



Lincoln Rogers

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## Coiling Point

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## Dedication

This story is dedicated to all those who know the  
friendship of a horse, or ever dreamed of it.

## Acknowledgement

Thanks to my wife, without whom I wouldn't be writing.

Thanks to Tullye, for helping it find its voice.

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“Far back, far back in our dark soul the horse prances... The horse, the horse! The symbol of surging potency and power of movement, of action, in man.”

—D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*

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~ \* ~

"Rosalie!" He screamed her name while an explosion of gunpowder, sounding like a demon roar of Lucifer, propelled the fatal bullet.

"Rosalie!" He shouted her name again and again as five more bullets stabbed the cobalt sky, but his rage at her was no match for the grief that lay before him. He wanted someone to blame for his own actions, and Rosalie was convenient.

Eli Burke lifted his face toward the sun, the lines around his eyes deepening their creases in defense against its brightness; the four-inch brim of his hat unable to provide adequate shelter from the unbroken sky. The rest of his lean countenance was a mixture of reddened skin, stubble, and sweat-hardened dust from a trail full of misery.

"Sorry about that, Kicker," Burke managed to say after the land settled back to a suffocating quiet. "But I reckon you're better off now."

The black horse lying in the dirt couldn't respond to his long-time partner's sentence, the cowboy's parched voice rumbling like a chair dragged across the saloon floor back at the beginning of this misfortune... back at Skinny's place. Kicker was dead, that first bullet relieving the stallion from the burden of struggling to move and draw breath with the combined venom of a dozen rattlesnakes consuming his life like flames through dry tinder. No matter the circumstances, it wasn't easy for a cowboy to put down a good horse. It was devastating when the steed was his closest friend and constant companion. Burke wanted someone to pay.

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Unbidden, an image of a beautiful woman flickered in his thoughts, and Eli spat a rare curse in response. He was a quiet man, viewing displays of emotion as a sign of frailty or the result of too much strong drink, but this was a heavy load to bear. As his gaze took in the lifeless form of his horse, his mind accused him in a voice only he could hear. Yesterday, he should have stopped sooner for rest. He shouldn't have pushed the endurance of horse and rider just to get those extra miles—miles now stretching like an arid barrier between him and that worthless town of Dry Gulch he'd left behind in the dust of a headlong sprint from shattered dreams. Bitter indictments circled his thoughts like a pack of wolves around wounded prey.

Eli's fury bested him when he first lit out, changing to an all-consuming lust for distance that wouldn't be satisfied. Half blind with a burden of weariness and thirst, Burke guided Kicker straight into another no-good town, this one located in flat rocks populated entirely by a nest of rattlers.

The first dagger of fangs from the rocks snapped them out of their exhausted trance, adrenaline providing a source of energy they hadn't possessed moments earlier. The athletic stallion jumped and sprang throughout the middle of the lethal foes, searching for a way out of death's trap, while Eli blew off six shots in quick succession from the barrel of his revolver. To his dismay, bleary eyes conspired against him, causing him to miss the coiled attackers. Burke was a dead shot, able on a good day to hit a jackrabbit on the run, but today was anything but good. If those pulls of the trigger had only found their marks, Kicker would be hurting, that's for sure, but he just might still be alive. And Eli would still have his best friend. The inner accusations transformed to demons of guilt, a shouting lynch mob, deafening in their appetite for vengeance.

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His hand journeyed to the unmoving neck of the black steed, palm quivering with a combination of fatigue and sorrow. The course timbre of Eli's voice broke the enfolding funereal silence once more.

"Forgive a fool like me for leading us into that forest of fangs, boy. I know you did your best to get us out of there in fine shape, and you almost did just that. All I got is a pain in my leg from hitting it somehow during the fracas. If I'd been able to plug any of those vipers, you'd still be alive. I know it. It was my fault for running us so hard. Running from that miserable town and that low-down cheating woman..."

The confession paused while his throat gulped back fervent emotions attempting to pass. "Trouble is, boy, I ain't never going to be in fine shape without you." Burke could feel a rush inside, building like a wall of water after a hard rain. The muscles of his rugged jaw tensed, and hands became fists as he resisted the flood the way a dam holds a river at bay. He cleared his throat before releasing syllables in a more controlled tone, but not devoid of feeling.

"I miss you already, Kicker," he said, a single tear carving an unnoticed line through the dust on his cheek. "You were the best I ever laid eyes on."

As his knees hit the dry earth next to his lifeless companion, the cowboy's memories unlocked under the climbing sun, spilling images of times he and his four-legged compadre spent together. He had come upon the horse while performing a summer of work for a local rancher. It seemed the spectacular yearling was intended for the rancher's daughter, but the child would have none of him after the colt spun and kicked her square with a flash of rear hooves, breaking her leg when she first attempted to hug his neck the way little girls embrace a doll or a stuffed animal. The rancher

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sensed the young horse was a good animal with a keen mind, but the daughter's tears soon became a mother's desire for retribution. Eli always considered himself fortunate to be at the right place at the right time, arriving at the front entrance of the ranch house to collect his pay the same moment the frustrated owner exited his door, ears ringing with loud demands regarding instant dispersal of the offending horse.

"Foolish womenfolk," the embattled man grumbled, his face a mixture of consternation and distress. "Can't talk any sense into them. That's the best horse I've ever seen, and I've got to get rid of him here and now, all because he had to go and kick my daughter."

Dispersions against his wife's stubbornness poured from the jaws of the barrel-chested cattleman while an idea took shape in Burke's mind. On more than one occasion, the cowboy caught himself admiring the young colt, wondering who would be the recipient of such a fine animal, and envying their good fortune at the same time. He was dejected at the news the colt was for the rancher's daughter, the information dashing any hope of his ever procuring the horse for himself, slim though it was to begin with. Burke tried to keep any enthusiasm for his resurgent objective in check behind a measured tone of voice.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Carlson," he said, surprising himself with his calm manner. "If you don't mind none, I've got a notion that might help out you and me both." The boss's eyes grew interested at the mere suggestion of a solution, and Burke hastily continued so as not to lose hold of the moment. "Instead of you paying me in silver for the work I've done for you, how about I only take one month's wages and that colt off your hands instead? As I see it, you'd be rid of your current predicament with the womenfolk of your household, and I'd

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have myself a good horse to take the place of my own which should rightly be retired by now." The call of distant cattle joined a soft chorus of breeze in the Cottonwoods while the cowboy held his breath, every passing second cutting into Eli's hope of owning a new horse.

"Although I'm loath to part with that colt," the rancher began with downcast words, "I reckon I have no other choice. The Missus says he has to be gone and right now, or she'll see to it herself." The crowfeet beside the man's eyes pushed deep as he faced the sun and the direction of the animal in question. An expression of sorrow rode its way across his features, like someone forced to give up a piece of youth he'd hoped to grip tight for the rest of his days. He dropped his head toward the ground in resignation before his attention returned to the younger cowboy, accompanied by words of certainty.

"You've got yourself a deal, son." The two men shook hands, and Eli left the next hour, leading the yearling away while the rancher and his wife looked on, she with a face full of triumph and his with storm clouds covering it.

Burke named the horse Kicker soon after, "'Cuz if that colt hadn't had the gumption to go and kick 'er, I'd never be able to own him, and that's God's truth." The rancher's judgment proved sound. The youthful horse was good and smart, and the two of them subsequently formed a closer bond during their travels and trials than many folk ever have a chance to experience. But now it was over.

He repeated his previous sentiment while he knelt beside the silent stallion, his voice carrying a higher content of anguish than before. "I miss you already, boy."

His strong hand patted the muscled black neck in the transmission of a cowboy's tormented goodbye before his legs brought him upright, a sharp pain surging through his right

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thigh in response. Eli's teeth gritted in discomfort as his sweating body made its way to the saddlebags, rummaging through sparse belongings before tossing away unnecessary supplies. The gear would remain while he attempted a long return journey to Dry Gulch in search of shelter, water, and a respite from the sensation of feeling like a breathing dead man. He hated to leave his saddle, but it would be a burden too heavy for a four-day trek with half a canteen of water. A resolution formed in his mind that if he survived somehow, he'd return to retrieve the tooled saddle and the memories of Kicker it contained.

"Good Lord, my leg hurts." Eli's dusty form progressed only a few steps back towards Dry Gulch when the agony of his leg stopped him short. He figured to have damaged it somehow during all the commotion back amongst the rocks, but this didn't feel like any ordinary blunt injury. A grimace of suffering covered his face while he rolled down his trousers in order to inspect the source of the torment. Disbelief ambushed him as his eyes took in the sight of spreading discoloration, swelling, and four puncture wounds—one set much smaller than the other. He'd been bitten by two of the rattlers himself, and he'd missed it, mistaking the initial soreness above his knee for an ordinary bruise acquired during a rough escape.

The scene of their battle back among the rocks flashed in his mind's eye as Eli tried to place the moment of being bitten. Kicker jumping and bounding; his own thoughts—*We must have walked into a nest!* The repeating thunder of his Colt Navy; his thoughts once more—*I'm missing them!* Kicker's screams as the horse was struck over and over; a ledge of rock by his side boiling with sound and movement... and then his own pain.

Burke's eyes focused on the wounds, absorbing the

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trickling red and the burn pushing its way to his senses. All he ever learned about vipers flooded his mind in a breathless instant. He wasn't "dry bit," a fortunate strike that carries no venom. Unlike his own errant bullets, several snakes did not miss their mark and both appeared to have been fully loaded. The smaller set of wounds told him a young one bit him, and he understood their venom to be more potent than that of their elders. He calculated his body might be able to handle one strike this far from help and still survive, but not two... not with the second being the more venomous dose of a young rattler.

Dizziness overtook him during the examination, his head spinning as if he were dropped on the back of a wild bronco. Pulling up his britches, Eli stumbled to the spot where his soundless partner lay, his stomach threatening to betray him in a wave of nausea. A gasp left him as his seat found the earth with a thud, the ground swirling as much with him sitting as it did when he was upright.

"Hey, boy... looks like we both took our licks back there."

He wanted to say more—more about the times they'd had, the troubles they'd seen, or the bond they'd shared—but a fit of chills ripped through him, shuddering every part of his dehydrated body and cutting off any words trying to make their way out. The fit left him after several seconds, allowing his throat to produce sound again.

"Whoa, boy. Can you feel that?" The eyes of the poisoned cowboy attempted to focus on the sky overhead, its high sun pounding the landscape with hammers of heat, but they refused to achieve clarity. "It's hotter than Hades and I'm sweating buckets, so why in blazes am I so cold?" He tucked his arms around his chest to find relief from the frost enveloping him, but the action proved fruitless. The sweating,

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chills, nausea, and blurred vision were all coming from within, symptoms of powerful venom aiming for his life like a raptor diving towards an unsuspecting varmint. It was just a matter of time.

The heels of Eli's boots scraped against stony soil, spurs digging and pushing in an effort to move his body close alongside the midnight-colored shoulder and neck of Kicker. The task took almost a minute as he felt the strength ebbing from his limbs amid rushes of merciless symptoms. Worsening signs were building, their assaults stronger as the sun raced across the sky; but the tall cowboy found some solace with his back propped against the neck of the only friend he really ever had in the world. Despite his best effort, a whisper was all his voice could manage.

"It's just you and me, boy. Just you and me." Like the hooves of a racing stallion, his heart pounded from the exertion of moving a short distance. He sensed the remainder of his strength longing to leave and take with it his ability to hold onto consciousness. In his weakened state, Eli began making a mental list of all the things he missed that brought him and Kicker to this cruel turn of fate.

First, he missed the signs of Rosalie and himself drifting apart. Raven-haired Rosalie, her slender form and smiling lips floated again in his vision. "*Senorita muy bonita,*" he used to say when describing her to other cowboys on the trail who cared to listen, his laughter sounding each time he spoke the words of her native tongue. But a woman needs more to hold than dreams of lingering lips and faded whispers of returning soon. Eli was always driving cattle somewhere else with Kicker, trying to save enough money to buy his own spread in order to become a rancher and make her proud. It wasn't until he rode into Dry Gulch three days ago and heard the

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announcement of her engagement to Ted Jackson, owner of Jackson's Mercantile and Sundries, that he realized she wanted a man who was around to spend time with her. The soft look of her eyes while she gazed on Jackson's face during their engagement party at Skinny's Saloon told him all he needed to know before he fled town, hoping with hooves to escape the inner calamity of a broken heart. Rosalie was now someone else's *senorita muy bonita*—another man's very beautiful young woman. Eli and his pride refused to watch it transpire in front of his own eyes.

The thoughts of the stricken cowboy turned bitter at images of other things missed on this ride: the rest and sleep foolishly skipped in his flight from unhappiness; signs of rock and rattler country on all sides; errant bullets missing their fanged targets; pain in his leg mistaken for a common bruise. Missing one was bad enough. Missing them all was hard medicine for a man who always found a measure of self-respect in the workings of his keen mind.

Another spasm startled him with its strength, forcing his eyes closed and then wide open again as he lay facing the sky. Through a fog of contaminated vision, Eli discerned dark spots circling high aloft and knew they were for him. The buzzards were coming. Struggling against the feebleness of his body, Burke made the effort to put his head next to the face of the unmoving steed, a film of soil coating the skin of his blistered cheeks.

"Kicker," he whispered. "Hey, boy, it's me. Can you hear me?" He knew the horse couldn't, but held to a fading belief the spirit of his comrade remained close by to watch over him in these last moments.

More than the company of fellow cowboys or even memories of affection for a certain woman, the rugged cowboy

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yearned for the low nicker and soft eyes of his trusted companion the most. In a moment of clarity, Burke finally realized Rosalie was right to marry Ted Jackson, since she must have seen she always held less of his heart than Kicker did. Numbness and tingling over the skin of his body joined the gang of symptoms set against him. Regardless of his wishes, Eli's breath grew short, as weary lungs surrendered their resistance against the conquering venom in his blood.

With fierce determination, Burke forced an arm over the neck of his expired friend, drawing himself close and displaying in a final embrace the unspoken intimacy that always existed between the two. Before the long sleep of the reaper claimed him, the cracked lips of the dying cowboy formed a last defiant expression in the face of his reckoning, forcing a smile as he plunged toward a waiting eternity and its ultimate judgment. Though no one in the wide-open West might mourn his passing or even miss the pleasure of his company, the emptiness tearing him apart over the last few hours would be gone...

Eli Burke wouldn't be missing Kicker anymore.

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### Meet the Author:



Lincoln Rogers lives in Eastern Colorado with his loving wife, spending his time writing, taking photos, and riding their horses when he gets a chance. Hundreds of pieces of Lincoln's writing and photography regarding the American West have been published in numerous magazines and internet websites. You can find him on the web at [www.lincolnrogers.com](http://www.lincolnrogers.com).