

B I G H O R N V A L L E Y M O O N

Authored by

Marvin Pegg

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with alterations
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Dedicated to:

**My Lord & Savior (without Him we could do nothing)
Pawnee Pegg, my Wife, my helper in everything
Anitra Cameron, my daughter
Dr. Pegg, my son**

**Patricia Kalnu, my Niece, whose early years were in the Big Horn Valley
Marbeth Bingman, long time friend, who taught me to "Live my Dream
These were the first to encourage me in this project, thank you!**

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CHAPTER ONE

The mountain ranges of the Big Horn Valley blazed a fiery crimson as the sun glanced off its edges and twilight settled in on the Ranch of the Sun Bar. () The sound of tinkling cow-bells and horses hooves in the corral seemed multiplied by the stillness of the evening air. Tiny sounds magnified themselves and various evening noises echoed around the ranch-house. The beller of a calf a mile away seemed close. Somewhere in the hills a coyote's yapping heralded the rising of a full moon as pretty Leona Wyman stepped out on the verandah of the ranch-house. Little attention could anyone pay to a rising moon, full or otherwise, in the presence of Leona. Strong and slender she stood, with the symetry of some ancient Goddess. Laughing blue eyes and a heart warming smile gave evidence of gayety, vitality, and good-naturedness. Waving brown hair cascaded around soft shoulders and added to her beauty. Heaving breasts taking in the purity of the Western air

suggested maturity. For a short while she stood watching the ascending moon and listening to the soul-stirring calls of a Turtle-dove. In the rocks above the ranch-house she made out the scampering form of a Cottontail. A hawk



slowly circled near the spot where she had seen the rabbit and swiftly made its dive. She shuddered at the grim reminder that this was a land of force and iron wills. She thought of the threat of the owner of the Lazy Y Bar (), Jim Farraday, and the accusation that her father had been "using the long rope" with his, Farraday's, cattle. Jim Farraday and "Big Bill" Wyman had always been friendly neighbors up until the past year. True, "Big Bill" had been doing well and the increase in his stock was noticeable and well known. Most people gave his accomplishments credit as being due to good management. His honesty and straight-

forwardness was emphasized in every line of his firm, square jaw. Six foot--two inches he stood and he had lost little of the solidness he had acquired in his younger days handling "the rough string" of various outfits. Not many had dared oppose him during



the days that he had been Sheriff of Big Horn County and those that did had markers in Boot Hill. Jim Farraday had ceased to believe in him though and had made threats to "shoot him on sight." Their places bordered, and how else could he be losing cattle? Except for a couple of Nester holdings owned by Gordon Belmont, mountain ranges separated them from other outfits. Jim had been forced to take a loan from Big Horn's Banker, Gordon Belmont, and payment on it would not be long due. He would have to sell a large portion of his stock at out-throat prices to meet the payment. Yes, Leona thought, suspicion could easily be cast on Bill Wyman because it had

ceased to become a joke that the Sun Bar brand so easily blotted out the Lazy Y Bar brand. Down in the corral "Foot" saw her and whinnied in anxiety for he knew it was time for his apple. It served to break her reverie and she started for the corral. She noticed with approval that "Big Bill" had left the pinto saddled and bridled for her in remembrance of her request to go riding that evening. "Good old Dad," she mused to herself, "I'll bet he made Mother's life happy while she was living." A horse had stumbled with Leona's Mother while racing Bill to the Ranch one evening, and she had died a few hours later. She had left him, Leona, and he had sworn to himself never to let her ride, but then in a country so filled with horses how could he help but give in to her tomboyish pleading? The creaking of the corral gate ceased as Leona dropped the cross-bar and mounted with grace and agility to the back of "Foot". It was but a short ride of a mile to her favorite spot in the cottonwoods on the north bank of the Big Horn River and there she could be alone to think of past events and wonder of the trouble-

some days that seemed to be in store. The slapping tail of a beaver near the shore sounded like a rifle shot as he gave warning of her presence. Where the moonlight glistened on the rippling waters flowing over a sand bar she could make out the dark forms of catfish playfully swimming about. Farther downstream a Doe was taking a young Fawn to the water.

Last week at the dance in town, their Foreman, Roland Hawkins, had asked her to marry him but she had managed to elude a definite answer. When she had spoken to her Dad about him he had simply told her to make her own decisions. It was her life she was living. Much could be said for Roland---- tall, dark headed, and handsome, he attracted many a girl's eye and Leona's girl friends had told her how lucky she was to have the attention of a man like Roland Hawkins. Something indefinable, maybe it was the furtiveness of his eyes, had caused her to mistrust him from the beginning. He had come to Big Horn just a few months before and had sought a job from her father. His horsemanship and apparent range sense had given him high esteem

with her Father and when their previous foreman, Red Karns, was mysteriously killed, Bill gave him the job of Foreman. Hawkins had refused to comment on his past, and where he'd come from Leona did not know. Questions were rarely asked of strangers because many honest, prominent citizens of Big Horn had had shady pasts before settling there. A man was judged by his actions as they appeared and if Hawkins did not wish to disclose his past the matter was scarcely given consideration. After days of thought, Leona had decided that she could do little better and had made up her mind to consent until yesterday when she saw him unmercifully lay the quirt to one of their best saddle horses. She never told "Big Bill" of the incident because she knew the ensuing quarrel would result in bloodshed. "Big Bill's" temper was quick where the treatment of horses was concerned. The slap of a beaver startled her---but was it a beaver? It sounded more like a shot! Crack!! It was a shot! From across the river on a section of Farraday's land! Could it be that they had apprehended a gang of

rustlers? Fervently she hoped that they had trapped them for she was certain her Father was not mixed up in it and that a capture would clear his name. She listened. The shooting had long ceased. Probably someone shooting at a coyote. She mounted "Foot" and turned to go back to the Ranch. Abruptly she stopped; again to listen. Yes, there was a horse heading towards the river from the other side. Suddenly it broke into the clearing along the river's edge and plunged into the water. Valiantly the horse struggled against the swift current. She noticed the rider swaying in the saddle. He was wounded! One of the rustlers perhaps. Quickly she dismounted and pulled off her riding boots, tossing her hat aside. Yes, he was falling and she couldn't stand by and watch a man drown, rustler or no rustler. Anyway, maybe he wasn't a rustler.

CHAPTER TWO

The coming light of a gray dawn was fast spreading thru the sky causing an owl to search for its day-time abode that offered protection against the brilliance of the Western summer sun that would be soon casting its rays in the valley. A buzzard, scavenger of the prairie, started its quest for appeasement of a ravenous appetite. Was that something below for the scavenger to start the day on? No, it was moving. A chipmunk began tugging at a mass of black hair extending out from it. Maybe it was something with which to build its nest. Quickly a hand snatched out but the chipmunk was quicker and it went scurrying away. "Thanks to that chipmunk for waking me," thought Lance Carter, "Maybe I can get an early start today and reach Big Horn before sun-down." Having made up his bed-roll, Lance walked over to where he had placed the saddlebags the night before, when he made camp, and got out a frying pan, coffee pot, bacon, and coffee. It was a simple matter to get a fire started with the use of the pitch he had found on a near by pine tree. A clear mountain stream afforded water for coffee and he soon had everything progressing nicely. He had

hobbled his horse to let him graze and after washing out his cooking utensils with sand in the creek, he found it simple to locate him. The huge gelding thoroughbred was a masterpiece of horseflesh and did justice to the man that owned him.

When Lance had earned first place honors at the Greywolf, Wyoming Annual Rodeo, by being the first man ever to stay with the gelding, the owner had presented him with the horse. Little did the owner realize then that the horse would make it possible for a rustler to make his getaway. One look at Lance and you'd judge him to be an honest and upright owner of some large Outfit and above any suspicion of rustling. His steel-grey eyes were clear and dominant. His features were well defined with thin straight lips, a finely chiseled nose, and a firm jaw that suggested determination. Bare footed he stood six-foot three and the high heels of his boots added to his height. Straight, square

shouldered, narrow waisted, and slim hiped, he resembled a professional fighter and his quick agile movements bespoke of self-assuredness. His eyes, though mischievous, were honest and frank. Lance was good natured and despite his present predicament, he chuckled to himself. Yes, he was wanted in connection with the Rankins brothers gang for cattle rustling in Greywolf, Wyoming. That was a laugh! He'd never seen either of the Rankins brothers let alone belonging to their gang, but try and convince the ranchers of that. He'd headed for Darnell's Ranch about ten miles out of Greywolf and had stumbled on to a couple riders putting a brand to a calf. They'd spied him first, however, and were making their getaway even as his eyes found them. He'd hurried down to untie the calf they'd left hogtied and had just began to undo the knot when a number of Darnell's riders broke over the hill. They hadn't stopped to ask questions for his intentions were evident. They opened fire on him and his only choice was to clear out while he yet had a chance. But who could mistake the gelding he was riding. A

beautiful horse was something none could forget and it was well known that Lance Carter, little more than a stranger in those parts, had won him at the last Rodeo. He chuckled. Yes, they had a price on his head but it was a C.O.D. charge and he hadn't been delivered yet. He wouldn't be if he could help it. Now he was headed for a country, where little, if any, was ever heard of Greywolf and there he could start life anew and be safe. He didn't hurry the gelding for he had been riding him hard. He rolled a quirley and whistled as they jaunted along. The hot sun seemed to be moving fast and shimmering heat-waves ascended from the ground. A Prairie-dog noticed the horse and its rider and scooted to its hole. From a nearby clump of sagebrush a rattlesnake's warning issued forth.

Lance didn't stop for dinner but munched on a piece of dried beef as he traveled. It wouldn't be long until he'd get into Big Horn and there he could enjoy a T-bone steak with mashed spuds and gravy. There he could get a hotel room, get the week's growth of beard shaved off and enjoy a good night's rest. The day wore on and as they came to streams Lance stopped to quench his thirst and that

of his horse. The sun was just setting as Lance topped a rise and he noticed in the distance a winding stand of Cottonwood trees that hid the Big Horn River. Off to the East a full moon was rising and Lance thought of stories he had read of love, moonlight, and a beautiful girl. "Fiddlesticks", he thought. None of that tommyrot for him. Lance had always felt uncomfortable in the presence of a woman anyway. He'd always managed to steer clear of the critters and he'd keep on doing so. As it got darker he noticed the light of a camp-fire down in the valley and headed for it thinking he might be able to pick up a stray bit of information as to the possibilities of obtaining work in these parts. When he got within calling distance he shouted a hello. He noticed with amazement that they were reaching for their guns and then he realized he'd stumbled into some dirty work. Branding irons were laying in the fire. Bullets hummed like a swarm of bees around his head as they opened fire on him. He could plainly see that he was outnumbered but, when he wheeled his horse to escape, he fired a random shot at one of the figures. He saw him fall but at that distance

he couldn't discern whether he'd prepared the rustler for a Coroner's inquest or not. He bent low in the saddle, somehow managing to hang on and retain his senses as he felt a searing sensation go tearing into his left shoulder. Faster and faster he spurred his horse until he saw that they had given up the chase. Futile efforts at trying to rein the gelding in was causing his wound to bleed profusely. He was getting weaker and finding it difficult to maintain his hold. Dimly he heard the splash as the gelding hit the water. Consciousness faded completely as he slipped from the saddle into the tumbling waters of the Big Horn.

CHAPTER THREE

The sound of scraping boot heels and the creaking of a swivel chair, as Harp moved his feet from the desk told the Greywolf, Wyoming Jail that the Deputy had spotted Sheriff Elwood coming up the board walk to his Office. "What's in the news, Harp?", the Sheriff asked as he took his place at the desk. "Have we heard from the Federal Government since we sent the report of rustlers working across the border?" The Deputy referred him to the telegram brought in a short while before. The Sheriff scanned its contents and reached for his hat. "I'd better be getting down to the Depot. There's a Federal Agent arriving this morning on the seven O'clock train." Quiet reigned in the Office once more when the creaking of the swivel chair announced that the Deputy had placed his feet in a comfortable position on the desk.

The train was just jerking to a stop as the Sheriff reached the Station. He greeted the Lawman, grunted when the Agent refused the proffered cigar, and invited him to his Office.

"Sheriff, you say these Rankins brothers are carrying on operations across the borders of Wyoming

and Montana? That's a violation of a Federal Law and demands investigation. You suspect this Lance Carter to be holed up with them do you?"

"Mr., I'll admit I'm Sheriff and when a man is caught in an act he's supposed to be guilty but somehow I can't believe Lance Carter is tied in with either Jim or Rodney Rankins."

"You think then, Sheriff, that he's on his own hook?", the Federal Agent queried.

"No Sir, I don't. I knew Lance Carter when he took top honors at the Rodeo and I don't think that he was ever caught in the act of rustling. You know that circumstantial evidence sometimes makes things appear what they ain't."

"Well Sheriff, it looks as if this is a case for the Federal Government and I'm going to do everything in my power to bring those Rankins brothers to trial. I'll hold in mind what you said about Lance Carter though."

Late that evening a rider was seen headed north from Greywolf.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Lance's eyes finally focused he found himself gazing at anxious but exceedingly beautiful features. Vaguely he tried to regain his senses and reason how he happened to be resting in the lap of such a lovely creature. Merely an apparition, he thought. But why try to think? Just keep on dreaming, but then he spoke, "Where am I? Wait a minute. Don't tell me. I'm in the happy hunting grounds and you're an angel!"

Leona blushed. "Not yet."

He moved and then it struck him. He nearly lost consciousness again but when he returned to his senses he felt for his shoulder. That's funny. Its got a bandage on it. Now he remembered. He'd had a run in with a bunch of rustlers and had evidently come out second best. He'd fallen from the horse into the river. He would have drowned! Aloud he spoke, "You saved my life! I can say this, I don't know of anyone I'd rather owe my life to."

Leona's face colored, "Lister here, Mister, your life isn't saved yet and I've a good notion to leave you right here."

"Oh please, don't do that. I might catch my

death of dam fool- er -damp foul weather, I mean." He started to rise but a feeling of nausea overcame him and he sank down again.

"Here, I'll help you. Is that your horse, that gelding standing over there? Well, if you can hang on, I'll put you on him and take you back to the Ranch. You won't be able to go anywhere for some time. Western hospitality forces me to acknowledge you as our guest. Now let's get going."

"Thank you, Ma'am. I'll be able to make it."

They rode back to the ranch in silence, each deep in thoughts of the other. Leona couldn't help but wonder where he came from and what his business was in the Big Horn Valley. Perhaps he belonged to the gang that was responsible for the loss of Mr. Farraday's cattle; causing the blame to be cast on her Father. Maybe they'd had a quarrel over shares and he had shot it out with them and escaped. He might be some fugitive from the law with a price on his head and she could turn him over to the Sheriff and collect the reward. In some ways he resembled an Outlaw. He was built like a fighter and his single worn

holster swung low and seemed to fit his being. From the beard though, he looked, to her expert eye, as if he had been traveling for days. Maybe, somewhere, he'd had a skirmish with the law and they'd chased him here. His eyes look honest, she thought, and they don't have the look of a killer. Oh well, why should she worry about it? "Big Bill" would know what to do.

To himself, Lance thought of his mental wanderings of a couple hours before, "Moonlight, love with a beautiful girl, tommyrot." Now he wasn't so sure. He'd never seen anything so breath-takingly beautiful before. She said he'd have to remain at their house until his wound healed. Well, here's one time where he'd fight to stay sick.

From the porch Bill Wyman saw them coming and hurried to meet them. "Never mind the explanations, Daughter. Just what is this? The wild results of some of your target practise? Never mind. Help me get this man into the house. He's badly wounded." Together they carried him into the house and placed him on to a bed. "Go get some hot water, Leona, and that bottle of alcohol in

the cupboard. We've got to get that piece of lead out of his shoulder."

Lance couldn't help but notice the steadiness of her hands as she assisted her Dad in removing the bullet, nor could she help but note with admiration the steady, unwincing manner with which he withstood the pain. She left the room and reentered with a damp cloth, returning his smile, as she placed it on his forehead.

"Sir, you're probably wondering what I'm doing here and how I come to have a bullet in my shoulder."

Bill turned, "Son, you don't need to tell me a thing. If you want to, okay, but keep it 'til later. Right now you need some rest. Now start getting some shut-eye."

Leona went to her room. She still wondered about him but had to admit that he was a likeable sort of a person. Say, maybe he was a lawman trying to find evidence against her Dad? Well anyway, if he was, he was a good looking lawman.

CHAPTER FIVE

"What's his chances, Boss?"

"I don't think he'll pull through, Rodney.

It looks like he's done for."

The conversation was taking place in a cabin closely hidden by surrounding pine trees. The general appearance of the place, a barn with half a roof caved in, a windlass over an old well with a half rotten line and a rusty bucket, gave evidence of a small farm long abandoned by Nesters. Stars were shining and the moon had reached the peak of its circle. In the yard the stamping hooves of many horses raised dust in the beams of light penetrating thru the cracks made by the uneven logs of the cabin. Within the cabin the flickering light of a kerosene lantern placed gruesome shadows around the lone room. A group of tense-faced riders were gathered around a bed wherein lay one of their men. A heavy set man of medium height, dressed in a well tailored suit of expensive riding clothes was placing a bottle to the lips of the dying rustler. The wounded man stirred and opened his eyes. His lips moved feebly, "Is Rodney here?"

"I'm right here, Jim. What did you want to

tell me?"

"Rodney I can't last long, but there's one thing I want to ask of you. If you ever run across that damn meddler that did me in, put him down deep for me, will yuh?"

"You bet I will, Jim", the man referred to answered.

Fear entered into the glazing eyes of the dying man as his face contorted. His body jerked convulsively and then he lay still. The heavy-set man rose from the side of the bed. "He's dead, Rodney. You'd better get back to the Sun Bar. Wyman's men are apt to get suspicious."

"That was my Brother, Boss", his face was filled with rage, "take care of him for me", he asked as he turned to go.

"Dirks and I will take care of him, Rodney. If you can get away without arousing suspicion, meet me in town tomorrow. Remember now."

The grief stricken man nodded assent as he opened the door and left the cabin. They listened to the hoof beats of his horse fade away into the night and then the heavy-set man spoke, "Tell me just what happened, Dirks." Dirks, one of the outlaws

in the room, looked up.

"We had gone over on tuh Farraday's place like yuh said, Boss, and had just finished changin' one of the Lazy Y Bar brands to a Sun Bar when this hombre rode up and hollered at us. We didn't know whether it was one of Farraday's riders or Wyman's but we wasn't takin' no chances. We didn't want him ridin' up there so we opened fire on him. Whoever he was he's a right good shot 'cause he just fired once and dropped Jim here. Don't know if we hit him. He made a break for it and we took out after him. We didn't have a chance tho'. I've never seen a horse to match the one he was ridin'. It was a big gelding and that horse was plenty fast!"

The heavy-set man thought a bit. "A big gelding, eh? Probably some stranger riding thru. Well, whoever he was, he gave a dose of lead poisoning to one of the Rankins brothers!"

CHAPTER SIX

The town of Big Horn was just coming to life and business houses were just opening as a trail worn rider dismounted and tied the reins of his horse to the hitching rail outside the Office of Big Horn's representative of Law and Order. He strode within and introduced himself to the Sheriff. "My name's Freeman, John Freeman." He presented his credentials and pulled up a chair. "Sheriff have you ever run across anyone that resembled these pictures? They're pictures of the Rankins brothers. One is a picture of a fella that goes by the name of Lance Carter. They're wanted for rustling in Greywolf, Wyoming." The Sheriff studied the photos for a minute.

"That one picture there, it sure resembles one fellow I know. He came here about three months ago. You've got it labeled Rodney Rankins. That's close. This guy's handle is Roland Hawkins. He's Foreman at the Sun Bar, owned by Bill Wyman. Say, you don't

think---?"

"Yes I do, Sheriff," The Agent spoke up. "If this fellow resembles that picture and he's been here about as long as you say, it ties in. According to confirmed reports the Rankins brothers have been operating in this locality about that long, moving cattle across the border into Wyoming. I'm of the opinion that this Lance Carter handled the strings at the other end until criminal evidence was found against him and he was forced to take a leave of absence. He's probably joined the gang here by now. Have there been any reports of rustling here in the Valley?"

"Why yes, come to think of it, there has been. Fellow by the name of Farraday, owns the Lazy Y Bar, claims he's been losing cattle. He accuses Bill Wyman of the Sun Bar, but---"

The Agent interrupted, "Who'd you say? Bill Wyman of the Sun Bar? There's a possibility that he's tied up in this thing. Didn't you tell me a bit ago that that was where this Hawkins, alias Rankins perhaps, was Foreman?"

"Why yes, I did." The Sheriff pondered a moment. "No, I don't think Wyman is that sort. He and

his wife came here over thirty years ago. I remember the day Mrs. Wyman was killed. Why he held a term as Sheriff here. No, he hasn't got anything to do with the rustling of Farraday's cattle or anybody else's."

"We can't be any too sure of that, Sheriff. Here's this Hawkins, or Rankins, guy working for him. He hasn't been losing any cattle you say, and look at those two brands. Be pretty easy to change a Lazy Y Bar to a Sun Bar! I wouldn't be surprised if he's at the head of it."

"Sure", the Sheriff spoke up, "it looks like an open and shut case but I'll lay ten to one that when this affair's cleared up you'll find Wyman didn't have a hand in it."

"You might be right, Sheriff. Just the same I'm not going to overlook any possible angles. Moving uninspected cattle, stolen cattle at that, across a State border is a Federal offense. I'm up here to put a stop to it and see if I can't get a line on these Rankins brothers. Will you throw in with me?"

"You bet I will," the Sheriff stated. "Just what plans have you got in mind?"

"Just this. First I want to see a map of this

region. If we can locate their hideout we can form a Posse and capture them."

"I've got a map here in my desk." The Sheriff opened a drawer and unrolled a large topographical map across the desk top. He pointed to a winding ribbon crossing the length of the map. "Here's the Big Horn River. Over here on this side the Lazy Y Bar is located. The Lazy Y Bar is owned by Farraday. Wyman's Ranch borders on the river also, directly across from Farraday's right here."

"This section you've got marked off here," the Agent asked, "who owns it?"

"That? Oh that's an old Nester holding. Gordon Belmont, the Banker here owns that."

"The Banker, eh? It looks like a good location for a hideout. I think I'll go over and have a talk with Belmont. In the meantime, you just sit tight. I'll get word in to you somehow and let you know how things are going." The Agent rose, shook hands with the Sheriff and walked out of the building. His roving eyes looked up and down Big Horn's Main Street and then he turned towards the Bank. The Bank was busy and filled with many occupants but the Agent's experienced appraisal quickly picked

out the figure of the Bank President. He wondered if he always wore those expensively tailored riding clothes. Bald headed, heavy-set, and of medium height, he gave the impression of a man used to giving orders, not taking them. The Agent identified himself and asked if they could go into the Banker's Office where they could be in private. The Banker hesitated. "What could a Federal Agent be wanting of him?" but then he led him into an adjoining room. The Agent spoke, "I hear you own a section of land next to Farraday's. Have you inspected that place lately? You haven't seen any signs of anyone using that cabin on it?"

The Banker's face relaxed, "So that's what you wanted to see me about? No, I haven't been out there for some time. Why do you ask?"

The Agent explained his position. "There's been rumors that the Rankins brothers have been operating in this region. I believe they're the

gang that's been rustling cattle across the border. That's what I'm up here about."

"Oh I see!" Belmont commented as he rose from the chair. "Well I don't know. I haven't been out there. I'd have liked to have been of some help to you. If at any time I can be of assistance, let me know."

Fishy acting bird, the Agent thought to himself as he walked out of the Bank building. "Well I guess the next move is to have a look in on Farraday and get his side of the story."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bill Wyman listened to the story of the happenings of the night before. When Lance had finished the Rancher rose. "Leona, I'm riding into town about noon today. Farraday might be there and we can talk this over if I can get him to listen to me. Take care of this sick guy here and see to it that he doesn't get any foolish notions in his head about getting up." When Bill had left, Leona went into the kitchen to fix Lance a lunch. So he wasn't mixed up with the rustlers after all. He was handsome, she thought. She wondered if he was just traveling through and if he'd be moving on when he got well. She compared him with Roland Hawkins and found the comparison to be much in Lance's favor. And just to think, a few days ago she had been ready to consent to Roland's proposal. She breathed a sigh of relief. She hoped Lance would remain and maybe take a job with her father.

Bill Wyman didn't hurry his trip to Town. He took a roundabout way across part of his range to look over his stock. He headed for the north springs. He knew some of his cattle would be gathered there. He thought of going up to one of the cabins they used as headquarters to get a report from his Foreman, Roland

Hawkins, but then changed his mind, deciding it would be too much out of his way. Looking over the cattle gathered at the springs he discovered something that verified Lance's story and explained why Farraday was making accusations against him. A yearling that had probably been driven across the river by the gang Lance had ran into was freshly branded by a Sun Bar iron but the job was poorly enough done that the former Lazy Y Bar brand could be discerned. He shook with rage as full realization of the rustler's clever scheme struck him. Determined now to find Jim Farraday, he hurried on into Town. He thought it odd that Hawkins had never noticed any changed brands or if he had, why hadn't he reported it to him? As he turned a corner on to Big Horn's main street he noticed a figure just entering through the swinging doors of the Stockmen's Bar. By God, it was Hawkins! What was he doing in Town when

he had given him strict orders to stay up on the West range until they'd finished rounding up the stock! He quickly tied his horse to the hitching rail and entered the Saloon just in time to see Hawkins leave with Belmont to a back room. "Some mighty queer doings here," he thought. "Say, that room is next to the alley! Maybe if I can get around behind--? The sun has gone down. I think it's dark enough so that no one will see me."

The Banker closed the door to the room, walked over to a desk, and poured a drink. "I'm glad you remembered I told you to meet me in Town today, Rodney. I've got something important to tell you."

"Spill it Boss. I'm all ears."

"We've got to keep a lookout, Rodney. There's a Federal Agent in Town."

"A Federal Agent?!!!"

"Yeah, he was in the Bank this morning asking me about that cabin we're using for a hideout. I want you to ride back out there, get the boys, and clear out. If this Federal Agent finds a few suspicious brands on Wyman's cattle he'll arrest Wyman. After everything's blown over I'll send word to you."

You'd better get going." Rodney rose to go but a knock on the door halted him. "Who is it?"

"It's me Boss, Dirks."

"Let him in, Rodney. Well, what brought you into town, Dirks?"

"It's Farraday, Boss. He's ridin' in tuh town tuh get a Posse! There's a Federal Agent out there. Farraday ran into our hideout today. I was at the Ranch and overheard him tell this Agent about it. The Agent told him tuh get into town and tell the Sheriff tuh form a Posse and come out there. The Agent's on his way now tuh the hideout."

"You say Farraday is on his way now to the Sheriff? We gotta stop him! You know where that alley is just as you come into town, Dirks? Wait there and get him as he comes by. Do a good job now!"

"You bet I will, Boss."

Bill Wyman backed away from the window where he'd been listening. "So Hawkins is one of the rustlers! And his name is Rodney, not Roland. Farraday's coming into town to get a Posse. They're going to ambush him! Not if I can help

it," he murmured to himself as he started running down the alley.

"What's all the excitement about, Boss? Did Dirks get Farraday?"

"Yeah, he got him all right but that isn't really what the excitement's about. Dirks got there just as Farraday was riding into town and drilled him twice as he went by. He started to get the hell out of there and someone saw him and fired a couple shots at him. Missed though. It turned out to be Wyman that shot at Dirks. Well, they found Wyman over Farraday's body. Everyone knew the threats Farraday had made to shoot Wyman on sight. Two shots in Farraday's body. Two shots out of Wyman's gun. They think Wyman decided to get Farraday the easy way before Farraday got him. The Sheriff has arrested Wyman for murder. Nothing could be better. Our best bet now is to get out to the hideout and get this Federal Agent. They'll think Wyman's men shot him. You had better take the boys and skip out until all's safe again anyway, Rodney."

"Just as you say, Boss. I'll get the boys but I'm taking Wyman's Daughter with me when I go.

Sure, I'll marry her when we get to some Town.
When we come back I'll have the Sun Bar and you'll
have the Lazy Y Bar with that mortgage you've got
on Farraday's place. The Widow will be more than
glad to give it up."

"Okay, Rodney. Get the girl if you want to
but don't waste any time about it. Hurry on out
to the hideout. I'll ride straight for there."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"How are you feeling, Lance?" Leona asked as she came into the room.

"Fine, Miss Wyman, fine."

"Didn't I tell you to call me Leona? That other sounds too formal. Here's your supper. It's a little late but I had to wait until you woke up."

"Don't leave, Leona. Sit down here for a bit and talk to me."

"What shall I talk about, Lance?"

"Just talk about anything. By the way, what are you so nervous about? You act as if you were worried about something."

"I'm worried about Dad. He should have been home by this time. There's someone at the door. That's probably him now. I must have left the door locked." She walked into the front room and opened the door. "Roland, what are you doing here?! Has something happened to Dad?!!!"

"Calm your fears, young Lady. Nothing's happened to your Dad. I just came to court my fair Lady, that's all. How's about you and me eloping? What do you say?"

"Get out of this house this instant, Roland Hawkins! If Dad were here you wouldn't come in here acting like that. How did you know he was

gone? What has happened to him?"

"Leona, my sweet, what's wrong? I asked you a week ago if you'd marry me and you were real nice about it. Enough of this foolishness," he spoke harshly, "You're coming with me." He grabbed her roughly by the waist and began carrying her struggling figure towards the door.

Lance had heard enough. He burst into the front room with his gun in hand. "Let go of that girl, Mister. I'm not claiming to know whether or not you got any right to take her but it sounded to me like she didn't want to go with you."

"Well I'll be damned! If it ain't the fella that was riding that gelding last night. Here's where you get yours, nosey, in payment for my Brother's death!"

Hawkins started reaching for his guns. Lance couldn't fire for fear of hitting Leona. He made a leap for him. He saw a blinding light and it felt as if a ton of rock had landed on his head as he went reeling off into space.

CHAPTER NINE

The door of the cabin opened and Belmont stepped into the room. "Well boys, what have you got here? It looks like you did a fine job. How'd you capture him?"

One of the rustlers spoke up. "Slim here, was out standing guard at the pass when this bird came riding in. Slim got the drop on him and brought him to the cabin. He was wearing a badge, Boss. Had papers on him that says he's a Federal Agent. We didn't know whether to let a little daylight into him or not. I was just getting ready to ride to town after you."

"There's plenty of time to fix him up for burial, boys. I'd like to have a little talk with him first. He's the gent that was in the Bank to see me this morning. You get to the bottom of things quick, don't you Mr. - er - Freeman I believe you said your name was, didn't you?"

The Agent lay bound hand and foot in a corner of the room. He knew he was finished but there was no fear in his gaze as he looked the Banker over. "You can kill me but you forget one thing. You're fooling with the Federal Government. In fact, there's a Posse on it's way now. You'll never get

away with it, Belmont," the Agent spoke defiantly.

"There's where you've been outfoxed Mr. Freeman. It just so happens that there isn't any Posse on its way. Mr. Farraday didn't quite get to the Sheriff.. One of our boys got him first. Don't worry, there won't be any investigation. Mr. Wyman stuck his nose out too far and now he's jailed for the killing of Mr. Farraday. You don't need to worry about who will get the blame for knocking you off either. I'll take the credit for it but unofficially only. You came here to get the Rankins brothers did you, Lawman? Well, one of them is dead like you're going to be. Maybe you can find him after you get where he is." The Banker guffawed at his own dour humor.

"You may get away with it now but there's always a reckoning somewhere, Belmont," the Agent replied. The Banker, with an oath, raised his foot in anger to kick the Lawman but was interrupted by one of his men with---"Someone's ridin' up, Boss!"

"Go see who it is."

"It's Rodney and someone's with him!"

"Probably the girl. Let him in."

Rodney entered the cabin pushing Leona in front

of him. His scratched face and torn shirt showed that she hadn't come meekly. Her hands were tied behind her but her eyes blazed in righteous anger.

"She fights like a wildcat, Boss, but I'll work her into submission. Just give me a little more time and she'll find that iron will of hers is bendable."

"You beast!" Leona vented chokingly, "You killed Lance!"

"That's right, Boss. I found that damn rat that did Jim in and paid my debt. We'd hit him that night and he was out at my Sweetie's place recuperatin'. He'll have a tough time getting over that last one. I see you've caught Mr. John Law. Is he enjoying his prelude to Hell?"

"He's pretty defiant yet, Rodney. I think a little lead will soften his fighting ardor," the Banker answered.

"You haven't got any iodine stored away somewhere have you Boss? I'd like to doctor up a few places where that she-cat bit me. She's going to be hard to tame."

"There's some liquor over there on the table. That will do," the Banker answered with a grin. "You

should've left her there."

After a half hour of contemplating their next moves and planning where they'd light out to, the Gang rose to go. "How about the pleasure of ventilating him, Boss. It was me he was after you know."

"Go ahead," the Banker laughed.

The door of the cabin flew open. "Just a minute. If there's going to be any killing done around here, I'll do it." Framed in the doorway stood the stalwart figure of Lance Carter. Blood streamed down his face from a head wound caused by a creasing bullet. His steel-grey eyes were piercing as he stood with a six-gun grasped in his right hand. His left arm hung limp but his attitude left no doubts as to his ability to handle the other. He swayed but sheer grit forced him to remain upright.

"Damn my soul to Hell if it isn't the meddler again! I thought I'd put you out of the way once," Rodney cursed as he reached for his gun. The weapon raised in an arc as it cleared its holster but its bullet dug wood in the side of the door when the soft thud of a slug striking flesh sound-

ed as Carter's gun blazed. As Rankins fell with a bullet through his heart, the Banker reached for the girl and pawed for a derringer hidden away in a shoulder holster. With the girl as a shield the boisterous Banker aimed the deadly midget-sized fire-arm at Lance's mid-section. "I don't know who you are or where you came from stranger but you should be able to reason how suddenly that gun might burn your hand if you hold on to it much longer."

Lance's grip relaxed and his gun fell to the floor. The last minute's episodes had proved to be too much for Lance and his knees buckled under him as he went down.

"His fangs are pulled. Drag him over into the corner with that Lawman boys. I think I'll have a little spelling bee with you and him, Mr. Freeman. See if you can't make out the letters these bullets circle as they head your direction. I think you'll find they spell death!"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Belmont!"

The Banker pivoted on his heels towards the business end of a shotgun glinting in the light streaming from the doorway. His gun clattered on

the floor as the Sheriff and his Posse took charge. The dumfounded Banker looked at the Sheriff in askance. The Sheriff enlightened him.

"I believed Wyman's story about Farraday riding in for a Posse, Belmont. It tied in with what Freeman had told me. Besides I didn't believe he was the type that would or could shoot a man from ambush."

"Leona! Are you all right?"

"Oh Dad! Come here quick and give me a hand with Lance. I'm afraid he's been killed!"

CONCLUSION

"Dad, how's Lance? Tell me please!"

"I don't know, Leona. He's still unconscious. He's a fine lad, Leona. Here comes the Doctor now."

"You may go in now if you wish Miss Wyman. I think you're going to lose something better than your Ranch, Bill," the Doctor said when Leona had left, "Let's stay out here. I've got a hunch they've got something to talk over."

The door to Lance's room flew open and Leona came running in. "Lance, darling, are you all right?"

"Why of course I'm all right. What did I do? Fall asleep while you were talking to me, Leona? Well if I did I sure had one dream to top all dreams", and he reached for his forehead. "I've got a bandage there all right. It wasn't a dream. Where's that Federal Agent, Leona? Is he hanging around waiting for me to get well?"

"He's left with Belmont. He told me all about it. Your name is cleared, Lance."

"It is?! Then I can go back to Greywolf!"

"Do you have to go back to Greywolf, Lance?"

"Would you want me to stay, Leona?"

There was no mistaking Leona's affection for him as she told him of Mrs. Farraday's intentions to sell her Ranch and go back East.

"But Leona, dear," Lance remonstrated, "where will I get the money?"

"You seem to forget, darling, that there was quite a handsome reward out for the Rankins brothers and they weren't particular whether they were dead or alive!" Leona replied.

"I'll take that place on one condition, Leona," Lance answered.

"What's the condition, Lance?" she asked demurely.

"That I have you for a life time partner."

Light coming through the window silhouetted the blending outlines of two sets of features. The Moon was rising over the edge of the Big Horn Valley.