

Peach Tree Ranch



**His future made him
change his past**

Paul Clifton

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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CHAPTER ONE

Falling

Allton knew it was his fault...he almost fell asleep in the saddle. The afternoon was warm, and the ride thus far had been completely uneventful. One of Trigger's finer qualities was his long, easy stride that seemed to rock him into a light slumber after a little while on the trail.

As Allton rode around the ridge nose he couldn't help but notice the fresh clean air that wafted from the forest. He especially noticed the vivid contrast of the rich dark tree line against the blue sky.

His attention suddenly shifted as he felt Trigger's right hind leg started to give way. Then he heard the loose shale and soil slide down the embankment. They had experienced wet weather of late, and the ground was loose with moisture. As he became more alert, Allton could hear the leather girth strap strain against the shifting weight of saddle and rider. It dawned on him that Trigger was struggling to find his footing now on his right front leg as well. The more he struggled to gain his rear footing, the more pressure it put on his front leg.

The trail was narrow. The moist earth would not hold the small, loose pieces of shale this ridge nose was made of. They had ridden this trail many times, at this time of year too. Conditions were such that on this trip, a relaxed rider could get into trouble, and Allton had become a little too relaxed.

As Trigger continued to fight the loose shale, he lost a little ground with each effort. He would flail with his front leg, then his hind leg. He couldn't find anything solid enough to hold.

By now, Allton had begun to shift his weight uphill, but this made matters worse for Trigger. As he shifted his weight up, it put pressure downward on Trigger. Allton should have rolled out of the saddled in an uphill motion but, by now it was too late.

Allton was beginning to get an uneasy feeling as he felt himself start to slide off the trail. A rider always keeps his boots loose in the stirrups and a little backed out for such a situation like this, in these conditions.

As horse started to go one way, and rider the other, all the slack in his right leg suddenly tightened.

He could feel himself being pulled over and away from the uphill side of the trail. He knew they were starting to roll down because his left stirrup hit the ground momentarily before the momentum forced them over the edge of the trail. The roll happened so fast. Allton thought his best option was to roll with the horse. Maybe that would prevent serious injury.

He felt the weight of Trigger roll across his leg. But he didn't feel any pain like a bone might have been broken. Trigger continued to roll on over Allton's body causing him to momentarily feel rocks and small pieces of limbs and sticks pressing into his back.

He hoped Trigger would be okay.



Allton had left the ranch about three hours earlier. He was riding into Moffett Canyon like he had done the past few years. He would search for stray cattle that hadn't come down with the rest of the herd. When cooler weather set in, most of the cows moved down on their own. Pretty much routine every year, he'd ride out for one or two nights and find fifteen or twenty head of cattle to nudge down to the lower country before winter.

It was mid-September. In three or four weeks, this canyon could be a foot or two deep in snow. But right now, the weather was beautiful, not a cloud in sight. Should have been an easy task, but you just never knew.

A time or two, Allton had been caught in storms, but not anything that prevented him from getting back home safely. He always came back with a few of those stray cows.

Back at the ranch that morning, Allton had ridden out without the least concern that anything disastrous would happen. Hank, Allton's father, was fixing some corral posts and rails that had needed it for some time. Mellie was in her garden, checking for ripe tomatoes.

Mellie did love her garden and peach trees. That had been one of the first things they had done when they were first married, plant peach trees. They set out around ten or twelve trees but lost three or four to storms or disease or other things. She liked to replant a couple every year to keep the number of trees around a dozen or so.

Seemed almost every fall they had bushels and bushels of peaches. Mellie would spend hours on end in the kitchen canning peaches. They had a path worn in the ground from carrying jars of them out to the cellar every year.

Allton had to admit, in the dead of winter, those canned peaches were a true delight. The family would sit around the fireplace after supper to enjoy them. For a family of five, it was nothing for two or three quart jars of peaches to be consumed at one sitting.

Allton's and Mellie's son Charles had been in the barn working on some traps as Allton rode out that morning. Trapping had been an interest to Charles for a few years now. Each season he got a little better. After trapping season was over, and he'd worked the hides, Charles would take them into town and sell them. It always gave him something to call his own.

Charles, at fifteen years old, had wanted to come with Allton to search for the cattle. Just last week he had asked his father if he could ride along this time. Charles was excellent on horseback. He could easily keep up and be of help

bringing the cows down. Allton just told him not this year.

But Allton knew that in the next year or two, he was going to have to give in. He knew he needed to let Charles start taking on some of the more important ranch chores. Allton was used to doing things his own way. It was hard for him to let go of that.

Charles was a good worker and could do just about anything his father could do, even at the age of fifteen.

Hank had really brought him along in teaching him how to do things. He had taught Charles about horses and roping. And Charles has been a fast learner. Hank was a lot more patient with him than Allton was. As Charles's grandfather, Hank took the time with him that Allton never seemed to have. As Hank had grown older, he had relaxed a little more about life. Allton hadn't.

Libby, their ten-year-old daughter, was helping Mellie with the garden work. Libby was like her mother—she enjoyed spending time in the garden, and picking peaches. She enjoyed spending time with her mother. After the picking and harvesting, they also canned peaches and vegetables together. It was a big job and Libby proved to be a big help. Like her mother, Libby wasn't afraid of work.



The last thing Allton remembered was the full weight of the horse on top of him. He was on his back, and Trigger's weight was forcing the saddle horn into his gut. Allton didn't feel pain, but he knew, as he lost consciousness, that this was not a good position to be in. He worried about what might happen to Trigger. "The sky is so blue" was Allton's last thought, just before everything went black.

The first thing Allton saw when he opened his eyes was Trigger's legs. Trigger was standing only a little way from where Allton had landed as they rolled down the hill from the trail. Allton slowly rose to his knees and didn't feel anything broken. But he did feel bruised in the stomach from the saddle horn, and his shoulders felt sore. As he stood up, he tried to stretch, but his stomach and shoulders hurt too much. Other than that, he seemed to be okay, no broken bones but maybe bruised ribs.

Trigger seemed to be okay too, no broken legs, only a few hide burns from the rocks he rolled over. The saddle had been twisted a little, but all the straps and rings were okay. Trigger had found a little grass to graze on while Allton was out.

Allton didn't know how long he had been out, but it must have been a while. The day was different than he remembered before the fall.

As Allton straightened the saddle and checked Trigger over, he felt a headache coming on. He thought he had better go ahead and ride back to the ranch. He hadn't gone that far anyway. He could ride back up the canyon in a day or two when he felt a little better.

He walked Trigger around the bottom of the ridge and out of the shale. From there it was better climbing back up to the trail, and the trail was wider too. As he started back down the trail, he hadn't gone far when it began to dawn on him that

something in the air was just not right, he couldn't say what. The air seemed heavier as he breathed in, like a real humid and muggy day might feel.

But it was not a humid day. It was clear and crisp. The air had been thin and light when he rode out earlier. Of course, he had ridden out in the cool of the morning, but that still didn't explain the weight of the air now.

When he rounded the last ridge, the ranch came into view. It was still a mile or so away. He glanced to the ranch buildings. As he looked closer, some things seemed to be strangely missing. Allton didn't see the corrals, or the peach orchard, or cattle. And the road that ran beside the river was black.

What was going on? He shook his head and rubbed his eyes hoping to see better. Upon coming to, after the fall, Allton had felt a little funny and headachy. It was probably just the result of the fall itself. His vision had been rather fuzzy too. He thought perhaps he was just not seeing right.

Somehow though, that didn't reassure him. He thought to himself how Trigger seemed to be acting a little different too. Maybe he had been affected by the fall as well.

PEACH TREE RANCH is a work of pure fiction, obviously. But I feel compelled to acknowledge that some of the characters and places and events were loosely based on some people and places I remember from my boyhood, after having grown up in a small town in the lower Midwest. So, although this book is absolute fiction, I did draw on some memories from my youth. Certainly, no proper names of real people were used. The proper names used in this story were the result of my random assignment to a particular character. If there is anyone whose name is the same as one used in this story, it is the result of pure coincidence.

Thank you for reading PEACH TREE RANCH.



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