

Prologue

It was 1886 and the American west was still a hard place. William Dean Ritter had left his small Montana farm three years earlier to become a cowboy. Having learned his craft on a large Wyoming ranch, he was now out to seek his fortune in Texas.

This second novel in the Montana series takes place in the Fort Worth area, where he finds all the excitement he can handle working on one of the biggest ranches in the state. It was his interest in race horses that took him there in the first place, but it wasn't long before he came face to face with rustlers and other low types... and, of course, a girl.

These are the stories of that young man who, guided by the lessons of his mother and father and the other strong men and women he meets along the way, searches for his place in a world that, in many respects, isn't all that different from today's.

To Jane

Steel Dust Dawn

A Montana Adventure

John E. Richman

Cover art by Herb Kopper

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Chapter 1

I'd been sufferin' for three days now and I couldn't take it much longer. Turns out there are few things in a cowboy's life more uncomfortable than a toothache. It started out as little more than an itch, but now it'd pretty much taken me over. I threw my blanket down late last night thinkin' I might sleep better, but it didn't turn out that way. Every time my face touched the ground, a lightening bolt of pain lit me up. Fortunately, Spirit and I should make Fort Worth by noon and I'll be quick to find my way to the nearest dentist. I've only been to Fort Worth once, and while I didn't know where any were, I suspected a city that size would be full of dentists who'd be happy to help me out.

I can't complain though. The truth is I haven't been sick much since leavin' Montana some three years ago, and this ache in my jaw's made me grateful for that.

I was also noticin' that the further south we rode, the hotter it was. Seemed to be hotter than usual for early June, but then again I'd only been this far south once before and that was last winter.

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Maybe this was normal for Texas and I know it bothered me more than it did Spirit, but I was concerned for him. We hadn't seen a water hole since right after dawn and I knew he must be gettin' thirsty.

As much as I was in a hurry to get to town, when the trail passed by a small grove of Mesquite trees I pulled up to a shady spot, grabbed my canteen from my saddle bag and took a break. I had to be careful not to add to my pain, so I was slow in takin' small, careful sips. When I was done I poured some in my cupped hands and held them up so Spirit could get a taste, too.

"Here you go boy. Take a drink and rest a minute. I think we're gettin' close to the Trinity and we'll follow her right into town -- shouldn't be more than another hour or so."

Spirit seemed to understand as he took a few licks and it was time to get back on the trail.

As we rode on, to get my mind off the pain, I thought back to how I got here. Three years ago I left home to be a cowboy – somethin' I couldn't be on our farm. My first real job was at a big ranch in Wyoming. That job was important to me for two reasons. First, it was where I learned to handle cattle, and second, it's where I found Spirit. He was just a yearling when my old horse broke his leg and had to be put down. Spirit was sired by my boss's horse and Dan planned to give him to his own son, Drew. But Drew was killed in an accident just before I hired on and when he

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decided it was time, Dan offered to sell him to me. Spirit was the most beautiful horse I'd ever seen and I was quick to take him up on the offer.

It took almost two years of hard work to pay off the loan but when I finally did, Spirit was all mine. Not long after that I left Wyoming for Kansas and got a job with one of the big cattle drives. Most those drives that end up in Dodge City start out in Fort Worth. After the first drive I stayed up there with friends for about a month 'til it was time to head back to Texas to catch another. The toothache started just after I left. If it'd started a day earlier I'd have had it taken care of in Dodge, but here I was out on the hot prairie with all the pain I could handle. Dang... this was supposed to be keeping my mind *off* the pain!

When I was on my way from Wyoming to Kansas I met up with an Indian tracker named Whiteplume, who once told me that when he got a toothache he cut it out with his knife. He seemed proud of it and, at the time, I didn't appreciate why. Now I did, but I don't think I could do it myself and hoped it wouldn't come to that. I still figured if I could just get to Fort Worth, I could have it taken care of by a proper dentist.

My last visit to the city was too short to learn much about it. Cowboys waitin' to start a drive were expected to stay in a part of town called 'Hell's Half Acre.' I was hopin' to be able to see more of it this trip... startin' with a dentist.

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About an hour later we reached the Trinity. The river reminded me of the Snake up in Jackson Hole, but its big bed told that it carried more water in other seasons. There the trail turned west and we rode another hour before I spotted the church steeples of Fort Worth.

As we entered the city, the clock in a bank window said it was just noon. I hoped I could find a dentist on my own and avoid havin' to talk to anybody. I was just too darn uncomfortable and figured talkin' would just make it worse. We rode past houses, stores, churches and at least three banks before I saw it, but there it was. A big glass window with a dentist sign hangin' dead in the middle. It also had a barber shop sign in the same window, but it wasn't a haircut I was interested in today.

I pulled Spirit up to the hitch rail and slid off a little more gentle than usual. When I got to the door I couldn't believe my eyes. There was a small piece of paper tacked to it that read, "CLOSED." No explanation, just "CLOSED." I was desperate. It was mid-week and mid-day. Maybe he was just closed for lunch, I thought. I knocked on the window but nobody answered. Didn't look like there was anybody home. I knocked again.

"What's the matter son, can't you read?"

If I'd felt better, I'd of jumped out of my skin. I turned to see a man about my size in a jacket and tie.

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“No sir... I mean yes sir. I can read, but I need a dentist somethin’ awful. Would you know of another one around these parts?”

“There are a few others, but none nearby. What’s the problem?” he asked.

“I’ve been ridin’ for three days with a terrible toothache. I can’t eat, drink or sleep. If I don’t get it taken care of soon, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“Well, I’m Doctor Winters and I’m *supposed* to be closed today, but by the size of that lump on your jaw, it seems like you have a real emergency here. Come on in and let me take a look.”

He pulled a small key ring out of his pocket and unlocked the door. I followed him in to what looked more like a barbershop than a dentist’s office, although I’d seen them combined before up in Kansas.

“What’s your name, son?” he asked.

“William Dean Ritter sir, but most folks just call me Montana.”

“Okay Montana. You just set yourself down in this chair and let me take a good look in your mouth. Now open wide...”

With that, he stuck most of his hand in my mouth and I didn’t know whether to just scream in pain or gag, so I did both. AWWWGGGG!”

“There, there -- I see the problem.”

He took his hand out and turned to get a tool of some kind from a jar of liquid. “Montana, you don’t have a toothache. You have an abscess, and a

bad one. I'm not surprised you're in pain. This should've been relieved days ago."

"Doc, will you have to pull a tooth?"

"No, Montana. An abscess isn't a tooth problem exactly -- it's an infection around a tooth. You have a full-blown infection in your lower jaw. I can't do much for the infection but I can relieve the pressure and that's what's causing the pain."

"If you can make the pain go away, please do. I'll pay you anything you want," I mumbled.

"Don't worry about that," he said, "but I'm going to have to lance it and that will hurt for a second or two. Do you want a shot of whiskey first?"

"No thanks, Doc," I said. "I'm not much of a drinker."

"The whiskey would be for the pain, but it *would* take ten or twenty minutes to help at all. If you'd rather not wait..."

"No thanks Doc, could you just do it?"

"Not a problem. You just open wide and grab the arms of the chair real hard."

I took a quick glance at the tool he had in his hand and closed my eyes. I felt his hand open my mouth again and felt the cut. He was so fast it didn't hurt as much as I expected."

"That's it. Now lean over and spit into this cup. Keep spitting until I tell you to stop."

I opened my eyes and did what he told me. He handed me a glass of water.

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“Swirl this around in your mouth and spit it out, then do it again.”

I swirled water for the next minute or so until he told me to stop. Then he gave me a piece of wet cloth to put in my mouth and press against where it had hurt.

“That cloth is sterile with alcohol. It might sting some, but you need to kill that infection.”

Again, I did what he said. The cloth did sting a little but compared to the pain I’d had just a few minutes ago, it wasn’t bad at all. I tried to talk around the cloth. “Doc, the pain’s almost gone. I had no idea it was that easy. If I’d known, I’d have done it myself a few days ago.”

“Just keep pressure on it for a few minutes. You need to drain it as much as you can. I’m going to give you a few more cloths so you can keep at it. This isn’t the type of thing you can do by yourself out on the trail, Montana. For one thing your knife would probably introduce more infection than it cured. It’s a good thing you found me when you did.”

“I really thank you for openin’ up, Doc. Like I said, I can pay you anything you want.”

“Two dollars will cover it. Truth is I didn’t want to close up today, anyway. All seems stupid to me.”

“Why did you close then?” I asked.

“It seems our illustrious mayor is a big supporter of the current administration in Washington, so he mandated that all businesses in the city close in

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honor of President Cleveland's marriage to Frances Folsom today," he replied.

"I'm new to town so I don't rightly know what all that means, but you say the President's gettin' hitched today?"

"Yes, Montana. Should be all married up about now, given the fact that we're an hour behind Washington."

"I'm not sure how you know all that Doc, but you did a heck of a job on my mouth, so I'll believe anything you tell me."

"That's all right, Montana. It's too hot today to work anyway. Now that you're emergency is over, where are you off to?"

"I don't rightly know, sir. I guess I was so concerned about my mouth I didn't have much time to think about anything else."

I gave him the two dollars and he put it right into his pocket.

As he headed toward his door he stopped and turned back around. "I was on my way down to the Paris Hotel to grab a drink. The mayor hasn't closed the hotels yet, so I wanted to get there before he thinks of it. Do you think your mouth could handle a drink now? A little whisky would be good for it."

"I'd like that, but I have to bring my horse along and I need to get him some water as soon as I can. Can we do both?" I asked.

"Don't see why not. You take him around the back while I close up shop. There's water back

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there and some nice shade. We won't be going far so if you want to leave him there in the shade, he'd be perfectly safe."

"Sounds good to me Doc, but let me take Spirit around and see what he thinks. We're pretty close and I want to be real careful with him."

"You go take a look and let me know. I'll be out in a few minutes."

I started to thank him again but it seemed unnecessary since we were likely goin' to the hotel together. I walked back outside in the heat and took Spirit around to the rear of the building. Doc was right. There was a pump and a trough, and they were only steps away from a great oak tree that shaded most the yard.

"What do you think, boy? Can you stay here and wait for me in the shade?"

Spirit took a long drink at the trough and wandered over to the tree on his own. I took that as a yes. I loose-tied him to the tree and walked back around to find the Doc just comin' out. Since I left home, I've often thought that somebody was watchin' over me. I don't get to church too often, but if it was God that made this day turn out as well as it had, I truly appreciated his work. I was startin' to move my jaw again and it felt good.

Chapter 2

As the pain in my mouth went away, I was growin' more and more aware of the heat. Bein' from Montana I'd been hot before, but I wasn't used to this Texas heat. My discomforts quickly passed, however, with my first drink at the Paris Hotel. Doc Winters recommended whiskey to help my mouth heal, but whiskey and I don't get along very well, so I was enjoyin' my first sarsaparilla since leavin' Kansas.

"I got a good look at your horse Montana, while you were walking him around the back of the shop. My brother Clint's the horseman in the family, but I know enough to see that he's a beauty. Have you had him long?"

"You have a good eye as well as a good hand, Doc. I've had Spirit almost three years now. He was just a colt when I bought him from my boss at a big ranch up in Wyoming's Wind River country. Dan's horse was Spirit's father and Dan knew he was special. I guess I was just in the right place at the right time."

"I'm sure there was more to it than that," he responded. "Have you ever raced him?"

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I finished my first bottle in three gulps while I thought about my answer. “We’ve been in some races and I’m not lyin’ when I tell you he’s never been beat, but I’ve never raced him for money, if that’s what you mean.”

“No, I wasn’t thinking that exactly, but horse racing is big business around these parts and if he’s as fast as you say he is, there could be some money in it. But I do admire you for protecting him and, like I said, my brother’s got the horse sense in the family. I guess that’s why I left the ranch years ago and took up medicine. I didn’t like seeing animals in pain – whether it was a horse being abused or just burning brands into cattle. I decided early on that I preferred to help folks.”

“You sure succeeded at that,” I said, softly rubbing my jaw. It felt so good to be able to have a drink and a normal conversation without that throbbing.

“I’m almost nineteen and I’m still not sure what I want to be when I grow up. I wanted to be a cowboy as long as I can remember, but I spent a little time workin’ with the Sheriff last year up in Kansas, and kind of liked it. A little dangerous though, particularly in Dodge City.”

Doc lit a cigar. “I think lawmen have it tough all over. There’s been a lot of civilization come to the west over the past decade or so, but it’s still a tough place and a tough life. When the war ended, a lot of soldiers from both sides didn’t have much to go home to, so a lot of ‘em came west.

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Unfortunately, they didn't have the education or skills to do much more than farm or fight. Some became very successful, but there were a lot of 'em that didn't. There's six or seven major railroads that use Fort Worth as a hub now and between that and all the cattle drives that start out here, Fort Worth has a built-in population of drifters. Not all of 'em are looking for honest employment either. There's been times I've given thought to closing my office here and moving back to the family ranch. I'd do it in a heartbeat if I thought I'd get any customers out there, but I suspect it wouldn't work out, so here I stay."

"So, you came from a family ranch, also?" I asked, thinkin' we might have more in common than I'd first thought.

"Yes Montana. My grandfather came from back east right after statehood, when he and his brother staked out about five-thousand acres northeast of town. It's been in the family ever since. It's mostly a cattle ranch, but my brother Clint who runs it breeds horses too. Last I knew he had thirty or more of some of the finest horses in Texas."

"I probably came through there on my way into town. It sounds like the ranch I worked at up in Wyoming. I'd like to see it sometime," I said.

"I'd like to see you tomorrow, to make sure that abscess heals up properly. After that, I was going out the ranch myself. I don't know if you need a job, but if you do, it's likely that Clint might have

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work for you. Either way, it would give you a chance to see the ranch and the horses.”

“I’d like that, Doc. My only plan was to join up with another drive, but I’m in no hurry. I’m carryin’ most the money from my last drive so I can’t say that I *need* a job, though I’m used to workin’ and get fidgety when I’m not... so yes, I’d be much obliged to join you.”

“In that case,” the Doc replied, “I’d suggest that you stay right here in the hotel tonight. I have a permanent room here myself, so if I ask the manager, I’m sure he can fit you in. You’ll also want to put your horse up at Brewster’s Livery, one street behind the hotel. Old man Brewster will take good care of him for you.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “Does it ever cool down, here in Texas?”

“This is funny territory,” Doc continued. “We have our wet years and we have our dry years, but one thing we always have is hot summers. This year it seems to be starting early. I wouldn’t expect anything but more heat until September.”

“We had hot summers up in Montana, but they didn’t last that long and never started in June. If I’m gonna be stickin’ around down here, I guess Spirit and I will just have to get used to it.”

Morning came early, mostly due to the heat. The room was great, but I found myself rollin’ around all night long anyway, tryin’ to keep cool.

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Spirit spent the night at Brewster's Livery and seemed better rested than I was when I picked him up. I'd just cinched my saddle when I heard Doc Winters call from behind.

"You're up early, Montana. I decided to get my horse ready as well, with some thought that I might run into you here. I figured if you were having trouble with the jaw, you'd have looked me up already. As it is, I can check it out just as well here as in the office, so it looks like we can get an early start."

"I reckon, Doc. My mouth is much better and I was gettin' a little worried about Spirit. He's always a little spooky around new places. Seems to have done fine though," as I gave my old friend a quick pat on the neck.

We walked outside into the light and Doc looked my mouth over. "Looks like it's healing fine. I think it's going to be another hot one, Montana. If we're going to the ranch, I'd suggest we leave right now before it gets too uncomfortable out on the trail."

"I'm all set, Doc," I replied. "How long a ride did you say it was?"

"Taking it easy, we can make it by noon," he said as he climbed up on his horse. "If we hurry we could make it an hour sooner, but I'd just as soon take it easy on the horses. If you're all set, let's go."

I was so glad to have that pain in my jaw gone that I wouldn't really have cared how long the ride

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was, but I *was* gettin' a little curious about the horses that Doc had talked about yesterday. Was he just braggin' or were his brother's horses some of the best in Texas? I wanted to find out.

As soon as we got out of town, the risin' sun was dead in our faces, meanin' two things. One, we were headed east, and two, my face was gonna burn. Seemed no matter how long I lived out on the range my skin never turned dark like some. It'd just turn red and hurt. I found that if I kept my head down, the brim of my Stetson shaded my eyes so I didn't have to squint as much, and I could keep some of the sun off my face. I didn't know where we were goin' anyway, so there wasn't a lot of point in tryin' to see much ahead. I'd let Doc lead the way.

We rode the first half hour pretty much in silence, which I was used to from ridin' alone. About five miles out we came to a crossing and headed north. We'd just crossed over a small rock ridge and were carefully comin' down the other side when the Doc's horse stopped dead in his tracks, then raised up, throwin' Doc to the ground. As Doc crawled off the trail, his horse continued to rise up and paw the air with his forelegs. Spirit slowed but continued moving forward so we could both better see what was goin' on.

"It's a rattler!" yelled the Doc. "Big one, too. Right in the middle of the trail. I didn't see him until it was too late."

"Did he get you?" I yelled back.

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“No, not yet, but he’s heading this way. I think I broke my ankle. Can’t stand up. Can you get me out of here?”

While Doc was talkin’ I spotted the big diamondback about four feet away from his legs, and he was definitely headin’ his way.

“I have a better idea. Hold still,” I said, quickly reaching down to my scabbard and, in one quick motion, grabbing and racking my Winchester. Doc had a panic look on his face when he saw me bring the stock to my chin and take aim.

“I hope this doesn’t hurt my jaw,” I mumble. CRACK! The dust beneath the rattler’s head exploded and when it settled, we could see that the critter’s head had exploded with it.

Spirit walked me over to Doc’s horse, which had wandered off the trail some in the excitement, and I grabbed the reins as we passed. With the rattler dead, the horse settled down.

“That was some good shooting, Montana. Thanks! I don’t think I could’ve out-crawled him,” Doc said as he slowly brought himself to his feet. “I guess I can put a little weight on it but I do think it’s sprained. I may need a few minutes getting back in the saddle.”

“No problem,” I replied. “That’s not the first rattler I’ve had to deal with. It’s even worse when we’re on a drive. Sometimes you can’t shoot for fear of stampedin’ the cattle.”

“What do you do then?” Doc asked.

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“Crawl real fast or get bit, I guess,” I replied with a laugh. “Never really happened to me, but I’ve seen it happen to others.”

“Well,” he replied. “I’m glad I brought you along. Maybe it was fate that put us together today. Either way Montana, I’m much obliged.”

Before remounting, Doc hobbled over to what was left of the snake and picked it up by the tail. He raised it level with his head before the other end cleared the ground. “Must be near six feet long!” he commented.

“Probably be a little longer if he still had his head on!” I replied. Doc laughed, tossed it off the trail and pulled himself back up on his horse.

A few hours later we pulled up to a side road just off the main trail. It had an arched sign across the top that read “Circle of Fire.”

“This is it,” Doc said as we crossed under the arch.

“Circle of Fire. That’s a funny name for a cattle ranch. Where did it come from?” I asked.

“The story goes that when my grandfather and his family were heading west, they came on a fierce summer storm. It was a dry storm with very dark skies and lots of lightening and thunder, but little if any rain. They were running low on supplies and had no choice but to keep moving toward it. As they approached what’s now the ranch, they saw smoke up ahead. It was a prairie fire. They stopped to wait it out but the wind

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kicked up and before they could do anything about it they were surrounded by flames. Facing certain death, they got out of the wagons and formed a small circle. Just as the fire was about to overrun ‘em, those dark skies opened up and it started to pour. The rain came hard and put out the fire. When it was over, my grandfather looked out and saw a clear circle of untouched grass around their wagons. The story goes he looked up, thanked the Lord for his mercy, and claimed the land. He was convinced that it was blessed and, then and there, decided their journey was over. Like I said, I grew up here and have many fond memories, but as I got older I knew I wasn’t cut out for ranching. When I left, Clint took it over on his own and he’s done a real fine job. His cattle are considered the best in the territory and he’s raising some very special race horses.”

“Doc, I’ve heard you talk about racin’ a few times. What type of racin’ does he do?” I asked.

“It’s changed some over the years,” he answered as we continued up the drive. “Before the war, father raced Spanish horses in endurance races. Story goes that some of those races went from the Trinity all the way to the Red River and back, often taking three days and nights, or longer. After the war they were too busy with the cattle business to do much racing, but when Clint took over, he started breeding ‘Steel Dust’ horses for track racing – mostly quarter to half a mile.”

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“I think I’ve heard of those,” I replied. “When I worked in Wyoming my boss used to talk about the ‘Steel Dust’ horses in Texas. I’d forgotten about it until you just mentioned the name. Why do they call them ‘Steel Dust’ horses?”

Doc raised his hat brim and pointed ahead to the ranch buildings that had just come into view. “I’m not sure I know, Montana, it’s probably their steel-gray color, but let’s look up my brother and see if he can fill you in.”

As we rode toward the buildings in the distance, I noticed that the fencing on either side of the drive was different. Low fencing on the left was probably for cattle. On the right, the fencing was higher, all straight and tidy with barbs at the top. I reckoned that was probably the fence for the Steel Dust horses. I didn’t want to get Spirit jealous, but I was getting real curious and couldn’t wait to meet Doc’s brother.

When we got closer, I could see there was a grove with a large central house with several smaller buildings around it. Out behind them, there was one particularly large barn and a number of long, low, out-buildings. I was struck with how big the ranch was. Until now, the Circle R in Wyoming was the biggest ranch I’d ever seen. The Circle of Fire looked even bigger. There were so many buildings it looked more like the Dodge City stockyards than a ranch. I’d heard things were bigger in Texas and maybe they were.

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We rode up to the front of the main house and stopped. I dismounted fast, so I could help the Doc. He hadn't been on that bad ankle for a few hours and I thought it might have gotten worse from all the sittin'.

"Thanks, Montana," he said as both his feet touched the ground. "You might have to give me a hand getting up those steps. This ankle is definitely sprained and now it's swollen to boot. I'm going to need to get off it as soon as I can."

Chapter 3

“Uncle Jack, are you all right?” came a girl’s voice from just inside the front door. I turned to see a girl about my age running from the house. “What happened? Why are you limping?”

“Slow down Annie, or your going to knock us both over. I’m fine. Just took a fall on the way out here. Montana here is just going to help me up those steps if you’d let him. Incidentally, Montana, this is my favorite niece, Annie. Ann, this is Montana. He just saved my life.”

I was too busy helpin’ lift the Doc up the stairs to stop for a proper introduction. “Hi Ann,” I said, mostly turned the other way, “pleasure to meet you.”

By the time we made it into the house and got Doc into a chair, we’d been joined by a grown lady and a boy of about seven.

“Katie,” Doc said, “this is William Ritter, who I was bringing out to the ranch to see Clint’s horses and see if we could interest him in a job. It’s a good thing, too. Ran across a big rattler about five miles out of town and I got thrown. Rattler would

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have got to me if it hadn't been for Montana. I was just about to get bit when he shot the head off him. Unfortunately, I think I sprained my ankle in the process."

Mrs. Winters turned to me and held her hand out. "I want to thank you... I'm sorry... I don't know what to call you. Since you walked in I've heard you referred to as both Montana and William Ritter. In either case, thank you for shooting that snake. Clint, I mean Mr. Winters, is out right now, but I want you to be our guest here for as long as you'd like."

"Thank you, ma'am," I replied. "I'm sorry about the confusion. My name *is* William Dean Ritter, but most folks just call me Montana. I suppose it's because I'm from Montana. I'd be obliged if you would, too."

"I'd be happy to. Thank you again Montana for helping Jack when he needed it. I do worry about his traveling to and from town so often alone. Maybe he'll listen to me next time. Bobby, can you show Montana to the bunkhouse? Take him to Pete's room. Montana, you get settled out there and we'll expect you for dinner at seven."

I was about to thank Mrs. Winter and head back out when I heard the sound of a throat being cleared. "Ahemmm... don't you think I should go too?" I looked over behind the Doc, now down and resting in a chair, and saw that the words came from Ann. "I'm not sure that bed is made up and if it isn't, I'll have to do it," she added.

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“That’s fine, Annie, but you get right back here and help me finish peeling,” her mother replied.

On the way out the door, I finally got a good look at Ann. I figured she wasn’t quite as old as me, probably sixteen or seventeen, but she was pretty. She was dressed in a long calico dress over cowboy boots that made way too much noise for her weight when she walked back down the front steps.

“Bobby,” Ann said as we reached the hitch rail, “it might be better if you took Mr. Ritter’s and Uncle Jack’s horses over to the stable and put them up. Would that be fine with you, Mr. Ritter?”

“Ma’am. Your mother’s callin’ me Montana now and I’d appreciate you doin’ the same. When you say ‘Mr. Ritter’ I think you’re talkin’ about my father! And, yes, Bobby can take Spirit but I’m gonna want to see him after he’s been put up. We’re kinda’ close.”

“Certainly, Montana, and please call me Ann. When you say ma’am, I think you’re referring to my mother!” she said with a little giggle in her voice.

“It’s a deal, Ann,” I said, thinkin’ that her voice reminded me of my sister Mary back home in Bighorn Lake.

I grabbed my saddlebags before Bobby took the horses away and followed Ann into one of the bigger buildings.

“This is the main bunkhouse, Montana. It’s mostly empty right now because our hands went up

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north with my father. But even when they come back, the guest room will be empty. It would normally belong to the foreman, but we haven't had a foreman since Pete left a month or so ago, so just make yourself at home."

The guestroom was different than the rest of the bunkhouse. For openers, it was private, with an inside door to the rest of the bunkhouse and an outside door. It had its own heat stove, wardrobe and a big bed. It looked nice enough to worry me a little about what the cowboys would think when they found out a stranger'd taken over their foreman's room. I dropped my saddlebags next to the bed threw my hat across the room onto one of the hooks on the side of the wardrobe.

"Nice throw," Ann said, looking surprised to see that I hit the hook on my first try.

"It's just like ropin' cattle," I said, "just a little easier when the wardrobe isn't runnin'!"

Ann laughed again. "Well, that shouldn't be a problem here, Montana. We haven't had a wardrobe escape in years! We think they're just too old and lazy to run anymore."

"That's good to know," I responded. "I suppose I'll see you later?"

"I suppose," she replied with a clear "who cares" in her voice, and proceeded to clack those cowboy boots on the wood floor until she disappeared out back out the door.

After she left, it occurred to me that she never checked the bedding. I reckon she just forgot.

Steel Dust Dawn

About an hour before dinner, while I was gettin' cleaned up, I heard horses come in the yard. I suspected it was Mr. Winters and his men returnin' from whatever'd taken 'em away. I decided to look in on Spirit and as I walked outside I could still feel the full heat of the day. My pocket watch said it was almost six and I don't think it had cooled at all yet.

A few of the cowboys were walkin' their horses toward what I assumed was the stable, so I fell in behind 'em and followed, mostly unnoticed.

As we neared the stable I heard somebody yell from inside. "Hey Luke, get in here. You gotta' see this."

I was a little curious myself until I walked through the door and saw that they were all lookin' at Spirit.

"That's a fine lookin' piece of horseflesh. Not sure if he's Arabian or Steel Dust. If he's Steel Dust, he's an odd color. I wonder where he came from?" said one of 'em.

About then I walked up and was finally noticed. "Don't rightly know," said another of 'em, "but I'll bet this fella' does."

By this time all but two of 'em had continued on, walking their horses through the stable and back out the other side.

"How's it goin'?" I asked. "Name's William Ritter, but most folks call me Montana."

"Good to meet you, Montana," one of 'em replied and held his hand out to shake. "I'm Luke

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and this here is Sandy. You've got a nice lookin' horse here. How's he run?"

"As seldom as he can," I replied, trying to evade the question without bein' rude.

"Are you the new foreman?" Sandy asked.

"Not hardly," I responded. "Doc Winters brought me out from town for a visit. I could use a job though if Mr. Winters is hiring."

"We could use an extra hand, particularly now. If you're as good a cowboy as your horse is a horse, I suspect you'll be offered a job," added Luke. "And incidentally, Clint doesn't like bein' called anything but Clint, so you can drop the Mr. Winters."

"Thanks for the tip. I expect I'll be meetin' him at dinner."

"Dinner!" gasped Sandy. "You sure work fast. I've been here near three years and haven't been to *dinner* yet!"

As soon as I'd said it, I knew it was the wrong thing to say. "I didn't mean to offend," I replied. "I guess it's Doc's way of payin' me back for helpin' him out on the trail. His horse got spooked by a rattler and I helped him out a little." I thought I'd leave it there and see if that didn't help.

"Either way, it's unusual," Sandy continued. "Clint and Katie are always careful about the hands spendin' too much time around the house. I think they think we're all after Ann. Might be true too – pretty little filly that she is."

Luke looked up, "Hey, knock it off. You're talkin' about my cousin!"

Steel Dust Dawn

“So you’re family, too?” I asked.

“Yeah. Katie’s my aunt. That makes Clint my uncle and Annie my cousin. She’s a nice girl and I can’t abide anybody talkin’ mean spirited about her.”

“I only met her briefly,” I added, “but I’d agree with you. Seems like a nice girl and reminded me a little of my little sister up in Montana.”

“Montana,” said Luke, changing the subject, “what’s the story on your horse? Looks a lot like our Steel Dust horses, but the coloring’s different and a little taller, too. Better muscled and longer legs - looks some like a Thoroughbred or Arabian.”

“To tell you the truth, Luke, I’m not all that sure. I bought Spirit about three years ago when he was just a yearling. Bought him from my foreman where I used to work. Dan’s horse sired him and Dan’s horse was known for his speed. This is where I usually tell you that Spirit’s the fastest horse in the west, but given I’m standin’ in the middle of a ranch that raises race horses, I won’t tell you that. But I can honestly say that he’s never lost a race and his wind has saved me more than once.”

“I believe you,” Luke responded. “Maybe if you stick around long enough we can test him down at our track. If you’re goin’ to dinner though, you better get ready. Aunt Katie serves dinner at exactly seven. You can set your watch by it.”

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“Thanks for the information. Will you be joinin’ us?”

“No, not tonight. Sometimes I do, but we had our foreman up and quit a while ago and I’ve been standin’ in until Clint can find a replacement.”

I wasn’t sure why Clint’s nephew wasn’t *the* replacement, but decided to keep my questions to myself. I suspected I’d find out at some point.

“I was just checkin’ up on my horse. Looks like Bobby did a good job. You’re right. I guess I better get goin’. It’s been a pleasure meetin’ you, Luke – nobody’s offered me a job yet but I’ll be real interested if and when they do. I’d like to learn a little more about your Steel Dust horses, too.”

Luke smiled, turned and started out in the same direction the others had gone. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing more of each other, Montana. You take care now,” he said as he turned the corner and out of sight.

Chapter 4

“So here he is, the young man who saved my life this morning. Montana, I’d like to introduce you to the rest of the family.” Doc was already seated at the table, but he was the only one who was.

“If you’ll pardon my inability to get up, this ankle feels like your jaw must have when we first met. Unfortunately, I’m afraid there’s no quick fix for this one. I’m doomed to limp around for at least the next week and drive Katie crazy.”

“That’s fine with me,” she answered. “There’s always chores that you can do from a chair, and I plan on keeping you busy. Lord knows it’s getting harder and harder to keep Annie interested in helping.”

Doc spoke up again. “Clint, I’d like to introduce you to Montana. He tells me that’s not his real name, but he seems to prefer it. Montana, meet my brother Clint.”

My first reaction to Mr. Winters was that he didn’t look much like the Doc. Doc was normal

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size, maybe five-six or so... smaller than me. Mr. Winters was at least six foot -- maybe taller. He looked to be about forty but you could only tell by his face. The rest of him looked younger. I learned to tell early on if a man worked outside or inside. Inside folks always had a pale look to their faces. Outdoor men had more weathering. I suspected I'd have the same look by the time I got that old.

I put out my hand and he quickly grabbed it and shook it with a little more force than I'd expected.

"Glad to meet you, Montana. I've been telling Jack that his leaving the ranch and setting up shop in the city would lead to no good. Sounds like it almost happened today. He tells me you used to work on a ranch in Wyoming. What brings you to Texas?"

"Nice meeting you too, sir," I answered. "I started out on a farm in southern Montana and left home at sixteen to be a cowboy. I was lucky enough to get a job at the 'Circle R' in Wyoming, and worked there almost three years, where I learned to handle cattle. I left to make more money on the Chisholm Trail but got side tracked in Kansas for a while on my way south. I met Doc in Fort Worth yesterday when I got into town to join my second drive."

"Have a seat and keep talking, son. I like to know about folks before I offer them a job."

I sat down where he motioned and continued, "I found your brother as soon as I got into town. I had

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this terrible toothache and needed some quick help.”

Doc spoke up, “Wasn’t a tooth exactly, but it probably hurt more because of it. Was an abscess and a bad one.”

“All I know is that he opened his shop, sat me in the chair, and five minutes later I was much relieved.”

By now the rest of the family had joined us and Mrs. Winters announced it was time to say grace. We all joined hands and bowed our heads. Mr. Winters began.

“Dear Lord, we thank you for the bounty of this meal and for all the blessings you’ve bestowed on our family and friends. We also thank you for bringing this young man into our lives just in time to save our brother Jack from a snake bite. In Jesus’ name we ask that you continue to protect us from our enemies. Amen”

I wasn’t sure what enemies he was referrin’ to, but it sounded a little like he had specifics in mind.

“Now back to you, Montana. You said you got sidetracked in Kansas. What did you mean?”

At that, Mrs. Winters spoke up. “Clint, for heaven’s sake, let the boy eat. He looks like he could use a good meal.”

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“You’re right there, ma’am,” I responded. “That toothache or whatever Doc calls it, put me on a pretty tough diet that last four days.”

“You go ahead and eat, Montana,” said Mr. Winters. “We can catch up after dinner when there’s not so many women around.”

“I want to hear, too,” said Ann from across the big table. “How am I going to know about Kansas if you don’t let him talk?”

Mr. Winters turned to her and said, “You just may not.”

I guess that was his way of discouragin’ her...or me – probably both.

After dinner Mr. Winters excused the men from the table, which was just Doc and me, and said he’d catch up to us in the den in about ten minutes. “I’ve got a little ranch business to take care of with Luke, but I’ll be right back.”

I helped Doc up and noticed that he’d picked up a cane sometime since I last saw him. He used it to hobble into what looked more like a library to me. “Make yourself at home, Montana. Clint’s having some problems with cattle disappearing from the north range. I suspect he wasn’t happy with what he found up there today.”

It was more like twenty minutes before Mr. Winters came back. “Damn it was hot out there today. Seems like summer’s comin’ awful fast this year. Won’t be good for the feed crops if we don’t get some rain soon.”

Steel Dust Dawn

“Now, Montana, where were we when the ladies of the house interrupted? Ah yes, Kansas. What exactly would take a young cowboy on his way from Wyoming to Texas, through Kansas? I suspect there’s a story there.”

“As a matter of fact, sir, there are a few of ‘em, but to keep it simple, I joined up with a buffalo hunter and his Indian skinner for a while. We were headin’ southeast through the Colorado flatlands when we came on a burnin’ house. The folks that lived there were killed in the fire but left a little girl who we found cryin’ in the woods. We took her to neighbors and reported the fire to Sheriff Masterson in Dodge City.”

“Bat Masterson?” he asked.

“Actually, no sir... my buffalo hunter friend had worked for a time in Dodge as an assistant to Bat and his brothers, but most of them had left and only Jim was still there and he’s the Sheriff now. Anyway, my friend suspected that the fire’d been set and Sheriff Masterson asked me to stay on a while and help him with the investigation. It was quite a learning experience for me.

“Did you ever figure out if the fire was set?”

“Yep, it was, and I almost got myself killed in the process. That was enough lawman work for me for a while. I decided to get back to the easier life drivin’ cattle. When I got into town yesterday I was just comin’ back from my first drive up the Chisholm.”

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Mr. Winters lit up a cigar and continued, "Are your folks still alive, Montana?"

"I sure hope so, sir. Like I said, I haven't been home to Bighorn Lake in almost three years. I sent a telegram home from Dodge last December but I didn't get one back. I'm plannin' to send another one from Fort Worth while I'm down here."

"I'm sure they're fine, son. Say, Jack tells me that you came out to see our Steel Dust stock. By the looks of that horse of yours, you know horses. What is it you want to know about ours?"

"Back in Wyoming, my boss used to talk about the Texas Steel Dust horses and wished he could get a few for his ranch. When I asked him why, he said that they could run cattle from dawn to dusk without a break. He said they were fast, too. Spirit and I had just beaten him in a race and I remember him sayin' that we wouldn't have if he'd had a Steel Dust. Ever since then I've wondered if the Steel Dust was a real horse or just another western legend."

"Oh, they're real all right and your old boss was right on a few counts. They've got plenty of speed and endurance and they run cattle better than any other horse I've ever seen. Now, whether or not they could beat your Spirit remains to be seen but if you're curious, we're planning to try out a few of our faster ones at our track tomorrow morning. It'd be a perfect place for you to see them, even if you're not up to racing yourself."

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"I'd like that very much, Mr. Winters," I responded, unclear on whether I'd put that all on Spirit yet. "I think I'd like to see *them* first, if that'd be all right with you?"

"A prudent move, my boy. Incidentally, if you call me Mr. Winters one more time, I'll take a whip to you. Everybody calls me Clint, except for my Annie and Bobby. They're the only ones who have to call me father."

"I'll try to do better, sir... I mean Clint."

"You go make yourself comfortable out there, Montana. It should be cooling down some now. We'll look for you at the track in the morning. Luke will show you where."

"I'll be there," I said. "I'll just go thank Mrs. Winters for dinner and be on my way."

I walked back toward the dining room to find Mrs. Winters and wandered right into Ann.

"Well, is he going to hire you?" she asked.

"We didn't talk about it," I answered. "We talked more about the horses than jobs. I wanted to thank your mother before I left but I don't see her. Would you please thank her for me, for having me to dinner?"

"I suppose I could. But she's gone to bed early with a headache. You might have to do it yourself in the morning – maybe at breakfast?"

"I don't think so, Ann. Mr. Winters... I mean your father, invited me to his track early tomorrow to watch the horses run. I might even try out Spirit.

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We've never raced on a track before. So, I reckon I won't be around for breakfast."

"Father and his horses... horses, horses, horses. I get so sick and tired of hearing about the horses. Anyway, I might see you at the track then."

"If you're so tired of the horses, why would you bother comin' down to see 'em in the morning?" I asked.

"Oh, I didn't mean I don't like to see them run. That's the fun part. What time did he say they were running?"

"He told me to be there at eight," I answered, a little confused by her sudden interest.

"Well then, good night Montana. I'll probably see you tomorrow at the track."

"Yes, ma'am," I replied and headed out for the bunkhouse. That's one pretty girl, I thought, but she seems awful confused about the horses. One minute you can't mention them without your head bit off, and the next, she's gettin' up early to see 'em run. I guess I'll just never understand girls.

Chapter 5

The room was comfortable enough but I got up early anyway to check on Spirit. When I walked into the stable, Luke was already there, combing down his horse.

“Is he a Steel Dust?” I guess I surprised him, because he jumped when I spoke.

“Oh, good mornin’ Montana. You caught me cleanin’ up. We had a long ride yesterday and I didn’t really get to comb him out proper last night. Tripper, this here is Montana. Montana, meet Tripper.”

“He’s a fine lookin’ horse, Luke. How’d he get such an odd name?”

“You wouldn’t know it by lookin’ at him now, but when Tripper was a colt, he had trouble. He could run plenty fast, but when he walked, he stumbled a lot. My father told me to find another colt – that this one would always be a ‘tripper.’ I liked the horse and I liked the name, so from then on he only answers to Tripper. Fortunately for both of us, he grew out of the tripping! And no, he’s not a Steel Dust. Runs like one, but Uncle

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Clint keeps the Steel horses to himself for now. He says the hands might start workin' 'em on the ranch next year. He's just tryin' to get the stock strong, first."

"So I've been here near a whole day now and I still haven't seen one of these Steel Dust horses. I'm wonderin' if they really exist at all."

"Oh, they exist all right. If you're comin' down to the track, let's saddle up and you can see a few for yourself."

Luke and I saddled up and rode out toward the rear of the ranch, past all the buildings, toward a small rise. We crossed over it and as we started down the other side, I was amazed to see a big race track sprawled out below us. Nearby there were a few sheds, three or four corrals and about a dozen horses in the corrals.

"Those are some of the Steel Dust'ers, Montana. That big gray on the left is *Hondo*, the most famous of our herd. Direct descendent of the original *Steel Dust*, brought to Texas by Perry and Greene in '44, and a shirtsleeve cousin to General Sam Houston's *Sir Archy*. There's a lot of Texas wrapped up in those horses. Hondo's gettin' too old to run, but Clint won't retire him."

As we got closer, I could see that Mr. Winters and the Doc were already trackside, with another older man.

"I don't know how you beat us down here Clint," shouted Luke, "but I hope we're in time to see some racing."

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“Don’t worry,” he replied, “we just got here ourselves. Thought we’d leave a little early for Jack, who wanted to drag his bad ankle down here with us. Montana, this is W. P. Stanton, our trainer, but you can call him Doc.”

“How do you do, sir... I mean Doc. I guess I’ll have to start calling Doc Winters something else or I’ll get everybody confused.”

“Jack’s good enough, Montana,” replied Doc Winters. “Well, these are some of the most famous horses in Texas. Some of the fastest, too... wouldn’t you say so, Clint?”

“I sure hope so. Montana, do you know anything about the Steel Dust history?”

“Luke filled me in on the way down. He told me that the big gray was related to one of Sam Houston’s horses?”

Clint put down the stopwatch he’d been playin’ with and turned toward me. “Direct descendent of the one and only *Steel Dust* and a first cousin of *Sir Archy*. Not to many of them around. Hondo has sired a few heirs and most of the rest of these horses share the same bloodline. As soon as we have one more generation, we’ll start workin’ ‘em on the ranch. Of course, the fastest will be saved for the Fair.”

I didn’t understand what he meant, but thought it best to let him get on with his business and just watch.

“Doc, let’s get goin’. I want to see *Whisper* run first. You say he made one-0-three last week?”

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"I couldn't believe it myself, Clint. Maybe it was a fluke. We haven't run him the full track since."

Doc Stanton waved his hand and out from the corral closest to us rode a lone rider on a silver-gray stallion, with a small racing saddle on his back.

"That, Montana, is Whisper. Grandson of Hondo and just old enough to race this year. If he's anywhere near as fast as Doc says, he's going to be our entry in the Great State Fair of Texas in October. Let him go, Doc."

Clint held his watch in his right hand and waited until Doc and rider were ready. Doc held up a small handgun and pulled the trigger. CRACK! And the horse was off. I noticed his legs were a little longer than the workin' horses the rest were riding, and he dug in hard when the gun went off, lurching ahead like he was snake-bit. The track looked enormous to me but it only took a few seconds for him to get to the other side, then around the last turn and back right at us. As he crossed the line, Clint hit a button on his watch. Nobody talked while he studied it.

"One-0-one-five! Wow, he did it again. Either this watch is busted or that's the fastest colt we've ever had! Walk him out. I don't want him getting overheated."

"Luke," I asked, "how does that time compare to the other horses?"

"This is the five furlong track, Montana, just about a mile and a quarter. Our fastest mustangs

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would run it in over a minute and ten or twelve seconds. You just saw it run a full nine seconds faster than that. Before last week, it'd never been run at a minute-three. If Whisper can keep it up until October, he'll win the state for sure."

"Montana," Clint called out. "What do you say we give your Spirit a run? Do you think he's up to it?"

"That was some race I just saw, Clint and I'm not sure that Spirit could beat him. Like I said, we've never lost a race, but I've never seen anything like this... either has he."

"Don't worry about that," he replied. "We breed racing horses out here and that's a whole different thing than you're used to. Horses like Whisper don't run cattle. I wouldn't expect your horse to come close to that time, but I am curious."

"Curious about what?" I asked.

"Your Spirit has the Steel Dust look. Coloring's a little different and I suspect he's from a little different blood line, but he stands taller than the typical mustang and he's better muscled. You say he's fast and I'll bet he is. Aren't *you* a little curious?"

With that, I put my left foot in Spirit's stirrup and jumped on. "I don't have a fancy saddle like that one, but I'm game if you're game."

Doc Stanton lined me up and pulled out his handgun. I patted Spirit's neck and whispered in his ear. "*Spirit, when that gun goes off, let's show 'em all how we raise horses in Wyoming.*"

John E. Richman

CRACK! and we were off! The hot weather'd dried the track hard as a rock and Spirit dug in and pulled away so hard he nearly knocked me off. I slapped his flank a few times to let him know we needed all the speed he could muster. Down the track we flew and into the first turn. I stayed low and leaned in so he could turn harder. Out the back turn and down the backstretch. I don't know where he got all this strength this mornin' because we hadn't ridden hard in weeks. Maybe he saw Whisper run and was jealous. Before I could think any more about it, we were around the final turn and lookin' down-track to the finish line, which, a few seconds later, we crossed at full speed. I leaned back and took him down. We were back at the first turn before he could stop.

I patted him again as we trotted back to the finish line. *"Good boy, you take it easy now. That was one great run!"*

"I don't believe it! Doc, get over here and see if I'm readin' this darn thing right."

Both Clint and Doc Stanton stared at the watch for the longest time before Doc spoke. "I could see he was fast, but this is hard to believe. Are you sure you hit it right?"

"I was right on. Yep, One-0-three! We just broke the ranch record twice!"

"I'm not sure I understand," I said as I got off Spirit and walked up to take a look. There it was – the fat hand was on the one and long hand was just

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past it. "Is that good?" I asked, strongly suspecting from all the commotion that it was.

Doc Winters came over and put his arm around my neck, pulling me away from the watch. "Montana, you're little cattle horse just ran as fast as any Steel Dust on the ranch, except for Whisper, who just broke the ranch record five minutes ago. That's near impossible. I can see you weren't kidding when you said he'd never lost a race. This might just be the second fastest horse in Texas! I think brother Clint is going to offer you that job!"

"You can bet your spurs on that," Clint said. "Luke, can you find Montana something to do around the ranch? I want him and this 'spirited' horse of his to stay close."

"Sure thing, Clint," Luke replied. "I think Doc can use him workin' the horses. He seems to have a knack for it."

"I'm much obliged, Clint, but I'm a better cowboy than I am a horse trainer. I don't think I could split my time between Spirit and the rest. I'd just like to run cattle if that'd be all right with you and Doc."

"Your call, Montana, but I would like you to work with Whisper some. Whatever magic you work on that horse of yours could serve us well in getting Whisper ready for the Fair. How would that be... split your time between workin' cattle and workin' with Doc? You might even learn a few things from us. I saw something different in your horse and I'm not altogether sure he doesn't have

John E. Richman

Steel Dust running in his veins. I'd like to know more about it."

"I'd like that very much, sir... I mean Clint." We shook hands on it.

Just then a bell started ringing back at the house.

"Katie's callin', men. We better get back and see what she needs. Let's go. Jack, can you get up on your horse?"

Clint, Luke and I mounted up and rode back up the hill toward the house, with Doc Winters followin' behind. I was feelin' a little bad about having to run Spirit so hard, so early in the morning, but I was also proud of the job he'd done. Seemed like he set some sort of record back there and really impressed the Texas folks. We didn't need any fancy racing saddle either.

Chapter 6

Mrs. Winters was still on the porch when we pulled up. She was talkin' with one of the hands, whose horse was wet with the sweat of a long, hard ride.

"Adam, what's up?" asked Clint as soon as we got to the rail. "Luke, Montana, you boys come on in too. I want you to hear this."

We all walked in the house and Adam began. "Clint, we lost five or six more since you left. This time I know they were rustled. I saw horse tracks. They had shoes, too. That makes near two dozen now and I think they're taken 'em north, over the rocks. You said not to chase 'em into Indian country on our own, so that's why I came back. We need to go after 'em or we'll lose the whole herd, half a dozen at a time."

"Where exactly did you see the tracks, Adam?" asked Clint, gettin' angrier by the minute.

"At the creek, just past the bend. They went north from there. I followed the tracks to the falls but figured I'd be a sittin' duck if I went much further. I don't think the Comanche's are in on it

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unless the rustlers are sellin' to 'em across the river. But, if not, it's a puzzle how they're getting past 'em."

"You get a quick rest," said Clint. "We'll get the boys together and start out in about an hour. It'll take us that long to get supplies together. We could be up there a while."

"Luke, I'll need you too, and Montana... we could use you as well. Go get the boys ready and I want them to bring plenty of rope and ammunition. Luke, tell Sandy to fill the wagon for a week. I'll need him to follow us up. We'll meet back here in an hour."

I followed Luke back to the bunkhouse and got my gear together while he was getting the other hands goin'. My Winchester was loaded and I packed an extra box of shells in my saddlebag. Ten minutes later, I walked back out to where I'd left Spirit, but he'd disappeared. I looked around and saw Luke loadin' the chuck wagon.

"Hey Luke, did you happen to see where my horse went off to?"

"Hey, Montana. I think I just saw Sandy walk him into the stable over there. Probably gettin' him some water."

I ran over to the stable and, sure enough, Spirit's saddle was off and he was drinkin' from the trough.

I looked around and saw Sandy out the window, gatherin' gear for the trip.

Steel Dust Dawn

“Sandy... what’s with your moving Spirit inside and takin’ his saddle off? You heard Clint. He wants me to go with you.”

“I know Montana, but he doesn’t want you takin’ Spirit. He told me to have you leave him here and take one of the other horses. I didn’t see you around so I thought I’d help. Clint said you could take your pick of the other horses. Your saddle’s over there.”

“I don’t want trouble with Clint,” I said, “but if there’s any decisions being made about my horse, I’ll be makin’ ‘em. And if I’m goin’ with you, I’m ridin’ Spirit... understand?”

“That’s fine with me, Montana,” Sandy answered while continuing to load the wagon. “Take it up with Clint if you have any problem with it. I was just doin’ what I was told.”

“I’ll do that,” I said. “Just remember, *now you’re told different!*”

Sandy smiled, shrugged, and went back to work. I didn’t want to bother Clint while he was already upset, so I decided to let it pass for now. I guessed he was just worried about Spirit and I couldn’t hold that against him. I grabbed my saddle and headed back to my horse.

“Montana!” I turned to see Ann comin’ straight for me.

“Montana, I’ve been looking for you. I heard your horse nearly broke the track record this morning! I guess you were right. He really is special. Where are you off to now?”

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"Oh, hi Ann." I answered. "Yeah, he ran fast enough to impress your father and the others, I guess. I'm goin' out on the range with him and the rest of the hands. Seems like they're losin' cattle to rustlers."

"I wish you wouldn't go. Daddy told me you'd be working with the horses and they need a lot of work. Anyway, it could be dangerous up there. One of the hands got killed up there last year and they never found who did it."

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, and your father asked me to go. Now that I work for him, I think it wise to mostly do what he asks."

Ann bristled, "I'm not concerned about you or my father! I just think Doc Stanton could use the help. He's getting older, you know. If you'd rather get your stupid head blown off, I'm certainly not going to stop you!" Then she turned and stomped off in those same loud boots she'd had on yesterday. I wondered what I'd said that upset her so much. I was beginning to think she was as moody as she was pretty.

It seems like every time I head out on the range lately, the sun's high and hot. There hadn't been a cloud in the sky for over a week and it looked like more of the same. There were eleven of us, includin' Luke and me. I guess we were an even dozen if Sandy was somewhere behind us with the wagon. Clint led us across miles of open range at a

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pretty fair pace, stoppin' only at water holes. If we were still on the Circle of Fire, it was big. About three hours out, we started seein' cattle again. Mostly strays at first, but as we closed in on some low, rocky hills, their numbers grew. These weren't hills like I'd ever seen before. They really weren't hills at all. Looked more like what Adam had called a rock pile. Clint led us through on a trail that wasn't much better than the hills themselves. We slowed down so the horses could pick their footing. I hoped Spirit wasn't too tired from the morning race to be careful. One wrong step and I could lose him like I did my old horse back in Wyoming. I was relieved when we crossed the spine and got back on open range.

Comin' down the north side there were more cattle. That usually means there's water nearby. Luke dropped back near me and raised his arm in the direction we were riding. "Montana, you see that strip of green up ahead? That's the creek and the north boundary of the ranch. It shifts north over there and feeds into the Red River a little further east. Across the river is Comanche country but we'll be stoppin' before we get there."

"Thanks, Luke. I was wonderin' how far we were goin'."

"Not sure myself," replied Luke. "All I know is that Clint's plannin' to stop at our creek camp for a while first."

As we got closer to the trees, it was easy to see why the cattle were gathered there. The stream

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Luke had pointed out was easy for the cattle to get to. Seein' them all up there, I wondered how they moved them through those rocky hills when it was time to get 'em back to the ranch. We rode through 'em and up a small rise and into a camp made up of two buildings and a small corral. Three cowboys came into sight and rode over as soon as they saw us.

"Clint!" one of 'em yelled. "Glad you're here. Did Adam fill you in?"

Clint dismounted and pulled them all together. "He did. Says you found tracks around where they disappeared. Are they still there?"

"Should be," replied the cowboy. "Hasn't rained in weeks up here. I've done some countin' since Adam left and I think we're missin' more like sixteen. Can't be sure but the tracks across the stream look to be that many."

"We'll rest the horses for an hour and start out when it gets a little cooler. But, first I want to see those tracks. Ed, you and Adam take me over there. The rest of you boys get some rest for now. It may be a long night."

I dismounted and walked Spirit over to the stream. "Go slow boy, I don't want you crampin' up." As he waded in, I followed and used my cupped hands to splash cool water on his backside. The water felt good. Not real cold, but cool enough be refreshing after a long hot ride. Luke walked his horse in next to us and I took the opportunity to

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ask him a question that'd been botherin' me for a while.

"Luke, can you tell me what happened to the old foreman? Ann told me he left a month or so ago. Why did he leave?"

"Pete was foreman for about three years and he was a hand for a few years before that. Clint trusted him and he *was* pretty reliable. For a long time he and Clint got along fine. Then, about six months ago, he started comin' up missin' a lot. He'd go off and not come back for two...three days at a time. As far as we knew, he never told Clint why. That'd been goin' on a while when Clint ran into him one night in a Fort Worth saloon. He was drunk and when Clint started to drag him out, a few of his new friends jumped Clint. Pete either didn't want to help or was too drunk to. Instead of makin' a big deal out of it, Clint rode back alone. The next afternoon, Pete showed up at the ranch and Clint let him have it. I remember him telling Pete that he was a lousy leader and that he better clean up his act fast or he'd be out of a job. About two weeks later he up and left. I'm not sure if he did it on his own or if somthin' else happened. Either way, somethin' changed in Pete. None of that was like him and most of us don't know any more about it than that. I wouldn't mention it to Clint if I were you. He's been tight-lipped about it ever since."

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"Thanks Luke. I didn't mean to pry but I always like to know why people leave places. Especially places where I just got a job."

"You don't have anything to worry about, Montana. Clint is one of the easiest bosses you could have, and he seems to have taken a likin' to you and your horse there. And don't worry about Pete. I suspect he's back in the bottle and long gone."

We cooled down the best we could and about half an hour later Clint called us back together.

"Men, I had Adam show me the tracks where we think the stock were stolen. Looks like we lost between ten and twenty and Adam thinks they lost as many a week ago. We've got to put an end to it. That means some of us will follow those tracks north to wherever they take us. Might be ten miles, might be fifty. And all of you know that the Comanche's are thick up Oklahoma way. I got no bone with them unless they're behind the missing stock... but I don't think they are. Either way, it'll be dangerous and I don't want any men with me who'll back down from a fight. If you cross the stream with me, I'll expect you to do what's necessary to bring this rustlin' to a stop. There's no law up here but what we bring. We're leaving in ten minutes, so if you're plannin' on coming, saddle up. If not, I won't hold it against you. I need one man to stay behind anyway, to meet up with Sandy."

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Clint turned and walked alone back toward the shacks. Seemed fair to me. There was no question in my mind that I was goin'. I wondered if some of the others might not.

Given the situation, I pulled my Winchester out of my scabbard and checked it for shells. It was full at sixteen rounds. I also pulled my Colt out of the saddlebag and strapped it on. I wasn't used to wearin' it, but it seemed like a good idea now. Even if we didn't get into a fight, I figured I'd probably need it to turn cattle.

Ten minutes later we were all saddled up and lined up at the creek. Clint rode over and saw that every man was there, ready to go.

"Thanks men. I knew I could count on you. But, I still need one man to stay behind and let Sandy know where we are. I don't want him bringing the wagon too close to the river. He can wait here for us and I need a volunteer to wait with him. Dalton, I'd like you to stick around."

One of the men, from the rear, rode forward.

"Clint, I'd rather go with you if you could see your way..."

"No," Clint cut him off sharp. "I need you more here. Bring Sandy and the wagon up to as far as the flats. Stay there 'til you hear from us," Clint answered, leaving no confusion who was in charge. They cowboy fell out and dismounted.

As we crossed the stream, I rode up next to Luke who seemed to be my only link to what was goin' on. "Luke, any particular reason Clint left that

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Dalton fella behind? Seemed like he snapped at him.”

“Not sure,” answered Luke. “Might be because his wife’s havin’ a baby soon. Maybe, maybe not. He’s also pretty good with a gun and might be safer on his own than some of the others in case the rustlers come back around us.” Satisfied he’d answered my question, Luke snapped his reins and moved up ahead toward the front.

I’d skirted Indian country on the way south just a few days ago. More to the east, I reckon, but I didn’t have any trouble. Ran across a few huntin’ parties but they didn’t pay me any nevermind, and I returned the favor. The Comanche’s were known throughout the territory as tough fighters before they finally settled down on a reservation set up some years ago between the Washita and Red Rivers. But I’d been warned by cattle drivers that they never warmed up to idea of Texans takin’ over their hunting grounds and that you had to sleep with one eye open when passin’ through. *Everybody* in the southwest knew of *Quana*, their Chief. Quana was also the son of a Chief, but his mother was white. I’d heard he was a strong leader and wondered if this trip into their country would bring with it any chance of meetin’ him.

We rode steady for about an hour with Clint taking the lead and, I suppose, following the tracks of his missing cattle. The sun was gettin’ low in the sky and the worst of the heat was starting to let up. We finally got to the Red River about five, but

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didn't stop any longer than need be, to let the horses drink.

"So that's the horse I've been hearing about all day?"

I turned to see one of the cowboys right behind me. "I reckon... I'm Montana," I said, holding my hand out to shake.

"Toby," he answered as he stuck out his hand as well. "Mighty hot out here today. How's your horse holdin' up?"

"Oh, Spirit's up to it. I'm not so sure I am. Do you think we're ever gonna sleep tonight?" I asked.

"I imagine at some point, but I'll guarantee you, we're not gonna eat. That chuck wagon must be fifty miles behind us."

Toby was a colored man. I'd seen him around the ranch and thought it a little odd. Most of the cowboys I'd been associated with were whites, like me. Some had Indian blood, but Toby was darker. More like a dark brown. I suspected the sun must have bothered him more than me because I knew dark colors got hotter than light ones, but if it did, he didn't show it.

"Nice meetin' you, Toby. I hired on this mornin', so I guess we might be seein' more of each other. How long have you been on the ranch?"

"Near twelve years now. My mother worked for the Winters family even when I was little. Clint and his father before, always took good care of us.

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But I don't like this rustlin' business. We lose enough stock in the summer just to the heat. We don't need nobody runnin' 'em off. So how did you find a Steel Dust up north?"

"I got Spirit in north Wyoming, but I don't know that he's a Steel Dust. I think Clint has his doubts and I can't prove it either way. I think he's just a real tall mustang."

"If he's anywhere near as fast as that Whisper," Toby said, "he's no regular mustang, so you take good care of him, hear?"

"I always do," I answered. I liked Toby. He seemed like a nice fella. Of course, his takin' a likin' to Spirit helped. Actually, I liked all the folks I'd met at the Winters ranch. I thought to myself that I wasn't ready yet to settle down, but if and when that day came, I might just head back this way. I've been lucky so far – always been around nice folks. I just hoped it stayed that way.

Chapter 7

We'd just crossed through some low brush when Clint pulled to a sudden stop. He and Luke jumped off their horses and stood over the carcass of a dead steer. Toby kneeled next to it and put his hand on its neck.

"He's ours," he said. "Been dead no more'n a day. We must be close."

One of the cowboys asked how he died.

"I don't see any wounds or marks," Clint answered. "If I had to guess, I'd say exhaustion. They're pushing 'em too hard for this heat. We might well find some more before too long."

It was clear that Clint didn't like losin' cattle – particularly to rustlers. His face got red and stern lookin' as he stood back up and re-mounted. "Let's go get 'em," he barked as he banged his heels into the side of his horse with a little more force than necessary. Until now, I'd only seen Clint's nice side -- a solid family man who ran a big, successful ranch. I was sure the "nice" was still in there somewhere, but for the moment, this was a determined man on a mission. I would not have wanted to get

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in his way and I sure wouldn't want to be one of the rustlers, somewhere up ahead.

The sun was gettin' lower with every mile and the prairie sky was startin' to turn red. The sun'd be down in another hour and I wondered how we planned to go on in the dark. I knew we'd have moonlight, but that would be about it. Yet on we rode -- straight into Indian country.

It was another hour before Clint slowed us down again. Then he held up his right hand, and we stopped. His signal was to keep us quiet, which we were... even the horses.

"Luke," he called back in a whisper voice, "I hear 'em up ahead. You come with me and the rest of you, stay here until we call or you hear shooting."

Then they disappeared into the brush ahead. We waited on horseback, ready to move at a moment's notice. Toby rode up next to me and whispered, "Better get your rifle out, Montana. I think we'll be needin' it soon."

I pulled my Winchester out of its scabbard and kept it in my right hand while I held Spirit's reins in my left. The wait seemed long, but in the silence we could hear the cattle up ahead.

CRACK! A rifle shot broke the silence, quickly followed by another. CRACK! CRACK! Then cattle noise. We didn't quite know where they were, but they were sure runnin'. I hoped it wasn't at *us*. CRACK! Another shot and we were all ridin' full speed into it.

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Half a mile up the trail, we crossed a small rise and had just enough light to see what was happenin'. A dozen or more cattle were runnin' to our right and we could see muzzle blasts light the dusk to our left. Apparently Clint and Luke had either jumped 'em or been caught tryin'. Both of 'em were off their horses, takin' cover behind some boulders. There was a small water hole in front of 'em and campfire on the other side, with heavier brush behind that. Muzzle blasts were everywhere, lightin' up the brush.

"Get down," said a voice behind the boulder. "Toby, you go around to the right. See if you can get behind 'em." It was Clint's voice.

Toby stayed on horseback and, keepin' his head down, started backin' off to our right. I decided to go with him. The two of us fell back far enough to move off unnoticed, I hoped. We circled around the water hole and moved behind it, maybe thirty yards. When we were far enough behind 'em, Toby dismounted, and I did the same. With no words between us, we left our horses and walked into the brush toward the water hole. Toby waved me to spread out so we could cover more ground. As I worked my way away from him, the darkness quickly separated us. I was worried that in the failing light, I wouldn't be able to see who was who if and when the shootin' started. It also occurred to me that while our circling the hole put us behind the rustlers, it also put us directly in the

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line of fire of our own men! Hopefully they knew we were here.

All I could do was keep creepin' forward. Quiet as it was, I only had a second's notice when a horse came flyin' out of the brush, right in front of me! I pulled up my Winchester, but the horse was riderless. That meant at least one of them was on foot. I never killed a man before and hoped I wouldn't have to here, but I vowed to do what I had to do to protect myself and the other men.

CRACK! Another shot followed by a second – very close. They were right in front of me and probably movin' in my direction! I dropped to the ground and held still, my heart pumpin' a mile a minute. Then he nearly backed into me. One man... lookin' straight ahead, in the other direction. When he got about five feet away, I stood up and slapped him on the back of the head with my rifle butt. THUD!... he went down. He dropped his rifle on his way and I grabbed it. Except for the thud, it was quick and quiet. I decided that was good because it didn't give my position away. I wondered where Toby was.

“HOLD IT RIGHT THERE... DROP IT!” Toby's voice called out and he sounded close. I couldn't see him from where I was, but it was clear he'd surprised another one of 'em. Then Clint's voice shouted from the out front. “Toby, are you all right?”

Toby replied, “Yes sir! I got one.”

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I picked up my rustler by his collar and started draggin' him forward, out of the brush. He was still out. By the time we broke into the clear, I saw Clint and the rest of our men standin' around a body on the ground. Whoever he was, he was dead, and Toby'd joined 'em with a live one. Then somebody asked, "Where's the new guy?"

"HEY, I COULD USE SOME HELP OVER HERE!" I shouted.

Clint looked over and saw us. "Montana! I didn't know you were in there, too. You got a third one? Good job. Is he dead?"

"Drags like he is, but I don't think so. I just gave him a good whack on the head."

"Clint," Toby spoke up, "there was a fourth one and I think he got away."

"You mean there were three of 'em in there?" Clint asked.

"I'm certain of it," replied Toby. "I saw the one head over toward Montana, but there was another one on horseback behind us. I got a quick peek at him ridin' out just before I ran into my friend here."

"Should we go after 'em, Clint?" came another voice from the back.

"No, it's getting too dark and I think we've done enough damage for tonight. Whoever he is, we made a lot of noise and he's ridin' right into Comanche country. Let's use what's left of the light to round up those steers and get back across

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the river. I suspect they didn't go far. I want to get 'em back before we can't see a thing."

Over the next twenty minutes we put the dead rustler over one of the horses and tied the live ones to another. While we were doin' that, the rest of the hands found the cattle and we headed back south under the ever-brightening moon.

I'd helped wrap the dead rustler. He didn't look much older than me. I couldn't help but think it seemed a heck of a way to waste a life.

It was dark now, except for the moonlight we were just gettin' adjusted to. About half way back to the flats, Clint stopped us again. He said he heard horses ahead. We waited in the dark for another five minutes, then he motioned us to start up again, but slow and quiet.

We came up another hundred yards when I saw the strangest sight I think I'd ever seen. Up ahead in a clearing, maybe thirty yards -- two Indians on horseback and a third horse in-between 'em. They were standin' perfectly still in the moonlight. We stopped dead while Clint sized up what we were lookin' at. I grabbed my Winchester again.

After starin' at 'em for a minute or two we could see that they weren't alone. There was another figure standing on the ground, in front of the third horse. Clint had us hold our ground while he rode slowly toward 'em. He no sooner got there, when they turned and rode off, leavin' the other horse and figure where they stood.

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“LUKE, MEN, COME ON UP!” he yelled back.

We rode up to see that figure was a white man with an arrow stickin’ out of his leg. He was alive, though, with his hands tied together by a piece of rawhide, which was then tied to the horse’s saddle horn. He also had his neckerchief tied around his mouth.

“What the heck is this all about?” asked Luke. “What’s Pete doin’ out here and why’d you let those Indians run off? What’d they say?”

Clint took his hat off and wiped his brow with his shirtsleeve. “Pete was the rustler that got away. Only thing is, he didn’t.” Those were two of Quana’s men. The one that spoke said only one word – *Tsumukikiatu*. I recognized the word from years ago... I think it’s Comanche for ‘peace.’ I reckon I was right, too. The Comanches weren’t involved. I’m just sorry Pete was. Let’s get him back to the wagon before he bleeds to death.”

Chapter 8

After we returned from chasin' the rustlers, I started eatin' in the bunkhouse with the hands. It made sense, since I was a hand now myself. Luke told me to stay in the foreman's room for now, but I knew I'd have to come out of it one of these days. I figured I'd just enjoy its comforts a little while longer and after capturin' one of the rustlers, nobody seemed to mind.

Clint turned Pete and the other rustler over to the Marshal in Fort Worth. We weren't sure who actually killed the third one, but maybe that was best. Pete confessed to his role in it and the others were just some drifters he'd picked up in a saloon. Their plan was to sell the stolen cattle to the Indians, but the Comanche didn't seem to want any part of it. We weren't clear on how Pete took the arrow in his leg but it was evidence that his plan hadn't been very well thought out, as is often the case with drunks and thieves.

With the rustlin' stopped, we were spendin' more time around the ranch than usual. Of course, I was spendin' most of mine with Doc Stanton and

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the horses. Ann got into the habit of joinin' us early every day to watch the horses work out.

"Mornin' Montana!" her now familiar voice called out and I turned to see her comin' down the hill.

"Mornin' to you, Ann. I'm surprised you don't have anything better to do than spend your time down here at the stables watching us run your father's Steel horses around."

"I've got lots of things I'd rather be doing smarty, but Bobby and I will be inheriting them one day and I want to make sure they're properly worked... and they're Steel *Dust* horses, not just Steel. What's the plan for today, if you don't mind?"

"Doc isn't here yet, so I don't rightly know, but one of Whisper's cousins turned up with a little limp yesterday and I want to walk him out to make sure it's nothin' serious," I answered.

"So why are you walking Spirit?"

"Spirit comes first and if I walk him a little, he stays lean and doesn't get jealous when I move on to the others."

"Do you plan on racing him in the trials?"

"I'm not sure yet. Spirit's fast enough, but he's not a racehorse. What I mean is, Spirit does a lot more for me than win races and I want to keep it that way. Your father doesn't seem to care as long as I work with Doc on the other horses, too."

"I heard him tell my mother that he wants you to work your *magic* on a few of the others. The trials

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are July 1st and that's coming fast. Whisper might be ready, but we usually run two or three of them and none of the others are even close to Whisper's times. That is, none of *our* horses. Spirit is the only other one close."

I walked Spirit back toward the stable and Ann followed.

"I know he'll want him to race, but I'm not sure yet. I might let him run the track a few more times just to see how he feels about it all. Maybe I'll let Spirit decide for himself."

"And how's he going to tell you what he decides?" she asked.

"Oh, we talk all the time. He won't have any trouble!"

"I don't know about you, Montana. You're the only boy I ever met who talks to horses... and they talk back! I may have to keep an eye on you, too."

"Just don't let your father catch you," I answered just as sarcastically. "I hear he wants you to be an old maid."

"Go walk your horse, Montana... and watch where you step!" she snapped as she spun away and headed back up the hill.

I was gettin' used to our little conversations and I found myself lookin' forward to her visits.

I was just gettin' Whisper out of his stall when Doc Stanton showed up. "Montana, I'm glad I caught you before you bring him out. I want to leave him in the corral today to rest up. Clint wants

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him to run full-track tomorrow and I want him fresh. This heat drains the strength out of 'em and I want to be extra careful with Whisper. Let's work on Spirit and the mare today. How's her ankle?"

"I just took her for a good walk and it didn't give her any trouble. I'd still use a poultice on it, but I think it's gonna be fine."

"I think you're right," he said, "but I want to see her run a little first -- no rider, just on her own. Do you think Spirit would mind if you led her around the track once? Not too fast, just a good trot."

"Sounds good to me," I said. "Spirit needs a little stretch anyway. If I leave him in the stable too long, he'll eat through all your feed. He doesn't know when to push the plate away, if you know what I mean."

"Saddle 'em up while I go check something -- I'll be back in ten minutes." Doc headed out to one of the smaller buildings.

I was just gettin' Spirit saddled when another voice caught called out from the stable door. "He's nice looking cow pony, but he's no Steel Dust."

I looked over and saw who was talkin'. It was the rider who'd taken Whisper around the track my first day on the ranch... and I already didn't like his tone.

"Name's Yancy and I'm gonna be your new foreman."

I held my hand out as he walked up, but he ignored it. "Montana," I said, puttin' my unshaken hand back to work on the cinch.

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"I know... you're the new guy who parked himself in the foreman's cabin. My cousin's gonna move you out of there pretty soon, now that I'm back."

"I'm not sure who your cousin is," I replied, "but I work for Clint and I'll do what he tells me, until he tells me different."

"I like your spirit, boy," he replied, still in that arrogant tone, "but Clint *is* the cousin I was referrin' to. Not *really* my cousin, but just like kin. Clint and my father were partners before my father died, and Clint's always treated me like kin. I expect he'll want me to marry in, down the road."

I knew he was referring to Ann, but didn't feel like takin' the bait.

"Well, when that happens, I'll probably take orders from you... but until then, why don't you just leave me and my cow pony to ourselves."

"They told me you were a pistol... that you even got one of the rustlers, but I've found that cowboys are pretty easy to impress. You'll find that I'm not."

That sounded more like a threat than a goodbye, I thought, so I cinched up the saddle and jumped on. Spirit walked right past him, payin' him no never-mind. I learned some time ago that the strongest words are sometimes the ones that aren't spoken.

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Doc Stanton was back, so we rode over to get the mare roped up. "I see you met our local pain-in-the-butt."

"If you mean Yancy, yeah. He just introduced himself. Kind of hard fella to warm up to, though."

"If it weren't for his father, Clint would have thrown him off the ranch years ago. That boy's nothin' but trouble. Clint knows it but indulges him. You'd be best served to keep your distance."

"Sounds like good advice, Doc. I was just thinkin' the same thing. Says he's gonna be the next foreman, though. Might be hard to do when he gets the job."

"Don't worry about that," Doc flinched. "Clint puts up with him but he's not stupid. Horses'll fly before Yancy ever gets the girl or the job. The only thing that kid can do is be nasty and ride. When Whisper gets to the Fair, Yancy'll be riding him... that is, if somebody hasn't killed him first."

We spent the next few hours workin' the mare with Spirit. The ankle looked good to Doc, too, so we bandaged her up after the workout and put her back to rest.

I've never been much of a dreamer, but the rest of the morning I found myself daydreamin' about racin'. I still had little interest in forcing Spirit to race, but I'd love to be on any horse that beat this Yancy... maybe even see his face when he and his fancy horse got beat by a cow pony!

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I was just gettin' back to the bunkhouse when Bobby came running up all excited. "Montana, my father is looking for you. He's up at the house. Says to come straightaway and bring Spirit."

I really didn't want to saddle Spirit up again after the workout, so I went back to the corral and just threw a bridle on him. I wasn't sure what Clint wanted him for, but I suspected he didn't plan on ridin' him. As we walked back toward the house, Clint was out front talkin' to a man in a dark suit.

"Here they come now," Clint said, pointin' in our direction.

"Tom, this is young Montana and his horse. Calls him Spirit and from what I've seen, that's a good name for him."

"Montana, I'd like to introduce you to an old friend and one of our best customers. This is Tom Marsalis."

"How do you do, sir?" I said as we shook hands.

"Forget the sir, young man. Clint here tells me you have some kind of special horse here. Tells me you're both from up north."

"Yes, sir... I mean Mr. Marsalis. I'm from Bighorn Lake, Montana and Spirit hails from Wyoming."

"What brings you two to our fair land of Texas, Montana?"

"We've been runnin' cattle up the Chisholm," I told him.

"Well, if you like running cattle, I'm sure Clint can keep you busy. He tells me my next order is

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scattered over a hundred miles of range. I reckon that's Clint's way of running up the delivery price. But I'm not just here today to buy more cattle. I hear your Spirit ran five furlongs in one-0-three! And with you on him with a regular saddle! Do you suppose he's just telling me stories?"

"Could be, Mr. Marsalis, but that story's true. I reckon we surprised him."

Clint's guest had worked his way over to take a closer look at Spirit and moved slowly around him like he was checkin' for ticks.

"Right odd looking for a workin' horse. You sure he doesn't have Texas blood in him?"

"I'm not sure of anything beyond his father. I know his father was sired on the Circle R in Wind River. I'm afraid I don't know where *his* father came from."

Clint walked over and patted Spirit on the rump. "These are Steel Dust legs if I ever saw 'em. Of course, Tom, the original Steel Dust came from Kentucky in the forties. Might be there's another branch of the family that ended up in Wyoming. I guess we'll never know. All I do know is that, given the right training, this might just be the fastest horse in Texas right now."

The conversation between Clint and Mr. Marsalis was beginning to sound like somebody had plans for Spirit. I thought I'd better speak up but just as I opened my mouth, Clint beat me.

"But young Montana here doesn't have any interest in making him race. Seems they've been

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through some times together and he doesn't see any value in racing him."

"Not interested in getting rich?" responded Mr. Marsalis. "Is that so, Montana? I never met a cowboy yet who wasn't interested in getting rich."

"Clint said it right, sir. Spirit's more than just my horse. He's my friend, and friends don't sell each other out."

"I like your style, son. Peculiar, but I like it anyway. Tell me one thing to make me happy. If you ever decide to sell him, you'll call on me first. Is that reasonable?"

"I can agree to that easy, Mr. Marsalis, because it'll never happen."

"Thanks, Montana," said Clint. "You can take him back out of the sun now. I just wanted Tom to meet the both of you."

"Been a pleasure, son," said Mr. Marsalis, as we turned and headed back toward the corral.

I'd just put Spirit back in the corral when I spotted Ann sitting on a low branch of the big old tree that separated the main house from the bunkhouse.

"Hey, cowboy. Don't you ever get tired of standing out in the hot sun?" she said, apparently forgettin' the hard words she had for me when last we met.

"Hi, Ann. I'd prefer to sit around all day and drink cool drinks, too, but somebody's got to make this ranch pay, so the owners can sit around and drink cool drinks."

Steel Dust Dawn

“Well I declare - you must have been up all night thinking that one up. I’ll bet you can’t say it again.”

“I’m sure I could if I wanted to, but duty calls.”

“Now you can take a few minutes off and sit. Remember, I’m one of those *owners* you so despise.”

I walked over and sat a few feet away on the same low branch. “I don’t really despise the owners. In fact, I envy ‘em. Might just buy me a ranch someday and be an owner myself.”

“Fat chance of that, chasing cattle all over Texas with the likes of our cowboys. I’m afraid you’re doomed to live in the sun and the dust, just like them.”

“Speakin’ of movin’ up, I met Yancy earlier today,” I mentioned. “and he tells me he’s planning on movin’ up in the world.”

Ann answered in a huff, “Good. I hope he does... because that’ll take him away from here.”

“Not necessarily,” I said, continuing to bait her.

“Montana, you are the most exasperating boy I’ve ever met. You talk in riddles. There’s no place on this ranch for Yancy to move up. If it weren’t for his God-given ability to ride, he wouldn’t be here now... and at that, he’s not here much.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know Yancy was such a touchy subject with you... hope I didn’t say anything out of line.”

That set her off. She shook her head like she was shaking off a bee. Then it happened. Her hat fell

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off and when she leaned over to pick it up, she slipped off the branch. It all happened so fast, the next moment she was sitting flat on the ground looking up at me with this painful look in her eyes.

“WE ARE NOT CLOSE AND YOU’RE OUT OF YOUR MIND IF YOU THINK I HAVE ANY INTENTIONS OF *EVER* BEING CLOSE TO A COWBOY! PARTICULARLY RUDE ONES LIKE YOU!”

I reached down and offered my hand to pull herself back up, but she refused and struggled back up on her own.

“I’m sorry to hear that, ma’am. Some of my best friends are cowboys.”

With that, I turned and walked back toward the bunkhouse. I would’ve loved to turn back around and see her face, but my instinct was to put ground between us as quick as I could. I don’t think I’d ever been called *exasperating* before. I wasn’t sure what it meant, but it didn’t sound good.

Chapter 9

Sometime after supper, Luke walked over while I was outside the bunkhouse sharpenin' my knife. "How's it goin' Montana? Startin' to find you're way around here now?"

"I am, Luke, thanks. Seems like a nice place to work and I appreciate your helpin' me along."

"No problem. Clint still wants me to play foreman for a while, so I guess it's my job. I saw you talkin' to Tom Marsalis today -- quite a guy, isn't he?"

"We were just talkin' about Spirit. I never got a chance to ask anything about him. Clint called him his best customer. What'd he mean?"

"Tom Marsalis is one of the richest men in Texas. He started out runnin' a grocery east of here and before long, he owned a dozen of 'em. After he got rich, he and a man named Armstrong started the Dallas Land Company. They bought up a few thousand acres south of the Trinity and built a city. They call it Oak Cliff and it doubled the size of Dallas. He still owns all the grocery stores east of here and he sells lots of our beef. That's why

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you've never seen our cattle runnin' up the Chisholm to Kansas. They don't need to. Clint sells most of 'em to Tom Marsalis and they all get ate up right here in Texas."

"I had no idea. He never mentioned cattle at all. He just talked horses – Spirit in particular. He talked about racing. Seemed like he races horses."

"Oh, he does. A man that rich needs his diversions. Tom's a business man first, but he's always had a soft spot for racin'. A few years back he and a few of his partners started the Fair over in Dallas. You mean you never heard of Fair Park?"

"Can't say I have. What's a fair got to do with grocery stores and buildin' cities? And what's any of that got to do with horses?"

"Fair Park is mostly a horse track. Every fall people from all over Texas visit Dallas to go to the Fair. There's lots of stuff to do there, but mostly people go to see the races. That's what Clint's getting Whisper ready for. Tom's mustangs always do well at the big race and Clint needs to beat him. Clint thinks it's time for a Steel Dust like Whisper to put this ranch on the map. Clint and Tom may be good friends and do business together, but one day every October, they're sworn enemies. I guess the news of another fast horse on the ranch was too much for Clint to keep to himself."

I finally got the connection. It still worried me a little that Spirit was that other horse. I didn't know if Clint still planned on my racin' him or was just

Steel Dust Dawn

showin' him off to worry his friend. It sure was somethin' to think about.

The next mornin' I awoke to a knock on my door. "Come on in," I groaned from bed.

The door opened and Clint walked in. "Montana, I need you to do a special job for me today."

"No problem, boss. Just let me get dressed and I'll be right with you."

"No hurry. I need to send Annie in to Fort Worth around ten o'clock. Normally, Jack would take her but with his ankle still laid up, he can't. Frankly, I don't trust any of the other hands with her, so Katie and I decided on you."

"Are you sure you want *me* to take her? She seems to have a problem with me. Whenever we talk, it ends up in an argument."

"Somehow that got back to her mother... I wouldn't be surprised if that's why she asked for you. You'll be taking a wagon. Be ready about ten and bring your rifle."

"I'll be there... and thanks... I think."

On the one hand, I was pleased that Clint and Mrs. Winters thought enough of me to trust me, new as I was to the ranch. On the other hand, I wasn't much lookin' forward to the trip. Ann was pretty and all, but we never seemed to be able to talk very long without gettin' into some kind of argument. I figured I'd just make the best of it.

It was almost ten when I grabbed my Winchester and started over to the house. As I approached, I

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could see Toby already had the wagon set up with two horses.

“Hey, Toby. I take it that’s for me?”

“Yes sir,” he responded, as he dropped the lynch pin in place. “You got two good horses here. Just get ‘em some water somewhere on the trail and in town. They’ll be fine.”

I was just about to jump aboard when another voice broke the quiet. “NO NEED FOR YOU TO JUMP ON... I’LL BE DRIVIN’ TODAY.”

The voice and attitude were familiar. I turned to see Yancy walkin’ toward me with his rifle in hand. “I’ll be takin’ Ann to town. You can stick around here and play with your horses.”

“Like I said before. When I work for you I’ll pay attention to your orders. Until then, I think I’ll just do what my boss tells me.”

“One of these days, Montana, that attitude of yours is gonna get you in trouble.”

“How about today?” I answered as I laid my Winchester up on the wagon and turned to meet him.

Just as we got within swingin’ distance, Clint came out the door and saw what was happenin’.

“Yancy, I asked Montana to drive today. Why don’t you go somewhere else and find something constructive to do.”

“Aww Clint, you’re not gonna trust the new guy with Ann are you?”

“I figure that’s my business. Now get before I lose my sense of humor.”

Steel Dust Dawn

Just then, Ann and her mother walked out to join us. "Montana," Mrs. Winters said, "Annie knows where she needs to be. Just get her there and back safely."

"I'll do that, ma'am," I assured her.

"Oh, come on now mother. I can take care of myself," Ann added, steppin' up onto the wagon.

"Annie," Clint said, "you sign those papers that Mr. Robb gives you and bring a copy back for me to see. That's all you've got to do and I want you back here before sundown. Don't get distracted."

"Certainly, father. You can trust me," she replied with the slightest note of deception in her voice.

"I'm pretty sure I can't," Clint answered. "That's why I'm sending you with Montana. Montana, have her home by dusk... hear?"

"Yes sir," I answered and snapped the reins, heading out the drive toward the archway.

We drove out the drive in silence, and stayed that way for the first five or ten minutes down the trail. The peace finally ended when Ann spoke up, already complainin' about the ride.

"I'll be a lot happier when somebody invents a wagon that runs without horses."

I couldn't resist. "How exactly would such a wagon move?" I inquired.

"I'm not really sure, but probably by steam engine. It has to be possible because steam engines already move trains across the country. All they have to do is invent a smaller one."

John E. Richman

"I guess it would be possible," I answered. "but why would that be better?"

"I suspect it would be a lot smoother. Riders wouldn't get jostled around so much," she countered.

I thought about it and, crazy as it was, she had a point. "But wouldn't we have to lay rails wherever we wanted to go?"

"I declare, Montana, as long as you have big enough wheels, you wouldn't need rails... would you?"

"I'm really not sure, Ann. I've never thought about it. I don't think steam engines are about to replace horses altogether though. I can't see myself chasin' cattle through the brush on a wheeled steam engine. The noise alone would scare cattle further away, the closer I got!"

"Oh, all right. Let me ask you a question, smarty. Why is it *you* wanted to be the one to drive me to the city? I saw you snap at Yancy when he tried to."

"Now there you go again, gettin' the wrong idea. I didn't volunteer for this trip. Your father told me to. You were in the room when he did! And I think he did because he knew he could trust me with you."

"And why would he think that...?"

"Because even he must have seen that you and I can't be together for over a minute without breaking out in some sort of argument! Like this!"

Steel Dust Dawn

“Oh, I don’t believe that for a minute. I think you wanted to drive me as a way of apologizing for knocking me off the tree branch last night.”

“I think we need a truce. I can’t keep up with your imagination so I suggest we change the subject or, better yet, just let me drive in peace. Where is it I’m to take you, anyway? Fort Worth is a pretty big place and I’m not that good at finding my way around it yet.”

“OK, truce – but I still think you like me. Once we get to town, you need to take me to lawyer Robb’s office. I can show you where it is. Father tells me I just need to sign some papers that he had Mr. Robb draw up. I guess it has something to do with their wills or the ranch or some such thing. I’m not really sure.”

“I wasn’t pryin’. It’s none of my business what you’ll be doin’. I just need to know where to find this lawyer Robb.”

“If you can stop this wagon from shaking me to death, I’ll show you when we get there,” she answered, finally showing some fatigue from peppering me with questions.

“Your father told me to have you back by dusk and we have to cover a good distance, so I’m sorry we don’t have a steam engine with big wheels, but I’m doing the best I can behind these two, old-fashioned horses.”

I guess that did it because my comment was immediately followed by another ten minutes of silence.

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It was gonna be another hot one. It was probably not eleven yet and the sun was already burnin' us up. I'd noticed two things about the weather, since comin' to Texas. One, it was always too hot, and two, real Texans didn't complain about it. I guess they didn't now anything different. Either that or they were just plain built different.

On the subject of being built, I couldn't help but notice that Ann was a strikingly pretty girl. Most times I was with her, she was dressed up in loose clothes so I couldn't really see much of her. But, even through our brief periods of silence, I could see that she'd started our trip out in a dress with some sort of jacket on. Now that we were being exposed to the full heat of the day, she'd taken the jacket off and loosened the buttons on her collar, to let some air in. I don't think I'd been this close to a girl since back in Wyoming and I was probably more conscious of it than she was. I guess to her, I was just another cowboy. Not a boy, or a man, just a cowboy. Kind of like the servant class. There I go daydreamin' again. All I had to do it just keep driving the horses and puttin' ground behind us.

"I'm getting hot, Montana. We need to stop at the next shady spot and take a drink. I promise I won't bother you."

"It's hot for sure, and Ann, you don't bother me. In fact, I kind of like your imagination. I was just thinkin' that when I was up in Dodge City, I was reading in their paper that a couple of boys in France invented a horseless carriage that ran on

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wheels. I don't think it was steam powered, though. Some sort of fuel they got from oil. I wish I'd kept it so I could show it to you. There's some trees up ahead. We'll try to find some shade up there and have some water. I need to find water for the horses, too."

We crossed over a small rise and found our relief from the heat. This part of Texas wasn't known for big shade trees but we'd come on a small creek surrounded by big willows.

"Oh, that looks good, Montana. Let's pull over there and you can take the horses right up to the water," she offered.

I pulled the team right up to one of the willows on the bank and jumped off. The creek was slow enough that I could do as Ann suggested and walk 'em right up to the edge.

I then went back to the wagon and helped Ann down. We both walked over to the creek edge ourselves, and kneeled down, dippin' our hands in the coolness of the stream.

She took a scarf of some kind out of her pocket and dipped it in the water, wrung it out and put it on her face.

"That looks like a good idea," I said, removing my own bandana and doing the same. We must have looked a sight as we covered our faces in water.

"If we weren't in such a gall-darn hurry to get to town, I'd walk right in that creek and sit it in," she said, dipping her scarf back in for a second time.

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“I think I’d join you but we can’t get our clothes too wet or it’ll be a miserable time lettin’ ‘em bake-out in the sun. We’d look so bad by the time we got to town that your lawyer Robb probably wouldn’t even let us in,” I answered.

Just as I spoke, I heard the rustle of horses. I looked up to see two riders coming toward us, likely for the same reason – to get out of the sun and find some cool water.

“We got company,” Ann announced, standing up and stepping away from the stream.

“It’s time we got movin’ anyway,” I answered, movin’ back to grab the horses and turn ‘em back toward the trail.

I was just hoisting Ann back onto the wagon seat when our company arrived.

“Hey there!” one of the two yelled.

I looked over to see a young man and a girl ridin’ in on two horses. They looked to be about our ages.

“How are ya?” I yelled back. “Mighty hot out here, isn’t it?”

“Surely is,” the boy replied. “You two don’t mind if we share a little of your shade and water, do you? I hope we aren’t interrupting anything.”

The boy was definitely my age, and the girl, with her golden hair falling out of her hat, looked to be just about Ann’s age.

“Help yourselves,” I replied. “You didn’t interrupt anything and we were just leavin’ anyway.”

Steel Dust Dawn

The boy helped the girl off her horse and, as she dropped to the ground, I couldn't help but see she looked right over at me.

"You folks go on and have a nice day," I said, as I snapped the reins and started the horses back toward the trail.

"You, too," he answered, as we moved back into the sunlight.

We drove another few minutes before either of us spoke.

"Aren't you a little bit ashamed?" Ann asked.

"Ashamed of what?" I answered.

"They way you stared at that girl. Was it her yellow hair that caught your eye?"

"Here we go again," I said. "I didn't stare at her and I didn't even see what color her hair was."

"Oh, sure," Ann replied. "I guess one girl isn't enough for a big Wyoming cowboy like you. You need two or three..."

"I thought we had a truce," I answered, tryin' again to change the subject. I wondered how she knew I'd snitched a peek at that girl. Ann didn't miss much.

"OK, truce," she answered. "Just next time, don't be so obvious."

Yancy had called me a "pistol" the other day. I wasn't quite sure what that meant at the time, but I was now pretty sure that Ann was a "pistol", too. Maybe we were both "pistols."

We rode the next hour in polite conversation, talkin' mostly about the ranch and her family.

John E. Richman

Finally, the buildings of Fort Worth began to rise up on the horizon and we began to close in on ‘em.

“We’re coming in on James Street,” Ann noted. “You need to take it up to Garner and make a left turn. About six or seven blocks up Garner, take a right on Andrews and that should put us right at lawyer Robb’s.”

She seemed to know what she was talkin’ about so I did as she said. We got to lawyer Robb’s ten minutes later. I helped her down and walked her to the door.

“You can come in out of the sun. I shouldn’t be long,” she offered.

“No thanks, Ann. I’ll just stay out here with the horses.”

“That’s crazy, Montana. You need to cool off just as much as I do. Now take me in, please.”

I’d found there was little to gain by arguing with Ann, so I did as she directed.

Comin’ in from the bright light of the afternoon, the office looked dark. But once my eyes adjusted, I could see a lady at a desk behind a small row of chairs.

“Miss Winters, I presume?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m here to see Mr. Robb.”

“You and the young man have a seat and I’ll tell him you’re here.”

Hot as the office was, it felt good to get in out of the sun for a while, but I felt a little guilty about the horses. I told myself I wouldn’t leave ‘em out there too long without movin’ ‘em to shade. I

Steel Dust Dawn

didn't have any particular fondness for 'em, but, as a cowboy, you occasionally put your life in their hands, so you need to take care of 'em.

A few minutes later, lawyer Robb poked his head out his door and asked Ann in. I didn't see much of him but he appeared to be small, with a handlebar moustache and a bald head.

Over the next twenty minutes I could hear 'em talkin' from behind the door, but made an effort to try not to listen. Just as I was about to excuse myself to go back out and tend to the horses, the office door opened and Ann stepped out. She had a big envelope in her hand, which I guessed was the copy of whatever she'd been there to sign.

We said our goodbye's and left, gettin' right back on the wagon.

"I need to get the horses some water, somewhere. I don't suppose you know where the closest place would be?" I asked.

Ann didn't immediately answer, so I looked over to see if she heard me. She was just starin' ahead as if in some sort of daze.

"Water... we need water for the horses! Any ideas where?" I repeated.

"Oh, I'm sorry Montana. What did you say?"

"Ann, the horses have been out in the sun for the past hour without water. We need to find 'em some before we get back on the trail."

"Drive us back to Garner and turn left. I think there's a livery just up the block. I'm sorry you had

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to wait so long. I didn't know what I was signing and lawyer Robb had to explain it to me."

Something happened in that office that took the spark out of Ann, at least for the moment, but I wasn't there to get involved so I tried to change the subject. She was right about the livery and we found it a few minutes later. The horses got a good drink and it gave me time to get off the wagon and walk around a little. I felt like I'd been cooped up all day.

"Montana, as long as we're in town I'd like to stop by the Emporium a few blocks from here. Do you need anything at a clothing store?"

It sounded like she was gettin' back to normal and I didn't want to say or do anything that would put her back in her glum. "We're about on schedule. I think we have time for a short stop. Not sure I need anything, though," I answered.

"Every time I see you, you're wearing that ragged old work shirt. Maybe I could buy you a new one?"

"Thanks, but I can buy my own clothes... when I need 'em," I responded.

"Well you can come in with me and find yourself a new shirt, or you can stay out in the sun. It's your call. By the way - you need one!"

I don't know what had her down, but her sudden interest in clothes told me she was returnin' to normal.

"You just show me the way and I'll decide when I see it," I resolved.

Steel Dust Dawn

Baxter's Emporium was the name over the door and it was a big building. The front windows were mostly filled with dresses and such, but there were a few men's trousers and shirts on one end, so I helped her down and decided to follow her in.

As I suspected, it was mostly women's clothes and, as soon as we entered, Ann disappeared into the dress racks. I asked a clerk where the men's clothes were and he pointed me to the far end, well away from the dresses.

I don't like bein' told when to buy clothes, but I suspected Ann was right. I probably could use a new shirt. I was down to two of 'em and they were both pretty torn up. It took me all of five minutes to find one and bring it up to the front counter. I wasn't used to payin' \$1.25 for a shirt, but this was the big city, so I figured everything cost more.

A minute later the clerk had tied my shirt in a paper package and I was lookin' for my "partner." She was nowhere to be seen. I went back out the front to see if she'd beaten me back to the wagon, but she wasn't there either. I went back into the store and walked up and down the women's aisles but couldn't find her there, either. I wondered if she'd gone somewhere else? I was only gone a few minutes. What would I tell Clint and Mrs. Winters? Just then, as I was walkin' by a curtained area, Ann popped her head out from behind the curtain and looked right at me.

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“Whoa! You scared me. I thought I’d lost you for sure.” Then I reached for the curtain to pull it open for her.

“MONTANA! DON’T YOU DARE TOUCH THIS CURTAIN. I’M NAKED BACK HERE!”

I must have jumped a foot off the ground! “WHAT? WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU’RE NAKED?”

“Silly, I’m trying on a few dresses and things. Now be a good boy and take these back to clerk over there, and stay away from here for the next ten minutes.” She threw me a pile of clothes and disappeared back behind the curtain.

Catching my breath, I did what she said and took the pile back to the girl working near the dresses. I then continued up the aisle and right out the front door. I got back on the wagon and sat there, fryin’ in the sun, tryin’ to catch my breath. I don’t know if she was really naked behind that curtain or not, but it was a hard thought to get out of my mind.

A good twenty minutes later the front door opened and out she came with several tied packages of her own. I helped her up on the wagon seat and started back the way we’d come.

When she carefully placed her packages under the seat, she noticed mine. “There’s another package here, Montana. What’s the chance you ended up buying a new shirt?”

“I *did* get one, but not because you told me to. I’d been needin’ one anyway and found one that’d do.”

Steel Dust Dawn

"I'd like to see it. What color did you get?"

"I don't remember. I don't think it has a color. It's just a shirt," I answered, tryin' again to change the subject.

"Oh, Montana. I don't know what my father's going to do when he finds out you tried to sneak a peek at me without any clothes on! I think maybe you better show me that shirt."

"Now don't even say such a thing," I snapped. "You know very well I didn't know that you were...."

"Naked?"

"I said, don't even say that! You could get me in all kinds of trouble with talk like that."

"I'm just kidding, Montana. Take it easy. Anyway, I wasn't *really* naked. I still had on my...."

"STOP! PLEASE STOP! That's enough. Let's talk about something else."

"I declare, I do think you're turning red. Must be the sun." Her giggle told me she was still playin' with me. She certainly was a pistol!

Chapter 10

After leavin' town, things settled down and we began to put good ground behind us. About an hour into our trip, we came back on that shady area with the creek. I knew we were both tired and that the horses needed water, so I pulled in there again.

"Thank you Montana, for finding us some shade. I'm near burned up. I need to get off and stretch."

"Me too. Let's cool off a minute like we did before. It's still a good piece to the ranch."

This time I unhitched the horses to let them go right into the water. I figured they needed a good cooling and that's the only way I could do it. While I was workin' 'em around, I found I was knee deep in the water myself. It felt good. I knew Ann was somewhere behind me but figured I'd leave her to her business and let her cool off any way she saw fit.

As I was movin' the horses back toward the wagon, I looked over and saw her just sittin' on a log, near the water. Her hair was wet so I knew she'd dunked her head, but she was just starin' straight ahead again, lost in some kind of thought.

Steel Dust Dawn

“Ann, we need to get goin’ again. I should have the horses ready in a few minutes. Can you be ready when they are?”

With that she snapped back to reality. “Yes, sure, do you need any help?”

“No, you just take your time. I can handle this,” I answered. Something was clearly botherin’ her and my guess was it had something to do with the visit to lawyer Robb’s office.

When we got back on the wagon, I asked. “You seem a little down. Is there anything wrong?”

“No, I’m sorry Montana. I guess I haven’t been very good company today. It was something that Mr. Robb said that’s been bothering me. It’s probably nothing. Just ignore me.”

“I hope he wasn’t mean to you?”

“No, nothing like that. It was just something he said as we were finishing up. Mother and father had their will’s drawn up and I needed to sign some of it. Bobby will have to do the same thing in a few years when he’s old enough. But when we were about done, Mr. Robb told me not to worry about the ranch... that he was sure everything would work out this year and we wouldn’t have to sell any of it off.”

“Did you ask him what he meant?”

“No... I was too surprised to. Also, he said it in a way like I already knew what he was talking about. The problem is, I don’t. It sounded like there’s some money problems that I don’t know about. Father hasn’t said anything about it. This ranch has

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been in our family for forty years. I can't imagine why we'd have any problem with it."

"I wouldn't worry about it," I tried to comfort her. "You have thousands of acres, thousands of cattle and some of the fastest horses in Texas. I'm sure he didn't mean any such thing."

"I hope you're right, Montana. Maybe you are. Maybe I just heard him wrong. OK, so when are you going to show me that new shirt?"

Recalling that she was planning to blackmail me for grabbin' that curtain back in the Emporium, I quickly agreed. "You can see it right now if you want. It's under the seat."

Ann reached under and found the smallest of the packages. She brought it out and began untying the string.

"I don't suppose you could slow us down a little. I don't want to get dust all over it before you even put it on."

The wrapping fell away to reveal a heavy, blue, workshirt with buttons all the way up to the collar.

"Blue! I guessed blue," she announced as if she'd just won a contest. "Why did you tell me there wasn't any color at all?"

"I guess I just forgot. But you're right. It's blue. Now I have another dull blue shirt."

"Oh, it's not dull at all. And if you wash it from time to time in cold water, it should stay that way. Why don't you try it on, so I can see how it looks on you?"

Steel Dust Dawn

“Ann, it’s too hot and I’m too sweaty. If you want it to stay clean, then I’ll have to get cleaned up first. And that’s not gonna happen out here.”

“Oh all right, but promise you’ll come see me when you get cleaned up and put it on.”

“It’s a deal. Now let’s get back to the ranch before the sun gets any lower... or your father will have my hide.”

The sun was low in the sky when we rode under the Circle of Fire arch and up the drive to the ranch. I drove right up to the main house and helped her down, with her packages and that envelope in hand.

“Now don’t forget. I’ll expect you to come by tomorrow with that new shirt on.”

I nodded my reluctant agreement and, waving back at Ann and her mother who’d now joined her, pulled the wagon away toward the corral. After takin’ care of the horses, I ate with the hands and went to bed early. I’d been away from Spirit the entire day and looked forward to takin’ him out for a ride in the morning.

The next morning there was a distinct change in the air. Sometime during the night, the clear blue skies of the past week had been replaced by a dark dampness that only a westerner knows. It felt like twister weather. At least, I thought, we could use the rain – if any came with it. On occasion, such weather brought frightful thunderstorms, but other times it didn’t. I guessed time would tell. I couldn’t

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help but remember the story Doc Winters told me on my first trip out here – how the ranch was originally founded by the great storm that had left the circle of fire.

I got Spirit saddled around sun-up and took him out to see a little more of the ranch. At least I thought it was around sun-up, given that the heavy clouds pretty much hid any sun that might be up.

It was clear that he was glad to see me because it was all I could do to keep him down. Maybe he liked the racin' we'd done earlier in the week, or maybe he just appreciated being out. Either way, we headed north, followin' the trail we'd taken to Indian country. About three miles out we came on a small creek and followed it west as it wound through some low hills. We'd occasionally come on small groups of grazing cattle that didn't seem at all bothered by our bein' there. It was about then that I heard the first crack of thunder in the distance. It was still a ways off, but I could see streaks of lightening to the northwest. After a few more minutes, I could see the storm was gatherin' and movin' in our direction. As the thunder got louder, the lightening got more regular and the wind came up. I figured we had only minutes before we got hit, so I declared our ride over and headed Spirit back toward the safety of the ranch. I hoped we had enough time to make it.

It was a good thing Spirit was in a running mood because I quickly took advantage of it. I didn't know the land that well, so I had to keep a eye out

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for fences and holes as we flew back over those little hills toward the Circle of Fire.

We were probably three minutes out when the sky opened up. I hoped Spirit remembered the way back because the drivin' rain in my eyes left me near blind.

A few long minutes later we reached the main corral to see a flurry activity. Through the wind and rain, the men were runnin' around movin' horses into the barns and securing everything else in sight.

"Montana! We could use some help over here!"

I turned to see Toby and Clint pushin' a wagon to the lee side of the big barn. I quickly threw a rope over the wagon bench and let Spirit pull.

"We got this one," Clint yelled over the crashing thunder. "Find Luke and get down to the track. Doc was down there with Whisper and I haven't seen 'em come back."

I jumped off Spirit and ran into the barn but Luke wasn't there. I put Spirit in his stall and ran back out, but now couldn't see Clint, Toby or Luke. I decided to run down to the track myself and see what I could do to help Doc.

It was a long run in the drivin' rain, but I made it just as a lightening strike hit one of the old oaks that shaded the corral. The crack of thunder was quickly followed by the crack of a giant branch fallin' to the ground. It came down right on the corral fence, bringin' *it* to the ground as well. It was then that I heard Doc yell for help.

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I ran into the corral and saw Doc doin' his best to keep two horses from runnin' off. There he was, with a set of reins in each hand and two horses risin' up on their hind legs, pawin' the air.

"Doc, give me one of those and let's get 'em out of here. The fence is down anyway."

In the commotion, I didn't see which horse he gave me, but it didn't matter much as we ran them out of the corral gate and back under another big oak. Hopefully, we wouldn't take any more lightening strikes.

I got my horse settled down and tied him off to a low branch. I then turned to see how Doc was holdin' up. He wasn't doin' as well. Through the darkness I could see him on his knees, fifty feet behind me...alone. "GET OVER HERE, DOC! IT'S SAFER UNDER THESE TREES!" I screamed.

"I LOST HIM, MONTANA. WHISPER GOT AWAY FROM ME. HE'S OUT IN THE STORM SOMEWHERE AND WE'VE GOT TO FIND HIM!"

"YOU NEED TO GET OVER HERE RIGHT NOW!" I yelled back. "WE'LL FIND HIM WHEN IT LETS UP. I'M SURE HE'S FINE. PROBABLY RAN BACK TO THE BARN."

I wasn't half as worried about Whisper as I was Doc Stanton. He was an older man and this kind of excitement might just do him in.

I finally got him to join me and the other horse under the oak and we held our ground for the next

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ten minutes until the worst of the lightening passed and the wind and rain started to let up.

“Montana, I’m awful worried about Whisper. Clint’s counting on him to save the ranch and I lost him! We need to find him right away and make sure he didn’t get hurt.”

That was the second time in a day that I heard about trouble with the ranch and I was beginnin’ to put it together. Clint’s interest in winning the big race at the Fair was as much about money as it was pride. Toby’d said winning that race would put the ranch and the Steel Dust horses on the map. I guess that meant the horses would be more valuable, the beef business would pick up, and that would go a long way toward fixing whatever money problem there was. Of course we’d have to find Whisper first... and hope he was safe.

Chapter 11

As soon as the weather allowed, Doc Stanton and I started back up toward the house. One of the big oaks in the central yard was down and most everything else had been tossed around, but it didn't look as bad as it could have. As we walked into the yard, everybody was busy puttin' things back in order, though Clint wasn't in sight. My first concern was for Spirit, and I was relieved when I saw the main barn and corral had weathered the storm. I knew Clint'd want to know about Whisper right away so I headed straight for the house.

"Montana! I'm glad to see you're all right. Clint told me you were down at the track with Doc when the storm hit. Is everything all right down there?" I turned to see Mrs. Winters speakin' from the stairs.

"I'm fine, ma'am, and most of the track buildings made it, but I need to see Clint right away. Is he here?"

"No, Montana. He took Luke and some of the men over to our neighbor John Reddig's place. His house was hit by lightening and the fire was

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still burning when Dora got here looking for help. Clint took some wagons and said he'd likely be gone a few hours. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, ma'am. One of the horses got loose in the storm, but don't worry. I'll see if I can find him."

"Well, do your best Montana. I'd suggest you take Toby with you. He's a good tracker. If I see Clint before you get back, I'll pass word on to him. Which horse was it?"

"I'm not sure yet, ma'am, but I better get right on his trail." I didn't want to tell her the truth. I didn't see any reason to worry her over somethin' that might be resolved before Clint got back.

On my way down the front steps, I saw Toby pickin' up some crates across the yard. "Toby! I need you over here!" I yelled. He heard me and started right over, followed by Doc Stanton, who still looked white as a ghost.

"Toby, Whisper broke away in the storm and we need to find him fast. Mrs. Winters thought you could help."

"Doc told me. I sure can," he replied. "Just let me saddle up and I'll be right with you." With that he turned and ran back toward the corral, kicking downed sticks and branches out of his way as he ran.

"I'm comin' too, Montana," added Doc. "This was my fault and I need to fix it."

"Doc," I replied, "I think Mrs. Winters needs you more here. Let Toby and me find Whisper. I'm

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sure he just ran for cover somewhere. He might even come in on his own. But with Clint gone and no real foreman, somebody needs to take charge around here.”

Doc looked straight at me for a few seconds before he replied. “I suppose you’re right, Montana, but I’m trusting you to find him for me.”

“We’ll find him Doc and bring him right in. You just be ready to tend to him if he needs tending.”

I hated to leave Doc in such a state, but knew if Whisper was hurt, time was important and we needed to get out on the trail fast. Spirit was glad to see me when I got to him, but we didn’t have much time to talk as I threw his blanket on and saddled him in record time. I made sure my reata was tied to my saddle along with a longer lariat. I didn’t know if I’d need all that rope but figured it couldn’t hurt to take it. One slap on his flank and we were outside the barn where we found Toby, all saddled up and waitin’ for us.

Without a word, we took off across the yard, toward the track. We got there moments later and for the first time since the storm, were able to survey the damage. There were a few trees down and one of them took part of the main corral fence with it, but the buildings were untouched and, all in all, it didn’t look too bad.

“Doc and I were headin’ over here for cover when Whisper got away,” I said as Toby and I walked the horses under the big trees. While I

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continued to examine the ground, Toby was first to see what I was looking for.

“Montana, there are some deep foreprints here... two sets, made from front legs coming down hard. One set continues over to that tree, following your and Doc’s prints. The other breaks off here and heads...north. He may not be there now, but that’s where he went.”

I was impressed by Toby’s ability to read the tracks. I found out early that most people can see and follow prints, but readin’ sign is an art. The depth of the prints in the wet ground told Toby the horses had fought us – that they’d raised and pawed the air, comin’ down hard. A lot of cowboys wouldn’t see that. I was glad he came along.

“Lead on, Toby. I’ll follow you.”

North took us further into the woods. Even though the storm was over, the sky was still dark which made it harder to track in the woods. I stayed up close to Toby so I could see what he was seein’ before our own horses muddled the tracks.

We pushed through the woods and out the other side where the ground cleared and slowly dropped away to a small stream at the bottom of the next hill.

“I see he’s still draggin’ that rope,” I said, noting the snake-like trail that followed just to the left of the tracks. I didn’t want Toby to think I was a dude.

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“You’re not bad yourself,” answered Toby, smilin’ and knowin’ full-well that there was a hint of competition between us.

We crossed the field and slowed at the stream, which was runnin’ fast from the heavy storm runoff. When we got to it we noticed the tracks turned west there and followed it. Apparently, Whisper didn’t want to forge it during the storm. We then followed the stream as it worked its way around the west side of the hill. We both spotted Whisper at the same time.

“There he is!” Toby yelled first. About a hundred yards up ahead, Whisper was standin’ on the stream’s edge right next to a small cattle bridge. He looked fine from the distance but as we got closer, he shifted his weight to his left side, takin’ it off his right. My heart sank. He was favorin’ his right foreleg.

“Something’s botherin’ him,” murmured Toby. “Let’s give him some space.”

We slowed and separated, each workin’ half way around him, until we were across from one another. All the while Whisper seemed nervous. We didn’t want to spook him for fear he’d run and do more damage to his leg.

Finally, I dismounted and grabbed the lariat off my saddle. I started to talk to him as I inched closer, keepin’ the lariat hidden behind my back. I hoped I wouldn’t have to use it.

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“What’s the matter boy... take it easy now. It’s all over. Let’s get you back to your barn and get you fixed up.”

Whisper stood perfectly still and watched me as if the wrong word might set him off. When I got within a few feet, I slowly bent down and picked up the piece of rope he’d been draggin’. With the rope in my left hand, I walked right up to him and held my right hand out for him to smell. He did, and once he licked it I knew we’d be fine. I patted his neck and slowly removed the rope that had been botherin’ him. Just as slowly, I replaced it with a loose coil on my lariat.

At that point Toby joined us and we both kneeled to take a closer look at that right foreleg. There was a small spot of blood about half way down his shin. I put my hand on it to check for broken bone and he jumped. Toby steadied him and I felt it again. There was a bruise and some swelling, but I couldn’t feel anything broken. Of course Doc would be a better judge of that once we got him back to the barn, but for now, I was relieved.

“Doesn’t look too serious,” I said to Toby, who was as concerned as I was. “Nothin’ broken, at least nothin’ I can feel. Let’s walk him back home.”

The more Whisper walked, it seemed the more weight he could put on his injured leg. This, too, made me more convinced that the injury was minor. But the ground was still strewn with

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downed branches and other litter from the storm and I didn't want him to trip on anything, so I led him by the lariat, kicking debris from his path as we made our way. Toby followed us on horseback with Spirit in tow. I also knew we had to stay out of the muddy spots because he had an open wound and I didn't want it to get tainted.

We were about a hundred yards from the main yard when Doc Stanton rode out to meet us. By the time he reached us, he'd already seen the limp and wound. Without a word, I passed him the lariat and he led Whisper right into the barn.

Inside, he started barkin' out orders for boiled water, clean bandages and the like. A few of the hands gathered to watch while Doc went to work. "You were right, Montana," he said after more than a moment's study of the wound. "It could have been worse. There's nothing broken but he's got a good bone bruise and it's gonna keep him from racing for a while. Clint won't like it, but the best thing for Whisper is to keep the wound clean and keep him quiet for a week or two. Thank God it wasn't anything more."

In all the concern about Whisper's condition, I'd never asked the obvious. "Doc, what do you think caused it? He still had your rope around him when we found him down by that stream, but there was nothin' there that told me how he'd done it."

"Probably one of those downed branches from the storm. It's a foreleg so I suspect he was running blind and tripped over a 'Y' branch. Lucky

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he didn't break a leg. Clint would've never forgiven me."

"Oh I don't know about that!" a voice bellowed from behind us.

"Clint! Am I glad you're back. Whisper bolted in the lightening and..."

"Relax, Doc. One of the hands told me on the way in. How bad is he?"

"He's sore, but there's nothing broken so I think it's just a bone bruise. He was cut too, but not bad. I washed it, salved it up and bandaged it. We need to keep it real clean for a few days until it scabs over."

Clint rephrased his question, "That's fine Doc, but can he run?"

"I'm sure he will, but it wouldn't be good to test him now. There may be more damage there than we can see. He favored it when he walked back but I'm convinced he'll be as good as new in a few weeks."

"He may lose his edge in a few weeks, but I know you're right. We'll just have to go slow and hope he comes back up to speed before the trials. You know how much I'm counting on him... and you."

Chapter 12

The next few weeks went by fast. Concerned about the forthcoming race, Clint took me off cattle duty completely and put me full-time with Doc Stanton and the horses. With Whisper still healin', we spent most of our time with the others, to see if any of 'em could take Whisper's place if it became necessary. The steel gray filly named Betsy put up the fastest times, but we didn't spend a lot of time with her as we knew the boys at the State Fair wouldn't let us run a filly anyway. Too bad, too -- Betsy was the fastest mare I'd ever seen... a true Steel Dust with big wind and long legs.

The fastest stallion was a blood-bay named Red. The name said it all. He was born a Steel Dust, but could have easily passed for a Thoroughbred, with his red coloring. I asked Doc where he got it?

"It's hard to tell, Montana. Most of these Steel Dust horses came out of Kentucky and the Middleton Perry and Jones Greene stock. All except Whisper, who we know by studbook, goes back to Sir Archy. There's paper to show that Sam Houston owned his great grandfather."

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“So Whisper has different roots than the rest?”

“Maybe... records got lost during the war, but we’re convinced they all go back to Kentucky, though there’s likely been some mixing along the way. So, Red doesn’t look like ‘steel dust’ at all. Red is red. But I think, in a few years, he’ll be as fast as Whisper, though not in time for this year’s race. Why the sudden interest in the Steel Dust lineage?”

“Oh, partly because I’m just interested,” I answered, wiping the sweat from my brow. “The other part is curiosity about my own horse. Clint says he’s sure Spirit’s got Steel Dust breeding. He sure runs like it. But there was no studbook when I bought him, so I really don’t know anything about his blood line.”

Doc raised his head thoughtfully, scratchin’ a real or imaginary itch on his jaw. “Montana, I’ve been doctoring race horses for thirty years and I’ve never seen anybody with the horse-sense Clint has. He can touch a horse’s neck and know which leg hurts. If he says Spirit’s a Steel Dust, I’d believe him. You may never know for sure, but Clint’s word is sure enough for anybody around here.”

Later, I spent a lot of time thinkin’ about Doc’s words. They made me feel good... and he was right. It really didn’t matter that I didn’t have written records on Spirit. It just added to the mystery. How was it that this young workin’ horse from Wyoming beat nearly every horse on this racehorse ranch the first time out? The more I

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thought about that, the more I was glad we didn't have the records. If the Steel Dust horses of Texas were the fastest in the territory, I was glad to be part of that – even *if* in such a mysterious way.

The days had turned routine. So did the heat, and it was beginning to overshadow everything else. Doc and I would start each day checkin' on Whisper's leg and changin' the bandages. The bleeding stopped early on, but Doc wanted to make sure the wound healed clean, so we kept packin' it.

About nine-o'clock, Ann would just happen to wander down and sit a while, watchin' while we worked the horses. In the course of her constant jabbering, I found out that she had pretty good horse-sense too, and she made a few good suggestions that Doc added to our workouts. She'd go back to the house a few hours later when it started really gettin' hot and Doc and I would take a break. My curiosity about the ranch's money problems was always on the tip of my tongue, but I held it, thinkin' that Doc would be uncomfortable talkin' about it to a near stranger.

In the afternoons we'd go over the studbooks and match 'em up with the horses, Doc said so we could evaluate their breeding against how they actually looked. Sometimes we'd take one or two out to the track for runs. I'd always do the ridin'. Doc had me use the racin' saddles and, as much as I didn't care for 'em, I *was* gettin' used to 'em. They weren't much as far as a saddle goes. No

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fenders and no real horn... nothin' to hang a rope to. The stirrups were real high, so I had to bend my knees almost to my chest in order to get my feet in. You had to lean forward in those saddles, too. Doc told me most of the racers leaned way forward during the races, stayin' as far up on the horse as possible. Truth was, I found it darn uncomfortable and dangerous. But, I knew I was just doin' it for the workouts and Yancy would ultimately ride in the races. As far as I was concerned the longer he stayed away from the workouts the better, but I suspected he'd show up eventually.

One morning, a little over two weeks after the storm, Clint came down early and joined us.

"Mornin' Doc, Montana. How's the big boy doing?"

"If you mean Whisper," I answered, "we think he's comin' along very well. We had him trot all the way around the track yesterday and he's completely sound."

Clint walked over to where we had Whisper tied up, and looked him over. "Doc, do you think it's too early to run him out?"

"Clint," Doc answered, "if he was any other horse I'd say get him out there, but he's so important to us, I'd like to bring him up slow. If we could wait another week, I'd be a lot more confident."

"I'll trust your judgment on that. But I'd like you to keep trotting him the full track. Just take it easy until you're sure he's ready to run full out."

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“Will do,” replied Doc, clearly glad that Clint agreed with his judgement. “I’ll have Montana take him around the track this morning before it gets too hot.”

“You do that,” he answered as he started back up the hill. “I’d like to stick around to see but I just got some new problems to deal with and have to get right back. You just get him ready to qualify in three weeks.”

I’d forgotten their race trials in Dallas were just three weeks away. That didn’t give us much time. I was thinkin’ about that when Doc threw me one of the race saddles. “Go to it, Montana. The boss said to take him around the whole track, but real slow.”

I had Whisper and the saddle but couldn’t find a blanket, so I threw the saddle over my shoulder and started walkin’ him back toward the corral that we’d just fixed.

“Doc, give me a few minutes to get his blanket and we’ll start from up-track aways.”

Doc nodded, waved me out, and continued to pour over a studbook. When I got back to the stable I found his blanket in his stall. A few minutes later I had him all saddled and cinched up, ready to go. Doc had wandered down toward the first turn so I walked Whisper out to the track and was gettin’ ready to climb on when somebody snuck up behind me and grabbed by shirt, reelin’ me around.

“HEY! I JUST TALKED TO CLINT AND I’LL DO THE RIDIN’ TODAY.” It was Yancy! Had I

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known that before I turned around, I'd have punched him in the nose, but it was too late. The moment was lost.

"I'd appreciate you mindin' your manners!" I answered. "You almost got yourself cold-cocked." I thought I smelled liquor on his breath but, given how early in the day it was, I wasn't sure.

"Yeah, yeah. Save that for another day, cowboy. Right now, I'm takin' Whisper around the track."

As much as I really disliked Yancy, it was likely that he'd just seen Clint on his way back to the house. Maybe he'd changed his mind and told him, *he* could ride. Anyway, he was Clint's rider I thought, so I stepped aside.

"Just take it easy on him," I said. "He's still got ankle trouble and he's not ready to be run full out. This is only his second full-track run since he was hurt. Doc just wants him to take it real easy."

Yancy must have heard me, but he didn't show it, slappin' Whisper's flank and movin' him out to the middle of the track. Seconds later he yelled and dug his heels into Whisper's sides. Whisper responded just like he was trained... he broke into a full run.

"SLOW DOWN!" I yelled but it was no use. Yancy was pushin' him way too hard and I knew Doc would see it too as soon as he ran past. I stood in the track and saw Doc wavin' his arms wildly as they came by, but there was no stoppin' 'em. On they raced out of turn two and down the back-stretch. I kept my fingers crossed that Whisper

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would make it, but as they rounded turn four, I saw Whisper suddenly let up. They were still too far away to see why, but he let up. Yancy didn't seem to know what was happenin', because he kept slappin' his flank to speed him up. By the time they got back to me, Whisper was barely trotting and I could see he was favorin' that same foreleg.

By now Doc had run back to us and before I could yell at Yancy, he beat me to it. "YOU DARNED FOOL! YOU HURT HIM AGAIN! LORD KNOWS HOW BAD THIS TIME! CLINT'LL HAVE YOUR HIDE. MONTANA! HOW DID THIS FOOL GET ON WHISPER?"

"Doc... he told me he talked to Clint! It sounded like Clint told him he could."

"Well, we'll just see about that. Yancy, you get your butt off that horse right now before I knock you off... and then get out of my sight. You'd be smart to pack your gear, too."

That was all Doc could bring himself to say as he grabbed Whisper's leg and lifted it up for closer look. "SPIT! It's bruised again. It'll take twice as long to heal this time, if it *ever* does. Montana, help me get him back to the shed. I want to get him right off it."

Yancy hadn't responded to Doc. He just turned and wandered off the same way he had wandered in. After we got Whisper to lay down in the shed, Doc told me to go get Clint, if he was still around. I ran back to the house and saw Clint talkin' to Yancy in the yard. I couldn't imagine that Yancy'd

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shared the truth with him so I kept my distance and yelled. "CLINT, DOC NEEDS YOU AT THE TRACK RIGHT NOW! THERE'S TROUBLE."

Clint looked at me funny like, and started right over.

"Why, Montana? What's wrong? Is it about Whisper?"

"I'm afraid it is, Clint," I answered as we both started running back down the hill. I'd hoped to let Doc tell him.

"Montana, answer me! What's the problem?"

"Clint, Yancy ran Whisper too fast on the track and the limp's back."

"What the devil was Yancy doing on him at all? I thought you were doing the training?" he barked, with his face turning redder by the second.

"I'm sorry, Clint. I was about to take him out when Yancy came up and he said he'd talked to you and he was doin' the ridin'!"

By then, we'd broken in a full sprint ourselves, runnin' down the hill toward the track stable. As we approached, Doc was nowhere in sight, so I figured he was still in the shed with Whisper. As we entered, we saw him wrappin' fresh bandages around the bruise.

"How is he, Doc? How bad did that idiot hurt him?"

"He started favoring the leg in the final turn. Yancy had him full-out when it happened. He just pulled up and walked the rest. I don't think it's any

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worse than it was before, but it may take a few extra weeks this time to get him back on the track.”

“I’ll kill that drunken fool. Montana, I never told him anything like that at all. I smelled the booze on him and told him you were gonna to take Whisper out. He conned ya’. Doc, you and Montana take care of Whisper. I’ll go take care of Yancy.”

“Now, Clint – don’t kill him. He’s a fool, for sure, but we can’t afford to lose you, too. I think Montana ought to go with you. I’m fine here alone. It’s not like we’re goin’ anywhere.”

I looked over at Clint for some indication of approval. Otherwise, I’d do what he’d told me – particularly given the fury on his face. But he thought about Doc’s comments a second and gave me the nod, so without a word, I followed him up the path we’d just come down.

“I was just talkin’ to that jackass, too,” Clint grumbled as he upped his pace. “I told him if he couldn’t clean up his act, I didn’t need him around here any more. I guess I waited too long.”

Not to my surprise, by the time we entered the main yard, Yancy was nowhere in sight. Luke was cleanin’ harnesses over in the corral and Clint headed his way.

“LUKE!” he yelled. “Where’s that idiot Yancy? Have you seen him?”

“Don’t much look for him, Clint, but I did see him headin’ toward the house a few minutes ago. Can I help you?”

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Clint was so hot, he didn't even answer. He just spun around and started runnin' toward the house. I followed, and as we got to the front steps we could hear Ann talkin' loud, tellin' somebody to get away... get out. I guess that was the final straw. Clint bounded up the big steps and nearly ripped the screen door off its hinges. Seconds later Yancy came crashing through that same door from the inside out, taking the entire screen with him.

While he was sprawled on the porch, Clint appeared in the doorway with the devil in his eye. He grabbed the broken doorframe and ripped it off its hinges. Then he bent down and picked Yancy up by the collar and threw him the rest of the way down the stairs where he landed spread-eagle on the ground. Clint jumped after him and picked him up again. I suspected he wasn't thinkin' about Doc's caution. It looked to me like he *was* gonna kill him.

Just then, Mrs. Winters came out and started yelling. "CLINT – YOU PUT THAT BOY DOWN RIGHT NOW. I'LL NOT HAVE YOU HURT HIM ANY MORE. ANNIE'S FINE. YOU JUST SETTLE DOWN!"

I guess he heard that, because he stopped cold, letting Yancy's limp body slump back to the ground.

"MONTANA! YOU GET THIS PIECE OF GARBAGE OUT OF MY YARD AND OFF THIS RANCH RIGHT NOW. GET HIS STUFF TOGETHER AND RIDE HIM OUT OF HERE.

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WHEN HE COMES TO, TELL HIM IF I EVER SEE HIM HERE AGAIN, I'LL KILL HIM ON THE SPOT!"

Clint's instructions left no room for question, so I grabbed Yancy's arms and started draggin' him toward the bunkhouse. Luke, having been witness to most of this, gave me a hand. As soon as we were out of ear-shot, Luke had to ask.

"Montana... what the devil did Yancy do to set Clint off like that. I thought he was gonna kill him right then and there!"

"I darn sure thought he was! Doc and I were gonna test Whisper on the track a while ago when Yancy jumped on 'em and took 'em around himself. He rode 'em way too hard. Whisper's leg got re-injured. To make matters worse, he had liquor on his breath. I don't know what was going on in the house when Clint found him, but I could hear Ann yelling at 'em, so I expect he was botherin' her too."

"Well, let's get him up and out of here before Clint thinks about it. He might still kill him."

Over the next ten minutes, Luke and I woke Yancy up with a bucket of water and told 'em he'd been fired. We got his gear together and saddled him up. Under normal circumstances, he was too wobbly to ride, but these weren't normal circumstances. It was clearly to his advantage to get out and get out fast and I guess he figured that out, too, because he didn't fight us. Like Clint had directed, I grabbed his reins and led him and his

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horse down the drive, under the arch and onto the main trail. I stopped there and asked him which way he wanted to go. He just looked at me in disbelief. I didn't want to talk to him anyway, so I turned east and continued leadin' him down the trail another quarter-mile. At that point, I threw him his reins and slapped his horse's rear. That was the end of Yancy as far as I was concerned.

Chapter 13

Later in the day, I ran into Luke who told me what'd happened earlier in the house. Yancy'd walked right in like he owned the place. He found Ann workin' in the kitchen and started to get fresh. Ann knocked him down with a cook pan and started yelling. Just as he was getting back up, Clint got there. I guess it just wasn't his day.

Just before dinner, Bobby came out to the bunkhouse and told me his mother wanted me to come to dinner tonight in the house. I had just enough time to put on a clean shirt when the bell started ringin'. As usual, I was expectin' a crowd, but when I walked into the dining room there was only Clint, Ann, Bobby and Doc Winters at the table. I asked Doc how his ankle was comin' along.

"I'm all healed, Montana, thanks in no small way to you. Say, how's your tooth?"

"It's fine, Doc, thanks to you. That job you did in town had me back eatin' steak in two days."

I glanced over at Ann, who was dressed prettier than usual.

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“Well, aren’t you going to ask me how I’m doing?” she said.

“How are you doing, Ann? I heard you had a rough day?”

“Not as rough a day as he did!” she responded with a smile, just as Mrs. Winters walked in with a big pot roast.

I wasn’t plannin’ to bring up any of the days events, but decided to just listen to the dinner conversation for clues on how they were all takin’ Whisper’s setback. Some time into the meal Doc Winters asked Clint how Whisper was doing.

“I was just down with him and he seems to be doing fine. Doc says he should heal, but it may take four to six weeks this time to be sure. One more injury to that leg and Whisper might never run again, so I’m stayin’ out of it. Whatever he says, goes.”

A little later Doc Winters asked Ann how her arm was? She squirmed a little, answerin’ only that it was fine. I took a closer look at where she’d pulled her sleeve down to try to cover it, and she had a small black and blue mark high on her left arm. I’ll bet it had something to do with Yancy, but, again, thought it best not to comment.

After dinner, Clint moved Doc and me into his study again. “Cigars?” he asked.

“None for me,” I answered, waitin’ for him to share why he’d brought me in.

“Montana...” he said as he lit up one of his big cigars. “Montana, it’s been a tough couple of

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months around here. First, I lost my foreman to liquor. Then I lost my best rider to liquor and stupidity. I also may have lost my only chance to win in Dallas come October, and without that win, we could lose part of the ranch.”

“I’m not quite sure I understand, Clint. Why’s the horse race that important to the ranch?” I asked. I was really havin’ trouble seein’ the connection.

“I’m afraid it is,” he answered with his head down. “You see, and I’d ask you to keep this between us, no ranch this size can operate without an occasional loan. It’s how the family’s run the business for years. As you know the beef business is seasonal. We pay for labor and feed all year for a payback when the cattle are sold. In a good year, we can save enough to keep the place running without loans, but the last two years have been dry. We have loans on top on loans and haven’t been able to keep up with all the payments. We’ve also lost over two hundred head to draught and rustlers. That’s why we went north to try to put an end to it. We just can’t afford to lose any more stock, for any reason. And, if I can’t pay off some of those loans by November, the bank will call them in and I’ll have to sell off part of the ranch. That brings me to why I asked you all here for dinner tonight. Montana, in the short time you’ve been here you’ve helped us a lot and I appreciate it. Why, you even helped out *before* you got here, by saving Jack from that rattler. Truth is, boy, you’ve been

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helpin' me more over the past month than any of my other men! I know you just want to punch cows, but I've been giving it a lot of thought and I think you'd make a good foreman. The men all seem to look up to you, to say nothing about Mrs. Winters and Ann. What would you say to taking on the job here? It'd mean \$120 a month, free board and all the beef you can eat."

I nearly fell off my chair. "I hadn't thought any about it, Clint. It sounds like a nice offer but why not Luke? The men look up to him and he seems to be doing a good job. Why me? Doesn't he deserve it more?"

"If I had that power, Montana, we wouldn't be in the predicament we're in... I *would* offer Luke the job... but he can't take it."

"I don't understand?"

"Luke's not well, Montana. I know he looks well, but he's not. He's got the fits. He'll do fine for a while, then he'll go into a bout of 'em, and when he gets 'em, he'll fall right to the ground and shake like a dyin' snake. If he got 'em while riding, he'd fall off his horse for sure, and probably kill himself. So he rides when we're around. He can't be trusted out on the range alone. He doesn't want everybody to know about it, so keep it tight. Don't even tell *him* you know, unless he tells you. It makes him feel bad, though it shouldn't."

"I'm sorry," I answered. "I didn't mean to get so personal."

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“No problem, Montana. It’s your concern for other people that makes you special. Most cowboys would’ve jumped at my offer with no concern for Luke. Your response demonstrates that you’re the right man for the job... if you want it.”

“I’m flattered, Clint, but I’d like to think about it overnight, if you could wait. I have to weigh it against some other plans. Could I sleep on it and give you an answer tomorrow?”

“Take a day or two, if you need to. I’d just like to get your answer this week so I can plan my next move if you turn me down.”

“Thanks, Clint. I’ll tell you tomorrow. So, as long as your answerin’ questions, why is the race so important to all this?”

“The west is growing fast, Montana, and you have to grow fast to stay with it. If not, just like in a race, somebody else will shoot right past and you’ll be left in the dust. We have a good cattle business here with Tom Marsalis buying most of our stock, but he’s got other suppliers closer to Dallas and we’re competing with some other good outfits. It gets tougher every year. If we could get our name out there, to other potential customers, we could sell more beef. That’s the engine that drives this ranch.”

“So how does a horse race help that?”

“It doesn’t... directly. I don’t sell horse meat, but the Steel Dust horses I’m breeding here could be the fastest horses in Texas... maybe in the entire southwest. If I’m right, whoever owns ‘em will

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attract a lot of attention. People will come from all over to buy. Stud rights alone could bring thousands of dollars into the Circle of Fire. Once our name is out there, in front of more people, our beef will be, too. More customers, more beef, more money. I'd like the Circle of Fire to be known as the Steel Dust center of the world. To do that, we have to win first place at the State Fair in October. It's just that simple. Now, I'm not even sure I have a horse, and even if I do, I just lost my best rider."

Clint's answer made it all clear to me. That's why he was as interested in the Steel Dust legend as he was with winning. Winning horses can come from anywhere, but Steel Dust horses would come from the Circle of Fire. It would be like a ranch within a ranch. I knew I wanted to be part of this and help, but the foreman job sounded pretty permanent and I wasn't sure I was ready to settle down. Clint wouldn't want a foreman for six months. He'd need one for years and if I wasn't ready to stick it out, I shouldn't take the job... even though it did sound great. I knew I was facin' one of those life-changin' decisions. Whatever I decided would set my direction for years to come. It was a pretty big deal and I knew I had to think long and hard on it. I figured I wasn't gonna get much sleep that night.

Morning dawned too early. I'd rolled around most the night, tryin' my best to think it all through... and I guess I had. I've found that

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sometimes the simplest approach to things works best. My problem was, I was makin' it too big and too complicated. What really was the *truth*? I worked on that a lot and thought I finally came up with it. The truth was, the folks at the Circle of Fire had all, except for Yancy who was no longer there, been very good to me. They were all fine folks, startin' with Clint and his family, and all the hands. I'd have no problem spendin' a good piece of my life around 'em. I also liked the work. I'd wanted to be a cowboy as long as I could remember and there was no better place to be a cowboy than a giant cattle ranch like the Circle of Fire. I also loved horses. That worked well here too, with Clint's growin' herd of Steel Dust. So most everything said, *take this job, stupid! Don't let this chance pass by!* My only concern involved Luke. I didn't know him real well, but he'd taken me in early and showed me my way around the ranch and I owed him for that. Luke was actin' as foreman and, even though I knew why he wasn't gonna get the job full-time, I couldn't help but feel bad for him. He claimed he really didn't want the job full-time, but I was pretty sure that was a cover for his sickness. From what I saw, he did it well, and even if he wouldn't get over his sickness, I had the feeling he could work around it a lot if given the chance. *The truth was... I needed to share my thoughts with Clint.*

Around mid-morning I decided to do just that. After groomin' Spirit, I took the long walk up to

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the house and knocked on the door. Bobby answered and asked me in. Instead, I asked Bobby if his father was available. He disappeared and a moment later Clint appeared with a cup of coffee in his hand.

“Montana, how was your night? I was hoping you’d come by this morning. Can I assume you’ve come to some decision on the job? Come on in and have the last cup.”

“Thanks Clint, but I’d rather talk to you out here, if we could,” I answered in a quiet voice so as not to attract any more attention from inside the house. “I was hopin’ we could talk alone on it.”

“Sure thing, here... sit with me on the porch. What’s on your mind?”

I spent the next ten minutes talkin’ while Clint listened, showin’ little emotion in his face. It got to the point where I didn’t know if I was makin’ him mad or not.

“...so you see, Clint,” I tried to summarize, “I like you, your family and all the folks here. The Circle of Fire is a great ranch and I’d be right proud to take you up on your offer. But, I still don’t feel quite right about takin’ the job out from under Luke. He seems to have earned it, while I haven’t.”

I felt like talking more, to better explain my concerns, but the words didn’t come easy, so I decided less was better than more and shut up.

Clint scratched his head and threw the bottom of his cold cup over the railing and onto the dry

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ground. He was thinkin'. Then he looked back at me and spoke. "I guess that's why I took to you so early on, Montana. You speak your mind. Naturally, I was looking for a clearer answer, but I can't fault you for what's in your heart. You're right, too. The foreman job on this ranch is a big one and it can't go to people passing through every year. I'm looking for at least four or five years from whoever gets it. Maybe more, but not less. I also share your concerns about Luke. He's earned the job and, in a perfect world, he'd get it. Unfortunately, I can't have two, part-time foremen. I need one who can plan the work and keep the men in line. I can't do it and run the business at the same time. I've tried and it doesn't work. So let me make you a deal. You take the job and I'll put Luke in charge of the business side. He'll keep involved in the operation but have more desk work to do. You'll be foreman and run all the operations. Luke will work for me, just like you, and if the day comes that Luke can do the whole job, you and I can meet again to talk about it. What would you think about that?"

"I don't have to think about it, Clint. I like it and I'll do it!"

"You're a good man, Montana, and more than ever, I need good men around here." He put his right hand out and I shook it with mine. I was now foreman of the Circle of Fire, one of the biggest ranches in Texas. I'd think more about that later, but for now, I was just happy Clint agreed.

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“You work with Doc today down at the track and come to dinner again tonight. I’ll have Luke there, too, and I’ll make some announcements. That’ll also give me some time to work up some schedules. If you’re starting your new job tomorrow, you’ll need to know what I want done around here. Deal?”

“It’s a deal, Clint, and thanks. I won’t let you down.”

I somehow made it down the steps without falling. I was as happy as I’d been in I don’t know how long... maybe since I left Montana. But the news wasn’t to be announced yet so I had to wipe the smile off my face and get back down to the track. I was also a little worried about Whisper. I now had a bigger stake in his health.

Chapter 14

That night at dinner, Clint lifted his glass and announced me as the new foreman. Luke was sittin' across from me and I watched his eyes as Clint made the announcement. He covered it well, but I'm sure there was some disappointment when Clint spoke. Of course everybody clapped and congratulated me. Then, Clint made a second announcement. He thanked Luke for doin' such a fine job after Pete left, and announced he was puttin' him in charge of the cattle business. He explained that he needed the help and that Luke was the man who could do it. He went on to list a few of the responsibilities that would be part of Luke's new job. Luke's face lit up with the news. When everybody clapped for him, he stood right up and walked over to Clint for a shake. I could see how important this was to him and I was glad I had a small part in it... even if nobody'd ever know.

Later that night, Clint gave us both the papers he'd made up, better explainin' the jobs. He said that the lists weren't full and that he'd be free to add new things as he thought of 'em, but hoped

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the lists would help us get started. He told us to go back to the bunkhouse and read the lists that night, so we could talk about 'em in the mornin'. And that was that. Luke and I walked back to the bunkhouse together under a full moon, mostly quiet, thinkin' about all that just happened.

The first thing on my list was to meet all the hands. Since they worked for me now, Clint believed it was important that I get to know 'em. Of course, I already knew some. I asked Toby if he'd be my top hand and help me when I needed it. "I'm afraid there's no money in it, at least for now," I explained, "but you know this ranch as well as anybody, and I'd like to be able to rely on you bein' nearby when I need help... and I will need help."

"You can count on me, Montana. I'll help you any way I can," he responded, and from Toby, that was a good as a contract.

But as I spent the next few days workin' my way down Clint's list, I was gettin' more and more concerned about the ranch. In a way, it was mine now, too, and I had to make sure we could deliver on Clint's need to get our name out in front of more people to attract more customers. Luke was makin' good progress settin' up plans for the cattle, but it was up to me to help Clint. If we could just win that race in October, I was as sure as Clint was that we could get the recognition he was hopin' for.

John E. Richman

That got me to worryin' more about Whisper. It seemed we had all our eggs in one basket and, even though Doc said his leg was healing, I knew if there was one more setback, Clint would be lookin' at Spirit to do what Whisper couldn't. I wanted to avoid that as much as I could. I truly believed Spirit, with the right training, could win that race, but I didn't want to have to race him. Spirit had saved my life up in Kansas and I felt like usin' him to win that race wasn't a very righteous payback. Also, Spirit wasn't a race horse. He couldn't compete physically with those other horses. Instead, he made up for it with sheer will and determination. In the back of my mind, I knew that Spirit would run himself to death if I asked him to. I didn't want to put him in that position. We needed to find some other way. There was also the problem that, even if Whisper could run, *who* could ride him? As much as Yancy was a fool, he was a fine rider and rumor had it he'd been hired to ride for somebody else. In the meantime, we couldn't test any of the other hands, though several volunteered. Whisper wouldn't be up to full-speed for another month and the trials were only a week or so away.

It was still mornin' when I pulled Doc Stanton and Toby aside to talk about all this. I told 'em we had some problems and I wanted to go over 'em out loud, thinkin' maybe the three of us could come up with some ideas. I guess I was really lookin' for help.

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“Why don’t *you* ride him?” asked Toby. “I know you’re not an experienced racer, but you must have the instincts... look at what you and your horse did that day at the track.”

“Aw, I don’t think I’m up to it, Toby. I was used to Spirit and he gave me all I needed that day, but it’d be a lot different, tryin’ to do the same thing with Whisper. I’ve never gotten used to those racin’ saddles, either. The last thing in the world I’d want would be to get in over my head and lose the race to inexperience. I don’t think I could live with that.”

Toby took off his Stetson and rubbed his hair. “Then you better find another rider fast. If we don’t come in, in the top twelve at the trials, the Circle of Fire won’t even get to the big race!”

I hadn’t thought about that. I’m sure Toby was right. The trials were some sort of a qualifying race. I didn’t want to sound any more stupid than I was on the subject, so I left it there and we went back about our business. I made a note, though, that I needed to talk to Clint later in the day.

It was about two o’clock and I was just leavin’ the main corral, when I spotted Clint over the by well.

“Clint! Can I talk to you a minute?”

“Hey, Montana. How’s it going?”

“I’m doin’ fine, thanks. I have a few questions for you though, if you have a minute.”

“Shoot... I *never* have much time but I’ll give you all I can.”

John E. Richman

“Clint, is it true that the ranch needs to do well in the race trials in order to even be in the October race?”

“Yes, Montana, but I wasn’t too worried about it because we’ve been there for the past few years and I think we have a few horses that could get us there, even if Whisper can’t. All we need to do is be in the top dozen or so. Depends on how many they let run this time, but I know it’ll be at least twelve.”

“So you know that Whisper shouldn’t be pushed to race?” I asked, hopin’ he’d agree.

“I’d hoped he’d be ready, but Doc tells me he won’t. Says it’d be too risky. But we don’t need to race him in the trials in order to race him in the October race. You qualify by ranch. We just need to have any horse represent the Circle of Fire, to qualify. After that we’re allowed to change ‘em around. It’s not usually done, but it is allowed. I’m glad you brought it up, though. Doc tells me our best bet is your Spirit. I guess he didn’t talk to you about it because we all know you don’t want to make him a racer, but under the circumstances, would you consider us entering him as a stand-in for Whisper? Remember, it’s only a qualification race... he doesn’t need to post the winning time and it doesn’t mean he races in October. I’d sleep a lot better if I knew it was him out on that track.”

“Well, now that you’ve explained it to me, I guess maybe we could do it if Spirit was up to it.

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You know, he's never raced on a track with other horses. I can't promise how he'll do."

"Well, we'd sure have to find that out first, but we could do that here. I take it you'd ride him?"

"I know I'm a little bigger than most the race riders, but I wouldn't feel right about puttin' another rider on him," I answered. "I think our chances would be best that way."

"I suspect you're right, and since we're talkin' about a week from Saturday, I'd like you to dedicate the next week to working at the track with Doc. You two need to get Spirit ready and, if for some reason he's the wrong choice, find that out in time to get Red or one of the others ready. I'll put Luke on your other duties for the week."

That night I went for a late walk around the main yard, hopin' it'd give me a chance to think over the day's events. I never wanted to take advantage of Spirit, but I now had some new responsibilities as well. I had to weigh my concerns for Spirit with the needs of the ranch. I guess runnin' Spirit in the trail race wouldn't really be takin' advantage of him. And, all we needed to do was come in with the top dozen horses. It wasn't like we had to win.

"Montana, is that you all alone over there?"

I looked up to see the silhouette of a woman coming toward me with a shawl over her shoulders. I recognized that voice. "Hi, Ann. Why the shawl? It must still be eighty out here. You can't be cold?"

John E. Richman

"You're right, but mother insists that if I walk in yard at night, I cover up. Not sure why... maybe she's afraid if I'm uncovered, some cowboy will simply fall in love with me and whisk me away!"

"Or maybe she just doesn't want you scarin' the stock!"

By now, she'd caught up to me and I could see her face as she just glared at me. "Now don't start on me again, Montana. You know if we start fighting, I'll win!"

"Sorry... I just wanted to see how cranky you were tonight."

"What are you doing out here all alone in the dark?" she asked, with a slightly more serious tone in her voice.

"Thinkin'... just thinkin'."

"About what? I heard it's dangerous for cowboys to think too much."

"If you really want to know, I'm a little worried about the race trials comin' up. Whisper isn't ready to race yet, so your father's asked if we can qualify the ranch with Spirit."

"So why are you worrying? You know your horse better than anybody else. Are you afraid he won't qualify?"

"Not really. Of course it'll all be new to me but they tell me if he runs anywhere near the time he ran on your track last month, he won't have any trouble qualifying."

Steel Dust Dawn

“Then, why worry? Father can bring more than one horse. If anything did happen and Spirit weren’t to race, he could run another one.”

“I hadn’t thought about that. You’re right. It’s only a qualification. He’d probably bring a few horses, just in case. I don’t know why I hadn’t thought about that, but it does take the pressure off a little. I’m glad you came out tonight, Ann. Now I can sleep a little better.”

“If you’re going to be our foreman, Montana, you have to start thinking like a foreman – not just one of the hands.”

Her face was too dark to see again, but the giggle in her voice told me she was baiting me again. This time I had no reason to fight with her. I was relieved and I knew she could sense it.

“Well, I’ll try to do better... and when I miss something, you can remind me, OK?”

“A woman’s work is never done around here. Now I have to run the house and the ranch! I think I ought to talk to father about getting on the payroll.”

“Good night, Ann” I said, and turned, walking back into the darkness toward the bunk-house. “You better put that shawl back on. I hear it might snow tonight!”

I couldn’t see her and didn’t even look, but I knew I’d won this round.

Chapter 15

Doc and I worked hard the rest of the week gettin' Spirit ready for the trials. On Monday, we also got Red and Betsy ready, and ran 'em all the full track. Doc said it wasn't necessary to run 'em full-out, but just fast enough to get 'em used to runnin' together. They all seemed to do fine and I ran Spirit just fast enough to win. I didn't think it was a good idea to let one of the others take the lead for long. If Spirit *was* still learning, I didn't want him to learn anything but how to come in first. Fortunately, he didn't have any trouble with that.

The rest of the week flew by until Friday afternoon when we packed up and headed to the Fair. I'd never been that far east down here, so the range was all new to me. Clint made a big deal out of it, too, and had us take three wagons and more than a few horses. Most the horses just pulled the wagons, but Clint and Doc had agreed to bring both Red and Betsy along. Clint said that even though Betsy wouldn't be allowed to run in the big race, there was no rule against runnin' a filly

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to qualify. Betsy was as fast as Red and maybe faster, so Clint called her his “insurance policy,” and hoped he wouldn’t need her.

We camped that night next to the new site. They called it The Great Dallas State Fair and Exposition. Clint was careful to use the right name because he said there was a scramble goin’ on among the owners. He said Tom Marsalis and some of his partners were split on where the Fair was to be located. The site we were on, north of town, was one of two they were fightin’ over. The other site was somewhere southwest of town. They referred to that one as the Dallas State Fair. It was all pretty confusing to me, so I left it up to Clint to figure out. My only concern remained that Spirit had to be ready to go when the starting gun went off.

After we made camp, Clint and Doc took Luke and me over to see the track. We walked out on it as the sun was just goin’ down, so I couldn’t see real clear, but it was even bigger than ours at the ranch – not so much the track, though it was a lot wider, but the seats! There were hundreds of ‘em.

“I wanted you to see this before tomorrow, Montana. We pulled an early number so we’ll be racing right after dawn. It may look bigger to you but it isn’t. Five furlongs is five furlongs no matter where it is. It’s only different because of the width, the surface and the seats. I kicked my feet around the surface and found that it felt like chopped up wood. “What is this stuff, Clint?”

John E. Richman

“They lay wood chips over the dust and water it in to keep it down. It’s a little softer on the horses so I don’t think Spirit’ll mind it at all. It might be a little more slippery though, particularly at dawn when it might have dew on it. Make sure you push him just hard enough to get a good time and remember, you don’t have to win. I wouldn’t want him to slip and break a...”

Clint had stopped mid-sentence, but a cold shiver when through me. I guess I never thought about the track bein’ slippery. A broken leg means you put the horse down, right then and there. There’s no recoverin’ from it. I’d seen it before while ranchin’, and it’s an ugly sight. I suddenly wondered if I’d done the right thing. If Spirit slipped and....”

“Hey, stop worrying,” Clint broke in. “We haven’t had much dew in weeks, so I’m sure it’ll be fine tomorrow... I’m just tellin’ you to be careful.”

I bent down to feel it. Clint was right, it was dry. I only hoped it stayed that way.

“You’ll be ridin’ against only one other horse. All I know about him is he’s from ‘Big W’, a good sized ranch out Tyler way. They did pretty well last year, but we were on a smaller track. Not sure what horse they’ll bring this time but if you and Spirit run to your abilities, you shouldn’t have any trouble. Any questions?”

While I was tryin’ to think of one, it was Luke that spoke up. “I have one, Clint. I heard that

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Yancy hooked up with one of the other ranches. If it's true, he's probably here somewhere. Do you know which one?

"I don't, Luke. I do know that he's not with the Big W, because I asked."

I guess we were all thinkin' the same thing. It would have added a lot of tension to be racin' against Yancy, so I felt a little better knowin' I wouldn't be.

The sun was set to come up around six-thirty, but Clint started makin' noise an hour earlier so we all got up early to grab some coffee and see what we could do to get ready.

"THERE'LL BE A STEEL DUST DAWN TODAY!" yelled Clint, already trying to get his name out there. "YES SIR, THE STEEL DUST'S WILL TAKE THE DAY."

It seemed like he was talkin' to himself until I saw why he was so loud. Two riders had just come into camp and one of them was Mr. Marsalis.

"What did you bring with you this time, Clint? Another one of your famous Steel horses? Can I ask which one?"

"Good to see you too, Tom. If I didn't know better I'd be thinkin' you're out spying on the competition," Clint responded.

"Maybe you're right," he answered. "Actually, I'd like to introduce you to one of the Fair owners, Bill Gaston. Bill, this here is Clint Winters. He's really my cattleman, but he tries his hand every

John E. Richman

year with his new line of horses. Calls ‘em Steel Dust.”

Clint and Mr. Gaston shook hands. “I’ve heard of your ranch and horses, Clint. I’m anxious to see what you brought with you today.” As he spoke, he looked around from atop his large black stallion. “I don’t see any steel lookin’ horses in your camp, except that filly over there. Are you hiding them on us?”

“No sir,” Clint responded. “Our horses are so fast we had quite a few to choose from. We’re planning on qualifying with that butter-brown stallion over there. He’s Steel Dust, but just doesn’t share the coloring. And if he decides not to run this morning, that little steel gray mare over there can give us all we need to lock in our place for the big race.”

“Highly irregular, but it’s your call Mr. Winters. I don’t think I’ve seen a mare qualify before, but if you think she can hold up, more power to you.”

With that he tipped his hat and moved on. I couldn’t help but notice that Mr. Marsalis looked back at Clint as they were ridin’ away, and winked. There was sure more goin’ on here than I knew about, but that was fine with me. I just needed to concentrate on the race, so I decided it was time to visit Spirit and get him up and goin’.

By the time sun came up I had Spirit ready for whatever was in front of us. “Don’t worry, boy,” I whispered as I put the bit in his mouth, “it’s just

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another race and it'll be over in time for breakfast. Are you ready to run?"

"I hope he's ready!" came a familiar voice from behind me. I turned to see Mrs. Winters and Ann walkin' up.

"Mornin' ladies," I replied, tipping my hat. "I didn't know you were coming."

It was Ann that spoke first. "We wouldn't miss it. Now, Montana, we got up real early to get here. You and that Wyoming horse of yours better not disappoint us."

"Annie, leave the boy alone. My Lord, he's got enough on his mind... right, Montana?"

"You're right, ma'am. I just want to come in with a good time and watch the rest of the races."

"Good luck, Montana," Mrs. Winters replied. "We'll be cheering for you."

As they headed off toward the seats, Doc Stanton and Clint came over to walk us to the track. "How's he feel to you today, Montana? Is he ready?" Doc asked.

"Don't worry, Doc. Spirit was born ready."

I'd answered without thinking. After the words had come out, I hoped I didn't put a curse on us. When I was workin' on the Circle R, up in Wyoming, Spirit and I trail-raced all the time. There was always some cowboy that thought his horse could out-run us. They never did, but that was some time ago. I hoped Spirit remembered. I decided I really had nothin' to worry about... except maybe worry, itself.

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Without any further talk, I mounted Spirit and walked him out to the track. Neither Spirit nor I liked the racin' saddle Doc made me use, but it *was* lighter than my normal saddle, so if there was a problem with it, it'd be with me. I'd make sure Spirit didn't know the difference.

Once on the track, I got my first look at our competition. A very small rider on a very large, dark-brown Thoroughbred. He was all shined up, like he'd already been run. When they pulled up alongside us, the other rider looked over and smiled. I returned the smile, noticin' that we were about eye to eye. While he was considerably smaller than I was, his horse stood near two hands taller than Spirit. That was unusual because Spirit was a big horse, himself. But even he had to look up at the one standin' next to him.

There was a line painted on the track that we couldn't cross until the gun went off. I lined Spirit up on the outside and patted his neck one last time for luck. He knew what was about to happen, so I didn't have to tell him anything else.

CRACK! The pistol exploded and so did we. I banged the stirrups into Spirit's side and he took off. For the first ten seconds, I was just holdin' on to that tiny saddle as best I could, tryin' hard to stay on. I started on the outside but wanted to get inside as soon as I could, to shorten the track a little. I figured every little bit helped. Spirit's great leg muscles then stretched out and he quickly got into a rhythm. Doc said that rhythm was important

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in a track race. The horse with the best rhythm often won the race even though, off the track, he might not be the fastest. I didn't understand completely, but I trusted Doc's racin' smarts and tried to keep Spirit's motion as smooth as possible.

Headin' into turn two, I looked over and saw the brown just behind us. He was too close for me to pull over yet, so I held our position and left it up to Spirit to get us to the back straightaway the best way he knew how. I remembered Clint's caution about the wood chips and didn't want to push him too hard through the turn. I knew he could pull away when I needed him to.

As we came out of turn two, I took my right hand off the reins and slapped his flank. Spirit knew that meant to move out. He responded just like I knew he would, and we accelerated down the backstretch as fast as I think I'd ever ridden him. Without lookin', I knew we'd taken the lead, so I slowly moved him toward the rail. Five furlongs is a long race and I knew we were on a very fast pace. I just hoped Spirit could keep it up. That brown was faster than I'd expected and was still doggin' us by about a length.

Spirit slowed slightly as we entered turn three. I was fine with that because he already showed me he could win on the straights. As we moved into the turn I kept him on the rail so even if the brown got close, he'd have to go around us... but he didn't. When we reached the final turn, I could see he was still behind us -- now, probably three or

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four lengths and he was tiring. Maybe Spirit was too, but I couldn't tell because as the track straightened out toward the finish line, he took off again and he was right back into his rhythm. I heeled him gently as we approached the finish line and he never flinched. As soon as we crossed the line I raised up and put my full weight on the little stirrups. That meant the race was over to Spirit, who probably didn't even recognize the finish line. We were nearly to the first turn again by the time he dropped to his trot.

I'd gotten so involved in *our* race, I hadn't looked to see where the brown was when we crossed the line. It was too late now, so I figured I'd ask when we got back to the start.

"Nice race, cowboy," shouted the other rider as he sided up to us. "That's some horse. Steel Dust, huh? I'm not sure what all that means, but they're fast."

"Thanks," I returned. "You ran a good race, too. That's some pretty horse."

I'd never really thought of Spirit as a true Steel Dust, but it was nice to hear. I hoped our time would hold up through the rest of the trials, but for now, Clint's desire to have the Steel Dust name "out there" seemed to be happenin'.

Of course, there were a lot of horses yet to run, and if they were fast enough, it didn't matter who won our race... we could both be eliminated. So, the other rider and I were just as interested in the times as we were who'd won. We both walked our

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horses over near the timers and let 'em catch their breaths while two different men reviewed their watches and marked times in a book.

Clint and the other owner were there with the timers. Luke and Ann walked over to where we were standin'.

"That was some fine race, Montana," said Luke. "You beat him by four or five lengths... and he was fast! I'll bet you posted a great time."

"I don't know about that," I replied. "There seems to be some pretty fast horses around here."

Ann walked over and spoke right to Spirit, grabbin' his bridle and looking him straight in the eye. "Good job boy! Even with that oversized cowboy on your back, you did just fine." She looked up and smiled. "Not bad, cowboy, not bad at all."

The timers finally broke up and Clint came over to us. "One and four-fifths! That's just over a minute! That's faster than Whisper! Montana, I think you and that horse of yours have just locked us into the big race. We don't even have to stick around to watch the rest! We will, but I'm sure that time will hold up. Great job! Go get Spirit cooled down. Doc'll go with you. Take care of that horse!"

I jumped off Spirit and Doc and I walked him back to our camp to find some shade. Luke came over to join us. "Now Clint's more convinced than ever Spirit's got Steel Dust blood," he said. "I'm sure, too. No ranch Mustang ever ran that fast. Not

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against a horse like that! Whisper's got his work cut out for him."

"I hope he heals in time," I answered. "I'd like to think one of Clint's *own* could win the big race. I know that's what he's lookin' for."

"I think he can do it," added Luke, "but he'll need a lot more work."

Chapter 16

It was September before we knew it and while regular ranch duties kept us busy the rest of July and August, as September arrived we started thinkin' more about the big race. Doc had worked his magic and Whisper was healthy again... and just as fast as ever. I was relieved because I really didn't want to have to rely on Spirit for the big race. Spirit and I have a special bond that I can't explain very well to people. I think Ann understands, because we'd talk about it on those rare occasions when I'd have dinner up at the house or whenever other circumstances put us together. She continued to confound me, and I her, but she was smarter than she usually let on and she understood horses better anybody gave her credit for. I knew Clint was relieved, too. He needed one of *his* Steel Dust horses to win and, while he was convinced Spirit shared the bloodline, he didn't look the same and nobody could really be sure.

Toby'd told me early on that the weather started to cool off in September. It hadn't yet, although it

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was only the fifth and maybe it was still too early. It was dry, too. By early August we'd had to scatter the herd all over the range so they could better find water and forage, and even at that, we were still losin' some. This time it was worse than the rustlin'... now they were starvin'.

I had a crew out on the range for four days when a rider came out from the ranch and told me Clint needed to see me. We'd just finished damming a small stream to make a waterin' pond. If it worked, we'd begin collectin' the cattle and movin' 'em toward it. Cattle aren't very bright. They can be a mile from water and still die of thirst. And now they were scattered over fifty to a hundred square miles, so we had our work cut out.

Before I left, I split the men into three smaller crews and told 'em to ride out in different directions to start bringin' cattle in. We figured by the time any of 'em got back, there'd be water enough in the pond to carry them another few weeks. I told 'em I'd try to be back in a few days myself, and started the long ride back to the ranch. I got back that night, but it was a long day. I must've covered sixty miles.

It was late enough that dinner was long over, but Clint had me come in and eat some of the left-overs anyway. There's nothin' like home cookin', particularly after you've been out of the range for a while.

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I could tell somethin' was botherin' him, but Clint didn't let on until I was done and, again, we went into his library.

"Montana, I need you to come to town with me tomorrow. Bring a pack because we might have to stay a day or two," he said in a kind of worried tone.

"Fine with me, Clint. What's it all about?"

"It's Pete – our old foreman. There fixin' to hang him..." The room was quiet while I tried to digest what he'd said.

I finally spoke, "I thought they were just gonna put him in prison for a while. I didn't know they hung drunks in Texas."

"He wasn't tried for being a drunk. They tried him for cattle rustlin' and something called *conspiracy*."

"What's that?"

"Lawyer Robb told me it meant they blamed him for the one that got killed."

"But *our* men killed him, not Pete," I protested.

"Doesn't matter... according to Robb. They found out that Pete was in charge. He'd set the whole thing up and since one of them was killed in the commission of the crime, regardless of who actually killed him, they put it on Pete. Now Pete turned bad and I have no compassion for a man who steals my cattle, but I hate to see him hung. There was a time when Pete was a good foreman and a good man. I know it was the liquor that

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turned him and, no, I don't get any satisfaction out of hangin' a drunk."

"So, what's your plan? What can we do?" I asked.

"Don't really have one. Lawyer Robb set me up to talk to Judge Green tomorrow morning. It was Judge Green that pronounced sentence. I want to talk to him and see if there was any way we could get the sentence reduced. I hate to even think of Pete spending the rest of his life in prison, but that would be a lot better than swingin' on the end of a rope next Saturday."

"Is that when they plan to do it?"

"For now... let's you and I get goin' early tomorrow. Maybe we can think up a good case to make for him on the way to town."

"Clint, I'm fine with that, but I have to ask why you're bringin' me? Of all the men who worked with and for Pete, I never did either. The only time I met him was the night the Comanche's brought him back to us with an arrow in his leg."

"I thought about that. I was gonna bring Luke, but you're the foreman now and I think it's a foreman's duty to be involved in this sort of thing. Maybe it's better that you didn't know him."

I still didn't understand completely, but Clint was the boss and arguing with him never crossed my mind. I said good night and went back to the bunkhouse to bed.

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Clint and I arrived at the Tarrant County Court House just before eleven. That's when we were supposed to meet with the judge. Lawyer Robb was there to meet us and we spent a few minutes talkin' about what Clint was gonna say. Clint and I talked about it some on the ride in, but we didn't come up with anything very good.

"Clint," Mr. Robb said, "I told the judge that you asked for him to hear you out regarding the sentence. Now bear in mind, the jury convicted him of the rustling charge. The conspiracy charge came from the judge. It's that, that takes him to the gallows. If you can convince the judge to drop it, you might save the boy's life."

Just then a man in a uniform came out and told us we could see the judge now. The three of us filed in the office together and took seats. Not a minute later the judge came in through a back door. We rose to our feet but the judge motioned us to sit back down.

"Clint Winters! You old cuss. How long has it been?" the judge said, with a big smile on his puffy, red face.

"Judge Green... probably since Dad's funeral. It's good to see you, too. I want to thank you for seeing us this morning."

The judge sat down behind his big desk and poured a glass of whiskey. "You don't mind if I have a shot, do you? Anybody want to join me?"

"Thanks, but no," replied Clint. "You know Mr. Robb here, but I'd like to introduce you to my new

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foreman out at the ranch. Judge Green, this is Mr. William Ritter, but he prefers Montana.”

I stood to shake his big hand and sat back down. I didn’t know that Clint knew the judge, but it all made more sense to me now.

“Montana, huh? Does that mean you’re from Montana, young man?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“Well, how do you like our glorious state of Texas, boy? Is it everything you hoped for?”

“That and then some, your honor,” I answered, not knowin’ what he was gettin’ at.

“That’s good. Now then, Clint, what was it you wanted with me?”

“Judge, we got word the other day that our old foreman, Peter Driscoll, was sentenced by your court to hang. We’re here this morning to make an appeal to you for his life.”

“I have to say, I find that a little odd, Clint, since it was *your* cattle he and his gang rustled.”

“I know it was, your honor, but that should put me in a special position to ask for his life.”

“I guess maybe it might,” the judge replied, scratching his beard. “What’s so special about that rustler that would cause you and your foreman to ride all the way into town to plead for his life?”

“I know he did wrong, judge, and I know if you grant my request, he’ll likely spend the rest of his life in prison, but he was a good man once and I think it was the whiskey that turned him bad. Maybe I could have done more when he started

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drinking. At the same time, he didn't kill anybody, at least directly. It was the whiskey that forced me to let him go and I know it was that same whiskey that caused him to take my cattle. I'd also like it noted that, to the best of my knowledge, he never actually got away with any. We caught him and his gang on their way to Indian country. I guess he thought he could sell them to Quana's men. It wasn't the plan of a sane man. It was Quana's men that returned him to us. *They* didn't even kill him, just left an arrow in his leg to remind him he was on their land."

The judge rocked back in his chair and looked up at us. "The only time I saw him was when he came to trial and the trial lasted less than two hours. He admitted to taking the cattle and trying to sell them. I guess he *was* honest." He paused and looked back down at his papers. "You say he never got any of the cattle?"

"Not a one," answer Clint. "A few died on the trail, but that was happening anyway."

"What do you think, young man? What would they do with a case like this up in Montana?" the judge asked, now looking right at me.

"I'm not sure, your honor, but I was there when we caught up with his gang. I was also there when the Comanche's returned him to us. I was surprised *they* didn't kill him, but since they didn't, I don't see any reason why his own people should. I reckon his mind was mixed up with liquor when he planned the whole thing. It didn't look like a very

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good plan to me. More like somethin' he just came up with. I think if given the chance and enough prison time to get him off the whiskey, he might find that goodness in his soul again that Clint says he used to have."

"Interesting... Are you a God fearin' man Montana?"

"Yes, sir. My folks raised me that way."

"Well, I am too... and I don't like taking lives away that God gave. But having said that, some folks just need killin'. You all have made your case. Now, if that's all, you have to give me time to think some about it. Clint, how about I notify Robb here of my decision tomorrow? He can figure out how to get it to you. Is that fair?"

"That's more than fair, your honor. It's all we can ask."

"It's been good seeing you again, Clint. You make sure you give my regards to Katie. I presume she and the family are doing well?"

"They're doing fine, judge. I'll make sure I tell her you asked."

"And Montana, it was nice meeting you, too, young man. No matter what happens to Mr. Driscoll, it's clear to me that the Circle of Fire got the better of that deal."

Clint and I talked some on the way back to the ranch. I asked him how he came to know the judge?

"Judge Green and my father were friends back in the early days. Before he became a judge, Walter

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Green owned a big spread south of town. Those were the days when they were as apt to be fightin' Banditos as Indians. It was amazing any of 'em survived. Folks had to rely a lot more on one another for survival."

"Kinda like Pete's relyin' on you right now?" I asked.

Clint was quiet a moment and then answered in a word. "Kinda..."

We were quiet the rest of the way back, which gave me a chance to think a little more about what had happened. The judge was a nice enough man, but other than hearin' us out, he didn't give any hint to what he was gonna decide. And I was a little surprised to see Clint so determined to help Pete. After all, this is the same man who turned on him, lost his job and formed a gang to steal his cattle. Like the judge asked, I was brought up to believe in God, and the Lord's Prayer would have us "forgive those who trespass against us..." but this was askin' a lot. Most ranchers would have strung him up as soon as they found him, or left him to bleed to death from the arrow. I'm not sure I understood where all Clint's loyalty was comin' from, but just the same, I had to admire him for it. I also wondered if Pete had any idea all this was happenin'?

I began the next day down at the track with Doc and Luke. We'd decided a few days ago it was time to fully test Whisper's leg. That meant we'd

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run him against the clock, full-out on the full track. We were all a little concerned, but the big race was only three weeks away and it was time we knew what he had and if he was gonna be our horse.

“Who should ride him?” Luke asked, as he cinched up Whisper’s saddle.

Doc answered slowly, “Hadn’t thought about it much. Montana, you should. You know Clint wants you to ride him in the race.”

“I didn’t know that for sure,” I replied. “I kind of wished he’d found somebody else, but I guess I can do it if that’s what he wants.”

The fall rains hadn’t come yet, so the track was dusty and hard. I had to remember that. But hard or not, we needed Whisper to post a good time, so I needed to push him.

“Is Clint comin’ to watch?” I asked, as I led Whisper out to the starting line.

“I’m already here,” Clint’s big voice boomed as he appeared from behind the shed area. “Doc told you were gonna’ run him this morning and I wouldn’t miss it. Now I don’t want you to hold back, Montana. Open him up and let’s see what he’s got.”

As soon as I had him lined up, Doc pulled the trigger. CRACK! And we were off! Whisper pulled away hard, remindin’ me of how Spirit started out. Those darned racin’ saddles didn’t give you much to hold onto but I’d learned to pull my knees together as hard as I could and clamp myself right to his back. If his leg was still givin’ him

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problems, he didn't show it. We flew down the straight and into the first turn and faster than I would have asked him to. I just hoped he didn't slip. Around turn two and into the back straight-away at full speed, findin' his own rhythm. In a blink of an eye we were makin' our final turns and headin' back toward the finish line. He held up well on the home stretch and didn't seem to tire at all. We crossed the line at full speed and, by the time I had him slowed down, the cloud of dust that'd been followin' us caught us, and I had to walk him out of it just to breathe.

When we got back to the line, Doc, Clint and Luke all looked happy.

"How'd he do?" I yelled from fifty feet away.

"One and three-fifths! That's our fastest time ever!" Clint shouted back. "He's our horse and if he can do that at the Fair, we'll win for sure. But, we all need to remember... he's runnin' alone out here. It'll be a lot different in traffic and if he gets cornered or pushed outside, he can still be beat. That's why I need you to ride him, Montana. You've got experience on that track and you're the only one here who does."

"Don't worry, Clint. If Whisper runs like he did today, I don't see how we could lose."

Clint talked to Doc a while longer before he went back to the house. Luke said he was takin' a break from his paperwork and could spend the rest of the day at the track with Doc and me. We both walked Whisper out, before we put him away. Doc then

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suggested we take two more of the Steel Dust stallions down to the track and get them used to racin'. Doc knew that while gettin' Whisper ready was most important, that would only be the beginning. "Getting our name out," as Clint puts it, was only step one. Once our name was out there we needed to prove that the Steel Dust horses were all fast - not just one or two of 'em. To do that, we needed to start spendin' time with the rest of 'em. Even a fast horse has to learn how to win and they won't get that by walkin' around pastures. They need to be raced and it was up to us to do it.

While I was gettin' one of 'em saddled up, I noticed Luke had pulled a second saddle out of the shed and was doing the same to another. Doc had disappeared so I had to ask him, myself.

"Hey Luke, what are you doin'? Are you thinkin' of racin' together?"

"Yeah, Montana. Doc says they need to learn how to race in a crowd. I don't think there's any better time for 'em to learn how. Do you?"

I agreed with what he said, but we'd never talked about his condition. I'd seen Luke ride, but never on a track at full speed. This was much more dangerous than ridin' the range. If he were to have a fit on the track, he could kill himself. I didn't know how to bring it up, or even if I should.

"What's the problem, Montana? Are you afraid I might not be able to handle it?" he asked, puttin' me right on the spot.

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“Naw... I don’t have any doubts that *you* can handle it. I was just thinkin’ about the horses. Maybe it’s too early to put ‘em together until they get a little more used to the track.” I was lying, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

At that point, Luke dropped the bridle he was workin’ with and walked over.

“Look, Montana. I figure Clint told you about my fits. Truth is, I haven’t had one in a few months and even if I did, I’d have time to get off a horse. Clint worries too much.”

“I’m sure he just doesn’t want to lose one of his top men,” I answered. “I don’t know much about the fits, but if you got one during a race, you might *not* be able to get off on your own. You might fall into the other horses. Seems like you’d be takin’ quite a chance.”

“Life’s full of chances. I can’t avoid it. Jack said maybe someday they’ll go away. In the meantime, I can’t put my life on hold just because I could fall down and twitch. I just want to be treated the same as everybody else.”

“Have you talked to Clint about that?”

“No, not directly. He’s kind a hard man to talk to about such things. Anyway, it’s kind of embarrassing.”

“Well, I’ve talked to him about some embarrassing stuff and he listened fine. You might want to try it sometime.”

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Luke finished saddlin' his horse and jumped on. "Come on cowboy... let's see if you can beat this old paper pusher."

I didn't know if we were doin' the right thing, but it didn't seem to me I should be tellin' Luke what he could or couldn't do. I mounted up and we walked both horses over to the starting line.

"Two bits says I beat ya... GO!"

Luke jabbed his heels into his horse's sides and took off. In an instant I did the same, and was right behind him. You could tell neither horse was used to the track, but they took off in the right direction just the same. Luke got a jump on me, but I was only a length back when we got to the first turn. Bein' behind him, my thoughts turned again to what would happen if he just fell out of his saddle. Dependin' on what side he fell off, I might run right over him before I could do anything about it – and I was just one horse! If we had another five or six out here, he'd be killed for sure... unless he was last, and I figured he didn't plan on bein' last.

By the time we hit turn three, I caught up with him and, even though I had the outside, it looked like I might be able to pass him. My lead was short-lived though. As soon as we made the last straightaway, he began pullin' on me again. By the time we crossed the finish line, he was almost two lengths ahead.

"That was some ride, Luke. I have to admit, I'm not that used to losin'."

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“Don’t feel so bad, Montana,” he laughed. “You came in second!”

I was impressed! I don’t know which horse was really the fastest, but Luke ran a real good race. If he was at all worried about his condition, he wasn’t showin’ it.

Chapter 17

It was around six when Clint and his small crew returned from a day of mending fences. He headed straight for the house to see if he could fit a bath in before dinner. Bobby was playing in the yard and Katie and Ann were working in the kitchen.

Katie saw him duck in the front door and directly out the back, toward the tub. "BEFORE YOU GET THOSE DIRTY CLOTHES OFF, YOU MIGHT WANT TO KNOW WE HAD A VISITOR TODAY," she yelled out the door after him, loud enough for everybody in the area to hear.

Clint heard her but continued to focus on getting the range dust off him. But while pumping water into the tub it occurred to him that he hadn't heard from the judge yet. A visitor? He figured it must have something to do with Judge Green's decision and stopped pumping.

"Lawyer Robb stopped by around three. I invited him in for some pie, but he said he had to get right back to town. Strange man -- wouldn't even come in to cool off, and in that dark wool suit he wears. He must have been suffering out there today."

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“Come-on Katie, what’d he say?” Clint knew when his wife of seventeen years was leading him on.

“Now, what was it he said... you know, I can’t seem to recall... something about...”

“KATIE, YOU TELL ME RIGHT NOW OR YOU’LL BE TAKIN’ A BATH WITH ME, CLOTHES AND ALL!”

“Oh all right. He said Judge Green commuted the sentence. Pete’s not going to hang... at least not this time.”

Half naked now, Clint ran back in the house and gave his wife a hug that took her four inches off the floor! “That’s great news! I guess we made some kind of impression on him. He sure didn’t let us know what he was thinkin’ yesterday. Did Robb say what he was plannin’ to do with him?”

“He said the judge hadn’t decided that yet, but he was considering ten years -- if Pete cooperated. That’s still a lot, but it’s a great deal better than a rope. You and Montana did yourselves proud.”

We’ll have to tell him,” replied Clint, still reeling from the news. “Have one of the kids invite him to dinner tonight. He deserves a good meal.”

“I think you both do,” she replied and went back to the kitchen.

I was just puttin’ Spirit away after a good ride when Ann appeared at the corral fence. “Montana, I’m supposed to invite you to dinner. You better get cleaned up quick – the roast is almost ready.”

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"I wish I had a little more notice, but I clean up fast. Tell your mother I'll be right there." After I spoke, I grabbed the blanket off Spirit and, with saddle and bridle over my shoulder, started back toward the stable. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Ann remained unmoved. "Was there anything else?"

"Nope... I was just supposed to tell you what I told you," she responded, continuing to not move.

"Well, I'd like to stick around and chew the fat but I have to get some water on me, dry off, and dress all in about ten minutes. So if you'll excuse me, I'll be gettin' right to that."

"You're excused," she replied, continuing to stand in that same spot at the corral fence.

"You're a strange girl," I replied, as I turned and walked out the stable door. I wasn't sure if she went out of her way to behave so strange or if it just came natural to her, but I was slowly gettin' used to it.

I'd just started up the steps to the house when Bobby came runnin' out. "WHOA BOY!" I grabbed him as he sped by. "What's the big hurry?"

"Oh, hi Montana! Mom wants me to ring the dinner bell," he answered in his normally excited way.

"Who else is comin'?" I asked.

"No one, I guess. I think it's just us and you."

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“Well, I’m already here so you probably don’t have ring the bell.”

“Oh, Montana... I like to ring it. Let’s pretend you aren’t here yet.”

I released his arm and he continued in the direction of the bell. He grabbed the rope and gave it four good pulls. DING! DING! DING! DING! I was startin’ to think there must be somethin’ in the water that made them *all* a little crazy.

Just then, Clint appeared in the doorway. He stopped, looked at me and then at Bobby. “You can stop with the bell, son... he’s already here.”

“Oh yeah,” Bobby replied, “I didn’t see him...” he then rushed back in the house as quickly as he’d rushed out.

“Weird boy,” Clint muttered as he watched his son disappear back inside. “Anyway, I’m glad you made it, Montana. I’ve got some good news.”

“Does it have anything to do with your lawyer, Mister Robb? I saw him ridin’ out of here a few hours ago.”

“Come on in and let’s have a drink,” replied Clint, “I think you’ll be pleased.”

We went in to Clint’s library where he poured me a small glass of whiskey. I didn’t have the heart to tell him I hate the stuff. He then touched our glasses as if to toast something.

“Robb told Katie that Judge Green decided to spare Pete the gallows. He hasn’t decided yet what the new sentence will be, but he’s considering as little as ten years. I feel better about the whole

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thing and I'm sure Pete will, too. I really didn't want his hanging to be on my account."

"That's great news," I responded. "I could tell the whole thing was weighin' heavy on you."

"I want to thank you for helping, Montana. The judge knew that you didn't really know him that well, but I think it helped to show that I wasn't alone in seeing it a little different. Sometimes I think judges get so used to dealing with the little things, they miss the bigger picture, and hearing good words from the foreman of the Circle of Fire sure didn't hurt us any."

"I appreciate that," I replied, "I just hope you'd do the same for me if it ever came to that."

"*You're* not planning to rustle my cattle, are you Montana?"

"No sir... it's just nice knowin' that somebody else might be in your corner once in a while."

Clint rocked back in his chair and looked up. "Montana, I don't know how long you plan on staying around these parts, but you should know... I'll always be in your corner."

"Thanks, Clint. Again, I do appreciate that. Now somebody told me there was gonna be a dinner here. What do you suppose happened to that?"

During dinner I had a few minutes to reflect on Clint's words. I know it's a sin to *take* a man's life, but I wonder what it is to *save* a man's life? I'd been involved in a few adventures since I left Bighorn Lake, but I don't think I ever actually saved a person's life. The events of the past

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twenty-four hours had come out of nowhere and weren't even my idea... but it felt kinda good. I'd always be grateful to Clint for insisting I came along.

But during dinner, when I wasn't daydreamin', Clint talked about the upcomin' race. It was gettin' close and I'd been thinkin' more about gettin' Whisper ready than about gettin' ready myself. I'm not a worrier by nature, but winnin' this race was very important to Clint, his family and the entire ranch. I couldn't guarantee that Whisper was gonna win, but if he didn't, I couldn't live with it bein' my fault. That's a lot of pressure and as much as I was tryin' hard to avoid thinkin' about it, I was beginnin' to feel it. I felt like I ought to be pushin' Whisper harder down at the track, but Doc wanted him rested up for the race. I knew he was right. There'd be no sense in tirin' him out beforehand. I knew horses probably better than any other thing in this world, but I needed Doc's experience this time. Clint asked me to spend most of the next week with Doc and Whisper. I quickly agreed, though I wasn't really sure what we'd be doin' all week.

Later that night, I went for my normal tour of the corrals and barns before turnin' in. I always slept better knowin' that everything was right with the ranch. I figured that was just part of the foreman's job.

I was walkin' through the main stable, doin' one last check on Spirit and the other horses, when I

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saw a silhouette move across the far door. There wasn't much moonlight and I hadn't brought a lantern. "Who's there?"

"It's me... Toby. Is that you Montana?" He stepped out from the shadow and with what little moonlight there was on his dark face, I recognized him.

"Yeah, it's me. What brings you out this time of night?" I asked.

"Oh, sometimes I just like to get away from the bunkhouse and have a little quiet time. I've seen you out in the dark before. What is it *you* do this time of night?"

"I could tell you it's just part of the foreman's job... to make sure everything's secure, but the truth is, I kinda like to get away a little myself," I answered.

By this time I'd made it out the door and caught up with him. "Another hot night, isn't it?" I said.

"It's hotter than usual for this time of year. Should start to cool down any day now," Toby replied. "What are our chances at the Fair, Montana? I see lots of activity around Whisper. Does he have a chance to win?"

"I think so. His leg's all healed and he's runnin' some of the fastest times ever. If I don't mess it up, I think he can do it," I answered, tryin' to conceal any concerns that I might have.

"They say you're gonna ride him... is that so?"

"Well, with Yancy gone, I don't think Clint has a lot of choice. None of the other volunteers could

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match the times we got. Winning is too important to Clint to risk. I wish it was different but, win or lose, I'll be on him Saturday."

Toby paused a moment and responded, "Doesn't sound like you're any too happy about it?"

"You got that, huh? I'm a cowboy, Toby. Just a plain old cowboy. I'm no racer and I must have thirty pounds on Yancy and those other riders. This race is important to Clint and the ranch. There's a lot of pressure to win and I just hope I'm up to it."

"I don't think you're just a plain old cowboy, Montana. You rode in three months ago with Doc Winters and a week or two later, you were foreman! You have no history with the ranch or the Winters family, but you took it on yourself to help out, even ridin' in race that you're clearly uncomfortable with. You stuck your neck out for Pete when you didn't have to, and saved his life. No sir... you're no plain old cowboy. You're a special one and Clint knows it. So do the rest of the men. We talk, you know."

"I never thought you didn't," I responded. "I suppose some of the men think I'm awful for takin' Pete's job ahead of them."

"Not so much," he answered. "The men just want somebody fair and steady in that job. That's all any man wants in a boss. Pete used to be that, but he changed. As sad as it was for Pete, it was even worse on the men. They didn't know from day to day what they'd be doin'. They don't like that. Oh sure, they'd all like the extra money, but if

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you were to take a survey of ‘em tonight, most of ‘em are glad you took the job. You might be a little strict from time to time, but they know you’re there for ‘em... just like you were there for Pete.”

“Aw, Clint did most of that. I just went along with him.”

“That’s not what we heard. It’s pretty common knowledge that you spoke up for a man you didn’t even know, and your words helped Judge Green change his mind. The men put a lot of stock in that. They like what you did for Luke, too.”

“What do you mean? What did I do for Luke?”

“Well, I don’t mean to be passin’ rumors, but rumor has it, you had something to do with Luke getting his new job. Seems awful funny that Clint would make both announcements at the same time.”

“I don’t know anything about that, Toby. Clint does what he wants. He’s the real boss. I don’t think I had much to do with it.” I was lying again, but it was another one of those *good* lies. Nobody’d mentioned any of that to me since it happened and I was hopin’ it never came up. Now I wondered if Luke suspected anything.

“Thanks, Toby. I think they’re a good crew and really like workin’ with all of ‘em. I have to be gettin’ back now, you have yourself a good walk and I’ll stop interruptin’ it.”

Friday morning we started our pilgrimage back to the Fair site in Dallas. This time it was a bigger

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deal. We brought three wagons with lots of supplies as well as Whisper and a few other horses. One of the wagons was for Clint's family. They were all comin' too, includin' Doctor Jack.

Clint drove Mrs. Winters, Doctor Jack, Ann and Bobby in the first wagon. Doc Stanton and I were in charge of the horses and he drove the second one. Whisper and Red were bein' drawn behind it, and Spirit and I followed behind them. Luke drove the wagon behind us with all the supplies. Half a dozen of our hands followed up on horseback. We looked like a wagon train goin' the wrong way!

The day'd dawned cooler, after a brief rain Thursday afternoon. It was nice not havin' the extra burden of the heat on us.

We got to the Fair site around three o'clock and made camp right where we were for the trials. Doc and I let the others set up while we tended to the horses.

We'd been at it about an hour when Ann stopped by with some news. The way she was carryin' on, somethin' had her real excited.

"MONTANA, DID YOU SEE HIM? DID YOU SEE YANCY?"

"No, Ann. Doc and I haven't had time to blink. Where did ya see him?" I asked.

"Just after we came in, two black wagons rode by with five riders. Yancy was one of them! He saw me, too. He just stared at me in that stupid way he has. He's just as scary as ever."

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"I don't mind him bein' scary, just as long as he keeps his distance from us. I don't want him nosin' around here and I know your father feels the same. He'd likely kick his head off if he caught him in our camp."

Just the same, when we finished settlin' the horses down, I mentioned it to Clint. "Ann says she saw him pass by with a small group of riders followin' two black wagons. I wonder if he's actually gonna ride in the race?"

"I wouldn't doubt it one bit, Montana. His reputation as a good rider probably outdistances his reputation as a drunk. I suspect he'll be ridin' for J.R. Cole and the Double B."

"Where's that?" I asked.

"J.R. owns a big ranch a day's ride south of Dallas. His Double B brand is well known in the cattle business around here, and he's a pretty good judge of horseflesh. He's got a stock of mustangs he's bred to race and he wins a lot. He won the last Dallas race before they moved it to the new fairgrounds. You can always tell J.R.'s camp because of his fondness for black. All his hardware, wagons and tack are shiny black. He even wears a black Stetson. If J.R. hired Yancy, he hasn't heard about how he left us. None of my business, though. Whisper can beat any horse he puts on the track and if you end up racing Yancy, just put it all aside and concentrate on the race."

Except for one quick walk over to the track, we spent the next few hours in camp. Luke helped

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Mrs. Winters and Ann get supper ready and we dined on steaks and beans. After the clean-up, most of the folks went on to bed, but I knew I couldn't sleep yet, so I went for another walk over by the track. There still wasn't much moon in the sky but I noticed that here were more seats around the track than there'd been last time. Rows and rows of bench seats set up on ramps, so you could see over the folks in front of you. It looked to me like you could sit a few thousand people around that track. I wondered if there'd be that many watchin' the race tomorrow. Just more to worry about.

I decided I needed to get some rest and was headin' back to camp when I heard a commotion over by the creek. I couldn't see very well in the dark and was tempted to leave it alone until I thought I recognized one of the voices. It sounded like Luke. I quickly changed direction and headed for the voices. The closer I got, the more I was sure one of them was Luke. As I walked up on 'em, I saw two men arguing. Most the noise was comin' from the other one. It was Yancy! He'd apparently caught Luke gettin' some water and was pickin' on him.

"I DON'T MISS ANYTHING ABOUT CLINT OR THAT RANCH... AND I DON'T MISS ANYTHING ABOUT YOU, YA CRIPPLE! YOU JUST WATCH ME BEAT THAT NAG OF YOURS TOMORROW AND WE'LL SEE WHO THE BEST MAN IS!"

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Luke obviously took offense to the name-calling and stepped forward. Yancy reached out and pushed him backwards, catching Luke by surprise, Luke went down. Yancy then stepped forward and kicked him while he was down, continuin' to curse him out. Then he saw me.

"You here to protect your boy, Montana? It's a little too late for that, but stick around. You might get to see him go into one of his fits." He pulled back to kick him again and I moved in and kicked his legs out from under him. Now Yancy was on the ground, too.

"I wouldn't get up if I were you, Yancy! If Luke doesn't beat you to a pulp, I just might."

Then... THUD! Something hit the back of my neck, hard... and I went down.

I awoke in a dark place and there were people movin' around above me. Squinting, I could see I was looking up inside one of our wagons. Mrs. Winters and Clint were both lookin' down at me. I tried to talk but had trouble with the words – and my neck hurt.

"Easy, Montana, easy..." Clint repeated over and over. "You took a bad bang on your neck out there but Jack thinks you're going to be all right. You just stay put and let Katie get some water in you. I'm going to go get Jack."

When my head started to clear, I could see some other folks outside, in the flicker of the fire light. It

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was Ann and Toby lookin' in. They all looked worried.

"I'm OK," I mumbled. "How's Luke?"

"Luke's fine," Toby answered. "He got a little scuffed up after you went down, but he's fine."

Ann jumped in, "What happened, Montana? How did it all start?"

"All I remember is I heard Luke and Yancy arguin' down by the creek. By the time I got there, Yancy'd already jumped him. I remember knockin' Yancy down. Next thing I know, I'm on display here in this wagon. I guess I'm not sure."

"Montana, Luke said there was another cowboy there with Yancy and he snuck up from behind you and hit you with a log. They'd have probably done worse if it hadn't been for Luke. Luke told us when he saw you go down, he jumped back up and took them both on. I guess they didn't like the odds because they took off and Luke carried you back."

My pain was quickly being replaced by my temper. "I'm gonna go teach Yancy and his pal a lesson they won't soon forget," I said as I started to get up.

"No you're not, youngster!" Clint was back with Doc Winters. "Jack may be a dentist, but he's a fair sawbones, too. He says you may have damage that won't show itself for another day or so. You're gonna stay right there and take it easy. We'll take care of Yancy later. There's plenty of time for that."

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“Clint, if I’m stuck in here, who’s gonna ride Whisper in the morning? We worked too hard to let that bum Yancy keep us from winnin’ the race!”

“I don’t know yet, Montana. We might not even race. Maybe I’ll ride him myself. I just don’t know.”

Again, Ann spoke up. “I’ll ride him, father. I’m the only other one who can. There’s no rule saying a girl can’t ride – is there?”

“That’s crazy, Annie. I’m sure you could but it’s just too dangerous. If anybody does it, it’ll be...”

“...ME!” a familiar voice came from out of the dark.

“Luke! Are you all right? They said you took them both on after I went down? How’d that go?”

“I’m fine, Montana and, Clint, I’ll ride Whisper tomorrow. I’ve track ridden him before and I can win. You gotta let me.”

Clint didn’t answer right away. Instead, he thought a minute and looked over at me. “Can he win, Montana?”

“Yeah, I think he can.”

“In that case, Luke, you get a good night’s sleep. Twelve horses are gonna run around that track tomorrow morning. Only one of ‘em’s gonna come in first. Whisper thinks it’ll be him. You have to make sure he gets his way. If you’re up to it, I’m fine with it. I didn’t know how I was going to lose fifty pounds tonight, anyway! And Montana, you’ll

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be watchin'. If we're gonna get Yancy, let's let Whisper help us."

It was pretty amazin' that Clint would let Luke ride. He was always so worried about Luke pitching a fit during the race, I don't think it even crossed his mind until Luke spoke up. I was glad he did. I'd been lookin' forward to ridin', but Luke deserved it more. I just hoped he could handle it.

Back at the trials Clint had talked about a "Steel Dust dawn." It was more than a catchy phrase to him. He really believed that if his horses of steel could win the big race, business would pick up and the ranch's money problems would be over. I guess it would be a kind of a dawn... a new beginning. I was reminded of it when he whipped open the back of the wagon I was lying in and yelled it again.

"IT'S GONNA BE ANOTHER BEAUTIFUL STEEL DUST DAWN! MONTANA, GET YOUR BUTT OUT OF THAT WAGON AND LET'S WELCOME IT AS A FAMILY!"

Clint had never referred to any of us hands as "family" before, but was sure feelin' that way now. I'd only been up once in the night to relieve myself and I didn't feel too bad then. I hoped I was even better this mornin'. My neck was still sore, but everything else was workin' so I reckoned I'd survive. Doctor Jack was right – no major damage. Given my druthers, I'd have gone right out to find Yancy, but I'd been told to get the race behind us

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first and I knew Clint was right, so I put that out of my mind... for now.

Apparently Clint's little outburst had awakened everybody in our camp at the same time and they were now all milling around in one form or another tryin' to get used to the daylight. Mrs. Winters and Ann started to put together breakfast out of Luke's wagon and it wasn't long before the smell of bacon was in the air. I went down to the creek and cleaned up some before droppin' by for a coffee.

"Mornin' ma'am," I said. "What's chances I could have a cup of that coffee before we eat?"

"It's good to see you back up and around, Montana. The coffee's ready so just help yourself. I take it you're feeling better?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am," I replied. "A little sore, but I'll be fine. Can I ask where your husband went off to?"

"Clint told me he had something to do first thing. He said it wouldn't take long and he'd be back for breakfast."

I nodded and went to look in the wagon for a cup. "Are you looking for this?" Ann asked, holding a full cup of coffee in her hand.

"Oh, mornin' to you too, Ann. As a matter of fact, I was... thanks." I leaned over and took it with both hands.

"How's your head?" she asked.

"Thick as usual. I'll be fine. I guess I made quite a ruckus last night."

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"You got hit from behind, trying to help Luke. You don't have to apologize for that," she answered. "Just remember, Uncle Jack doesn't want you doing too much today. He says you could still have a delayed reaction."

"I still feel foolish, puttin' all that pressure on Luke."

"You didn't do that... he did it to himself. Luke thinks he can win that race and I believe he can. The only pressure he probably feels is from folks who think he can't."

"Maybe you're right, Ann. I'll try to be more positive. This is his big chance to show your father that he can ride like all the other hands. So he might have an occasional fit? He handles it."

"Great minds think alike, Montana. Now why don't you take your coffee and go find him. We need to get some food in him early, so it has some time to settle before the race."

"Good idea," I answered, and did as she'd suggested. I went over to our makeshift corral, knowin' that I'd find Luke there somewhere. There he was, combing out Whisper who had a feed bag tied around his neck.

"Hey, Luke. How's he doin'?"

Luke looked up and saw me headin' for him. "*He's* doin' fine, Montana. How are *you* doin'? That was quite a whack you took last night."

"Truth is, I'm still a little weak, but I'll be OK. Are you ready to race?"

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“I’m ready and so’s Whisper. I walked out on the track a little earlier. That’s some funny surface, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it surely is. When I rode Spirit in the trials, Doc Stanton told me to take it easy in the turns – particularly if the surface was a little wet. It gets slippery in the dew and a horse could slide out on one of those turns. I remembered that when we ran our race and held back just a little, lettin’ Spirit set his own pace. I think Whisper’ll do the same thing. Hold him back a little goin’ into the turns and let him come out on his own. The only time you might need to push him is on the last straight, headin’ for the line. He’ll be up against more horses this time, and will have to fight for position.”

“Doc told me the same thing last night but it’s good to hear it from you, Montana. You’ve actually done it!”

“And I’m a little worried about all those other horses and riders. Whisper hasn’t been in that kind of crowd before. I’m not sure how he’ll react. It’d be great if you could take the lead right off and hold it, but that probably won’t happen. Most of these races are won by a horse that comes up on the home stretch. So you have to figure, you’ll spend some time in the pack. They’ll try to crowd you out and block you. Whisper will need room in order to take the lead, so you have to watch your position. The inside’s shorter, but the outside’ll probably be cleaner. I don’t know if Whisper has it

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in him to come up on the outside, though. That takes a double effort... until the home stretch.”

With that little speech, I’d given Luke all I knew about how to win on this track... and I was guessin’ at some of it. But Luke seemed to pay attention to what I was sayin’.

“Thanks, Montana. I’ll do my best.”

That’s all I had to hear. It is a horse race and the horse has to play a big role in winnin’. I just didn’t want any loss to be on Luke. He deserved better.

Chapter 18

Clint returned in time for breakfast and told us a little about the owner's meeting. "They mostly talked about the rules. If any horse jumps the starting gun, they have one more re-start. Any horse that jumps the re-start is automatically disqualified, but the race will continue. That's the big one. The rest of it has to do with deliberately interfering with another horse or rider. Blocking is not illegal, but teaming to block is, and there can't be any deliberate contact between riders. Any rider that hits, pushes, or in any other way makes contact with another rider during the race will be disqualified, regardless of how he finishes. They just want a clean race."

One of the hands muttered, "That won't be easy for Yancy. I expect he'll try something."

"After the meeting," Clint continued, "I had a little chat with my old friend J.R. Cole. I asked if he'd hired a new rider and he told me he had. I may have mentioned that I'd let him go and that Yancy and somebody else jumped one of my men last night and near-killed my foreman. J.R. wasn't

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happy to hear that, but wasn't real surprised either. He said he had some problems of his own with Yancy and would take care of it. He wasn't sure who the other man was, but said he'd try to find out and let me know after the race. I'd like to think that Yancy was smart enough not to start anything on the track but Luke – you be careful out there, particularly of him. He'll be on big a palomino... probably the only one out there."

Clint's advice was good. I hoped Luke took it seriously.

"And one other thing. I heard some of the other owners talking and apparently J.R.'s palomino is the favorite. Most the real money's on him. You sure you're up to this, Luke?"

"I sure am," Luke replied without a hesitation. "At the end of this race, people will know about the Circle of Fire and its Steel Dust stable!"

For the first time in a while, I felt a little helpless. It truly was all up to Luke and Whisper now. Spirit and I may have gotten us here, but we couldn't control what was gonna happen. Doc and I helped Luke get Whisper ready. I started with the small blanket and Doc followed up with the racing saddle. Luke brought his new boots because he said they fit in the high stirrups better and let him bend his legs more. The sun was well up as the horses and riders gathered in the paddock. Owner's and their families had special seats, right near the start-finish line. It was a good thing, too, because people had been comin' in for hours. Earlier, I'd

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wondered if they could fill all those seats, but by nine-thirty they already had. Hundreds of people were left to stand and watch from the small rise at the end of the fence line on either side of the stands. I don't think I'd ever seen this many people in one place.

Clint, Mrs. Winters, Doctor Jack, Ann, Bobby all sat together in the third row. I sat right behind 'em with Toby and a few of our other hands. Except for Luke, seemed like we had the best seats in the place.

As the horses left the paddock for the starting line, I spotted the palomino. If I wasn't mistaken, Yancy had a black eye. I hoped Luke had given it to him. The palomino was a beautiful horse, though. Big and well muscled, he looked fearsome. Luke was lined up two horses to his outside. That put the two pretty close to one another. The starter yelled some words through some kind of a horn, then set it down. The light breeze that'd been blowin' all mornin' just seemed to stop. The crowd quieted down and it was time to race.

CRACK! The starter pulled the trigger, the horses jumped and the race was on. We were able to see the starting line well from our seats and it looked like a good start. Unfortunately, we weren't high enough to see much more than that. As a dozen race horses chewed up wood chips, they were runnin' away from us. We couldn't get a sense for the order until they began to spread out in the first turn and we could see from the side. One

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of the Bays was in the lead, but by less than a length. Two horses were right on his heels and one of them was the palomino. Whisper was about mid-field and on the outside, with the rest fast on his heels. They stretched out a little more goin' into the turn two, but pretty much held their positions. I suspected Whisper was gonna have trouble if he stayed on the outside.

Then they were down the backstretch. The lead horse started to fade and Yancy's palomino began to move up. Most of the field began to fall off with Whisper and one other keeping up near the front.

"Whisper's in third!" yelled Ann, but Clint was far too fixed on the race to comment. It was like he was out there himself.

Now at full speed down the backstretch, it was a three horse race and the palomino had a full length lead. Watchin' closely, I could see Luke take advantage of the space that freed up as he guided Whisper back inside. He'd put on more speed, but the others had as well and their positions stayed about the same as they entered turn three. Whisper and the Bay were now neck and neck, but Luke stayed on the inside rail and, as the turn continued, he started to move up.

"Watch this!" yelled Clint, finally showing some emotion. "Whisper's gonna head for home."

I don't know what he saw that I didn't, because the palomino still had a good length on him and wasn't showin' any signs of givin' it up. "Come on

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boy,” I mumbled. “If you have it in you, you need to show it now.”

By the time they got to the final turn, the third horse had dropped three lengths back. The pace being set by the palomino was incredible. I could see why he was the favorite. But as they came out of the final turn, Luke took his hand to Whisper’s flank and turned him loose. Yancy’d been so far ahead, he’d let himself get off the rail. Luke saw his chance and, on the home stretch, snuck up on the inside. In a matter of seconds, they were neck and neck. I half expected Yancy to pull something dirty, but either we were too far away to see or he was too busy to try. In a final burst of strength, Whisper started to pull ahead. Now the palomino had something to look at. With every one of his muscles strained to the limit, he tried to stick there, but he couldn’t. Maintaining his new pace, Whisper moved ahead. First one length, then two. By the time they crossed the finish line, Luke had almost three lengths on Yancy and if the track had been longer, he’d of had more. Luke had done it! The legend of the Texas Steel Dust horses had begun!

The next twenty minutes were a blur. We all jumped out of our seats and by the time we made our way to the track, Luke had walked Whisper back to the finish line.

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Clint grabbed him and pulled him down, keepin' him in a big bear hug. "You son of a gun, Luke! You did it! I knew you could."

While we were still celebrating, Mr. Marsalis and Mr. Gaston walked up. Mr. Marsalis grabbed Luke's right hand with his, and shook it hard.

"That was one heck of a race, young man!" For a man who'd just lost a big race, he seemed awful excited. "I knew we were out of it by turn two, but I really thought J.R.'s gold horse was going to take it. You and that Steel horse of yours came up out of nowhere. Clint, you ought to be right proud of the race you ran today. It's a shame so many people lost money betting on J.R. With the odds so favoring the palomino, anybody that was crazy enough to bet on you must have made a killing!"

His mention of betting reminded me that it was betting that this was mostly all about. In worryin' so much about the race itself, I'd clean forgot about that.

Clint rocked back on his heels and a big grin started to form on his face. "There was at least one who did, Tom. I'm not at liberty to discuss it at the moment, though."

Mrs. Winters ears perked up at Clint's words. "You didn't... did you?" she asked, almost thinking out loud.

"We can talk about it later, Katie. In the meantime, let's get Luke something to drink. That was some pounding he took out there."

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At that point, Mr. Gaston spoke up. "Congratulations to your horse, your rider and your ranch, Clint. That was one of the finest finishes I've ever seen and it will be remembered for years to come. Incidentally, I thought your foreman Montana here was going to ride. Is there some kind of story behind the last minute change?"

"Not one I'd want to discuss here, but thank you for your kind words. I have every confidence that Whisper would have won with either Luke or Montana on top. That's the luxury of having the best riders and the best horses in Texas! Just remember, the Circle of Fire breeds the very best whether it's beef or horseflesh."

"Yesterday I'd have taken exception to statements like that, Clint, but today I don't believe I will. My best to you and your folks on a truly memorable win!"

"Thank you, sir. We're already looking forward to next year," Clint said, as he shook his hand one last time.

About then, Luke came over to me and whispered in my ear. "Montana, come here a minute. I want to talk to you." He led me out of the winner's circle and over to a quieter place near the now emptying seats.

"Montana, I know I have you to thank for a lot of this. Not just the race, but my new job and all. If it weren't for you I'm not even sure I'd of had the confidence to race at all. Before you came along, I was really beginnin' to think maybe I didn't belong

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here. You can deny it all you want, but I know you were behind a lot of the good things that have happened to me lately, and I want you to know that I appreciate it. I guess I'm a little sorry I took this race away from you, too."

"Luke," I answered. "I didn't do much. You've got a lot more time tied up in the ranch and I just wanted you to get your due. And as far as this race, I'd like to think Clint was right... that Whisper'd of won with either of us, but we'll never know that for sure. You did some great ridin' out there today and you got the job done. That's what's important. And *you* didn't start that fight last night. I still don't know who hit me, but I'll deal with that later. For now, let's just enjoy the Fair! I could use a drink – how about you?"

"I'll make you a deal, Montana. Let's go help Doc put Whisper away first, and I'll buy that drink."

We walked back to the track to see the owners now all bunched up and talkin' again, so we decided to duck out and catch up with Doc and Whisper. Ann saw us leave and caught up to us as we headed out though the crowd.

"Luke, that was some great ride... I don't think anyone could have done better. Not even me! I'm so glad you volunteered. I wouldn't have wanted to get my dress all dusty, winning in your place!"

"That's important, Ann," I offered. "If it came down to getting your dress dusty or losin' the race,

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I'd hope you'd have the sense to slow down and keep that dress clean!"

"Why, Montana... I do believe that bang on your head has improved your thinking." With that, she lifted her dress over her feet and ran on ahead.

"I think she likes you," Luke said as we both watched her disappear into what was left of the crowd.

"It's hard to tell, Luke," I replied. "I'd really worry about how she'd treat me if she didn't."

We both laughed and started runnin' after her.

We all spent the rest of the day roamin' around the Fair. There was a lot to do and see, and we had more fun than I could remember. Toby wanted to stay with the horses, so Luke, Ann, Bobby and I spent the afternoon watchin' the cattle judging, the buggy races and just walkin' though the livestock barns. Mrs. Winters had entered a cooking contest and won a red ribbon for her pecan pie. Clint said she'd have won first prize except for the fact that one of the judges' wife won the blue.

By the time the sun was gettin' low in the sky, we'd all gathered back in camp again, to help with dinner. It was around then that we heard a horse comin' in. Toby saw him first and his voice was loud and clear, "YANCY! YOU BETTER TURN AROUND RIGHT NOW AND GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE YOU GET IN MORE TROUBLE THAN YOU CAN HANDLE!"

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Clint saw him and started over when Yancy said something that surprised all of us. "I'm not here to make trouble, Clint. I'm here to apologize to Luke and Montana."

By that time I'd made my way over and Luke was right behind me.

He got off this horse and stood there with a real serious look on his face I'd not seen before, and I was right -- he was also sportin' a big black eye.

"Luke, Montana. I'm sorry about last night. I don't have any excuse except that I'd had too much to drink and it all went too far. Luke, you ran a fine race today and you beat me fair and square. I just wanted you both to know that before I take off."

As surprised as I was, I still wasn't a big Yancy fan. But before I could put together some kind of response, Luke walked over to him and shook his hand. "Apology accepted. I *do* think you need to slow down on the drinkin', Yancy. It's gotten the better of you and if you don't, you just might end up like Pete."

"I know, and I'm sorry," he answered as he started to remount.

"Yancy!" I finally spoke up. "I can live with that, but just the same, I'd like to know the name of the fella who hit me last night. What could I do to get you to give it to me?"

He stopped and turned back in my direction. "Montana, it was Jeb Pearce, but it won't do you

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no good. He left for Mexico some three hours ago.”

“That’s too bad,” I answered. “I owe him.”

“Well, you won’t be seein’ either of us around, anymore. I’m headin’ west to my uncle’s place in Arizona. J.R. fired both of us right after the race. He came over and congratulated me on a good ride and told me to clear out my stuff... I was done. Montana, I didn’t want you to get hurt last night. Jeb shouldn’t have hit you at all, much less from behind. J.R. said he wouldn’t have that stuff associated with his ranch and that he’d rather lose races than win like that. So that’s it... I come to apologize and I’m done.”

We were quiet while Yancy picked up his reins and headed out. There was no need for any more words. He’d said it all... and Clint was right again. J.R. Cole was a good man!

Chapter 19

Right after the Fair, and well into November, our cattle business picked us just like Clint said it would. In addition to Mr. Marsalis' stores, we started sellin' beef to customers we didn't even know were out there. Mr. Turner out of Tyler contracted to buy a hundred head a month if we'd get 'em to the railhead in Fort Worth. I had to hire on a special crew just to do that. We also started seein' a lot more interest in the Steel Dust horses. For a while, we had a regular flow of ranchers and breeders from all over Texas, come to watch the steel horses run on our track. Clint sold a few off but held enough back to continue to build up our stock. He figured holdin' some back just increased demand and price for next year.

Of course the money trouble ended right after the Fair. Turns out that while Clint was missin' the mornin' of the race, he'd put down a thousand dollars on Whisper! The odds were twenty to one, so Clint walked away with twenty thousand – more than enough to pay off the bank.

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Luke stayed in his new job, but spent more time down at the track with Doc, workin' the horses. That was just as well because after the race I got real busy with the cattle operations and didn't have time for the horses. All except one. I was spendin' a lot more time on Spirit and I know he appreciated it as much as I did. No more long days in the corral. Spirit and I would take off early in the mornin' and, if we got back that day at all, it'd be after sundown... just in time to go to bed and start all over the next day. I didn't mind the work, though. I always wanted to be a cowboy and now I was gettin' paid to run a whole outfit! Things couldn't have been much better for me and my only fear was that it wouldn't last. I knew if I kept thinkin' that way, I'd put a curse on myself, but I couldn't stop.

It was a sunny mid-November afternoon and I'd just come in from three days on the range to have Luke order some fence we needed for a big job the next week. I was over at the well, throwin' water on Spirit to clean some of the range dust off him when Ann saw me and came over.

"Haven't seen much of you lately, stranger. If I didn't know better I'd think you were avoiding me!"

"Hi, Ann. Nope, I'm just tryin' to make this ranch some money, so you can live in that big house forever."

"Oh, don't start on me, Montana. I'm lonely. With everybody out working so hard, there's

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nobody around here to visit with. It's enough to make a girl go stir-crazy."

"I'd think a good cook like yourself would be busy plannin' for Thanksgiving."

She bristled, "What would you know about Thanksgiving?"

"Not much... Toby tell's me it's a big thing around here. Some time near the end of the month, isn't it?"

"You know very well it is. Why, don't your people celebrate it?" I think she was starting to see that I really didn't know much about it.

"I can't say that we did up in Montana. I didn't hear about it until I got to Kansas. Some kind of holiday, isn't it?"

"I happen to know all about it from a report I did on it in school. It's a celebration of how the Pilgrims helped settle the country back a few hundred years ago. President Lincoln made it the last Thursday of November and we have a big dinner for all the hands, like the Pilgrims did with their Indian friends."

"Do you invite Indians? Somehow I can't see the Comanche comin' down to sit and eat a dinner with us. We might end up the dinner, ourselves."

"No, Montana. The Indians that came to that first Thanksgiving dinner were peaceful ones from back east near Boston."

"Well, Indians or not, if there's good food, it sounds like my kind of a holiday. I don't rightly

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care if they come, just so long as they leave my hair on my head!"

"Oh, I can see this year's celebration is going to be something. I'll make sure mother puts you at the main table."

"Now, don't go to any trouble for me. Just pass me a dish and say the prayer. I'll handle the rest."

"I do miss our little talks, Montana. I learn so little from them!"

Just as I was about to respond, Doctor Jack pulled up in a wagon and waved me over.

"Montana, come over here! I have something for you!" He was waving some kind of paper in his hand.

I walked over and held his horses while he got down.

"Montana, you said your real name was William Ritter?"

"William *Dean* Ritter, Doc, but nobody's called me that since I left home."

"And home was Bighorn Lake, Montana?"

"Yeah... why all the questions?" By this time Ann had joined us.

"Then this telegram *is* for you. Did you let your folks know you were here?"

"I sent a telegram a few months ago, but hadn't heard back. I wasn't sure they even got it. Why? What's it say? Is it from my father?"

"No, it's from... Mary?"

Now, I was excited. "That's my sister. What's she say?"

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Doc handed me an envelope with a yellow paper inside. I pulled it out and looked at it.

-----WILLIAM RITTER----- C/O
CIRCLE OF FIRE RANCH, FORT
WORTH, TEXAS----STOP----NEED
HELP----STOP----PLEASE COME
HOME RIGHT AWAY----MARY

My blood ran cold. I'd been gone over three years now and hadn't heard from home since I left. But I'd been thinkin' about them a lot lately. That's why I sent the telegram. They must of got it, I thought, because they knew how to get hold of me. But why Mary?

"I admit that I read it, Montana. I had to, to figure out if it belonged out here. The telegraph office didn't know there was anybody out here by that name. I didn't either, at first. Then I remembered that your given name was William... William Ritter. I'm sorry. Sounds like your folks have some trouble."

"I'm glad you did, Doc," I answered. "If you hadn't, it probably wouldn't have got to me... sounds that way to me, too."

I caught up to Clint later that afternoon, when he came in for dinner. As much as I was in a hurry to meet with him, I really wasn't looking forward to it. He'd come to depend on me and I didn't want to

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let him down. I thought it best to first show him the telegram.

"Montana, this means one thing to me," he said as soon as he looked up from readin' it. "I expect you'll be pullin' out in the morning?"

"Clint, I feel terrible about leavin' the ranch, but yes."

"Don't feel terrible about a thing, Montana. Even though you've become a part of our family, we know you have your own, and family comes first. Whatever the trouble up north, you need to go take care of it. Would you want to take anybody along?"

I hadn't thought about that, but hoped it wouldn't be necessary. "I appreciate the offer, Clint, but I think it's best if I do this alone. Anyway, you need all the hands you have right now. I'll be able to handle anything I find back there. Thanks anyway."

"I expect you will. Just remember, if you get in a pinch, that telegraph worked just fine getting to us and it would again. Help is just a message away and your job will be waiting on you when you get back."

I should have known Clint would take the news well and his offer of help and to keep my job open was better than I could have asked for. But I still had that hurt in my stomach. For Mary to send the telegram and not father or mother, it must be something big. All I knew was that I needed to get there fast.

Chapter 20

I said my goodbyes last night and left before sun up. Luke got up with me and stuck around while I saddled up. He said he'd miss me most of all and offered to come to Montana if I needed any help. His comments made me think about all the good friends I'd made at the ranch and how fortunate that toothache had really been. It made me remember somethin' my mother once said.

"Sometimes the best things in life are the ones you don't plan for." I sure hadn't planned for all this.

I was sorry I wasn't able to stay for the ranch's Thanksgiving holiday. Ann said she'd cook me another Thanksgiving dinner as soon as I got back. Of course neither of us have any idea when that's gonna be, but I told her with God's help I'd make it back as soon as I could.

The good weather'd changed over the past few days and there was a new chill in the air I wasn't used to. It'd been a hot summer in Texas and I'd been lookin' forward to the change, but not like this. The cold and gloom of *this* morning wrapped around me like a wet blanket and gave me even

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more reason to worry. The trip back to Bighorn Lake would take two weeks, and that's if we didn't run into snow. It could take three if we did. Last night I asked Doctor Jack if he'd mind sendin' a telegram back to Mary, tellin' her I was on my way. He said he'd do that today.

So, it was back to just Spirit and me, puttin' ground behind us. Unlike our ride south, we'd be movin' faster this time. I won't push him too hard but we'll need to keep movin' and, with the weather turnin', it wasn't gonna be easy.

I decided I'd miss Ann the most. I'd met a few nice girls since I left home, but Ann was special. She was smart but never made me think she was smarter than me, though she probably was. And she knew horses better than any girl I ever knew. I knew I'd miss our talks. They mostly ended up in fights, but not the serious kind. She liked to mess with me and I guess I liked messin' back. After I said goodbye last night, she was quieter than usual and I didn't know why until I saw a tear in her eye just before she turned and left the room. It was her mother that nearly brought a tear to my eye. Just as I was gettin' up from the table, she stood up, walked over and gave me a big hug.

"Montana, you take care up there. I want to see you back here as soon as you get it all settled. And you feel free to bring your sister back with you if need be." It was more like being scolded than your typical goodbye, but I knew that was just her way of saying it.

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My daydream ended when a cold shot of wind came down range and hit us head on. I wrapped my slicker tighter and patted Spirit on the neck. "Hang on boy - this is sure to get worse before it gets better, but I'll be here for ya. You don't have to worry about that. We're a team."

Spirit lifted his head like he understood, and picked up the pace, carryin' us both straight into the wind and the dark hills on the horizon.

