

July 23, 1985
1740 hours
Double M Ranch
Beaver Creek, MT

Jackson MacKenzie whistled Cathy's new favorite song, *Holding Out for a Hero* , on his way from the barn to the main house for dinner. The two-story farmhouse with a wraparound covered porch glowed white in the late afternoon sun. Cathy reminded him constantly how the lyrics reminded her of him. Never in a million years was he a white knight. Too many deaths by his hands.

Today turned from one of uncertainty to fantastic. His youngest horse, Shotgun, worked well during the roundup. The size of the steers exceeded his expectations, each one weighing sixteen-to-eighteen hundred pounds. The ranch would eclipse last quarter's sales figures tenfold at the auction this weekend.

Crunching gravel invaded his thoughts. Jackson recognized his best friend Harry's brown Ford Bronco and met him at the driver's door, looking him in the eyes. They were the same height—six foot one. "What're you doing here? You never come without calling first. Has something happened?"

"Everything's fine. We need to talk." Harry nodded at the bunkhouse. "Are Ty and Chief around?"

"Yeah. They headed to the house a few minutes ago. Why?"

"Let's go inside." Harry grabbed his briefcase from the passenger seat. "The general will be interested in this too."

As they entered the house, Jackson spotted the telltale outline of a Colt .45 pistol in Harry's waistband, under his untucked shirt. *Why's he armed?*

Jackson stopped at the kitchen door as Harry continued toward the ranch office. "Aunt Sara, Harry's here without Gabby and JJ. Can you set an extra place at the table? He wants to have a powwow. We might be late for dinner."

Sara turned from the stove and smiled. Her coffered silver hair sparkled in the overhead light. "Sure. Go take care of your business first. If Harry's here without his wife and that exuberant godson of yours, it's important. Dinner can wait. I'll keep it warm."

"Thanks." Jackson kissed her cheek then went into the dining room, where his godfather Mangus Malone and two friends, fellow AWOL Army fugitives, 1st Lieutenant Tyler "Ty" Carter and SFC Dakota "Chief" Blackwater, sat at the table. "Hey, guys, go to the office. Harry showed up unannounced."

Harry stood next to the office doorway as they filed inside. "Sorry for the short notice. It'll be worth it."

Mangus placed the desk chair in front of the couch, taking up every bit of it as he sat down, looking like a gruff bear with a silver-white Marine regulation high and tight haircut.

Chief and Ty sat on either side of Mangus in folding chairs from the closet. Chief's chair creaked from his massive six-foot-two-inch frame. Ty, at five-foot-ten, looked like a slim curly brown-haired suntanned movie star but darker-skinned than Chief, a full-blood Osage Indian.

Jackson took a seat beside Harry on the couch. "What got you on the road without calling first?"

"A package arrived from Colonel Cord yesterday." Harry placed his pistol alongside his briefcase on the coffee table. "Initially, I thought it might be Cain trying to take me out with something that goes boom."

"Because you turned down that chicken-shit mission to Africa last week? The one that would have got all of us killed."

"Yeah. That's why I made sure the package wasn't booby-trapped." Harry unlocked the briefcase, pulled out a piece of paper, and handed it to him. "Read this first."