

## *ETHAN'S BOYS*

### 1

It was early morning and late May. The sun had risen hot. By mid-morning it would be another scorcher.

Ethan Tanner sat at the large mahogany dinner table drinking his last cup of coffee. Even though Juanita was growing old, she still made a fine cup of coffee. Before Ethan could down his last swallow, Davis Adams, head-foreman of the Tanner's ranch entered the dining room. Davis Adams stood slightly less than six feet tall, lean with a broad, raw-boned frame and an unmanageable head of thick chestnut hair. He looked nervous. Adams hated these morning reports. Ethan raised his coffee cup to his lips and eyed his foreman. Adams was twisting his sweat-stained hat around in his rough hands. He was concentrating his gaze on the toes of his well-worn boots.

Ethan sat his cup down and turned to face his foreman.

"Well, Adams, what do you have to tell me?" Ethan's tone was gruff. He had become a hardened, ill-tempered man. The past seven years of pain and loss had nearly broken him, but he denied destiny any joy from his personal tragedies.

Ethan Tanner had overcome and moved on, maintaining his vast empire and wealth.

"The men trailed the 'Ghost Stallion' to the SouthBound, but lost his trail. They said its tracks just died off without a trace. They stuck around to try to pick up a new trail, but couldn't find a track." Davis Adams felt sweat forming along his hairline.

Ethan stared at Adams. “*Ghost Stallion?* Who in-hell thought that one up, Adams? *You?*” Ethan was visibly irritated. Adams squirmed.

“It’s what some of the men are calling the ‘Marauder’, Mr. Tanner. Some say it ain’t a real stallion. That’s why he ain’t been caught, or seen for that matter”, Adams stated nervously.

“It’s no *ghost* stealing my best mares, Adams! It’s a rogue stallion. *A marauder*. That’s all! You’re men can’t see it, track it or catch it, so it suddenly becomes a ‘ghost’, a spirit with four legs, tail and mane! Bah! Superstitious nonsense! I hope you don’t believe in this...this ‘*ghost stallion*’ bull.” Tanner’s tone was threatening. Adams shifted his weight.

“No, sir, Mr. Tanner. I know it ain’t no ghost, but its getting some of the men a might bit edgy. They’re out every day and every day it’s the same, no sight of the ‘Marauder’. Makes some of the men feel...well...spooked, that’s all.”

“How many mares lost to the Marauder to date, Adams?”

“ ‘Bout five hundred, Mr. Tanner, countin’ this morning.” Ethan blinked hard.

“ This morning? Where were the men? What the hell are you doing, Adams?”

Before Davis Adams could explain, Ethan rose and squarely faced him. “I want you to set a watch, thirty-six hour watch, at the mouth of the Canyon Maze. That’s where that marauding bastard has to be taking my mares! You’ll catch it there and that should dispel any more superstitious nonsense!” Ethan’s blue-gray eyes were challenging, “*and* I want that beast *alive!*” Ethan stood up and rose his full six feet five height. Adams cleared his throat.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Tanner.” Adams knees were beginning to feel weak. He wanted to get away from the ‘old man’s’ angry glare. Ethan seemed to rise up even taller.

“Then see to it, Adams!”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Tanner. I got six good men for the job!” Adams tried to sound confident.

“Now, Mr. Adams!” Ethan hissed, leaning into Adams face. Ethan’s scalding anger stung Davis Adams. He spun on his heels and stepped double-time out the front door and hurried toward the corral and sixteen men breaking wild horses.

Jeeters Kilroy watched his boss hot-footing it towards he and the others. Stopping short, he took a deep breath then entered the corral. Kilroy knew by the strained look on Davis Adam’s face, his meeting with Tanner didn’t go well, but then, in never did. Tanner was a hard case. He paid his help fair and well, but gave no ground for poor results. Kilroy respected the ‘old man’, but kept his distance. Adams was different. A compassionate and fair enough foreman. Kilroy had worked for many ranch bosses over the years and Adams had proven himself a good man.

“What’s the word, Davis?” Kilroy asked. Adams removed his hat and swiped his forearm across his brow.

“Mr. Tanner’s not happy with the loss of more of his mares. ‘Specially this morning’s. He thinks you fellows are neglectin’ watch.” Adams paused. “But, Mr. Tanner’s got a plan.” Adams invoked cutting laughter from his men that startled him. “You won’t be laughin’ when I tell you the next move on the ‘Marauder’”, he barked. The men quieted.

“So. Don’t keep us in suspense lad, what’s on ya’ mind for the capture of the ‘Ghost’?” asked Blackie McDivens. McDivens was the oldest man working for Tanner and had been one of the first Irish trappers who came down from the North Mountain to work the ranch after winter trapping. There had been money to be made from fox, wolf and beaver pelts then, but no more. Most of the Northern Mountain had been trapped out years ago, leaving McDivens ranching for Tanner year round. It was a hard living to be made, but Tanner always paid well and McDivens had been able to keep a dry roof over his head.

“Gather round men. There’ll be night watch tonight.” The men groaned.

“Night watch! For a ‘ghost’?” complained Ryan Kendrall. Kendrall had signed on to the Tanner ranch three seasons ago. He was a good Irish ranch-hand, but didn’t see the point in beating the issue of a lone wild stallion and the loss of five hundred mares day in and day out, and now pulling a night watch. “Setting watch here, now that’s something to consider, but going ‘ghost hunting’, well....” Kendrall stopped in mid-sentence. The anxious looks on the other men’s faces told their own stories. Davis Adams ignored his men’s grumbling.

“Kilroy, Kendrall, McDivens, Mansfield, Tighe, Bannister and Franklin! You six men gather up enough gear for three nights and head out to the Canyon Maze. Set up camp at its mouth and watch for the ‘Marauder’. Mr. Tanner thinks...he’s sure...that’s where the Marauder takes the mares. Any questions?” Adams surveyed the six men, all looking pissed-to-the-gills.

“Yeah. I got a question for ya’.” Kilroy spat on the ground and cocked an eye toward Adams. “How you catch a ghost?” Adams face darkened.

“See here, Kilroy, I don’t believe in ghosts! And neither do you, any of you”, Adams looked at each man’s sullen face, “We got a *marauder* on our hands, that’s *all*. So we catch the bastard and make Mr. Tanner happy. *Right?* And Mr. Tanner *wants* it alive” The men didn’t often see Adams angry, but if this was his worst, it was enough.

“All right. Maybe it *ain’t* no ghost, but it don’t behave like a livin’ creature either, now do it?” rebutted McDivens. “I mean, look how it comes in right under our noses and runs off with a dozen or more prime mares, like it knows when we *aren’t* with the mares. How da’ ya’ explain *that*, Adams?”

“Can’t and don’t have to. All I have...all *we* have to do is get the job done and if Mr. Tanner says night watch at Canyon Maze, then night watch it is. Got it!”

“We got it”, mumbled Tighe. He was the youngest of the ranch-hands, only twenty-five, but old for his years. He had been punching cows and breaking horses since he was twelve. He didn’t like night watch and he surely didn’t like going near the Canyon Maze. There were too many tales of ‘those-who-never-returned-from-that-Canyon’. He even heard some call it the ‘Labyrinth-of-Death’. It gave him the willies. He shuddered as a rippling chill ran the length of his spine. He could feel the tiny hairs at the base of his neck standing at attention.

“Come on, Tighe. Let’s get to that blasted Canyon before nightfall!”

“I’m comin’, I’m comin’, Kilroy. Keep yer’ chaps on, will ya?” Kilroy laughed to himself. He knew the boy feared that Canyon. He kept it to himself. No need embarrassing the boy by telling the others. Besides, if the truth were told, none of them appreciated going near the Canyon. Something spooky about it. Something...unholy.