

*Colorado*

Matt pulled up within the tree line a hundred yards from Maxwell's bunkhouse and took stock of the situation. The fire roared, engulfing the house, and black smoke billowed skyward. The outbuildings and haystacks were far enough from it that, with luck and the grace of God, they might not catch fire. But the men couldn't do anything to prevent it. They were pinned down near the barn and the bunkhouse.

A tremor ran through him. This was too much like Glorieta Pass, where he'd received his leg wound last year. His hands tightened on his rifle stock. He had no captain to order him forward this time, but he couldn't let Maxwell and his men down.

Gunfire issued from several points outside the yard, and Matt observed carefully for a couple of minutes, trying to determine how many attackers there were. Three on horseback circled the yard, turning back when they approached Maxwell's corral fences near the road. They were able to go behind the burning house in a wide arc and get behind the bunkhouse as

well. He concluded they were hoping to take some of Maxwell's horses from the corral.

A couple of outlaws were on foot, and Matt focused on learning exactly where they concealed themselves. Those he could see were white men, which was a relief in a way. He had feared a large party of Cheyenne might have decided to raid the settlers in these parts. They'd raised havoc in the goldfields, but so far, the ranchers in this valley hadn't been targeted.

Maxwell's strategy seemed to be holding fire until the outlaws showed themselves and then letting loose with a wild volley. That might hold the bandits off for a while, but it would also likely run the rancher and his men out of ammunition soon.

Sweat broke out on Matt's brow, though a cool breeze fluttered through the cottonwoods. He'd have to go out in the open to get to a position where he could help his neighbor. The outlaws couldn't ride behind the barn because of the fences. That might be his best chance.

He waited for another round of gunfire, and while it was at its height, he slipped through the trees to the corral fence behind the barn. Ducking between the rails, he hauled in a deep breath, and then he sprinted across the corral, hunched over. The back door of the barn, where they hauled out manure in winter, was closed. It creaked when he pulled it open, the counterweight rising on a rope. When he let go, the weight would plunge downward, and the door would close.

"Maxwell," he yelled into the barn. "It's Matt Anderson."

One of Maxwell's cowhands rose from near the big front door and whirled toward him, pointing his rifle straight at Matt. For an instant, Matt thought he was a dead man. No doubt the shooters' ears were ringing, and the cowboy hadn't heard him identify himself.

"Hey!" He held up one hand. "Don't shoot me! I'm here to help."

"Matt? Thank God."

Matt recognized Bud Lassen, Maxwell's foreman, in the dimness of the barn. Hurrying across the barn floor, Matt joined him near the front entrance.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"We don't know. Raiders. There's about ten of them."

Matt frowned. "I counted five, or maybe six."

"That's all? Seems like more. I know one of 'em's down."

"How are you doing?"

"Lost one man, and the boss is hit bad."

"Mr. Maxwell's shot?"

"Fraid so. Hank and Dusty have got him in the bunkhouse. We've got a man in the hayloft door upstairs, and four more scattered around, if they haven't been hit. Is your father coming?"

"I sent Miss Maxwell to tell him. He'll be here, but it might take a while."

Shooting erupted again. Bud turned his attention to a crack at the edge of the big, rolling door and stuck the barrel of his rifle through it. Matt squeezed in below him and peered out. The riders had dismounted and left their horses out of sight. Now all of them hid behind trees, bushes, building corners—whatever would give them cover.

Bud squeezed off three shots, during which Matt focused on a copse of pines several yards beyond the well. He'd seen gunfire emanate from those trees earlier, and he waited for it now. Sure enough, he saw a puff of smoke right where he'd calculated one of the outlaws hid. He trained his sights on the spot and waited, trying to ignore the cracks and pops of other weapons. The man he watched for leaned out from behind a tree to take another shot, and Matt squeezed his trigger.

He couldn't tell whether or not his bullet found its mark, but overhead came a loud grunt, followed by a thud.

The shooting quieted, and Bud looked at him then up at the ceiling.

“Charlie?” he yelled.

“Yeah,” came the reply. “I’m hit.”

“Stay down. We’ll get you later. Matt Anderson’s here, and help’s coming.” There was no reply, but Bud eyed Matt soberly. “You’ve had experience in the militia. What do you think?”

“How many cartridges you got?”

“A few more rounds. The men in the bunkhouse probably have more. We keep our stash in there. But the outlaws got what was in the house.”

“How’d that happen?”

“They were in there when the boss and a couple more men discovered them, ransackin’ the place. He drove ’em out and made a stand. Me and the rest of the boys were out working on a holding pen half a mile from here, but we heard the gunfire and rode back. By then, they’d set fire to the house.”

“Everyone get out?” Matt asked.

“Yeah, but that’s when they shot Mr. Maxwell. I got caught out here. Lucky to have my rifle. All Charlie has is his Colt.”

“How do you know about Mr. Maxwell?”

“One of the men hollered up to Charlie.”

Matt nodded. “We probably can’t wait for my pa. They’re picking your men off one by one.”

“What do they want?” Bud peered through the crack at the edge of the door.

“Money. Guns. Horses.” Matt shrugged.

The outlaws had likely rifled the house for valuables before they were caught and chased out. Apparently, they hadn’t found enough and wanted more. The ranch’s stock of firearms would be attractive to the gang, as would the horses in the corrals.

Matt thought of Vida in his family home. In the kitchen most of the day, she would be vulnerable in an attack like this.

“Here we go,” Bud said as the shooting resumed. He stuck his

rifle barrel out the door and fired off several rounds, then withdrew to reload. Matt took his place and fired once at a spot where he knew one of the outlaws was concealed. Movement on the far side of the yard drew his attention. Were they heading for their mounts?

"We'd best not wait," he said. "They could get around back and throw a torch into the bunkhouse."

"Listen." Bud held a hand out, and Matt cocked his head to one side.

He could hear more shooting, but from farther away. "That's my father and his men. Come on!" Matt shoved the door open a few more inches and sent several quick shots toward the stand of pines. No gunfire was returned.

Yelling and hoofbeats were punctuated by more shots, and several horses pounded into the dooryard. Matt saw Pard and two more of his father's men flash by, and close behind them came his father and two more men, riding hard. Matt ran out into the yard and looked all around. In the distance, a half dozen horsemen streaked it for the hills.

"There they go!" Matt pointed.

His father wheeled his bay horse and tore after them, with his men right behind him. Matt wanted to mount and go with them, but he'd arrived on foot.

Three of Maxwell's men ran from their hiding places. "Saddle up," one of them yelled.

"No. Wait." Bud stepped out into the middle of the yard and held up his hands. "By the time you all reload and saddle your horses, it'll be too late. Let Mr. Anderson and his men handle it now. We've got to see to the boss and Charlie."

"Charlie's hit?" One of the other men strode toward them, his leathery face etched with dismay.

"He's up in the loft, and he needs help. I don't know how bad it is. You and Telly bring him down to the bunkhouse."

Matt looked off the way his father had gone. “What if my pa needs help, the way you did?”

Bud sighed. “All right. Joe, you boys go. Take horses from the corral. They’re pretty jumpy now, but—”

“Bud, one of the horses is shot.”

Bud swore and strode toward the corral fence.

The cowboy they called Dusty appeared in the doorway of the bunkhouse.

“Matt Anderson,” he called.

Matt jerked his chin upward, signifying he’d heard.

“Mr. Maxwell wants to see you.”

Matt limped toward him. His injured leg was tired from the exertion he’d given it in his run down the hill. Most of the time, he could walk almost normally, but when fatigue caught up with him, the old wound made his leg throb, and he favored it.

He reached the bunkhouse steps. “What does he want? I’m surprised he even knows I’m here.”

“We told him you’d come to help us, and when the shooting stopped, he said he wanted to talk to you. I expect he wants to know if Miss Rachel is safe.”

Matt sucked in a deep breath. He’d almost forgotten Rachel’s existence, but his father’s arrival laid proof she’d completed the task he’d given her. He mounted the steps.

As he passed Dusty, the cowboy caught his arm. “They’re bringing Charlie. Looks like they winged him.”

Three men came from the barn. Charlie was on his feet, supported by Telly, whom Matt knew slightly. The other man walked on Charlie’s other side, one hand in midair, as though he expected Charlie to pitch forward any second.

“He’ll make it,” Dusty murmured.

“Looks like.” Matt went on into the bunkhouse.

A teenager named Hank, one of Maxwell’s newer employees, sat on a stool beside the bunk where they’d laid the boss. He

rose and nodded. "We're sure glad you came, Matt. Think your pa will catch those no-goods?"

"I don't know. I hope so." Matt sat on the stool and let his eyes adjust to the dimness.

Mr. Maxwell's eyes turned toward him, and his mouth twitched in his stark face. "Matthew."

"Yes, sir," Matt said.

"Thank you, boy."

"Don't know as I helped much. Wish I could have got here sooner."

"Rachel?" Mr. Maxwell gasped as he said his daughter's name and grimaced.

"She's all right, sir. I sent her to my pa's house, and she told him what happened."

"Your father ran off the outlaws?"

"Yes, sir. He's chasing them now."

"Good." Mr. Maxwell's mouth pressed into a thin line.

Where was his wound? The wool blanket covering the rancher hid the damage.

Dusty rushed in and strode to a bunk to clear it off. The other men came through the door with Charlie leaning on them.

"We'd best send for the doctor," Matt called to Dusty, Hank, and the world at large.

Dusty looked over at him, a box of cartridges in one hand and several items of clothing in the other. "Sam went."

Maxwell's eyes were closed, and his face contorted. Matt touched his shoulder. "You hear that, sir? Sam's gone to fetch Doc Nolan."

The older man's eyelids flickered. "I don't know as I can hold on, boy."

Matt's stomach plunged. "You can, sir. Doc will help you."

Maxwell groaned then looked up at him for a moment, his eyes wide. "You ... take care of my Rachel."

RACHEL HAD STAYED out near the corral, not wanting to miss any signs, but all she could tell was that the smoke continued to rise from her father's ranch for the better part of an hour, then dissipated until she couldn't tell where it had been.

She stroked the team's noses and considered unhitching the wagon. She could do it—she'd learned that as a girl. But she wanted to be ready when word came that she could go to her home. After a while, she compromised by removing the horses' bridles and letting them browse around the edges of the yard.

The sun was lowering before she picked up the sound of hoofbeats. Far across the grassy valley, two horsemen came into view. She climbed up to sit on the corral fence and watched them grow larger. When they were within two hundred yards, a bittersweet pang ran through her as she identified the men. Matt, the one who had driven her here, and Pard, the hand who'd met her in the dooryard when she arrived. Their faces were smudged, but she recognized Matt's bearing and both the men's clothing.

She hopped down from the fence as they gained the dooryard. Matt swung down from his horse, doffing his hat at the same time. He moved as gracefully as a gentleman at a ball. She almost forgot for a moment that he was one of her father's employees. Any of the girls back at her school would be thrilled to dance with a man of his pleasing appearance and carriage. Of course, if he were at a ball, his face wouldn't be smeared with soot and dirt.

As he walked toward her, she noticed for the first time that he limped slightly, further marring the impression.

"What's happened?" She stepped toward Matt, her extended hands trembling. She drew them back and hugged herself, knowing she would hear bad news.

Matt stopped a pace away, looking into her eyes.

"Tell me," Rachel said.

"I'm sorry."

Her stomach plummeted. She looked past him to the other man, Pard, but he had dismounted and was undoing the cinch of his saddle, his back toward her.

She reached out again. "Please! Is my father all right?"

"I'm afraid not," Matt said.

Her knees gave way, and her head spun.

"Let me help you, ma'am." Matt grabbed her arm, then called sharply, "Pard!"

Things went gray for Rachel, all hazy and swirling, like a funnel cloud without sound.