

**BLOWN
TO HELL**

P.A. Bechko

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Chapter One

People filled the boardwalks and clogged the streets beneath the gaily colored banners that festooned every pole and post almost as far as the eye could see. Their voices were lifted in bright chatter, and laughter continually rippled through the crowd as vendors moved in and out of the throng hawking refreshments that included everything from candied apples to cold beer. Dust rose up in huge whorls around them, and the rain the promoters had feared would appear to mar the day had not materialized. A carnival atmosphere reigned over the proceedings as the crowd continued to swell in size and the appointed hour of the demonstration neared.

Company men lounged around the strange contraption that was parked at one end of the street where it held the center of attention, roped respectfully off from the masses that surged around it trying to get just a little bit closer for a better look. It looked like a wagon of the type that crossed the plains, square and boxy, and yet it did not look like one. There were no animals to pull it. Masts and sails protruded upwards from a flat wooden deck where the canvas top should have been. It was a ship with wheels, a prairie schooner in the truest sense of the word. It was, the placard that stood prominently before it announced, the latest thing in hauling freight across the great plains. The greatest boon to freight hauling since the invention of the wheel itself!

The two company men, young and alert, well dressed in baggy black pants, vest, suit coats, trimmed with white paper collars and cuffs, politely answered questions members of the crowd put to them. Yes, they acknowledged, this had indeed been tried before. There had even been limited success around 1860, when several of them had traveled the Smoky Hill road

leading to Denver. But, they reminded their listening public, that had been over seven years earlier! Seven years! Why this frigate had all the innovations and improvements that modern science and engineering had developed over those years. They acknowledged too that the train was a coming thing, spreading Westward with vigor. But this new freight wagon would be hauling to places that the railroads would not reach for years. And speed, why it could cover fifty miles in a day! In only a few months those sail-bedecked freight wagons would be as common a sight in towns clear across the plains as horses standing at hitching posts were now.

A low ripple of laughter started at a far corner of the crowd nearest the saloon and built into a roar, cutting off the company man's spiel. Having decided to add a little more life to the proceedings, a group of determined men dragged both piano and piano player out of the saloon and onto the broad boardwalk, momentarily diverting attention from the main event. The man at the piano did not seem to mind his abrupt change in locale as he continued bashing out a gay little tune on his piano though both he and it were in motion. Brittle notes rang out sourly in loud and strident discord, almost in protest, as either piano or seated piano player was pushed a little too hard and his hands went out of line with the keyboard. The human contents of the saloon spilled out into the street like an overturned keg of beer, following behind the piano. Bubbling with the enthusiasm of the carnival atmosphere and the added impetus of too much to drink, they launched into a loud, if not tuneful, rendition of a salty old sailing song. The crowd swayed in rhythm and the song spread until even those who did not know the words were humming along in fine spirits.

Even then, the crowd continued to swell in size as the saloon girls, now out and wandering freely through the crowd,

tried to coax some of the men back inside for another drink or other favors. A stooped old man appeared from somewhere with a fiddle and joined the piano player on the boardwalk, playing fast and brassy sea songs along with a periodic rendition of "Buffalo Gals" or "Clementine."

The company men lounged back against the windwagon, resuming their original positions, glancing complacently over the crowd. That was the whole idea behind the promotion. To get the local folks happy with the freight line, so happy that they would trust their freight to it on its maiden voyage. Later, the rolling ship would be christened. Soon after that it would be launched on its demonstration run. It would be a proud and jubilant day for the K and J Overland Freight Company.

Dressed much the same as the company men in the street below, in baggy uncreased pants and linen shirt with its pointed paper collar stabbing him in the throat each time he turned his head, Elias McPherson stood on the balcony of his hotel room, overlooking the milling throng below, with his granddaughter. Perched on his balding head at a rakish angle was a black bowler.

A robust man with well-rounded muscular shoulders, he stood only two inches taller than his granddaughter's five foot three inches. He wasn't enjoying the festivities, nor was he impressed with them. Pulling his American Horologe watch from his vest pocket where it hung at the end of a Dickens chain, he popped open the case, glancing thoughtfully down at the spidery hands that moved around the face. Twenty minutes left until the demonstration was due to take place. He frowned sourly, his bushy white eyebrows knit together pensively, when he closed the watchcase and slipped it back in his pocket.

"They can't pay me enough to compensate for the humiliation of having my name even remotely associated with

that . . . that thing,” Elias muttered, his bright, steel gray eyes flickering continually over the crowd below in quiet, unyielding disapproval.

Emma laid a long slender hand, gloved in white lace, on her grandfather’s arm. “Gramps, you mustn’t take these things so seriously,” she tried to placate him.

“That’s the only way to take them,” Elias grumped. “They ask for my ideas, my recommendations, take damn few of them, and then turn this into a circus to boot! Why, the way it’s built, they’ll be lucky if that contraption will hold together long enough to roll out of town. They didn’t even add the special brake I designed. Once that thing gets moving, what they have on there now would have about as much chance of stopping it as a cowboy on a good horse trying to rope a train.”

“Now, Gramps,” Emma began soothingly, “it can’t be that bad.”

Elias shifted his gaze to his granddaughter and immediately his expression softened. Since she had been a squalling baby, through her childhood of bright red pigtails and a face covered with freckles, to now when she stood beside him, a stunning young woman, her thick red hair caught up in a tumble of soft curls, her beautiful heart-shaped face framing direct green eyes and her fair cheeks touched with rose petals, she could have asked for anything from him and gotten it.

But Emma had asked for nothing and, while she seemed happy, Elias sometimes worried about her, Emma was twenty-two, and not yet married. Young, wild and fiery, Emma’s mother had not been quite seventeen when Emma had been born. Though Emma had inherited a large proportion of her mother’s quick temper, her steadiness she had inherited from her father, Elias’s son.

Elias sighed. “Emma, you need more than what you have.

You're twenty-two, and still following your grandfather from one town to the next. You need to find your own life. Now your mother," he rolled his eyes heavenward. "God bless her wherever she is. She knows how to live!"

Emma didn't blink. She was used to her grandfather's comments bouncing from one subject to another so quickly, though they took others aback and at times were tactlessly insulting. She was also well aware of her grandfather's expansively generous opinion of her mother. And Emma knew her family history thoroughly. She knew her father had been among the first to believe the wild stories about gold lying around on the ground waiting to be picked up in a place called California back in 1849. He had been among the first to head for the gold fields. Emma's mother had gone with him mainly because she had refused to be left behind. And Emma had been left in her grandfather's keeping, it was said, until both could be sent for.

There had been a couple of letters from her father and mother in the first year. After that a long time passed before they heard again, and then it had been a letter from only her mother. Emma's father, it seemed, had disappeared without a trace. And Emma's mother, never one to be long at loose ends, especially in such a woman-starved area as San Francisco, had decided in short order what was best for her. She had taken up with a man who had done well in the gold fields and was leaving the mud pit with canvas and paper buildings known as San Francisco by the earliest possible route. She had enclosed some money for Emma, courtesy of her new escort, and thanked Elias for taking care of her daughter for the next eighteen years. They still got an occasional letter from Emma's mother when one managed to catch up with them. The last one, Emma remembered clearly, had been from London.

Though Elias had always been a rational man, he could not

accept that the loss of his son was permanent or that he might be dead. Deep inside he had no doubt that he would see his son, Danny, again.

“Look, Gramps!” Emma pointed toward the windwagon. “They’re almost ready.”

Elias looked in the direction of the unwieldy-appearing craft. Company men were removing the restraining ropes and another pair were busy hooking up a team of horses to haul the prairie schooner to the starting point at the edge of town. Excitement spread through the crowd with an unrestrained electricity. Whoops and cheers filled the air as the windwagon, drawn by two teams, rumbled along the main street to its designated point of departure. Town dogs started running along with the crowd, barking and yapping at their heels, caught up in the excitement that hung on the air. Elias muttered under his breath.

“Let’s go down and watch with the others,” Emma suggested with a bright smile.

“You go on ahead. I’d just as soon watch that thing fall in a ravine from up here.”

““Gramps,” Emma protested.

He waved her toward the doorway. “You go on ahead. I guess someone should get a little entertainment out of this.”

“But . . .”

“Better hurry, Emma, or you won’t be able to catch up before they launch her.”

With an exasperated sigh, Emma dashed for the door, ran down the stairs and out into the street. The dust at street level was almost too thick to breathe. Pulling out a white, lace-trimmed handkerchief, she held it over her nose and mouth as she picked up her skirts with her free hand, showing more than a demure bit of ankle, and hurried after the yipping and howling crowd. To one side, several steps ahead, a dog stopped

to sniff a post and leave his mark for any other dog that might be coming along even farther behind.

Finally Emma managed to catch up with the packed crowd. Edging her way past a saloon girl, she felt the beginnings of her heavy curls slipping from their proper position softly gathered at the top of her head, when her progress was abruptly arrested. A pair of square rough hands seemed to reach out of the center of the crowd to attach themselves to her slim shoulders. A pungent smell consisting of booze, tobacco and an odd, musty odor stabbed at her nostrils as she was jerked sharply toward the source of the overpowering smell.

“Hi ya, honey,” a tall, stubble-faced man roared in her ear. “Let’s the two of us get away from here.” Without waiting for a reply, he started pulling her swiftly away from the center of the crowd.

Emma gave a start and braced herself unyieldingly against his pull. “Let me go!” she demanded, pulling wildly to break free of his binding grip.

Chuckling loudly, the dirty stubble-faced man drew Emma closer, putting his face only inches from hers.

“Let me go!” she demanded again, and raised her foot to slam it down on the drunk’s instep.

Emma’s foot hadn’t even connected when the man who held her yelped in pain, breath exploding from him like he’d been hit with a heavy board. The next instant, Emma’s foot followed through, slamming down on his arch. His grip on Emma already broken by the blow from behind, the drunk stranger yelped again, hopping crookedly on one foot and bellowing even louder. Emma could have sworn the man was turning green beneath that thick layer of dirt and the black stubble covering his face. Abruptly he disappeared into the crowd as it surged around him.

For only a moment, Emma caught sight of another, smaller man just a pace or two to one side of the injured reveler had been. Grinning at Emma, he shook his hand as if the knuckles stung, then tipped his bowler hat in her direction, and he too disappeared, swept along by the crowd. It had been only an instant, but Emma identified her valiant knight as the piano player from the saloon.

Gathering a new hold on her skirts, she hurried on toward the starting point with the others.

By the time Emma reached a satisfactory position from which she could clearly see, the christening ceremony was already nearly at an end. The K and J Overland Freight Company had never been one to take things slow when things got moving. Once they were sure they had the crowd's undivided attention, they didn't plan on losing it. Business was business.

An attractive woman, the wife of one of the company men, was standing high up on a flimsy scaffolding above the milling crowd which had been erected for the occasion. In one small white hand was a beribboned bottle K and J claimed was champagne, but Emma suspected was more likely beer, which the woman was swinging with much gusto toward the bow of the windwagon.

"I christen thee," she said in a high, piercing voice just before the bottle connected with wooden bow, 'Challenger I!' as the bottle shattered, spraying its contents over everyone in range.

The crowd roared its approval. The insubstantial scaffolding swayed beneath the sudden shift in the young woman's weight. A couple of company men pressed in close to steady the falling structure as she dropped to her knees and scrambled madly over her billowing skirts, for the narrow steps that would put her feet safely back on solid ground, before the

whole matchstick structure could fold beneath her.

Emma gazed critically at the foaming, frothing liquid that had been released from the bottle at its breaking. Her nose twitched as the smell of hops reached her. There was no mistaking it. It was beer all right. K and J were firm believers in cutting corners wherever it was possible.

Then the crowd was being forced back and the men who were to man the magnificent craft, Challenger I, were boarding her and making ready to shove off with the first stiff breeze to fill her sails.

On board ship, the captain was giving orders fast and furiously. The crew was running back and forth amongst the rigging. The sails were rigged and flapping in a stiff south-easterly breeze. Below, on the ground, the signal was given to shove off. There was another flurry of movement on the ship's deck. Then the huge sails tightened down and filled with the gusting wind until it seemed the restraining cords would pop with the strain. At last the captain gave the order. The brakes were released. Challenger I gave a sharp lurch forward, paused, then started rolling slowly forward. Challenger I creaked and rattled as it rumbled out across the open prairie, gaining speed with every revolution of its wheels.

With wild whoops and cheers, mounted spectators took off after the strange craft, pacing it on horseback. The activity shipboard was never-ending. Lines were tightened and loosened. The sails billowed as the captain, at first cautiously, maneuvered his craft.

Emma felt a small thrill race through her as the craft remained steady on its course, looking about as graceful as a lame duck, but apparently moving with ease. The acrid smell of sweat and tightly packed bodies mingled with the thick dust that billowed up around the spectators standing on the only barren patch of earth for miles. But Emma endured it,

did not really mind it because her grandfather had had a part in making it happen.

Challenger I went on to negotiate a low hill with little difficulty. The captain, apparently now a bit more optimistic about his strange craft, began a tacking course, zigzagging down the opposite side of the hill. The interested onlookers still on horseback had little trouble in keeping up with the windwagon until the captain, now obviously fired with enthusiasm for his accomplishments, started to pour it on.

The riders following the ship, waved their hats and cheered as the windwagon picked up even more speed, leaving them in the dust churned up by its oversized wheels. Still the speed increased, and for the first time, Emma felt a twinge of doubt. What was it her grandfather had said about the brakes they were using? What, she wondered angrily, was the fool of a captain trying to prove the first time out?

Challenger I lurched suddenly onto two wheels, careening along at breakneck speed at least partly out of control. The crowd caught their collective breath as one while the ship teetered between upright and a sideways plunge into the ground. Almost miraculously, the ship righted itself and plunged on madly across the open plain. Emma noted the captain was no longer plotting a tacking course. The windwagon was moving off straight as an arrow, but showing no slackening in its speed. Each of the craft's four wheels seemed to leap up and slam down to earth independently of the others each time they hit a pothole or partially buried rock.

K and J's company men were blandly passing the situation off as a demonstration of both the craft's speed and stoutness even though the harsh sounds of its whanging, rattling progress could be heard plainly by the entire crowd. Emma knew better, but the crowd was in a festive mood and ready to believe most anything they were told. Why, Emma wondered,

was the captain leaving the sails up, when they could be lowered and the speed of Challenger allowed to halt? Was it a matter of pride?

Suddenly the craft lurched again, appearing to almost have been lifted clear of the ground and set back down on a new course. Her hands clenched, Emma blinked, and her knuckles went white as she twisted her white lace handkerchief. The windwagon was headed straight for Steelman's wash!

Together, Emma and her grandfather had ridden along a considerable piece of its length only the day before. In times of heavy rain, it was a thundering watercourse. Now, it was not much more than a trickling stream. It had been named after Joseph Steelman, the man, who'd had the unfortunate honor of being the first to stumble across the wash. It had been at high flood when Steelman had been riding hell for leather for more hospitable parts and his horse had run right out over the thin air, then plunged into the raging torrent. His horse had managed to flounder to the other side and scramble out, but Steelman had been swept away. Three days it had taken him to hike back in boots not at all suited for the purpose.

Now, at low water, Steelman's wash was fully fifteen feet deep. Emma had seen it with her own eyes. The wash was supposed to run parallel to the windwagon's course, posing it no threat. But now Challenger was headed straight for it, and evidently the captain still had found no way to stop it.

Unconsciously, in anticipation, Emma bit the corner of her handkerchief.

It was about then that the crew, one by one, began abandoning ship. Though it was neither the courageous nor the safe thing to do, Emma had to admit that it was showing a marked amount of good sense. She hoped the captain would have the intelligence to do the same. Almost without realizing

what she was doing, Emma began counting softly out loud as the men jumped clear. There were ten men aboard Challenger I including the captain. Emma had reached three men when the rest of the crowd began picking up the count with her. Emma stopped. They were treating it like a game!

“Five! Six!” the throng yelled at the tops of their voices as two more men jumped clear, rolling over and over in the thick grasses that carpeted the ground. It never occurred to any of the crowd that the men aboard Challenger could easily be badly hurt or even killed when it plunged headlong into Steelman’s wash.

“Seven! Eight! Nine!” they chanted. Three more men who jumped came to their feet and started the long, unsteady walk back toward town.

“Nine!” Emma held her breath and squinted in the direction of the wayward windwagon. The last one on board would undoubtedly be the captain. Jump! Emma thought frantically. Jump!

The company men stood staring as if in shock. They couldn’t believe what they were witnessing. It was completely out of their control. Challenger I hurled on toward the rim of the wash. Only seconds were left. Still the last man on board had not jumped clear. The crowd was shouting garbled instructions, urging the remaining man to jump. Then, suddenly, a figure leaped from the back of the wagon.

“Ten!” The crowd surrounding Emma gave a deafening roar. They were all whistling and cheering and yelling at once, pounding each other on the back as if each one had personally plucked the remaining man from the deck of the doomed ship.

Staring helplessly, the company men stood transfixed as Challenger continued its wild run a few seconds longer. As the captain was picking himself up off the ground, Challenger I

shot out over the chasm that was Steelman's wash. It hung there a second, as if suspended on air, then promptly dropped like a rock into the maw of Steelman's wash. The echo of its rending crash could be heard even at that distance. In another moment, it was as if Challenger I had never been. Only a faint haze of dust hung over the place where it had gone into the wash to mark the spot.

For an instant an awed silence settled over them all. Then someone let out a wild cowboy whoop, and the crowd, in jovial good spirits, turned back toward town. There was still the prospect of free food and beer awaiting them. And opportunities for wingdings were so rare that they were not about to let a little thing like the windwagon falling into a wash that had been there a considerable time break up their party. After all, everybody knew it was there, and no one had moved it lately. The men on board the craft should have been more careful of where they were going.

Letting her breath out in a long sigh, Emma turned and followed in the crowd's wake back toward the hotel. The company men remained where they were, just staring out across the open plains, where the windwagon had sailed. Emma shrugged off a chill. It was almost spooky.

Chapter Two

Elias McPherson scratched a slightly bulbous nose, then let his fingers slide down his face to his chin, where his thumb found and rested in the slight cleft of his chin as he surveyed the scene. A few other people had been at the site earlier. Mostly K and J company men, but they had left shortly after arriving, declaring Challenger I a total loss. And it had been made clear that the entire project would be scrapped.

“I knew something like this would happen,” Elias muttered, staring down into Steelman’s wash at the wreckage.

Emma did not say anything. She just stared at the wreckage strewn over the bottom of the wash. Even she, expecting the worst, could never have imagined it to be so bad. One wheel had disappeared from sight completely, no doubt pulverized. Another was shattered into splinters. The other pair had been flattened out sideways at impact, and the ship lay on its belly across the tiny stream. Water trickled steadily over, under, and around the shattered hulk of Challenger. One of the mainmasts had toppled, and another was listing badly to one side. The sails rippled and fluttered in the breeze, hanging from their fixings and lines like so much dangling laundry. It looked almost like a squashed bug.

“Damn fools,” Elias said bitterly. “They foul things up, then blame it on the invention. It would have worked if they had done it right! I’ve known it would work since I first saw it tried back in ’53. They just keep right on doing the same stupid things over and over.”

Elias paced the edge of the wash with his usual rolling, authoritative gait as he spoke. Emma watched from horseback, politely listening to her grandfather rave. The windwagon had been his pet project, but she had no doubt that this would be no different from the others. He would eventually

turn from it and go on to other things. She was in no way prepared for what he had to say next.

“There’s only one way for me to prove what I already know, and that’s to build a windwagon and take it across the country myself,” he claimed with fire.

Emma gave a start like she had been jerked out of a quiet dream. She looked at her grandfather as if she was not certain she had, in fact, heard what she had.

“What?” she asked quietly, leaning out of the saddle with soft, accompanying creaks.

“I’m going West, Emma! I’ll prove that it can be done if it’s done right, and,” he added excitedly, spurred by a new thought, “I’ll find your father when I get there. It was San Francisco he disappeared from. I’ll track him down, find out what happened.” He paused. “You, of course, can go back to St. Louis. I’ll write to you there. I’ll get started right away. Today!”

“You want to go alone, across that trackless waste? Past hostile Indians and God knows what else? Meanwhile I’m supposed to sit alone in St. Louis, twisting my lace hankies waiting every day to hear you’ve finally gotten yourself killed?” Emma’s temper flared to the surface, lighting her green eyes and sending a rosy blush high up in her fair cheeks.

“A man with a vision, a man with a destiny, must meet it alone,” Elias expounded in reply to his granddaughter’s outburst.

“Ah, it’s McPherson against the world then, is it?” Emma asked, allowing a bit of a brogue slip in with her thick sarcasm. “Well,” she went on heatedly, “let me tell you one thing . . . if you’re going, I’m going. And, if you don’t let me go with you, I’ll follow behind.”

Emma smiled grimly. She knew she had him. He would never go if he thought she would be following along behind

through dangerous country. As to her father, she was not as sure as her grandfather that he was still alive.

For long seconds Elias stared at Emma, his bushy eyebrows arched questioningly high above his steel gray eyes.

“I think you really mean it,” he said almost in awe of her.

“Yes,” Emma said firmly. “I mean it.”

Elias was silent for several seconds. Then slowly, a smile started and spread across his face until he was beaming.

“All right!” he said exuberantly. “We’ll both go. We’ll find your father, by God! There’s land out there, I’ve heard, free for the taking. We can all start a new life . . . right after we prove the windwagon can make it. We’ll take only what we need. Set up a new life from just what we carry along in the wagon. And Emma, we’ll prove that settlers can use the windwagon going West. Maybe,” he added under his breath, “in a woman-starved place like that you’ll find yourself a husband.”

In open mouthed amazement, Emma stared at her grandfather. The brilliant sunlight shimmered through her red curls, once again loosely draped up to the top of her head, as she shook it in unbelieving wonderment.

Elias swung back into the saddle with a strength and ease belying his age and small stature. “Yes,” he was saying, “we can get started right away. I’ll start building tomorrow. No, today. We’ll be able to leave in a month, or two at the most. Come on, Emma,” he called over his shoulder as he wheeled his horse and started back to town at a gallop.

Puzzled, Emma stared after him, letting the new set of facts sink their way into her mind. She glanced again at the wreckage in Steelman’s wash. It had to be some kind of a joke he was playing on her. He couldn’t be serious about going West. He just couldn’t. She contemplated his retreating back. Could he?

Chapter Three

Chance Fargo stared longingly at the clear, quiet little seep-fed pool, his black eyes alight, his broad forehead lined deeply in thought. It had been a long time since he had been able to settle down in some cool water and wash off the sweat, grit and sand that seemed to have penetrated right through to his soul. He was still well within Comanche territory, and that would make it risky, even foolhardy, but Chance was not one to pass up easily such a beckoning opportunity. The little hollow was a well-hidden, scooped-out dimple on the land. Grasslands rolled out in all directions from the hollow, rendering it invisible unless a man rode right up to it and looked down. It was about an acre's worth of joy in an indeterminable expanse of gently rolling land.

He had already made noon camp, building a small fire from buffalo chips to cook the rabbit he had caught, and he had stripped the gear from his worn-out mount. It was his plan to rest there a couple of hours before pushing on. Chance had crossed the Washita River a couple of days earlier on his gently northwesterly trail, but that had been far too open to risk what he was planning now. A bath.

He had seen no Indian sign since the river, nor did he expect to. Traveling alone, he was shying away from the well-traveled trails where Indians, bandits, and Comancheros lurked to pick off the lone traveler. The route he chose ran roughly parallel to the Santa Fe Trail, but a considerable distance farther south. Chance Fargo didn't relish being fair game to anyone who happened along, and he usually made it his business to steer clear of trouble. He had spider-webbed the country with trails of his own making several times, and it had, so far, managed to get him to his destination alive.

Without further hesitation, Chance stripped down to

nothing more than the black stetson on his head and the slim cheroot he held clenched between his even, whitely glistening teeth. For a few seconds, he felt the singeing heat of the noon-day sun on his exposed skin. The deep mahogany tan of his arms, face, neck and chest contrasted oddly with the stark whiteness of the rest of his lean hard body. Firm, trail-hardened muscles bunched and unbunched, sliding easily beneath the skin as he sank down into the water, feeling its cooling wetness lap up around his waist, and finally up to his armpits.

Sighing, Chance puffed contentedly on his cheroot. It had been uncommonly warm, the past few days, for that time of the year. Near the center the pool was deep enough for a few short strokes of swimming, so he slid back and forth a few times, enjoying the silkiness of the water playing over the six-foot-two-inches of parched skin.

It was quiet and invigorating, and there was no sign of trouble, though Chance lingered more often toward the end of the pool where he had laid his burnished black gun belt so it would be within easy reach. He could feel time passing, but he did not care. In fact, once he threw the stub of his cheroot away, the only way he had to tell how much time had slipped away was by the wrinkles that were developing on his toes.

Holding his stetson above the water with one hand, Chance ducked beneath the water's surface, relishing the feel of the water washing through his curly black hair. When he surfaced, he was half deafened by water in his ears, but that was when he first heard it. An odd, distant rumbling sound. Chance knew that sound, and yet he did not. Violently he shook his head to clear his ears of the droplets of water that clung there, muffling the sounds. Sounds that if he did not recognize and categorize could possibly cost him his life.

Buffalo! Chance thought wildly. A stampeding herd headed his way! If that was what was coming over the grass,

Chance knew he had a hatful of trouble and nowhere to go with it.

Jamming his hat down over his wet, streaming hair, Chance jumped up out of the pool and started running for the lip of the rise that bordered the pool to the north. As he ran, hopping, cursing and swearing while the rocks bruised and cut his bare feet, his hearing cleared, and when he reached the top of the rise he knew it was not a herd of stampeding buffalo he would see. The sound was not nearly so distant as his muffled hearing had made him believe. It was almost upon him.

Chance blinked, staring, not sure what it was. Whatever it was, though, it was making a terrible, clanging, whang-banging noise. And it was heading straight for the little hollow, showing no signs of slowing. The strange craft was moving fast, faster than anything Chance had ever seen in those parts. It was, at least in part, a wagon. There were four wheels and a wagon bed, but there the resemblance ended. On top there was built a flat deck-like structure, and full white sails billowed out from heavy masts as the prairie winds hurled it along at a fantastic speed.

Below, in the shelter of the hollow, Chance's horse shook his head nervously a couple of times as the strange banging noise drew closer. He whinnied shrilly, sidestepping against the rope that held him fast, then abruptly pulled his picket pin and took off for open country. At almost the same instant, the contraption Chance had been watching topped the edge of the rise surrounding the hollow and plunged down into the dip. If possible, it seemed to go even faster. Yet, it was not out of control, he would have sworn to that as much as he swore at it when it ripped through the middle of his camp, scattering the small cookfire and pulverizing the rabbit carcass into the dirt.

With a wild yell and a another string of curses, Chance

ran like a crazed man, his dripping hair spraying out drops of water behind him, while he tried to intercept the strange wagon. What he would have done, stark naked, without his guns before a careening unhorsed wagon was never put to the test. The sail-bedecked wagon slowed a bit as it crested the far side of the hollow, then picked up speed as it reached open ground again and took off like it had been shot out of a cannon.

For only a moment, Chance got a clear view of the occupants of the wagon, an old man and a young woman. He caught the flash of red hair and a pretty, white-skinned face turned in his direction before the contraption passed beyond his view and continued out across the grasslands.

Chance stopped where he was, his dark eyes fastened on the fast-moving craft. He was far off the usual trails. And, knowing that, he wondered, astonished, where the strange wind-driven craft had come from. What in blazes had it been? It took him long seconds of staring to even recover enough to be properly surprised. Chance had seen many things in his life that most folks would never experience. He had sailed two oceans and traveled far beyond, even returning to his native England in physical body as well as thoughts, but he had never seen anything like what had just flattened his dinner into the dirt. For a moment his gambling instincts surfaced. He would take odds on that contraption in any match race between it and a horse-driven wagon. Then Chance got mad.

With a steady-flowing stream of curses reserved for only moments of greatest anger, Chance snatched the stetson from his head, ready to slam it into the ground in his frustration, then thought better of it, remembering what he had paid for it back in Wichita. Instead, he jammed it awkwardly back on the top of his head. Finally, hoarse and acutely aware of his bruised and cut bare feet, Chance half hopped and half hob-

bled back down the gently sloping incline to what was left of his camp, stopping first beside the pool for his clothes and all-important boots.

Fuming steadily, Chance pulled on his clothes and surveyed the scene with some calm. Fortunately, there wasn't much damage to his few possessions. The coffeepot was the only real casualty. One side was caved halfway in toward the other. The fire had been snuffed and scattered, and he could not even find what was left of the rabbit, but all that was unimportant. Only one fact worried him. His horse was gone. He was alone, on foot in Comanche territory, where survival could easily go to the man on the fastest horse.

Sitting down in the bristly grass, Chance pulled some jerky and hardtack out of his saddlebags and started chewing thoughtfully on it. He was a man who lived by the odds, and odds were that his horse would be heading back in that direction as soon as he figured he had outrun whatever it was he thought had been chasing him. That is, if the Indians did not run across him first. Chance decided he would have to make a cache of his gear and start looking for the animal right away. If he was going to have to end up walking, he wanted to know that fact as soon as possible. It was, Chance reflected, one hell of a long walk to the next town.

Sighing, he got ready to start walking. Sometimes it seemed like life was a stacked deck. He still was not sure exactly what had happened, but he did know one thing. He wanted to catch up with whoever had been driving that wagon.

Emma McPherson got only one good, fast look at Chance Fargo, but the one look she got turned her a blushing red from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes.

Turning anxiously to her grandfather, Emma gasped. "Gramps!" She yelled excitedly over the noise of the flying

windwagon, "There was a man back there, standing on a rise, and he was . . . well, he was," she began, then blushed again without finishing her sentence.

"Was what?" her grandfather yelled back over the roar of the wind.

"Stark naked!" she blurted out, embarrassed, but not enough to ignore what she had seen. "He was waving to us. I think he was yelling something."

"Probably a native," her grandfather returned, and shrugged. "An Indian."

"Nooooo." Emma was definite. "He was no Indian."

Elias risked taking his eyes off the terrain dead ahead for an instant, giving his granddaughter a sideways glance. "Well, this is the best wind we've had since we started out ten days ago. We can't risk losing it just to stop and be sociable. A train doesn't stop for everyone the engineer sees standing alongside the tracks."

Hard to debate that. Emma nodded and leaned sideways out of her seat until she could catch one last glimpse of the lone white figure as it faded into the distance behind them. What, she wondered, was he doing way out there, stark naked, alone, without even a horse? Except, she reminded herself, for that ridiculous black hat stuck on top of his head. Was he crazy? Emma had heard the Indians were inclined to leave crazy people alone.

As a hummock blocked Emma's view of the naked man on the rise, she returned to facing forward, reveling in the feeling of the wind on her face. Her hair, held by a ribbon at the nape of her neck, blew back behind her in a golden-red stream.

It had been an easy trip so far. Emma's grandfather had installed special brakes on the windwagon that, combined with judicious maneuvering of the sails, allowed him to somewhat regulate the speed of their craft. With his designs

everything was running smoothly. They had had no trouble since their quiet leave-taking. In fact, the only excitement of the whole trip so far was her sighting of the strange man in the black cowboy hat. She smiled to herself. Maybe it was a sign. Maybe now there would be other things to break the monotony of the passing miles.

Chapter Four

“Stupid jughead,” Chance muttered to his horse when he finally caught up to him, sore of foot, weary of the walk, and not looking forward to the long bareback ride back to his camp and supplies.

A bridle had been the only thing Chance had seen fit to carry along on a walk and search that could have taken days. Without wasting time, he slipped it over the unprotesting horse’s head. The big, rawboned red horse had always been easy to handle. Chance would have trusted him with his grandmother, if he had a grandmother. And if there was no contraption like the one that had scared him off in the vicinity.

Gathering the reins, Chance jumped upon the horse’s back and pointed his the animal’s nose back toward where he had come from. Never before had Chance had an occasion to see and feel just how rawboned his mount was. He had only been up on his bare back a few minutes when his mind started reaching back to his supplies. Some liniment should be there, but was it enough?

By the time Chance had gotten back to the little hollow where he had stashed all his gear, it was pitch black, and big Red was stove in. He spent the night there, and started out fresh the next morning, but without sitting the saddle with his usual relaxed ease. Only time would cure the stiffness and soreness that twinged each time he shifted in the saddle. In the past he had spent days in the saddle, even weeks, and never had an ache. But bareback, that was something he hoped to leave to the Indians from now on.

In spite of everything, Chance was making good time, and, luckily, he had still seen no sign of the Comanches. Thinking about that fact, he was startled to see the contraption that had

destroyed his camp the day before spring into view. The sails were down, the masts standing starkly against the backdrop of blue sky like the bare bones of a skeleton.

A small campfire was burning and a woman tending it like she was cooking. Chance felt his stomach contract at the thought of food. He had had nothing but some jerky and hardtack since his fool horse had run off early the day before. Faintly, he could catch the scent of fresh coffee drifting on the breeze. A man was moving around the strange craft with his every movement telegraphing his authority and assurance. The wagon was his all right.

It occurred to Chance that he should be good and mad, but every time he looked at the wagon he could not repress a slow grin. Touching his heels to his horse, he sent him across the rolling grasses toward the wagon to have a better look. That much, he was sure, they owed him. And if he was up to his usual form, he would not be leaving without lunch.

As he approached, Chance saw the woman get to her feet, turning toward the obviously older man and calling something in his direction. By the time he rode in, the older man was standing alongside the young, red-haired woman looking in his direction. When Chance pulled up in front of them, he had his usual inscrutable look firmly locked onto his face. He sat quietly in the saddle for a few seconds, holding them both in a long, appraising stare. Chance wondered if the woman, who he knew had seen him, could recognize him with his clothes on. As for her, she cut a strange figure, standing before the fire, carefully keeping her hands, covered with flour, away from her sides. Her dress was much too neat, fresh and starched-looking for her to have been out on the prairie long. Most of the wagon women Chance had run across before either wore an apron day and night or used their skirts for one. After months on the trail, women were not in the least squeak-

mish about wiping their hands down the fronts of their skirts. It was handy, it was fast, and above all it was practical.

Meeting the young woman's bright green eyes, Chance knew she recognized him, even before she opened her mouth.

"Gramps," Emma said quietly, "This is the man I was telling you about. The man I saw yesterday near that water hole." Without success, Emma tried to repress a blush. The stetson hat, she decided, that was what she had recognized first.

"Well! You'll have to excuse us for passing you on the trail, but we couldn't lose the wind." Elias enthusiastically made a broad gesture toward the windwagon. "The name's McPherson, Elias McPherson. And this is my granddaughter, Emma."

Emma blushed again, feeling the warmth rising in each cheek. She hardly dared meet the penetrating black-eyed gaze of the stranger that sat his horse so unmoving before them. Astride the big red horse, he looked so different. Dressed in black pants, black leather vest over a tan shirt, and a buckskin fringed jacket worn open with one side tucked behind a burnished leather holster holding a pearl handled gun, he looked bigger. Much bigger than he'd seemed from the deck of the windwagon. His face was still and hard, tanned a dark nut brown over high, broad cheekbones, and a broad-lined forehead. The look in his dark eyes was as piercing as a pair of arrows.

There was a softening about his face, a vague suggestion of humor as he shifted his gaze toward the windwagon. "Chance Fargo," he said offhandedly, and he swung down from his horse. "And after the way you charged through my camp yesterday, smashed my dinner into the dust and ran off my horse, I think you owe it to me to at least tell me what that thing is."

"Oh! I'm so sorry," Emma blurted out. "If we had known

we had done all that we would have stopped, I assure you. Won't you stay to lunch?" she went on quickly.

"Give us a chance to make up for yesterday?"

Why, I'd be honored, ma'am," Chance said gallantly, sweeping his stetson from his head. Getting the invitation to share their meal had been easy enough. Now he was more interested in the sail-rigged wagon.

"Son, that's a windwagon!" Elias said before Emma could say anything more, unable to control his enthusiasm any longer. "The first of its kind to cross the breadth of our great continent." Elias led the way to his invention. "With my innovations, this baby will be the only way to cross the country in the next couple of years. Once we prove her, why, there's no telling where it could lead."

Eagerly, Elias began showing Chance some of his ideas and inventions. "With these," he pointed to a huge straight lever beside the steering seat, and a smaller, oxbow-shaped one closer to the steering mechanism, "I can control the speed. Go as slow or fast as I care to. Depending some on the wind of course. That's why I was anxious to keep the wind yesterday. Test her out. See how fast she would really go. How she runs in rough weather."

Gesturing for Chance to follow, Elias climbed up on the windwagon's deck. "If I want to, I can keep the speed of this wagon as slow, or even slower than a team of oxen, but with a stiff breeze in her sails, she has more pull than two teams, or even three teams of oxen. She's a wonder," he added lovingly.

Chance nodded in agreement. She was that all right. "Where are you headed in that thing?"

"Why, West, young man!" Elias blustered. "West! California! Where there's free land for the taking. I thought a man of your sort would know about that."

"I have heard some rumors," Chance responded, grinning.

“But what about the mountains between here and there?”

“How big can they be? We’ll make it over all right,” There was no doubt in Elias’s voice.

Chance did not look convinced. “Does this thing sprout wings and fly too?”

Elias ignored the question. “I had a little trouble with her, that’s why we stopped here. But that’s all fixed, she’s ready to roll. After we eat, we’ll be moving on.”

“Come and get it,” Emma called.

Chance climbed down from the windwagon’s deck. He was a gambler, but Elias McPherson, he decided, had to be foolhardy and crazy to be trying to get across the country in that sail-rigged wagon. The odds were heavily stacked against him. And, to make things worse, he did not have any horses. No back-up, no contingency.

Chance dropped down on the ground close to the fire, sitting cross-legged as Emma handed him a plate brimming with beans, beef, some unrecognizable greens and fresh biscuits, all steaming hot. He had not had a meal anywhere close to it put in front of him in months. The smells made his mouth water and almost made him glad it was his camp the wagon had chosen to go stampeding through. Almost.

“I guess,” Chance said between mouthfuls, “That someone has already told you about the Indians in these parts?”

“Oh yes.” Emma was serious. “I understand they can be very brutal.”

“War,” Chance pointed out, “is always brutal. And that’s what we have out here. Now you take the Comanche. He was pretty friendly to the white man until the white man started killing all the buffalo and stealing his land. The Texans were the ones the Comanches were really after at first, but since all white men look alike to them, things got out of hand. It’s been pretty much the same with most of the tribes. Don’t get me

wrong. They're not angels. The Indian nations have been warring among themselves for years. Best thing to do," he added, "is to run like hell if you spot any of them. If you can't do that, then try to parley. With a contraption like the one you're riding in, it just might work. Barring that, you better stand ready to fight."

"You sound awfully cynical," Emma chided him quietly. "And your language . . . Really, you don't have to curse to get your point across."

"Lady," Chance said calmly, "I have long since, with few exceptions, categorically and individually, given up on the entire human race. As for my language, you better get used to it. You're going to hear a damn sight more of it as you head West." He prodded her, "When you run across some mule skinnners, you'll see what I mean. They're going to shatter those pretty ears."

"We've heard about the more, uh . . . callous Westerner," Elias put in. "We simply did not think that you were one of them."

Chance smiled faintly. "I am whatever suits my purpose."

Elias looked puzzled at Chance's last remark, but Emma just changed the subject.

"Chance," she said thoughtfully. "What kind of a name is that? What I mean is, that isn't your real name, is it?"

"No," Chance answered her easily. "It's short for Chauncy Alexander Fargo."

He said the name with Old World dignity. "I got tired of people calling me Chancey," he held his nose and made a high nasal sound like he was half sneezing the name, "so, after I'd been here a while, I shortened it." As he set his empty plate down Chance gave Emma a direct look. "I wouldn't go asking too many people that question about their names. I didn't mind answering it, but I'm not running from the law

or anything else. A lot of folks out here have things they want to forget, or places they want to be forgotten,

When a man tells you his name is Texas, or Pecos Pete, that's all you need to know."

Taking Chance's advice seriously, Emma looked a little embarrassed. "I'll remember that, Mr. Fargo."

"Chance," he told her. "That's about all most people know me by. You might notice folks don't stand much on ceremony out here either."

"Chance, then," Emma said softly. "Would it be dangerous or embarrassing if I asked you where you're going?"

"Actually," he confided, "I'm on my way to the California gold fields."

"Been there before?"

Chance nodded. "A couple of times."

"Are you planning on doing some mining?"

Chance shrugged. His face lightened. "There are some considerably easier ways to turn a dollar than that."

Though puzzled at his remark, Emma refrained from questioning him further. She wondered about him, though. Such a strange man. So cryptic. He had a quiet, subdued sense of humor and gave the vague impression that he was laughing at almost everyone and everything. Where had he come from? Why was he there? He was an obviously educated man. A man of good breeding. From England if his name was anything to go by. Chance Fargo, she observed, was no longer exactly in the spring of his life. Early summer would be closer to it. What had happened during those years to make him as he was? To bring him out to the wild country, traveling alone? Was he married? She wondered. Curiosity was one of her weak points, and Emma would have given almost anything to be able to see inside this strange man's head. See where he had come from and where he had been.

Openly returning the appraising look from Emma's green eyes, Chance sat back and lit up one of his cheroots.

"That was mighty good cooking ma'am," he said easily.

"Emma," she reminded him, "and thank you. Her smile made her face radiant.

There was no denying it, Chance decided, Emma McPherson was a real beauty. She would be an eye-catcher wherever she went. Provided, of course, that she made it across the prairie with her grandfather in the first place. The alternative wasn't pretty. Chance gave Emma one of his most engaging smiles, then glanced off across the gentle roll of the land.

What he caught a glimpse of out there gave Chance a real start, but he managed to control himself and shift his gaze slowly, almost casually, to take in a little more territory. Unconcernedly, he puffed on his cheroot a couple more times, then turned to Elias.

"How fast can you get that windwagon of yours moving?"

"Within just a minute or so after I board her," Elias said proudly. "Why?"

"It has to do with what I said earlier about running," Chance told him conversationally as he casually picked up part of their gear and tossed it into the windwagon's hold. "There are Comanche behind us," he kept the tone in his voice steady, "quite a few of them, I'd say."

Elias blinked. "I don't see anything."

"They're below the crests of the hillocks. And they'll be on us soon if we don't get moving. They probably think you're broken down, without horses to pull your wagon. They're not in much of a rush yet. That'll give us a little more time, but not much, so you better move fast!"

Uneasily, Chance waited long seconds while Elias clambered about the deck of the windwagon making her ready to sail. His eyes shifted over the gentle, innocent-appearing roll

of the land. But the look of it didn't fool him for a second. The small folds and dips in the earth hid trouble. He had run before, and he had stood and fought. It was not the mark of cowardice that he should prefer running. It was a mark of studied good sense. Chance Fargo was not a man who often played the long shots. He preferred the safer odds. Especially when his life could very well be thrown in as part of the stakes.

The windwagon gave a sudden lurch, then started to roll. Startled by the movement, Chance paused a moment, then vaulted easily into the saddle, nudging his big red horse into a trot, easily passing the wagon.

Once the Comanches that Chance had spotted saw the wagon start to move, they came boiling up out of the hills behind them like they were being spit out of the very core of the earth. As the wagon started to pick up speed, Chance spotted the riders coming at them from the southwest, riding all out.

He would have sworn there was no way they could get past the mounted Comanches that were pounding determinedly for them, and he would have been right if Emma and her grandfather had been in the usual type of wagon used to cross the plains. But the windwagon continued to pick up speed so quickly Chance was hard put to keep his big Red with them. The powerful horse was already close to running all out when the Indians were on them. The air was filled with war whoops and the breezy whiffs of not so expertly aimed arrows. A couple of them stuck in the sides of the wagon as it rumbled and clang-banged along, moving faster still under Elias's expert handling. It became abruptly apparent to Chance that he had a choice to make. Within a very few seconds, the windwagon would be going much too fast for his horse to keep up with. He had to either fight for himself or stick with the strange sail-bedecked wagon. One more quick glance around convinced

him that there really was no choice to be made. His own hide meant more to him than a big, bony red horse and all his gear. Chance urged his horse forward, asking more, a little more speed, going for the deck of the windwagon.

As Chance pulled up even with the windwagon, the deck bounced and jostled, just barely beyond his reach as Elias poured on more speed, oblivious to Chance's desperate plunge for the windwagon. Chance cursed bitterly, his words strung out on the wind behind him as big Red hung on, then started gaining again slowly, by painful inches. He began to fear, as Red's strides became tired, and the pumping rhythm of his shoulders jerkier, that he was going to run the animal to death. He shifted his weight to the horse's advantage and Red took heart, surging forward just enough for Chance to lay firm hold on the upright side of the flying windwagon. His fingers fastened themselves on rough wood, and he dragged himself out of the saddle well beyond the reach of the wildly spinning wheel.

For long uncertain seconds, Chance clung to the edge of the windwagon's upright side before he was able to begin hauling himself to the deck. With painful slowness, he chinned himself against the jerky pounding of the wagon, his eyes coming over the top of the deck. He shifted, got a better grip, then looked right into the dark eyes of an Indian warrior coming up onto the deck of the windwagon from the opposite side.

Spurred by the simple fact that the Indian was bound to throw him over the edge if he got the chance, Chance's brain telegraphed an urgent message to his muscles that sent him catapulting up over the edge of the wagon onto the deck with something less than grace.

Off balance from the start, Chance hit the deck in a half crouch. There was no way to recenter himself as the

windwagon pursued its tipsy, careening course. The adventurous young warrior was doing little better. He had reached the ship's deck and was somehow managing to stand, even if he was a little stooped, and not very steady.

Easing away from the edge of the windwagon, Chance was keeping a wary eye on the Comanche warrior, preferring to let the kid facing him make the first move.

With a grim smile, the young Indian pulled a knife from the sheath at his belt and started for Chance, his stride rolling, like that of a man who had been at sea many months and had just set foot on land again.

Getting set for him, Chance shifted a little to one side. The windwagon lurched sharply, and he sat down hard on the wooden deck. For an instant, he was dazed. Giving a wild war whoop, the Comanche tried to lunge across the deck to where Chance was sprawled. The windwagon rolled beneath the young warrior's moccasins as he crouched beneath the rigging, brandishing his knife above his head, lurching and staggering across the deck.

Scrambling for some control of his body on the heaving, twisting deck, Chance managed to climb to his hands and knees as the young warrior came on. Taking his cue from Chance, the Indian kept low, but in his enthusiasm forgot how high above his head he held his knife. Chance cringed as the heavy bottom timber holding down the sail swept above him with the force of a battering ram. It kept right on going, carried by the shift in the windwagon's course, caught the knife the young warrior was brandishing with enough force to imbed it in the heavy timber, swing it far beyond his reach, and flip him flat on his back.

Grunting, the Comanche rolled over on his belly and scrambled to his hands and knees, barely able to keep himself from rolling over the edge of the speeding windwagon.

Chance tried to scabble across the deck to give the Indian the extra push he needed to send him over the edge, but the windwagon took a low hill, dipping into a small valley. Chance slipped, flattened spread-eagled and slid several feet before he was able to arrest his progress by what amounted to almost sheer will, and by digging his fingernails into the wood.

He hung on desperately until the windwagon righted itself, sailing the bottom of the little valley with ease. As he got his feet back under him, the Comanche launched another attack. They collided amidships and the advantage almost immediately turned toward Chance as the windwagon took to the low slope leading out of the valley. That advantage lasted only an instant though as the incline became steeper and locked together, they began staggering toward the rear of the windwagon, clinging to each other more for support than to fight.

The wagon lurched abruptly as one of the oversized wheels bounced off an huge rock suspending Chance and the Comanche warrior momentarily above the windwagon's deck. When they came down, it was to uneven footing and they sprawled awkwardly in each other's arms, dangerously near the back end of the wagon.

Clasped tightly in the Indian's grip, Chance bounced along the deck of the windwagon and felt himself slipping inexorably, along with the young warrior, toward the rear of the fast moving windwagon. He and the Indian grappled near the edge of the craft's deck, clawing and gouging at each other. Each tried to maintain his own grip while forcing the other over the edge.

The windwagon bounced. Hard. All of a sudden, Chance and the Comanche were both half hanging over the rear of the windwagon. It was Chance's head that was nearer one wildly spinning wheel. He could hear it singing in his ear, feel the breeze of its passage. Suddenly every muscle in his body felt as

if they had all grown their own separate hands and all were trying madly to cling to the wood of the wagon's deck. All the same, he was aware he was slipping. The fact that he would take the Indian along with him was of little consolation. It was, after all, the laps of the Comanche's friends they would be falling into. If he went off the back of the windwagon and the fall didn't kill him, Chance figured the odds of his survival immediately thereafter would be hovering right around zero.

Abruptly, the warrior twisted sharply to one side, tearing loose Chance's precarious grip. Octopus-like, Chance attached himself to something else just as fast. The windwagon lurched. Chance kned the young Comanche in the ribs, lifting him bodily off the deck of the windwagon and sailing almost free over the edge. Chance felt a terrific jerk as the warrior maintained his grip on him a second longer, trying to drag Chance over with him. His head slammed against the deck, dazing him. Then miraculously, just before Chance lost his last vestige of a grip on the wood, the Indian was jerked free, tumbling into the thick buffalo grass like a cuffed bear cub.

Only half conscious, Chance spun around like the blades of a windmill on the deck of the wagon, unable to establish any solid contact with the bouncing deck beneath him. He was about convinced that he was going off after the Indian, when his grip caught and held. Half hanging over the edge, he was slipping only a little as he craned his neck as far as he dared to catch sight of something he might be able to latch onto to pull himself back up. Blearily he spotted Emma jumping into the back of the wagon, her skirts hitched up unladylike to well above her knees. She negotiated the deck with experience if not grace, ducking the swaying timbers and dodging the flapping canvas.

Without a word, Emma grabbed hold of one of the heavy metal rings imbedded in the side of the windwagon with one

hand and snagged Chance's leather jacket with the other. The blush was whipped high in her cheeks, her green eyes reflected her determination, and her soft, full lips were compressed into a thin bloodless line with her effort. It was fortunate for both of them that it was more a matter of balance than strength that was needed to haul Chance back to the still-questionable safety of the windwagon's deck.

Regaining enough of his faculties to give Emma some help, Chance heaved sideways with the direction Emma was dragging at him. He was not exactly sure what happened after that, but all of a sudden, instead of his head hanging in mid-air dangerously near the wheel that was spinning like a buzz saw, it was beating, instead, unrhythmically on the wooden deck of the wagon. And he had somehow gotten both his arms wrapped around the base of one of the upright masts.

Satisfied that he was safe, at least for the moment, Emma hitched up her skirts again and crawled back up front with her grandfather. Almost immediately the windwagon began to slow. Shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, Chance sat up and crawled toward the front of the windwagon. It was comparatively easy going with the bounces less forceful and the course a little more even.

"You're a very brave man," Emma exclaimed enthusiastically over her shoulder as Chance wedged himself up in a corner behind the pilot's seat.

"No . . ." he denied her observation. "Just a practical one trying to keep his skin whole."

Gingerly, Chance touched the sore spot on the side of his head where it had so violently made contact with the windwagon's deck. He remembered the bright look he had seen on Emma's face. He could swear she had enjoyed every minute of the whole thing.

Chapter Five

For three days the windwagon had clear sailing at a much more moderate speed, stopping only occasionally for the three of them to eat and for Elias to man his endless pots of grease, coating and recoating every moving part of the wagon. Even with all of Elias's continual tender care, the windwagon still sounded like a one-man band marching cross-country. The rattles, bangs and clangs managed to rob Chance of what little daytime sleep he tried to get after standing an uneasy watch all night.

Without his own horse, even one from such questionable stock as Red had been, Chance felt tied down and helpless. He was beginning to get restless almost beyond endurance. On the afternoon of the third day, as he paced the moving deck, hanging onto the masts for support against the odd bumps, a dark little sod hut rolled up into view. Smoke was curling up out of a hole in its roof. Horses were there, five of them in a sod and rope corral already saddled. Chance's hand went to the belt he wore around his middle beneath his clothes. That much, at least, had not been lost when he lost Red and his gear. It contained a couple decks of cards and his working capital. If anyone in that soddy was in the mood for a friendly game, he might be able to win himself a horse, and maybe a saddle thrown in to boot.

"Gramps," Chance heard Emma saying up front, 'maybe we shouldn't stop.'

"Why not? We haven't met any of the people who actually live out here on this prairie we're crossing. It could be a very enlightening experience."

Silently Chance cheered for Elias. If the older man had decided differently, he would have had to leave them on the chance that he could manage to lay his hands on a good horse.

The idea of letting the windwagon continue on without him before he was sure of his ability to procure a horse was not to his liking. It cut down considerably on a man's maneuvering room when he left himself only one course to follow.

If he could get someone into a game, Chance was almost certain of his own ability to win. He never cheated just to win, though he knew how and had done it a time or two to get a point across. Chance Fargo was simply good at what he did.

Moving up front as they continued to roll toward the little soddy, Chance stopped behind Elias and Emma, automatically flipping his jacket back and taking out his gun to check the load.

"What's that for?" Emma was apprehensive as she caught sight of him dropping the gun back in his holster, making sure the butt remained clear of his jacket.

"Habit," Chance returned. "Just like to be ready."

"Ready for what?"

"The worst."

"And that is?"

Chance shrugged. "You never can tell until it happens."

Emma shuddered a little. "Gramps," she began, but it was too late. The windwagon was already rolling into the yard of the soddy, and several rough and wild-looking men were piling out the low front door to get a better look at what was making all the racket.

"Well, I'll be a whey-belly cayuse, boys," the one who came out the door first exclaimed. "Will you look at that! What in tarnation is it?"

The other three with him did not need any urging, they were already staring at the wagon from every angle, splitting their attention between it and its occupants.

"And a real female, pink pretty to boot!" another exclaimed around a mouthful of chewing tobacco. "Hell! I ain't seen no

woman for nigh onto six months, and then it was that there calico queen back in Dodge . . .”

“The name’s Bleak,” a tall, thin, dark man, obviously the leader of the bunch, interrupted. “The man with the big mouth is Yancy Hawks,” he said of the man with the mouthful of tobacco, standing a bit shorter than himself, stocky of frame with wide-set, liquid hazel eyes that seemed to be somehow stuck on Emma.

“Over there is D’Arcy Duncan,” Bleak went on. “Folks call him Dee.”

Dee snatched off his hat at the introduction to Emma and smiled faintly as if the effort would somehow do permanent damage to his dark brown, deeply seamed face. His brown eyes were like a ferret’s, small and narrow, but intense in their gaze.

“And that,” Bleak gestured to the small, bandy man who had been first out the door, “is Bronco.”

Bronco had sandy hair fringing a balding spot on the top of his head. Bright sparkling blue eyes were accented at the corners by tiny clusters of crinkles caused by laughter or squinting too much in the bright sunlight. The man fairly bounced when he walked.

“Why don’t you folks climb on down, light and set for a spell,” Bleak went on. “We don’t get many folks passing this way, and I sure ain’t never seen a contraption the likes of that.” His voice was cool and steady.

“Don’t mind if we do,” Chance said, dropping lightly from the deck of the windwagon to the ground, keeping his gun in clear sight.

As soon as they had piled out of the soddy, Chance had known this was no bunch of sodbusters. A rough bunch by any standards, it was even rougher when measured by the ones Chance lived by. One of the bunch, Bronco, Chance had

heard of. He was a sometimes cowboy, a part-time horse thief, and he was not sure what else. But Chance did know Bronco's horses had a reputation for being as loyal to him as big dogs. The result was, God help any man who tried to ride on a mount owned by Bronco. The horse would, with deadly certainty, throw any rider other than Bronco, and proceed to kick the hell out of him.

Dee Duncan Chance knew only by reputation, if that could be called knowing another man. He was said to be a fast gun, very fast. A bank robber, and quite possibly a killer.

Bleak and Yancy Hawks Chance knew nothing about, but he knew their breed. And if Bleak was the leader, he would have to be the strongest. In Chance's experience, that could mean almost anything. Sure of himself, he walked easily among them, but he was wary, taking their measure as they were taking his.

"Hot damn!" a fifth voice said from the door of the soddy. "I sure am sorrier'n hell I missed all the excitement when ya'll pulled in." He paused, standing up straight in the low opening. "Folks call me Pony," the young man with the tangled mop of blond bowl-cut hair went on. "I didn't catch your names."

"Chance Fargo," Chance obliged, letting himself slip into the role that suited his situation, his voice deepening, his Western drawl thickening, and his attitude changing in many subtle ways. "And the pilgrims with me are Elias McPherson and his granddaughter, Emma."

With one quick look, Chance appraised the newest member of their group. He was decked out in homespun pants, sodbuster boots and muslin shirt. The side gun was prominent on his hip. Pony was young, inexcusably young, maybe seventeen, or, pushing it some, eighteen. He was short, no taller than five foot six. There was a dark shiny hue to his skin like

he had been rubbed all over with nut oil, and blue eyes peered out of a round face on either side of a nose that was much too large. Well, there was still some hope for the boy there. Chance thought that since Pony was still so young, there was yet a possibility that his face might catch up with his nose.

“Where ya’ll headed in that thing?” Pony’s eyes were popping with curiosity. “And what the hell is it? Ain’t none of ya got no horses?”

Chance chuckled softly, more to convey a feeling of good humor to the group than because he felt like chuckling. He still needed a horse. He meant to lay his hands on one of them if it was humanly possible. Better one of the men from the soddy should be without a horse than he.

“We’re bound for California. Ran into some Comanches a couple days back,” Chance told them while Yancy was eagerly giving Emma a hand down from the wagon. “We managed to get clear of ’em but I lost my horse. Big red rawboned broomtail. Any of you boys see him?” Chance knew none of them could have seen Red, but he was trying to build at least a surface feeling of camaraderie. And it never hurt to let men, no matter what their cut, think they can somehow help or choose to withhold their assistance.

The bunch from the soddy glanced quickly back and forth among themselves, all of them shaking their heads negatively.

Bleak shrugged. “Ain’t seen nothing but each other for quite a spell. Reckon we’ll be moving on soon too.”

Chance didn’t doubt that. They were on the dodge, either from the law or someone even more determined.

“Come on in,” Bleak offered friendly enough. “We’ve got coffee on. Me and the boys can sure use someone else to talk to. Like I said, it’s been quite a spell.”

“Yea,” Yancy grunted, but his gaze was glued on Emma.

Emma appeared a little uneasy but managed a gracious

smile as they were all steered toward the doorway of the sod house. Sunlight poured through open doors front and back. A pair of coal lamps lit the corners, and the rich burnt smell of strong coffee scented the air in place of the musty stink they had half expected.

“Well,” Elias began, “there’s really not too much to tell. The wagon outside is a windwagon, the method of propulsion is the same as a good sailing ship cutting the waves.

The wind!” Elias exuberantly launched into his favorite subject with vigor.

Chance glanced heavenward as if expecting help from that quarter. Pony, Chance noted, didn’t look any too interested in Elias’s spiel and was heading his way. The others were listening to the old man with what seemed to be rapt attention. Elias was quite a showman, pacing the dirt floor and gesturing expansively with his hands while Bleak and his boys sat around the table listening. Still, it occurred to Chance that they had to be more desperate for new blood in their midst than he had first thought. For the first time Chance had heard Elias punctuate his speech with questions about his son. He was apparently looking for him with as much determination as he captained his windwagon.

“California, huh,” Pony broke in on Chance’s thoughts. “You figure on picking up any horses ’Tween here and there?”

Chance shrugged. “Depends.”

Pony looked serious. Like Chance had answered his question in detail. Then the kid changed the subject. “You any good with that?” He gestured toward the pearl-handled six-gun at Chance’s hip.

“Good enough to keep my skin whole,” Chance replied, thinking at the same time that Pony had come through with the typical kid’s question.

Pony grinned. “I’m fast. Good’n fast.

Chance mustered up a grave, fatherly look of concern. "I hope you never have to prove it, Pony."

"Yeah." Pony surprised Chance with his answer. "I never have hung too much on the idea of killing somebody. Oh, I got plenty of nerve. There ain't nothin' I won't stand up to, but I'll be damned if I can manage to pull the trigger at the right time. It started when I was thirteen," Pony went on eagerly, taking advantage of a friendly ear. "My pa and me were jumped by a bunch of Indians on a little spread we had. Pa, he stuck me in a window with a rifle and we went to banging away at them Indians. I don't even know if I killed any. I mean I wasn't looking that close.

"My pa," Pony took a moment out to explain, "never had much use for me. Ma died right after I was whelped and Pa raised me from a cub. He was a good man, did everything was expected, but he sure didn't cotton to me none.

"Well anyway, after a while one of them Indians found a way to slip up on the house and come up through the window I was firing from. I never seen him till he was on me, but if I had pulled that trigger instead of bellowing like a fresh-branded calf I'd a had him. Pa, though, he got him. Kilt him right there, but another'n was coming up through his window at the time. Kilt Pa on the spot. I thought I was done too, but it was right then that Bronco come bustin' in and settled their hash proper. I've been riding with him ever since."

"Sorry to hear about your pa, shame he didn't make it," Chance interjected.

"No need," Pony told him with a half grin. "It was a long time ago, and like I said, Pa and me, we didn't have too much between us. I liked him fine enough, but that was all. It's sort of the same with Bronco. We like each other fine, but I don't owe him nothin'. I've held the horses a time or two, made myself a target for half the gunslicks in the country for him

and the bunch he rides with. That's why Bronco taught me to shoot straight and fast. Anyway, I figure we're even and I've been thinking about pulling out. I like Bronco fine, but I'm gettin' damn sick of sittin' in this stinking soddy in between doing things I know a man's Ma wouldn't approve of."

Slouching a bit, Chance leaned against an upright bedpost that supported the upper bunk, drinking his coffee. "Where you figuring on heading?" Chance was starting to match his way of talking more closely with that of the soddy's occupants. The key to co-operation in a situation such as he now found himself was to make himself blend in. That meant sounding and acting like one of them.

"California! " Pony answered quickly. "You reckon I could tag along with you folks?"

"I ain't the man to ask, I'm just tagging along myself. Don't know how long I'll be with the wagon. But," he added, reaching inside his shirt, coming out with a deck of cards, "I don't reckon it would hurt for us all to talk about it later, before we pull out."

Pony grinned his thanks and stepped outside. Chance was about to turn to the men seated around the table deep in conversation when he bumped into Emma.

"How can you do that?" Emma assailed him.

"Do what?" Chance blinked in surprise almost as if he had not been aware of her presence in the same world with him, let alone the same room.

"Change like that. You talk different, stand different. I could swear you're even drinking your coffee differently."

Chance hesitated, then gave a wry smile. "If you've seen more than one side of me," he told her dryly, "then you've obviously already been around me too long."

Piqued, Emma opened her mouth to say something, but Chance turned away from her, focusing his full attention on

the men around the table. "Any of you yahoos interested in a friendly game of poker?"

"Poker ain't never friendly," Dee said with grim humor, "but I'm always ready for a game."

Chance threw the deck carelessly on the table, fanning it out full for inspection as he drew up a chair.

"Why not?" Bleak agreed, his long, thin face more of a caricature of a man than the real thing. Long brown fingers expertly gathered the cards and flipped them out rapidly as he made a fast count for a full deck.

"Mind if I sit in?" Elias asked.

"Gramps," Emma protested, but he just raised a hand for her not to worry.

"The more the merrier," Bronco answered Elias above Emma's protest. "We've been playing and shuffling the same money back and forth between us for quite a spell."

Satisfied with the deck, Bleak snapped it smartly to the center of the table. "Cut for deal," he ordered.

Emma snorted with unladylike heartiness as she spun on her heel to leave. "I'll wait for both of you in the wagon," she said pointedly over her shoulder as she exited.

Chance wondered how he had gotten included in that last remark. He was going to have to get away from Emma and her grandfather. He reaffirmed the fact in his mind. There was something about the way she had looked at him from the first time they had met.

"Your cut," Yancy said at Chance's elbow.

Chance cut, came up with a jack giving him first deal. From then on Emma was no longer a part of his thoughts.

Pony smiled at Emma as she stalked out of the sod house in his direction.

"Why aren't you back inside playing cards with them?"

Emma demanded of Pony as she strode up to him, anger flaring and causing her to hold her slender frame even straighter than usual.

“No, ma’am, than ya’ kindly, not me.” Pony shook his head seriously for emphasis. “Too dangerous.”

“Dangerous!” Emma exclaimed. “How can a game of cards be dangerous?”

“Poker, ma’am,” Pony told her with continued gravity, “is played mighty serious in these parts. Seen a couple of men get themselves kilt over a game in Santa Fe. Seemed like a kinda dumb thing to die over, so I just decided I ain’t gonna get myself involved.”

“Do you mean to tell me my grandfather could get himself killed in there playing poker with your friends?” Emma asked, appalled at the thought.

Pony nodded. “It could happen, ma’am,” he told her truthfully, but rushed to reassure her, “but it ain’t likely. What I really want to talk to you about, ma’am, is my ridin’ along with you folks to California. Course, I expect to talk to your grandpaw soon as the game is over, but I just wanted to how you would feel about it.”

“Fine,” Emma answered Pony absently, not hearing half of what he said as she glanced anxiously back over her shoulder toward the soddy. “You’re not just trying to scare me, are you, Pony?”

Pony shook his head. “Noooo, ma’am. My pa always told me I should tell a woman exactly what I was fixin’ to do, then follow through with it.”

Emma was puzzled by the remark but let it pass. “How long do you think that game will last?”

“Ain’t no tellin’. Couple of hours, a couple of days, it’s all the same to them once they get to playing.”

Emma bit her lip thoughtfully, then turned to mount the

windwagon. "I'm going to have it ready to sail," she told Pony. "You can give me a hand if you like."

"Sure thing," Pony agreed eagerly, glad of the opportunity to board the strange contraption.

It didn't take them long to have the windwagon ready to sail at little more than a moment's notice. Getting it ready was nothing new to Emma after all the time she'd helped and watched her grandfather in the past. But after she was finished, there was nothing more for them to do but wait.

Emma shared the pilot's seat up front with Pony, glad for the company. They talked, and the hours passed quickly in spite of Emma's worry. Pony, she found, was a sweet, likable boy. The coarseness of his language took her aback at first, but there was something engaging about his manner. Emma found herself very quickly deciding she liked Pony very much.

"Reckon I best go have a look and see if they're fixin' to go right on past sunset," Pony suggested as the sun started to swing low in the western sky and he jumped down off the wagon.

When he stepped through the soddy door, Pony got about as much notice as a prairie dog inside its burrow. The men sitting around the table were lost in their game, and a tense, electric feeling crackled through the air. Pony felt it the moment he walked in. The set of Dee's face told Pony that someone had crossed him, and Dee was an uncommonly easy man to cross. His quick temper was something of a legend around their campfires.

Chance glanced in Pony's direction once when the boy entered, then returned his attention to his cards. He too felt the silence, the tenseness, that filled the small room. If it had been any other time, any other place, he would have pulled out, thrown in his hand.

Chance Fargo was no fool, but he did need that horse. From the first time Dee had dealt, Chance had detected the whisper of a bottom deal. And Yancy was handy with the hideouts. Only Bleak, Bronco and Elias were playing completely straight. Chance alternated, playing it straight when it came to a showdown with Bronco, Bleak or Elias. Whenever confronted by either Yancy or Dee, he did whatever came natural at the time. He had won a few big pots, lost a few of the small ones, and had about cleaned Yancy out. Now was the time to go after his horse. Yancy Hawks, Chance judged, would be fool enough to bet his horse and gear.

The problem, as Chance saw it, was Elias. He was a cagey old man. It had not taken him long to catch on to what was happening. While he had not yet out and out accused anyone of cheating, his comments and actions spoke clearly of what he knew to be fact. The fuse was lit. All Chance hoped for now was to hold things together until he could lay his hands on Yancy's horse, fair and square of course.

As the play continued around the table and the pot grew, Chance waited. Three tens, a queen and a six stared up at him from his hand. Chance upped the pot by twenty dollars and asked for two cards. Yancy complied and stood pat on his own hand. Chance glanced down at the new cards. A ten and an ace . . . four tens. Still and inscrutable, Chance's face never changed. Dee threw in his hand muttering something under his breath. Bronco took one card, and Bleak stayed in, taking two. Elias, to Chance's relief, folded.

Bets circled the table again and when the cards were spread out face up, Chance raked in the pot. Yancy, he noted, was down to his last few dollars. Chance knew he would be able to make his try for the horse on the next hand, corner Yancy into betting his horse and gear. It would be tricky, though.

It was Dee's deal.

The cards slid across the table under Dee's not so expert guidance. A set expression was in Elias's steel gray eyes. Unconsciously, Chance hooked his foot around the table leg. He sensed trouble and he was ready for it. As ready as any man ever was for that kind of trouble. Dee's clumsy cheating continued. Chance saw that trouble coming in the set of Elias's face.

The old man looked Dee right in the eye as he half rose from his seat spreading his hands before him as he cleared his throat for his pronouncement. "I have seen few men clumsier or more awkward at cheating than you." he said with dead calm.

Elias had not been west of the Mississippi long enough to know just what such an accusation could mean. And Chance had seen the flame leap into Dee's brown ferret eyes.

"You need glasses, old man," Dee gritted from behind clenched teeth, "and I'm expectin' an apology right quick."

What followed happened so quickly Chance never was sure exactly what had followed what. Elias had started to say something more to Dee, his own volatile temper rising like a hot air balloon. Then, all of a sudden, Dee had his gun out, leveling it on Elias. Elias yelled a string of well-chosen oaths at the younger man, not making the slightest effort to get clear of Dee's gun. Chance jerked the foot he had wrapped around the table leg and lifted up on the edge with his free hand as his other reached for his own weapon. The heavy table flew up in the air, scattering cards, money, chairs and men. The coins peppered the earthen floor with stuttering plops as they skittered off the table.

Somehow the edge of the table connected with Bleak's chin as he started to rise, and sent him sprawling. Yancy had jumped to his feet as the guns started coming out, just in time to catch the force of the rising table in the belly and sit down

hard with it in his lap. Elias dove for the dirt floor. Chance followed him down as guns exploded all around them, sounding like the Battle of Bull Run.

“Oh no!” Pony yelled, seeing the chances of his leaving fleeing on the wings of the deaths of Chance and Elias.

Pony’s gun was out. He flipped it over in his hand, and brought the gun butt down on Dee’s head, knocking him cold. Bronco, unarmed, was belly-crawling across the floor for his shotgun filled with bird shot. He had been using it to go after prairie chicken, but it was the only gun he could lay his hands on in a hurry. Yancy’s gun coughed a couple more times, the slugs going up through the sod roof, sifting the dirt down on them in clouds. Pony turned, took two long strides and dove through the window, tearing out the oiled paper.

Grabbing hold of Elias’s shirt sleeve, Chance started pulling him roughly toward the door. He was madder than hell at the old man for getting the ruckus started, but now was not the time to hold a grudge.

A stray bullet slammed into the coffeepot, spilling its contents into the fire with a loud hissing and sputtering as Chance and Elias made the door. When they gained their feet outside the soddy, Chance’s first instinct was to make a run for the horses, but the windwagon caught his eye. The craft was ready to roll, Emma on board, yelling for them to hurry. With only a moment’s hesitation Chance stuck with Elias, giving the older man a hard shove to help him along as he scrambled onto the wagon.

Astride his own mount, Pony was galloping madly in their direction when Chance latched onto the riggings on the back of the wagon as it lurched forward with the release of the brakes. Chance dangled by his handhold as he took a couple running steps with the wagon, then lurched up onto the deck, flat on his belly, his legs still dangling over the back end of the

wagon.

Bronco, Bleak and Dee piled out of the soddy, Bronco in possession of his bird gun. Impulsively, he put it to his shoulder and squeezed the trigger.

The weapon roared as the windwagon picked up a little speed, and Chance felt the sharp sting of the shot all the way up his right thigh into his posterior. He pulled himself the rest of the way up, rolling over on his left side as Pony caught up with them.

“Get this thing moving,” Chance yelled angrily, spurred by the stinging pain coursing up his leg and the warm, sticky feel of his own blood.

“This is as good as it gets!” Emma snapped over her shoulder. “And if you think you can do better,” she added heatedly, “then I suggest you use some of that hot air you’re so free with and blow it!”

Elias was already scrambling up front to take over control of the land ship from Emma, when Chance staggered to his feet, clinging to a mast for support. There was no sign of pursuit. Chance was glad. Cards just plain were not worth dying over. He glanced sourly at Pony as he galloped alongside. The boy was sitting the only horse around for miles. He knew he couldn’t try to maneuver Pony out of his horse, it was not his style.

Besides, Chance winced as he shifted his position, it didn’t look like he would be able to sit a saddle for quite a time.

The windwagon slowed as the evening clouds drifted across the sky and the sun dipped down behind the far horizon. Elias was looking for a likely spot to camp. Emma swung around and stepped lightly onto the windwagon’s deck, walking back toward Chance where he half leaned against one of the upright posts along its side.

“You’re hurt!” she exclaimed. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Uncle Bronco sure don’t miss often when he pulls a trigger,” Pony offered.

“Uncle Bronco?” Chance repeated as the wagon rolled to a gentle halt.

“Hell-fire!” Pony exploded. “Ya mean I didn’t tell ya? Well, he sure is. Not that it makes much difference. I thought I told you about the time my pappy got himself kilt.”

“You better let me have a look at that,” Emma interrupted Pony, indicating Chance’s wound.

“If you don’t mind,” Chance informed her calmly, “I think I would rather your grandfather did it.”

With an impish grin, Emma reminded Chance, “You’re forgetting the first time I saw you.”

“No,” Chance replied coolly. “I would never forget that.” He gave her a look that sent a bright red blush up her cheeks.

“Well,” Emma went on quickly, nervously, “I suppose you’re going to lay all this on Gramps.”

“He did start the party back there,” Chance pointed out bluntly. “And he did manage to get me shot.”

“No, he didn’t,” Emma answered Chance heatedly. “You did! You wanted to play cards.”

With his leg sore and stiffening, Chance climbed down out of the back as Elias came around the back from securing the windwagon.

“Bird shot, or its like,” were the first words out of Elias’s mouth when he laid eyes on Chance. “Saw a man back in Ohio catch a load when he was stealing another man’s chickens. Smarts, does it, son?”

Chance gave Elias a long-suffering look, and it was not all caused by the bothersome wound.

Chapter Six

It was a little after midnight when the rain started. There was nothing spectacular about it. The sky merely darkened until there was no sign of moon or stars, and then it started to rain. And, it kept on raining. A picture of complete misery, Pony's horse stood where he had been tied, the water pouring down on him. Beneath the poor animal's feet, the ground began to turn to mud. Still it continued to rain, a heavy, steady downpour with no letup.

Chance had seen that kind of rain before, had seen times when it went on for days with hardly a break. He glowered out at it from where he huddled in the windwagon's hold with Emma, her grandfather and Pony, sullenly cursing the fates that put him there.

Wrapped in a blanket and some spare canvas they carried to patch the sails, Chance also cursed the cold, penetrating damp that made the multitude of tiny wounds that Elias had bandaged earlier ache and throb. He shared the horse's misery.

Through the long hours of the night the shower continued. Chance slept fitfully, rolled up in a tight ball on his good side beneath the pile of blankets and canvas. By dawn his eyes were red rimmed and bloodshot, looking like a pair of burned-out coals, and still the rain did not stop. There was no chance for a fire and even less for a cup of hot coffee.

The dingy dawn, the dampness and the steadily falling rain were depressing to them all. Emma unenthusiastically dug out some dried apples, cold biscuits and jerked beef from their supplies and dropped the sacks within the rough circle they had formed.

"Breakfast," she grumped sourly, and they all began mechanically, to eat.

Only Elias remained undaunted. 'We're going to have to

roll as soon as we're through," he informed them. "Have to see how she'll roll in bad weather. This is the first good soaking rain we've had since we started out."

"Gramps," Emma began a little testily, "can't that wait?"

"No," Elias told her firmly, "it can't. This is a test run, remember? I explained that to Chance when he first joined up with us. I'm sure he understands my position."

Chance grunted something from beneath the heap of blanket and canvas and muttered something more under his breath.

Elias took it as an affirmation of his statement and nodded shortly. "We'll pull out as soon as we all finish breakfast."

Pony, at least, looked eager. "You reckon I could just leave my horse tied on behind and ride in this here thing with you folks?"

"Sure. Why not?" Emma said shortly. "Gramps and I will have to ride up top, but somebody might as well be dry. You and Chance can stay down here in the hold."

Chance was not ungrateful. The hold was watertight. But he had slept little and the heavy wetness of the air had not even allowed his clothes to dry out from the night's soaking. And every time he moved, a sharp twinge reminded him of Bronco's unerring aim.

"Let's go, then," Elias said enthusiastically. "We won't be able to move very fast so we better move early, if we want to cover any distance at all."

Reluctantly, Emma left the comparative comfort of the windwagon's hold. "Are you sure you're all right?" She directed her question to Chance. With his eyes bloodshot and no hat on his head, allowing his untamed curly black hair to hang in almost studied disarray, he looked like a cornered wild man.

"Terrific," Chance returned solemnly around a last mouthful of cold, damp biscuit.

Emma followed her grandfather around toward the front of the windwagon. Chance could hear their footsteps sloshing through the mud and water that were undoubtedly well over shoe and boot tops by now. The day was brightening a little as the morning sun came up behind the thick gray cover of clouds. They should be able to see at least enough to steer clear of pitfalls and filled-up washes. At least Chance hoped they would be able to see that much.

“I ain’t never even rode on a ship in the water before,” Pony was saying. “You reckon this is about the same thing?”

Drawing out one of his few remaining cheroots, Chance leaned back, lighting it with almost the same motion.

“Don’t see why not,” Chance answered sarcastically. “I feel just about as miserable as I did on my ocean crossings.”

Pony look blank.

“I got seasick,” Chance told him bluntly as he listened to light footsteps moving overhead.

Maybe, Chance thought idly, it would make him feel better to get moving again. He still did not have a horse, but the windwagon was moving him generally in the right direction for California, and he did know of some bands of wild horses they could run across along the way.

Meeting up with Elias McPherson and his granddaughter had not been the luckiest day of his life. Still, he philosophized, he was no worse off than he would have been had he lost his horse to some Indians or bandits and ended up on foot. There was a good side to the coin no matter what happened, Chance decided, if a man looked hard enough.

Above, Chance could still hear the soft, continual whooshing of the rain. Pony had lifted the trap door leading out the back of the craft and was watching the rain fall beyond.

“Hell’s bells,” he exclaimed, “if it keeps on a-rainin’ like this, this here windwagon will be floating on water just like

the ones on the oceans.

Pony barely had the words out of his mouth when the windwagon gave a long groaning creak, lurched solidly and held. It felt like a Mississippi river boat running aground, grating over river sand. There was a pause, a shudder, then another lurch. Still the windwagon held fast. There was another pause, a little longer than the first, and Chance could feel the windwagon straining forward against the mire that was sucking it down tight. Even before the hatch leading to the deck above them swung open, Chance knew what had happened. They were becalmed in a sea of mud. Stuck fast.

Emma thrust her head down through the hatch, the water running off long clumps of her red hair in streams. "We're stuck, you're going to have to give us a hand."

"A hand?" Chance asked, knowing the answer and dreading it.

"Get out and push," Emma said with a half smile. "Gramps thinks once we get it rolling it'll keep moving."

Pony chuckled, "Sure thing, ma'am." He jumped out of the back of the windwagon into the rain and mud like he was on his way to a Sunday social.

With considerably less enthusiasm, Chance followed. It was daylight now, if that gray, feeble light filtering down from the clouds could be considered light. One good look around, once he had his feet sinking quickly in the thick mud, told Chance everything he needed to know. They would need a small miracle to get the wagon loosened from the muck, but if they did not manage it now and the sun had a chance to do its work, they would need pickaxes later. The mud that held the wheels fast would harden after the rain stopped and it would be almost as if the windwagon itself was growing right up out of the prairie.

"Pony," Chance said as the water collected quickly on his

hatbrim and began running down his back, "I think you better take your horse around front and hitch him up. Get him to lend us a little muscle."

Pony nodded and got his horse. The animal drooped even more, when Pony put his hand on the bridle and lead him forward through the sticky, sucking mire.

Impatiently, Chance waited at the back of the wagon, watching while Pony, with an assist from Emma, who had climbed down into the mud again, got his horse hitched to the front of the wagon. The bottom of Emma's skirts had collected mud a good foot and a half or two feet up from the ground. Her clothes hung and dragged against her every move. How she even stood up under the weight of mud and water, Chance couldn't even begin to guess. She must be stronger than she first appeared. With considerable effort, Emma and Pony got the horse maneuvered into position.

The kid hurried to the back of the wagon to help push, when that future stray breath of air puffed the sails, while Emma remained with the rain-soaked horse, ready to urge him to pull when she got the word.

The air stirred, the sails fluttered limply from the masts, and Elias shouted at the top of his lungs. Again the windwagon heaved against the mud that held it fast. Emma's voice, shrill and piercing, rose above the softly falling rain with the raking quality of a mule skinner. She hauled and jerked at the poor animal's bridle while Chance braced a shoulder against the rear of the wagon to push and Pony grabbed hold of the wooden spokes of the wheel, pushing with all his strength in the direction they would turn.

Chance could feel the strain of the wood beneath his shoulder, as if the windwagon were leaning forward from the axles while they continued to flounder in the knee-deep mud. Emma yelled wild encouragements to the little pony as he

struggled and gamely threw himself bodily against the harness, spraying thick mud in all directions with his efforts.

Then, the windwagon moved. A stray gust of wind puffed the sails fatly and the windwagon bounded forward with a sudden jerk. Chance went to his knees in the grasping ooze. Pony yelped in pain as the smartly spinning wheel caught his hand in a rough pinch and threw him sideways, to sprawl full-length into the mire just before the windwagon came to just as sudden a halt as it had a start.

Sharply bumped from the rear by the suddenness of the wagon's start, Pony's horse buck-jumped against the harness he was so unaccustomed to, flailing wildly against the mud that entrapped his hoofs and the contraption behind.

Emma staggered in the slime, terrified the animal was going to hurt itself, trying to keep her firm hold on the bridle, while the horse half reared, popping her clear of the mud like a cork. When the horse went down to unsteady footing, she went down into the sticky, grasping mire with no footing at all. Emma screamed, the horse sidestepped to keep from stepping on her and she rolled frantically to the side to throw herself clear of what she thought to be a still-plunging animal.

"Emma!" her grandfather yelled from the pilot's seat, stark fear momentarily coloring his voice. "Emma! Are you all right?"

Still fighting the mud that had the grip of a sinkhole, Chance climbed to his feet. Unsteadily he slogged around the back of the wagon heading toward Emma where she had gone down in the mud and was covered so completely from head to foot that he could have sworn that she was suffocating.

Unexpectedly, she rose up out of the mud a few paces in front of Chance nearly setting him back in the mud with shock.

"Damn!" Emma said softly, then more loudly, "damn,

damn, damn, damn.”

Awkwardly she tried to wipe some of the mud from her face as the rain continued its gentle downpour, rinsing down from her hairline to her chin, little brown streaks that

blended with those of her own making. Her soft red hair, nothing but mud-covered lumps, hung heavily in front of her eyes, and she stiffly held her hands and arms away from her body as if they would somehow help keep the mud from some small patch she vainly hoped it had missed.

“Now, Emma,” her grandfather admonished her as soon as he could see she was all right. “That kind of language is not becoming to a young lady.”

Deliberately placing her hands on her hips, Emma turned slowly, her skirts twisting with the heavy mud, and stared in Elias’s direction. “And this is?” she demanded. “Hell, Gramps,” she replied, “if I can stomp through mud like a man, haul at this wagon like a man, and fight with a crazy horse like a man, I can damn well curse like one when I feel like it!”

Though startled by Emma’s outburst, Elias could think of no quick argument to the contrary of the facts that she had stated. He supposed he could get used to her cursing. Almost wistfully, he stared down at her standing knee-deep in the mud and pouring rain. Her father sure would have been proud of her.

Pony finally managed to regain his feet in the sticky slime and take a couple of uneven steps in their direction, shaking his still-stinging hand, flinging droplets in all directions.

“Wagon coming,” Chance announced, gesturing toward the northeast.

As one, they all turned to look. There, heading steadily for them through the still-pouring rain, came a wagon drawn by a six-horse team with two more tied on behind.

The sounds of the approaching wagon were barely audible above the driving rain when they first spotted it.

Pony slogged through the mud around the back of the wagon to join them in watching the strange wagon's approach. His appearance was little better than Emma's. Chance was thickly coated with the brown ooze from the waist down, and heavily splattered from the waist up. Only Elias, manning the pilot's seat, had remained unsoiled by the river of mud that surrounded the windwagon.

It was impossible to make out the occupants of the oncoming wagon until it was almost upon them. Even then in the pouring rain, it was hard to tell much about the driver and his companion except that they were man and woman since both the driver and his companion wore heavy slickers and hats.

"Be glad to lend a hand if we're able," the man driving the wagon called out as he pulled his team to a halt only a few feet away, keeping his horses wisely clear of the bog while he strained forward, trying to get a better look at the windwagon. "The name's Jack Kinkaid." He touched the brim of his sodden hat in Emma's direction. In Emma's opinion, he had no right to be as cheery as he was while they were floundering in such slop. "And the lady with me is Ida."

"We're obliged to you," Chance was saying. "We sure could use the help. "The name's Chance, Chance Fargo." He turned to make the introductions. "And the young lady," he said with dry humor, is Emma McPherson, the older gent her grandfather, Elias, and that over by the back of the wagon is Pony."

Leaning a little further forward from his wagon seat, Jack continued gazing quizzically at the windwagon. "You folks mind if I ask what or is? And what happened to your stock? You lose them to Indians?"

"Why this is a windwagon! First of its kind to cross the breadth of our great country," Elias started in. "It's the

dawning of a new era. A new mode of transportation is upon us. . .”

“And it’s stuck,” Chance broke in. “My horse I lost to Indians quite a way back, and they never had any.”

Handing the reins of the team over to Ida, Jack climbed out of the wagon box into the mud. When he did, Chance caught sight of his boots. They were of shiny black leather and obviously extended to well above his knees. They were of vaguely Spanish design. And right about then, with the mud having oozed over the top of his own sometime earlier, Chance would have been glad to own a pair himself.

Close up, Jack Kinkaid appeared to be part Indian. His face was etched in hard planes, his skin a dark nut brown, his hair thick and black, and his eyes a changing combination of brown and green. His eyebrows knitted in thought, he stood there surveying the scene while he continued to sink in the thick brown ooze until the bottom edge of his long slicker lay on its surface.

With not even a suggestion of a smile tugging at his lips, Jack stared at the windwagon long and hard. He was taking it very seriously, having decided for himself anything having come that far across the prairie before being bogged down had to have a future of some kind.

“Looks to me like we’re going to need six to drag it free,” Jack said, turning to Chance. “What do you think?”

Chance nodded slowly in agreement. “The more the better, just as long as we don’t get your wagon bogged down with us. The way it looks to me,” he added, “is that this is a catch basin we’re stuck in. Farther ahead the ground should be more solid.”

“A reasonable conclusion,” Jack agreed. “You get that scrawny little fella unhitched from the front of your wagon,” he said with a grin in the pony’s direction, “and I’ll bring up

my team.”

Pony's horse was worn out and bedraggled by the day's events, but when the last buckle was opened and the harness removed, he still had the pep to high-step through the mud in his haste to be clear of the oversized wagon.

As Jack brought up the two spare horses from the rest of the wagon, he paused to pass a few words with Ida. “Keep the wagon moving, a few feet every few minutes,”

Emma heard Jack advise her. “Don't give it a chance to settle in or we'll end up having to drag all the girls out into this to lighten the load.”

Ida nodded her understanding.

“Girls?” Emma wondered about the remark she had overheard.

Unsteadily, one step at a time, fighting the mire that attempted to hold her fast, Emma started for the back of the wagon. She could hear her grandfather hurrying back and forth, getting the windwagon ready for another forward lunge. The air was still calm, the quiet rain still falling, but the six horses Jack Kinkaid had looked like they had enough pull in them to move a mountain. Awkwardly, Emma dragged herself laboriously up into the wagon's hold, smearing mud in a dismal trail as she did.

Chance welcomed the horses with open admiration as Pony guided them into place and he and Jack harnessed them up. The horses were big, solid draft animals. They would be the best money could buy, Chance decided, for he knew Jack Kinkaid's breed of man. Things in life came easy to him. Blessed by Lady Luck, and the ability to easily take advantage of any situation or opportunity, Jack Kinkaid was the kind of man who wandered through life wondering what all the fuss was about. He was the sort who could walk out on the gold fields to merely take a walk and trip over the mother lode, or

be a success in any business he might care to enter. And the type of business his kind of man cared to enter was never a hard one that depended on physical risk or hours a day of hard labor. Still, he would be a strong man, a man to be depended upon.

With the horses hitched and ready to go, Pony, Chance and Jack climbed up out of the mud.

“Ready to roll!” Jack called over his shoulder to Elias, who released the brakes and manned the steering mechanism.

“Roll her!” Elias called back enthusiastically, content that it had been he that gave the final order to move, assuming they were in fact going to move.

“Get up there, sons!” Jack called lustily to the six-horse team they had hitched to the windwagon as he snapped the reins sharply. “Pull!”

As one, the six horses took up the slack and pressed into their work. With sturdy legs braced stiffly in the mud and muscles standing out beneath their glossy hides in cords, they leaned into their harnesses. The wagon creaked and moaned, straining forward against the unyielding grasp of the mud that held it. Pony started yelling, adding his urgings to the horses to those Jack was already shouting above the creaking of the wagon and the sucking of the horses’ hoofs as the rain continued to fall.

In spite of his urgings and the power in the muscles of the six horses combined, Jack was beginning to doubt they could pull the strange contraption clear. They seemed to be sinking lower in the mire, floundering, when something caught and held. All of a sudden, the bogged-down windwagon jerked and started to roll forward.

Inside the wagon’s hold, Emma felt the sudden lurch, then the vague suggestion of motion. She sat up abruptly and pushed open the rear trap door to have a look just as a jubi-

lant cry went up from the front of the wagon. It hadn't been her imagination, then, the wagon was broken free, the wheels turning again. Contenting herself with a silent cheer of her own, she got back to considering what she could do about the terrible condition she found herself in. She took up an old towel, tying that around her hair, lifting the heavy, muddy strands out of her face. Then, she surveyed the rest of herself. Casting her eyes about in a vague half-unconscious way, something arrested her attention. The sleeve of one of her grandfather's shirts was hanging out of the trunk where his things were stored. Emma stooped to pick it up, then picked up a pair of pants, and with a bright glint in the depths of her green eyes, started to wriggle out of her mud-crusting dress.

The windwagon, being hauled by six of Jack Kinkaid's powerful horses, picked up speed as the last of the mud's grip on the wheels was broken, and they began turning with a sprightly rhythm. The team stepped out briskly as the wagon broke free of the mud and started to roll with their effort as Jack urged them on to catch up with Ida and his own wagon. Pony's horse trotted along on lead behind the wagon, appearing quite content with his lot. The ground was in fact more firm as they rolled up out of the basin, but mud was still well up over the rims of the wheels. And the windwagon continued to roll easily behind the team of six horses until it caught up with Ida and her tiring team.

Jack stopped the team drawing the windwagon just long enough to unhitch the two front horses, turning over the reins of the remaining four to Chance while he went to hitch up the lead pair with Ida's team.

When the wagon stopped, Emma had a quick flash of panic fearing it had somehow gotten stuck in the mud again. Half undressed, her hair still wrapped in the old towel, and her mud-smearing face only partly cleaned, she swung open the

back trap door, peering uncertainly out into the gloom. There she saw Kinkaid hurrying across the short distance separating the wagons with a pair of horses from the front of the windwagon. With quick, deft movements, he began hitching the team up with the pair that had been left to haul their wagon. Sighing with relief, Emma let the trap door bang closed as the windwagon lurched forward once again.

They camped that night, the wagons side by side on a rocky plateau. It was neither a safe nor a good place to camp, but it was the only place Chance came across where the wagons would not spend the night sinking up to their hubs in mud. The rain, as Chance in his stiffness and clammy discomfort had predicted, continued in a soaking drizzle.

Chapter Seven

Emma greeted the new day with a glum expression and a grimy itch that only a bath could cure. She had managed to rub and scrape a great deal of the mud from most of her, but the residue remained. Her hair was still caught up in the old towel on top of her head, and she was determined to do something about that as soon as she could filch some water from the barrel. The others had already left the confines of the windwagon's hold. Wrapped in a rough blanket that drooped around her shoulders, Emma cautiously opened the trap door a crack to peer outside.

While the sun was not visible through the heavy cover of ominous gray clouds, it was dawn and the rain had stopped. Emma could hear the quiet plopping of the water dripping off the windwagon's masts and sails. A campfire was crackling warmly between the two wagons, and the delicious smell of coffee drifted up through the opening of the trap door. Jack, Chance and her grandfather were sitting comfortably before the fire, a welcome relief after the chilled soaking.

Easing the trap door shut, Emma scooted back farther inside the hold to where she had set aside her clothes the night before. A few minutes later she gingerly lifted the back trap door, peering anxiously outside, wondering what the reaction to her new attire would be.

Steeling herself to the unbridled shock that would be her grandfather's, the half-hidden snickers she expected of Chance Fargo and the general laughter at her absurd appearance, Emma pushed the trap door open a bit wider and slid to the ground outside.

No one too much notice of her right away and Emma started slowly toward the campfire, scuffing her feet like a kid caught red-handed doing something which wasn't proper. She

had taken no more than five paces in that direction when Pony seemed to appear from out of nowhere, breezing up beside her.

“Mornin’ ma’am,” Pony said brightly, completely ignoring her abrupt change in attire. “Sleep good last night?”

“Yes,” she blurted, startled by his total disregard of her sudden change in appearance, for Emma did not believe it was possible that he had simply not noticed the baggy pants she wore with their two big pleats in the back, legs that did not reach down to her ankles, and rope belt. The shirt was almost as bad. Plaid, and much too large, as the size was meant to accommodate her grandfather’s broad, heavily muscled shoulders, it puffed out and drooped on her at the same time. The button cuffs were open and the sleeves rolled up to hang loosely below her elbows.

In his usually buoyant mood, Pony continued to walk along with her to the campfire. Emma was acutely conscious of her high button shoes and the way the tops of them disappeared into the legs of the pants she wore as they came upon the little group sitting around the campfire. She also immediately became aware of Ida, Jack’s companion, who she had not seen a moment before. She looked nothing like what Emma had expected from her quick glimpse of the day before. Somehow she seemed younger, though she was plainly no sprout. Ida had dark brown hair fixed in a tight bun, bright blue eyes and a straight, aristocratic nose above very full red lips. She wore a kind of quiet authority like a mantle as she sat unmoving before the small fire cupping a mug of coffee between her small hands.

As Ida glanced Emma’s way, a slow smile escaped the other woman’s lips, but Ida succeeded in hiding it by taking a sip from her coffee cup and she lowered her eyes. Chance looked right at Emma, never batted an eye, and casually poured her a

cup of coffee from the steaming pot. Nothing about Emma, Chance decided, would surprise him. Kinkaid was a bit startled, but held his own counsel, and continued in conversation with Chance.

It was not until Emma reached across her grandfather whose back had been turned to her, that she got at least part of the reaction she had been anticipating.

“Emma! Good God, what have you done to yourself!?” Elias blurted before he could stop himself and sprang to his feet. “What’s gotten into you?” he asked, obviously appalled by his granddaughter’s apparel.

“Some good sense, it appears,” Chance put in with a chuckle.

“These are just for working. I’ll put on a dress when we find a town.”

“But, Emma,” he protested, “a lady never dresses like that!” But, even as Elias said it, he was a little proud of her. Could it be that a little of her mother was finally starting to seep through to the surface?

Assuming a relaxed stance, Emma shrugged, then resumed sipping the strong, black coffee from her cup. She was not going to fight her grandfather, but neither was she going to change her decision. No longer would she go stumbling around in the mud, rain, and who knew what else in heavy, cumbersome skirts. She couldn’t move in them, and she was not about to drown or smother for the sake of someone else’s opinion of her.

All of a sudden the flap of the Kinkaid wagon flipped open. One by one, a succession of six young, pretty women stepped daintily out of the back of the wagon, heading for the campfire. Emma could not believe what she was witness to. Could they all be Jack’s sisters? It did not seem possible. They were all so different from each other, and just as different again

from Jack. And none of them bore any resemblance to Ida that Emma could see.

Then, Emma's attention was diverted by the girls themselves, as Ida, began introducing them in rapid succession.

"This is Clementine," she said of a sprightly young woman with dancing gray eyes, a pile of naturally curly blond hair, and tiny features.

Clementine nodded politely to those gathered.

"And Carmen." Ida introduced the second one, a decidedly Spanish girl with shiny, raven-black hair that hung straight and smooth down her back, dark brooding eyes and olive skin, who carried herself with aristocratic dignity that spoke of royalty.

"Next is Lila," Ida went on, placing a motherly hand on her slim shoulders. Lila was short and rounder appearing than the others. Her face was round with bow-shaped lips, pug nose and lively hazel eyes, all framed in light brown hair.

Lila tilted her head a little to one side and smiled coquettishly. "Pleased, I'm sure," she said expansively, her voice thick with the accent of her Southern origin.

"And now Phoebe," Ida continued without interruption as the fourth girl stepped up. A tall, slender young woman, she too was in possession of a thick crop of black hair against snow-white skin, though it was not nearly so pretty as Carmen's. Her large violet eyes, the most unusual Emma had ever seen, were arched by black eyebrows that made them appear even larger.

Barely suppressing a self-conscious giggle, Phoebe gave them a big, dazzling, little girl smile.

"Bessie," Ida said of yet another slender young woman who swished up to the campfire with a very distinctive and eye-catching gait. Bessie too had black hair though it was rather thin and mousy. But the rest of her more than made up for it.

She had wide, sensuous lips, catlike black eyes and thin black eyebrows shaped like feathery wings. Her forehead was broad and unmarked with a widow's peak in the middle of her hairline.

Bessie let her gaze pass casually from one member of the party to another, letting it rest longest on the men, her cat eyes talking quietly to them without her ever uttering a sound.

"And finally, Cassandra," Ida introduced the last and obviously youngest of the girls. A blonde, though leaning more toward light brown, Cassandra had surprisingly dark skin. Her eyelashes were unusually long and curved, flattering soft, doe-like brown eyes. The cut of her softly curled hair made her face appear impish with its full cheeks and small, heart-shaped lips, red as fresh cherries.

"You can call me Cassie," Cassandra told them all gaily. "Everybody does."

"We told the girls all about you last night," Ida informed the windwagon's party, then gestured from one to the other. "Girls, these are Emma McPherson, her grandfather Elias, Chance Fargo and Pony."

As the introductions were being completed, Emma glanced in Chance's direction. His eyes were alight with knowing humor. He was enjoying every minute of this, though Emma was left in complete puzzlement. What was Jack Kinkaid doing out there alone with seven women? She stared at them in their various traveling costumes. They were all very prim and proper, but somehow they gave the impression that they were not. Why, Emma wondered, would that be?

"We've talked it out," Elias was saying, "and for now we'll be going on together . . ."

"Hey," Pony interrupted in bright good spirits, "we go out and find a few more people and we'll have a wagon train of our own."

Then, as abruptly as if someone had turned a switch, the talk among the men turned to horses. Emma was not interested. Instead, she was eager to know more about the six young women, but she had had far too good an upbringing to just come right out and ask about their backgrounds. It was simply not one of the things one asked new acquaintances. But, since they were all continuing on together, there might be a time later when she could find out more about them.

“There used to be a wild herd running in the canyons about two day’s travel ahead a couple years back,” Chance said to Jack. “If you and Pony would give me a hand, I should be able to get a rope on one of them.”

“Sure thing!” Pony agreed enthusiastically. “I’ve been out mustanging with Bronco more times than I can remember. But we ain’t stoppin’ with one! Them little ponies ain’t got a chance.”

“I’ve never had an occasion to handle a rope,” Jack admitted, “but I’ll be glad to do what I can.

A small smile slid across Chance’s normally quiet face. At last he was getting closer to again having a horse, and to him that meant he was close to again being in possession of his own freedom that the contraption known as a windwagon had somehow managed to take away from him. When he got his horse, it would be every man for himself. At the first opportunity, he would be clearing out.

The thought half amused Chance. With him gone it would be Emma, her grandfather, and a strange kid on one hand, and Jack Kinkaid with his wagonload of girls on the other. Chance had known what they were from the moment he had laid eyes on them, but he was sure that Emma had not. How long, he wondered, would it take for her to find out?

Chapter Eight

Actually, it was closer to four days than two to where they finally found wild mustangs still roaming their territory. Chance had been starting to get a little nervous about the difference in time from what he remembered, as he alternately rode in the wagon box with Jack, or at the helm of the windwagon with Elias. Mustangs were a far-ranging breed. They could have been hundreds of miles away from their old haunts. But late the fourth day, the herd of mustangs Chance remembered did appear.

Since it had been dragged free of the mud, the windwagon had been traveling well. They had been negotiating a series of steep hills, managing to avoid some of the really high ones. Jack's horses strained against their harnesses, and the windwagon creaked and groaned its way up each slope a little behind and to one side of the horse-drawn wagon. The lumbering, oversized prairie schooner had been slowed considerably by the hills, but it continued to make it from one hilltop to another, surprising even Elias, though he was careful not to reveal that feeling.

Emma was standing on the deck of the windwagon with Lila, one of Ida's girls who had wanted to take a ride on the strange, horseless contraption, when the two wagons crested the broad, dome-shaped top of the latest hill. Both Emma and Lila, who had become friends over the past few days, gasped as the dusty arid hills ended and the land swept down dramatically into a broad grassy valley covered with wild flowers and small green trees. Looming in the distance were even higher hills than what they had previously passed through. They lay directly ahead. An obstacle to be faced. The startling sight of the distant hills was still foremost in her thoughts when Emma heard Pony give an excited whoop. She glanced

his way and he waved his hat in the air enthusiastically pointing toward a large band of horses galloping out across the valley, barely within their vision far off to the right.

The horses were too far distant to be able to tell much about what they looked like. A good number of mustangs had been known to be short, scrubby little animals with matted manes and mottled coats. Even so, their movements were beautiful. Graceful like they were carried on the wind.

Emma watched intently as they continued a little farther out into the valley. There the horses slowed and spread out across the grassy valley floor to graze, then one separated itself from the bunch, moving off to slightly higher ground where he could keep a protective eye on his charges. Against the background of bright green, he stood out as plain as ripples in a quiet pool of water. Transfixed, Emma stared at the beautiful stallion standing apart from the herd. A truly magnificent animal, he was tall, clean-limbed and powerfully built. He looked like the leader he was. His coat was a light gray with darker gray and black dapples across his back and hind quarters.

Emma glanced to where Chance was standing up in the wagon box beside Jack, staring transfixed across the valley. He no longer stood awkwardly or walked with that odd limp he had developed after being wounded back at the sod hut. The undignified wounds caused by the buckshot had evidently healed quickly. She continued to look at him. Chance Fargo was, Emma had to admit, a tall, lean, good-looking man. Shifting her gaze back to the stallion, she tried to picture him astride such an animal and was pleased with the picture that it presented in her mind.

Pony had already climbed down from the windwagon and was saddling up his horse to go have a closer look at the wild herd.

“Don’t spook them,” Chance cautioned him.

“Be damned if I would! I’ve been mustangin’ since I was knee-high to a short horse,” Pony called over his shoulder as he touched his heel to his mount and bolted off down the steep slope at breakneck speed.

“Better find a good place to camp,” Chance commented as Pony galloped off. “This will probably take a few days.”

“A few days!” Elias spluttered. “I wasn’t made aware of the fact that catching a horse would take a few days. We’re on a proving trial here. We have to keep moving . . .”

“Gramps,” Emma sighed, “we’re out here to get the wind-wagon across the country, and to find Father. You never said anything to me about a time limit. How could a few days hurt?”

All she needed right now was for him to insist they push on alone. With the Kinkaid wagon they had a small amount of protection and Emma enjoyed the company of Ida and her girls.

“I don’t know,” Elias grumped. “But I’m sure there’ll be something.”

“Don’t be silly,” Emma cajoled. “A rest wouldn’t hurt any of us. All that good green grass there would be good for Jack’s horses as well. And besides, you’ve been neglecting the wind-wagon lately anyway. I’ll bet some of her joints are running dry, and I’ve seen more than one small rip in the sails.”

“All right,” he consented grudgingly. “We’d better find a good place to camp, then. A place with some water.”

“If there’s any to be had around here it would have to be down there in that clump of trees,” Chance announced. “Pony will find us there without any trouble.”

The two wagons started again, rumbling off down the slope with the windwagon in the lead because of its often erratic speed and direction.

Within the clump of welcoming, shade-providing trees there was, as Chance had predicted, a pool of fresh water. Plenty of it for themselves and the horses for a few days. The desert and its ways had always fascinated Chance. The springs that bubbled up out of the ground between dry rock, the seeps that appeared at odd places, marked by giant trees on an otherwise treeless plain, the strange plants that swelled with so much water with the coming of each rain that they could go completely without until the next. And the animals, some of whom needed no water at all for their survival, combined in a wild interdependence that made anyone who cared to think about it sure that there had to be a force far greater than man at work. Chance believed it. He always had. In his opinion it was man himself who was the fly in the ointment. Always out of step with nature, always trying to change something or just plain destroy it. For now, he was pleased to take a rest.

The next day they were all up before the sun. Emma busied herself with fixing breakfast. Bacon with hot biscuits and plenty of beans and two pots of coffee steaming in a rock bed to one side sent tantalizing odors drifting up into the clear morning air. The chore of cooking had fallen exclusively to Emma, mainly because everyone in the two wagons had to admit that she was the best cook. Emma didn't mind, and with so many to tend to the other chores, cooking was her only real duty. The arrangement it gave her plenty of time to socialize and get to know the girls. She and Lila hit it off from the start. Lila was openly gregarious and fun loving. Her opposite, Emma decided, for she herself was nothing if not practical and down to earth, always.

Lila, Emma had discovered from the beginning, was not very communicative where her past or, for that matter, her future was concerned, though she would talk about pretty much anything else at length. She talked a good deal about

their trip before meeting up with the windwagon. It had been a total disaster as far as Carmen was concerned, but not so in Lila's estimation. She managed to find joy in almost everything. According to Lila, they had left St. Louis a couple of months earlier, heading south to meet a wagon train. Some way or another, they had never managed to meet up, and, already weeks of travel from any settlement, they had decided to continue on.

"They had decided to go on," Bessie had put into the conversation when she swished past. It had not been their idea. She had been all for turning around and heading back, for New Orleans maybe. Lovely city, New Orleans. Lush and green. Not at all like out here.

Ignoring Bessie's interjection, Lila concluded that they had not had any real trouble since they had started out and that most of the girls were wondering what all the fuss was about even though Jack continued to warn them to keep a sharp eye out for trouble.

In Emma's eyes, Jack Kinkaid was a strange romantic figure, almost as strange as Chance Fargo. Jack wore a gun, though most of the time its butt was concealed by his jacket, and Emma never saw him out of the high-topped boots he had been wearing the night the windwagon had been bogged down in the mud. When Emma had finally ventured to ask about the odd-looking boots, Jack had answered her with a broad smile that lit up his eyes and announced, loudly for the entire camp to hear, that they were for protection against tall snakes.

What, Emma wondered, was the strange unwritten law among the men and women who traveled West that kept them from telling anyone about themselves? She realized that in spite of all the time she had spent with Chance she knew nothing about him either. He knew that she was curious, she

could tell. And, she knew that he knew that she knew. That made Emma all the more determined not to give Chance the satisfaction of having her ask him anything. All the same, she was just as determined that she would eventually slip past his defenses and dig out something about his past. She was sure it had to be a wild one for him to be so closemouthed about it.

Chance wandered over as Emma continued to tend the cooking food, and dropped down opposite Pony, anticipating a mouth-watering breakfast. "Don't burn the biscuits," he said to Emma with his usual early morning lack of good graces.

Emma wanted to snap back at him, but could not think of anything fast enough, and let his comment pass as though unnoticed. "Breakfast," she called to the others, and prepared to dish up the meal.

That morning, breakfast was downed in record time. As usual Pony was first to finish, in spite of the fact that he consumed more than two helpings with a kid's appetite. He left his tin plate, cup and utensils and hurried off to saddle his horse for the day's work ahead. Wild-horse hunting. That was something Pony knew, and he was feeling like a man.

Chance could read all the signs, and he smiled faintly as he finished up his coffee. Pony was just a kid, but Bronco was the best mustanger anyone had heard of, and Pony had learned from him. Out there with the wild herd was one place where Pony would know his way around. Chance had done his own share of working with wild horses, breaking them, but he was happy to have an experienced hand, kid or not, working alongside him.

"That was fine cooking," Chance said to Emma expansively as he rose to accompany Jack to where they had picketed the horses the night before. "But I don't think the biscuits were done enough."

He was baiting her and Emma knew it, but she rose to it

anyway, snatching up Chance's empty coffee cup and flinging it after him. She missed him, but connected with Jack, walloping him smartly between the shoulder blades. The man with the tall, snake-proof boots never winced. It was as if he was oblivious to that kind of obnoxious behavior. Chance, Emma could tell by the set of his broad shoulders, was laughing.

"Damn!" Emma uttered irritably.

"You need to broaden your vocabulary, honey," Ida said with motherly concern. "Is that the only swearword you know?"

The older woman was smiling as if sharing a confidence.

"What?" Emma glanced curiously at Ida.

"Well," Ida offered conversationally, "if that is the only cussword you know, then the girls and I are just going to have to finish off your education."

"I think I'll stick to what I know," Emma declined politely.

"All right, honey, suit yourself," Ida's full red lips again curved up into a conspiratorial smile, "but if you should change your mind, we're always willing to lend a hand, aren't we, girls?"

Smiling sweetly in Emma's direction, they all nodded. Phoebe started picking up the dishes, cups and utensils for washing. Emma, sipping the last of her coffee, was still trying to figure out what had happened. One instant she was mad at Chance, and the next she was surrounded by seven teachers, all eager to teach her how to curse like a mule skinner. Ida and her girls were a puzzle to Emma. Polite, demure in their dress, they were always eager to be helpful, but there was another side to them as well. They could all curse freely. Emma had overheard them a time or two. Ladies would not behave in such a manner. And none of them had been affronted by her

odd costume consisting of bits and pieces of her grandfather's clothes, as many other women would have been.

Emma thought often about Ida's girls. Observed them and spoke freely with them. They reminded her so much of something she had heard about back East. Except for their politeness. But no. It couldn't be that. She tried to push the stray roguish thought from her mind, unfortunately without much success.

Her grandfather probably knew all about the young ladies, Emma suspected, but he had always sheltered her. If something was involved that he thought not proper for her to hear, he would simply not tell her. If she asked Chance point blank, she was sure he would tell her what it was all about, at least about that, even if he did give her that irritating smile, but she was not about to do it.

Lila, who among other things loved horses, picked up the brush from their wagon and went to give a good brushing down to the animals not needed on the wild-horse hunt. Emma went with her.

"You're good with animals," Emma remarked as Lila started a vigorous but gentle brushing of one of the big horses. "They like you."

"That's because they know I love them," Lila drawled softly, flashing Emma a dimpled grin. "It was a long time ago," Lila went on, "but I used to live on a horse farm in Virginia, my Daddy's. Nothing big like some people had, but the house was large and comfortable, and Daddy, he had three hundred acres."

"Whatever made you leave?" Emma asked.

"The war," Lila answered shortly. "Daddy went off to fight, and Mama just wasted away when they told her he had been killed at Vicksburg. Right after that a bunch of men showed up on the farm claiming they were Union soldiers,

but they weren't wearing any uniforms. They stayed on for a couple of weeks. I was only nineteen at the time, but I knew there was only one way I was going to stay alive, and I did it. I made up to that captain of those soldiers, or whatever the hell they were, and I survived," Lila said with surprising forcefulness, reliving old memories. Then she brightened and waved her free hand as if brushing away what she had told Emma. "But that was a long time ago. I took care of myself after that until I met Ida and the others. Now we all sort of take care of each other."

Emma was stunned speechless. She had heard stories of the horrible things that had happened to Southern families during and after the war, but she had never met anyone it had actually happened to. She didn't know what to say.

Lila solved the problem for her. Gazing over the horse's broad back, she pointed out across the valley. "Look, they're starting."

Emma looked in the direction Lila had pointed. She could make out the two larger horses carrying Chance and Jack and the smaller one bearing Pony splitting up, making for the herd that was still quite a way from them. Emma screwed up her face, squinting, trying to see better. She wished she could have gone with them. It was all so exciting, and right then Emma decided she was going to learn how to ride astraddle a horse. She had ridden sidesaddle often, but it had always put her right leg to sleep and strained her left. Once or twice she had brought the matter up to her grandfather, complaining about the difficulties of the sidesaddle, but he had only chuckled. Then he had asked what she intended to do about her skirts should she begin riding astraddle like a man. Well, she was not wearing skirts now. When Pony got back she would ask him if she could try out his horse.

All of a sudden her grandfather's original idea of coming

West did not seem nearly so bad. In fact, she was beginning to really like it. When she got right down to it, she had never felt so free in her life.

Chapter Nine

Chance sat astride one of Jack's big work horses, and beside him, Jack rode another. The animals wore partial harnesses to give the men somewhere to attach the ropes and canteens, and a place to dally their ropes when they got hold of one of the wild horses.

Pony was eagerly divulging the layout of the valley's terrain, and giving his experienced advice on how to handle the approach to the herd. It was, from Pony's viewpoint, a good-sized herd. That would make their job a little easier. The tight-packed little bands that would follow their leader to hell and gone were the ones that caused real trouble.

"I figure to get myself a string," Pony asserted, "a real remuda."

"What're you going to do with that many horses out here?" Jack was curious.

"Man has to earn a living somehow," Pony asserted. "Specially since I broke with Bronco."

"Bronco?"

"His uncle," Chance answered Jack. "Best mustanger west of the Mississippi. Also part-time horse thief, bank robber, and whatever else suits him."

"That's Bronco!" Pony agreed expansively.

"But we sure had better times when we stuck to mustanging. Bronco only took to stealing once in a while when he was stone broke before he took up with the rest of that bunch." Pony imparted the facts reasonably.

The horses were grazing quietly, strung out across a little green knoll, when they spotted them and drew up to have a good look around. Chance took note of the fact that the big stallion caught sight of them at about the same time. His head came up from grazing and he continued to chew, but his attention was riveted on the three men. A smart beast, he saw

them as a threat.

As a breed, wild stallions were fighters and at times could be pretty crafty in defense of their herds. Stories were told around winter campfires that had wild stallions taking on anything from a full-grown grizzly to a pack of winter-starved wolves in defense of a single foal or mare from their herd. Chance had no way of knowing exactly how much of those tall tales were true, but he had seen a pair of stallions do battle once and it had been quite a spectacle. After that he had had no doubt that one of them could at least try to take on a grizzly.

“Hell’s fire,” Pony was saying with carefully muffled enthusiasm, “they couldn’t be in a better position if they came up and sat in our laps! Up ahead,” he went on, “there’s a high-sided draw, a damn tight one. I saw it last night. All we have to do is get the herd running, and spook some of them off down that draw. We use that draw and we should be able to have our horses before he even knows what happened.”

“Sounds good,” Chance answered. “You’ll have to do the cutting, Jack’s horses aren’t exactly cow ponies. We can get up over by the entrance of the draw and help funnel them in when you start the bunch moving.”

“Reckon that’ll do it just fine.” Pony was eager, ready to get started. “Give us plenty of time to find that draw,” Chance told Pony as he and Jack turned their horses to skirt far around the herd and take their position farther up ahead.

The big work horses took off at a gallop, carrying their comparatively light burdens with untiring ease. Their large hoofs rumbled over the land as they galloped side by side, keeping pace as if they were working under harness. The quick evenness of their strides and the resulting smoothness of the ride surprised Chance. Before mounting, he had even thoughtfully thrown a blanket across the horse’s broad back in

remembrance of the narrow-backed jughead he had lost to the Indians when he had joined up with Emma and her grandfather so unexpectedly.

Jack rode his mount with practiced ease. It figured. Chance did not believe Jack was the kind of man to ride into anything blind. He would have been doing some scouting along the trail and that meant he had to have been riding something. With that much experience behind him, at least he would know how those big horses handled when Pony brought the herd running down on them.

The draw Pony had spoken of was more or less where he said it would be. Pony had been right in his estimation of it. The mouth of the draw was almost funnel shaped, narrowing down quickly from there. Chance would have liked to check it out himself, but there was not time. He and Jack had barely reached the entrance of the draw when he heard the herd on the run, and Pony's faint, distant war whoops and gunshots riding the air, driving the mustangs their way. Chance knew he and Jack had better be ready when they came up the draw or they could lose them all.

"If you have any tips on how I'm supposed to hold those horses when they come flying down here on us," Jack said dryly, "I'd like to hear them now."

Chance grinned. "Nothing to it. You take the inside, closest to the draw. I'll act as catcher. All you have to do is keep your horse between them and freedom. They'll take off down that draw like scalded cats." Then he turned his head so Jack could not hear the "I hope," which he added under his breath.

The pounding of the driving hoofbeats rumbled over the land like an approaching storm, almost shaking the earth beneath the feet of their horses. Pony's shrill yells and commands could be heard plainly above the running herd. Then, Chance caught sight of the leaders thundering down on them

as they crested a low rise, coming on, heading almost directly for them.

“There they come!” Chance yelled above the rising din, pointing to the cloud of dun-colored dust that billowed up in the horses’ wake.

Jack had not needed anyone to point out the hard-running herd as it bore down on them, but he too had felt the electricity of the moment that had caused Chance to yell. There was a wild, savage beauty about the mustangs, some tall and rangy, others short and shaggy, as they ran in a tightly packed herd. The big spotted stallion raced a little to one side of the rest, guiding them, gently forcing his charges one way or another.

Pony had managed to catch up with the back part of the herd, working his horse slowly forward inside the packed bunch, ready to try and turn a part of the herd as soon as the mouth of the draw hove into view.

Chance’s mouth went dry as the desert wind. Pony was pulling a dangerous stunt, cutting right into the herd the way he was. One slip and that fool kid could go down under the hoofs of the plunging herd. To make matters worse, the stallion was not unaware of Pony’s presence in among his mares. Repeatedly, the stallion split the air with an ear-piercing whistle, a challenge to fight. The stallion had associated the danger to his harem with Pony. He was sizing up his adversary, and if the kid valued his own hide, he had better keep clear of that animal.

For the moment, though, Pony seemed to know what he was doing. He had waited until they were close enough to the draw to make the run a short one. The herd was almost upon Chance and Jack when Chance saw Pony put pressure on the mare closest to his left in a bid to make her turn.

Hurrying his oversized mount out to meet Pony, Chance

barely got him in position and turned before Pony managed to force the mare he had targeted out of the herd, and she trailed another ten or eleven behind her. Expertly he directed them toward the mouth of the draw. Chance swung his horse sharply, coming up on the mustangs' flank, continuing to drive them away from the rest of the herd. Pony stuck with the lead mare a short way while Jack manned the mouth of the draw until the bunch all passed down its length. Then he swung in behind them, effectively closing off any attempts at retreat. The hole episode, much to Chance's surprise came off without a hitch and he, Pony and Jack rejoined forces about twenty-five yards down the draw, well behind the still-running horses. The draw was apparently a long dry watercourse that went nowhere. About a hundred yards farther up, it ended in a small, rounded dip surrounded by steep hillsides, unscalable by none but the most adept and determined of horses. Pony, as usual, knew that from first-hand experience. He had tried to put his little horse to the steep slopes the night before when it had been almost dark. Every time Chance heard of one of Pony's stunts, he marveled at the charmed life the kid led. Any other man would probably have had his horse fall on him in the dark and been stove up, lying alone on the hillside until morning came and someone started looking for him.

The three of them kept their distance from the mares for a time, giving them a chance to settle down and have a look at their surroundings. Then, they went forward slowly to see what they had caught. There were twelve mares and a couple of foals to Chance's count. It was a foregone conclusion that they would have to cut out the mares with foals and send them back to the herd, but that would still leave ten. As agreed, Chance would have his pick for a mount, and the rest would make up Pony's string. Not a bad catch for a morning's work. Stallions gained and lost mares all the time. It happened

quickly and often. It was only those stallions willing to fight and make raids of their own who managed to accumulate harems the size of the monarch's they had just plundered. Powerful, intelligent, aggressive animals.

Chance paused, aware of a sudden chill at the nape of his neck, the thought barely seeping into the corners of his mind when he heard a frenzied rush of hoofs, and an instant later the piercing scream of a fighting stallion. The tiny hairs at the back of his neck snapped to attention, following the chill of foreboding of a moment before.

He jerked around, hand wrapped tightly around the harness leather, and for an awesome instant the draw behind them seem to fill with the electrifying presence of the gray spotted stallion. Never in his life had Chance seen anything like it. A stallion willing to fight for his mares even to the point of taking on man.

Pony spun halfway around in his saddle almost the same instant Chance did, and his horse pivoted, looking over his shoulder to better appraise the developing situation himself. What that little horse saw he did not like. He must have decided immediately it wasn't his fight because he slew sideways beneath Pony, nearly unseating him, then bolted into the cluster of milling mares.

"Son-of-a-bitch-in-a-sack!" Pony exploded as his horse darted in among the mares and he clung helplessly to the saddle, already half out of it.

Whistling his piercing challenge again, the stallion came on. It was Pony he was after, but Chance was directly in the path of his charge. The draft work horse beneath Chance was startled, unsure of himself and not nearly so nimble-footed as Pony's mustang, but the threat was plain. And the bigger horse didn't have the more cowardly demeanor of Pony's horse. Without warning, Chance sat astride rose up to meet the stal-

lion's challenge. Chance was out in the open, a prime target for the savage fury of the mustang's slashing hoofs and iron teeth. Instinctively, the way Chance reacted to every emergency, he wrapped one hand in his horse's heavy mane and the other gripped the broad straps of the harness.

The next moment found Chance's mount and the gray stallion thudding together in a brutal dance that could cut one or the other, or both of them, to ribbons. And while Chance's mount was more powerful, the gray stallion was a more nimble experienced fighter, battle-scarred and pitiless in combat.

A few yards off to Chance's right, Jack's hand darted to his rope in almost the same instant that the stallion charged. Beating the rope against his leg and waving it in the air, he bellowed like a charging bull and sent his own horse lunging directly for the combatants. Mares squealed in the close quarters. Chance's mount gave a wild war cry he would never have believed came out of the horse if he had not heard it himself and Jack drove his mount between the pair of them like a bull moose in rutting season.

The battling horses broke, the gray stallion leaping nimbly aside at the unexpected charge from other quarters. In his still-burning fury, the stallion caught sight of Pony appearing above the heads of the mares when barely regained a firm seat in the saddle, and went for him. The mares screamed and kicked when the stallion nipped at them to hurry them out of his path. But, both Pony and his horse were no fools. Pony would have kept the mares between the stallion and himself, but just in case that thought hadn't occurred to him, his faithful cow pony would have done it for him, no guidance needed.

The big gray stallion bellowed his frustration and fury in more bloodcurdling war cries, but the mares were too tightly packed to swing aside for his passage. He paced wildly back

and for among his mares, pushing them first one way then another, but always Pony's light-footed little horse slipped neatly past any opening that appeared, dodging back behind the safety of one of the stallion's own mares.

Then, suddenly, the stallion lowered his head in the herding posture, and with one more long whistled blast started the mares moving out of the dip toward the draw. The two mares with foals were near the lead, and they took off at a gallop heading for freedom. Chance and Jack let them go. Chance's horse was still trembling from the excitement, shaking his head and prancing on over-sized feet. Sweat was breaking out all over Chance's body, plastering his shirt to his back, his pants to his legs. It had been a damn close thing.

Almost in disdain of the men watching, the stallion continued on with his work as he herded a couple more mares into the draw. Just as determined in his resolve as the stallion, Chance wasn't going to let that big gray spotted horse take back all the mares. He was willing to concede to a compromise, but not to give in entirely to the stallion when he needed a mount so badly. So when the stallion started another mare into the draw, Chance moved to cut her off.

Instantly, the stallion saw red. Shaking his heavy mane, he snorted once, sharply, then leaped for Chance as the mare was turned back into the dip. The charge was so sudden that the stallion slammed into his mount before Chance could even try to maneuver the animal into a defensive position. The big draft horse staggered beneath the impetus of the stallion's furious charge and Chance was shot off his horse's broad, glossy back like he had been launched from a catapult.

The gray stallion saw him go down and would have gone after him, but the horse whose back Chance had so recently unwillingly vacated was still ready to fight. He half rose as the stallion, with head lowered, charged directly for Chance.

Bruised and half dazed by the fall, Chance scrambled wildly and ineffectually against the steep grade of the slope, not bothering to look back to see what would happen when the two horses collided for the second time. That stallion, Chance decided through swimming thoughts and a sharp buzz in his head combine with his wild effort to scale the almost perpendicular side of the draw, had to be half crazy.

As the heavier draft horse rose to meet the more nimble stallion, he somehow caught the wild horse off stride. They crashed together with the soft audible thud of powerful bodies and the gray spotted stallion went over sideways into the dirt. Inexperienced in the ways of wild-horse fighting, Kinkaid's horse just stood there above the stallion pawing the dust, giving angry snorts and tap-dancing around the gray as it rolled quickly to its feet.

Pony was a little quicker on the uptake. Seeing the stallion making another charge for Chance, he pulled his gun and started firing into the air.

Frightened by the gunfire, the mares were milling faster, nervously eyeing the only exit from the little dip where they were held, the draw. All of a sudden a couple more mares made a break for it as the stallion pranced, neck bowed, amid the din of Pony's gunfire, Jack's wild Comanche yells and Chance's clattering on the hillside, which stopped as he observed the scene below, then started back down. The stallion came to a stand-still, and stood there quivering a few seconds, his head held low, as a couple more of his mares rushed past him heading for open country. Then, as if deciding a partial victory was better than no victory, the stallion wheeled with one last sharp whistling blast and took to his heels in hot pursuit of the mares who had taken off down the draw to rejoin the herd.

A couple of the remaining five mares they held tried to

follow behind the stallion, but Jack managed to contain them in the dip while Pony charged his horse over to where Chance had rejoined his valiant horse and was laying a calming hand on the big horse's head. No doubt the noble draft horse had saved his neck. And Chance was not the kind to be ungrateful.

"Well, I'll be a cross-eyed mule," Pony exclaimed upon first seeing Chance clearly since he had been taken off his horse, "you're still in one piece!" And Pony said it like he was really surprised.

Nodding slowly, Chance had to admit he was a little surprised himself. A few more deep gouges were in the leather of his buckskin jacket and a new rip in his pants near the knee, but except for a few bruises that would never be seen, he had emerged from the melee not seriously damaged.

With a few more reassuring pats, Chance swung easily back up onto the broad back of the solid work horse. "Well, let's see what we've got," he said to Pony.

Eagerly, Pony turned back to where Jack was holding the five remaining mares at the end of the draw. The haul was not as good as Pony had first congratulated himself upon, but after the tangle with that stallion, he figured they had come off pretty good. Chance would have his pick for a mount and he'd would have the remaining four.

"The little blue one's mine," Chance told Pony.

The kid shook his head in exasperation. "Shoulda knowed it," he said, smiling. "Best one in the lot. Well, what the hell," he added, "you aim to ride her. I aim to sell mine. And you almost got your hide wore to a frazzle getting her. You sure as hell do hang and rattle. Make a fine mustanger if you had a mind to."

"No, thanks," Chance answered quickly.

"Don't you think we better get these horses moving

before that stallion thinks about coming back?" Jack asked nervously.

Chance nodded. "You've got a point."

Within a few minutes they had a rope corral strung between their horses with Pony riding point and Jack and Chance forming the two points of a triangle behind him. The wild mares were held effectively inside. With still no sign of the stallion nearby, they started back for camp.

Chapter Ten

Emma heard the men and horses approaching before she saw them. She was surprised that her ears were attuned to the sounds of moving horses even above all the noise of the bustling camp. She had supper already simmering in a kettle over the fire unneeded of her close attention, so she ran to the edge of the trees to watch as they came in with the small clutch of wild horses. Without thinking about it, Emma's eyes searched the tightly packed little group for some sign of the magnificent horse she had seen standing apart from the rest of the herd when they had first spotted it. It was with a considerable amount of disappointment that she realized at last that he was not among the short scruffy bunch of horses they were herding in between them. Then, as the men corralled the horses properly Emma spotted the bright indigo mare. For an instant she thought her different from the rest, but no, the difference was only in her color. She was rounded and thick-coated like the others.

Joining Chance outside the rope corral that contained the nervous, snorting wild ones, Emma appraised the little knot of mares with a critical eye as Jack led his draft horses away to be groomed and fed. One of the pair looked a little battered with several cuts in evidence on his dusty hide. And he walked beside Jack with a prancing gait, lifting his feet high he led him away. Emma could have sworn the horse was proud of himself. The big oaf was acting the clown. He was strutting like a peacock with neck bowed and large, round hoofs stepping beating a sprightly rhythm.

Emma turned her attention from the horse to Chance. "I thought you would bring back that pretty horse," she prodded. "The gray one with the dark spots."

Chance sighed. "The gray one with the dark spots was the

stallion.”

“So?” she asked, puzzled.

“So,” Chance went on, “unless you plan to take the whole herd, you don’t take the stallion for a number of reasons. First, without the stallion, the herd has no protection. Second, if that stallion is the only one around for quite a few miles it would leave them without a sire for the new foals and the herd would stop replenishing itself. And third,” he finished in a conversational tone, as if it did not concern him at all, “that horse damn near killed me.”

Emma surprised herself by not even twitching when Chance made the casual remark about himself being nearly killed. She was actually beginning to get used to his flip-pant, grim humor. That should disturb her, she decided, but it didn’t.

“He sure as hell ain’t telling no lie,” Pony put in, overhearing what had passed between Chance and Emma. “That horse is the devil himself. He come down on us a shriekin’ and a tearin’ up the ground like he’d just come up through the gates of hell and was aimin’ to take us back with him. He just plain didn’t take kindly to us helpin’ ourselves to his mares. He woulda had Chance sure if I hadn’t started firing my gun while Jack made a charge at him.”

“Firing your gun?” Emma was appalled. “the horse is all right, isn’t he? Pony didn’t shoot him?”

“No,” Chance answered patiently, “Pony didn’t shoot him. I doubt that Pony would shoot anything.”

Pony grinned widely and shrugged.

It was three days later that the wagons rolled out, moving West again. The windwagon was under full sail before a gentle breeze and Jacks horses were stepping out smartly after a well-deserved rest. Chance’s indigo mare was saddled with Elias’s battered old saddle. She buck-jumped and crow-

hopped a few times as he mounted before he settled down in the saddle, then quieted under his firm hand. When the little blue mare settled down she had a surprisingly smooth gait. Surprising to Chance anyway, after the bouncing and beating he had taken while breaking her to saddle. He had all but lost count of how many times she had thrown him. She was not exactly gentled yet, but she was broken to saddle. The rest would take time.

The land they traveled changed abruptly from mountainous to deep rolling grasslands, though the grass appeared a little sparse and a little dry. It made the going much easier for the wagon, but it made Chance a lot more nervous at the same time. Within a couple more days they would be crossing Apache land. The Apache were widely known for the vigorous way they had of protesting the presence of trespassers. Chance never fought when he could find a way around it. Fighting was not the sensible solution to hardly any problem, but the Apache could have other ideas about it. In wide open country such as they were entering, it would be impossible for the wagons to slip past unnoticed. Alone, Chance could have done it, as he had been in that part of the country before and knew well its dangers. In a few days, Chance kept telling himself, he was pulling out. They were not his problem. Emma and her grandfather had managed before he had joined them and they would manage after he left. Why, he wondered, did he keep telling himself that?

They had camped early one day, Chance having found the only deep hollow they were likely to for miles around. Emma, as usual, was busy with the evening meal when she jumped up from what she was doing, glancing around, puzzled, and listening hard for the sound she had heard to repeat itself.

“Did you hear that?” she asked of Chance as he passed beside her.

“What?”

“That,” Emma told him as the distant sound again drifted to her ears. “What is it?”

“How the hell should I know if I can’t hear it yet?” Chance returned, but he was a bit nervous. She had heard something, and in those parts likely as not it meant trouble.

“I heard it too,” Ida agreed. “It’s cattle. A trail herd.” Her bright blue eyes twinkled as she added, “I’d know that sound anywhere.” She gave Chance a sly, conspiratorial smile.

What Ida said made sense. It was about the right time of the year. And trail herds were known to use that strip they were crossing. Then Chance heard the sounds too. The faint distant bellowing of cattle and the dim shuffling sense of movement that went with it.

“Well,” Chance returned Ida’s smile, “I’d better go make sure.”

Borrowing Elias’s spyglass, Chance hurried to the top of the curved rise that sheltered them and bellied down to have a good look around. It didn’t take long for him to confirm that Ida’s declaration was true. Far in the distance, cattle were spread out along the horizon like a swaying, dark brown sea. And the herd was coming straight on in their direction. The sounds of a herd on the move were much more audible from where Chance lay than below in the hollow. A couple of outriders were with the herd. He knew they would have to reveal themselves camped in the hollow or, ignorant of their presence, the cowboys could send the herd right through their camp. The only way to do that was to climb up on his horse and ride out to meet them.

Collapsing the spyglass as he walked, Chance hurried back down to camp, where nearly everyone was clustered around the campfire staring in his direction, nervously waiting for what he would say.

“Ida’s right,” he announced, ease replacing nervousness as he returned Elias’s spyglass. “It’s a trail herd. Looks like a big one, too. I’ll ride out and let them know we’re here.”

“Did you hear that, girls?” Ida exclaimed. “We better get ready for company. We don’t have much time!” Abruptly, she began giving orders like an army sergeant. “Clementine, you and Phoebe and Bessie are to help Jack get the tent set up. Carmen, you and Lila get out the coal-oil lamps and fill them. Cassie, you give me a hand.” Ida turned to Emma before rushing off. “You wouldn’t mind having dinner ready just a little early, would you? I didn’t think you would.” She answered her own question in the face of Emma’s blank stare and hurried off.

“Hey,” Pony yelled as he galloped up a little belatedly in a cloud of dust. “There’s a trail herd a-comin’. I saw the lead steer and the outriders from the top of the hill.”

Though the others laughed softly at his lateness, Emma ignored him and turned to Chance. “What’s happening?” she started to ask him, but he was already mounted and starting to ride out.

“What’s going on?” she finally asked of Pony in desperation.

Pony shrugged. “Be damned if I know. We got cows coming and Ida and her girls a’runnin’.”

Elias, it was obvious, knew, but he was not opening his mouth. Emma snorted with irritation. Why did he have to insist on sheltering her, even now? Whatever was happening would happen whether or not he told her about it. And Emma, while a little naive, was not totally ignorant. She had a few suspicions of her own as to what the profession of Ida’s girls might be, and she feared they were about to be confirmed.

Seeing that the brief burst of excitement was over, Pony

turned his horse to go back and pick up work with his mustangs.

Elias winced when he saw Kinkaid's tent quickly taking shape. It was, no doubt, to house their business for the night. And with a bunch of trail-crazy cowboys in the area, business would undoubtedly be brisk. He had certainly not expected anything like this when he'd settled on heading West. Finding his son had been the driving force behind his decision. That and testing the windwagon clear to San Francisco. Nothing like this had ever entered his thoughts.

Emma continued to watch Pony in the process of breaking horses, though her attention was divided between him and the frantic activity inside the camp until she heard the sounds of horses approaching at a gallop.

Instantly, remembering her appearance in her grandfather's clothes, Emma whirled and started running for the windwagon, hoping to slip inside the hold and be out of sight before whoever was with Chance rode into camp. But it was already too late. She hadn't gotten even halfway to her goal when Chance rode into camp, a big, square man riding alongside him. Emma sighed. A blush was working its way up into her cheeks as she walked back toward the gathering. By the time she got to them, Jack was already there, having appeared from the inside of the tent that now looked like it had been standing for days.

"Seth Black," Chance was saying to Jack. "We're old friends. Met down in southeast Texas running mavericks off the offshore islands. Couldn't believe it when I saw him heading up that trail drive heading our way."

Smiling vaguely at Chance's comments, Seth's eyes were riveted on the tent and the painted board sign that hung over the entrance. A sign Emma had never seen before painted in flowing red letters, 'IDA'S RED GARTER.' She tried to keep

the stunned look off her face, but Emma couldn't help being shocked in spite of her past suspicions of Ida and her girls. It just wasn't, well, proper!

"Well I'll be a cross-eyed skunk!" Seth was saying through a thick Texas drawl, his brown eyes large in his sunburned face.

Not quite knowing how to make her presence known without feeling herself more embarrassed than she already did, Emma was helpless with the situation. And Elias was carefully keeping himself out of it, remaining aboard the windwagon, where he had taken refuge in defense against the awkward situation he knew was going to arise.

"I would never have figured you for heading up an outfit like this!" Seth was saying to Chance.

"I don't head it up," Chance told him. "We just met on the trail a while back."

"Well, good for you!" Seth exclaimed exuberantly as Ida, Carmen and Lila appeared, dressed in low-cut revealing dresses.

After a moment, Clementine joined them, her eyes teasing, her every movement suggestive, and far from ladylike. One by one, the rest of Ida's girls appeared in what Emma considered to be various stages of undress. A couple of the dresses were short, almost letting stockings show above their shoe tops, and there were lots of feathers, bright beads and shimmering jewelry.

"Won't you stay for dinner?" Emma managed to ask Seth at last, gesturing to the simmering kettle. "We really have plenty, and it's all ready." She raised her voice and turned in her grandfather's direction. "All I have to do is serve it up."

Seth rubbed his large nose and grinned when he clapped eyes on Emma. "By God, Chance, how many of them are there?" he spluttered with wry good humor.

“Just them.” Chance gestured to Ida and her girls, making it plain that Emma was not included.

“I understand you have a trail herd out there,” Jack was saying to Seth while Emma began dishing up food and Lila coyly handed Seth a brimming plate and steaming cup of coffee.

Seth nodded. “Sure do. Got better’n thirty men pushin’ it too.”

Jack smiled warmly. “Well, as you can see, if some of your boys would like a little relaxation, we’re open for business.”

Seth grinned broadly. “Sure can see that all right. It looks fresh as a spring-fed pool in the middle of the desert.”

Feeling slightly nauseous at the analogy, Emma grimaced and cast Chance a sidelong glance.

He gave her one of his what-the-hell shrugs and commented to Seth, “I’ll have a game going if anyone’s interested.”

“You fine folks are going to make this drive seem like a holiday,” Seth announced. “And you can be sure my boys would never let me live it down if I passed it up. Reckon we can work something out.”

“I have to go see to my horse,” Chance said as he finished his coffee in three long swallows. “I’ll catch you later, Seth.”

The trail boss nodded and rose from the campfire, rubbing his stomach in satisfaction. “I better get back to the herd and tell the boys we have a night on the town coming.”

When Seth rose from the campfire, Emma jumped up and trailed along with him. “Do you have a few minutes you could spare to talk?” Emma asked when they were out of earshot of the campfire.

“Why, sure, ma’am,” Seth answered, touching his hatbrim to her. “What can I do for you?”

“You know Chance pretty well, don’t you?” Emma began hesitantly as they reached Seth’s horse.

Seth's brown eyes twinkled. "Sure do, ma'am, better'n most I'd say. We rode a lot of miles and chased a lot of steers together."

"I know he'd be mad if he heard me ask this, but maybe you can tell me something about him," Emma went on hurriedly, her softly spoken words tumbling one over the other. "He just never says anything about himself and I've known him for weeks now."

Seth chuckled. "I don't doubt that. It sure sounds like ol' Chance. He only talks about the past when he's drunk, and he don't get drunk very damn often. 'scuse me, ma'am," he added in apology for the swearword. Finding the whole situation highly amusing, Seth thought it might add some spice to things if Emma knew more about Chance. "I don't know many details myself, but one time when we got drunk together after a drive he told me he came from England. Went to answer the call of God or something by being a missionary in the Sandwich Islands. Came out here from there. Docked in San Francisco when it was no more'n a mudhole on a hillside."

Not waiting for Seth to add anything more, Emma put in quickly, "I think I understand. He feels he failed those people, and is afraid of failing someone again."

"Hell, no!" Seth thundered, adding another, "'scuse me, ma'am. Chance decided them savages were a whole lot more civilized than the missionaries, so he packed up and lit out."

Emma's jaw dropped.

"Well, I best be moseyin' along." Seth swung up onto his horse's back. "I'd be obliged if you didn't tell Chance what I told you. He'd be fit to bust my head." He touched his hatbrim to her again and turned his horse, then rode out.

For long seconds Emma stood there staring after Seth Black, wondering if what he had told her was completely true, or if he was spinning a yarn for her benefit. Somehow it was

hard to envision Chance Fargo as a missionary of any sort. But Seth's telling of the episode did sound like something Chance would do. Puzzled, more confused than ever, and frowning, Emma went back to the campfire.

Elias joined her there, sitting on one of the barrels that had earlier pulled from the windwagon to serve as a seat. "Emma," Elias began paternally, "What did he say to you?" He indicated Seth's retreating back.

"Nothing," Emma answered, "it's not important."

"I wonder if I didn't make a mistake when I let you talk me into coming out here," Elias jumped right in, glancing occasionally in the direction of Jack and Ida's tent.

"What!" Emma demanded.

"I don't think it's a very good environment for you," Elias added calmly.

"Now wait a minute," Emma interrupted bluntly. "It was you who wanted to come to find Pa and to prove what that windwagon of yours could do. I tried to talk you out of it."

"Now, now, Emma, honey," Elias said placatingly, "we all make mistakes sometime."

"We sure do!" Emma exploded. "But this wasn't one of them. I've never felt so free in my life."

"You mean you're happy?" Elias was incredulous.

"Well, I wouldn't quite go that far," Emma answered him a little more quietly, "but I'm working on it."

"Even with all this?" Elias gestured toward the tent and wagon occupied by Ida and her girls.

Emma laughed out loud. "You're sweet for worrying so about me, Gramps, but this is the best thing we've ever done." She stood up and bent to give him a loving peck on the cheek before starting out across camp at a brisk walk.

Ida and Chance were standing outside the tent beneath Ida's sign just doing a little loitering and waiting for company

when Pony came shambling up, staring with round-eyed, innocent curiosity.

“Evening,” Pony started out. “I ain’t seen your husband around tonight,” the boy commented as if mentioning the weather.

Ida glanced at Chance, who merely looked blank. “Oh, you mean Jack.” Ida finally got the drift.

Pony nodded.

“Well, actually,” Ida said sweetly, “he’s not my husband, brother, or even my son.”

It was Pony’s turn to look blank and then puzzled. “He ain’t? Well, then, what is he?” Pony got right to the point.

“My partner. We’re going to California to open our business.”

Pony stared at Ida in her working clothes, then at the tent and finally shifted his curious gaze to Chance as if the answers would appear on his face.

“What kind of business?” Pony asked her bluntly.

Ida looked down at her own clothes, then toward Chance. It was hard to swallow, the boy being that dumb. For an instant she thought he was fishing for a free one, on the house.

“Well,” Ida began, then paused when she saw the crooked smile slip across

Chance’s face. “Well, Jack keeps things orderly in the place and sometimes runs a little gambling on the side when he’s not tending bar and I run the . . .” Ida paused, blinked and looked again to Chance, who had no intention of trying to help her out of the predicament she had worked herself into. In fact he was thoroughly enjoying the situation. Then, with a flip of her hand, Ida gave up all attempt at tact and blurted out, “Whorehouse.”

For only an instant Pony appeared astonished. Then, slowly, a smile spread across his round boyish face. “Hell for

breakfast!" Pony exclaimed, and "I'll be damned. Bronco told me about them, explained it good and proper. He promised to take me into one when we reached town again. That's somethin'. That's really, somethin'."

"It sure is," Ida agreed with a look of disgust on her face, then disappeared inside the tent.

Pony's eyes were bright with excitement as Ida slipped away. "I'd like to go in," he confided to Chance, "before the cowpunchers get here, I mean."

"What's stopping you?" Chance prodded.

"Money," Pony answered. "Even I know it takes money." He paused, then asked on a more hopeful note, "don't it?"

Chance nodded and drew a five-dollar gold piece from his pocket, flipping it to the kid. "Pay me back when you sell the horses."

"I sure do thank you." Pony took the gold piece and eagerly dashed inside the tent.

Seeing Pony disappear inside, Emma quickened her step, rushing up to Chance.

"You didn't," she breathed, staring at him wide-eyed. "You couldn't have just sent Pony in there! He's just a boy."

Chance shrugged eloquently. "He was bound to learn sometime. It might as well be from downright friendly experts."

At a loss for words, Emma couldn't stop staring at him. Chance broke the spell by taking her by the elbow and steering her away from the tent's entrance. A few feet farther on, Emma stopped, irritated by Chance's quiet yet domineering manner with her.

"Why?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder, indicating the imposing tent.

"That's a broad question," Chance answered, "and I'm not a philosopher."

“What a way to live,” Emma commented, blushing at the thought of it, as much of it as she could put into thoughts.

“I would imagine there are better ways,” Chance agreed. “But circumstance doesn’t always allow for a person finding them.”

Emma faced Chance squarely. “Have you ever visited one of those places?” She gestured vaguely toward the tent, as if the less specific she was the less embarrassing it would be for her.

Chance cleared his throat roughly. “Do you want the truth or do you want a lie?”

“Do you have to lie?”

Chance shook his head. “Lying is an unhealthy business.”

Emma shook her head in frustration. “How can you take all this so lightly?” she demanded, forgetting she was not supposed to reveal her knowledge of his past. “You were a missionary once. Things like this should bother you.”

At Emma’s revelation of her new enlightenment, Chance did a double-take. “That was more my family’s idea than my own. As a matter of fact, I went along with it mostly

to get away from those fine upstanding people. It didn’t work out, and I ended up here. And how did you find out about that, anyway?” He shifted his gaze in the direction from which the trail herd would come. “Seth,” he said, half to himself. “That old . . .” he broke off his comment on Seth’s character and turned back to Emma. “You do like to pry, don’t you?”

“I wasn’t prying,” she countered. “I was just . . . just curious.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Pony was curious,” Emma reminded him. “You didn’t seem to have any objections to him satisfying his curiosity.”

“That was different,” Chance stated flatly. “I told you, out

here a man's past is his own affair." His back eyes were alight with a bright fire. "I ought to break Seth's head for him."

"He said you might want to do that," Emma remarked quietly. "I don't think you should, though. If you did, he'd know that you know he told me about you."

Again Chance caught himself glancing heavenward. What help, if any, he expected from that quarter he couldn't say.

"What's the matter?" Emma queried, "some of that old missionary zeal still buried deep?"

Chance cringed. "I'm not going to get into a philosophical debate with you. Let's just say that I don't believe in sin, and I don't believe there's a hell. That leaves me out of the whole shooting match as far as I can see." He locked eyes with Emma. "And don't go trying to push me into some kind of mold of what you think I should be because of this. I am what I am."

Chance let his breath out in a long sigh as the first of Seth's cowhands rode up. He strode quickly off to meet the riders, relieved to get away from Emma. She was starting to get under his skin.

Chapter Eleven

Throughout the evening, Seth's cowhands wandered into camp in twos and threes until there must have been between fifteen and twenty men in camp with two or three coming and going almost the whole time. Coal-oil lamps burned brightly outside the entrance of Ida's Red Garter as well as within the front section, where there was some dancing going on to the music from a music box one of the girls was toting along. But the back section of the oversized tent was kept in darkness, the noise of raucous good humor from the front pretty much covering the carryings on at the back.

Chance was busy dealing a game of five-card stud to some eager-looking cowboys in a circle of light just off the entrance of Ida's establishment.

There was no booze to be had in camp except for the couple of bottles Ida had brought along for emergencies on the trail. This, she had decided, qualified as an emergency and Ida was dutifully handing out one drink to a man, on the house, from her precious stores. Every once in a while she appeared outside the tent to get a breath of air and look for new faces at Chance's makeshift gambling table.

The men were properly grateful to Ida, and Emma watched with rapt attention from the deck of the windwagon while their camp was turned into a small boom town right before her eyes. There was a hum of excitement on the air as the cowboys jovially spent all their pocket money for the trail. They wouldn't find a better place to spend it between Ida's and trail's end.

Jack and her grandfather, Emma knew, were standing watch outside the pools of light cast by their camp. They had gone up to the rim from where Chance had first spotted the herd approaching. Emma didn't expect trouble. After all, what

were the men doing in camp gambling and partying if there was any real trouble in the offing? Still, Chance had said something to her about being headed into Apache country and they would be there in a few days. A few days? She doubted the line of demarcation was so clear and Chance was always so vague. According to his observations, they were always headed into or getting out of somebody's territory.

Shrugging into a jacket against the chill of the night air, Emma caught sight of Pony as he emerged from Ida's tent wreathed in smiles then turned his footsteps toward the rim.

Pony was a responsible boy. He knew he was to take over the watch and in spite of the obviously good time he had been having he hurried off to relieve Elias. Emma, watching from the windwagon's deck, climbed down to meet her grandfather on his way back. With long, swiftly graceful strides, she crossed the camp and stopped several yards behind Ida's tent, waiting for her grandfather to appear through the gloomy darkness. Standing there only a few seconds, she heard footfalls nearby. It couldn't possibly be her grandfather, there wouldn't have been time for him to reach her.

Knowing the footsteps couldn't be her grandfather's, Emma was not really interested in who they belonged to. Plenty of men were running around their camp that night, and she knew only a few of them by sight, none by name. It was probably just another one of them heading either for the front entrance of Ida's tent or Chance's card game.

As the footsteps drew closer, Emma turned unconcernedly toward the originator of the steps and turned right into a big bear of a man. He gave Emma a broad grin, revealing large gaps in his teeth where some were missing and yellowish brown stains from chewing tobacco on those that remained. Emma staggered back a few steps before the alcoholic onslaught of his breath, wondering at the same time where he

had gotten so much whiskey with Ida doling it out a single drink to a man. But he held a bottle, nearly empty, loosely by the neck with one hand and continued to grin at Emma. Drunkenly swaying on his feet, he put a hand out to her.

“Ida said all the girls were busy,” the drunk cowboy slurred. “Reckon ya musta slipped out when she wasn’t lookin’.”

“I’m not one of Ida’s girls.” Emma sharply jerked back from his groping hand.

“Aw, come on now, honey, this ain’t no time for games,” the cowboy complained, his voice rising and falling with emotion and alcohol.

“I’m not . . .” Emma started to repeat her statement of a few seconds before, but the cowboy caught her up in an immense bear hug and planted a loose-lipped kiss square on her lips.

Emma squealed and tried to wriggle free but could do nothing until he turned loose of her of his own accord.

“An’ that’s just a sample,” the drunk told her with expansive good humor. “We’re gonna have us lotsa fun.”

Emma tried to duck him and slip away, but somehow in his uncoordinated blundering he managed to snag her each time she tried to make good her escape.

“Gramps,” Emma cried out in frustration. “Gramps!”

The cowboy looked blank, then gave her another sideways grin, as if he had had a great revelation. “I get it, ya got somebody else waitin’ for ya,” he said thickly. “Well, I gotcha and you’re mine. He’s gonna have to wait his turn like I did.”

Chance was looking at an ace-high royal flush when he first heard Emma’s strident tones coming from behind the tent. But he knew her to be a capable girl, able to handle herself in most situations and he wasn’t any too eager to throw in the hand just because she might be having a little

misunderstanding with one of Seth's hands. Still, the second time he heard her voice, she was calling for her grandfather, and that could only mean trouble she couldn't handle. Reluctantly, Chance flipped his hand together and dropped it face down on the crate.

"I fold, boys, be back in a few minutes."

Chance didn't know what he was walking into, but it didn't occur to him that it could be too serious. The cowboys were in a good mood, that was all. Just ready for a little fun. Emma had probably appeared more than a little interesting to one of them, and Chance could not fault a man there. She looked more than a little interesting to him on many occasions.

When Chance came upon the two of them, the cowboy was trying to kiss Emma again, this time without much success as she dodged and slipped one way and another in his grasp. Thinking the problem an easily remedied one, Chance took another step closer, putting his hand on the cowboy's shoulder.

"That's not one of Ida's girls," Chance pointed out bluntly as he started to pry the man off Emma. Where the sight of the cowboy kissing Emma had not bothered Chance when he first came on them, it began to raise his ire as he found the man immovable.

"Do something!" Emma pleaded from the embrace of the bear-sized cowboy.

"You're gonna have to wait your turn if you're the fella she's been yellin' about." The cowboy half turned his face in Chance's direction to address him.

Catching the full blast of the man's breath, Chance knew the cook back at the herd would be finding his bottle of medicinal whiskey missing in the morning, and that he had a real problem on his hands right now.

Chance was sure reason wouldn't get through to the drunk

in his present condition but he tried anyway, pulling harder, attempting to break his grip on Emma. "I said she's not one of Ida's girls."

"Why, shore she is!" the cowboy protested. "She's here, ain't she? And Ida's in there, ain't she?" he went on, pursuing his own course of logic. "That sure as hell makes her one of Ida's girls in my book. Now quit yore tuggin' an' wait your turn."

"Do something," Emma begged Chance again from between clenched teeth while she continued to feel as if she were doing battle with an octopus.

Chance pulled his gun in anticipation of giving the man a smart wrap on the skull to put an end to the situation when Elias came charging through the darkness, head lowered like a charging bull and slammed right into the cowboy with all the force his driving legs could muster. At the last instant Chance heard him coming and tried to dodge the old man's wild charge, but it was too late. Elias plowed into the three of them, and, unable to control his own momentum, piled on top of them as they went down against the back side of the tent. Emma shrieked, Chance grunted, and the drunk cowboy muttered something unintelligible as they were slung into the springy side of the tent and the network of canvas, rope and poles started collapsing beneath them.

The tent, having been put up in haste, was no match for the combined weight of the four of them and Elias's maddened drive.

Muffled screams and sharp curses came from the other side of the canvas as the tent continued to collapse with slow inevitability, like a long string of dominoes stood on end close together. The drunk cowboy dropped his bottle in the fall and started to swing as Chance rolled over sideways and felt a body squirming beneath his on the other side of the tent canvas.

In defense of his granddaughter's life and honor Elias flailed wildly as Emma tried to crawl away from the scene. She made it a few feet before being engulfed in the billowing canvas, catching a sharp jab in the stomach from someone's fist from beneath the canvas as she begun to crawl over him. Gasping for breath and turning red, Emma slid off whoever she had been climbing on and sat down hard, holding her stomach with one hand and wheezed out a couple of quiet curses of her own.

Chance, caught beneath both the drunk and Elias, was on the receiving end of both men's attempts at combat on the unsteady canvas that heaved continually as the tent's occupants tried to figure out what was going on and crawl free. With a mighty concerted effort, Chance pushed and pounded against the combined weight and succeeded in rolling all of them off the side of the tent. They were no sooner clear of the canvas than a head popped out from beneath the edge of the tent peering from a table up at tent ropes and poles. With a wild yell, the rest of the body followed clad only in long johns and piled into the fray. He was quickly followed by a second and a third, all in various stages of undress, all throwing themselves bodily into the tussle with no preamble as to what had started it or where it was to lead. It was an unexpected pleasure as far as these boys were concerned. The next best thing to a Saturday night in town on payday.

Like a pot of bubbling oatmeal, the canvas continued to bulge, billow and heave as the cowboys and Ida's girls fled its tangled confines. Ida's girls crawled out dressed for the most part in flimsy wrappers with bits of bright ribbon in their tousled hair.

Once Elias was in the middle of the melee, he made no effort to extricate himself from it. With gusto, he swung at the drunk cowboy who had accosted Emma, missed as the cow-

boy staggered, and connected with one of the men who had just climbed clear of the shambles they'd made of the tent. Doubling his fist, the cowboy turned to retaliate for the unexpected side attack. Chance intervened, caught a fist full on the jaw that made him see stars and hope to hell it wasn't broken as he bulled the cowboy over. He was sprawled in the dirt near the outside fringes of the fight as it shifted more toward the front of where the tent had stood.

The poker players, still clustered in a tight knot around the overturned crate that had served as their table, became suddenly interested in the brawl as it howled around the corner and enveloped them. The pot that had been on the crate flew in every direction, bills riding the soft night breeze to the ground as the players were engulfed by a sea of pounding fists, jabbing elbows, and bellowed curses.

A couple of the gamblers cursed loudly, then threw down their cards and met the free-for-all on its own terms as it rolled over them. The others scrambled to retrieve the stakes from the last hand as well as a part of the considerable amount of money that fluttered gracefully to the ground when the crate had been overturned. Several of the combatants at the edges of the fight fell over the men who were scrambling along the ground trying to pick up the fallen money, and immediately turned on the objects of their mishap. In another few seconds the stand-up brawl had diversified into a dust-raising wrestling match that rolled back and forth between the stand-up fighters' legs, knocking them sprawling in the dust. The air was filled with hoarse curses, grunts, and shrieks as Bessie and Clementine started cheering on their gentlemen friends. Carmen looked disapproving, and Ida appeared stern, her hands propped on her hips as she stood well away from the fracas.

Holding his own in the middle of the fight, Chance man-

aged to dodge more flying fists than he connected with as he slowly worked his way toward the outside edge of the fight. Brawling wasn't his style, and while Chance had been caught in them a time or two, and could hold his own in almost any situation, he was looking for a way to get himself clear of this fight. Cowboys were a rough-and-tumble lot. They enjoyed it, and as far as Chance was concerned, they could have it.

The drunken cowboy who had managed to touch off the set-to blundered in and out of the fight, buffeted and pummeled by the other hands as he passed in and out with little trouble beyond that of just managing to stay on his feet. He was staggering through the center of the fray again, blocking whatever blows that flew in his direction with a casually upraised arm and a weaving gait when Pony and Jack came running down the side of the rim in response to the din rising from the camp.

"Hell's fire!" Pony exclaimed upon getting a clear look at what was left of the gaudy tent.

Jack swore with a little more experience as he hurried toward where Ida and the girls were standing off to one side, several of them with faces alight with the excitement of the moment. Pony headed right for the heart of the matter, the fight itself.

The edge of the brawl was close to hand and Chance was about to slip out of it when he spotted Pony running toward the fight and at the same time was grabbed in a suffocating bear hug from behind. As Chance half turned his head, he caught the full blast of stale booze in his face. He didn't need anyone to tell him who had laid hold of him, but the trick would be to get free of the cowboy's grizzly-like embrace before he managed to break a rib. Chance grunted and heaved. The cowboy, still jolly with drink, chuckled and lifted Chance's feet clear of the ground as Pony ran up. Pony paused

to shove his hat a little harder down on his head, then plowed in without invitation or request as Chance dug his elbow sharply into the cowboy's ribs, trying to break his grip.

Looking for an opening, Pony hopped up and down like a bantam fighting rooster. Finally he jumped up and swung wide, connecting with the cowhand's jaw with considerable force, but producing little result. With less grace and more determination, the kid started working on the exposed side of the bear-sized man's belly, swinging his fists from the hip, pounding away while Chance continued to swing his elbow.

It was beginning to look to Chance as if even between the two of them they weren't going to be able to break the big man's grip, when all of a sudden Pony gave a wild whoop of victory and redoubled his efforts. The fight surged in their direction encircling them again, and Chance, not able to feel any change in the cowboy's grip, wondered what Pony was getting so excited about. But he hadn't seen what Pony had. The big cowboy's face was turning a pale, yellowish green beneath the combined battering inflicted by Pony and Chance. For another few seconds the cowboy held on blindly, then gasped, dropping Chance and doubling over. With all that whiskey in him Pony was sure that wasn't where it was going to stop. He had seen the same pained yellow look about Bronco after a saloon brawl. The bear-sized cowboy was about to lose a good part of the liquid he had consumed.

"Look out!" Pony yelled, making himself heard above the din and the added clatter of a rider coming up fast as he pushed brutally to get clear of the sick man before it was too late.

Miraculously, a circle opened around Chance, Pony and the drunk cowboy. Pony lost no time in scrambling clear, though it put him in jeopardy of being drawn into the brawl that still raged all around them.

Suddenly a gunshot cracked harshly above the uproar and

a deep, resonant voice boomed out across the wreckage of the camp. "What the hell's going on!" Seth demanded as the boom of his weapon brought everyone to attention.

Silence fell heavily among the brawlers as they stopped in the middle of what they were doing. For a moment, fists were suspended in the air, men sprawled in the dust, and the drunk cowboy was noisily sick.

"You bunch of yahoos pile back in your saddles, and get on back to camp before I drag your tails through the cactus!" Seth ordered and threatened in the same roaring breath.

Amid low-keyed mutterings and the shuffle of feet, the trail hands started toward their horses, following Seth's order but not liking it one bit.

"Sorry 'bout all this," Seth said through his Texas twang. "If it was a saloon I'd pay you for the damage and take it out of their hides, but . . ." Seth shrugged.

"It's all right," Ida spoke up. "No real damage done."

Emma would have liked to debate that as she unconsciously rubbed a sore spot on her posterior which she had gained when she'd sat down forcefully on the hard ground after being roughly hurled clear of the canvas by an anonymous body from beneath.

"You're a real lady, ma'am," Seth was saying gallantly to Ida.

Ida gave him one of her slow, sultry smiles in appreciation and Seth gathered up the reins to leave. "Be seein' ya, Chance," he called over his shoulder, and rode out, a thin cloud of dust showering into the campfire that still burned near the windwagon as he left.

Chance had no doubt that Seth meant what he said. He seldom said anything he didn't, even in passing. When this drive was over, he would be off to find another herd to trail boss. Somewhere along the line he and Seth would meet again.

Chapter Twelve

Chance drew up, letting the blue mare beneath him rest part way down the slope of a long rolling hill. The air was crisp, the chill of the desert night still lingering on into the early morning. Taking a long deep breath, Chance let his dark eyes roam over the miles of surrounding countryside. The aloneness, the oneness with the throb of life that surrounded him on the seemingly barren slope, was something Chance had missed the past weeks while traveling with the wagons. There was a rhythm to the flow of life, and most of the time Chance fit it very well, but ever since he had seen Emma hanging onto the windwagon's pilot seat, he had felt out of step.

Chance had never experienced so many trials, accidents and mishaps in all his life combined as he had over the past weeks on the trail. After that brawl with Seth's men several days back, Chance found that he now didn't even have a deck of cards left intact. Shifting in the old worn saddle Elias had given him, Chance continued to gaze uneasily out over the rolling land that spread before him.

With his experience in that kind of country working for him, he was turning his efforts to guiding the wagons toward more traveled routes so that he would be able to leave them on their own within the next few days with a clear conscience. Moving along more frequently traveled routes, the wagons would in all likelihood find others to tie in with.

His plans made and his mind set, Chance still felt uneasy as he touched his heel to his horse and sent her down the gentle slope at a trot. There was only one hitch in his plans. The long flowing hills, the broad flats between them and the mountains that rolled in the distance combined to make up the Apache stronghold. He had passed through this

country many times alone and actually had seen only a few Apache. And luckily he had had only one real scrap with them, but he'd been traveling far from the more frequently used trails. A contradiction to what he was aiming to do this time. Wherever he might find more settlers there would also be more Apache, for obvious reasons. Add to it the simple fact that those folks weren't overly fond of the white man in the first place as he moved in and settled their land, land that the Apache had always roamed at will, and it usually totaled up to a lot of trouble for everyone involved. Indians and white men alike.

The gently rolling country that spread before him, open and beckoning beneath the clear azure sky, did more to unsettle Chance's nerves than the twisted canyon lands where imminent danger was a smaller likelihood than here.. Apache were experienced tacticians and they were not bad in the art of concealment either. Surprise was one of the most important elements of their attacks and they used it with astute adeptness.

Chance guided his mare up out of a fold in the land and lifted her to a gallop along the flats, topping out on a steep rise where he again paused to have another look around. Miles of desert rolled before him appearing almost smooth and unbroken in the distance though the land was dotted with cactus, chaparral and hundreds of varieties of local vegetation. His eyes, accustomed to the flow of the land, moved with it, not really focusing on any individual bush or low tree, but going more by feel of what belonged and what did not.

It was something that didn't belong that caught his attention. Far out from the rise where he sat his horse, out on the flats. There, on a stretch of unbroken ground where the vegetation thinned out, was a dark blotch against the light tan of the surrounding earth. Chance's eyes stopped their sweep of

the countryside and focused more sharply on the spot that had arrested his attention. For long seconds he sat perfectly still in the saddle, absorbing surrounding sights and sounds. He waited as the soft wind that blew over the desert brought nothing to his ears that it shouldn't have. And suddenly as he waited, it moved. Barely more than a flicker, the movement was something that might have been mistaken for the sway of a branch in the wind or the flutter of a bird, had he not been watching so closely.

There was a choice to be made. Chance knew he had to either investigate the blotch or head back to the wagons and detour them widely around it.

He didn't wait any longer. Touching his heels to the mare's flanks, he sent her toward the unidentified blotch at a trot, trying to keep the dust down. What he was doing amounted to inviting trouble to a square dance, but from the moment that damn blotch had moved his choices had begun to narrow rapidly. If there was any chance at all the darker patch on the ground could be a man, he would have to investigate.

His nerves strung tighter than a bowstring, Chance moved in closer to the dark shadow he had spotted from the rise behind him. He kept to what cover he could find, though there was not much of it and it thinned down to even less as he neared his goal. His back tingling with anticipation of attack, his eyes searched every inch of the surrounding hills until they burned in his skull and his ears were attuned to every sound. Insects chirped and hummed as the sun warmed the earth. Sand squished and grated beneath his mare's hoofs as he crossed a dry wash and the rustle of his own clothes seemed unnaturally loud. Still there was nothing to indicate anyone else was around besides himself and what was now clearly a man-shape several yards farther on.

Then as he moved ahead, the low brush abruptly disap-

peared, leaving a blank, sandy, rock-strewn slope that could be seen clearly for miles. At the edge of thick brush Chance hesitated for another few seconds, licking his dry lips and trying to feel any danger that might be near. The man in that clearing was, stripped to the waist and staked out between four short stout posts. He seemed to be straining with all his strength against one post at a time, alternating and trying to work himself free. Chance wouldn't have bet a nickel on his chances, but a man in that situation had to try something. And what the thin, angular man stretched out in the sand was doing was about all there was to try.

Cautiously, Chance dismounted. Once he stepped into the clearing, he would be plainly visible to any Apache who happened to look for a radius of miles. Chance did not like it, but his feet were carrying him forward, his boots crunching softly over sand and loose rock. The man's head twisted and strained to lift far enough to see who was approaching as Chance walked quickly toward him, holding the mare on lead, not wanting her out of his reach for even a few seconds.

With one last look around, Chance squatted on his heels beside the man, who lay on the sand and hard rock apparently undamaged except for his predicament.

"I got me a real problem," Chance began, using his less than proper language. "Two wagons are not too far from here, heading in this direction. Now it might be to our advantage for me to leave you right here, and maybe keep the Apache off our backs," he went on conversationally. "So you answer my questions real fast, and with the truth and I'll see about cutting you loose."

His wiry eyebrows quirked into a disbelieving arch, the man lying spread-eagled in the sand with sharp rocks digging into his bare back gazed up at Chance, while Chance looked down into his narrow leathery face. But before the man on the

ground could say anything Chance continued with his discourse.

“How long you been here?”

“Since before dawn,” the man answered hoarsely, “but I’m . . .”

“You seen any of those Indians since they left you here?” Chance cut him off again.

“There sure ain’t been none flying overhead, and I couldn’t swear to nothin’ else.”

“Don’t reckon there have,” Chance agreed, still glancing nervously around. “You go and do anything to get them all riled up besides riding through?” Chance persisted.

“I am a man of God. The name is Samuel Boley,” the preacher answered sharply.

“That could do it.” Chance met his gaze, the penetrating, startling stare of a man with one brown eye and one blue. “You been prayin’ much?” Chance asked dryly.

Samuel Boley nodded.

“Get you anywhere?”

“Got me you, brother,” the preacher countered.

Almost forgetting what he was on the open hillside for, Chance snorted, “Maybe I should leave you here and see who you come up with next.”

“You and your people will have one more gun if you cut me loose,” the preacher promised solemnly.

“A sky-pilot?”

“A man’s got to live,” Preacher contended contritely. “Can’t preach the word of the Lord if I’m dead.”

“Where’d you get your call, in a stand-up gunfight?” Chance asked, eyeing the empty burnished black holster strapped to the preacher’s hip.

“The Lord works in . . .” Preacher began piously.

“Mysterious ways, his wonders to perform, or words to that

effect,” Chance finished. I know, I heard it before.”

He pulled out his knife and started sawing at the leather thongs that bound the preacher’s wrists. He didn’t know what had made him wait as long as he had to do it, since there hadn’t been any question in his own mind that he would. It was the black side of his nature that made him pull stunts like that, Chance decided. With a couple more swift strokes of the finely honed blade the leather thongs parted and the preacher was climbing stiffly to his feet as Chance bent to retrieve a bundle of shirt and coat that had been thrown to one side in the dust.

“Let’s get moving.” he handed the bundle to the preacher. “I think we’d better do some fast running.” Chance swung into the saddle and waited for the preacher to swing on behind.

The little mare had not been ridden hard that day and she stepped out with a springy gait back toward the wagons.

“Brother, do you carry a spare gun?” the preacher asked as the mare went into a swift gallop.

“I did, but it was lost,” Chance answered over his shoulder. “If there’s trouble grab the rifle and make yourself useful. We should be able to find you a six-gun back at camp to fill that empty holster of yours.”

Slowing the mare’s gait to a brisk trot, Chance held her to the lowlands, keeping clear of the ridges. It was almost noon when they reached the wagons where they had stopped by a spring.

“Who’s that?” Lila blurted the question Emma was too polite to ask, referring to the half-naked man who rode behind Chance.

“Samuel Boley, ma’am.” The preacher reached up to touch the brim of his hat to her, forgetting that he no longer owned a hat. “I am a man of God, bringing his word to this wild and savage land,” he added, sliding off the back of Chance’s horse.

“And the word of the six-gun as well,” Chance put in, waving vaguely toward the empty holster that rode at the preacher’s hip, then turned to Jack. “He wants to borrow a spare. Do you have one?”

Jack nodded, and the preacher smiled patiently as he shook out the dusty, wrinkled wad of clothes and began, with dignity, don them.

“Where’re you headed?” Jack asked when he returned from his wagon with the spare six-gun and handed it to the preacher.

“Wherever the wind blows me, brother, wherever the Lord’s will guides me and his work is to be done.”

“Not much different from your last job, is it?” Pony put in brightly. “Cept then it was wherever the judge sent you, and wherever you had to go to pick up a prisoner.”

“What does that mean?” Emma asked of Pony, “What are you talking about?”

“He was a lawman up in a little town in Kansas,” Pony told her. “Bronco pointed him out to me one time. I heard tell that before that he was a miner, and before that he trapped beaver up in the high country.”

The preacher remained unruffled as he finished buttoning his shirt and shrugged into the black frock of his calling. “What he says is true and I am not ashamed of any of it. The Lord called on me to do his work when I was camped alone on the trail one night. I knew then what I had to do and I’ve been following his word and doing his work since then.”

“Heard he was a damn fine lawman,” Pony enthused. “Bet he makes a helluva preacher!”

As they sat down on the ground to a lunch of fried biscuits, coffee, some strange tubers Emma had pulled and stringy jerky, the preacher was formally introduced to each of Ida’s girls. He gave each an openly appraising look.

“I hate to throw a damper on your good spirits,” Chance commented sarcastically from where he stood near the windwagon, his plate balanced on one hand while he ate, his cup of coffee perched precariously on the windwagon’s wheel, ‘but we’re going to have to get packed up and pull out of here damn fast.”

“Trouble?” Jack was instantly alert.

Chance nodded. “When I found our friend, the preacher there, he was staked out on a bare hillside. Apache left him there, and you can take odds on the fact that they saw me when I went in to cut him loose.”

Pony gave a low whistle.

Chance’s simple statement of fact was all Jack needed. He stuffed the couple of biscuits remaining on his plate in his pocket and flipped the still-dirty plate into the back of the wagon. “All right,” he mumbled around his mouthful of food. “Let’s pack it in and get out of here. You all heard what the man said.”

In a wild flurry of activity, dirt was kicked quickly over the campfire, reducing it to glowing embers in seconds, Jack shifted the fresh team from the back of the wagon to lead, and Pony tied his string of mustangs securely to the back of the windwagon. Elias had the windwagon almost ready to sail when Chance spotted the Indians spread out on the ridge.

“Uh oh,” Chance said clearly, “Hold it,” he called out to the others. “We didn’t make it.”

Emma ran to Chance’s side, following the direction of his gaze to the ridge. “Shouldn’t we circle the wagons or something?” she asked breathlessly.

“Two wagons?”

“Could it be that negotiation would be possible?” Elias asked from his high perch aboard the windwagon’s deck.

“We could offer them one or two of the women, they

might be satisfied with that.”

“What!” Emma gasped.

“Just a thought,” Chance returned casually, an eyebrow lifted toward Emma. “Besides, they would probably put a higher value on our horses than our women, and we sure can’t spare any of the horses.”

Jack appraised the situation with a critical eye. “It sure doesn’t look like we would gain anything if we tried to run,” he remarked as if he were merely taking note of some strange land formation that lay ahead.

Chance agreed. “They’d run us down before we could manage a couple of hundred yards. We’ll have to stand and fight.” Then, as fresh thoughts crossed his mind, Chance snapped out orders. “*Ida*,” he spoke to her over his shoulder, knowing she was there without looking. “You and the others string a rope between one of the windwagon’s wheels and your wagon. Lay it flat on the ground and kick a little dust over it in spots so a man riding up on horseback couldn’t see it. The rest of you get the horses under cover and drag anything from the wagons that we can use for cover. And grab something you can use as a weapon while you’re doing that.”

“I still don’t understand why those, those,” Emma gestured vaguely, not remembering the right word, “those Comanches want to attack us.”

“They’re not Comanches,” Chance answered her calmly. “We left their land quite a ways back. These are Apache. Comanche are wholly a plains tribe and the Apache stick more to the mountains and desert.

“What difference does it make what tribe these Indians are from if they’re going to kill us all anyway?” Emma burst out in anger at Chance’s calm acceptance of the entire situation.

“It makes a lot of difference to them. Besides, if we do get a chance to talk, which I doubt, I sure wouldn’t want to try

talking Comanche to an Apache. It could be very bad for my health, should it remain intact for that long.”

“You speak Apache?” Emma asked puzzled.

Chance nodded. “And Comanche. At least enough to get my message across if I had the opportunity.”

“Then why don’t you try to talk?” she asked, appearing a little more hopeful despite the crack in her voice.

“Because,” Chance explained, “I interfered with their business with the preacher here. They’re good and mad about that. I think I’d better wait and see what they’re planning on doing before I waltz out there in the open, unarmed, to try and talk.”

“The Lord sent you to me, brother,” Preacher said quietly as he checked the handgun for a full load. “Have faith and he will not desert us now.”

The expression on Chance’s face turned a little sour and Emma thought she heard him muttering something to himself about men using God as a scapegoat for every scrape they ever got themselves into, but she was sure that wasn’t exactly what he could have meant.

“They’re moving around up there,” Elias called down. “I think they’re going to do something soon.”

Chance glanced up, startled to see Elias perched up high in the windwagon’s riggings. “Get down out of there,” he yelled up at him, “before they shoot you down like an oversized bird.”

Abruptly, Chance became aware of Pony standing at his elbow. Glancing over his shoulder, Chance could see the horses were tied securely inside the box shape formed by the wagons where they stood side by side. The rope was laid as Chance had instructed. Cassie and Bessie were stationed at the untied end, wedged tightly beneath their wagon and boxed in by crates and sacks, waiting.

“You going to be doing any shooting?” Chance met Pony’s blue eyes, the boy peering at him from beneath long, straight bowl-cut bangs.

“Sure!” Pony grinned, stretching sunburned red-brown cheeks. “I’ll shoot.”

“Will you hit anything?” Chance persisted.

Pony shrugged, looking once more inexcusably young as he philosophized, “Can’t rightly say. A body never knows what’s going to happen when he pulls the trigger.”

With an attitude like that, the boy wouldn’t be welcome in many places that Chance knew of, but at least he was honest. The way that kid could draw his gun from his holster, he could have made up almost any story he chose and been believed. At least until he got himself into some tight situation and the real shooting started. Chance believed Pony to be more dependable than he wanted others to know. For some reason, he wanted to emerge from any situation completely blameless for his own actions.

“Uh oh,” Jack said quietly. “Here they come.” He readied his rifle, resting it on one of the spokes of the oversized wheel.

“I make it fifteen, maybe twenty,” Chance said as the Indians poured over the ridge, their ponies pounding toward the wagons.

Jack nodded, sighting along his rifle. “That’s what I make it. With a little luck we might even come out of this with our hides whole.”

“Yeah,” Chance was thinking quickly. “We might. Hold your fire!” he yelled to the others as an afterthought.

“They’re coming on mighty fast,” Preacher said, a little edgy.

“Keep under cover and don’t shoot” Chance ordered. “Let them think it’s going to be easy. Be ready on that rope,” he called to the pair of girls who were completely invisible behind

their barricade.

After a moment, he saw one slender white hand poke out from between a couple of barrels and wave in his direction.

“They aren’t carrying rifles,” Chance added quickly, bringing his eye for detail into play. “If we start shooting, every other Apache for fifty miles will hear it and come charging down on us.”

“How would it be different if the Apache were carrying rifles?” Preacher protested.

“Except that then they would be shooting at us already.”

“Then, we’d shoot back, and there’d be a helluva lot more racket,” Chance explained quietly as if the Indians were not already charging pell-mell in their direction.

The Apache were bearing down on them, their ponies in a flowing mass washing across the land, thunder rolling from beneath their hoofs. The camp was quiet, the fire out, the women all well hidden under the generalship of Ida Grey. Each clutched in one hand or two a pot, pan, cooking spoon, heavy stick or large rock. Silence settled in heavy folds, pierced only by the sounds of running horses and an occasional apparently unenthusiastic war cry from one of the war party headed their way.

Ida appeared inside the area between the two wagons carrying a small keg with a hole in one end and was spreading the contents in continuing circles all around the camp. Emma ran to help her with her undertaking, whatever it was unclear to Chance’s view, then they both disappeared. Ida’s shelter between three crates and a heap of wadded-up bedding beneath the belly of their wagon.

Chance had no time to find out what they had done.

“Don’t fire unless you have to,” Chance repeated. “It’s a gamble, but the odds are better than an all-out shooting war. Bluff is one of the best weapons man ever thought of.”

Dashing across the camp as Elias, Pony, Jack and Preacher took cover, Chance took up a position only a few feet from where Cassie and Bessie were waiting with the free end of the rope he had ordered strung between the wagons. Chance didn't know why he automatically took command of the group every time a crisis threatened. He wasn't sure he liked it, but the fact remained that the others would readily accept orders from him. It did at times make things easier, Chance had to admit to himself. Undoubtedly that was because he wasn't geared to taking orders from anyone other than himself.

The band of Apache came on, but they were coming slower. Their war whoops were beginning to sound more like a pack of hunting wolves who had, in the beginning, thought themselves hot on the trail of an aging buffalo but came up with a ground squirrel instead. Finally, their wild charge having elicited no response from the pair of wagons waiting quietly in the sunshine, nothing stirring, the Indians drew up about fifteen yards outside camp, fearing some kind of trap. The only sounds were the blowing of their own ponies and the guttural exchange of an animated discussion taking place among the warriors.

After only a few seconds of debate, the leader of the small band raised his lance high in the air once again and cut loose with a piercing yell, sending his pony right for the opening between the two wagons. The rest followed.

"Damn!" Chance gritted his teeth and waited.

Cassie and Bessie knew what the rope they held was for. Now they would see if his idea would work. Sweeping down on the camp, the Apache braves covered the last few yards at a headlong run.

Braced against a rough crate, Chance was ready as the leader came across the invisible line along the ground and the rope sprang up out of the dust when Cassie and Bessie pulled

the looped rope taut. The rope bounced up to almost knee-high on the horses, half of whom never saw it, and the other half were going too fast to avoid it. Only the startled leader and a couple of warriors bringing up the rear avoided the tangle as the rest of their number pitched, plunged, and somersaulted to the ground. Ponies squealed, kicked and bit as they tumbled into the dust and each other, churning up the dust in a billowing cloud as more than fifteen Apaches, ready for battle, were dumped into the camp.

Catapulted from his place of concealment by tensed, unleashed muscles, Chance lunged for the Apache leader who was still astride his pony brandishing his lance and seeking a target. He thudded into the startled warrior with enough momentum to pitch them both off the far side of the paint pony and slam into the ground.

Pony appeared from somewhere, snatched the lance from the struggling Indian's grasp and wrapped him smartly across the skull with the butt end of it. Chance rolled to his feet in time to see Ida drop a match to her handiwork and an acrid cloud of smoke started circling in and out, stinging eyes and spooking horses even further as the black powder burned.

One of the Indians remaining on horseback notched an arrow and let it fly. The arrow passed through a piece of Lila's skirts and sank itself deep into the wood of their wagon as Ida's girls poured forth to join in the fight. Before the warrior could notch a second arrow, Jack jerked him off his horse, pinwheeling him to the ground only to be dragged after and ended up, for a few heart-stopping seconds, with the warrior on top of him, as he pulled a wicked-looking knife from its sheath at his belt. One of the other Apaches, dazed and staggering to his feet, stumbled across Jack and his struggling opponent. The knife jerked, pricking Jack's shoulder. Jack flinched, gave a heave and ended up on top with the knife

suddenly under his direction. He was about to return the weapon to its owner, point first, when a tangle of arms, legs and bodies consisting of Preacher and a couple more members of the war party slammed into Jack's fight. The knife went sailing off under the wagon, and Jack, finding his hand abruptly empty, slammed his fist into the Indian's jaw.

Armed with their club-like weapons from the cook wagon, Ida's girls and Emma dove into the fight, bashing skulls, stomping on fingers and toes, and ganging up on any warrior who seemed to have a little too much pep left for their liking while Lila continued to tug and pull at the arrow that held her pinned to the side of the wagon.

Blows from pots, pans, and stout sticks rained down on the Apache warriors from all quarters as they tried to regain their footing. Lila continued to struggle with the stubbornly imbedded arrow, reaching out with a heavy frying pan to wallop an occasional Apache who, in the excitement, got too close to her.

Spotting Lila's predicament, Emma dodged unconscious bodies and unaimed swings by Clementine and Phoebe, hurrying to Lila's side, to join her in tugging at the stubborn arrow.

After several hard tugs and jerks, Emma realized the two of them together weren't going to be able to free the arrow and was turning to look for more help when Lila went ashen before her eyes as a sinewy arm fastened itself, like a too tight belt, around Emma's waist. For an instant Lila froze as Emma jerked against the steel-like grip that constricted her middle and threatened to choke off her breath. Then she dropped the frying pan she had still been holding in one hand and grabbed hold of Emma's arm as the warrior started to drag her away.

Fiercely, Lila clung to Emma's arm as the Apache pulled in the other direction. Emma felt like a prize bone being fought

over by a couple of scrapping coyotes. She could feel the strength of the coppery brown arm where it circled her own slim waist, and she could also feel Lila's fingers digging into the flesh of her arm in her attempt to hold her fast against superior force.

"Help! Help!" Lila shrieked over and over again above the din that surrounded them.

Emma tried to dig her heels in the dirt, but the surface was hardpan and littered with rocks that rolled beneath her feet. She felt herself slipping, but Lila, bless her, wouldn't let go. She continued to let loose with full-throated bellows. Her softly bow-shaped lips stretched into a tight square pressed against straight white teeth.

Lila's skirts began to tear where the arrow had pierced it pinning her to the side of the wagon bed, and although she was trying to keep her footing on the hard ground, it was the arrow that had been helping her hold onto Emma.

Now her heavy skirts were ripping. The unmistakable sound was audible even above the bedlam that surged on three sides of them.

"Oh no!" Emma whispered, now hanging on to Lila for dear life as the warrior continued to try and pull her loose.

Desperately, Lila fought to keep her feet beneath her and her grim hold on Emma's arm unbroken. But somehow, each time Lila made a renewed effort to right herself and regain her balance, her skirts ripped a little further beneath the strain.

All of a sudden, the last few threads of Lila's skirts gave way. The determined Apache, Emma and Lila piled onto the ground as all three lost their balance at the unexpected release from behind Lila. The intrepid Lila tried to pounce on the warrior, who still held Emma firm, but he managed to keep Emma between himself and the she-cougar who tried to reach him from the front. Yelling and shrieking like a mother bird

twittering over the loss of one of her young, Lila followed until she ran almost headlong into Pony.

The boy was still brandishing the captured lance above his head as he traversed the camp delivering stunning blows whenever Chance or one of the others seemed to have a little too much to handle, or just to shorten a fight.

“Do something!” Lila yelled in Pony’s face, gesturing wildly to where the warrior had already tossing Emma up on the back of a horse and was proceeding to mount behind her as four other braves regained their ponies and flew out of camp in a cloud of dust.

Taking one quick look at the situation, Pony put his fingers to his lips, and cut loose with a short, sharp, ear-piercing whistle. Pony’s faithful horse under a double load, and in the middle of his first stride froze in response to the whistle and started to rise on hind legs as the rest of the camp found the fight abruptly ended and began to converge on Emma and her captor.

Not liking the weight of a double load in the first place, Pony’s horse was only too pleased to obey his master’s command. The message of the single whistle was clear. He was to be free of all riders and return to his master’s side. Like an oversized, faithful puppy, the animal proceeded to do just that.

Running toward the Apache warrior and Emma, Chance was almost there when Pony split the air with his commanding whistle. With abrupt suddenness, Emma flew off the back of the horse, and Chance shifted course enough to be beneath her when she came down. His arms outstretched, he reached for her as she fell toward him. All he could do was to cushion her fall, and that was what he did. The force of it threw them both to the ground, Emma ending up in Chance’s lap, dazed.

Elias snatched the lance from Pony’s hands as he ran up

from the far side of camp and rapped the dazed Indian who had begun to sit up in the dust, smartly across the skull. That pleasure, at least, had belonged to Elias.

“Now,” Chance said, still sitting on the ground, Emma perched in his lap, “we run.” But there was a note of triumph in his voice.

Everybody scattered, running for a wagon or a horse, Elias clambering on board the windwagon, readying it to sail, leaving Chance sitting alone at the edge of camp, holding Emma in his arms.

Chapter Thirteen

Wagon wheels rumbled over broken ground and eight sets of metal-shod hoofs pounded with an urgent rhythm. Jack had all eight of his horses hitched to the front of his wagon holding nothing back and it rolled briskly across the open flats, paced by the windwagon.

The prairie schooner's big white sails billowed out in all their glory as the it trundled swiftly over the rough ground. Elias fought the gusty wind that rose with evening, blowing across the barren land, holding his speed down to match that of Kinkaid's horses.

Running free and easy, Chance's blue mare was having no difficulty as he paced her alongside the wagons. Scouting the front, Chance was nonetheless keeping an eye to the rear where he knew the Indians would be following. For a time, they would keep their distance. And for the moment, there was no sign of pursuit.

Pony sat precariously near the back edge of the windwagon, his feet dangling over the edge, facing backward. One of his arms was looped around an upright post in the deck, and for added security, he had buckled his belt around it. His six-gun was in its holster and a rifle was propped on his thigh, barrel pointing at the darkening clouds as dusk began settling in around them. The kid glanced over his shoulder at the pilot's seat.

Preacher stood upright behind that elevated seat, where Elias and Emma were guiding the windwagon. Emma occasionally jumped up to make some adjustment or another on the lines that held the sails in conjuncture with her grandfather's instructions. Leaning into the wind, Preacher stood his ground against unexpected bumps and hefty gusts of wind directly behind Elias's seat, his clothes fluttering, his thick

brown hair tangled in the wind. He reeled in this odd, new mode of transportation.

The windwagon, a freight wagon in capacity, also carried a couple of Ida's girls as well as some of the supplies from the horse-drawn wagon to lighten its load. Even with the added weight, it creaked and rumbled over the land just as it had with only Emma and her grandfather on board. They were moving fast, but it wouldn't be fast enough to outstrip the lightly mounted Apaches. By now, they would have seen the windwagon moving without aid of horses or oxen.

They would also no doubt have their eyes on the horses and know exactly how many people were with the wagons.

All that, Chance was aware of. He also knew they were probably puzzled by and maybe a bit leery of the lumbering horseless wagon. That was what he was counting on. The longer it kept them from a second attack, the better their chances would be.

Giving his mare her head, Chance pushed past the wagons and out to the front. He put her to a brisk gallop knowing he was totally dependent on the little horse beneath him to carry him through whatever was to come. He had abandoned the deck of the windwagon, and while he had come to believe the strange craft to be safer than horseback, he was nonetheless jubilant at being free of it. Chance Fargo was not a man to be tied to anything.

All of a sudden Chance topped out on a particularly steep fold in the earth and found himself looking down on a broad valley that rolled unbroken for miles except for one thing. There were railroad tracks running its length and far off to the southwest, barely visible, an engine was chugging toward him.

Then Chance spotted something else. A tiny wooden building sitting alongside the tracks with a water tank and a windmill beside it. And beside the shack, out of sight of the

slowly approaching engine, was a knot of men and horses. Chance recognized the bunch in a heartbeat. He had eyes like a hawk and a memory that allowed little to escape. The men below were the same four they'd run across back at the soddy. The bunch Pony had separated himself from.

Huddled together as if in conference and still on horseback were Bleak, Yancy Hawks, D'Arcy Duncan and Bronco. From where he sat his horse on top of the high ridge, Chance easily identified their intent. A train was coming down the tracks. And Bleak and his bunch were outlaws. Pony had confirmed it. If they weren't planning on stopping the train he couldn't imagine what else they'd be there for. Unconsciously, Chance shifted in the saddle, remembering the wounds he had suffered at the hands of Bronco and the rest of that bunch.

Ordinarily, Chance would have kept out of something like what he could see was going on below, but this was one robbery he intended to stop. He felt he owed it to Bronco and the boys. He was being irrational in his quest for a bit of revenge, but Chance began to counter that with a rational of his own. There was no time to go around them. He and the wagons had to go through Bleak and his boys one way or another. How he was going to accomplish it was something else, but his first concern was to stop the approach of the wagons. It was when he wheeled his mare to head back for them that he saw the Indians boiling up over a hill not more than a few minutes behind.

The Apaches were all done up in their war paint this time, as were their horses. It gave Chance a bit of a chill. This time they would be sure they were carrying big medicine. Stopping them would mean blowing them off the backs of their horses. Darkness would be settling in soon, black as the mane and tail of Chance's mare. There wasn't much time for thinking.

Putting his heels to his mare's sides, Chance dashed back

across the ground he'd just covered, waving frantically to Jack and Elias, signaling that trouble was up ahead. At the same time Pony leaped up, almost strangling on his own belt where he was strapped to the upright post. Freeing himself, he ran forward, thundering over the wagon's deck to warn the others about the Apaches approaching from behind.

The kid was nimble as a ground squirrel and when he spotted Chance's signal of trouble up ahead, he wheeled, running unsteadily back down the length of the bouncing windwagon to the rear where his horses were tied.

That was where Pony stayed as the windwagon and the Kinkaid wagon took to the last steep angle in the earth that overlooked the sweeping valley beyond. As they crested the rise and took the plunge into the valley below, he got a good look at what Chance had his tail all twisted about.

Though the light was dim, Pony recognized Bleak's bunch, and the figure of his uncle, Bronco, who he would have recognized in the pitch black of night. That was all the kid needed. The sight of that bunch sent him scrambling like never before. With youthful agility and nearly insane daring, Pony eased over the back of the windwagon right onto his horse's back. In another instant, he had jerked the reins free along with the rope that held his string of mustangs and as the windwagon plunged down the far side of the rise, Pony jerked the rope free, peeling off to the north, riding hell for leather, bent low in the saddle and urging his horse with hands and feet to greater speeds. He raised a hand in farewell to Chance as the gambler approached the wagons at a dead run.

The last Chance saw of Pony, he was disappear into the rapidly approaching thick gloom of early night. He heard part of the Indians pounding up behind the wagons alter course and pursue Pony. He was a prize. They wanted those horses.

There couldn't be any doubt after this that the boy had no

intention of taking sides against his uncle, and that was something Chance wouldn't hold against him. He wished Pony luck, he was sure going to need plenty of it. Still, what Pony lacked in plain guts, he made up for in slipperiness. Not devious slipperiness, Pony wouldn't know how. What Pony had mastered was plain old fast-moving, fast-talking, hard-to-lay-your-hands-on elusiveness. It was a trait Chance at times wished he had better cultivated himself. If he had to give odds, he would give Pony about a fifty-fifty chance, and the way things stood, that was a sight better than he gave himself.

As the wagons careened down the slope, the Apache crested the rise behind them. Their yips and yells became louder as they continued to gain on the wagons. Below, Chance could see the faint sparks from the smokestack of the train flaring as wood was added to keep the fire stoked. Another flame was visible to Chance's harried gaze as well.

A tiny spark that danced along the ground, following a wavering and undefined course toward the vicinity of the railroad tracks.

Dynamite!

Bleak and his bunch planned on blowing the tracks well ahead of the engine's arrival to force it to stop, and the fuse was already lit.

Chance cursed under his breath. Leaning low in the saddle, he put his mare to a dead run, heading straight for that sparking fuse and the dynamite it threatened. Odds were he was going to get himself blown to hell with his foolhardiness, but it was, as far as he was concerned, too late to turn back.

As he drove his mare for the dynamite, the wagons thundered behind him. At the same time the night air was filled with the yips and blood-chilling screams of the Indians, the distant chug-chugging of the engine as it bore down on them, and the pounding of what sounded like a herd of stampeding

horses.

For an instant, Chance was close enough to the huddled outlaws to see their dim forms still bunched behind the cover of the plank building. And he knew they had seen him because one of them separated himself from the others and took out after him as he charged down on the lit dynamite. It was nothing but pure luck for Chance that had made the outlaws put a long fuse on the dynamite. And if it had been a few inches shorter, he never would have made it. As it was, the stakes were riding mighty close when he laid his hand on the tightly bound bundle of explosives.

A little farther down the line the windwagon hit the tracks at almost the same instant Chance threw himself from his horse, diving for the dynamite. The Kinkaid wagon slackened its speed for the crossing, but the windwagon, going much too fast, slammed into the tracks with a creaking crash, leaped into the air, throwing the passengers around like dried beans, bounced again and crashed back down onto the earth on the other side, still upright, still moving.

Chance didn't know why it hadn't simply collapsed right there on the tracks, but it had not. Instead it plunged wildly off into the thickening darkness. Ida, handling the reins of their wagon while Jack rode shotgun, slowed almost to a stop before the tracks that glistened dully in the dim moonlight. She bump-bumped over them, each jolt sounding like a crash, then leaped the team of eight horses into a full-out run as Chance grabbed the dynamite off the tracks and the outlaw he had seen coming after him stuck his face in his.

For about two seconds D'Arcy Duncan stared at Chance in the reverberating darkness before he recognized him from the few hours they had spent together at the sod hut.

"Damned gut puller!" Dee exploded in recognition as he went for his own gun.

“Indians!” Chance yelled hoarsely back in Dee’s face. “Run for your lives!”

With that he hurled a few epithets and the still-burning dynamite in the general direction of the fast-approaching Apaches.

Almost the instant it left Chance’s hand and went airborne the dynamite exploded, and it had been an ambitious load. The concussion hurled both him and Dee flat on their backs with its force and terrorized the better part of the Indians’ ponies. Bedlam erupted as ponies shrieked, jumped and twisted sideways to avoid the area of the blast.

Down the tracks, Chance heard the train slam on the brakes, breaking the chug-chugging rhythm of the engine as metal shrieked against metal and the engine’s wheels, now spinning in reverse, sought to once again gain a firm purchase on the steel tracks while it continued sliding forward.

Chance was first to recover as guns began to crack in the darkness thickening around them. He could see nothing save the bright flashes of discharged guns, and he couldn’t understand why his mare had stood firm through the blast and following commotion. But she had, and he was never one to question good fortune. Without a backward glance, Chance threw himself at the saddle grabbing reins and leather and jumped the little blue mare into a headlong run while he still hung sideways half way out of it. He skipped with her pace and hung on, every muscles straining and burning with that strain.

The engine continued to grind and screech its protest at the attempted abrupt halt, shooting bright blue, yellow and red sparks from beneath the wheels as it continued to plunge almost to the windmill before the engineer managed to get it stopped. Then moving very slowly at first, it went into reverse.

Hoarse yells of protest, screaming horses, and shrill war

cries peppered the air as even the dim light of a silver moon was cut off by a passing cloud, and rifles spoke sharply on all sides.

The train was moving faster, the rhythmic chug-chugging picking up speed as the front light and the sparks from the smokestack grew dimmer in the distance.

Running, a couple of skipping steps and a shot of adrenaline helped Chance drag himself into the saddle on the run, his face half buried in the mare's whipping mane. The voices behind him seemed to be growing louder, and the gunshots more frequent, but the mare beneath him was running strong, and far in the distance ahead of him, he could hear the familiar clang-banging of the windwagon progressing across the open valley accompanied by the wagon driven by Ida Grey.

It wouldn't have taken Chance long to catch up with the wagons if his fine, strong wild mare had not gone lame.

Chapter Fourteen

What had caused Chance's mare to go lame was no more than a minor bruise, but it took him better than three days to catch up with the wagons all the same. Since that night beside the railroad tracks, he had seen no more of the Apache, Bleak's bunch, Pony or the wagons. Somehow everyone had scattered and Chance had ended up alone, not an unpleasant feeling to his way of thinking. But he had to know the fate of the wagons definitely, one way or another, before he could cut his ties with them for good.

To that end, Chance found himself sitting his mare atop a hill high enough to be called a mountain, a bit off the crest to keep from sky-lining himself and maybe attracting hostile attention. He would not have believed that the wagons could have gotten this far except for the fact that he hadn't run across them yet, and he'd been following the wheel ruts in the earth since he had started after them. The way he read the sign, it was the windwagon that had been way out ahead. The Kinkaid wagon followed it and Chance was, in essence, following the Kinkaid wagon. His mustang pony was recovered now, and moving with her old quick, easy stride. Chance wouldn't have liked to put her in a race against any Indian ponies or the mounts of Bleak and his ilk, but in another couple of days she would be ready to take them all on again. Basically, she was a sound horse, in many ways an outstanding one. A stone bruise was no fault of hers.

Chance's point of lookout was about the highest point around for miles, and while he had strained his eyes during the past days for some sign of the wagons, he didn't have to strain them now. They lay west of him, just as plain as a wart at the end of his nose, tucked away up close to a ribbon of cottonwood trees that appeared to simply spring up out of

the desert. He paused, trying to establish his exact location in his mind. It had been a long time since he'd been through this particular country, more than a couple of years, but as far as he could tell, both the windwagon and the Kinkaid wagon were once again on an established trail.

Relief at that realization caused Chance to consider for a moment, just turning his mare and circling them, continue on his way, now that he knew they were as safe as they could be on a trail pointing west. But then he hesitated. It crossed his mind that they had probably given considerable thought as to his whereabouts and had probably even stopped to wait to see if he would show up. Sweeping his stetson from his head, knocking off some of the dust that had collected on the brim, Chance sent his mount down the steep hillside in the direction of the camp before he could change his mind. Sentiment had won out over better judgment.

As Chance rode in, a few more landmarks triggered memories. Not only had the wagons camped beside what was, as far as he knew, the only river in the whole territory, but they had managed to camp right at the crossing point for the settlers heading West. Shifting his gaze eastward, he half expected to see a wagon train coming hoving into view on the horizon.

When Chance rode into camp he was disappointed to find no sign of Pony. Wherever the kid had lit out to, he had obviously kept on going.

No great fanfare was raised in camp when Chance rode in and dismounted. And it was plain at first glance that no one was in particularly high spirits. Emma, though, showed a marked interest and came toward him while Jack strode purposefully forward to shake his hand.

"I knew you'd turn up again with your hide whole," Jack said heartily, the hard planes of his face dissolving into a welcoming smile. "Just like a bad penny."

While Emma joined the two men Carmen hung around the outside fringe of the little knot of people. Carmen wasn't a joiner, but she liked to have her finger on what was going on. Unnoticed, she quietly stood where she was, holding some cottonwood branches she had gathered for the cook-fire.

Emma gave Chance a good looking over as if she was trying to be sure he was all right, then, apparently deciding he passed her inspection, hit him with the news.

"The wagon's broken down. Gramps says he can't fix it out here."

So that was it. The reason everyone in camp was in such a quiet mood. They had gone and had a crisis when he had not been around. Chance shifted his gaze to the windwagon, and now that he was at a closer proximity than out on the steep hillside, he didn't have to question Emma further as to the craft's ailment. The prairie schooner was listing badly, its rear axle splintered through. A few spokes were also missing from a couple of the wheels, and even the mast no longer looked as if it was set just right. The headlong slam into the railroad tracks had done more damage than Chance had thought at the time, but it had taken more miles over rough terrain to reveal itself.

Chance finally spied Elias. The old man was sitting on the pilot's seat, his chin resting morosely in his hand, deep in contemplation. Chance felt a quick twinge of sympathy. It was hard for a man to see a dream die. But, in a few moments the twinge passed, and Chance knew what he had known in the first place: Elias McPherson had been crazy to try it.

That didn't make it easier either as Emma related the events that had transpired since he had last seen them. She told of the wild careening ride when the windwagon's brakes had proved useless after the uncontrolled plunge into the tracks. With outlaws and Indians so close behind they had not

been able to risk lowering the sails. A final bone-jarring crash when the rear axle had broken clean through had brought the windwagon to a crackling, grinding halt on the spot where it now rested.

When the story was told almost everyone in camp except Elias was standing around Chance in a circle, staring at him like he was the Messiah. Chance stared back, for a time, looking each member of their strange party up and down. Then he let his eyes drift over the countryside surrounding their disaster. For quite a long time he remained quiet, appraising, taking it all in, and then Preacher roughly cleared his throat, rasping through the silence.

“You are obviously their chosen leader,” Preacher started out softly. “I am little more than an interloper, though I can offer spiritual guidance. Now, I am not trying to interfere, but I would frankly like to know if you are trying to think of a solution to this problem or if you are merely exercising your eyes.

Chance frowned, remained silent, and gave Preacher a baleful stare from beneath dark eyebrows. He walked to where he could be closer to the front of the windwagon and the pilot’s seat, where Elias still sat unmoving. The others followed in a tightly knit group. It unnerved Chance, made him feel even more as if he was supposed to be the oracle that just walked in off the desert after a ten-day fast, complete with visions. Even with the pressure though, he could feel his old gambling instinct coming into play. He did have an idea, but not being able to resist letting the suspense build, he waited a few seconds longer.

“Well,” Chance said after a time, “this would sure make a fine townsite.”

Except for Emma, the others remained silent. Frowning, she wrinkled up her face.

“A what?” she demanded in a low tone.

“Townsite,” Chance repeated simply.

Emma looked out at all the dusty, dry country that spread out from the river, then turned to face Chance full on, letting out a long string of swearwords accented by her own peculiar kind of dignity.

“This would make a hell of a townsite and you know it,” Emma ended, her hands on her hips.

“I’m glad you think so.” Chance bluntly took her comment to be in the affirmative.

“And that’s as good a name as any. Hell.” He turned toward where Elias still sat immobile, immersed in his own contemplations. “It’s what you wanted, isn’t it?” Chance prodded him. “To come West in your windwagon, start fresh like all the rest of the settlers coming out. Well, you did it.”

Elias began to sit up and take notice. His steel gray eyes brightened as he gazed out across the open country that rolled on all sides of them. It wasn’t exactly what he had planned. It was even better than what he had planned! And he would still be able to find his son. It would only be a matter of time before the word spread and his son sought him out. If that didn’t happen, he’d go to San Francisco after he had a home established for Emma and find him.

“Hell,” he muttered under his breath, “a town named Hell.”

Chance had to bite his tongue to keep from telling Elias that such a name wasn’t uncommon in the Western lands. He himself had been in three or four towns separated by hundreds of miles, all named Hell.

“You can’t be serious,” Emma interrupted. “Gramps, there’s nothing here.”

“He looks serious to me,” Carmen commented through her thick Spanish accent, her usually dark brooding eyes alight

with humor. "If you remain here," she went on in her usual droll, sarcastic tone, "you will have surely been blown to hell!" Then she laughed softly at her own joke.

Chance smiled faintly. "I was out here with some railroad men a couple of years back when they were surveying through this country for a line. This is one of the hubs of the Western lands. Most settlers heading for California seem to pass through here at one time or another. Give me a hand, Elias, and we'll stake our claim right here and now."

What Chance had said about the railroad men wasn't entirely true. He hadn't actually been with them, and there was some doubt as to if they were actually railroad men. What he had seen was some men with surveying equipment in the general area. At the time he had seen them they had been concentrating mainly on getting clear of the territory with their hides whole and their hair still in place. But the last part of what he had told them was true. This river crossing seemed to be the center of it all. Wagon trains were constantly crossing at that point. Even if an entire town never grew on the spot, a trading post and saloon would have no trouble surviving. Of course if someone who left the new townsite of Hell were to spread a few rumors as he went along, it could have quite an effect on the new town.

The business about the railroad didn't cut any ice with Jack. What he was more interested in was the volume of people passing through. He had scouted the area pretty thoroughly after they had caught up with the broken-down wind-wagon, and there was plenty of sign around to back up Chance's claim. He dealt in people, his and Ida's business depended wholly upon them. He was getting one of his gut hunches. If the McPhersons were going to stay, it might be worth a try.

"What do you think?" Jack asked of Ida as Elias com-

menced to climb down from the ill-fated prairie schooner's deck.

Ida knew that look on Jack's face, and every time she had seen it, it had been the harbinger of good fortune for them all. "I'll go with you," she said as if reading his mind. "Your hunches have paid off mighty well till now, sweetie."

"That's it, then," Jack said lightly. "We're staying, at least for now. Might be interesting, building a town."

"Well," Preacher added, "any town with the name of Hell to begin with is sure going to need my services." He spread his arms expansively. "It looks like I have found my flock. Besides, I don't have a horse to ride out of here even if I wanted to."

He hurried after Elias, Chance and Jack.

"There must be a place allowed for the building of a church," Preacher called as followed the town builders, leaving Jack's girls and Emma behind.

Emma couldn't believe it. After all she had been through, this was to be her new home. As if rooted to the spot, she stood and watched as they went to lay out an imaginary town. She overheard Chance saying they would have to claim the townsite itself plus several thousands of acres surrounding it between them to thwart the starting of a second town close by.

So Chance Fargo was going to claim a piece of that dry wilderness for himself. That gave Emma some hope, for if nothing else, she had read him as a man who looked out for his own interests first.

The bright sunshiny day unraveled like a piece of cloth with a snagged thread, and when the men returned to camp, a forest of short sticks topped with small flags torn from one of Ida's old petticoats had sprouted, marking off lots and streets. It was extensive as far as Emma could tell, and between them, Chance, Jack and her grandfather had written an accurate record as to who had claim to what.

They spent the last minutes of sunlight, and long after, before the campfire making copies of the claims on old ledger sheets Jack dug up. It was a foregone conclusion that the claims would have to be filed and done legal if they expected this thing to hold together. And, they would be needing supplies.

Jack and Chance each made a copy of the list of supplies wanted, and it grew longer than the list of staple necessities. A copy of the list would be needed when the supplies arrived to keep straight who had sent for what. And, as that list grew, so did the pile of money between Jack and Chance that was to pay for everything ordered. Money came out of old shoes, trunks, small purses, and long stockings, clinking and rustling softly as it was added to the pile. The amount of money between them was appalling. Jack came up with the bulk of the wad to be used for the supplies. He was the one Chance would have expected to produce the money. He naturally saw to things like that where his group was concerned.

Elias, who was planning to run a trading post and general store, knew he would need a little of everything, but he hesitated to lay down the cold cash of his savings. It was going to take all he had. Chance could see the hesitation in his face.

“If you’re going to take a risk,” Chance told Elias quietly to one side, “you might as well go all the way. And I tell you that from experience.”

Elias looked at Chance, then at Emma, and after a few seconds added the necessary money to the pile, leaving him with only a few dollars.

“I guess we all know who is best suited to go file our claims and get the supplies,” Jack said seriously as he began folding the supply list and claim papers. “The one who doesn’t have a wagon or others to look out for, and,” he added before Preacher could volunteer, “a good horse to get him there.”

Jack didn't quite know how to turn down a preacher volunteering for anything, but he hadn't known the man long enough to trust him with the collective money from both wagons. Chance was another matter. He might be cynical, wild and at times almost a little crazy, but he was honorable. If he set out to do something, it would get done.

"Not him!" Emma blurted out in protest, knowing full well Jack meant Chance. "If you give him all that money and send him after supplies, the supplies will get back but he won't."

Chance gave Emma a grim smile that reflected in the depths of his jet black eyes. She knew him too well. Her claim was valid. If he took up Jack's offer and went off for the supplies and to file the claims, he would use it as an easy way out. Emma could read him all right, and that was another part of what was making Chance nervous. He wasn't one for long-term, serious relationships and that, he knew, was what Emma was looking for. That kind of stuff made him want to run.

"If you're so worried about it," Carmen said coolly, "why don't you go with him?"

"Oh, shut up, Carmen," Lila retorted softly in Emma's defense. "She has as much right to speak her mind as any of the rest of us."

"If it bothers you," Clementine directed her comments toward Carmen, "then why don't you go with him?"

"Wait a minute," Chance said, raising his hand. "If it's me, I go alone. There's too much wild country out there ahead for me to be looking out for anyone else's skin."

"See," Emma observed, "he's not coming back."

"Whether he comes back or not is irrelevant," Jack countered. "He's the best man for the job. Unless you're saying he's going to steal that money I figure as long as the supplies come back, that's all I care about. Besides, who else can we spare?"

“He’s right,” Elias agreed. “The windwagon isn’t going anywhere. If it was, we wouldn’t be staying here in the first place. And considering the fact that Jack and I have the most money in this, it seems to me that we have the deciding votes on who is to handle it. If Chance is willing to go, he has my vote.”

“Then it’s settled,” Jack agreed. “If Chance is willing to do it.”

Chance nodded. “Be glad to do you folks a favor.”

Emma snorted and retreated into the hold of the listing windwagon. No one seemed to miss her much. The chore of cooking had already been completed, and the meal eaten. Chance watched her go.

“Tomorrow,” Jack announced to everyone at large, and no one in particular, “we put up the tent.”

It seemed appropriate. The first establishment to open in Hell would be Ida’s sporting house. If the miner-turned-trapper-turned-lawman-turned-preacher had anything to say on the matter, he was keeping it to himself. Actually, he looked positively content. Like he had finally found his true niche in life.

Samuel Boley appeared every inch the inoffensive preacher, except for the gun he wore. And Chance had seen him practice. A man had to practice his draw if he wanted to keep it smooth, and Preacher was no exception. He was fast and he was good. Chance decided the first time he saw the preacher handle the gun he had borrowed from Jack that, in spite of his appearance, Preacher was not a man to get crossways of. Chance wondered if Preacher was a forgiving man, or if he believed in an eye for an eye. It would be interesting to see how he ran his church when he got one.

The night was not as dark as past nights owing to the fact that the sliver of moon had broadened into nearly a half. After folding the money and papers into his money belt, Chance

had retreated to the riverbank with one of Jack's curry brushes to give his mare a good going over. It helped to keep the pests down and made riding easier on both of them.

He'd just started working across her slick, broad back when a distinctly feminine figure drifted gracefully toward him over rocks and fallen logs through the glowing moonlight. At first he couldn't identify the small, slender form, but he did catch a whiff of tantalizing perfume adrift on the quiet night air. He took a deep breath. That was Lila's brand. But the figure approaching through the darkness didn't move like Lila, and in a moment Chance knew why. It was Emma. He hadn't recognized her because he had become accustomed to seeing her around camp in her too short, too baggy pants and billowing shirt.

Instantly, Chance was wary, defenses rising. He knew Emma well for their short acquaintance. She had to be up to something. Lila's perfume. And the walk that made her appear to be floating over the rough ground with a graceful sway instead of a solid walk, that was something she had to have picked up under Lila's tutelage as well. In the silence of the night, Chance swore right then that he wasn't going to let Emma get to him no matter what. He'd been down the river a time or two, and what he figured she had in mind was nothing new. Ordinarily, he would be cynical enough to believe he should go whichever way the road took him, but Emma was a different matter. It would be easy to hurt her and Chance wasn't cut from that cloth.

He continued the energetic brushing of his horse when Emma reached his side, and even circled around to the blue mare's far side. Almost teasingly, the faint smell of Lila's perfume occasionally drifted past, though Emma had used a much lighter hand in applying it than Lila. Her hair was different too. It wasn't tied tightly back as it usually was

when she worked. Instead it hung loose, red, shimmering and tumbling over shoulders.

The change it brought in her appearance was astounding. In the dim moonlight her face seemed to glow, her green eyes flashed like twin jewels. Chance stopped what he had been doing. She had gotten his attention.

“You are truly a vision of beauty tonight,” Chance told her expansively, meaning every word.

Emma smiled shyly. “Thank you,” she murmured under her breath, moving a little closer as she did. “It’s for the celebration of the starting of the town, and I knew you were leaving in the morning. I wanted you to remember me like this instead of in those old clothes of Gramps’ that I wear.”

“There’s no danger of me remembering you any way but this,” Chance said evenly. “Looking the way you do right now, you’d be the devil to forget.”

Sighing softly, Emma slipped under Chance’s outstretched right arm where it still rested on the mare’s back. She accomplished it a bit awkwardly, and once there felt stiff and unnatural, but Emma was sure she was taking the right step. How else could she really demonstrate what she felt for him? At least that had been Lila’s advice, and it had sounded logical. But, as she stood there in the dim moonlight, she began to have small doubts about the decision she’d made. Still, Emma had her pride. She was not going to run away. The next move was up to Chance.

And it was a move he was having a hell of a time deciding on. He looked down at Emma nestled against his arm. He felt uncomfortable. No matter which direction he turned, he was going to end up with her in his arms. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do when that happened. His earlier resolve to not let her get to him was doing battle with the soft womanliness of her presence. The rich clean smell hovering about her,

spiced lightly with Lila's perfume were sparked with the electricity of her being. Chance had known from the first that Emma could get under his skin. For another moment, Chance kept his arm on the mare's back. The whirl of feelings that Emma had aroused was doing battle with his better judgment. His better judgment lost. She, after all, had come to him, was Chance's last rationale as he took her into his arms and placed a lingering kiss on those soft, slightly parted lips.

Emma, Chance could feel, was hesitant but clung to him as the kiss ended. Feeling the softness of her hair as it brushed over his hand where he held her, he kissed her again. The mustang snorted and stamped, irritated that the brushing she so favored had been interrupted.

Chance felt the rapid rise and fall of Emma's breasts while she pressed tightly against him, and when they parted he spotted the flush rising high in her creamy cheeks. For a moment he gazed down at her upturned face wreathed in the soft glow of moonlight, then the quiet bubbling of the river reminded him of a grassy bench sheltered by thick brush on three sides only a few strides upstream. In vibrating silence, Chance guided Emma swiftly toward that refuge.

With the tufts of grass giving softly beneath their feet, Chance cradled her head in both of his hands and they kissed again and again while sinking to their knees on the soft sward. Hastily, Chance began to unbuckle the gun belt that hung at his hip, now like a lead weight. Looking for all the world like a frightened young doe ready to dash back into the closed, dark security of the forest, Emma watched him. It was unsettling for Chance, but even more exciting, watching her as she sat almost rooted to the spot, the dim moonlight passing through her faintly disarrayed hair, hauling her in a soft, ethereal appearance.

Buckle and leather had barely parted company under

Chance's hand when he heard an urgent shout from camp some hundred yards away.

"Indians!" Preacher bellowed at the top of his lungs as he charged back into camp from lookout duty. "They're headed this way. Grab your weapons and get to your places!"

Chance gave a startled jump, straightened in an instant and deftly settled his side gun back in place with quick, sharp movements, his mind already focused elsewhere. Emma appeared first puzzled, then frightened. Chance didn't give her more time to think about Preacher's warning. He gathered her up in his arms and made a wild dash for the blue mare, still standing patiently near the river where he had left her.

With little grace and no concern for her comfort, he threw Emma up on the mare's back, and jumped up behind, sending the horse toward camp at a high gallop. Preacher, Chance knew, was not one to be kidding around where Indians were concerned. If he said there were Indians out there heading in their direction, then it was a plain fact and they didn't have much time to get ready. How Preacher had spotted them some distance out was the mystery as far as Chance was concerned. Even with the faint light of the half-moon, he hadn't been able to see camp from where he and Emma had been down near the river.

Everyone in the camp was already moving when Chance and Emma rode up, the dust rising in a large cloud behind them. Preacher was dismounted and had pulled his gun. Jack held a rifle at the ready and Elias, as usual, was clambering up into the windwagon's riggings for a better look at the situation despite the darkness which had to be a detriment to both climbing and seeing anything once he was aloft.

Ida was snapping out orders as her girls hauled sacks of supplies, boxes and crates from the inside of the wagons for

cover. Chance set Emma down in the middle of the frenzy of activity, and remained where he was, astride his horse, peering into the gloom of the direction Preacher had indicated trouble was coming from.

After straining his eyes against the darkness for an indeterminate amount of time, Chance managed to spot three riders topping out on a low knoll maybe fifty yards from camp. They stopped there, facing camp, which was much more visible to them than they were to it. It looked as if they were having some kind of a conference among themselves. At last, they started moving toward the camp again, but slowly.

Chance touched his heels to his horse, and rode out, just as slowly, to meet them. He was not unarmed. His six-gun rode reassuringly at his hip, but instinctively he knew he would not have to use it. This was no raiding party.

The riders were Indian all right, like Preacher had said, but besides that they were a pair of army scouts. Between them rode a third Indian. Old, small and slight with a seamed, leathery face, he rode an ancient, emaciated pony that appeared to summon all its strength just to place one hoof in front of another for the next stride.

One of the pair, riding U.S. cavalry horses, explained their predicament to Chance. The old man was an aged war chief who had ridden off to die with his war pony in dignity far from the camp of his people. Chance didn't catch the name of the old man's tribe, and he could not remember which one had a custom which might account for the old man's actions. The ancient war chief didn't utter a sound. He sat between the two army scouts, the top of his head coming barely above their waists. To accent what his companions were saying, he bobbed his head up and down vigorously and gave a nearly toothless grin. What it boiled down to was the old man was taking longer to die than he had anticipated, and had not taken

enough supplies to last him and he hadn't planned on starving himself to death. He had planned on his last hours being in comfort. So, at the urging of the scouts, he had continued on with them. What they hadn't counted on was the stiff slowness of the old pony. Their light supplies had run out quickly due to the voracious appetite of the old man, and the fact that he kept feeding the hardtack to his pony. What they really wanted was a square meal and some coffee, if it could be spared.

Without hesitation, Chance gave his agreement to their request, nodding gravely at the seriousness of their situation and lead the way back to camp. When he told Emma they needed to feed the hungry she didn't look thrilled with having to cook another meal, but she didn't look all that unhappy, either. He looked at her sideways wondering if she'd gotten cold feet back there at the river with him. Or was she simply relieved that these were friendly Indians and the danger of attack had evaporated? He wondered, but nothing was changed. He was pulling out in the morning.

Chapter Fifteen

Emma picked her way along, walking on the boardwalks where they were available, and daintily lifting her skirts above street level where they were not, trying to save the hem from dust and grit. It was early afternoon, the sun was shining in an azure sky, and it was hot. It seemed like it was always hot. That was when it wasn't raining and turning the make-shift streets to mud.

The town of hell had grown up overnight. One day, Emma and her grandfather, along with Preacher, Jack and Ida's girls, were the only ones sharing the open hills and the crystal river. The next, wagonload after wagonload of supplies arrived and one of the teamsters presented Jack and her grandfather with a fat envelope containing all the legal papers to their claims. The papers for Chance's claim were among those in the envelope, but he was nowhere in evidence.

Supplies kept pouring in for days after that, much more than they had ordered between them, and the settlers surged into Hell with them. Lots of them passed through taking advantage of water and spartan services, but some stayed on and those services were becoming much more than spartan. Emma had even overheard a couple of burly men talking about a railroad scheduled to run right through the middle of Hell. And every day prospectors came into or left Hell, on horseback or foot, leading pack mules off into the surrounding hills on their search for silver or gold. Vague rumors of small strikes being made floated on the air with every new dawn, and that drew even more people into the area.

Jack Kinkaid had managed to get his hands on the first large shipment of lumber coming into town, and immediately built Ida and the girls a permanent structure. There had been a wild celebration the night the permanent home of

Ida's Red Garter was completed. Emma remembered it vividly. She'd gotten three marriage proposals that night, one of them almost worth thinking about if he had taken a bath occasionally.

That was another thing about Hell. Most of its residents were single men.

Miners and railroad men. It made for a rough town, and it was only in rare instances that Emma found herself unescorted by her grandfather, Preacher, or Jack. It was the most fun with Jack who held her arm and guided her through town like he was a king overseeing his vast holdings.

And, it was almost true. Jack was a shrewd businessman. He had sold off a few of his town lots in strategic places, keeping a couple for himself and holding prime lots just out of reach while he sold off a part of his thousands of acres outside town to a couple of big ranchers. Naturally, he split that property so the river brushed both the parcels he sold and the parcels he kept. In the meantime, he held onto the best town lots, knowing that the way things were going the value would climb rapidly. And he held onto a few pieces of the out-of-town acreage for a ranch of his own that he confided to Emma he had always wanted.

Elias McPherson had done much the same thing, though he had not had the advantage of Jack's larger grub stake, or the income from a booming business such as Ida's Red Garter. Even so, he managed money wisely, sold off chosen sites and managed to get his general store and trading post built into the largest of its kind in Hell. So many new people came into Hell with each passing day that the demand for almost everything was beyond belief.

So far, the main headache all of them had been forced to deal with was Chance Fargo's holdings, and his absence. They'd thrown off a few squatters from his prime town lots,

and posted signs. But when things started getting rough, both had bowed quietly out of the picture. Neither one had been interested in getting his head blown off for a man they weren't likely to see again. It had been an irritant in more ways than one. As long as Chance's lots were available, free for the taking, it held the value of Elias and Jack's down. And that end of town had grown like a mushroom, the poisonous variety, sparking shootings, brawls and robberies. Ida's Red Garter hadn't been hit yet and neither had McPherson's mercantile. But that was only because they were the strongest, biggest, and stood united. Even that wouldn't put the outlaws off forever. Soon they would work up enough courage to try and take on the giants of Hell, try to tree the town, as Jack had put it.

Preacher had been on the move since the town started booming, meeting his flock and canvassing for donations for the new which he envisioned on the big square corner lot that had been set aside for that purpose. But every person in Hell, as he found out, was willing to spend money on almost anything except donations for the church he planned to build.

Jobless cowboys had started drifting into town. And they were being hired by the surrounding ranchers who seemed to be multiplying almost as fast as the railroaders who had no apparent work and miners.

The town did not yet have a permanent sheriff of any kind, though a United States Marshall had passed through a couple of times, staying for a day or two. For a variety of reasons, that was a situation that had to be remedied. The largest reason at the moment being the fact that there was a banking interest thinking of starting up in Hell. Growing at a fantastic speed, the town really needed that bank, but it wouldn't come in without some

kind of law. And Elias, Jack and Preacher, acting as town

elders, hadn't yet come up with any likely candidates. Notices were posted almost everywhere in town. With all the men running around loose in Hell, it seemed that one of them would have to be willing to take on the job of full-time sheriff but they had no takers yet, at least none worth thinking about.

Emma cast her eyes about as she continued on her way. Hell was a healthy, growing town bubbling with life. Everywhere there was building, laughter and the bustle of non-stop activity. Passing the little seamstress's shop, she could hear a piano playing, tinkling out above the hoarse yells in the streets that accompanied the loud poundings and sawings of construction. In another moment, Emma recognized a bright and brassy rendition of "Buffalo Gals."

Stepping up to the saloon batwings of Ida's Red Garter, Emma pushed one aside and slipped inside the doorway, pausing there to let her eyes adjust to the dim light, and to catch sight of Jack's whereabouts. She found herself becoming very fond of Jack. But, he neither raised the feelings in Emma that Chance had nor appeared to want to. Jack's affection for her was something akin to brotherly and Emma felt the same toward him. It was pleasant and safe. Emma was, for the moment, content.

She had been standing inside the door for barely more than a few seconds when Jack breezed up, dark and handsome as usual, beaming a welcoming smile in her direction.

"Always a pleasure, Emma," he said gallantly, then caught her small hand in his and tucked it into the crook of his arm.

Looking up at Jack as he guided her across the room, Emma noticed that his face was softer now, more relaxed than when they had been on the trail together. Well, why not? He was on the way to becoming a wealthy man and he dressed the part, no longer appearing as he had on the trail. His strange, over-the-knee boots were still in evidence for protection

against tall snakes of all varieties, though the ones he wore now were new, made by a bootmaker who had appeared in town several weeks before. The buckskin jacket had been replaced by a black broadcloth coat, white shirt, and string tie. Of late, that finely cut coat was always hooked behind the burnished red-brown holsters, revealing the twin pearl-handled guns that he had not had much occasion to put to use. Even so, Jack was a man respected in Hell, and maybe even a little feared. No one seemed too eager to cross him which led to Emma's personal fears of ambush. There was a dark element in Hell, one not easily dissuaded.

The man sitting at the piano switched to a bouncy little tune Emma didn't recognize as she glanced around the saloon. A few customers were scattered, sitting at tables with drinks, listening to the music, and eyeing Emma as well as Ida and the three of her girls who were visible. There would be headed Ida's way very soon. Emma edged a little closer to Jack. She wished the men would stop looking at her like that. It made her nervous. Lila and the rest of her girls might be used to it, but she most decidedly was not.

Thinking of Lila, Emma couldn't help casting an appreciative eye over the dress the short Southern girl wore. It was a bright green silk with shimmering gold trim at the hem and shoulders. A matching green feather was in her hair, set in a base of sparkling base of sparkling glass beads. The seamstress, only a few doors down, had been among the first settlers to arrive in Hell. Since then, she had built up her clientele, a good portion of which was counted the girls from the Red Garter and Emma among her customers.

Emma, at her grandfather's insistence, had gotten several dresses sewn there as well as a couple of hats. And some shoes she had made by the same leatherworker where Jack had gotten his magnificent boots. She was beginning to feel quite the

lady again. And, after the months of the trail, she wasn't even sure she appreciated it. Often, Emma would climb back into the dumpy pants and shirt she had worn during those days of travel, and go riding astraddle, the way Pony had taught her. Her grandfather didn't like it when she did, nor did Jack. Both thought it too dangerous a practice though she always stayed close to town as she promised. Jack had offered to go riding with her but there were times when she simply preferred to be alone. With the town booming the way it was, it had gotten so she had to sneak off to be alone, even for a few minutes.

As long as she kept clear of the end of town where Chance Fargo's lots, staked out but abandoned, were Emma felt she'd be safe enough. The safety of any respectable person would be questionable there. On them had sprung up a string of dumpy saloons, a shady freight business, and a man who dealt in horse trading, gambling, and, in the absence of a bank, loaning money with small outlying ranches or businesses as collateral.

On one occasion Jack had pointed out a few known outlaws frequenting that end of town with a worried scowl on his face. And Emma had without a doubt identified couple of the men her grandfather had tangled with back at the sod hut almost a year before. She was sure they had to be behind at least part of the thievery and wild gun battles that had begun to erupt with alarming frequency. A shiver went up Emma's spine. As Jack had told her, such an element pouring through town was unavoidable, especially without a sheriff, and meant nothing but trouble. The fact that they congregated almost exclusively on that end of town worried Jack even more. It was almost as if they knew the denizens of that part of Hell and were planning on making the new town live up to its name. Wisely, Emma steered clear of those few shabby tents and cockeyed buildings. There were times when she could almost

curse Chance for letting that end of town become what it had. If he'd returned to protect his own claims, she was sure that it could never have happened.

Where had Chance gone? She couldn't help wondering about that. And, what was he doing? Many times she'd told herself that she was getting over him, but somehow she couldn't rout out the feelings, jumbled and unreadable as they were, that she felt for him.

Then there were the settlers coming through. The ones who had no idea of staying in Hell, but were pushing on to California. Emma envied them. At the outset of the trip with her grandfather they had settled on California as their final destination. Now, it seemed as if she would never see it, though her grandfather made it plain he hadn't given up in his quest to find his son. What did that mean? Was she expected to remain here and take care of the store while he went wandering off in search of Danny? Emma sighed. California. The land of golden dreams. She wondered idly if that was where Chance had ended up.

"Sarsaparilla?" Jack asked quietly, interrupting Emma's thoughts.

She smiled and nodded as he guided her toward a table and raised a hand above his head to signal the bartender his wishes. The bartender was used to Emma. Automatically,

at Jack's wave, he brought either sarsaparilla, or when he could lay his hands on some from a passing settler, fresh, cold milk. This time it was sarsaparilla. A settler with a cow still giving milk hadn't passed through town in several weeks.

Emma was about to thank Jack when Preacher slammed through the doors, striding purposefully to their table, towering over everyone, and addressing them all in his usual booming voice.

"Glad tidings good people! I have just received the word!"

Jack smiled and looked blank for a moment. "What word?"
"About the bank of course."

"But we haven't found a permanent sheriff yet," Emma protested.

"No matter," Preacher said with a vague wave of his hand. "They are convinced that Hell will soon have one and want to be ready to open as soon as that fact is confirmed. They're going to start building immediately. A load of lumber will be arriving in the next few days."

"How did you find out all this?" Jack was curious.

"A rider came in with the news," Preacher told him. "Stopped at the mercantile first. Your grandfather already knows." Preacher directed his final comment in Emma's direction.

"This is cause for celebration," Preacher said formally, and strode quickly to the bar for his drink. "For if there is to be a bank, can a telegraph be far behind?" He tossed a drink down his throat and strode back to Jack's and Emma's table, boots ringing against the board floor. "I think not!"

Barely suppressing a giggle, Emma managed to smile pleasantly at Preacher who took himself more seriously than virtually any man she'd ever known. A single swiftly consumed drink was his idea of celebration. And now that he had his new Bible, he was given to abruptly giving forceful quotes before impromptu audiences. With great gusto he would clear his throat, open the big black book to a random page and give full-throated power to his delivery. Thereafter, Preacher would close his book with a solid thwack, and stride briskly away, preceded by his huge beak of a nose.

Preacher's short, ratty-looking beard got no better with the coming of a semblance of civilization in Hell's growth. Neither did he stop wearing his side gun, which was probably wise, or taking an occasional celebratory drink. The only change in

Preacher was his slightly increased piousness with the arrival of his bulky Bible. That and the increased dignity and formality of his speech. Even at that, he carried the heavy book only in his left hand. His right he kept free in case he would have to make a grab for his gun.

In a town like Hell nothing needed, or received, justification. Civilization did not yet have its cold, clammy grip on Hell, and for a while, Emma hoped it would not.

“After my pleasant duty as purveyor of good news, it is time to return to my flock, good people,” Preacher proclaimed. “I would love to spend the day chatting with you in quiet reflection, but there are many souls out there in need of saving.” He touched his hatbrim to Emma, pointed his thin angular frame toward the door, and exited with great dignity.

The batwings hadn’t even stopped swinging behind Preacher when the usual bedlam of Hell’s frenzied building, combined with the jovial good spirits of its residents, was punctuated suddenly by a volley of shots and a wild, unintelligible outcry. It poured through town like water released from a broken dam and within seconds the main street was filled with people yelling and firing their weapons.

At the first sounds issuing from the far end of town Jack was on his feet and running for the door, his hand resting on his right pearl-handled gun. Right behind him was Emma. And everyone else in the Red Garter trailed along behind them. Jack had always been worried about an outbreak of trouble from the ramshackle end of town.

Urgently, Jack waved Emma back inside the building when she tried to follow him outside.

“Stay back and keep away from the windows,” Jack snapped, then stepped out onto the boardwalk he’d had a hand in building himself.

Emma paused by a window, keeping to one side, peering

out. People were pouring out of all the buildings, tents, and lean-tos that bordered either side of the street. Her round-eyed gaze passed over the milling, surging mass of humanity filling the dusty street. The crowd continued to swell with the populace that streamed in from the side streets, and Emma got her first real look at the many people in Hell. Mostly, they were dirty, dusty and sweaty. They consisted of miners who were working, railroaders who were not, and cowboys fresh in off the surrounding range. Mixed in were a few townspeople who ran shops and services, along with some greasy-looking gamblers and horse traders. One or two were of Jack's cut who stood back and played a waiting game body tensed, eyes narrowed.

A wild, joyous whoop erupted farther up the street, and through the rising dust and commotion, Emma finally spotted the nucleus of the crowd. Held aloft on some

railroaders' shoulders were two men dressed in the citified version of how they thought Westerners dressed. Each was clutching some kind of equipment and a canvas bag slung over one shoulder.

"We caught 'em measuring on the north end of town!" someone whooped. "The railroad's on its way!"

The North end of town! Chance Fargo's end of town! For a moment, irrationally,

Emma wondered how he had done it without ever setting foot in Hell since the stakes had been set. Then, she realized that even Chance couldn't have known about that in advance. It was a mere trick of fate that the tracks would swing north of the town instead of south.

"Well, I'll be damned," Jack said out loud, still standing on the boardwalk in front of the Red Garter, watching the celebrating crowd as it reversed itself and the railroaders started pouring out of town in the direction from which the track

would be coming.

From a celebration, it quickly turned into an exodus. On anything they had, could borrow, or steal, the railroad men thundered out of Hell to join up with the approaching tracks. Burly steel-driving men, they had at one time or another become separated from the work on the rails and had congregated in Hell to await the word of new track. Now the word had come and their waiting was at an end. They were heading out.

The surging crowd folded back on itself, heading back for the north end of town, deposited the two surveyors and continued on. No question was in their minds about whether they would indeed reach the head of the tracks, for these were railroad men. And from where he observed the exodus of the railroaders, some carrying their big hammers casually perched on their shoulders as they walked, others driving a buckboard load of men and equipment, and still others singing in their rough, guttural voices all the verses of "Zack the Mormon Engineer" or "Echo Canyon" with full-throated gusto, Jack was inclined to agree with them.

From time to time, as the crowd streamed off in the distance, those left behind could hear the words to the songs drifting over the shoulders of the railroad men as they tromped along. Pretty soon, the piano player was back at his piano matching the tune to the words that drifted over the hills.

" . . . Old Zack, he had a wifey in every railroad town.

"No matter where he stopped he had a place to lay him down.

"And when his train was coming, he wanted her to know,

"So as he passed each wifey's home his whistle he would blow . . ."

Chapter Sixteen

A crowd of people was waiting at the platform for the train's arrival, but that didn't mean much. Crowds of people were almost everywhere in Hell these days. To Emma, though, this day was special. It was the day of the first scheduled arrival of a train in Hell, and she was going to be on hand to see it come huffing and puffing to a stop at the siding.

Emma had another reason for waiting for the train besides the usual carnival atmosphere Hell generated about each new event and her own just wanting to be on hand when the first train pulled into town. Over the telegraph had come the first partial list of passengers to be traveling on the train due to stop in and pass through Hell. Its point of origin, San Francisco. There, near the head of the alphabetical list, had been the name of C. A. Fargo. She had to be there to see him step off the train, and to make sure that she was the first thing he laid eyes on when he did.

Emma thought back over the weeks and months since he had ridden off. Hell had grown up from no more than two wagons and a tent to a teeming town with its own railroad stop. She was still angry with him for so closely living up to her announcement that he would not come back and leaving them with that cesspool on his end of town. But knowing she was going to see him again in only minutes dimmed the unpleasant memories, and a thrill shot through her.

Forcing her way forward, Emma began to eagerly push her way through the crowd and up on the platform where the passengers would be disembarking. She had grown accustomed to the pinching and pushing that she let herself in for every time she got caught up in the middle of a crowd.

Standing on tiptoe, Emma could barely see over the collective heads of the surrounding crowd. The train was

not yet in sight, but it was not due for ten more minutes. The largest source of betting in the town during the past days was on whether or not this first train would manage to be on time. Emma herself had placed a bet with Ida that it would be.

Pushing a little farther forward, she felt a hand touch her waist, then linger at her hip. Abruptly she half turned in the packed crowd, scanning faces for a guilty countenance, but saw only disinterested gazes fastened on twin rails of steel where they appeared to run together in the distance.

Then, from far away, came the throbbing, clanging sounds of the steam engine's approach. Black puffs of smoke could be seen staining the brilliant blue sky a dull gray along the train's path. Emma could hear the chug-chugging of the engine, could almost feel the rhythmic pounding of the train coming down the tracks through the bottoms of her feet as a wild cry went up from the crowd so tightly packed on all sides of her. It was the first time, Emma reflected, and probably the last, that the train would be anywhere near on time. Trains and stagecoaches were notorious for their unscheduled schedules. But the future arrivals didn't matter to Emma. The train was here, now, and Chance would be stepping off as soon as those big steel wheels stopped turning on the tracks.

Intently, Emma stared into the windows of the passenger cars, one at a time, as the train pulled in, hoping to catch a glimpse of a face she recognized. The train ground to a halt amid wild cheers and a crush of enthusiastic helpers pressing forward to swing open the doors.

In the wild atmosphere of celebration that Hell projected about almost everything happening in the town, a couple of men jumped from the raised platform and threw open the doors to the passenger cars.

Chance was the first to appear inside the doorway. Emma

had never seen him so duded up, dressed in the handsomely cut black coat and brocade vest over a white shirt that was draped dramatically with a gold watch chain. His hat was new too, flat-crowned with a broad silver and gold band encircling it. His black eyes glittered and slid over the crowd, finding and steadying on Emma.

For an instant she fought an urge to run forward and throw her arms around him. In a moment she was glad she had won that battle. Chance smiled vaguely in her direction, but showed no signs of being ecstatically happy to see her again.

As always, Emma felt at a disadvantage with Chance. She wondered why that was when it wasn't that way with anyone else, but there didn't seem to be any cure for it on her part. If this was love, she vaguely considered the possibility, then it was too darned much trouble.

"Emma." Chance politely touched the brim of his crisp, black hat in her direction to acknowledge her presence as other passengers spilled off the train all around him.

"All right!" a voice called from below as a loading ramp was shoved into place against the side of the stock car. "Let's get those animals out of there. We've got a schedule to keep."

Chance retrieved his blue mare from the stock car as Emma walked quietly alongside, warming him with her presence. Often during his months in San Francisco he had thought of Hell. Wild rumors had started to fly, lots of them not of his making, and he wondered how many of the more original ones he'd heard were true. When the railroad had been put through he decided to find out for himself, and he'd begun to think about his own holdings in Hell. A good portion of the main street and a fair-sized hunk of land outside town. He had the money now, won gambling in San Francisco, to set up his own gambling hall. A boom town could always stand another entertainment hall.

With people like Elias McPherson, Emma and Jack Kinkaid along with Ida Grey to get things moving, something had to come of Hell. Still, Chance had at first counted himself lucky to be shut of it. Free of the windwagon, free of Elias with his crackpot ideas. Free too of that crazy gun-toting preacher, who, if Chance was forced to admit to it, was more his kind of preacher than any other one he had ever managed to come across.

And, then there was Emma.

There was always Emma. Soft, good-smelling, yielding, willing Emma. Chance's picture of her had remained as vivid and clear in his mind as the night before he had ridden out. He recalled the memory of her in his arms, soft and willing, her lips warm against his. In fact, couldn't get it out of his mind. The memory of the 'almost' was tantalizing.

Now he was back and one glance told him everything he needed to know. Emma hadn't not changed! Soft, sweet-smelling, desirable Emma.

Chance focused his mind on the first stop he wanted to make in Hell, the Red Garter Saloon. It had been a long, dry ride on the train and he wouldn't mind a few friendly faces. As they walked toward the saloon, he tried to visualize the patch of open desert the town had been the last time he had seen it, and soon gave up in the trying. Emma talked quietly by his side as she walked along with him, telling him of all that had happened. It was a pleasant sensation, having her there, close beside him, speaking in her soft, well-remembered tones. Thoughts of that last night together flooded his mind, and he wondered if there would be another.

Shifting his gaze around the mushroom-like town, Chance was forming his own ideas and coming to his own conclusions about the whole thing. The first thing that caught his eyes was almost a quarter of the town that lay diagonally across from

the Red Garter's. The whole town had a half-built, somewhat insubstantial feel to it as most boom towns had, but that section of town was many times worse than the rest. The section to which Chance knew he laid claim. The only solid structures in sight on the street seemed to be the hitching posts. Nothing but trouble could be expected from that end of town, and Chance knew that was exactly what he would have plenty of when he started to lay claim to what was his.

"Now I'm not here to voice any objection to a man partaking of a little libation." Preacher's words were deep and resonant, booming out above the rest of the noise in the main room of the Red Garter when Chance and Emma stepped through the batwings. "I do so myself." With that announcement, he tossed off a drink Jack had just set on the bar before him and returned again to his speechmaking. "And, I don't intend to bring any objection to a man laying with a woman, so long as it doesn't lean to excess. But what I do most heartily object to is the fact that this town doesn't have itself any kind of a proper church." He let a long silence hang in the room as he paused. Then, two shots split the air as suddenly as if a bolt of lightning had sped through the room. Emma jumped at the unexpected cracks and blue smoke curled up around the mouth of Preacher's gun.

Instinctively, Chance pushed Emma behind him and grabbed his own weapon. Other hands rested on butts of guns, but no one else had been able to match Preacher's draw. With the immediate, imagined danger past, Emma stepped out in front of Chance again. Catching sight of her, Preacher smiled in her direction and went on with his speech as Chance holstered his gun.

"Just wanted to make sure you were paying attention." Preacher coolly looked around the room that was dead silent as he holstered his gun.

“What we need here in Hell,” Preacher went on in a convincing baritone, “is a place where folks can go on Sunday and tell the Almighty about the good as well as the bad things they’ve been up to all week. A place to marry our young folks. A place to speak to the Lord about our dead. Now, there’s another load of lumber coming in next week, and what I want is to get enough money together to buy it when it comes in.” He took off his hat and set it on the bar. “So let’s everybody pitch in.”

To no one’s surprise, least of all Chance, every man in the place stepped forward during the next few minutes to throw something in the upturned black felt hat. Preacher’s words and demonstration had been convincing. With a few low words of appreciation, he collected his day’s haul and started for the door.

“Brother, it’s good to see you again,” Preacher said sincerely as he came up alongside Chance. “San Francisco,” he mused as he looked Chance up and down. “Well, you have the look about you.”

Chance dug in his pocket and came up with a ten-dollar gold piece to add to the collection.

“That makes it even better to see you again,” Preacher said bluntly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go put this in Elias’s safe before someone tries to rob me.”

“He’s only kidding,” Emma said nervously as Preacher stepped outside, headed for the mercantile. “No one would bother Preacher.”

“With a gun hand like his, no one would dare,” Chance commented, but he did have the distinct impression that Preacher had been in a hurry to get out of there once he had arrived. Emma looked edgy herself, clasping and unclasping her hands and fidgeting with her hair.

Trailed by Emma, Chance started to make his way to the

bar. Jack was setting up the drinks across the room at their approach and Chance could almost taste the whiskey.

Every head in the place was turned in Chance's direction as he pushed his way to the bar, picking up Ida's girls in grasping hugs of affection along the way. Emma wished they would cut out the display and let Jack get on with the business Preacher, he and her grandfather had discussed upon seeing Chance's name on the passenger list. There was no doubt in Emma's mind that Ida's girls were trying to smooth the way, to butter him up for the news that was forthcoming. How Chance would react when Jack told him of their vote was something else. Emma was sure it wouldn't be in a quiet way. And to make things worse, rumors were already flying that Hell was Chance Fargo's town, and that it was he the residents of shanty town were out to get.

"On the house," Jack announced as he placed the drink in front of Chance and the clutch of girls started dissolving back in the crowd.

Every one left Chance with one last lingering touch or coy glance. Emma could understand why. He positively reeked of money.

"Fine town Hell's turned into," Chance remarked, downing the drink Jack had poured, and felt inexplicably uncomfortable in his presence. He had always liked Jack, and they'd gotten along better than most. But something was going on and Chance wished he knew what it was.

"Took a lot of work, but it sure did," Jack agreed amiably. "All except for that section northwest of this place. Elias and I chased off a few of the earlier squatters and posted the area, but we had our own businesses to run, and it didn't look like you were coming back, so it slid into ruin, you might say."

"It's my intention to do something about it as soon as I'm settled in town," Chance announced clearly and loudly

enough for almost everyone in the room to hear.

That, Emma decided, should stir things up more.

“We all kind of thought that was what you would say when we talked about it at the town elder meeting last night,” Jack said with serious dignity. “So we voted you something to make doubly sure your authority isn’t questioned.”

Chance was immediately suspicious. “Who are the town elders?” he asked warily before Kinkaid had a chance to go on.

“Myself, Elias, Preacher, and of course you,” Jack informed him, “but since you weren’t here, you couldn’t very well have voted.” Without further comment, Jack produced a sheriff’s badge as if from thin air, dropping it with a tinny clink on the bar in front of Chance.

Chance jerked back as if he had been burned, eyeing the shiny star-shaped piece of metal that laid now in the center of the bar. “I don’t want any part of that,” he stated his position flatly. “I didn’t come back here to wet-nurse this whole town.”

“This town wouldn’t need wet-nursing if it wasn’t for the fact that you left your section to go to seed and start crawling all over the rest of the town,” Emma pointed out hotly. “It’s your mess. I think you should clean it up.” A volley of shots erupted from the far side of town accenting Emma’s sentiments.

“You mean to tell me you waited all these months just to stick me with the job of being the first sheriff of this town?”

Jack shrugged. “You’re the fourth, not counting the times I’ve held the job between sheriffs.”

“The what?” Chance exploded. “In how long?” he pressed, knowing the town’s brief history.

“Four months,” Emma answered “since the bank came in.”

Chance drew one of his cheroots out of an inside pocket, lit it, and almost nonchalantly began blowing smoke rings, regaining control of his usually cool composure. “What hap-

pened to the other three?”

“The first one got an ear shot off when he tried to be heroic and take on a bunch of toughs alone without any kind of a plan except charging in head on,” Emma told him, “He was run out of town and a few days later his horse threw him and he drowned in the river before anyone missed him, but that was a pure accident,” she hastened to assure him. “The second,” she continued, “was doing pretty well. A lot of the thieving and shoot-outs stopped with him around, but he got a little crazy. Kept demanding more money for his protection until Jack, Gramps and Preacher had to convince him to leave town. That was the first time Jack took over being sheriff for a while. The third sheriff was here three weeks then one night he just rode out and didn’t come back.”

“I knew he had a yellow streak down his back,” Jack mused to himself.

“Why didn’t you stay sheriff?” Chance asked.

“I have a thriving business to run,” Jack reminded him. “At the moment you don’t, and we need a sheriff to fill in until we get another one. We’ll back you up on anything you need,” Jack assured him.

“And we almost have a jail, too,” Emma put in. “It’ll be finished soon.”

“All right,” Chance agreed slowly, “but I won’t be needing to wear that,” he shoved the tin badge away in disdain.

“Goes with the job,” Jack firmly pushed the badge back.

Emma picked it up and pinned it on the front of his black coat, where it stood out as bright as a star against the night sky. Muttering a few well-chosen oaths, Chance unpinned it and attached it to the lower part of his leather holster.

“Be damned if I’m going to walk around this town with that thing on my chest like a bull’s-eye.”

“Pays thirty a month and room and board above the mercantile until the jail’s finished.” Jack couldn’t resist

prodding Chance.

“Where’s the jail?” Chance asked flatly.

“I’ll take you over there,” Emma offered, heading for the door.

She hastily led the way to the jail as afternoon turned into evening and the piano in the Red Garter started up again, tinkling out an old river song.

Chapter Seventeen

A little over a week had passed since Chance had taken on the job of sheriff, and things were still going along pretty much as they had been except for the shootings. The ones that had been directed at him.

Word had traveled fast in the shanty town that stood on Chance's claim that he was back in town and planning on doing something about their presence. Chance, for his part, had been willing to lay back a few days getting the lay of the land, but they hadn't been about to give him a chance to gather his wits and make a plan. One of their number, a gunslick thinking he was better than the rest, had called Chance out. The gunslick had caught the new sheriff off balance, unprepared for such a frontal attack. Startled by the gunhawk's command to go for his gun as he had stepped off the boardwalk in front of the Red Garter into the street, there had been no time to think of what he was going to do or even get tense. Chance had just whipped out his gun and fired. The craggy, square-shouldered gunhawk died right there. To the spectators, there had been no beginning, only a thunderous and deadly end.

Beating the gunslick to the draw had not been difficult for Chance, but killing was not his idea of solving a problem. What was worse was that another man called him out the second day and then on the third. Three men in three days were enough to get under his skin. And this day was still young. There could well be a fourth before the day was through.

Chance lounged back in his chair, propping his feet up on the desk, and sighed, deep in thought. The jail, or what there was of it, was no help to his situation. He slept in it, eschewing the room above the mercantile and its proximity to Emma and used it as a kind of command post, but at the moment it was no earthly good for locking up a prisoner, that

was, unless Chance decided to chain the lawbreaker to the stack of jail bars that had been delivered several days before. While not set in place, or even upended, they were the only solid part of the structure by virtue only of their weight. The rest of the jail consisted only of a wooden floor, the front and back ends braced upright with a long center beam running between them and a large width of canvas draped over that center beam, tent style, to keep the weather out. Aside from that, the jail had everything a sheriff could want. A desk, chair, and also there was a bulletin board nailed up on the front section of the building. In addition Chance noted the gunrack, completely devoid of guns, save the ones he himself had brought along with him. Still, there was a pot-bellied stove and a coffee pot. He glanced toward the open space where a window would one day be just in time to see Preacher approaching with a brisk stride.

Preacher stepped through the door, slamming it so hard the braced front nearly fell in. He stopped long enough at the stove in the corner to pour himself half a cup of thick black coffee, then went to the desk drawer, fished out the bottle that was there, and topped off his coffee with straight whiskey. Before talking to Chance he took a deep draft of the mixture.

“Emma said to tell you a man named Bleak is in town,” he announced. “And the bunch from the sod hut is still with him, along with several other individuals of dubious backgrounds. In addition, I myself overheard some talk about a big herd of cattle, prime for rustling, on its way into town. And that’s not the worst of it. I ran into another damn leather slapper on my way over here. He told me he was looking for you. I told him you were down in shanty town and he was headed that way the last I saw of him. But he’ll be back up this way real soon if I’m any judge.”

The corners of Chance’s lips turned down and a deep fur-

row crept across his brow. It was beginning to look like they were going to send one man against him each day until they found one faster or ran out of volunteers. It made it difficult for Chance to spend any real time devising and implementing a plan to clean out shanty town for good. Now too, there were Bleak and his boys hanging out on that end of town, his end of town, who were most likely planning on pulling off a big rustling job. He would have to try to find a way to prevent it. It was part of his job. And he wouldn't have given in and accepted that job if he hadn't planned on carrying out his duties. The whole business was enough to drive a man to drink and he said as much to Preacher.

"I'm losing my patience, Preacher, this is pushing me too far. Were I a man to fall into the arms of drink, this would be the push I needed."

Preacher poured the remainder of his spiked coffee down his throat and readily agreed. "This is the kind of thing that will do it to you."

"You happen to know when this rustling you were talking about is supposed to take place?" Chance asked Preacher.

"A couple of days."

Chance nodded. "The U.S. marshal is due through here again when?"

"Couple of days."

Then Chance thought of something more. "And when's the next train due through here?"

"Couple of days," Preacher repeated, trying to follow Chance's thoughts without success.

Chance sat up straighter, puffing thoughtfully on one of his now frequent cheroots. "That's the train with all the cattle cars, isn't it?"

Preacher nodded, then his face lit up as understanding finally came to him. "Damn right! You don't think those

shiftless brand blotters are planning on taking the cows when they're loading them, do you? Right here in the middle of Hell?"

Chance didn't answer. He didn't think that at all, but somehow it all fit. Pieces of a puzzle. The part about the rustlers and the train, not the part of the loading. He knew a bit about how Bleak's mind, and those of his cohorts, worked. They'd be planning some kind of a grandstand play. Nothing so simple as stealing the cattle from the loading ramps would suit them. It would have to be something more impressive like . . . like . . .

"They're going to steal the train!" Chance blurted.

Chance let his feet down from the desk top with a reverberating thump as the thought exploded in his mind. Of course, that was why they needed a lot of men.

"And we got the railroad men in town celebrating again." Preacher was pattering around the outside edges of Chance's churning thoughts.

"What are they celebrating now?" Chance asked vaguely through his own whirl of thoughts.

"Who knows?" Preacher retorted. "But from past experience I can say things are apt to get rough for a few days until they leave town again. Good cover for anything anybody wants to pull."

Chance was aware of what Preacher said, but what really broke his train of concentration was the sharp, commanding voice that penetrated from outside the jail.

"Come on out here, Sheriff!" the voice demanded, "I know you're in there. I left this for the place to look. Thought you had more guts! Didn't that sky-pilot run and tell you I was lookin' for you?" the voice queried in a higher pitch.

There was no need for Chance to go to the window to see who was waiting for him in the street. From where he sat he

could see perfectly well the tall, bewhiskered young man who stood loose and ready just off the boardwalk a few feet in front of the office. So confident was he, in his position of being the aggressor, that he was standing nearly close enough to the door to be trampled by someone in a hurry to get out.

“Now that does it!” Chance snapped. “I am really damn sick and tired of this. A man can’t even think with all this going on all the time.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Give them all something to think about.”

“Like what?” Preacher was curious.

Chance grabbed the double-barreled shotgun he’d had gotten from Jack Kinkaid when he’d taken over the job of sheriff, and loaded it.

Puzzled by Chance’s action, Preacher blurted out, “But he called you out.”

“Yea, and he’s going to get me, too. I’m sick of rules to these things. There shouldn’t be any rules!”

Through the window Chance could see a few curious citizens gathering far to either side, giving the contestants a wide berth. Other, more sensible folks, were hurrying to get clear of the street altogether.

“Emma’s coming,” Preacher announced as Chance finished fooling with the gun.

“What?” Chance asked sharply, but the question didn’t require an answer. “Slip out the side and stop her.”

“Too late,” Preacher informed him. “She’s already starting up the steps. The time for action is now, brother,” he added for emphasis.

Chance flipped the shotgun down into firing position and stepped to the door. It would be more dangerous now for both him and Emma if he stopped to reconnoiter. In an instant, he kicked the door open, handily catching Emma, who let out

with an indignant squeal of surprise, behind it. Without hesitation he jammed the shotgun up tight against the jeering gunhawk's side like he was leaning to the attack with a lance, and pulled the trigger in a heartbeat. At the same instant the weapon's terrific roar sounded, Chance shifted the shotgun, jamming it hard into the gunslick's belly, sending him reeling backward off the steps and into the dusty street.

The vibration of the gun barrel as it exploded, the tug of some pellets as they sliced through his jacket, and the jab in the stomach, combined to create the illusion Chance had been after. The gunman fell down in the street, rolling about as if he had been mortally wounded.

"You kilt me! Goddammit you didn't give me a chance to draw!"

Stepping briskly off the steps, Chance laid a hold of the gunhawk, dragging him to his feet, though the former tough's knees were still like water and the surrounding crowd was taking note of the fact that he had disgraced himself. A spreading wet stain could be seen plainly along the inside of his pants legs. The rest of him didn't look much better as Chance held him on his feet, keeping him from sliding back down in the dust. The tough's eyes were large and round, his face distorted to where it looked as if he were about to cry. And, his right hand continually wandered back and forth across his belly while he slowly, incredulously, discovered that he had, in fact, not been so much as nicked when he'd been sure he'd been ripped wide open by the blast. It'd all happened so fast, he hadn't even made a move for his own gun. In that instant, blinking into the chasm of eternity, all of his nerve had drained out of his boot heels into the sand.

The shock of what Chance had done was beginning to wear off, and those onlookers who still remained were starting to chuckle at the situation the onetime belligerent gunslick

now found himself in. Chance didn't even give him the dignity of treating him as a full-grown man and locking him up. Instead, he grabbed hold of one ear with considerable force and began dragging him to the edge of Hell, by way of shanty town. Even some of his former companions guffawed at the sight of him stumbling along beside Chance, disheveled and grimacing in pain.

"Where's his horse?" Chance demanded as they briskly passed the dilapidated buildings that made up shanty town.

Someone obliged by bringing a bay gelding and respectfully handing Chance the reins at the outside edge of town.

"Get out of town and keep riding," Chance snarled the order as the smooth-faced gunhawk clambered up unsteadily into the saddle. "I might have to take a strap to you the next time I see you." As the young gunslick rode off, Chance discharged the shotgun's second barrel into the air to let him know that it had in fact been packing a full load.

Of course now the weapon was empty, so he hastened back to the jail.

The jail was where Emma stood waiting for him, her hands on her hips as he approached. "Just what the hell do you think doing?" she demanded angrily, gently rubbing the side of her the door had connected with.

"Saving your life and his." He gestured after the departing gunslick. "Not to mention my own."

"Well, you might have let me know."

Chance sighed, resting the shotgun barrel on his shoulder as he stepped up beside her.

"You might not have come waltzing over here when there was a man yelling at me from the street to come out and fight."

Emma shrugged in a vague, unconcerned way, but she frowned. She wasn't going to tell him that she had been wor-

ried about him. That she had been in that state from the first moment he had taken the job as sheriff, in spite of the fact that morally she felt he was obligated to do so. She'd been so wrapped up in her own thoughts walking over to the jail that she hadn't taken note of the drama that had been unfolding as she approached. She had hardly been aware of the man standing in the street in front of the door as she had brushed past him, reaching for the latch. But now she was aware of Chance's tone and her own rising temper.

"Well, what is it you wanted?" Chance asked patiently.

"Wanted?"

"There must have been something that brought you over here in the middle of a gun fight."

"There was," Emma returned forcefully.

"And that was?"

Emma was silent, resenting Chance's patronizing tone and trying to remember why she'd been heading for the jail in the first place, but the excitement and irritation of the past few minutes had driven all other thoughts out of her mind.

"Damn!" Emma snapped at last, turned on her heel and left as Preacher stepped out onto the boardwalk in front of the jail.

"What was that all about?" he asked, puzzled.

"Beats me." Chance scratched his head, watching as Emma move quickly across the street.

Chapter Eighteen

Like a general inspecting his troops, Chance was astride the strong, dependable blue mare patrolling up and down along the side of the train where the cattle cars stretched out in a seemingly endless line down the tracks. But he didn't feel the security of a general. These were not his troops, and he had nothing but real trouble.

Preacher had ridden out to the surrounding ranches, telling them all about the plan to rustle their beef. Some of the ranchers had flatly refused to believe any outlaw gang would be crazy and brassy enough to try it in broad daylight, right from the loading gates at a train siding, even in a town like Hell. Others, while they were prepared to believe the possibility that they might try it, were just as sure that they could never pull it off. With the arrival of the railroad in Hell folks had gotten to feeling secure and were getting some lazy.

The information Chance had pointed to the near dead certainty that his conclusions were the correct ones. In the past couple of days he had managed to overhear a couple of conversations. Conversations that he was sure he had been meant to hear. Bleak and his boys now knew he was sheriff of Hell. They were playing a game of cat and mouse with him. Letting him know what was going on, and also letting him know in subtle ways that he wouldn't be able to stop it. If that wasn't enough, there was a low charge of electricity pulsing through shanty town. Something big was in the wind and everybody over there knew it. They were all counting on Chance trying to do something to stop the outlaws alone, figuring this was their big chance. With him out of the way shanty town would once again flourish instead of showing signs of beginning to fold beneath his heel.

Bleak and his ilk wanted Chance dead. It was no longer an

issue concerning only the defense of the cattle, it was a showdown between Chance and the outlaws of shanty town and they all knew it. This would be the deciding battle. Already he had spotted several of the shadier residents of that section of town buying tickets and boarding the train. How they were planning to pull off their scheme Chance didn't know, but he had Jack, Preacher and Elias stationed in the passenger cars. From the looks of things, that was about all the help he could expect. There's been a time or two when he'd thought of chucking it and letting the cattlemen take their losses but then he'd think about the dark element over in shanty town and his resolve would stiffen.

Right after the train had pulled in, Chance had taken the opportunity to talk to the engineer and his crew. He'd told them of his suspicions and advised them to barricade themselves in the engine until they reached their next destination. The engineer, a dyed-in-the-wood company man, had sworn no man would be able to take over control of his engine from him. That had been good enough for Chance, for railroad men were a tough breed. Trying to walk over one might prove to be a rough trip.

The train had been loading for well over an hour and the cattle were still coming in a steady stream under the expert herding of the cowboys. Dust was rising on all sides of them in clouds, and the air was filled with the bawls of cattle mixed with the yells and yips of the cowboys hustling them along. The passengers, too, were loading slowly for the trip, knowing they still had plenty of time before the train pulled out. It couldn't leave until the cattle were all on board.

Turning the blue mare he rode, Chance galloped a short way down the line, then came back, still keeping a hopeful eye out for the arrival of the U.S. marshal. What he saw instead was Emma and she was hurrying in his direction,

skirts flying, face flushed with exertion. Pulling his horse to a stop, he waited.

“That end of town is almost deserted!” Emma told him breathlessly when she reached his side. “Do you know what that means?”

“I have an idea,” Chance answered her warily, not needing her to explain exactly which end of town she meant.

“Why there must be a hundred of them! Are you going to fight them all?”

“At least thirty or forty,” Chance conceded, “but I haven’t even seen that many hanging around here yet.”

“You haven’t answered my last question,” Emma pounded at him. “Are you going to try and fight them all over some lousy beef the cattlemen won’t even help you defend?”

Chance shrugged. He had a few ideas, but this wasn’t the time to explain them.

“You’re crazy!” Emma almost yelled in accusation to his silence. “They’ll kill you!”

“I’ve been told that before,” Chance answered vaguely, not really paying attention to what she was saying.

“Then I’m going with you!” she announced, immediately receiving Chance’s undivided attention.

“Hold on.” He spurred his horse forward cutting her off from the train. “I’m not letting you get on that train.”

“Why not?” Emma demanded. “You’re getting on.”

“That’s different.” Chance dismounted, handing Emma the reins. He’d spotted the end of the stream of cattle appearing in the distance. “You’re not going. Now take this horse on back to the corral and go on home. If I catch you on this train I’ll throw you off myself.”

Emma’s green eyes shot flame, but she knew better than to try to force her way past Chance. Instead she gave him a sullen glare, accepted the reins and stomped off around the station. His steady gaze remained fixed on her rigid back the

whole way.

Once out of his sight, she tied the pony in front of the train station and slipped inside to buy her ticket. Then she eased out the side door, cut around the front of the engine and boarded the first passenger car from the off side. The step from the ground to the platform on the car was a large one, but Emma hiked her skirts up and swung nimbly on board. She slipped along the aisle and dropped quickly into a seat about midway along the car facing the front. Chance, she had noted before she stole aboard, had gone into the second car back. If she was lucky, he wouldn't even come into this car, but if he did, she was determined she'd somehow manage to go unnoticed. He wouldn't be expecting to see her and that gave her the opportunity to hide in plain sight.

By chance Emma's eyes focused on an old newspaper which had been left behind on the seat facing her. Eagerly she picked it up. She could hide behind its pages if Chance were to enter the car. Already she felt better, especially since there had been no sign of her grandfather on the car either, though she had spotted the back of Jack's head. She scrooched down a bit more in her seat.

Emma's gaze encompassed the entire car, examining it bit by bit, until she met the steady, half-amused stare of a stranger. She had never seen him in Hell, and she knew she would have remembered such a man. He was tall, that much was obvious even though he was sitting in a seat down the aisle. The muscles in his shoulders and arms bulged against the inside of his clothes. Broad and open, his face was craggy, ruddy, and framed by a thick shock of curly red hair and a bristly red beard. His eyes sparkled when he met Emma's gaze. He appeared an older man. Older than Chance and certainly much older than herself. Staring at her oddly, he seemed to be analyzing her appearance. Emma felt a strange compulsion to

do the same of him.

After a few more moments, the tall stranger stood up and walked to her seat.

“Pardon me, miss,” he said, sweeping a sailor’s cap off his head, “I wonder if you would mind if I joined you?”

Emma froze. She was unsure as to what to do. She didn’t know this man, and yet if she made any kind of a fuss Jack was bound to find her out and put her off the train. She couldn’t allow that. In the end Emma nodded dumbly and gestured toward the seat across from her.

He dropped into the seat across from her and sat quietly for long minutes, his eyes examining and probing every detail of her face. “You’ll have to pardon me,” he said at last, his voice husky, touched by a faint Irish brogue. “I don’t usually force myself on young ladies like this. It’s just that you look so familiar. I feel as if I should know you from somewhere.”

“I doubt that,” Emma muttered under her breath as the train took its first lurch forward and she caught sight of Seth Black jumping onto the front of her car all in the same instant.

Emma gasped. Where had he come from? She had never seen him in town before this. She hadn’t seen him anywhere since the ruckus at Ida’s tent that night. She had believed a lot of prairie to be between herself and Seth. She jerked the newspaper up in front of her face. If he spotted her he was bound to boom the news up and down the length of the car. Jack couldn’t help but hear.

At the sight of Emma’s distressed reaction, the stranger occupying the seat opposite her craned around in his seat to see who had entered the car to upset her so. All he saw was a big, square man, not overly tall, with a large nose and a jutting jaw. He didn’t know her reasons, but she obviously preferred to go unobserved by the man. With a relaxed movement, the stranger leaned sideways, propping his elbow on the arm of

the seat, placing himself between Emma and the late arrival. The big cowman, his spurs jangling, hurried down the length of the car, opened the back door and without a backward glance crossed over to the next car. A long sigh of relief oozed from Emma as the train began picking up speed, and the rhythm of the wheels beneath her feet began to hurry along with a cheerful clinkety-clack.

Chance had spotted Seth at the station as he left his horse to join the train. He hadn't seen him in town earlier, but that wasn't surprising what with all that was going on at any given moment in Hell these days. Chance slipped through the door, closing it behind him, waiting on the platform between the cars for Seth's expected arrival. He did not have long to wait, and he got exactly the kind of reception he expected from the older man.

"You the bald-faced jackass I've been hearing so much about, claiming the whole herd is going to be stolen right off this here train?" Seth demanded through his thick Texas drawl at the first sight of Chance.

"That's me," Chance agreed amiably, clasping Seth's ham-sized hand in greeting.

"Then there sure as hell must be something to it," Seth acknowledged. "What do you figure?"

Chance braced his feet against the sway of the train and spotted several pairs of hostile eyes fixed on him from inside the car. And climbing to his feet heading in his direction was Elias. Preacher was there too, having volunteered to come along claiming that thieving was not the way of the Lord and it was his duty to try and stop it. Good, in his opinion, must fight evil wherever it was found.

"We've got a train full of outlaws and cattle. You put those two things together and there's bound to be trouble," Chance said. "Aside from that you know about as much as I do

already. Except that they're probably going to have some help from outside somewhere along the line. There aren't any horses along for the ride."

"Looks like you came along to get your ears shot off," Seth boomed out good-humoredly above the racket of the moving train.

"It's beginning to look that way," Chance admitted as Elias came through the door.

"Well, count me in, you've got yourself another gun.

Elias joined them on the cramped quarters of the platform between the cars.

"Seth," greeted the cowman Seth with a curt nod, and wore the grim look of a man intent in imparting important information when the ruckus broke out in the first car at their backs. Chance had been so intent on keeping an eye on the outlaws in the second car that he had entirely ignored the first, counting on Jack to signal if trouble showed. But trouble had a way of just erupting with a speed what prevented Jack from doing much of anything.

Gunshots cracked through the air. Honest passengers screamed and dove for the vibrating floor boards. At the front of the car a couple of men were suddenly grappling for possession of a gun, and at the rear, Jack sprawled on the floor close to the left row of seats, hesitating to shoot, unable to tell the outlaws from the passengers. And, somehow, through the melee, Chance spotted Emma being dragged to the floor by a tall red-haired stranger. He saw her draw her knees up and roll up into a ball under the seat, the stranger pushing her even tighter against the side of the car out of the line of fire, shielding her with his own body. In an instant of calm, Chance wondered why it didn't surprise him to see her there.

The next instant he wasn't so calm any more. Without thinking, he made a dive for the door leading to the first car,

flung it open, and burst inside. Fearing for Emma's safety he was looking for a target for his gun. Shots were still flying wild when he made his entrance, though no one was hit, and all of a sudden Chance knew why. It had been a diversion. The outlaws he had spotted earlier were no longer in the car. They had slipped out the front once the ruckus started, and had to be headed over the tender for the engine. With long, driving strides, Chance ran for the front of the swaying car, bowling over the pair of fighting passengers in his flight, not recognizing either of them as belonging to the pack of outlaws who were putting the train under siege. Chance's brutal shove sent them both reeling and broke up the fight as he made a grab for the door handle, his six-gun still in his hand.

No one was in sight beyond the door, and Chance expected it to swing open easily beneath his hand, but it was jammed. With a savage yell, he threw himself at the door as Seth and Elias charged up to join him, and under their combined weight the door went crashing outward. Instantly, the air was peppered with lead, bullets whanging off metal, screaming off to the side of the moving train. Elias scuttled back inside the car with Seth opposite him as the shooting broke out in the rear car.

Pinned by the gunshots ahead, Chance wheeled to dash back along the car, but his toe caught on Elias and he went sprawling to the floor along with the others. At that level, his eyes met Emma's where she was still curled up beneath a seat.

"I thought I told you to keep off this train!" Chance exploded.

"And I told you," Emma reminded him, "That I was coming."

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"I'm trying to see you stay alive!"

Chance cursed. Then he heard footsteps overhead. Some of

them were heading for the rear car. What about the engineer and his stoker, he wondered. Were they still running the train or had the outlaws taken them by surprise? He cursed his own failings. Cursed the outlaws and then cursed the cattlemen. He should've posted a guard in the engine, but he hadn't even had enough men to cause a ripple in the ocean if they all jumped in together, so how could he have posted one there? Scrambling toward the rear of the car on all fours, Chance held up beside the door with Jack while Seth and Elias held down the front.

"They cornered Preacher," Jack informed him as Chance came to crouch beside the door.

Cautiously, Chance raised his head enough to see out the window and into the rear car. He couldn't recognize any faces, save Preacher's near the head of the car where he was gesturing wildly, his face animated by righteous speech. What passengers there were in the second car seemed to be segregated near the rear and of no interest whatsoever to the outlaws. The mood in the car the outlaws occupied seemed to be one of jovial good humor as the door between the cars swung open, and Chance could hear Preacher's booming voice even above the continuous racket of the train.

"You have brought the righteous wrath of the Lord down upon yourselves! Surrender now!" he admonished them as he clung to the railing along the front of the platform. "Do not fly in the face of His anger."

Chance watched helplessly as they broke Preacher's grasp on the rail and shoved him over the edge. He saw Preacher roll a few times, then climb to his feet before the train took a bend in the tracks. Preacher hadn't appeared to have been hurt, but they could ill afford the loss of a man.

Watching the cars slip by, Preacher stood alongside the track bed. The train was not moving fast, and he was looking

for a way to reboard it. The cattle cars, though, offered nothing in the way of handholds low enough for him to grab a hold of. Then, he spotted the caboose.

That car, Preacher realized, would be his only chance to rejoin the train. If he missed it, it would be a long, lonely walk back to Hell. With an easy rhythm, Preacher began to run alongside the moving train, counting the cars as they slid past on his left. He glanced over his shoulder, gauging the caboose's progress. Then, as the front of the caboose slipped by, he increased his running speed, legs pumping, holding his gaze anxiously to the side as the railing he was looking for leaped into view.

In another instant, Preacher grabbed for the lowest part of the black rail, caught it, and plunged wildly ahead for a few more strides before he managed to swing for the lowest step. Propelled by the momentum of the moving train, he flew onto the back of the caboose, and jerked himself the rest of the way up onto its platform, then tumbled in a bruising somersault against the closed rear door. For a few seconds Preacher gasped, not used to such athletic events as he had just performed along the side of the train.

"Praise the Lord!" he said at last, fervently, between labored breaths.

Staggering to his feet on the swaying platform, Preacher gazed up along its length. When he had reached for the caboose he thought he had seen something and now he was sure. Far down the line there was a dark, suspicious blob to the right of the tracks. Riders.

Hardly pausing to catch his breath, Preacher mumbled a few appropriate curses under his breath, kicked off his boots and started up the ladder leading to the roof of the train's last car. Chance and the rest were pinned down in the front car. They wouldn't be poking their heads out to have a look

out front, and see that there was more trouble coming than they already had. The only way to warn them was by going over the top.

In stocking feet, Preacher crouched low and ran swiftly along the roofs of the cattle cars. Hopping and skipping along from one car to another like a bead of water across a hot greased pan, he was making his way to the front of the train.

The mood in the second passenger car was indeed one of victory. An easy victory at that. A simple diversion had caught Chance and his few men in the middle. Even with the advantage, though, they had not pressed it, had not tried to rush them in the first car.

Chance wondered why and was pondering what he was going to do next when he heard the soft padding of footsteps overhead. His gun at the ready, he moved along the center beneath the footsteps, stopping when they neared the middle of the coach. He waited. There was a pause, then a scraping, and suddenly Preacher's face appeared in a side window, upside-down.

"Riders up ahead!" Preacher's voice boomed out loud enough to be heard even above the noise of the train and through the closed window.

Chance threw that window open, and in a moment had managed to squirm through and drag himself up on the roof beside Preacher. Staring where Preacher pointed, far up ahead, Chance could see a large group of riders waiting beside the tracks. The real threat.

Chance didn't pause to think it out; he just started moving forward along the roof toward the engine with Preacher on his heels. Control of the engine had to be restored before anything else could be attempted. He had his gun holstered, needing both hands to balance as he moved along the swaying roof of the coach toward the tender. Elias was edging the door

open below as Chance jumped from the roof of the coach to the tender with Preacher still following closely behind.

The instant Chance completed his jump, he saw two of the outlaws holding the engineer and stoker at gunpoint inside the cab, and at the same moment he was seen by them. With a terrific lunge forward, Chance propelled himself down the slope of cordwood straight at the two startled gunmen. Behind him something shifted, and Preacher, only an instant behind, was suddenly hurled past him on a rolling toboggan of cordwood that scattered in all directions.

Dee Duncan made a lunge for Preacher as Chance made a grab for him. The three of them collided in the close confines of the cab as the engineer flattened the second of the pair, Yancy Hawks. Dee had an arm lock wrapped around Preacher as Chance came down on him and they grappled together, close as sardines in a can, each hardly able to do more than flex a muscle in his own defense.

“Get this thing in reverse!” Chance shouted at the engineer above his attempts to free the choking Preacher from Dee’s deadly grasp.

Dee slammed an elbow backward into Chance’s midsection while he kept the other arm wrapped stubbornly about Preacher’s neck.

“Throw it into reverse!” Chance shouted the command again, panting from his struggles with Duncan. Neither the stoker nor the engineer had made any move to help him aside from taking Yancy Hawks out of the action. “Look up ahead,” Chance bellowed.

Startled into action by the sight of riders bearing down on them, the engineer grabbed the brake lever and in a convulsive moment, closed it all the way. The engine’s wheels locked solid. Elias, who had been crawling over the back of the tender, was catapulted forward across the hill of cord-

wood in a headlong dive into the cab that terminated when he crashed into Chance, Dee and Preacher. All up and down the line behind the engine, the cars slammed violently together raising a din of metallic crashes, hoarse yells and the bawls of startled and bruised cattle packed into cars so tightly that it was impossible for them to fall down.

The effect for D'Arcy Duncan was disastrous. His grip on Preacher was broken and they were both thrown sideways toward the opening to trackside. Preacher's arm shot out as he sailed over the edge, somehow snagging a piece of railing set in the entryway. Dee sailed right on past Preacher who hung suspended above the track and the engineer slammed the locomotive now into reverse. In mid-air a moment or two, Preacher was barely aware of motion and the sight of running horses pounding down at them from up the line. Then Elias's hand reached out of the cab and dragged him back inside.

"Hallelujah," Preacher roared in Chance's direction, then he staggered to his feet.

The train was moving backward now, picking up speed as it rolled, but the riders were still gaining on it. The amount of cars the train had been drawing made any real speed impossible. There was no question that the riders would catch them.

"Keep them from boarding the engine," Chance shouted, then turned and crawled back up the pile of cordwood, scrambling as pieces dislodged beneath his efforts, finally disappearing over the edge.

Preacher looked out of the engine when Chance was gone. The bunch from up the line were riding hard, gaining fast on the slow-moving train. Within only a few more strides they would be getting close enough to try forcing their way on board. Preacher pulled out his gun, then, glancing around, slipped it back in his holster. He hefted a piece of the cordwood in his hand, then got ready.

As the first rider came up alongside, horse lathered, riding hard, Preacher hurled his chunk of wood at the man. "The Lord's will be done," Preacher yelled as the wood connected with a solid thump, sending the rider flying off his horse's back. Preacher grabbed another piece and another, wielding each one with the power of a battering ram.

Seeing the effect the cordwood was having, Elias and the stoker joined Preacher while alternating between keeping up the fire in the box, utilizing the wood spilled in behind the engineer.

The cordwood rained among the outlaws with deadly accuracy, unseating several and bruising a number more as well as disarming many of their number. Determinedly, though, the mounted outlaws continued to make for the train, swerving wide of the engine, trying to dodge the rain of stout wood, trusting that their companions were still in possession of their weapons.

When Chance dropped back down on the platform on the first coach, he could hear the sounds of a riot in the second, and saw the first was completely empty. Running for the back door he jumped through it and plowed into the wild fray in the second passenger coach.

The abrupt halt and reversal of the train had thrown outlaws and passengers together indiscriminately like so many beans. Jack and Seth, neither slow at taking advantage of an opportunity, had piled into the middle. The red-haired sailor and Emma had followed along close behind.

Chance pushed his way into the flailing, heaving crowd that packed the aisle, and saw the sailor in the act of throwing one of the outlaws bodily off the back of the coach. The front of the train was surrounded now by the horses of the pursuing outlaws. Forcing his way past the sailor, who had returned to the inside of the coach, Chance stepped out on the back

platform to defend it against boarding and came eye to eye with Bleak. Tall, dark, and thin as Chance remembered him, the outlaw already had a firm purchase on the platform when they met. Bleak's horse, his saddle empty, was slowing his pace as Bleak went for Chance.

Chance jumped back, but there was no room on the platform for fancy maneuvers and Bleak's charge brought him crashing down. As they wrestled together, Chance heard someone yell that Hell was in sight. For his part he was already there, but a wild cheer went up from the passengers inside the coach nonetheless, though Chance didn't know why, and then, suddenly, Emma was squeezed on the platform with them. She was holding a gun, reversed in her hand with which she obviously intended hitting Bleak, but Bleak, aware of her presence, had other ideas. He heaved sideways, away from Emma's blow, and Chance felt himself and the outlaw going right on over, off the side of the platform. At the last instant, Bleak felt it too, because he tried regain a fresh hold on the metal platform as Chance rolled off into open daylight, Chance, not unaware of Bleak's shift, was equally determined that he was going to take the outlaw with him, and that was exactly what he did.

Somehow they managed to fall, clear of the train wheels where they glittered only inches from them in the sunlight. The ground felt like it leaped up and slammed into them, leaving both, Chance and Bleak dazed though both continued to fight like wildcats, throwing up thick clouds of dust as another wild cry rose up ahead of them and horses plunged past on all sides. Chance was at a loss to be able to tell if they were coming or going, and felt the flesh tingle along his spine tingle at the closeness of so many thundering hoofs.

Like a pair of grizzlies clenched in mortal combat, Chance and Bleak were still locked in each other's grip, neither able to

do so much as throw a punch, when the horses, disappeared as quickly as they had rushed in around them. Bleak had worked one hand loose and was trying to gouge Chance's eyes while Chance braced the heel of his hand beneath Bleak's chin and forced his head back, oblivious to all else.

Abruptly, the outlaw gave under the pressure, trying to slide free of Chance's grip, but Chance lost no time following up on his new-found advantage. He slammed Bleak's head against the hard earth, dazing him. Then in a tangle of flailing arms and legs rolled him over, pressing his face into the dust and pinning one arm behind his back. Cursing, Bleak was lashing out savagely; Chance grimly holding on as he sprawled half astraddle the outlaw when a lone rider dismounted and a pair of boots appeared within their line of vision. A moment later a gun was shoved between their dust-streaked, panting, faces, and both Chance and Bleak heard the distinctive click of a hammer being drawn back.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," a voice said in calm, quiet tones, "I'm U.S. Marshal Clayton and I'm looking for Sheriff Fargo,"

Slowly, by degrees, Chance Bleak shifted their brutal attention from each other to the stranger. Unsteadily, Chance stood up dragging Bleak along with him, keeping his arm pinned safely behind his back, allowing the marshal to get a good look at the dirty, somewhat dented badge still, attached to his empty holster.

When Chance finally was able to bring his eyes into sharp focus, he almost couldn't believe what he saw. Not more than a few paces away was Hell's station and beyond that were dozens of burly rough-looking cattlemen pouring into the passenger cars, sorting out the passengers from the outlaws. On either side Chance saw many mounted cowmen riding down the would-be thieves like a charge of the light brigade as the outlaws scattered to the four winds. Bleak, under the mar-

shal's gun, was more cowed than Chance could recall having seen him.

"What happened?" Chance asked as he finally gathered his wits about him.

"Offhand," Marshal Clayton told him casually, "I'd say that you're responsible for saving one of the largest herds of cattle this territory has ever shipped. When I hit town the piano player told me the sheriff was out trying to guard a whole trainload of beef. I figured you might need some help so I sent him out a way to have a look. He came running back with the news that the train, was running backward. So I just told those cowmen to get their tails out there if they didn't plan on writing off the whole herd." He gestured at Bleak with the barrel of his gun. "Let's get moving."

Bleak stumbled on ahead, still boggled by the events that had so recently transpired. His plan to steal the cattle had failed, and his opportunity to see Chance dead was gone.

Chance limped along beside the marshal, conscious for the first time in months of the old wound he had suffered at his first meeting with Bleak and his bunch. He concluded that he must have landed just right when he and Bleak had tumbled off the platform into the dirt. He saw some of the would-be cattle rustlers being brought back as he walked, but there was no sign of Bronco. It looked like he was one of the bunch who had managed to slip clear.

Up ahead, Elias and Preacher were coming out of the engine followed by the engineer and stoker, who held Yancy Hawks in custody between them. The contents of the passenger cars were spilling out onto the loading platform under the rough-handed guidance of some railroad men. Emma appeared, then the red-haired sailor.

"I'm in need of a stiff libation," Preacher announced, then headed for the Red Garter for a proper celebration.

Elias, who had turned to seek out his granddaughter at the station, locked eyes with the tall sailor at her back and stared aghast. His bushy graying eyebrows arched questioningly, disbelievingly above the sharp glitter of steel gray eyes, and then Emma saw him burst out laughing as he ran toward her. His display had to be intended for her and Emma stretched out her arms for him as he ran over the rock-strewn earth.

From behind her, Emma heard the sailor who had come to her aid give an explosive yell and burst ahead of her, running to meet Elias's charge.

"Pa!" the sailor exclaimed as he and Elias met like a pair of charging bulls, slapping each other enthusiastically on the back and giving forth with wild whoops of joy.

"Where the hell 'ya been for the past eighteen years, Danny?!"

Emma froze. Danny? Had her grandfather said Danny? That was her father's name. It couldn't be. How could word have spread and reached him so soon of their presence in Hell? The rough, broad-shouldered sailor she had admired on the train was her father! No wonder she had looked so familiar to him, and he to her.

"Got shanghaied," her father was telling her grandfather as she stepped up to be closer to them. "Was out of the country trying to find a way back most of the time. Finally hit port last year and started working my way East . . . to find you . . . and Emma."

"Emma!" Elias exploded. "Why Emma's right behind you!"

Danny McPherson wheeled to look down into Emma's startling green eyes, his daughter's green eyes. With another wild yell, he grabbed her about the waist whirling her high in the air as if she were no more than a feather. Emma laughed and hugged him as he set her back on her feet, but when her eyes went beyond his shoulder, she caught sight of

Chance limping along beside the marshal and her face darkened. He was hurt, she should have known it. She looked up into her father's craggy face. She'd just found him. She couldn't leave him.

Danny followed the direction of her concerned gaze and smiled down at her. "You better go get him if he means that much to you," he chuckled. "I'll be hanging around town for quite a while. We'll have plenty of time to be together later."

"Get going, girl," Elias urged. "You've waited too long already."

Emma hesitated another moment, then Chance turned, looking back over his shoulder in her direction. She hesitated no longer, but gathered up her skirts and started to run toward Chance. And, this time he didn't keep walking or duck out of sight. He stood, supporting all his weight on his good leg, waiting.

– The End –