

# HILLS OF DESTINY

BY AGNES LOUISE PROVOST

**CHAPTER X**  
Synopsis  
Lee Hollister returns unexpectedly from a trip abroad to find Matt Blair, his foster father and owner of the Circle V ranch, dead by his own hand. The ranch is going to ruin and Matt's daughter, Virginia, now owner of the ranch, is living in New York with the Archers, her aunt and uncle. Her uncle wants her to sell the ranch to Milton Bradish, one time Matt's associate. Lee persuades Virginia to return to the ranch. Her aunt follows her, accompanied by Stanley, son of Milton Bradish. Stanley tries to discredit Lee in Virginia's eyes. One evening, Josefa Ramirez, who is jealous of Lee's interest in Virginia, dances for Lee and throws herself into his arms just as Virginia rides past with Stanley. Stanley visits Josefa, and is shot from ambush.

From the side of a rock on the hillside Francisco watched his flight with a grunt of contempt. "I think you not fool 'round here no more," he said calmly, and went back to his sheep. He had protected the honor of his house efficiently and in his own way.

Stanley drew in his sweating horse only when he came in view of the Circle V ranch house. Virginia, sitting at Matt's desk, heard her aunt's terrified scream. "Stanley, what has happened?" Virginia said. "Fear gripped her. She ran. Stanley was just coming in. Blood stained his shirt on the shoulder, blood was crusted on the fingers of one hand, where he had pressed them against the wound to staunch the flow. "Stanley! What is the matter?" "Oh, nothing to be frightened about." He smiled pallidly. "Somebody winged me. Just a

pleasant little attention." Mrs. Archer moaned, but Virginia was very quiet. She was as pale as Stanley now, but her voice was steady and cool. "Sit down here in this big chair. Curly, please help me." They worked quickly. A call to Ling brought warm water, iodine and bandages, and Curly's strong fingers made short work of the stained shirt. "Curly squinted at the wound judiciously. "Whoever plugged ye must've been considerable higher up than you was," he said innocently. "Did ye get a chance at him?"

"I don't go around armed," he said curtly, "and he took good care not to show himself. I was on my way here, just entering the mouth of Turkey Gulch." Mrs. Archer shot a triumphant glance at her niece; Virginia looked steadily down at the wound she was bandaging. Curly's brick red face was as nearly expressionless as a human face can be. The mouth of Turkey Gulch was in a direct downward line from Lee Hollister's cabin. "We should have a doctor, Curly. Will you get him?" That was the only comment Virginia made.

"I'll go and bring him," suggested Curly obligingly. Mrs. Archer followed him with a nervous backward glance at Virginia as she left the room. "Stanley, how did it happen?" Virginia's low voiced question came the moment they were alone. "Why, just as I told you, Vee." "But you suspect someone," she persisted. "Who is it?" "No one that I would care to accuse," he answered evasively. She ignored his light tone, but she could not ignore the implication back of it. "But I'm sure no one here would do such a thing." "No one?" he queried ironically.

She flushed. "If you mean Lee Hollister, he would never fight that way from ambush." "Oh, I'm not accusing him." He raised cynical brows that did accuse.

Out on the veranda Curly took some hastily written messages from Mrs. Archer and started back to the corral with Stanley's waiting horse.

"He's a liar," reflected Curly dispassionately. "I've been plugged myself, and I'll bet two dollars Mex that he carried that cat scratch from a blame' sight further than Turkey Gulch."

The doctor came and went, pronouncing Stanley's injury only a flesh wound that might be painful for a few days, but was not dangerous. Virginia wandered restlessly from room to room. It was all maddening and impossible. Only one thing stood out definitely. A guest in her house had been the victim of a cowardly attack from ambush, almost within the limits

of her own land. That could not be passed in silence.

Footsteps on the veranda caught her attention. She went to the door. "Good evening," said Lee. "I hear Bradish has met with an accident." "I should scarcely call it that," Virginia chilled instantly under this casual reference. "Stanley was shot in the back this afternoon by some contemptible assassin who hadn't the courage to let himself be seen. He is a guest in my house and a friend, and I shall expect every man connected with the Circle V or interested in it to make it his business to find the man who did it."

His steady eyes were on her, unsmiling. "Men don't usually ask women to fight their battles for them," he commented. "He hasn't asked anything!" she flamed back at him. "Hope you find your man," he said politely. "Is Bradish in? I'd like to see him. Alone, please."

Stanley looked up sharply at the tall figure in the door. "How d'you do," he said languidly. "Looking for Miss Blair? She just stepped out."

"No, I'm looking for you. I hear that you're spreading the report that some friend of mine tried to kill you in my interest. You happen to know that it's a lie. In the first place, I wouldn't take the trouble to have you killed. In the second place, I don't hand dirty work to other people, and in the third place, my friends don't miss."

The curt contempt of it brought a dull red to Stanley's face. "Look here," he began angrily, but the sardonic voice went on. "If any friend of mine winged you like that, he wasn't trying to commit murder. He was posting a warning, and I advise you to take it. Whatever you were up to when that thing happened, don't do it again."

Without waiting for any reply he turned to go, not by the way he had come, but by another door.

From the veranda Virginia saw him go without making any attempt to see her again. She went slowly into the house to meet her aunt.

"I thought I heard voices," Mrs. Archer glanced nervously past her niece. "You really ought not to leave that door open, Virginia. You don't know who may be out there in the dark."

"There is no one out there. It's perfectly safe."

"Safe!" Mrs. Archer cried hysterically. "How can you say such a thing when Stanley has been nearly murdered! I shall not feel safe for one minute until we get away from here. I have telegraphed to your uncle and Mr. Bradish."

"Oh, darling! Without even telling me." Mrs. Archer flushed guiltily. "Why not?" she demanded with injured dignity. "One might almost think that you were trying to shield this criminal."

She shot an indignant glance at her niece and then broke into hysterical sobs. "Oh, I can't stand it any longer! I've been worried to death for weeks, ever since that insolent, lawless man came east and persuaded you to come back here. He's at the bottom of all this; I know it."

"Aunt Adele, please. That isn't so." "It's true, Virginia. And you just keep on dropping me into this bottomless pit of misery by the greed of that man. Instead of taking the wonderful price Mr. Bradish has offered you just out of friendship sentiment for the place!"

On and on. Accusations, pleads, babbling, hysterical reproaches. Virginia closed her eyes. "You needn't worry any more," she said wearily. "I wrote to Mr. Bradish some days ago that I was ready to sell. I'll keep my word."

A second telegram a few days later announced the hour of Milton Bradish's arrival. Virginia went to meet him, and he greeted her genially. "How d'you do? Has that boy of mine been making trouble for you up here? I'll take him in hand. By the way, just drive around to Gideon Morse's office first, will you? He has something there that we'll both want to see."

She drove him there. Half an hour later, when they left Saunders, Bradish was in an exceptionally contented frame of mind. Virginia was unusually quiet, with steady eyes fixed ahead of her. "Well, what have you been up to?" "It was the first moment that Stanley and his father had been alone, but there was more suspicion than sympathy in the stare that Bradish bent on his son.

Stanley looked sulky. "I've told you I was riding horseback in this infernal desolation, and some sniper tried to pick me off." "Don't talk bosh with me! You were probably meddling around with some girl. One more affair of that kind and I'll cut off your allowance. You must think I'm asleep."

"Far from it." Stanley drawled it out with the slightly patronizing air that his father particularly hated. "But I'm not exactly unconscious myself. And some-

thing seems to tell me that Matt Blair's ore samples weren't quite so harmless as they were assayed."

Bradish's eyes bored into the insolent weakness of his son's face. "Well?" he snapped. "What of it?"

"Oh nothing," Stanley was bland. "I just thought I'd remind you that I have some business acumen myself. How about a half interest, giving you a first option on buying me out? You know," he added, "I might have advised Virginia not to sell, and managed my wife's interests myself."

Bradish regarded his son with a heavy stare. "Trying to buck the old man, are you?" he demanded. "Bigger men than you have tried that, and most of 'em are in the bread lines or adding up columns of other people's assets."

"Stanley looked annoyed. "Hollister bucked you pretty successfully until I took him in hand," he hinted sulkily, but got no further.

"What's that out there?" his father demanded abruptly. Stanley went to the window. "The gentleman himself," he murmured maliciously. "That's your amiable friend, Mr. Lee Hollister. I wonder what he's up to now?"

"Humph! Looks like a competent young devil." Bradish stared

after him with interest. "I was a fool not to get him on my side," he reflected. "Maybe I'll do it yet. Rides like an Indian and has as cool an eye as I ever looked at. Bet he can handle men. I'll get him. I'll have him on my payroll inside of two weeks."

Lee had been looking for Virginia, going first to make his inquiries of the friendly Ling, but Virginia was not there. She had slipped out without a word to anyone, wanting only to get away from the house and everyone in it. High up on Monument Rock where they had carried her father to look down forever on the Valley of the Sun, she sat in a disconsolate little huddle, her chin in her hand, staring out at the rugged country he had loved. Hot tears came into her eyes. She laid her cheek against the rough rock. "I had to do it! I had to! You understand, don't you?"

Quiet and solitude were around her. Far above, a hawk wheeled in smooth curves, watching for prey. Back of her was a grassy flat where a few pines whispered. A squirrel whisked up a tree; a darting wren scolded.

Virginia jumped up quickly. The girl from the sheep ranch stood a short distance away, leaning against the rough trunk of a pine.

"You wish to see me?" asked Virginia.

"No. I not wish to see you. I

hate you. But I come." "But why do you hate me?" "I hate you because he love you! I hate you because he theenk always of you and never of me. I hate you because you throw heem away like the soiled rag, like a poison snake, because you see heem touch me." Virginia listened, astonished

and a little angry. The last words caught her attention sharply. "What are you talking about? What have you been doing?" (Continued Next Week)

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SATURDAY-

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WEDNESDAY-

**FAMILY SHOW**  
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