you know what you’re getting into. Tomson is a hard man.”

"It'll work out. Sometimes hard men just need to be shown the light. Reckon we'll try to do that." Nolan turned to the door with Cletus right behind. "Melinda, we've got to be going. Tell Rocky I'm sorry I missed him."

"Take care, Nolan," she said, as the two men left the shop.

Cletus spit as soon as he got to the street. "Whew, thought I might drown." He wiped his mouth on his shirt sleeve.

They crossed the street, with Duke in tow, and walked to the saloon where Cletus had his horse tied. The two men mounted and rode out of town.

"How long a ride is it, Cletus?"

"Not much more'n an hour, but I wanna show you some of the ranch first. That'll take us a couple more hours. We'll still be to the ranch house in time for supper." They nudged the horses into a trot and headed west.

Chapter 3

THE MOUNTAINS REACHED skyward, thrusting up like harsh, snow-capped granite fingers. The grass improved as they rode west. Dark green juniper trees dotted the foothills. Nolan could see a creek coursing through the center of a narrow valley marked by cottonwood trees marching along the bank.

"I own all this land from the south entrance of that canyon the creek comes out of, north and west. Tomson's property starts from there and goes south and southeast. He owns a lot more'n I do. But he ain't got near the water. I reckon that's what's got him more ornery than a grizzly with a toothache."

Nolan scanned the country. The creek had a holding dam built across it, forming a good-sized tank, and appeared to be full, with a small stream running around the north end, continuing down the creek bed. Several head of cattle were on the south side of the tank. They had stopped eating and were watching Nolan and Cletus.

"Those your cows?" Nolan said.

"Nope, they belong to Tomson. We both use this creek. I reckon if you ride up that valley, you'll find his stock mixed with mine."

"You haven't fenced the water?"

"Reckon I don't believe in being a cattle killer. I've seen 'em die of thirst—it ain't pretty. 'Course, I imagine puttin' up a fence would be like declaring war with Tomson."

"There's not much water running past the holding dam," Nolan said.

"Not so's you could tell. The creek is spring fed. It starts a couple of miles back into the valley. Like I said, the farther it gets from its source the more the ground soaks up, until it finally dies out. That dam holds the water longer. I've got another one nearer the spring. I've built 'em on all the streams on my land."

Nolan and Cletus stopped at the tank and let the horses water before heading up the valley. The grass continued to get better. The cattle were slick and fat. This is prime ranch land, Nolan thought. The canyon sides rose to their right and left, covered with scattered lodgepole pine and thick stands of quaking aspen now showing their golden leaves of fall.

"Cletus," Nolan said, "this is some fine-looking ranch land. How far back does this valley run?"

"Figure another couple of miles. We'll cut across this ridgeline to the north. That'll put us in another valley that's almost a twin to this one. That's where I built the ranch house."

The two men left the valley. As they climbed, the horses worked their way around huge, red boulders, finally arriving at the crest of the ridge. Topping out, Nolan could see the ranch, set back in a narrow neck of the next valley. A rail fence zigzagged across the valley floor, with a single gate allowing passage to the ranch house and the other buildings. The crystal clear creek ran from behind the ranch house, cut near the north canyon wall, and continued on its way down the valley. Scattered lodgepole pines thrust their green fingers toward the blue sky.

They rode down the ridge, into the high grass of the valley. Cattle grazed, just as fat as those in the other valley. They reached the road and followed it to the gate.

Cletus pulled up and yelled, "Hello, the house."

A man stepped out of the front door of the ranch house, rifle in hand, and waved.

"Good," Nolan said, "your men are alert."

"That they are. We keep a guard all the time. Ain't much of a chance of someone slippin' in on us. At least, that's my plan."

Cletus closed the gate, and they rode past the house and tied the horses up at the water trough next to the corral. They waited while the horses drank their fill and then led them into the barn.

Buster and Tom came walking from the house accompanied by two other men, all four men carrying their rifles. They followed Nolan and Cletus into the barn, where the two men forked some feed into the stalls, stripped their horses and curried them down.

"This here tall drink of water is Slim," Cletus said. "He's been with me since I started this ranch. He don't talk much, but he's a hard worker and mighty deadly with that Spencer."

Slim towered over all the men. *With boots and hat on, the man must be pushing the upper side of six and a half feet.*

Slim stuck his hand out and said, "Howdy."

Cletus turned to the other man. "This here is Shep."

Nolan moved the brush to his left hand and shook hands with both men. "Name's Nolan Parker."

Shep chuckled and then spoke up. "Yeah, we heard about you and your run-in with Grady. Reckon he won't be shootin' any dogs for a while."

"I'm hungry," Cletus said. "Has Cookie started supper?"

The men left the barn and walked to the ranch house. As they walked in, Nolan's eyes wandered over the bachelor's home. Spartan would have been an improvement. The living room had a desk and two chairs that looked as if they had been thrown together as an afterthought. Paper was scattered across the desk, along with a coffee cup filled with cold coffee. He could see into the bedroom that had only a bed and a chair. A rod had been slung across one side of the room to hang clothes on. The kitchen had a large table, surrounded by eight chairs that

appeared to have been made by the same workman who made the other furniture. A husky, bearded man was pulling biscuits out of the oven as Nolan walked in.

"Cookie," Cletus said, "this here is Nolan Parker. Nolan, this is our cook. We call him Cookie. His name is Andrew O'Grady."

The cook nodded and turned back to the biscuits, piling them high on a large plate. "Hiya. Now sit yourself down and get ready for a little taste of heaven."

"Cookie thinks highly of his cooking," Cletus said.

"Pleasure," Nolan said to O'Grady, then pulled up a chair at one end of the table.

Cletus sat at the other end with the cowhands on each side, still leaving two empty chairs.

The men sat and quickly put away the biscuits, venison, and gravy. They each followed it up with a big piece of apple pie. After finishing the pie, Nolan said, "Mighty good food. That pie was fine."

Cookie turned to Cletus and said, "You see, a good word don't hurt now and again."

Cletus grumbled into his last bite of pie, and cleared his throat. "I've got something to tell you all. Cookie, come over here and have a seat."

Once he had their attention, Cletus continued: "You boys who've been with me for a while know what's been going on. Tomson's been hiring gunslingers and trying to run us off. He's been successful with some of our hands, but I'm not leavin'. With that in mind, I want you to meet my new partner, Nolan Parker."

Cookie, Slim, and Shep were surprised. Buster and Tom just nodded.

Cletus continued, "From now on, Nolan's the ramrod. You have questions, take them up with him."

Shep started to ask a question when the sound of approaching hoofbeats got their attention.

"Cookie, do you have a gun?" Nolan said.

O'Grady nodded toward the Spencer standing in the corner.

"Good. I want you in the house to back us up. Slim, you and Shep head for the north side of the house. Buster, you and Tom take the south. I want you men visible, but be ready to get behind cover if shooting starts. Cletus and I will meet them out front. Now let's go."

The men grabbed their rifles and headed for their assignments. Nolan and Cletus walked out onto the front porch as Tomson, accompanied by eight hands, galloped into the yard. The riders pulled up in a cloud of dust.

"Cletus, I've been patient," Tomson said. "Now my patience is finished. I've come to buy your ranch once and for all."

"Lon," Cletus said, "you're dealing with the wrong man. Nolan here is the one you need to talk to. He's the new ramrod of this outfit."

"I don't care who I'm dealing with, I'm buying this ranch, and—"

"Has Cletus given you fair usage of his water?" Nolan said.

The question halted Tomson. He was a hard-headed, angry man, but the words drilled through his anger. He stopped for a moment. Then he said, "Yeah, I reckon he always has. But I'm gettin' more cattle, and with more cattle I need more water."

Nolan noticed that the big man next to Tomson frowned at Tomson's more reasonable tone. "Why don't you get down," Nolan said, "and come inside. We can talk this over. Maybe there's a way we can work it out."

"Mr. Tomson," the gunman said, "this looks like a trick. They've got men with rifles on both ends of the house. It don't look like they're plannin' on any peace talk."

"Who are you?" Nolan demanded of the gunman.

Tomson sat quiet.

The man turned back to Nolan, smirked, and said, "I'm Coker Sadler. Maybe you've heard of me."

Nolan knew Sadler's type. He'd dealt with them before. The man was about his age and a killer. *Why did Tomson hire him?*

"No, can't say as I have. But I met a young, dog-killing whelp in town. He had a tough time staying in the saddle. Don't think he'll be doing much shooting for a while. His name was Sadler, Grady Sadler. Does he belong to you?"

Nolan watched Sadler's face cloud up momentarily. Then the man showed even teeth in an icy smile. "My son. Takes after me. I don't much like dogs either."

Nolan turned back to Tomson. "Mr. Tomson?"

Tomson looked, for a moment, like he was considering taking Nolan up on his offer. "Coker's my foreman. He thinks you might be trying to trick me into coming into the house. I'll have to go with his judgment." Then Tomson straightened to his full height and said, "I came here to tell you, one last time, I want this land. I'll pay for it—or I'll take it."

"Mr. Tomson," Nolan said, "you're out of luck both ways. We're not selling, and if you try to use force, you'll be starting a war that, I promise you, you won't win.

"Now, if you've said your piece, it's time for you to take your hired dog killers and get off this land."

Nolan could hear the metallic snap and slide of rifle actions behind him. He watched the men on horseback, waiting. Each man's hand had slid down, close to their six-guns. The tension was heavy, like an afternoon thunderstorm just before it cut loose. All that was needed was for either Tomson or Sadler to call the play, and there would be blood on the ground from wounded and dying men on both sides. He felt his heart slowing. He couldn't explain it, but since he was a boy, anytime he was facing danger his body moved into a state of calm. His arm hung, relaxed, next to the Colt.

"I've said what I wanted to say," Tomson said, breaking the tension. He wheeled his horse around. "Let's go. Now's not the time."

Sadler gave Nolan a cold look and pulled hard on the bridle, spinning his horse around toward the gate, followed by the remaining men.

Nolan and Cletus remained on the porch. Nolan slipped the thong back over the hammer of his Colt as he watched the men race down the road, slowing only long enough to funnel their horses through the ranch gate. "That was close. I thought the kid on Sadler's right was going to start the music."

Cletus's head bobbed up and down. "Yep. That boy is real poison. He's another of Sadler's spawn. He goes by Lefty. He's faster than a mountain rattler and just as deadly."

The sun had disappeared behind the mountains to the west, taking the warmth with it. A chill wind was picking up as the air cooled and rushed down the mountainside. Nolan pulled his coat close. "Cools off mighty quick after that sun goes down."

Cletus spit at the base of one of the posts supporting the rail around the porch. "It sure does, but being among these big pines helps break the wind. You get yourself up above timberline, where there ain't a tree to slow down the wind, and it's downright uncomfortable. Let's get some coffee."

The riders disappeared down the valley. "Okay, boys," Nolan said, "let's go on in and warm up."

Once they were settled around the table, with Buster on guard, Nolan asked Cletus, "How long has the Sadler bunch been working for Tomson?"

Cletus took a sip of his coffee, savoring the hot liquid for a moment before swallowing, and said, "They joined up shortly after Tomson's daughter was killed, so that means they've been there for nigh on to a year now. Her dying sure hurt Lon. She was quite a girl."

"How'd it happen?"

Cletus continued, "She had a hardheaded strawberry roan that Lon had given her. I always felt the devil was in that horse, but Nancy was as headstrong as the horse, and she insisted on riding him. One morning she swung up on that hardhead and he went to buckin'. She'd just about rode him out when he twisted in the air and unseated her. She hit her head on the top rail of the corral—broke her neck.

"Lon ain't been the same since. When he knew his daughter was dead, he walked up to that horse, cussin' like a madman, pulled his six-gun, stuck it right up against the horse's head, and shot that roan right there in the yard. He emptied his gun into that horse."

Silence took over around the table, each man in his own thoughts. Finally, Nolan said, "Never had any kids, but I reckon that'd be mighty hard on a man."

Cletus nodded. "Yep, it sure was. Lon changed. He got mean. Lydia, that was his wife, finally had enough and left him. I figure all he had then was his ranch, and he got this crazy idea he needed my ranch to grow his. Up to then, we'd been mighty friendly. Why, Nancy would ride over here all the time. She was like a granddaughter to me."

Nolan stood, walked across the room, and looked out the front window. There was no moon. The stars twinkled like gems in the sky, but gave little light. "We need to stay alert. When you boys ride from the ranch, keep your rifles handy. Always work in pairs. I don't trust the Sadlers. I've got a bad feelin' about them."

He turned back to the table. "I'm pullin' out in the morning. I want to do some scouting. Cletus, I need you to sketch me out a map. Show all the water you've got on the ranch and where Tomson's ranch is located."

"Sure. How long you figure to be gone?"

"Maybe three or four days. I might ride back into town before I head back."

"You be careful out there," Buster said, from his watch by the window. "I know those Tomson hands. They're on the prod. It won't take much to set them off."

“Thanks, Buster. Okay, boys, I’m heading out to the bunkhouse to get some shut-eye.” Nolan opened the door to the chill mountain air, closed it behind him, and strode across the yard to the bunkhouse.

Chapter 4

THE THIRD MORNING after Nolan left the ranch, he awoke to a white carpet. He reached out from under his blankets and stirred the coals of the previous night’s fire. The warmth, though small, felt good. He put a few of the smaller sticks he had gathered the night before on the fire. Flames quickly licked up around the dry cedar limbs, and pale smoke filtered through the leaves of the trees in the cedar thicket where he had bedded down.

The snow was light, but a harbinger of things to come. It wouldn’t be long before several feet of snow would rest on these mountain slopes.

The past two days he had traveled to all of the water holes, springs, and creeks that covered the ranch. He had also ridden up to the timberline, where the wind blew clouds of snow around the gnarled limber pine, lone sentinels fighting for existence in the unforgiving environment. The craggy peaks above him, covered with snow, jutted into the clouds, piercing them like jagged spears.

The cattle he had seen were gathered in the canyons and valleys, eating the thick grass while they could still get to it. Nolan wondered what the winter-kill might be. They needed to keep the cattle close, so they could feed them if the winter became too harsh.

Nolan threw back the blankets and pulled on his boots. He set his old, beat-up coffee pot on the edge of the coals, pulled his canteen out from under his blankets, and poured water into his pot. He stood and stomped into his boots, swung his gunbelt around his slim waist, and fastened the buckle. He checked on Duke, then brushed the snow from his back and led him to the stream. The cold was beginning to freeze the edges of the stream. Duke thrust his nose into the cold water, pulled it out, snorted, and then stretched back down and started drinking.

Nolan rubbed the horse’s neck. “That water’s cold, isn’t it, boy? We’ll be back at the ranch this evening and you’ll get a chance to warm up those old bones.” He let Duke finish drinking and led him back to a fresh area of grass to stake him out, while he got himself some breakfast.

He had just pulled some jerky from his saddlebags when he heard the rifle shot. It was a long way off, but he could hear the solid thunk of a bullet hitting flesh, followed by the crack of the rifle. The shot echoed throughout the mountains. He sat silent, slowly chewing his cold jerky and sipping his steaming coffee. *It was only one shot. Could be someone hunting up here. There’s plenty of deer and elk around.*

Five minutes had passed. Two more shots rang out from two different rifles. He was on his feet and moving to his saddle when he heard the short bark of a pistol. He had Duke saddled and ready to go. He poured the coffee over the small fire, and then, using his boots, raked dirt over the remaining embers. He yanked his Winchester ’73 Carbine from its scabbard, worked the lever to make sure there

was one in the chamber, picked up the cartridge that had been tossed out, wiped it off, and slid it into the loading gate.

After checking his Colt, he dropped it back into its holster and swung into the saddle. He sat listening—nothing. Nolan reined Duke around and headed down the mountain in the direction of the shots. He took it slow, his right hand gripping the Winchester across the saddle bow.

His experience told him that someone had been ambushed and, very likely, murdered. He moved a few yards and stopped, surveying everything he could see, then moving forward again. He guided Duke from one spruce to the next, stopping, looking, moving forward. In this way, he worked his way closer and closer to where he thought the gunshots came from.

He had left the spruce and was now in a thick growth of aspen, the brilliant leaves giving up their tenuous hold, creating a golden rain in the light morning breeze. He continued moving down the mountainside. He worked his way to the edge of the aspen stand. Light snow drifted on the wind, obscuring the bottom of the canyon. Nolan waited in the edge of the aspens, protected from view by the myriad of white trunks jutting toward the sky. The snow thinned and sunlight broke through the gray, somber clouds. He waited a few more moments, scanning the opposite sloping canyon wall and floor. This was a deadly game of he who moved first died.

The sunlight lit an open patch on the canyon floor. The patch was surrounded on three sides by piñon pines. At the very edge of the opening he caught movement. He waited. There, again. It was a horse's tail. It disappeared. Minutes went by, and nothing showed. Nolan eared the hammer back on the Winchester Carbine and eased Duke out of the protection of the aspens. He gradually made his way to the floor of the canyon. Nothing. No sound. No movement. The clouds were breaking, and sunshine reflected off the creek that ran down the canyon floor.

Nolan pushed forward. He peered into each shadow, trying to spot the horse he had seen from the canyon slope. *Don't get impatient. Don't hurry. Impatience can be a death warrant.* He moved Duke into the cedars and looked back to where he had been in the aspen. He couldn't be far.

Then he spotted the horse. It was cropping grass with what appeared to be no intention of leaving. As Nolan neared the horse, he saw the man. He was covered in blood. Nolan scanned the surrounding area once more, then stepped down from his horse. He tied Duke and moved up to the buckskin, speaking softly and reassuringly to the animal. He slipped close enough to reach the reins that hung over the buckskin's neck. He tied it to a nearby limb, then moved to the injured man. The man was lying facedown. Nolan rolled the man over onto his back. Lon Tomson! Blood was pouring from a head wound. Who would shoot Tomson? He stripped the man's coat off and exposed bleeding from a chest wound and a bullet wound in his side.

Nolan found it hard to believe the man was still alive. Just the bullet in his head should have killed him. The ground was covered with blood. He returned to his horse and pulled a cloth from his saddlebags. After tearing it in pieces, he moved to the stream, soaked the cloth, and returned to Tomson. His first goal was to stop the bleeding. He cleaned the man's wounds. The blood flow had slowed to a seep.

He wrapped them as best he could and then contemplated how he was to get Tomson back to the ranch. In his condition, moving him could kill him, but remaining out in the elements, with the threat of more snow, might do the job even quicker.

Nolan mounted and rode up to the nearest stand of aspen. Here, he cut two long saplings and several shorter ones. He tied them together with a couple of piggin' strings and looped his rope over the awkward bundle. Then he looped his end of the rope over the saddle horn. With Duke dragging the saplings, Nolan walked alongside him down the hillside to Tomson. He untied the bundles and started building a travois. He crossed the two long saplings so they would join just behind the horse's rump and extend past the animal's head. After tying the main frame together, he laid five thinner saplings on the portion that would extend behind the horse and tied them to the main saplings with his piggin' strings.

I hope Tomson's horse will put up with the travois. The last thing he needs is for his horse to kick him in the head. Nolan laid out and tied his sughan on the travois. Then he fastened Tomson's bedroll, to make a pillow. The clouds had broken and were clearing from the west. The warmth of the sun penetrated Nolan's coat. He removed it and laid it across a stump. Then he led Tomson's horse in front of the travois and tied him to a limb. Nolan lifted the travois across the horse's rump and tied it to Tomson's saddle. He waited for a couple of minutes to see what the animal might do. It remained calm.

He lifted Tomson onto the travois and roped him in place. The man was still unconscious. Blood seeped from all three of his wounds, staining his bandages. Laying the last blanket across the wounded man, Nolan slipped his coat back on, mounted Duke, untied the bridle of Tomson's horse, and slowly started down the canyon floor. The horse tossed his head and rolled his eyes a couple of times at the saplings extending past his head, but settled down quickly.

All I have to do now is get this man to the ranch without him dying and without running across any of his killers. Nolan continued to scan the canyon for any signs of riders.

"What the blazes you got there, boy?" Cletus said.

Nolan had pulled up in front of the ranch house. Slim had been on guard and was helping him with Tomson.

"We need a bed fast, Cletus. Tomson's been shot. I'm surprised he's still alive."

They took Tomson into the house and laid him on Cletus's bed, then stripped his clothes off.

"Roll him over," Cletus said. "I need to see if that bullet went all the way through." Slim grasped the man's shoulders and eased him over on his side so Cletus could see. There was a huge bruise with a bulge in his back.

"Nope, we need to get that bullet out of there. Looks like the bullet in his side was a through and through. It's far enough to the side, he may have got lucky with that one. Roll him on over to his stomach.

"Cookie, get some water boiling."

O'Grady yelled from the kitchen, "Water's already on the stove."

Cletus reached under the bed and pulled out a small leather bag, set it on the side of the bed, and opened it. "My doctorin' kit. I use it more for stock than

people, but I reckon it'll work either way." He gave Slim his knife. "Tell Cookie to toss this in some boilin' water."

Slim took it and returned quickly. He handed it back to Cletus.

Nolan looked around as Cookie brought a big iron pot with boiling water into the room and set it on the floor near the bed. "Who's on guard?"

All of the men were watching Cletus. They turned and looked at Nolan with sheepish expressions. "Okay," Nolan said. "Slim, why don't you get on out there and keep an eye peeled. We don't want Tomson's men catching us bunched up in here."

"Sure, Boss." Slim left the room.

"Okay, boys, hold him tight. That bullet's got to come out."

Cletus removed the bullet, and, using a sterilized cleaning rod from his rifle, cleaned out the path it had taken. After he had finished with the chest wound he moved to the man's side and cleaned that bullet hole. He then sterilized both wounds with a bottle of whiskey he'd been saving. "This stuff is almost pure alcohol. It ought to clean out anything." Then he took a long swig and grimaced. "Whew, that tastes as bad as it did when I got it."

Nolan watched silently while Cletus worked. If Tomson died, he knew they would get the blame. He had been shot on their ranch. He could see the plan of whoever had done this. Tomson needed to live, and hopefully identify the shooters.

Cletus saved the head wound for last. He slowly unwound the bandage, took some scissors from his bag, and cut Tomson's hair from around the wound. The bullet had struck just behind and above the left ear. It hadn't penetrated the skull, but a section of bone had been blown out from the surface. The track of the bullet continued forward, blowing through bone and leaving a trench almost three inches long. The skin had been torn away, exposing white bone. Cletus cleaned it out, then trimmed the jagged edges of skin.

"I always knew," Cletus said, "that Lon was tough, but I'll tell you, he oughta be dead. He was lucky with the chest wound. I imagine an inch or so left or right and he'd either had his heart blown out or his backbone." He pointed to the head wound. "If he survives those other two hits, this could still kill him. Just the jar of that bullet hitting him could have scrambled his brains like a pan of eggs. I'm gonna pull the scalp together and sew it up. If he makes it, he'll have himself a mighty interesting souvenir."

Nolan leaned over and looked at the trench through Tomson's skull, noticing the smooth edges of the scalp where Cletus had trimmed it. "Where'd you learn to doctor folks?"

"Shoot, when you live out here like I have, you ain't got time for a doctor. You notice anything about Shep?"

Nolan shook his head.

"Well, about four or five years ago—"

"Five, Cletus," Shep, who had been watching, chimed in. "It were five years ago come December."

Cletus stopped his sewing and looked at Shep. "I reckon I'm tellin' this, Shep. How 'bout you keepin' your mouth shut? Anyway, Shep, here tried to cut his leg off with the axe. He was cuttin' wood and hit a knot. That blade skidded like it was on ice and went clean through the top of his boot."

Shep nodded. "Ruined a fine pair of boots."

Cletus shook his head. "A man can't rightly get a story told without someone around here interruptin'. Shep, ain't you got some work to do?"

Shep headed for the door. He opened it, and as he stepped through, Nolan could hear him say, "It's my story, you crusty old badger."

Cletus finished sewing the scalp up and shook his head. "I'm just too danged easy on these cow nurses." He dropped the needle into the hot water with the other tools. "Cookie, boil all these things and then put 'em back in my bag, except my knife. I want it back."

Cletus stood up, placed both hands on his waist, and bent back as far as he could go. "Not as young as I used to be."

Nolan nodded and said, "You think he'll live?"

Cletus looked down at the silent figure on the bed. The wounds were cleaned, and the bleeding had stopped. Color had returned to Tomson's face. "I just don't know. I'm more worried about the head wound than any of 'em. 'Course, infection could set in and he'd be a goner. Nothing we could do about that. Give him a day or so. If his brain ain't scrambled, he should be coming around."

Two days had passed. Nolan was sitting with Cletus at the kitchen table. They heard some movement from the bedroom, then a string of cursing.

The two men rose to their feet and headed for the bedroom. Tomson had one leg out of the bed, as if he had tried to get up. As they stepped into the room, Tomson said, "What am I doin' here?"

Nolan started to explain, but Cletus jumped in ahead of him. "Lon, you done been shot up something fierce. Nolan here found you and got you back here. Looks like you're doing a little better, but you've still got a ways to go. You're luckier than a two-bit gambler. By all rights you should be dead, but here you are cussing up a storm in my house."

Tomson looked around, as if he was trying to process the information that Cletus had given him. He felt his head, gently running his index finger along the trench. "Who fixed me up?"

This time Nolan beat Cletus with the answer. "Cletus did. He got the bullet out of your back, cleaned you up, and sewed you up. Reckon you'd probably have died if it weren't for him."

Tomson took a long look at Cletus. "I owe you."

"Not a thing," Cletus said. "As ornery as you are, I couldn't let you die."

"I can't stay here."

"Really?" Cletus said. "Where you expect to go? You start moving around and that chest wound and hole in your side are gonna start bleedin' again. You need to stay here until your body is pretty well healed."

Nolan said, "Do you remember what happened?"

"Clear as day. I rode out to take a look at your water."

Cletus shook his head. "Don't you get tired of being greedy, Lon?"

Tomson gave him a hard look and continued. "I had a good idea of how many head I could add when I bought your land, but I wanted to make sure about the water. The weather was being a little dicey, so I packed up my bedroll and some supplies. Figured on being out maybe two or three days. I got an early start and

was just riding up the canyon when they shot me. The first shot hit me in the side. I managed to stay in the saddle and made it to some thicker cover, grabbed my rifle, and crawled behind a big lodgepole pine.”

Nolan nodded. “I was grabbing something to eat when I heard the first shot. It wasn’t too long before I heard two more shots.”

“That’s right. I saw all three of them ride down the north side of the canyon. They couldn’t have been more than seventy-five yards. I stepped out from behind that tree and took a quick shot at the leader, but I missed. Lefty must’ve seen me as soon as I stepped into the open. His rifle snapped to his shoulder before I could get back behind the tree. I saw the smoke and felt a terrible blow in my chest. It knocked me back on the ground, and my rifle flew out of my hand. I figured I was dying right then. It was something terrible hard to breathe.”

“You’re a lucky man,” Cletus said. “That bullet missed everything important. So who was it?”

Tomson said, “They rode up. I was trying to crawl away. It was the Sadlers. All three of ’em. Coker laughed. He said, ‘Ain’t you a pathetic sight.’ Then all three of them laughed. Lefty said, ‘Can I finish him, Pa.? Can I?’”

Tomson tried to sit up. His face reflected the sudden pain he felt, and he dropped back prone on the bed.

Cletus said, “Don’t you go trying to move around too much. Those holes need to heal.”

Tomson took a deep breath, then relaxed. “Coker said, ‘Thanks for the ranch, old man.’ They all laughed again, and Coker said, ‘Finish him, Son.’ No sooner had he said that than my head exploded. That’s the last I remember.”

Cletus scratched his head. “What’d he mean by ‘thanks for the ranch?’”

“Danged if I know. I ain’t written anything that names them to get the ranch if I die. Lydia’s still named in my will.”

Nolan could see that the conversation had taken a toll on Tomson’s stamina. The man could hardly keep his eyes open. “Why don’t you get some more rest? We can talk later, when you’re feeling better.”

Tomson sank back into the bed, closed his eyes, and was immediately asleep.

Cookie had followed them into the bedroom and listened to Tomson’s story. “So how you figure the Sadlers expect to get Tomson’s ranch?”

“How about some more coffee?” Nolan said to the cook as they walked back into the kitchen.

Nolan and Cletus pulled up chairs at the table. Cookie poured them coffee and went back to preparing dinner.

Cletus took a sip of his coffee and said, “Cookie had a good question. You have any idea?”

Nolan thought for a moment. “You know if the bank or land office has copies of Tomson’s signature on anything?”

Cletus thought for a moment. “I ain’t for sure, but I suspect they both do. Lon has borrowed from the bank on occasion, and I know he’s bought several smaller ranches, so the land office would most likely have it.”

“That would let out the possibility of forgery. You think his wife could be in with the Sadlers?”

“Naw, ain’t no way. She was mightily upset when Nancy died, but I don’t see her being involved in killing Lon.”

Wrinkles stood out across Nolan’s brow. He sat, deep in thought, trying to figure out how the Sadlers could expect to take over Tomson’s ranch. After a few moments, he came to a decision. “I’m going into town. I might be gone for several days. Be sure to keep the lookout going. If the Sadlers think they have a lock on the Slash Bar, they’re liable to be heading this way.”

“I’ll do that,” Cletus said. “Why don’t you send the doc out? Lon seems to be doing good, but it won’t hurt for a real doctor to have a look.”

“I’d planned on it. I also want to find out if Tomson’s signature is on file. If that’s the case, the Sadlers don’t have a chance. But for now, I just want to look around, get a feel for what’s happening, and see where the town stands.”

Cletus looked up with a sly twinkle in his eyes. “Reckon you might be staying at Mel’s place?”

Nolan frowned. “Maybe. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothin’. Tell her I said howdy.”

Without another word, Nolan picked up his gear and his Winchester and headed out the door. The snow had melted, but there was a permanent chill in the air. The snow line had moved down the mountains and had merged with the trees at the upper levels. It wouldn’t be long until all of the ranch would be white, and the cattle would have to start working for their meals.

Duke had been resting up for a couple of days and was ready to go. He whinnied when Nolan walked into the stables. “You ready to go to town?” Nolan said, as he stepped up to Duke. He patted the horse on the neck and laid the blanket across his back. Running his hands over the blanket, he smoothed it out and tossed up the saddle. Moments later, he led Duke out of the stable, mounted him, and headed for town.

Chapter 5

MUSTANG CITY WAS normally a quiet little town. It had sprung into existence with the growth of the nearby ranches. Many a town had been birthed in the West, only to turn into a ghost town after a few years. The residents hoped it would last, but no one knew.

Nolan topped a rise to see the town in the light of a dreary afternoon. The clouds had returned, there was a smattering of rain, and the wind was picking up. All that was needed for snow was for the temperature to drop a few more degrees. He pulled his hat low over his eyes and considered taking out his slicker, but he figured he could make it to town before the heavens opened.

His goal, as he rode into town, was to go to the bank first and try to find out if they had any record of Tomson’s signature. Then he’d head over to the doc and get him started out to the ranch. Several horses stood tied to the hitching rail in front of the bank. One had a sidesaddle. He tied Duke and walked into the bank.

As banks go, it wasn’t much. The teller, standing behind his counter and bars, welcomed the bank customer. At the end of the counter, a swinging door allowed

entry into the inner sanctum and the door to the banker's office, which was open. Nolan saw a woman sitting in front of the banker's desk, with Coker Sadler standing on one side. On the other was the sheriff. With the closing of the bank's front door, Sadler looked up, leaned over, and said something to the sheriff. The woman's head snapped around, and she was staring at Nolan. The sheriff left the office and strode up to Nolan, the badge glistening on his chest.

"Howdy, Sheriff," Nolan said. "What can I do for you?"

"Are you Nolan Parker?"

"That would be me. What do you go by?"

"I'm Sheriff Martin Scarborough. I'm puttin' you under arrest for the cold-blooded murder of Lon Tomson."

"Whoa, Sheriff. Pull in your reins. I haven't murdered anyone, especially Tomson."

Sadler and the woman charged out of the office. "That's him, Sheriff," Sadler said. "That's the man what murdered poor Mr. Tomson. Shot him in cold blood."

Nolan started to say something and stopped. His mind was racing. Sadler was acting as a witness to Tomson's killing. That meant that he had no idea Tomson was alive. He decided to say nothing about Tomson being at the ranch. "Sheriff, I didn't kill Tomson."

Sadler spoke up again. "I saw him, Sheriff. Me and my boys saw him shoot Lon Tomson dead. Are you going to arrest him or not?"

The sheriff turned a cold eye on Sadler. "I'm gonna arrest him, but you don't worry about my business. Understood?"

"Sure, Sheriff. I ain't meant nothing by it. I reckon just seeing this killer got me excited."

The woman started crying. She drew an embroidered handkerchief from her reticule and dabbed at the corner of her eyes.

"Mrs. Tomson," the sheriff said, "you don't need to be here for this. Why don't you wait in Mr. Graham's office? I'll have this man out of here pretty quick."

So this is Lydia Tomson. It sure doesn't take vultures long to start feeding on the body.

Lydia looked up at Nolan. Though she was much older than him, she was still a fine-looking woman. Through tearful sobs, she said, "Why did you kill my husband, Mr. Parker?"

"I didn't kill him, ma'am."

"Give me your gun, Parker," the sheriff said.

Nolan unbuckled his gunbelt and handed it to the sheriff. "You're making a mistake, Sheriff."

"Let's go. Turn right, when you go out the door."

He glanced at Lydia and Sadler before he turned to the door. Both of them displayed a faint smile, as if they were relishing his demise and their success. He could see and hear the hard rain. "Sheriff, my horse is tied in the rain. Wonder if you could take him to the stables? I've got money in my saddlebags. That'll pay for him. If you'd ask Lester to wipe him down good and take care of him, I'd be obliged. Also, my gear's getting soaked. If he'd clean and oil down my rifle it'd sure be appreciated."

Sadler spoke up. "I'd be glad to do that for you, Sheriff."

Nolan shot Sadler a threatening look. "Sheriff, how long have you been in this country?"

"Nigh on to ten years, why?"

"Then you know Sadler's reputation. I'd like my money and my horse to make it to the stables. I'm not real sure it would if Sadler has anything to do with it."

Coker Sadler's hand went to his gun. His face was mottled with rage. "I'll make you eat those words."

The sheriff pulled his coat back from his six-gun and faced Sadler. "Cool yourself off. You're not makin' anybody do anything."

Turning back to Nolan, he said, "I'll get your horse taken care of, Parker. Now let's go."

Nolan pulled his hat down tight on his head and stepped outside. The cold rain was falling in sheets, pushed by the wind out of the mountains. He glanced at Duke as he walked by, leaning into the wind. Once inside the sheriff's office, the sheriff hung Nolan's gun and gunbelt on a hook behind his desk and motioned him into the jail cell.

The sheriff locked the cell door and walked over to his desk. He sat down and pulled a piece of paper out of his desk drawer. He looked it over for a moment. "You're in luck, Parker. The circuit judge should be by here in three weeks, give or take a couple of days. If he'd just gone through, it would be three months."

"Sheriff, I didn't kill Tomson."

"You know, Parker, I don't think I've ever had anyone in that jail who said they were guilty. The judge will be here in three weeks. I'll grant you that bed ain't the most comfortable, but you'll eat good. Mrs. Williams fixes the meals. I think you might know her. Her son's the boy whose dog you saved. I'll admit, that was a right good thing to do. Can't rightly see how a man who would save a dog would murder a person. But I've been in this business a long time and met some mighty strange people."

"Sheriff, would you mind asking Melinda, I mean Mrs. Williams, to come here as soon as the rain slacks up?"

The sheriff started to speak when a young fellow wearing a yellow slicker suit stomped in. "It's raining something fierce out there." He started to slip out of the slicker.

"Leave it on, Harley. I need you to take the big horse tied up in front of the bank to the stables and bring the rifle and saddlebags back here."

The deputy shook his head and grinned. "Sheriff, if you don't see me again, just figger I washed down the street and into the river."

"I'll do that, Harley. By the by, on your way back, tell Mrs. Williams we've got a prisoner and she needs to start meals. Tell her he's a big one. I imagine he'll eat a lot."

"Yes, sir," the deputy said as he stepped into the driving rain.

Before the deputy returned, Melinda Williams marched through the door. "Sheriff Scarborough, what is this man doing in jail?"

"Ma'am, just calm down. I've got three witnesses who say Mr. Parker murdered Lon Tomson in cold blood."

"Humph. I know your witnesses. You can't believe a word that comes out of the Sadlers' mouths."

“Mrs. Williams, I realize this man helped you and Rocky, but he’s been accused of murder, and now he’s got to stand trial. That’s all there is to it.”

Melinda Williams faced the sheriff with her little hands balled up into fists and braced on her slim waist. “Sheriff, why can’t he be released? He’ll give you his word he’ll be here for the trial. I’ll vouch for him.”

Nolan was standing with his forearms resting on the cell’s horizontal bars. “Melinda,” he said, “the sheriff is just doing his duty. He told me the circuit judge should be here in three weeks. That gives me plenty of time to relax and enjoy your cooking.”

She turned to Nolan, her attractive face a picture of exasperation. “Well, you don’t have to agree with him. Sheriff, may I go talk to your prisoner?”

The noise of the rain on the roof had subsided. The sheriff glanced out the window and stood. “Mrs. Williams, you talk all you want. The rain’s let up, so now’d be a good time for me to make my rounds.” Sheriff Scarborough slipped his coat on, slapped his hat on his head, and escaped from the irate female in his office.

“Good,” Nolan said. “Melinda, I need to talk to you, and be quick about it. I need you to get a message to Doc Nelson. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Nolan, I can.” Melinda moved close to the bars, her eyes locked on Nolan.

“He’s needed at the Lazy S. I know the weather looks like it’s turning nasty, but if he can make it there, we could sure use his help.”

“Who’s hurt?” Melinda said.

“This is a secret that we can’t let out. You understand?”

“I can keep a secret, Nolan.”

“Lon Tomson’s not dead. He’s at our ranch.”

“He’s not dead? The Sadlers said he was! That’s why Lydia is here, to take over the ranch.”

“No, he’s alive. He was shot up mighty bad, but Cletus fixed him up real good. However, I think it would be smart for Doc Nelson to take a look at him. But the doc has to stay quiet about him. Be sure and tell him that.”

“Nolan, why don’t you want the sheriff to know? He’d let you out of jail.”

“I think we’ll have a better chance of smoking the Sadlers and Lydia out if we wait for the trial. That’ll give them time to get settled in and begin to think they’re in the clear.”

“Nolan, I don’t like to see you behind bars. You don’t belong there. I don’t want Rocky to think you’re a bad man. He talks about you all the time.”

Her face brightened a bit, and she said, “Oh, I think you might like to know that Whitey is doing very well. He’s up and walking around. I can tell he’s still sore, but he’s going to live. I’m so glad for Rocky. Thank you so much for what you did.”

Nolan saw the sincerity in Melinda’s face. He also saw something else in her eyes. Something that he hadn’t seen in a woman’s eyes in many years. His heart caught for a moment. *Is it possible that such a woman as this could care about me? No, it’s just wishful thinking on my part, but maybe.*

He cleared his throat, waited for a moment. “I’m glad I could help.”

Melinda smiled up at the big man. She placed her small hand lightly on his. “Nolan, you helped more than you’ll ever know. It has been so long since a man has reached out to Rocky. There’s an empty place in his life I can’t fill.”

They stood there for a few moments, then she slowly removed her hand. "I hope you like my meals. You're going to know my cooking very well by the end of three weeks."

Nolan sat on his bunk. Rocky sat across from him in a chair he had pulled into the cell. A checkerboard rested on top of a box the sheriff had brought in for them. The cell door was swung open against the bars.

"Son, you're not going to beat me again, are you?"

Rocky grinned. He reached down and patted Whitey's rump. "Yes, sir. If I can."

The boy had been bringing Nolan's evening meal for the past couple of weeks. He would bring three meals in a big basket. He would eat his dinner with the sheriff and Nolan, Rocky and Nolan eating on the box in Nolan's cell and the sheriff eating at his desk. Then the sheriff would pull the checkerboard from his desk drawer and bring it into the cell. Sheriff Scarborough would say, "Guess it's time for my rounds," and head out the door. The ritual had been going on for a few days over three weeks. The circuit judge had arrived that morning, and the trial had been set for the following day.

Rocky jumped Nolan's checker and said, "Crown me." His grin looked like it would split his face in two.

Nolan put another checker on top of Rocky's. "I swear I don't know why I play this game with you. Seems all I do is lose." He leaned over and scratched Whitey behind the ears. Whitey had made a habit of following Rocky into the jail cell and lying next to the box until the man and boy were finished with their evening game.

"Mr. Parker, are you scared?" Rocky asked. His face had turned serious.

Nolan could see the boy was concerned. "No, Rocky. I'm not scared, and I don't want you to be bothered. This is going to work out. You'll see tomorrow. So don't you worry that head of yours. All right?"

Rocky gave Nolan a sheepish grin and jumped another of Nolan's checkers. Only a few minutes passed before Rocky had won another game.

"That's enough for tonight. Did your ma send someone out to the Lazy S to fetch Cletus for tomorrow?"

Rocky started picking up the checkers. On cue, Whitey stood up, stretched, and yawned. "Yes, sir. I rode out right after the judge got here and told Mr. Shamrock. He said he'd be here with bells on." Rocky grinned again and said, "Mr. Shamrock is kinda funny. I can't picture him with bells on."

"Yes, he is funny," Nolan said. "Now why don't you run along? You beat me so bad, I need to rest up. Tell your ma thanks for the fine-tasting food. I think she's fattened me up over the past three weeks. Now, get along." He rubbed Whitey's head between his two big hands. "You too, Whitey."

Rocky took the checkerboard and checkers over to the sheriff's desk, and with Whitey on his heels, he raced for the door. He turned at the last moment and said, "Good night, Mr. Parker."

"Good night, Son."

The door slammed, and Nolan could hear the clattering steps of Rocky as he raced down the boardwalk with Whitey barking at his heels. He'd never imagined he would enjoy being in jail. His life had been a hard one, mostly spent working from before sunrise to after dark. Never much of a break. The past three weeks

had been like a vacation. After the first couple of days, Sheriff Scarborough had opened the cell door and left it open for the rest of his stay. He had three meals a day of delicious food. He saw Melinda every day. *Yes, sir, I've been on a vacation.*

It would end tomorrow. The attorney from the land office would be defending him. Mr. McClaran had been upset because he felt they didn't have a defense. Nolan liked the man, but the fewer people who knew about Tomson, the better.

Sheriff Scarborough came back in, followed by Harley Culpepper, the deputy.

"I'll be headin' out," the sheriff said to Nolan. "Trial's supposed to start at nine in the morning. You need anything?"

"No, I'm just fine."

"I swear, Nolan. For a man who could be sentenced to hang, tomorrow, you're almighty calm."

"That's because I've led a clean life, Sheriff."

Sheriff Scarborough chuckled and said, "I reckon that must be it, but I'll tell you, if I didn't know better, I'd say you've got something up that sleeve of yours."

"We'll see, Sheriff, we'll just see. Night, Harley—night, Sheriff." Nolan stretched his long legs out on the bunk and was asleep in minutes.

Chapter 6

THE DAY DAWNED bright and clear. The early snow had melted, and even though the light breeze carried a winter chill, the sun warmed the town. It seemed the population of Mustang City had tripled. Word of the death of Tomson, a prominent rancher, had spread, as well as news of the trial. Even with only a day's notice, folks from the nearby towns and ranches had used the trial as an excuse for a holiday.

Nolan was dressed in his only suit. Melinda had cleaned it for him. He had brushed his black hat to where it almost looked presentable, and applied some polish, loaned by the sheriff, to his boots. He was a striking man, broad-shouldered, slim-waisted, and narrow-hipped. Standing a full six feet and two inches in his boots, he towered over most other men, except Cletus and Slim.

Melinda was there, waiting to accompany him to the saloon, which was the acting courthouse for the trial. She was dressed in a dark brown dress and a white blouse with brown trim around the tight collar and the sleeve cuffs. The high-waisted style accented her trim figure. As she turned to him, the light slanting in through the window caressed her pale face. Dark brown eyes, soft like a deer's, watched him with concern. The sun glinted off the few gray hairs that were barely visible in her thick, brown locks. *What a woman. How could she ever consider having anything to do with an old saddle bum like me?*

"You ready?" Sheriff Scarborough asked.

"About as ready as I'll ever be," Nolan replied.

The sheriff opened the door. Melinda and Rocky, followed by Whitey, went out first. Harley followed, then Nolan, and, finally, Sheriff Scarborough. They crossed the crowded street for the saloon. Several men tipped their hats to Melinda. She was still a striking woman.

The tables had been moved from the saloon, and the chairs were set in two groups with an aisle down the middle. The judge had moved a tall barstool behind the bar and was using the bar as his desk. The prosecution and defense had a saloon table set in front of and to each side of the judge, with a seat for witnesses in front of the bar and to the judge's left. The jury sat against the wall on the other side of the witness chair. The front row behind the defense table had been reserved. Sheriff Scarborough, Harley, Melinda, and Rocky, with Whitey at his feet, sat in the reserved seats, with a couple of open seats remaining. Nolan sat at the defense table, in front of the sheriff, with Mr. McClaran.

When the sheriff had come in, Coker had told him that Grady was running late.

The prosecuting attorney sat at the table to their right. In the first row, behind him, sat Coker and Lefty Sadler, with Lydia Tomson between them. She leaned over and whispered something to Coker. He smiled and nodded toward Nolan.

The room was filled. All seats were taken, and people were packed along the walls. A hum of excited conversations filled the saloon. The circuit judge pulled his short-barreled thirty-six caliber Colt Model Police and, using the butt as his gavel, he banged it on the bar. "Everybody settle down. This here trial is about to begin. What we got here is a murder trial. Mr. Nolan Parker has been accused of murdering Mr. Lon Tomson, the owner of the Slash Bar." The judge took a moment to nod at Lydia Tomson. "Mrs. Tomson, I'm right sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, Judge," she said, lowering her head and sniffing, as she dabbed the corners of her eyes with her handkerchief.

A murmur ran through the crowd.

The judge grabbed his Colt by the barrel and banged it on the bar. "I'm gonna tell you folks one time. Keep it quiet in my court. I can empty this here saloon quicker than a chicken can grab a june bug, so don't push me." The crowd immediately quieted, and the judge continued. "Mr. Prosecutor, I reckon you have something to say."

"Yes, Your Honor," the prosecutor said, as he turned to face the jury, sitting to the judge's left, against the wall. "It falls to the state to bring justice for our poor murdered friend and ranch owner, Mr. Lon Tomson."

"He ain't no friend of mine," a voice said from the back, accompanied by several men agreeing.

The judge banged the butt of his Colt on the bar, then pointed the butt of the gun toward the man who had spoken. "Jasper, you keep your mouth shut in my court. You understand?" At the man's affirmative nod, the judge took a moment and slowly looked around the room, his eyes stopping for a moment on each of the men who had agreed with Jasper, then said, "This is my last warning. Mr. Prosecutor, you may continue."

"As I was saying, Judge, Mr. Tomson was heinously murdered by—"

The heavy steps of a man echoed through the saloon, accompanied by the squeaking of the batwing doors as he pushed through.

"Judge, is it all right if I attend my own murder trial?" Lon Tomson asked.

The room erupted in bedlam. Tomson stood in the doorway, a big grin across his face.

Nolan leaned back in his chair, laughing at the consternation of everyone, including his own attorney, Mr. McClaran. He turned to face Melinda and smiled at her twinkling eyes.

The judge banged his Colt with no effect. Finally, he eared the hammer back and fired into the ceiling. The gunshot overpowered everyone's curiosity. They shut up.

"Judge," the bartender and owner of the saloon said, "I've got rooms up there. You could've killed somebody."

"I don't see any blood or hear anybody screamin', so I guess we're safe. Now everybody shut up and sit down!

"Mr. Tomson, would you like to tell me how you happen to be alive, and where you've been? Come up here. I want you sworn in, and you can sit in the witness chair."

The Sadlers and Lydia were staring at Tomson as if he were a ghost. Tomson strode past them to the witness stand. He glared at Sadler and smiled at Lydia and said to her, "Miss me, hon?"

Her face turned flaming red as he continued to the witness chair, was sworn in, and sat down.

He sat there for a moment enjoying the confusion everyone suffered from, including Sadler and Lydia.

"Remove your hat in my courtroom, Lon."

Tomson jerked his hat off. "Sorry, Judge."

The judge then began to question Tomson. The whole story came out. Coker Sadler and his son Lefty tried to slip out of the courtroom, but Sheriff Scarborough and Harley stopped them and took their revolvers, then sat them back down.

"Mr. Parker," the judge said, "please accept my apologies. All charges are dropped. As soon as these proceedings are over, you're free to go. Mr. Tomson, I'm glad you're still kickin'. You can step down. Sheriff, get Coker Sadler up here and sworn in."

Tomson sat down in the front row next to Rocky, reaching down to pet Whitey. Whitey let out a low growl, and Tomson jerked his hand back.

Sadler was sworn in and was now fidgeting in the witness chair. Nolan watched him, enjoying every moment. It wasn't often a plan worked out so well.

"Sadler, you know you're going to the pen for a long time. How long depends on how much you tell me right now. This is going to be your only chance. After you, we'll get Mrs. Tomson up here and let her have her say."

Lydia was squirming in her seat and shaking her head at Sadler. The attractive woman had disappeared. Now the high cheekbones, thinned lips, and bulging eyes made her a caricature of her previous self.

"Well, Judge, I want leniency for me and my boys. If I can get that, I'll tell you everything."

The judge looked to the prosecuting attorney, who nodded yes. "You got it, Sadler. Now spill your guts."

Sadler began. "I met Lydia in Denver. We kinda hit it off, and she asked me to help her. She had a plan. Bottom line, Judge, she wanted Tomson dead. Seems she blamed him for their daughter's death, so to get even, she wanted the ranch and she wanted him dead."

All eyes had turned to Lydia Tomson. She sat with her head held high. At a pause in the testimony, she said to Lon in a voice as cold as the mountain wind, "You killed my daughter. You never cared about me. You doted on her all the time, and then you gave her that horse. It was all your fault. I wish you were dead." With her last statement, she yanked a two-shot derringer out of her reticule, aimed at Lon Tomson, and pulled the trigger.

Derringers are notorious for being inaccurate. They're good for only a few feet. Lon was on the other side of the aisle, far enough away to guarantee a miss. Only this time, the bullet flew true. It struck Lon just above his eyebrows and buried itself into his brain. He slumped over onto the floor, dead.

The sheriff jumped to grab the gun from Lydia, but he was either too far or too slow. With her eyes locked on Lon's dead body, she turned the derringer, gripped in the white lace gloves on her petite hands, placed it under her chin, and pulled the trigger again. Blood sprayed on the people around her as she slumped against Lefty. He pushed her off, and she fell to the floor.

Bedlam reigned in the saloon. Women were screaming, men were yelling, and Whitey was barking.

As soon as Nolan saw the gun come out of her reticule, he dove toward Melinda and Rocky, covering them. Then, holding them close, he watched the gruesome scene unfold.

Calm slowly returned to the saloon. Again, Coker and Lefty Sadler had tried to escape in the confusion, but Sheriff Scarborough and Harley caught them before they made it to the door. The sheriff immediately marched them to the jail and locked them up.

Nolan helped Melinda to her feet, and with his arm around her, he asked Rocky, "You all right, Button?"

Rocky's eyes looked as big as saucers. "Yes, sir. I reckon I am."

"Good. Why don't we get out of here?" Nolan glanced back at the judge.

The judge nodded, then said to Harley, "Get these bodies out of here, Deputy. Get some men to help you." Then he spoke louder and said, "Trial's over. Bar's open!"

Men elbowed their way up to the bar, while Nolan guided Melinda and Rocky, followed by Whitey, outside. Cletus was waiting for them.

"Would you have ever thought that would happen?" he said, around a big plug of tobacco. He spit and continued, "I've knowed Lydia fer a long time. She weren't never a friendly person, but I'd never expect her to do somethin' like that."

"It's such a sad thing," Melinda said. "The woman must have been crazy with grief. I just can't imagine what she must have been going through. The poor woman."

Nolan said, "Why don't you go on home? I'll take Rocky. I need to pick up my rifle and gunbelt from the sheriff's office, then check on Duke. It's been a while since I've seen him. After that, we'll be back by."

Melinda placed her hand on his arm. "Thank you for what you did in there. You protected both of us."

Nolan, embarrassed, said, "Anybody would have done it."

"No," Melinda said, "not anybody, you."

Cletus cleared his throat. "I'm gettin' hungry. Let's get somethin' to eat."

“That’s a good idea,” Melinda said. “Cletus, come with me. You can help.” She turned to Nolan and Rocky. “I’ll fix something up, and you two can meet us at the house when you’re done.”

The three of them, Nolan, Rocky, and Whitey, left Melinda and Cletus and headed over to the sheriff’s office. Nolan got his rifle from the sheriff, along with his gunbelt and his coat. He ignored the Sadlers in the jail cell. He swung his gunbelt on, pulled out the Colt, and checked the loads. Once checked, he dropped the revolver back into the holster. He started to slip the hammer thong over the hammer, but the sheriff said something and distracted him.

“I’m glad to know you, Nolan. I believed all along you were innocent. You’ll be a great addition to this country. I’m just sorry that Harley and I weren’t around to see you take down Grady when he shot Whitey. Speaking of Grady, keep an eye out for him. We’ll get him eventually, but I sure wouldn’t want anything happening before we do.”

Nolan shook the sheriff’s hand. “No hard feelings, Sheriff. You were doing your job. I’ll have to admit, the last three weeks were like a vacation, especially when you started leaving the jail cell door open. I know I haven’t eaten that good in a long time.”

The two men laughed. Nolan shrugged into his coat and handed his rifle to Rocky. “Here you go, Button. You can carry that for me. Just be sure you don’t let that muzzle point at anyone.”

“Yes, sir,” Rocky said. His little chest puffed out like a strutting rooster as he followed Nolan out of the sheriff’s office.

The two of them headed down to the stable. Free. It feels good. I wonder if Melinda will have me? I hope I’ve found a home. It’s about time for an old, broken-down cowboy like me. In fact, I think I might buy the Slash Bar. Couldn’t ask for a better neighbor than Cletus.

Rocky was chattering away as they walked to the stable. Nolan was looking forward to seeing Duke. They neared the door to the barn and started to turn in when Whitey growled. Without pausing, Nolan pushed Rocky to the ground and drew his Colt.

Grady was standing deep inside the shadowed stable. He had his rifle against his shoulder, hammer back, waiting for Nolan. Lester was lying at his feet, unconscious. He pulled the trigger as Nolan came into view, but Nolan dove. He moved just enough so that Grady’s bullet hit the door facing where he had been standing when Whitey growled his warning.

Nolan watched as Grady attempted to work the lever of the Winchester, holding his fire, not wanting to kill the young man. “Don’t do it, Grady. Drop the rifle.”

“I’m going to kill you, Parker.”

He waited until he could wait no longer. Grady continued to fumble, trying to close the lever, his bum finger still hampering him.

Nolan had been in several gunfights. He knew the smart move was always to shoot for the body. He had learned that as a young man and had never deviated. But today was different. He raised his Colt in front of him and took a steady aim. It took only a slight amount of pressure on the sensitive trigger to send a 255 grain chunk of lead flying toward Grady. The bullet slammed into the forearm of

the Winchester, coursed down the right side, plowing into the knuckles of the index and trigger finger of Grady's right hand, then drove through the hand, exiting out at the wrist. The boy screamed like a panther and fell to the ground, cradling his ruined right hand in his left. Blood poured from between his remaining fingers.

Nolan glanced at Rocky, made sure he was okay, and then moved quickly to Grady.

Grady was moaning and rocking back and forth. "You ruined my shooting hand."

"I could have killed you. Prison will give you plenty of time to think about that. You've got a chance now, boy. Change your ways."

He reached down and pulled Grady's six-gun from its holster and walked out of the stable.

Townpeople came running. Melinda was in the lead, followed by Cletus and the sheriff. The sheriff continued into the stable to check on Lester and Grady, and Melinda flung her arms around Rocky.

The embarrassed boy pushed her away and said, "I'm all right, Ma. Not in front of all these folks."

She laughed and, turning, saw Nolan coming out of the darker interior of the stable. As he stepped out into the sunlight, she threw her arms around his neck. She hugged him for a moment, then stepped back to examine him for a gunshot. "You're not hit?"

Nolan smiled, shook his head, and knelt down. Whitey ran over to him, his tongue hanging out and his tail wagging. He grasped the dog's head in both hands, his fingers kneading Whitey's neck. "No, we're all fine, thanks to Whitey. He warned us. Grady would have had the drop on me if Whitey hadn't growled." He continued to pet the dog for a few more moments, then stood and faced Melinda. Looking into her eyes, he smiled, and said, "I like Whitey. You think he'd come live with me?"

Rocky had moved over beside Nolan, faithfully holding the rifle. It took Melinda a second to realize the meaning of his question. She smiled up at him, her brown eyes glistening, and said, "Yes, I think he would, as long as Rocky and I could tag along."

