

Rustlers in the Sage

by Donald L. Robertson, ...

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Chapter 1

The man sat erect on the worn-out buckskin. His binoculars enlarged the dusty activity playing out on the valley floor. Four cowboys were busy branding a small herd of cattle. After watching for a few minutes, he dropped the binoculars into his saddlebags, stepped down from his horse, and, leading the animal, walked back toward the thick pines silently disappearing into the tall trees.

The sun was low in the west, about to drop from sight, when an average-looking, down-on-his-luck cowboy rode into the ranch yard. The ranch matched the horse and cowboy, a little rundown. He rode to the watering trough near the barn, stepped down, and loosened the cinch on his horse. The buckskin dipped thirstily into the water.

"What can I do you for, Mister?" asked the man who had been watching him ride in.

"Name's Holt Kincannon. Hope you don't mind me watering my horse."

An old brindle hound came strolling up and began sniffing at Holt's boots. He leaned over and scratched the dog behind his ears.

"Call me Ike. The dog's name is Brownie. Friendliest old hound you're ever goin' to see. Mr. Maser gave him to his daughter, Carolyn, Miss Maser, when she was little. I swear she'd do anything for that old dog." The older man nodded toward Holt's horse. "Never turned away a thirsty horse or a hungry cowboy. Looks like your buckskin's seen better days."

"Traveled quite a distance. Any work to be had around here?"

Brownie turned and ambled back into the shade of the barn, circled a couple of times, and dropped, with a groan, into the soft dirt.

Another voice, gruff, coming from behind Holt, said. "Not for you, Kincannon."

Recognizing the voice, Holt turned to see Jesse Savage, a cold and vicious rustler he had arrested when he was a deputy sheriff in Texas. "When did you get out, Savage?"

"Makes no matter. I've been lookin' forward to this day way too long. I plan to pound your holier-than-thou face right into this here dry dirt."

Savage stood at least three inches taller and carried fifty pounds more than Holt. He had a long scar across his left cheek and a front tooth was missing, causing a slight lisp when he talked. His belly battled with his waistband, trying to escape.

"Savage," Ike said, "you know the boss don't like fightin' here at the ranch."

"There'll be no fighting, Ike," Holt said. "Let me water my horse, and I'll be on my way."

"You're gonna be on your way after I finish with you," Savage said, his right arm already swinging for Holt's head.

Holt moved slightly to his right, Ike's blow hammering nothing but air. Holt stepped in and drove a powerful right jab straight at Savage's chin. It connected, and the bigger man's eyes rolled back. He collapsed to the ground, his body sprawled out like a rag doll.

The buckskin raised his head from the trough and glanced at the unconscious man, then went back to drinking.

Ike shook his head, laughing. "I'd never expected that. The man's got the weakest jaw I've ever seen, and him bulling his way around here like he's somebody."

With the sound of the blow, a man and woman came running from the house. Arriving at the scene, the woman looked at Savage, still out on the ground, and turned to the man with her. "Trent, you know I don't allow fighting on this ranch!" She turned back to Holt. "Who are you?"

Holt touched his hat. He couldn't help but admire the fire of the young woman standing in front of him. "Ma'am. I'm Holt Kincannon." He grinned at the flashing green eyes. "I was looking for a job, but I reckon I've burned that bridge. I'll finish watering my horse and be on my way."

She looked down at Savage again, whose fingertips were starting to twitch. "Mr. Kincannon, this ranch turns no man away from the table, but you'll have to speak to my foreman about a job." She indicated the man with her. "Trent Lyles."

Holt smiled at her. "Thank you, ma'am, and your name?"

A little flustered at his asking, she said, "My name is Carolyn Maser. You're on the Lazy M Ranch, Mr. Kincannon."

She turned, her skirt rustling as she strode back to the house. Holt watched her go, then turned to the foreman. "Mr. Lyles, I guess my question about a job should be directed to you."

Trent Lyles was a big man, similar in size to the man in the dirt, but without the belly. He carried heavy shoulders and arms over a slim waist. "Call me Trent." He looked down at Savage, who was just now shaking his head and trying to rise. "We just might have an opening."

When Savage regained his feet, he threw an evil look at Holt, then turned to Lyles. "You don't want to hire him. He was a deputy sheriff in Texas."

Lyles looked at Holt. "Is that true?"

"It is. That's why Savage, here, has a burr under his saddle. I arrested him for rustling. He was lucky none of the ranchers caught him, or he'd been tree fruit."

"That's a lie. I ain't never rustled a head of beef in my life," Savage said.

Lyles held up his hand to Savage. "I don't think I've ever met a man that hasn't dropped a loose loop over a cow or two. Savage, you know the boss's rule about starting a fight. Get your gear and get off the ranch."

"You can't fire me," Savage blustered. "I know—"

Lyles took a step toward Savage. "You *know* the rules. Now, git!"

Savage stood frozen in place for a second, then wheeled and marched off to the bunkhouse.

Lyles turned back to Holt. "Holt, if you're looking for a job, you've found it. Thirty a month and all the hard work you can stand. Stow your gear and come up

to the house for supper. You might give that horse of yours some oats and let him rest for a while. He looks worn-out.”

“Thanks,” Holt said. “He is. We’ve come a far piece.”

Lyles turned to Ike. “Show him the tack room, and then introduce him around to the boys.”

“I’ll do ’er,” Ike said to the foreman’s back. “Come on.”

After stowing his tack, Holt moseyed over to meet the men in the bunkhouse.

One of them stuck out his hand. “I’m Stony Pitts. I was outside and saw the fight, if you can call it a fight. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone drop like Savage did. He deserved it. Glad to have you here.”

“Thanks. Lucky punch.” He noticed Stony’s two guns and pointed at them. “You good with those?”

Stony smiled. “I get by. You hungry?”

You have no idea. I’ve been living on hard biscuits and jerky for the last week. “I could take a bite.”

The other cowhands, as soon as they were introduced to Holt, headed toward the house, with Holt, Stony, and Ike right behind. One young, skinny hand seemed extra vigilant as he crossed the yard toward the house. When he was halfway across, Brownie burst from the barn, racing toward him. The younger man took off at a dead run with Brownie angling for an intercept. The cowhands who were with him were roaring with laughter.

Stony yelled, “Get him, Brownie!” He then turned to Holt, to explain. “That’s Elmer Dawkins. Brownie sure don’t take to him.”

Dawkins leaped to the porch just ahead of Brownie, yanked the door open, and jumped inside. As soon as he was no longer an available target, Brownie turned and ambled back to his shady spot in the barn.

After the laughter had died down, and while still crossing the yard from the bunkhouse, Ike said, “Miss Maser is mighty fine-looking, ain’t she?”

“I’d say so,” Holt agreed.

“She’s a fine lady,” added Stony.

“She got that red hair from her ma,” Ike continued. Now, her ma was one powerful, strong lady. Mr. Maser was the same way. They were both killed when their buggy went over a ledge, coming back from town, mighty bad. I’d never figgered Mr. Maser would lose control of a buggy, but he shore did. Killed ’em both. Worst thing these old eyes ever seen, the bosses wife and him, all sprawled out and bloody from the fall. Miss Maser took it awful hard. Then, not a month later, old Arlo Houston, the old foreman, was bushwhacked. A blasted shame.”

They entered the kitchen through a side entrance to the house. Inside, Holt found a long table, capable of seating twenty at least. Now, there were only seven others, including Carolyn Maser.

Holt nodded to Carolyn and Lyles, pulled out a chair and sat. The cook was an old, crusty cowhand with a bad limp. He had an older Mexican man helping him. The two of them were constantly bickering back and forth in Spanish. A big stack of fresh tortillas, with enchiladas, beef and beans, and spicy pico de gallo sat on the table.

As the food disappeared, it was replaced with more. “Eat up, boys, but save room for a surprise,” the old cook said.

Ike leaned over to Holt. "That's Shorty Knox, and the Mexican feller is Juan Ortiz. Shorty's a pretty good cook, but Juan fixes the best food you'll ever sit down to. See that big, bubbling pot of grease? I bet we're gonna have sopaipillas tonight. Makes my mouth water just thinking about them."

"Trent," Holt said, across the table, "does the Lazy M have cattle running in a valley beneath the long mesa to the east of here?"

"Yep, we sure do."

Holt nodded. "You got some boys out there working them?"

Before Holt could answer, Carolyn Maser spoke up. "No, Mr. Kincannon, there is no one working them right now." She turned to Lyles. "Isn't that right, Trent?"

Lyles hesitated and said, "That's a fact, Miss Maser. Shouldn't be anyone working the east valley."

Carolyn, still looking at Holt, said, "Why do you ask?"

Holt finished chewing the tortilla, swallowed, and said, "Saw four cowboys branding about twenty-five head. Seemed to be working pretty fast."

Stony pushed back his chair. "You want us to head out to the east valley? Maybe we can catch up with those rustlers."

"Relax and finish eating, Stony," Lyles said. "We won't accomplish anything by rushing around like a bunch of crazy chickens."

Carolyn frowned. "Yes, but, Trent, those aren't any of our people. Shouldn't we get started over there to find out what's happening?"

"Yes, ma'am. But in the morning will be soon enough."

Carolyn turned back to Holt. "We've been losing cattle, but haven't yet caught anyone rustling. Every count we've made has been down." She again turned her head to Lyles, her soft auburn hair swinging with the turn. "How many are we missing?"

Lyles pulled out his tally book. The book almost disappeared in his large sun-browned hands. He flipped a few pages, scanned it for a moment, and said, "By my figures, in the past three months, we've lost nigh on to fifty head."

"Oh," Carolyn said, "I thought it was more."

Stony Pitts nodded his head. "Yes'm, I thought so too."

His comment brought a hard stare from Lyles. Stony held the glare, and Lyles looked back down at his book. "I've some more notes in my office I'll check." He directed his next statement to Holt. "Numbers aside, though, we've been losing beef."

Chapter 2

Ike spoke up. "Boss, you want some of us should ride over in the morning, and check out the herd? Can't see where it would hurt."

Lyles nodded his big head. "Yeah. We should do that. Ike, take Holt and Stony with you and do a count on the east valley herd. Leave early."

"Boss," Ike said, "we could head out tonight. That way we'd be there well before daylight. We could get a full day in."

"No, Ike. I don't won't any horses stove-up from twisted legs, or worse. That's rough country. Nobody needs to be riding it at night."

Ike glanced at Stony, who returned the look, but then said, "All right, Boss, in the morning." The men went back to eating.

During the meal, Holt examined the lady owner and the men around the table. *She's mighty pretty. Looks a lot like my Mary. Must be tough for a young woman running a big spread like this. I've seen green eyes before, but never that bright and clear, like emeralds, and they sure glisten, set in her soft, tanned skin.* His eyes moved to Lyles. *Now there's a man to be cautious of. Feels like I've seen him before, but can't place him.*

Holt's thoughts were interrupted when Juan Ortiz started putting platters of sopaipillas on the table. They were light, fried pastries, puffed like a tiny pillow, and golden brown. All conversation stopped. Elmer reached for one of the delicacies.

"Hold yore horses, boy! Ain't you got no manners?" Shorty yelled, his high-pitched drawl emanating from his stooped, six-foot-two-inch frame. "Let Miss Maser fill her plate first."

Elmer sat back, his pimply face red all the way down to his collar, while Carolyn picked two from one of the platters. She said, "Go ahead boys. Don't wait, or they'll get cold."

At that statement, long arms reached, making the delicious pastries quickly disappear. Shorty replaced the plates twice, with no slow-down in the men's consumption.

"That's enough, dang it," Shorty said, again. "I swear, if Juan fixed these things all night long, you cowpokes would be like a bunch of hogs, eatin' every one."

The men finished eating the last sopaipillas, said their good nights to Carolyn, and started back to the bunkhouse. Holt stood to go along with the others.

"Holt, stay for a moment," Lyles said. "Have a seat."

Holt moved up the table and sat to the left of Carolyn Maser, across from Trent Lyles. The other men could be heard talking outside.

Lyles took a sip of his coffee, waited a moment, and then asked, "How's it happen, your being in New Mexico? Understood from Savage that you were a deputy sheriff in Texas."

"Never been to this northern New Mexico country. Thought I'd mosey on up this way and look around. Had the idea of working my way farther north, maybe as far as Montana or Wyoming. There's a lot of cattle ranches starting up, in that north country."

Carolyn spoke up. "You were a deputy sheriff, Mr. Kincannon?"

"Yes, ma'am. Kind of fell into that. Had a friend that was a sheriff. I helped him with an investigation, and before I knowed it, he'd hired me. That lasted a while, then I decided to move on."

"So," Lyles said, "you're not working for anyone now?"

"The way I understand it, I'm working for the Lazy M?"

Lyles persisted, "But no one else?"

"Nope, can't say as I am. Who would I be working for?"

"No one. Just curious."

"Hey, Boss," a call from outside sounded. "You got a minute?"

Lyles stood and looked at Holt. "You coming?"

"I'll finish my coffee and be right along."

Lyles nodded and continued through the door to the darkness outside. Shorty and Juan were at work clearing the table and dropping the dishes in a big tub filled with soapy, hot water.

Carolyn asked, "Why Montana?"

"Well, ma'am—"

Carolyn interrupted, "Please, call me Carolyn. May I call you Holt?"

"You sure can, Carolyn. You see, I've been moving quite a bit since I left sheriffin'. Haven't quite found a place to settle down."

She turned those emerald green eyes on him and said, "Daddy taught me that when a man's a moving man, he usually has a reason. Do you have a reason, Holt?"

He finished his coffee. Looked into the eyes of the ranch owner. *This could be dangerous*, he thought. "Reckon I do, Carolyn. One of these days, I might tell you. But now, I need to hit the sack. We leave early in the morning."

He stood, took his cup to the wash tub, and dropped it in. Glancing back, he could see the surprise on her face. "Good night, Ma'am." He turned and walked out the door.

Holt walked across the yard to the bunkhouse. Lyles was standing at one side of the house with one of the men Holt hadn't met. He nodded to the two as he walked past them and entered the bunkhouse. Sandy and Ike were leaning against a bunk, talking. When they saw him, they motioned for him to join them. The other men glanced up and went back to what they were doing.

"We'll be leaving early in the morning," Ike said. "I'd like us to be well on our way by sunup. Shorty seems like he never sleeps. Says his old bones keep him awake. He'll have some grub for us when we leave. So, Holt, what you doing in these parts?"

"Passin' through. Getting short on funds and need a job. Sure glad this one came through. I was just looking for a meal and a bed, before I headed on."

"Looks like you got both and more," Stony said. He laughed and then added, "Never seen anyone fight themselves into a job before. Course, it's hard to call it a fight. You hit him once and he's down like he's been stomped by an old mossy-horned steer. Never seen the like."

Holt yawned. "Boys, I've had a long day and a good meal. Think I'll put it to bed."

Still dark, there was a chill in the air when Holt rolled out of bed, pulled his pants on, then put on his hat and shirt. He picked up his boots, turned them upside down, and, as quietly as possible, slapped them against the bed and felt inside them to make sure there were no stingers or biters hiding inside. He swung his gunbelt around his waist, fastened it, and pulled his Colt Conversion .44 from the holster. He opened the loading gate, and checked five of the six cylinders were loaded, then rotated the cylinder so that an empty chamber rode under the hammer to prevent an accidental discharge if the revolver was jarred too hard.

In the dim light, from the stove that was heating the room, he could see Ike and Stony getting ready. He pulled on his coat, picked up his 1873 Winchester, and

made his way outside. He was quickly followed by Ike and Stony. The men stopped outside the bunkhouse and looked at the full moon sinking behind the mesa to the west of the ranch house. "Brr," Ike said. "Cold out here."

Stony laughed. "That's just because them old bones of yours can't take it anymore."

"Watch out, young feller. I'm liable to put a hitch in your git-a-long if you ain't more polite to your elders."

The three men laughed and headed for the kitchen.

"Good morning, Shorty," the three men said, as they entered the kitchen.

"What's good about it, I ask you? It's already gettin' cold, you cowboys are drinkin' me out of coffee, and my rheumatis is actin' up. Not much good I can think of. Now grab a cup and a plate and get to eatin' so's Juan can clean up when he comes in."

"Looks like Shorty's in a good mood this morning," Stony whispered.

"I heard that. You best be careful, or I'll cook your biscuits with castor oil and see if that gits something runnin' besides your mouth."

The three men grinned at each other, quickly devouring the biscuits and bacon.

Shorty nodded to three bags by the door. "There's some grub for you. Understand you might be gone for a couple of days." He then went back to work preparing breakfast for the rest of the crew.

The men dropped their dishes in the tub, each picking up a bag as they headed out the door for the corral.

Holt looked over the horses in the corral, and dropped a loop over a tough-looking grullo. When the lasso settled over the horse's neck, he kicked a couple of times, then shook his head before he came to Holt. Ike and Stony looked at each other and grinned. Holt saddled up with no problem and swung into the saddle. The horse stood still for a moment, then started crow-hopping around the corral. The other horses cleared a path. He made a circuit, finally thought better of it and stood shaking his head.

"Feisty, ain't he?" Ike said.

"He'll do," Holt replied. "You boys going with me, or you waiting for another show?"

"Guess we best be on our way," Ike said.

The other two men saddled up, and the three of them walked the horses out of the yard.

Ike led the way. "We'll take it easy, till we get some light."

Two hours later, daylight caught them loping up a canyon bordered on both sides by tall mesas. Scattered grass and sagebrush covered the floor of the canyon.

"So, where did you see those fellers working our cattle?" Ike said to Holt.

"Another couple of hours east of here, where it opens into a wide, grass-covered valley with scattered sagebrush. It looked like they were trying to move the cattle southeast."

Stony spoke up. "I know that country pretty well. Used to work for a rancher southeast of there. Name of Cliff Jagger. Not a bad sort. I just got an itch to move on. He had the Rocking Hat brand."

Holt started picturing how the Lazy M brand could be changed to the Rocking Hat with a running iron or a cinch ring. It could be done.

The sun worked its way up the eastern sky as the three riders rode toward it. The warmth chased the chill of the morning away. Big pines began near the crests of the mesas, climbing up the sides and pointing to the sky from the tops. Pinion and juniper were scattered below the pines, until, near the base, the sagebrush took over.

Holt liked this country. It was much different from where he and Mary once had their ranch. Scattered mesquite and oak dominated there, with big pecan, sycamore, and cottonwood along the creeks and rivers. They'd had a good life, until she died. He brought his mind back to the present, looking up at the mesa to the north and the valley spreading wide to the south. "Looks like we're here."

The three men walked the horses through the valley, looking, until they found the tracks and remains of a fire. They could see where the cattle had been worked and branded, then pushed south. They stayed with the trail until noon, then pulled up at a shallow stream, shaded by cottonwood and willow. They made a small fire under the trees, with well-dried wood that gave little smoke. Ike went down to the stream and dipped the coffeepot half full of water. Stony and Holt watered the horses downstream from Ike, then brought them back and staked them out on good grass.

Ike set the coffeepot on the fire to boil. "Whatcha think of Lyles?" he asked of Holt, as the men sat around the fire, digging into the bags Shorty had given them.

"Not much. I just met him."

"I don't like him," Stony said.

Holt turned to look at Stony and then back at Ike. *What were these two up to?* He'd let them talk. As deputy sheriff, he'd found that everybody liked to talk, many, too much for their own good.

Chapter 3

"He came on about a week after Arlo, the old foreman, was bushwhacked." When the water was boiling, Ike moved the pot off the fire and tossed in the coffee grounds.

"Ike makes great coffee," Stony said. "Better than Shorty."

"Better not let Shorty hear that," Ike responded. "He'll never give you another cup."

"Anyway, wasn't long after, Lyles fired three of the boys, said he didn't need 'em any longer. They'd been with the ranch for quite a while. Miss Maser objected, but Lyles talked her into it, said he was the foreman and knew best. Then, not a month later, he hires these gunnies—"

"They sure ain't cowboys," Stony said. "All they seem to do is lay around the bunkhouse and eat."

Ike shot Stony a frown. "Who's telling this? All them boys seem to do is lay around and eat. I don't think they've ever worked cows. So, it's a mite troublin'. I think he has his eye on Miss Maser. She acts sweet on him. When there's a dance

in town, he takes her. She used to dance with the boys from all around. But now, it's like he won't let nobody else dance with her. Couple of the town boys tried, but they ended up getting beat pretty bad."

Ike took his cup to the creek and scooped up a little of the cold stream water, walked back, and poured a little bit into the coffeepot. "Settles the grounds." He waited for a few minutes, then slipped his glove on and picked up the pot. "Hand me your cups."

Holt and Stony stuck their cups under the coffeepot spout, and Ike poured the black liquid, first into theirs and then his.

Holt took a sip and, surprised, said, "That's danged good coffee."

Stony nodded vigorously. "I told you. Ike makes the best coffee I've ever tasted."

Ike grinned. "An old mountain man showed me. Once the water's boilin' you got to take it off the fire. That's the important thing. Course, a little cold water sinks the grounds, where you can drink your coffee, not chew it."

Holt, seated on a long log next to Stony, said to Ike, "So you think something fishy is going on?"

Ike nodded. "Don't know what. Maybe he truly likes her, but why'd he bring on these gunnies? I don't know."

Stony piped in. "He's a shootist himself, I tell ya. You see how he carries himself. He keeps his right hand free all the time. I never seen him carry anything in that hand. I'm afraid Miss Maser has gotten herself messed up with a feller that's real bad medicine."

Holt had been listening and sipping his coffee. "You two have any idea what Lyles is after?"

Ike shook his head. "Don't rightly know, but whatever it is, it ain't good. 'Bout the only thing I could think of is that he's after the ranch. I don't see how he could get it without marrying Miss Maser. Unfortunately, she's taken a shine to him."

The two men finished off the biscuits and bacon that Shorty had sent with them. He'd even tossed in a couple of apple hand pies for each of them.

"That shore beat jerky," Ike said. He headed to the stream to rinse out the coffeepot. The men packed up and remounted their horses. They crossed the narrow creek following the cattle trail.

"Is there somewhere near to sell the cattle?" Holt asked.

"Fort Union," Stony tossed in, "is the best place. It's southeast of here. Surprised you didn't pass it coming in. Course, a man could sell a few beef down at Mora or Golondrinas, but I'd bet on Fort Union."

They rode on, quiet in their own thoughts. *Beautiful country*, Holt thought. *I might be ready to sink some roots again. This wouldn't be a bad place to do it.*

The cattle trail continued to the southeast. The rustlers weren't pushing the cattle hard. From their trail, they seemed to be unconcerned about being followed. Late in the afternoon they started seeing thick dust in the distance. The cattle had crossed the river and were being pushed into a canyon.

"Either of you know this canyon?" Holt asked.

Stony shook his head, and Ike said, "Never seen it. The way the mouth twists around, it's kinda hid. Looks like it runs east to west. No telling how long it is."

"I'm betting," Holt said, "that we'll find the rest of the stolen cattle up here. We'd best keep an eye out. If they've got lookouts up on those canyon walls, we'll be sitting ducks."

Holt stopped, and the others followed. He pulled his binoculars from the saddlebags and looked over the juniper and sage-covered canyon. He took it slow, examining every spot the binoculars exposed. It took him ten minutes, but he felt sure the rustlers had taken no such protection to ensure their security. *They must think the canyon is so well hidden they're safe*, Holt thought. He slid the binoculars back into the saddlebags. "Looks all clear to me."

They rode silently on, shadows growing long, as the sun drifted lower in the crystal-blue western sky. Toward the east, the rays of the sun illuminated the dust particles rising from the cattle.

"I want to find a way to get on top of the canyon wall on the north side. That should give us a good view of the cattle and rustlers," Holt said.

The men searched in the waning daylight. Just before the sun set, they found a path, probably a deer trail, well north of the entrance. Holt led off, the grullo taking to the trail like a goat. By the time they reached the top, it was almost completely dark. The moon wouldn't be rising for another couple of hours. They came to a rock face that jutted up for twenty-five feet or so, on top of the mesa. At the base of the rocks a big pond had formed, fed from an underground stream that showed no entrance or outlet.

"This is far enough back from the canyon walls, I doubt anyone could see our fire," Holt said. "Why don't we water the horses, and grab some food. Then we can move up the mesa. I'll bet we find the rustlers not far away."

"Sounds good to me," Stony said. "I'll take the horses to water."

Holt started gathering dry wood to get a fire started, and Ike pulled out the coffeepot and coffee. Before long a small fire was blazing.

Back with the horses, Stony staked them out so they could feed, then joined his two compadres. The young man squatted by the little fire and held his hands out. "Feels good. Starting to get a little chilly."

"Yep," Ike said. "Gonna be cold tonight. I'd much rather these old bones be curled up under my blankets at the bunkhouse, but I'd shore like to catch me some rustlers. We've lost a lot more cattle than what Lyles allowed. I'd bet closer to ten times that much. Maybe five hundred head."

Stony was staring at the fire. *Never a good idea*, thought Holt. *It ruined a man's night vision, but we'll be moving on shortly.* A great horned owl's hoot, back in the pines, sounded forlorn in the heavy darkness, lit only by the myriad of stars. The men filled their cups and took some jerky from their bags. They sat back chewing on jerky and sipping their coffee.

Holt said to Ike, "When we finish here, what say we head on up the mesa and check out where those cattle might be in the canyon? It's my bet they aren't far."

"Reckon that's fine with me. Though I'd like a fire, I figure we'll be better off with a dry camp tonight."

The three men finished and washed their cups in the spring. Ike dumped the remains from the coffeepot on the fire and rinsed out the pot, slipping it back in his sack. The men mounted and started riding through the pine trees close enough along the side to keep an eye on the canyon below. They had ridden

carefully for half an hour when they heard cattle lowing. Following the curve of the mesa, the campfire of the rustlers came into view.

There were two of them sitting at the fire. A brush fence, across the canyon, could be seen, in the reflection of their fire, holding the restless cattle. They were no more than two hundred yards from Holt and his crew.

"Wait here," Holt said. He slipped off his horse, reached into his saddlebags, and pulled out a pair of Apache moccasins. He removed his boots and slipped on the knee-high moccasins, with his pants tucked in, and rolled the moccasins down to mid-calf. With a piggin' string, he tied his boots together and tossed them over the saddle, then slid his Winchester from the scabbard, and moved toward the side of the mesa.

"I'll be durned," Ike said. "Never expected that. You reckon he's part Injun?"

"Nah," Stony replied. "He's just canny."

Holt eased down the steep slope, moving from juniper to pinion to juniper to pine. Upon reaching each tree, he stopped and scanned the canyon floor. For some reason the cattle were restless. If they decided to stampede, that brush fence wasn't going to stop them. They'd get scratched up a mite, but other than that, they'd roll over it like it wasn't even there.

It took him an hour of careful slipping to reach the bottom of the canyon. Listening, he heard no sound of a night herder to settle the cows. The cattle were on their own, although it didn't sound like the herd they had seen the dust from. The amount of dust indicated a much larger herd. He slipped closer to the rustlers. They were jawing over steaks. Evidently, they had killed a cow for food. He moved closer and could hear what they were saying.

"I'm getting almighty tired of being stuck out here in these blasted hills. I need a drink, and I'm going to town pretty soon."

The other snorted. "I'd be careful with talk like that. The boss hears you and you won't be able to go to town. You'll be pushing up sagebrush."

"I'll say one thing," the first man said, "that there woman raises some tasty beef. The onlyest place I tasted meat this good was up in Denver. Mighty good food there."

Holt had moved closer to the two and had determined they were the only men left with the cattle. They kept talking.

"When you reckon we're gonna get the payoff? If I'm goin' to town, I need me some money."

"We'll get paid when the boss is ready. Now quit your bellyaching."

Holt had moved to the edge of the brush, no more than three feet from the cowboy who was complaining. He reached out slowly and pressed the cold muzzle of the Winchester against the man's neck. The man had cut a piece of steak and was in the process of lifting it to his mouth. His hand froze in midair. The other cowboy continued eating, glancing over at his partner.

"What's up with you?"

Holt eared the hammer back on the Winchester, the audible, metallic clicks reverberating around the campfire. "Looks like a Winchester's got his tongue," Holt said.

The other man tried to see into the darkness, but his night vision had been ruined by the glare from the fire. He could see nothing. The man's right side was

away from Holt, and the rustler started slowly moving his right hand to his revolver.

He heard a dry chuckle.

"Now that'd be such a bad decision."

"What do you want?"

"First," Holt said, "I want both of you to empty your holsters one at a time, and toss your guns to the edge of the fire, between you. Now!"

The two men slowly lifted their revolvers from where they were nestled in their holsters and tossed them to the ground.

"Good," Holt said. He stood, moving the muzzle of the rifle from the first man's neck. An audible sigh issued from the rustler. "Now, what's your names? I always like to know the names of the men I'm going to hang."

The men started to stand.

Holt pointed the rifle at one and then the other. "You boys stay right where you are, and tell me your names."

The complainer, young, pushed his hat back so he could see Holt better, and said, "My name's, Vern Parker, but it ain't gonna make no difference. The boss is taking over this country, and fools like you will either run or die."

Chapter 4

The other man turned to the kid and, with a voice dripping in venom, said, "Shut up."

Holt took two quick steps and slapped the talker with the butt end of his rifle. The man toppled over and lay still. "What's his name, Vern?"

The words rushed from Vern's mouth. "His name is Pike Smith. He's pretty fast with that gun." He nodded, a couple of times, to the other man's handgun.

"Pull a piggin' string off that saddle next to you and tie Mr. Smith up, Vern."

Vern reached for his saddle and untied a piggin' string. He looked up at Holt before he stood.

"You can stand."

The younger man stood, walked over to Pike Smith, rolled him over on his belly, and tied his hands behind his back. He straightened and looked at Holt.

"Now, reach down and pick up those handguns, one at a time, and hand 'em to me, nice and easy."

The young fella bent over, picked up the revolvers one at a time, with thumb and forefinger, and handed them to Holt, who slid them behind his waistband. Holt pointed to the log the rustler had been sitting on with his Winchester. "Move back over there and sit. Stick your feet straight out and keep them there."

Rocks rolled on the sloped canyon wall. "We're coming down, Holt."

The moon reached for the stars above the tree line and cast a pale light over the two men as they worked their way down to Holt. A few minutes later, Ike and Stony rode into the firelight. Stony was leading Holt's grullo. The two men pulled up and dismounted.

"Looks like you had all the fun," Stony said. He walked over and nudged Pike. "Wake up, boy. You don't want to sleep through your hanging."

Pike moved, then pulled his legs under him, sat up, and looked around. Blood trickled down the left side of his head, from where the metal butt plate struck. He looked at the three men standing over him.

"You gonna hang us?"

Ike looked at the rustler. "Reckon you brought it on yourself, old son. Rustling's frowned on in this part of the country. Now you took it a step farther and killed one of those beeves. The boss won't look too kindly on your actions. In fact, he'd be mightily upset with us if we didn't hang you."

"Stony, why don't you ride over to the fence and take a look at the cattle. See if you can tell how many head they've got stashed in there, check the brands, as best you can, and maybe try to calm them down a bit," Holt said.

Stony climbed back on his horse and slowly rode through the canyon bottom to the brush fence, stood in his stirrups, and peered over it. He could just make out the new brand, on the cattle close to him. It was the Lazy Running W. He rode back and forth, singing to the cattle. After a few minutes, their nervous bellowing started to subside. He continued for a while longer, then rode back to the fire. "Looks like they're branded the Lazy Running W. Fits nicely over Miss Carolyn's brand. I figure maybe fifty head. For sure no more than sixty. That wasn't the bunch that was leaving all the dust."

Holt turned back to the rustlers. "All right, boys. Here's your chance to ride out of this canyon sitting on the back of your horse, not draped over it like a sack of potatoes. Where's the rest of those cattle, and who owns the Lazy Running W?"

Pike looked at Vern and made a small, quick shake of his head. Holt saw it. He walked over to Pike, put his boot on the man's shoulder, and shoved. Pike tumbled into the dirt.

"Look for a tree, Stony," Holt said. "This one's dead set on stretching hemp."

"I can see one from here, by that little stream. It's a big cottonwood with a perfect limb for hangin' a feller. You want me to get a horse?"

Pike glared up at Stony. "Kid, if I get out of here, you're a dead man."

Stony stepped down from his horse and strode over to Pike, reached down, grabbed him by the shoulders, and yanked him onto his feet. He continued looking at the man, while saying to Holt, "Why don't you untie this feller and give him his gun? Looks like he's got a hankerin' to die."

Holt looked at Stony for a moment. The cowboy was eager to draw on the rustler. A cold confidence emanated from the young man. Holt had seen it in men like Masterson, Holliday, and Thompson.

"Not now, Stony. He doesn't deserve a chance."

In the flickering firelight, Stony threw a hard glance at Holt. "I didn't say give him a chance, Holt. I said give him his gun. He'll still be just as dead as if he hung."

"No. He's a rustler. He deserves to hang. Get his horse."

Stony held his position in front of the rustler for a few more seconds. The tension was thick as cold molasses. He finally shrugged, walked to his horse, untied his lariat, and then walked over to the rope corral.

The men had a remuda of ten horses inside the corral. He tossed a loop over a bay, untied one end of the rope corral, led him out, and retied it. He tossed the blanket over the horse's back, smoothed it out, and threw on the saddle. After tightening the cinch, he looked back at Holt.

Holt grabbed Pike by the arm and pushed him over to the horse. Pike stepped into the stirrup, and Holt balanced him as he swung his leg over the saddle. Now on the horse, his hands tied behind his back, a look of resignation settled on Pike's face. Momentarily, his shoulders slumped. Holt could see the determination in the man's face as he strove to retain a small shred of dignity. Pike pulled his shoulders up and looked down at Holt. "If it's gonna be done, then get to it."

An icy stillness had settled over the camp, broken only by the lonely howl of a coyote on the rim of the canyon. Holt took the rope from Stony and led the horse to the big cottonwood. Ike had pulled Pike's rope from his saddle and, now mounted, rode to the cottonwood. He built a hangman's noose and tossed it over a thick limb of the tree, one that wouldn't break with a man's weight, and tied it off at the trunk.

Holt moved the horse next to the noose, while Ike pulled the noose over Pike's head, positioning it around his neck and making sure the heavy knots rested just behind the man's ear.

A short groan came from Vern, as he watched from the fire. The men were only shadows in the distant moving firelight and the ghostly pale glow of the moon.

Holt, holding the horse with the rope, let out some slack so the horse would be able to jump out from under the man to provide a quick drop. "You have anything to say, Pike?"

Pike looked at each of the men, his eyes hard and black in the darkness. "Reckon I'd rather be just about anywhere else."

Holt nodded to Ike, who immediately slapped the bay with the end of his reins. Surprised, the horse leaped forward, leaving Ike's body hanging in the open night air. The big cottonwood limb hardly moved with the man's weight. There was an audible snap that echoed through the canyon when the man's weight hit the rope. His feet hung, dangling in the cold canyon air, kicking only for a few moments. Then he was still.

Holt led the horse back to the fire. Stony stepped up and said, "I'll take him."

Ike rode back to the fire and dismounted. He walked over to the coffeepot, shook it, made a face at the small amount that was in the pot. He walked over to the stream, rinsed it, filled it, came back, and placed it on the coals of the fire. He straightened, placed both hands at the small of his back, and leaned back. His back popped. At the loud pop, Vern jumped.

Ike looked around at the young rustler, sitting by the fire. "Relax, boy. It ain't your time yet. We're gonna have some good coffee first." He walked to his horse and pulled out the coffee makings and returned to the fire, waiting for the water to boil.

"Stony," Ike said to the cowboy who was returning from putting the horse back in the corral, "how 'bout you watering these cayuses, while I get us some coffee going?"

"Sure thing, Ike." Stony took the three men's horses over to the stream and let the thirsty horses drink.

Holt had been watching the boy. The rustler was staring at the ground, obviously expecting he would be hanging alongside Pike on that big cottonwood. Holt watched Ike walk over to the log Vern was sitting on and sit down beside him. "If it's all right with these other fellas, Vern, you might have a chance to save yourself."

Vern's head came up and, with blood shot eyes, he looked at Ike. "How's that, Mister?" he asked, his voice breaking a little on the last word.

"First, I need to know everything you know about what's going on with this rustling. Do you understand, Vern? Everything."

The boy nodded. "Yes, sir. I understand, but I don't know much. I'm just a boy what come along looking for some excitement. Them fellers always talked amongst themselves, never much to me." He looked down, then, with his head down, cut his eyes to Holt, who was still watching him.

Holt caught the glance and shook his head. "I don't know, Ike. This kid looks a little shift to me."

"Aw, heck, Holt. He's just a kid."

"So's Billy the Kid, and look at the people he's killed."

"Boy, seems this man don't trust you. You reckon you could tell us anything?"

"Well, sir"—the boy coughed and looked down at the ground, then glanced again at Ike—"I did hear something about them taking half of the big herd to Fort Union, and the rest down to the ranch. But I don't know for sure if that was the plan or not."

Vern stared toward the cottonwood. A breeze had picked up, and, in the faint moonlight Pike's body could be seen slowly swaying with the ebb and flow of the wind.

Ike let the rustler watch for a few moments, and then said, "If it's all right with the other boys, you help us drive this little bunch of cows back to the ranch and you'll be free to go."

"You mean it?"

"I do, but if any of us ever find you even near a rustled cow, you'll hang. Do you understand me?"

Vern's head nodded vigorously. "Yes, sir, I sure do." He looked at Holt and Stony. "I promise. No more rustling. I may even take up sheep herding."

Ike laughed and slapped the boy on his back. "No need to go that far, young feller. Why, I'd rather be caught rustling than wrangling sheep."

Vern exposed a sickly grin, and glanced under his hat brim toward Holt. "Well, maybe I was exaggerating a little bit, but I ain't gonna rustle again, no way, no, sir."

"All right," Ike said. "Why don't we get some rest and we'll push these steers back to the home range."

Vern looked at Holt. "I don't have to ride into the ranch headquarters, do I?"

Holt paused, still feeling uneasy about the boy. He watched him silently, then said, "No, Vern, we'll let you skedaddle as soon as we get these cows back home. My suggestion to you, is west or north. There's a lot of opportunity in both directions. But understand, you turn on us, I'll kill you as quick as I would a mad dog."

"Now, what say we get some rest?"

Ike spoke up. "Good idea. I'll take the first go, then Stony, and you, Holt. Two-hour shifts. Does that work for everybody?"

Holt and Stony nodded. Holt tossed a piggin' string around Vern's wrists and made it secure. Vern said nothing.

"Lay down, boy," Ike said to Vern. The young man moved over to his bedroll. The older man pulled the blanket back, letting Vern stretch out, then spread the blanket over him. Moving out of the firelight, he walked to the stream, cleaned off a spot beneath another large cottonwood and sat, watching the mouth of the canyon and the walls.

Stony and Holt stripped their mounts, staked them out, and grabbed their bedrolls. Not even five minutes had passed before Ike was listening to continuous snoring.

Chapter 5

Holt watched daylight wipe out each star, one by one. He had been on watch for almost two hours. The chill of the morning in this high-up country invigorated his body. Earlier, he had tossed a few logs on the fire to bring a little warmth to the camp. In the pale morning light, Ike groaned, complaining about old bones and hard ground, threw back his extra blanket, and rolled out of his bedroll. He pulled his boots on, and walked over to the stream, coffeepot in hand.

Vern wiggled around, his hands still tied, and sat up. Holt walked over and untied the boy's hands.

"Thanks."

"De nada."

Stony lifted his hat from his face and looked around the camp. "Dang, I was dreaming I was sleeping on the softest feather bed in St. Louis."

"You ever been to St. Louis, Stony?" Holt said.

"Nope. I dream about it a lot, though." Stony checked his boots, stomped them on and swung his gunbelt around his waist.

The camp was coming alive with the morning. The cows were bawling, restless in their confinement. Ike was back with the pot. He scraped ashes from a corner of the old fire, exposing hot coals, and set the coffee pot on the coals.

"Look up." Holt pointed to the north rim of the canyon. The men followed his finger. Five bighorn sheep stood on the rim, looking down on them.

"Mighty pretty animals," Ike said. "You ever seen 'em fight?" he asked Holt.

"Can't say as I have. Sheep like that weren't around where I was in Texas."

"It's hard to describe," Ike began, "if you've never seen it for real. Couple of big ole rams stand off a ways from each other, sizing the other feller up. Then, at the same time, they charge, raring up on those hind legs. Adding the force of dropping and charging, those two big sheep slam those wide, curled horns together. Sounds like somebody firing a Sharps. Vibrates the whole durned countryside."

The sheep stood, watching the men for a while longer, then turned and disappeared into the timber.

"Coffee's ready," Ike said.

The men sat around the fire, drinking their coffee and chewing on jerky.

"Ike," Holt said, "I've been thinking. If the rustlers plan on taking half those cattle to Fort Union to sell to the army, taking these cattle back to the ranch first would put us too late to stop 'em. They'll be long gone."

"That's true. If what the boy says is true, they'll be holding the other half on that ranch south of Mora. We can get those anytime. So what do you have in mind?"

"If it's all right with you and Stony, I'd say we leave these cattle here and head straight for Fort Union. We know that's where they're going. Once we take care of that situation, we'll pick up the other cattle at their ranch, swing by here, add these to the herd, and drive 'em all back to the ranch."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Ike said. He turned to Vern. "We'll need you in Fort Union to make a statement to the marshal."

"That's fine. I'll do it."

Ike looked around at the other men. Stony nodded.

Holt said, "As long as he's not armed."

"That's settled," Ike said. "Now, let's get busy. We'll move this brush fence closer to the mouth of the canyon. That'll give these cows a little more room to roam. There's good grass and plenty of water here. Reckon they'll be fine. Let's get to it."

The four men finished eating, saddled and loaded up, and rode near the mouth of the canyon. There, they spent a good part of the morning cutting extra brush and spreading it across the narrow canyon. After completing the fence, except for a make-shift brush gate they left open for them to pass through, they rode back to the old fence, roped sections of it, and dragged it down to add to the new one they had just built.

The cattle milled around, slowly grazing toward the new fence. The men finished reinforcing the fence, stopped the hole where they had ridden through, and surveyed their work.

"I think that'll hold 'em till we get back," Holt said.

"Yep, so do I," Ike replied.

The four men turned in unison, and headed for Fort Union. They continued into the night, finally stopping to camp and rest the horses, close to midnight.

Starting early the next morning, they arrived at Fort Union mid-morning and rode to the Fort Union cattle pens.

The pens were full of cattle branded with the Lazy Running W. Holt and Ike rode in the middle with Stony and Vern on each side. An army captain was talking to one of the rustlers, while three others were sitting their horses off to the side. Four soldiers were mounted behind the captain. Holt recognized the man talking to the captain. He had been a partner to Jesse Savage, and had accompanied Savage to prison.

Holt leaned over to Ike. "Let me handle this. I know the man talking to the captain. Watch the other three. I plan on holding these men for the marshal. They're not leaving here."

Ike nodded. "You bet. I'll get Stony to take a look at the brands. I don't think those fellers will start anything with the army right here."

"Stony, check those brands and let me know what you see."

"Sure thing, Ike." Stony peeled off from the group and rode to the pen entrance. He opened the gate and rode in, closing it behind him.

The captain watched the four men ride up.

"Morning, Captain," Holt said, pulling up in front of the captain. He was in such a position that the outlaw had to turn his horse around to face the newcomers. The rustler started to turn his horse, and Holt said, "Just stand easy there, Payston."

The man stopped his horse's movement and looked over his left shoulder. "Didn't expect to see you out here."

The captain watched the interchange between the two men. Turning to Holt, he said, "May I help you, sir?"

"I think it's more like me helping you, Captain. If you'll give me just a moment." He looked back at Stony, riding through the cattle. Stony nodded back to Holt. "Captain, I'd like you to know, you're about to buy stolen stock."

"Now, hold up here," Payston said. "This is all Lazy Running W cattle. They came from our ranch south of Mora."

Holt locked eyes with Payston, and said, "Captain, those are lies. These are Lazy M cattle, and I can prove it."

"What's your name, sir?" the captain asked Holt.

"My name is Holt Kincannon. I ride for the Lazy M Ranch. These other fellas are with me."

Payston and the other rustlers were giving Vern hard looks.

"Then, Mr. Kincannon, you are disputing the validity of the identity of these cattle?"

"I am, Captain, and I can prove it. How much are you paying this man per cow?"

"We had arrived at a price of fifteen dollars a head."

"Fine, we'll shoot a steer, skin it, and you can check the brand on the backside of the hide. If it isn't the Lazy M, we'll pay this man fifteen dollars. If it is, those cattle are ours and those men are rustlers."

"Very well. But Mr. Kincannon, I'll be checking no brands. When you men work out whom these cattle belong to, please call on me at the fort. We are in need of beef. Good day." The captain touched his hat in salute, wheeled his horse, and the cavalrymen followed him back to the fort.

Stony exited the pens, dragging a scrawny steer from the group. He tied him to the corral and joined up on Ike's right side, facing the other three rustlers. A few bystanders had started wandering down from town, curious about the spectacle. One was a boy of about fourteen years. Holt called the boy over and flipped a four-bit piece to him. The boy caught the coin and examined it.

"What can I do for you, Mister?"

"Son, would you make a fast run up to the marshal and bring him down here?"

"Yes, sir," the boy said, and took off running.

Up to this point, the rustlers had held their positions. Now Payston said to Holt, "You're not skinning any cows here. These are our cows, and we aim to sell them to the army."

"Payston, you and these other coyotes are going to jail for rustling. Now would be a good time to drop your guns."

One of the other rustlers said, "I'm not going to jail. I'll just leave your bones in the dirt right here."

"Payston yelled, "Don't draw, boys! This here Kincannon is a curly wolf with that sixgun."

The talkative rustler ignored Payston and went for his gun. He hadn't cleared leather before two bullets, one from Holt's sixgun and one from Stony's, slammed into his chest. His gun fell from his hand, and then his body slowly toppled from the horse and fell on top of the sixgun lying in the dirt. The other men sat frozen in their saddles.

"Drop your guns, and make it quick," Holt said, as a small column of smoke drifted from the muzzle of his Colt Conversion .44 along with a matching one from Stony's Colt .45 Peacemaker. As the marshal walked up, carrying a shotgun, the four remaining men unfastened and dropped their weapons.

"What's going on?" the marshal demanded.

"Howdy, Marshal," Holt said. "We're from the Lazy M."

The marshal looked over to Ike and Stony. "Howdy, Ike, Stony."

The two men nodded.

"Ike who's this man?" The marshal asked, pointing at Holt.

Ike introduced Holt, and explained about the rustling in general and these cattle.

"All right. I seen that feller draw first, so no one's in trouble for the shooting. Soon as you yank a hide off, so I can see the brands, we can get this settled."

Stony swung down and walked up to the old steer. He talked to him for a moment to calm him down. "Sorry, old son." Stony fired a shot through the steer's brain. The animal dropped without a single kick.

Ike swung down to help, and little time passed before the steer was skinned. On the flesh of the left hip, under the skin brand, was a perfect, healed dark burn. Over the original burn, the result of the running iron showed red, where it extended the Lazy M to form the Lazy Running W. The marshal swung his shotgun to cover the rustlers and eared back both hammers.

"Don't make a tricky move, boys. I've had this here old gun for many a year. Age makes this trigger a mite loose." He looked up to Ike. "Why don't you come to the office and make a statement we can use at the trial. I don't figger you'll be around here when the trial happens. In fact, all of you come to the office. The more paperwork we have, the happier the judge."

The Lazy M crew rode to the marshal's office with the rustlers, and watched as the marshal locked them in the one cell he had.

"Sheriff, you mind if I ask Payston a couple of questions?"

"Go ahead, just don't forget to write out a statement for me."

Holt stepped to the bars. "Payston, where can we find this Lazy Running W, and how many hands still at the ranch?"

"Why should I tell you anything?"

"It'll go easier on you at sentencing. You boys know you got lucky. You're going to prison, but you'll get out alive. If you'd been caught on the range, with those cattle, your neck would be stretched like Pike's. Now, answer my question and I'll tell the marshal you cooperated."

Chapter 6

Holder, angry and sullen, finally gave directions to the ranch. He continued, "You'll find four men there. The herd's probably still bunched on the river where we left 'em."

Holt walked over to the desk where the other men were writing statements. Marshal Davis slid a blank piece of paper across the desk to Holt.

"Give me a statement, and write in it you were a deputy sheriff in Texas. That'll help."

Holt picked up a pencil and wrote what had happened, then slid it back across to the marshal. "You satisfied those are Lazy M cows?"

"Yep."

"And we're free to do with 'em as we please?"

"Your cows."

"Ike, what would you think about selling them to the army? We can get a pretty good price, and it'll save driving them all the way back to the ranch."

"I reckon Miss Maser'll be right glad to get the money."

Statements finished, the marshal thanked the men and they trooped out, pausing outside the office.

"Those horses are beat," Ike said. "Holt, you were talking with the captain, why don't you ride to the fort and sell the cattle. We'll grab hotel rooms in the Longhorn and figure on pulling out in the morning."

"Meet you there," Holt said, and swung up on his horse.

Cattle sold, and with rested horses, daylight found the men well on their way. Ike had felt comfortable returning Vern's weapons and had done so, even though Holt still found Vern shady.

The morning passed quickly. Mid-afternoon they topped a boulder-studded rise east of a nearly dry river, and spotted what remained of the herd, grazing contentedly on the brown, short grass.

North of the herd was a corral containing four horses, heads down, dozing in the afternoon sun. A rickety lean-to stood adjacent to the corral, saddles piled against the inside wall. Within a stone's throw of the lean-to, an old adobe house stood, portions of the exterior wall crumbling with age. A thin column of smoke found its way out of the broken chimney.

The men dropped back on the east side of the rise, and followed it around to a point near the front of the adobe.

"Vern," Holt said, "watch the horses. It ain't necessary you be in on this."

The men dismounted and eased over the rise, working their way from boulder to boulder, until they drew close to the house.

"I'm heading over to the lean-to," Holt said. "I want to see if there's a back door on that thing. I don't much suspect there is, but it won't hurt to check."

Holt ran across the open ground. The only visible window was in the front of the old house. He left the lean-to and moved to a point where he could see the back of the house—no door or window. After returning to the lean-to, where he had a good

angle on the house, he settled down to wait. From his position, it was apparent that Stony and Ike had spread out to different boulders. Now they'd wait.

It was tough, waiting in the afternoon sun. Drowsiness was their enemy, and it could shutter eyes with the stealth of a panther. The sun was slipping lower in the western sky, when the door opened and one of the rustlers stepped outside. The man stretched, looked around, and prepared to relieve himself.

"Val, look out!" a surprise shout came from Vern, followed by a rifle shot that struck Stony in the back.

Holt spun around to the origin of the shot, and saw Vern working the lever of a smoking Winchester and swinging the muzzle on Ike. He steadied the front sight, resting it in the rear buckhorn with both lined up on Vern's chest, and squeezed the trigger. Vern staggered back and disappeared behind a boulder.

"Ike, keep an eye on the door. We don't want any of those rustlers getting out. I'm gonna go make sure Vern is done for."

"What about Stony?"

"I'll check on him next. Nobody's safe until Vern is dead."

Holt raced across the yard toward cover, followed by two shots from the front window, the only window in the house. Ike laid down a barrage of covering fire, all of it centering on the window. No more shots were fired from the house.

Rifle ready, Holt stepped around the boulder to find Vern stretched out on his back. Blood was pouring from his mouth and the wound in his chest. Holt grabbed the rifle from the boy's hand.

Vern coughed twice, choking on his own blood.

Holt looked down on him, no mercy in his eyes. "You shot Stony in the back."

"He was gonna shoot my brother. I couldn't let that happen." Vern coughed again. Fear radiated from his eyes. He stared up at Holt. "Am I going to die?"

Holt stared back at him. "Yes."

"I don't want to die."

"You should have thought of that before you pulled that trigger."

Tears flowed from the boy's wide eyes as he gasped, choked, and died in the middle of a cough.

Holt spun around to check on Stony. He found him resting against the boulder that was supposed to protect him, dead. He checked the young man's pulse and swore. Stony had been a good man, and now, he was dead. Holt shook his head. He had known there was something wrong with Vern. *I should have insisted Ike not give him back his guns.* He shook his head again. *Too late now. Put it behind you and move on.* He ran over to Ike.

"How's Stony?"

Holt shook his head. "Dead."

"How about Vern?"

"Dead."

"Good riddance. Now what do we do?"

"Did you get a bullet into the guy that was outside?"

"Nope. I was too busy tryin' to see who was shooting behind us. That feller made it back into the house. I never should have given Vern his guns back."

"It's over. Right now, we need to get those fellas out of the house before dark. Otherwise we'll be in trouble. The least that could happen would be them escaping, and we both know the worst, but I have an idea."

"Well, come on, I'm all ears."

"They've still got that fire going. There's no doors or windows on the sides or back of the house. I can ride Vern's horse behind the house, stand on the saddle, and climb on the roof. I'll drop a blanket over the chimney. They won't be able to stay in there very long once it starts smoking up."

"You'll have to move fast. They hear your feet, they'll be firing right through the roof."

"I'll take my chances. I danged sure don't want them coming out of that house after dark."

Ike nodded. "Me too. Give me those rifles, and I'll keep bullets flying around in there until you get down. That should keep 'em occupied."

"Thanks." Holt ran back to the horses and mounted Vern's. He dropped below the ridge until he was well away from the house, then crossed over and rode up behind the adobe. Ike was pouring lead through the window. Holt had taken Vern's blanket from the bedroll and draped it over his shoulder. Holding the horse still, he stood on the saddle, grabbed the top edge of the adobe and swung himself over, resting for a moment. Then he ran to the chimney, tossed the blanket over the smoke hole, and dashed to the edge of the roof, bullets ripping near his feet as he ran. Reaching the edge, without pausing, he leaped.

Holt hit the ground, rolled, and swung up on the horse. It had only walked a few paces, and was pulling at some short grass. He rode well behind the house, back over the ridge to where the other horses were tied. He jumped down and ran back to Ike. Once there, he picked up his rifle and moved behind another rock.

"You hit?" Ike asked.

"No. It shouldn't be long. They'll have to come out. No one can stand that kind of thick smoke for long. Give them one chance to drop their guns, but only one. They have us outnumbered, so we can't let them get to cover."

Five minutes had gone by. Smoke was pouring out the front window and through the cracks in the door. Finally, the door burst open. The first man dashed out with his revolver in hand, wiping his eyes and trying to find a target.

"Drop your gun!" Holt yelled.

The man fired at Holt's voice, and was met by two .44-40 slugs slamming into his chest. He staggered forward a few paces, bent over, and fell.

"Don't shoot!" came from inside the house.

Holt yelled back. "Come out. Hands empty. You make a move and you'll look like one of your grandma's sieves."

Revolvers and rifles came flying out of the old adobe house, followed quickly by two coughing, hacking, stumbling men. They stood just outside the door, rubbing hard at their eyes while, at the same time, trying to raise their hands. One of them had a heavy, dirty beard. It looked like his beard was still on fire, smoke rising from it.

"On the ground!" Holt yelled, his Winchester ready. "Where's the other guy?"

Both rustlers coughed uncontrollably. Finally, one was able to answer. "Dead. Val's dead. He caught one of those ricochets in the neck. Bled like a stuck hog."

Holt cautiously moved out from behind the rocks. "If you're lying, when he steps out, you'll be the first person I shoot."

"I ain't lying, Mister. I swear. He's inside the house, dead on the floor."

Holt walked slowly up to the rustlers. Smoke continued to pour from the house. He stood where he could cover the two men and the front door. "Ike, would you mind getting that blanket off the chimney? We'll need to breathe if we're going to check the house."

"Good idea," Ike said. He hurried back to his horse, and rode to the front of the house. He pulled himself up on the roof, walked over to the chimney, grabbed the blanket, and threw it to the ground. Smoke billowed from the chimney, while Ike carefully lowered himself to the ground.

Holt checked the men for hideout guns and found nothing. "Stand up."

The bearded man turned around. "Where's Vern? He's the brother of the feller that's dead inside. Vern's gonna be mighty disappointed."

Ike shook his head. "Reckon those boys are shaking hands with each other right now. I won't speculate where."

"Vern's dead?"

"Behind those rocks," Ike said. "He back shot a fine feller. Burnin' in hell is too good for him."

"Ike, look who we got here," Holt said, pointing the muzzle of his Winchester at the other man.

"Well, if that don't beat all. Howdy, Savage. Reckon you shoulda kept on riding."

Savage stared at Ike. "When a man's luck turns bad, it turns all bad, but I'll tell you, the world ain't lost a thing with the killin' of those two young fellers. Those were some mean and shifty youngsters. Back in Texas, they would have skinned an old sodbuster alive if we ain't stopped 'em."

"Savage," Holt said, "what am I going to do with you? Our paths keep crossing, and not for the good. Now you've been caught rustling again."

"Ike, what do you think we should do with Savage here and this other feller? We've already hung Pike."

Chapter 7

With the mention of Pike hanging, the two rustlers looked at each other.

Ike nodded his head. "Holt, I have an idea. We could have just barely handled these cows with four of us, and there's no way we'll get all of 'em back with just two. What say we get these boys buried, then take these two yahoos up to the marshal in Mora. I'm betting I can find three fellers lookin' for a month's work there. With them, we'll be able to wrangle these mossy horns back to the ranch, and we'll pick up the other bunch on the way. Mora ain't but seven or eight miles up the road."

"All right, that sounds good," Holt said. "Now, let's get to work. There's a shovel in the lean-to. Savage, you get it, and the two of you start digging."

"No, sir," Ike said. "Stony ain't being buried by a bunch of rustlers. We'll take him back to the ranch. That's where he belongs."

Holt slid his hat to the back of his head. "You realize he'll be getting pretty ripe by the time we get there."

"I do. We'll wrap him in a couple of blankets and tie him to a travois. There's some willows along the river we can make a frame from."

"You're gonna be hard pressed working cows and leading a horse with a travois."

"Dang it, Holt, I'm gonna do it."

Savage and Becker stood listening to the argument.

"What are you still doing here?" Holt said. "Get the shovel and start digging one grave big enough for two."

Savage looked at Holt. "You puttin' both in one hole?"

"Yep, they're brothers, aren't they? Now get to work."

The two rustlers, taking turns with the shovel, started digging the grave at the side of the house.

"Ike, if you'll watch these fellas, I'll take care of Stony. Also, what do you think of this? Since we're going to Mora, why don't we take Stony? If they have an undertaker, we can get him a marker and a decent burial, with a preacher saying a few words over him."

Ike kicked a rock, took off his hat, and scratched his unruly hair. "Dang it, Holt, I'd sure like the boy buried on the ranch."

"I understand that's what you want, but look at this way. If we bury him in Mora, he's in a town cemetery. That will allow his family to find him, if they're ever looking for him."

Ike thought about it a little longer. "I hate it, but it does make sense. All right, we'll do it, but I'll take care of him. You watch these fellers."

After a few minutes, Ike rode up, dragging Vern's body behind his horse. He dragged him next to the grave, and Savage loosened the rope from the killer's feet. Without a word, Ike rode back to take care of Stony.

The hole finished, Savage started into the house.

"Hold on," Holt said. He walked into the house, spotted Val's body, and picked up the handgun, sliding it behind his waistband. Then, spotting the men's rifles, he gathered them up and carried them outside. "All right, Savage, you can get your pardner's body."

Savage nodded, disappeared for a few moments, and soon stepped back outside, dragging Val by his feet. The boy's head and shoulders left a wide trail in the dust.

"Dump 'em in," Holt said.

"I'm taking the horses to water," Ike said, as he rode by leading the other horses and Stony, wrapped in a blanket and draped over his cowpony.

By the time the two boys were covered, Ike was back, and had turned the other two horses into the corral. He dismounted and looked at the hole, now covered.

"You say something over the grave?"

"Sure," Holt said.

The men removed their hats and stood around the unmarked grave.

"Lord, these two boys didn't amount to much here. Reckon you'll know where to send 'em. Amen."

Holt locked Savage in a hard stare. "Savage, now it's your turn to talk. I want to know what's going on. All of it."

"You gonna hang us or take us in?"

"That's up to you. You talk, I'll take you in, for the second time. You decide to keep your mouth shut, I'll string you up right here."

Savage looked across the green valley at the mountains. "I don't have much interest in going to jail again." He paused, looking at the river and the big cottonwoods. "But I shore don't want my neck stretched." He looked back at Holt. "I know all about it. I'll tell you every bit of it. You'll tell the marshal I cooperated?"

Holt nodded, and Savage started talking, laying out the complete plan. Ike shook his head, disgust written across his face. When the rustler was finished, Holt looked at Ike.

"Do you believe this?"

Ike nodded. "Yep. I'm sorry to say, I do. We need to get back to the ranch. What say we get a move on and get to Mora. I'd like to be back as soon as we can."

The five men had stopped on the hill east of the ranch. With the three additional cowhands Ike hired in Mora, the drive had gone smoothly. After dropping Savage and his partner off with the sheriff in Mora, they had returned and driven the cattle to the canyon holding the additional herd and remuda. Those cows were glad to be out of the canyon, and quickly joined up with the others.

A week later, they were back on Lazy M land, and close to water. The men stopped driving the cows, and allowed them to settle down on their home range, while they continued, with the remuda, toward the ranch headquarters.

Now, they could see the quiet ranch yard. It should be bustling with activity, yet stillness cloaked the home. Holt turned, opened his saddlebag, and pulled out his binoculars. He thoroughly checked the barn, smokehouse, bunkhouse, and ranch house. The only movement came from the four horses standing in the corral. Through his binoculars, Holt could see the animals standing, their heads down, motionless.

Ike was the first to speak. "That ain't right, Holt. Don't know what's going on, but something's big wrong."

Holt replaced the binoculars in the bag. "We're gonna check it out. I saw no movement. If they're waiting for us, they've got the advantage. Let's see if we can turn the tables."

He turned to the three new cowhands. "You boys signed up for pushing cows, not gun fighting. If you want to wait here, no one will hold it against you."

The three men looked at each other and shook their heads. Rafael, the slight Mexican with the big mustache, grinned back at him. "Señor, nursing these cows has been the work, but now it is time for the fiesta. We took your money, we did the work, now let us play."

Holt nodded back. "Don't know how much fun this'll be, but it could sure get active. We'll circle around the buildings and come in from the back."

"Ike, you take Henry and hit the bunkhouse. I'll take the house. Rafael, you and Liam check out the barn. When you hear a yell, charge in and be prepared to shoot, but be careful. We've got to think about Miss Maser, Shorty, and Juan."

The men dropped back behind the hill, heading for their assigned destinations. Holt circled behind the main house, and tied the buckskin to a pinion tree, before

slipping near the house. He removed his hat and peeked through a lower corner of one of the back windows that looked into the kitchen, empty.

Holt eased up to the back door and tried the latch. It opened easily. He waited, giving the others time to get into position. When he felt everyone had plenty of time, he yelled "Now!" Bursting through the back door, he found the kitchen a mess, but empty. He slipped into the parlor and quickly scanned the room. Furniture had been turned over and books had been scattered from the bookshelf, as if someone had searched the room, but now it was empty.

He went throughout the house, finding no one, but the house was in disarray, mattresses ripped open, drawers yanked from cabinets, and clothing scattered over bedrooms. Holt finished his search in the office. Again, the same chaos met him, including Carolyn Maser's safe, standing open and empty with papers scattered in front of it.

He spun around as the front door slammed open, his sixgun covering the intruder.

"Easy, Holt," Ike said as he stared at the muzzle of the Colt .44.

Holt dropped the revolver back into the holster. "Looks like this place has been ransacked, but no sign of Miss Maser or the cooks."

"Yep, that's what we found. Ain't no one here. The boys are filling the trough for the horses. Looks like they ain't had food or drink for a couple of days."

Holt and Ike walked out on the porch of the the ranch house and looked around the empty yard. Even the old hound, Brownie, was nowhere to be seen. The place was deserted.

As they watched, Rafael and Liam stepped out of the barn and walked to the house. Upon reaching the steps, the two men stopped. Rafael removed his big sombrero and looked up at Ike. "No one is in the barn, Señor Holt, but there is a big *perro*. You know, a dog. He is dead. It looks like he was shot many times."

Ike took off running toward the barn, with the others following. He stopped just inside the barn door. Lying in the shadows was the big brindle hound dog. His body was riddled with bullet holes. There were so many holes, it looked like someone had emptied their revolver, reloaded, and emptied it again.

Ike knelt down beside the dog. "Dang that sorry so-and-so's hide. He never liked poor old Brownie, and Brownie took a mighty dislike to him when Lyles hired him."

"Who are you talking about, Ike?"

"Elmer Dawkins. He swore, one of these days he was gonna shoot Brownie. I told him to get ready if he did, cause I'd take every inch of skin off his scrawny body and make a lamp shade out of it." Ike took a short sniff. "I reckon he lived up to his promise."

Holt jerked his head around. "Did any of you hear something?"

All of the men stood quietly, listening.

Holt heard it again. A muffled grunt, couple with muted pounding. "Sounds like it's coming from the smokehouse." He turned and trotted over to the smokehouse, followed by the other men, guns drawn. Yanking the door open, Holt took two steps into the small building, the tantalizing aroma of smoked meat in the air.

Hanging from the tall rack, their feet well off the ground, were Shorty and Juan. Holt holstered his weapon and leaped forward, pulling his bowie knife from his

belt. The other men followed and grasped first Shorty and then Juan as Holt sliced through the ropes securing them to the smoke rack.

He pulled the bandanna from Shorty's mouth. "Git me outside," Shorty croaked. "I may never be able to eat another piece of smoked meat, ever."

They carried Shorty and Juan outside and closed the smokehouse door. After laying the two men on the ground, they cut their bindings and removed Juan's gag. Both men lay there for a few moments, sucking in the fresh mountain air.

"Water," Shorty said.

They helped the two men to their feet and assisted them to the kitchen, where they collapsed in chairs at the table. Ike filled a big pitcher of water from the indoor hand pump and set two full glasses on the table in front of the men. They immediately emptied them.

"More," Shorty said.

Ike filled the glasses again. As the two thirsty men reached for their respective glass, Holt said, "You boys better drink that slow and easy. You want it to stay down."

Shorty nodded and the two of them took sips of their water.

Ike and Holt sat down on the opposite side of the table and waited.

Chapter 8

Finally, Shorty coughed and tried to talk. He was hoarse and croaked a little as he started telling the tale. "It was Lyles. Two days ago, a rider, flogging his horse, rode into the yard. Lyles talked to him for a few minutes, then went to the bunkhouse, where those worthless cowhands he hired were hanging out."

He stopped and took another long drink of water, then held his glass out to Ike. Ike filled his and Juan's again. Then Shorty continued. "All of 'em came marchin' into the house, as big as you please, all except that scrawny, pimple-faced Dawkins. He went into the barn where Brownie was sleepin' and shot that old dog full of holes.

"Miss Maser, she went running out, but Lyles grabbed her by the arm, before she reached the door, and tried to kiss her. She loved that dog. They'd had Brownie since she was a little girl. Anyway, when Lyles tried to kiss her, she gave him a fearsome slap. He turned loose of her and slapped her so hard it knocked her across the room. That's when I grabbed my old Winchester. I keep it in the kitchen. But before I could use it, that other worthless trash Lyles hired had me covered."

The two men were slowing down with the water. Holt said, "Did you hear where they were going?"

Shorty nodded. "Yep, just before they threw us in the smokehouse, I heard them say something about heading up north, into the mountains to a hideout. Sounded like they have it stocked up for the winter. I can tell you, Lyles was some mad. Seems he had some kind of a scheme to marry Miss Maser, and if that didn't work, he had a ranch down south. Said he'd just steal all her cattle and take her."

He looked directly at Holt. "Lyles thinks you messed up his plans. He wants you dead!"

Holt smiled, a cold smile that never passed his lips. "There's been several that wanted me dead. They found it an easier thing to say than do." He stood. "Ike, I want you and Rafael with me. Liam, you and Henry stay around the ranch. Shorty knows what needs to be done. Listen to him, and get this place up and running again."

Shorty looked over at Ike. "I'll bury Brownie. You go on after Miss Maser, and if you get a chance, kill Elmer. After shooting Brownie, he wanted to light up the fire in the smokehouse, said we'd make good bacon. The other boys stopped him."

Ike gave a short nod. "He was a good dog. Believe me when I say it, Shorty. Elmer's buzzard bait. He just don't know it yet. Now, let's go save Miss Maser."

"We'll whip up something to tide you over," Shorty said. He and Juan stood and went to work in the chaotic kitchen.

"Take two horses each," Holt told the others as he pushed his chair back and stood. "Once we find their trail, I want to push hard. If we're lucky, maybe we can catch them before they get to the cabin."

They had found their trail shortly after heading north, out of the ranch. It had been easy. Lyles and his gang were riding fast and making no effort to hide their tracks.

After riding for several hours, they stopped to switch horses. Rafael spoke up. "Señor," he said to Holt, "I think I know where they're heading. In my younger days, it is possible I dropped a lasso over a cow or two. I spent some time in the cabin they are riding for."

Holt stopped after switching his saddle to his buckskin, who had recovered nicely from the long ride from Texas. "Tell me whatever you know, Rafael."

"I know plenty. To the cabin they head for, there is a trail from the south and the north. But I am sure they do not know of the eastern trail. We will have to ride east for a while, then turn north to intercept the trail. From there, I can lead you into the small valley with the cabin. It is much quicker, fewer mountains. The direction these *banditos* are taking tells me they know nothing of this trail."

The men finished switching horses, and Holt said, as he mounted, "If you feel sure that's where they're heading. If we lose them, Miss Maser could be in big trouble, if she isn't all ready."

"I am sure, Señor."

The three dangerous men galloped to the east, with Rafael in the lead.

Holt and Ike pulled up beside Rafael inside the thick pine forest, and the three men gazed down on what appeared to be a deserted cabin. It was nestled in a small valley, hidden between the snow-capped peaks. To the south, mountains jutted up to the sky, offering no hint of an entrance to this valley, but Rafael had assured them that Lyles and his gang would be working their way toward them from that direction.

"That is why, Señor, that it takes them so long. They must pick their way through very rough country. The trail is so narrow that sometimes your leg hangs over the cliffs. Very bad."

"Let's waste no time," Holt said to Rafael. "Is there a place, along the trail, where we can set up an ambush, without harming Miss Maser?"

"Si," Rafael pointed to an aspen-covered ridgeline. "Just before they break over that ridge, there is a good spot. We can kill them all."

"Let's go," Holt said.

As the men started to turn their horses, a rider trotted over the top of the ridge. He stopped for a moment and surveyed the valley from the south, then rode forward, followed by five other riders.

Holt and his companions held their positions under the tall ponderosa pines. Fortunately, they were far enough back in the pines to be hidden from the oncoming riders. Holt yanked his binoculars from his saddlebags, checked the angle of the sun, and jerked them up to his eyes. Carolyn Maser jumped out to him. He handed them to Ike, who was riding next to him. Ike watched for a moment, then passed them to Rafael.

"Miss Maser is third from the front," Holt said. "Looks like she's right behind Lyles. He has a lead rope tied to her cowpony."

"Yep," Ike said. "That no-good piece of dirt, Elmer Dawkins, is riding lead. I want him."

Holt responded, "We've got to make new plans. If we move in any direction, they'll spot us. The only thing I can see to do, and it has to be quick, is slowly back our horses deeper into these pine trees, and then slip behind the cabin."

"Si," Rafael said. "We must do it now!"

The three men carefully backed their mounts deeper into the tree cover, allowing the dark shadows to hide them. Once below a slight rise, they turned and, remaining deep in the pine trees, galloped around behind the cabin. Due to the slope of the land, the area where they came out of the tree line was below the line of sight of the approaching riders in front of the cabin. Guiding their horses close behind the cabin, they dismounted, tied their six animals to sagebrush, and pulled their rifles from the scabbards.

Fortunately, the cabin had a back door. The latch was hanging out, so Holt pulled on it. The men pushed quickly inside. Holt stepped up to the front door, and slid the small board covering the firing slit to one side. The other two men followed suit at the windows. The riders were no more than a hundred yards from the cabin, and Holt could hear them talking, confident of their successful escape.

"I want them out of their saddles, before they know we're here," Holt said. "When I throw this door open, you boys push open the shutters, so you have a broad field of fire, but don't shoot. We don't want Miss Maser harmed."

They waited. The four men and one woman rode straight to the front of the cabin. "Lyles, you think anyone followed us?"

Lyles laughed. "Through that country? There ain't any way we could've been followed. Why, it'd been tough for an Injun to follow through those mountains."

He stepped from the saddle and removed the lead rope from Carolyn's horse. Holt could see her hands were tied together. He felt a hot rage burning inside of him. *How could anyone treat a woman that way, especially Carolyn?*

One of the men had stepped off his horse and began unbuttoning his pants to relieve himself. Lyles saw him. "Go behind the house. Can't you see there's a lady present?"

Carolyn stared down at Lyles. "Now you're going to start treating me like a lady, after keeping my hands tied, even along that cliff? You're a monster, Trent Lyles."

Elmer laughed, and having tied his horse, stepped up to the front door. He grabbed the latch and pulled. The door swung open, and Holt stepped out, driving the muzzle of the Winchester into Elmer's stomach. Elmer folded and fell to the ground. At the same time, Ike and Rafael threw the shutters open.

The rustlers turned to see what the noise was and saw three rifles pointed at them.

Holt, in a calm, level voice, belying the rage he felt, said "Lyles, make a move and you're a dead man. Miss Maser, if you'll ride over here to the side, I'd be much obliged."

"She ain't goin' nowhere!" Lyles shouted, grabbing her reins and going for his gun.

Holt didn't hesitate. He stepped forward, past Elmer Dawkins, where he had an open field of fire, and pulled the Winchester's trigger. A hot slug of lead flew straight and true for the chest of Trent Lyles. The bullet penetrated the jacket Lyles was wearing, and, with some of the heavy wool preceding it, drove into his chest, exiting at the base of his shoulder blade and continuing across the valley.

Two more shots rang out as rustlers foolishly drew their guns against leveled rifles and paid with their lives. After the shooting had ceased, Holt made sure Lyles was finished, and then jumped to Carolyn's side. He helped her from her horse.

When her feet hit the ground, she gripped his arms with both hands, and turned those brilliant green eyes toward his. "Thank you. I felt I was lost." She noticed movement behind Holt. Pushing him away, she stepped between him and Elmer, who had recovered from the blow to his stomach, and, with an evil grin on his face, was drawing his revolver.

Ike had stepped to the door as Elmer was straightening up. Seeing the dog-killer go for his gun, he yanked out his six-shooter and began firing.

Elmer's grin disappeared with Ike's first shot. The bullet entered his side, knocking him back. He tried to turn the weapon on Ike, but Ike wasn't finished. He fired again. The second bullet hit Elmer in the chest, causing him to drop his gun and grab his chest as he fell to the ground.

Ike stopped firing.

Holt walked over to Elmer, who was moaning, blood flecks on his lips, and kicked his gun away. He turned to Ike, who still had Elmer covered. "You stopped shooting?"

"Have to admit," Ike said, "I wanted to keep firing, still do. But he's the animal, not me. Reckon he'll die from those two bullets, anyway." He turned to Carolyn. "Are you all right, Miss Maser?"

"I'm just fine, now, Ike. Thank you so much."

Ike turned red. "Welcome."

Rafael had stepped from the cabin and removed his sombrero, holding it in both hands before him. He bowed slightly, "*Buenas tardes, Señorita.*"

Carolyn smiled at the man. "Thank you for saving me."

Rafael smiled back, showing even white teeth below his big mustache. "De nada."

“Come on, Rafael, let’s get these hombres in the ground,” Ike said.

Elmer shuddered, gave one last breath, and died.

Ike spit and then said, “Guess he won’t be shootin’ any more dogs.” He grabbed Elmer’s heels and dragged him around to the back of the house.

Holt turned back to Carolyn. “You were willing to step in front of a gun for me?”

With a serene look on her lovely face, she said, “I was, wasn’t I?” Then she gave Holt an impish grin. “I couldn’t let anything happen to my new foreman.”

