



Winter Kill
J. R. Parker

Hard Shell Word Factory

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FOR KEITH AND DONNA MILLER

AND

KAY GROSS

for their unfailing friendship and encouragement
and for John Eberle and Lynn Kolloen, two very special people.

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Prologue

Jason Locke left the army patrol bivouacked beside the river and rode upstream. He rode warily with his rifle across his lap. His gaze continually swept the country, searching, assessing. This was Shoshoni country and they had always been friendly to whites but that didn't mean he couldn't run into a party of Blackfoot or even Cheyenne.

Removing his hat, he ran a hand through his hair, letting the breeze cool his scalp, and wiped the sweat from his face with the back of a calloused hand. He replaced the hat, cocking it low over his forehead to shade his eyes.

He was a big man, over six feet tall, with wide shoulders tapering to the narrow hips of a man who had spent his life on horseback. The face, under hair so black it glinted with blue highlights, was lean and chiseled. Not handsome. It was too rugged for that, but it was an interesting face, full of strength and character.

The grass beneath his gelding's feet was tall and beginning to cure on the stem in the hot August sun. On his left the ridge was grass covered with only an occasional tree. On his right lay

the Wind River Range, rough and pine clad. Ahead the mountains thrust their majestic heads against a clear blue sky.

As he passed a clump of aspens nestled in the curve of the river, he felt a vague stirring inside him, a poised expectancy. He shook his head as if the motion could dislodge the feeling.

Ahead, he could see that the valley curved to the right. On impulse, he turned and sent his horse scrambling up between Gypsum and Battleship Mountains, following South Fork. He worked his way through the cool, quiet pines and up the side of Big Sheep Mountain. Suddenly, the valley on both sides of the mountain spread out before him. He pulled the horse up and sat, silent, his cold gray eyes softened as he absorbed the view.

The valley was shaped like a fish hook, the river he had followed forming the shank. It swung around the point of the ridge and back below him on the right. At the short barb end, two lakes sparkled in the sun, like jewels dropped in folds of green velvet. Beyond the upper lake stood a flat-topped mountain, its covering of snow glistening in the sun.

With a sigh, Jason relaxed in the saddle filled with a sense of contentment, of coming home. He sat for a long time, while his mind wandered. He hadn't had a home since he was thirteen, since the Comanches had raided their two-by-four spread and killed his folks. His gaze settled on the

bench above the lower lake and his heartbeat quickened. Home. A longing grew in his belly until it was a gnawing ache. His horse snorted impatiently but he hardly noticed.

Everything he owned was on his back in his pack. A good horse and saddle, a couple of changes of clothes, his guns and thirty dollars in his poke. Not much to show for ten years of work.

Shadows were creeping in, covering the valley like a warm blanket on a chilly night, as he finally turned and rode, reluctantly, back down the mountain knowing that he would return, had to return. In this valley, he would someday make his home.

Chapter 1

Jason Locke tucked his chin farther down into the collar of his sheepskin coat. The cold wind whistling down the valley numbed his cheeks and made his eyes water. A trace of the year's first snow lay under the pines along the top of ridge on his right, but had not lingered in the valley where he rode.

He was bone weary as he sagged in the saddle, his muscles cramping and his booted feet beginning to ache from the cold. It had been a hell of a long ride from Texas to this valley in Wyoming Territory. But now he was home. Home. The dream was a reality at last. He was on his own range and damn but it would be good to see Wiley, his partner, again.

He heard a horse nicker and looked over his shoulder at the two pack mares that followed him. He saw the Appaloosa stumble and pulled up. Even the big dapple-gray stallion he rode seemed to sigh in relief.

"Guess we'd best stop, Dapple. Was hoping to make it on in tonight, but we're all tired. Most nigh dark anyway." He patted the stallion's neck as he looked around.

The river on his left was a gray ribbon, its banks rimed with ice like an edging of white lace. Ahead, it made a loop around a grove of aspen, their bare branches a black silhouette against the darkening sky.

"Might as well camp over there, boy, and go on in the morning," he said, kneeing the horse forward.

In the fading light, Jason stripped the horses and, pulling up handfuls of dry grass, rubbed them down. He led them, one at a time to the river to drink, then staked them out to graze. Working swiftly but without wasted motion, he soon had a fire going and coffee water heating.

Clouds were building over the mountains to the north and the cold wind carried the scent of moisture. Jason lugged the pack containing flour, sugar, beans and rice over to a deadfall and stuffed the pack back under widest part of the trunk where it would be protected if it did rain.

He cut down some small saplings and rigged a shelter for his soogans. Getting out the spider, he shaved some bacon and started it frying. Then pouring himself a cup of coffee, he settled down by the fire, warming his chilled hands on the tin cup.

After he ate, he leaned back against a stump and rolled a cigarette and let his mind drift. It had been five years since he had first seen this valley and known this was where he would finally hang

his hat. He'd been scouting for the Army and he'd used his summer's wages to lease the valley from the Shoshoni. There had been no money left to start the ranch so he'd drifted west, to the gold fields of California, then down through Arizona and Mexico, and finally back to Texas. Back to the C-Bar-X, where he'd gone to work after Indians had wiped out their hardscrabble spread. Now at last he was coming home. Tomorrow, he would be at the ranch headquarters.

He grinned as he pictured his partner, Wiley Carr. Roly-poly Wiley Carr; that short, stocky bundle of vitality and good humor. Two years younger than Jason's twenty-eight years, with a cherubic face and devil-may-care attitude that hid a streak of stubbornness a mile wide. Jason wished he had been able to come up in the spring with Wiley, but he had been delayed in Texas helping an old friend. Wiley had come on ahead to start work on their horse ranch.

He had met Wiley Carr on the C-Bar-X, down in west Texas. Until he met Wiley, Jason had been pretty much of a loner but they hit it off immediately for Wiley had the same love for fine horses as Jason and they both shared the dream of owning a horse ranch. They had quit the C-Bar-X and gone wild horse hunting in the San Juans. After a winter of butt and ball breaking work, they came out with over seventy good broncs that brought top dollar from an army remount officer.

With this money and a stake Jason had banked after gold mining in California, Wiley headed

for Wyoming to start building the ranch while Jason went to San Antonio to say goodbye to close friends.

In the last letter Jason had received, Wiley had said the bunkhouse and corrals were done and they had started on the barn. He closed his eyes trying to picture the buildings. Next summer he'd make a start on a cabin. He'd dreamed about that cabin over the years, building and rebuilding it in his mind. Picking up ideas here and there, adding and discarding, until he knew exactly what he wanted. No rawhide outfit for him. It would be a real home. A place where he could bring a wife. Someday.

A wife. Like most lonely men, he'd built a picture in his mind of the woman he wanted. Not the face, that had always eluded him, but the character and personality. She'd be honest, with an inner strength and a goodness that shone from her face. She'd be gentle and caring, her voice soft and musical. But strong, too. The kind to walk beside a man, not behind him.

He chuckled as he threw the dregs of his coffee in the fire. Where was he going to find such a woman? And, even if he did, how would he ever win her? Good women made him nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. He never knew what to say to them. He usually ended up grumbling roughly and getting away as soon as he could. As for the other kind... A

couple of times, when he was much younger and the need was on him, he'd visited them, but the experiences had left feeling physically relieved but emotionally unfulfilled. Would he ever find the woman he wanted? If he did, would she be able to see beyond his rough exterior?

Jason was nodding off before the fire, when the sound of hoof beats snapped him awake. This was high, wild country and completely unsettled as yet. It was one of the things that attracted Jason to the valley. There was room here for a man to stretch his arms without bumping into a neighbor. And even the Indians, Shoshonis from whom he leased his land, were friendly.

The four men that charged into the camp were strangers to Jason and there was nothing friendly about them. He stood up slowly, watching them warily, as they pulled up in a semicircle facing him. The older man in the center held a rifle balanced casually across his thighs, but there was nothing casual in the way he had his finger inside the trigger guard.

"This is closed range, Mister. Come morning, you just head back the way you come."

Jason felt an icy chill race down his spine as he studied the lean, hawk-faced man. His stomach tightened. "Don't guess I can do that. This is my range."

"Not anymore, it isn't. Belongs to the Green River Cattle Company now. You'd be Locke. We've been watching for you. If you're smart, you'll be gone come first light."

Jason studied the four men. They were a tough bunch of rannies. Rage began to build in him. This was *his* range, *his* home. He had carried his dream too long to give it up. What was going on? Where was Wiley and the two men he'd hired? He needed to stall for time. "Seems you know me but I don't recollect meeting up with you before."

"John Drayton. Foreman for Green River. No, we've not met but Mr. Corning said you'd be coming. Fact is, we expected you before this." He pulled a buckskin pouch from his pocket and tossed it at Jason's feet. "There's two hundred dollars. That's for the buildings. Now, you be gone come sunup."

Jason toed the sack but made no move to pick up the money. He looked back at the foreman, his eyes bleak. "Where's Wiley Carr and my two hands?"

"One's dead and I reckon Carr is too, by now. He was shot up pretty bad. He and the young kid took off into the mountains over a week ago. They won't be back, even if they're still alive, which ain't likely."

The anger flared white hot and Jason looked down to mask that anger. He bent over and picked up the pouch. He stood for a moment, casually tossing it in his hand as he fought for control. By nature, he was a patient man, but patience wouldn't help him here. Sure, he could take

the money. Sell out his dreams and run, but he'd never been much of a runner. Once a man began running, it was almighty hard to stop.

He was conscious of the gun on his thigh. If they planned to kill him, he'd take a couple with him, rifle or no rifle. He tossed the bag back to Drayton. "You tell Corning this ranch is not for sale. I won't be leaving. If Wiley's dead, I'll be coming to collect Corning's scalp."

Drayton pocketed the money, eyeing Jason speculatively. He saw a young man, whipcord tough, with cold gray eyes set in a rugged face burned deep from years of exposure to the elements. This was not the lazy squatter Corning had described. No, the man in front of him had been up the creek and over the mountain. Not a man to take being thrown off his ranch lying down, even if he was just squatting. He hoped to hell Corning knew what he was doing. Suddenly uneasy, he shifted in the saddle.

"Okay, if that's the way you want it. Boys, it looks like Mr. Locke here is going to need a little convincing." Drayton nudged his horse back a few paces as the other three dismounted. The rifle swung to cover Jason.

So it was to be fists instead of guns. Jason smiled grimly, studying them as they approached, looking for an edge. The slim, curly-headed kid on his right had the eager look of a novice. In the middle was an ordinary cowhand in his middle twenties. From the look of him, Jason figured he wasn't much of a fist fighter but there was a mean look in his eyes.

If he had to take a beating, then by God, he'd get a few licks of his own in first. There was no way he was going to win, but at least they'd know they had been in a fight. Jason's Pa had always said that if a thing needed done, best just get in and get it over with. He heeded that advice now.

From the arrogant way they approached, they obviously expected him to back away. Instead, Jason took a quick step forward and to the right, turning slightly and buried a powerful left fist into the belly of the kid. As the fellow doubled up, Jason spun him into the other puncher and turned to face the third. One look and Jason knew he was in trouble.

He was a big man, towering at least an inch over Jason's own six feet two inches. With his brawny shoulders and huge arms, he outweighed Jason by a good forty pounds and not an ounce of it was fat.

Jason ducked a roundhouse punch and came in with two fast punches to the stomach. He ducked quickly, his hands tingling. He felt like he'd just slammed a brick shithouse.

He danced away, then aimed a swift kick, catching the big man behind the knee and dumping him on the ground. As he turned, Jason caught a wild punch on the ear as the kid he had first hit lunged to his feet and attacked. The other man scrambled up, yelling, "Get him, Curly."

Jason leaped forward, landing a telling blow to Curly's chin, knocking him off balance, and charged the caller. He caught a blow on his arm and drove a fist wrist deep into the other man's breadbasket, following with a quick jab to the jaw that dropped the puncher on his butt.

He turned away into a powerful blow from the big man that sent Jason reeling. Staggering to keep his feet, he sent a short punch at the big man's jaw.

Someone grabbed him from behind, an arm locking around his throat, and he heard the man shout, "I got him, Bull."

Jason kicked back and felt his heel connect with a shin. The grip on his throat slackened and he twisted sideways, taking the blow Bull aimed at his stomach in the ribs. Gasping, he threw the man on his back over his hip and into Bull. While they were entangled, he launched two hard, fast blows to Curly's face as the kid charged.

A blow to the side of the head stunned Jason and he went to his knees. A kick in the ribs sent him toppling into the dust. He felt a hand clamp tightly around his arm and heard Curly's voice.

"We've got him now. Jim, grab his other arm. Come on, Bull, teach this ranny a lesson."

Jason was jerked erect and held firmly by Jim and Curly. Knowing the fight was over and he was in for a beating, he sent Drayton a look of contempt that brought color to the older man's cheeks.

There was a feral gleam in Bull's pale eyes as he said, "I'm gonna enjoy this."

Jason rolled over and groaned. Someone was beating an anvil in his head. He forced his eyes open and it was several seconds before they focused. He dragged himself slowly into a sitting position and gasped as pain knifed through him. He sat, propped against stump, until the cold penetrated his semi-consciousness and he began to shiver. His brain felt like mush and he had to force himself to concentrate. His gun belt was gone. His fingers continued up to his waist and he sighed with relief. The money belt was still around his waist.

He crawled across to the fire. After careful stirring, a few coals glowed weakly. He found his knife still in his boot and carefully shaved curls of wood onto the coals. As the flames greedily licked at the shavings, he added a few small sticks. Soon the fire burning brightly again and he

huddled over its warmth.

Gradually the chill left his body and he looked around for his coffee pot. It was empty and had a bullet hole near the top, but could still be used.

Nursing his bruised ribs he forced himself up, and taking a flaming brand from the fire, began to survey his camp. It was in shambles. Packs were torn apart and his food and supplies scattered in the dirt. His bedroll was gone, as was his spider.

He found a package of coffee with a handful left in the bottom and carried it carefully back to the fire. Picking up the coffee pot, he stumbled down to the river and filled it. When he had the coffee started, he went out to check the horses.

They were gone. Anger warred with a touch of fear. On foot, a hundred miles from help with the Wyoming winter breathing down his neck and armed with only a knife, survival became a very chancy matter. Forcing the fear away, he let his anger grow. He would survive. Survive and hunt down the bastards that had killed Wiley.

On the way back, he stumbled over a side of bacon. Crouching over the fire sipping coffee, he forced his thoughts away from Wiley. There was nothing he could do until daylight. This fight wasn't over by a long shot. Patiently, he waited, occasionally nodding off.

The sound of a horse approaching, snapped him awake and he dove into the shadows beneath the trees. Grasping his knife he inched his way farther into the darkness. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he concentrated on the night sounds.

The horse stopped at the edge of the trees. Jason waited with the patience of an Indian. In his twenty-eight years, all spent in country where impatience frequently meant death, he had learned how to wait. His keen eyes studied the darkness but he could detect no movement.

After an hour, Jason began to work his way silently towards where he could hear the horse grazing. Careful to avoid stepping on a twig or allowing his clothes to touch against brush or branches, he slowly inched his way to the edge of the trees.

He recognized Dapple instantly. Wary of a trap, he lay hidden under a bush until the blackness gave way to a gray dawn. Satisfied at last that Dapple had returned on his own, he sheathed his knife. Catching up the horse, he led him back into camp.

In the gray light, he found his pistol belt hung over the saddle horn. His rifle was in the scabbard and his saddlebags tied behind. He strapped the belt on, checked the pistol and found it was fully loaded. Why had Drayton bothered to saddle his horse before taking it away? Why hadn't they taken his guns? He shook his head. It didn't make sense.

As it grew lighter, he made a survey of the camp. He spotted the coffee mill under a bush. Its handle was broken and the top dented but it was usable. He gathered what was salvageable in a pile by the fire.

He took the slab of bacon down to the river and scrubbed it free of dirt. A dark spot in the water attracted his attention. Wading out a couple of feet, he saw his spider. On the way back to the fire, he found an unbroken package of coffee beans.

Hunting through the brush, he discovered his hatchet where it had been dropped by what was left of his pack saddles. Not far away, was his short miner's shovel.

He carried these back to the fire and then remembered the pack he had stuffed under the tree in case of rain. He heaved a sigh of relief as he pulled it out. It had gone unnoticed in the dark.

He cooked a quick meal. As he ate, he tried to decide on his next move. It was hard to picture Wiley dead. He'd miss him; miss his optimism and good humor, the tremendous vitality, miss his fine tenor voice around a campfire. The ache in his gut deepened.

The first thing was to try to locate the mares. Then he would head up into the mountains and see if he could find the rider that got away. Hell, he didn't even know his name. Whoever he was, he hoped he'd been able to give Wiley a decent burial.

He brought Dapple up and undid the saddlebags, smiled a little when he discovered they hadn't been touched. His shaving gear and two extra shirts were still there. Also intact were several boxes of shells for his pistol and rifle, and his supply of tobacco. He took out a sack and rolled a cigarette.

He repacked the salvaged supplies and tied them behind the saddle. Mounting, he rode out to where he had left the mares and studied the tracks. As he read the signs, he was even more puzzled. Any horseman would have recognized that they were both good horses. So good, in fact, that Jason had been planning to use them as brood mares to start his herd. Why then, he wondered, had they been driven away? Why hadn't Drayton taken them with him? He shook his head. It didn't make sense. He smiled, but there was no pleasure, no warmth in it. It was a grim, almost sadistic smile.

He followed the mares' tracks as they angled away and then back towards the river. Nearly a mile downstream, he found his bedroll clinging to a half-submerged log. He squeezed out as much water as he could, rolled it up and slung it in front of the saddle.

It was the middle of the morning when Jason spotted the two mares grazing along the bank. They came up at a trot when Dapple whinnied. He dismounted and checked them over; both seemed in good shape. Using the lengths of picket rope he had salvaged and a couple of piggin'

strings, he transferred his supplies to the buckskin mare.

He headed east across the valley until he struck the South Fork of Gypsum Creek, then followed it into the mountains. He spent the night high up on the pine clad slopes of Battleship Mountain camping in a shallow crack in the granite escarpment. Cutting stakes from pine branches, he stretched his blankets around the fire to dry and form a windbreak. Huddling against the rock face, with only his coat and saddle blanket for protection, he dozed fitfully, kept awake by the cold and his thoughts.

Chapter 2

After a quick breakfast of coffee and bacon, Jason saddled up and headed for Big Sheep Mountain. There was no trail and Jason had to pick his own. Mid-afternoon found him on the promontory from which he had first seen the valley.

Cattle grazed on the dry grass to his left and in the distance, Jason saw two riders slowly circling the herd. He shook his head in disbelief. Whoever had brought this herd in was either crazy or did not know much about Wyoming winters. His glance sharpened. Only a half a dozen horses grazed with the cattle. Where was the rest of the remuda? He settled in the saddle gazing down at the valley, thinking.

The name Corning nagged at him. Obviously, the man knew him but Jason couldn't put a face to the name. Still, he couldn't dismiss the feeling that he had met the man somewhere. It didn't matter. They would meet and when they did... But that could wait. Now he had to find the kid.

He rode on along the ridge and down past the twin lakes. This was the same ridge he had ridden five years before, when he had first come into this country. Just ahead he knew he could

look down on the bench above the lake where his headquarters would be located.

Riding on, he found a spot where he could study the ranch on the lower lake. The loss of his friend lay like a stone on his heart as he stared down onto the bench. Wiley had built the bunkhouse in the exact spot where Jason had pictured it. The barn was finished but Jason could see only one small haystack near the two corrals. Had Corning struck before they had finished gathering winter feed? Jason shook his head. It wasn't like Wiley to put off such a chore. They would need more than that one small stack of hay to get the horses through the winter.

He pulled out a pair of army binoculars and studied the ranch yard. Several cords of wood were neatly stacked between the barn and the house. At least there would be plenty of winter wood when he took the ranch back. That he would not take it back never entered his thinking.

He shifted in the saddle and studied the corrals. The sight of Wiley's white stallion sent a shaft of pain through him. How Wiley had loved that horse! He lowered the glasses, his heart heavy with grief.

They had captured the mare during their first trip to the San Juans. She died two days later foaling the little colt. Wiley hand raised the foal and still treated it like a baby. It turned into a magnificent animal. Not an albino, it was still almost pure white and stood over sixteen hands.

Despite the fact that it followed Wiley about like a puppy, it maintained its fire and pride. While it tolerated Jason's attentions, no one but Wiley had ever been able to ride him.

If Wiley had not come back for the horse, he must be dead. Well, he would settle that score. But first he needed to find the boy that got away. Corning could wait.

Jason pulled his gaze away from the white horse and surveyed the valley. Which way had the cowhand run? Jason slapped his saddle horn in frustration. If he only knew more about the two men Wiley had hired, knew how they thought. Drayton had referred to the hand that got away as a young kid. How young? Would he have stopped to bury Wiley or would he have abandoned his body to the scavengers? Jason shuddered at the thought. He had to find Wiley and give him a decent burial.

Corning's outfit would have had to have come up the valley or over the ridge near where he was now sitting. If the kid had ridden back down the valley, he would have been a sitting duck for Corning's guns. No, he and Wiley must have headed around the lake and into the mountains beyond.

Lifting the glasses again, he studied the opposite side of the lake. No movement. Nothing. He swung them back to the buildings below. Smoke drifted up from the two chimneys of the

bunkhouse. He concentrated on the windows and thought he saw movement inside but couldn't be sure. He watched a few minutes longer. Movement at the barn attracted his attention. A man came out of the barn door and began to pitch hay into the corrals.

Putting the glasses away, Jason giggled the horse and headed back along the ridge. It was dusk when he dropped down to cross the river between the upper and lower lakes. He almost missed the tracks in the dim light.

Dismounting, he saw where two horses had passed, running hard. He remounted and rode slowly, trying to follow the tracks in the dying light. Where Clear Creek poured down from the left, he stopped. It was too dark to see whether the riders had turned off or continued toward the upper lake.

Jason made camp behind a clump of trees against the mountain. After unsaddling and rubbing down the horses, he led them to the creek to drink and picketed them on a patch of grass. He didn't risk a fire. At least his soogans had dried. He crawled into them, cold and hungry, his body still aching from the beating. He gazed up through the trees. Where was Wiley's body? Where was the kid?

The next morning he risked a small fire, hardly bigger than his two hands, built under a huge

pine where the little smoke given out by the dry wood would dissipate in the branches. He boiled up the last little dab of the ground coffee he had salvaged and put out the fire, drank quickly and saddled up. Leaving the horses, he walked back to study the trail in the daylight.

The tracks disappeared into the creek, but did not emerge on the other side. Had they turned up the creek or had they ridden into the lake to hide their trail? It was only by luck that he spotted the blush of rusty red on the leaf of a bush, a few feet upstream. He pulled the branch over where he could get a closer look. Blood.

He walked back to the horses, mounted and headed up the creek. Half a mile later, he found where the two horses had left the creek, and not long after, where they had camped.

Jason studied the camp and a pile of bloody leaves where someone had rested. Doggedly he searched around the campsite, his heart beating an Indian death chant in his breast. There was no sign of a grave or a body. A tiny flame of hope flickered feebly within him. Wiley had still been alive then. He found where a rabbit snare been set but couldn't tell whether they had caught anything.

Mounting, he continued following the creek to where it disappeared into a cave. Finding no more trace of the two riders, he backtracked to a small meadow and began casting for sign.

Nothing. It was as if they had disappeared into thin air.

He dismounted, loosened Dapple's cinch and let the horses graze. Rolling a smoke, he climbed a boulder and lay back, letting the warmth of the sun steal through him easing the stiffness in his muscles. High up the mountain across the meadow, he watched the light dance on a cataract. Slide Creek.

He sat up and stubbed out his cigarette. Eyes squinted against the glare of the sun, he studied the mountain. His gut tightened. If there was a trail, it would need a mountain goat to climb it.

He tightened Dapple's cinch, mounted and put the big stallion into the water and headed up Slide Creek. The banks rose and Jason was about to give up and backtrack when, out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a white scar on a rock ledge. They had come this way. His heart raced as he put the horse up the same ledge and found a narrow trail hidden behind a nest of boulders.

As the ground got rougher, he lost the trail again and again but determination drove him on and each time he found it. At times the trail was barely more than six inches wide and old, very old. Just as he was finally ready to give up, he spotted a few drops of blood on a rock. Wiley had made it this far.

He looked up the mountain looming over him and hope faded. The trail before him clung to

the face of the mountain like an eyebrow. Surely a wounded man would not be able to survive such a climb. He shivered. He'd rather fight a band of marauding Apaches than climb that trail.

The Appaloosa was mountain bred and could go anywhere. Untying the lead rope, he hazed her up the trail, then sent the buckskin mare after her. Swallowing, he fought down his fear and started up.

Less than a quarter of the way up the mountain, the trail narrowed and Jason had to dismount. Leading the stallion, he climbed doggedly, keeping his eyes glued to the trail, forcing his mind away from the void on his left. One look and he knew he would either freeze or give in to the panic building inside him.

He reached the top on trembling legs and sank down, weak with relief. When his pulse and breathing were back to normal, he stood and looked around. The two mares were grazing contentedly on a patch of dead grass. He reattached the lead ropes, then risked a look down his back trail and his stomach lurched. He turned hurriedly away and mounted.

"Dapple, there sure better be another way down from here or you better sprout wings. There's no way I'm riding down that trail."

The trail cut back a few yards to the creek. Jason halted and let the horses drink. Upstream

from the animals, he drank then splashed water over his face and neck, letting the water wash away the stench of his fear, and pushed down the shame that flowed over him. At least he hadn't given into his fear. Someday, somehow he would conquer this weakness, this stupid fear of heights.

He rode on as the sun sank behind the mountains, studying the terrain. The hope that had flickered earlier died away, for surely no badly wounded man could have survived the climb up that trail.

He rode around a shoulder of the mountain and recognized several landmarks. Slide Lake should be fairly close. He started to hunt a campsite for the night. The sound of a gun cocking shattered the twilight silence, echoing as loud as a cannon's boom, in Jason's ears.

Chapter 3

The hairs on the back of Jason's neck rose. Before he could move, a voice sang out on his left. "Sit easy, mister, less'n you want to be pushing open them purly gates. Now, raise both them hands up high."

Jason did as he was told, cursing himself silently for his inattention.

"Okay, now just slide off that bronc real careful." When Jason was on the ground, the voice continued, "Unbuckle that gun belt with your left hand and let it fall. That's right. Now just kick it over this way."

When Jason had kicked away the gun belt, the bushes parted and a gaunt young puncher stepped out. He held a revolver pointed at Jason's belly as he stepped forward. His eyes never left Jason as he reached down and picked up the gun belt. Quickly he holstered his own gun and pulled out Jason's.

"Now, mister land grabber, you just start walking back down that trail. I'll be right behind you so you better not stop till you get back to the ranch. When you do, you tell that murderin' coyote

boss of yours, the next man he sends up here is going to be sent back over his saddle. Now git, 'fore I change my mind and shoot you like you deserve."

"Hold on a minute, youngster. I guess maybe you're the fellow I'm hunting, but not for the reason you think. Name's Locke."

The youngster looked at Jason is surprise. Hope and relief flared in his eyes. "You're Jason Locke?" A frown appeared. "How do I know you're Locke?"

"You must be one of the punchers Wiley hired. He ever tell you how he came by that stallion of his?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Jason shrugged. "Don't reckon many folks around here know that when the mare died, Wiley rode twenty miles to a Mexican sheepherder's camp and lugged back a nanny goat across his saddle. He milked that fool goat twice a day till that colt was eating on his own."

"Reckon you're who you say you are. Hell, boss, I'm Toby Lang. Wiley said you'd be along and that outfit wouldn't be able to stop you. Sure is good to see you."

He stuck the gun back in the holster and handed the belt to Jason. As he buckled on his gun belt, Jason studied the kid. Young he might be, but he had a competent look about him although it

was obvious that he was about worn out.

The words almost stuck in his throat, but Jason had to ask, "Where did you bury Wiley?"

Toby looked at him, his eyes wide. "Bury? Wiley? Hell, Wiley ain't dead yet. Not that he won't likely be, if'n he don't get some food and warmth soon. He's in pretty bad shape. Come on. Our camp's just back here."

Jason followed Toby behind a thicket of aspens that shielded a little hollow at the foot of a low escarpment at the edge of Slide Lake. There was a fire ring but the ashes looked several days old. Toby saw the look and hastened to explain.

"Ran out of matches, then I fell asleep the other night and let the fire go out."

Jason pulled out some matches and tossed them to the kid as he spotted Wiley lying under a crude shelter. "Bring up the mares. There's a little food in the pack," he said over his shoulder as he walked over to the lean-to.

Wiley was unconscious, his breathing shallow. Jason's gut tightened and he felt the bile rise in the back of his throat as he knelt and laid a gentle hand on the flushed forehead. Wiley stirred slightly and his eyes opened.

Jason had to swallow the lump in his throat before he could say, in a shaky voice, "Hell, I send

you up here to build a ranch and I find you laying around like some rich railroad baron."

"Jason.--Knew...you'd...get here. Sorry...about...the...ranch. Took us...by surprise...."

"Don't worry, old son. Soon as you're on your feet, we'll get it back. You go on back to sleep. I'll wake you when dinner's ready."

"Dinner...sounds...good...."

Wiley drifted back into a feverish sleep and Jason gently tucked a blanket around the sleeping man, forcing back the tears that threatened.

"Man, this looks prettier than Cheyenne squaw."

Jason looked up to see Toby clutching the coffee mill to his chest. The boy grinned as he set it by the fire and continued to paw through the pack until he found the coffee beans.

Jason walked back to where Toby squatted by the fire grinding coffee. Slapping the kid's back he moved over to the horses and finished stripping the pack off the mare, carrying it over to the fire.

Then he unsaddled Dapple and rubbed down all three of the horses. By the time he had finished, Toby had the coffeepot on and was rummaging through the packs.

Jason shaved bacon into the spider and started it frying.

"Ain't much there, I'm afraid. They hit my camp a couple of days ago and destroyed most of

the supplies."

"Hell, this looks like a banquet feast. We been living on roots, berries and an occasional rabbit I could trap."

"Couldn't get a shot at a deer?"

Toby grimaced. "Coulda got half a dozen, if'n I'd had any bullets. Used all but a couple in the fight. Pried the powder out of those to sprinkle in Wiley's wounds and fire them to stop the bleeding."

Jason eyed the kid with new respect. "That's a mighty old remedy. Where'd you hear of it?"

The kid reddened. "Aw, I used to sit around and listen to my Grandpap tell stories. He fit Indians back along the Ohio when he was a young'n'. He used to tell me all kinds of things about back then. I just happened to remember that when I was trying to get the bleeding stopped." He looked at Jason, worry plain in his eyes. "You reckon Wiley will make it?"

Jason looked away. "He's a tough man, so there's always a chance. I'll not kid you, son, he's in pretty bad shape. We got to find a better place than this to hole up."

Jason made a thin gruel with the bacon dripping and meal and fed it slowly to Wiley who ate it greedily and then sipped the coffee Jason held for him.

As Jason eased Wiley back down in his blankets, he thought there was more color in his friend's face. Wiley looked up at Jason, his eyes crinkling in a weak smile that didn't reach his lips. "Now, if I just had a smoke, I'd be plumb happy."

Jason rolled a cigarette and held it to his lips. After a few puffs, Wiley drifted off to sleep and Jason finished the cigarette. He checked the wounds and rebandaged them. They looked bad but not as bad as Jason had feared. At least there was no putrefaction. There was something about the clear mountain air that seemed to hold infection at bay.

He left Wiley sleeping and went back to the fire. Toby had made pan bread and they ate it with the bacon. Jason watched with awe as the kid ate. Toby lit into the grub like a wolf after guts.

Jason checked the horses, then settled down and rolled another cigarette. He tossed the makings to Toby.

"What happened at the ranch?" he asked.

"It was early in the morning. We'd finished the barn the day before and were going out to cut more winter hay. Wiley and me had just finished saddling up. Carl was hitching up the wagon."

"Carl?"

"Forgot you didn't know. Carl Johanson. He was a big Swede feller Wiley hired at Ft.

Laramie. Didn't know much about ranching but he sure knew how to use tools. Wait till you see the bunkhouse. Anyway, like I was saying, we were getting ready to go cut hay when this dude rode up in a buggy."

Jason was startled. "A buggy? "

Toby grinned. "Yep. Damnedest thing I've ever seen! One of those fancy ones with a top and a lot of fringe. Must of stopped and washed it at the river, cause it was all shiny. Black with fancy red trim. Just this duded up fellow and a real pretty woman. Both of them was blond-headed and looking like they was just out for a Sunday drive." There was a certain amount of awe in the kid's voice as he bent over and picked a twig from the fire. When he had his cigarette going, he continued.

"The fellow calls over and asks which one of us is Wiley Carr. Wiley says, that's me. This dude pulls out a little pouch and tossed it at him. Says, there's two hundred dollars for the buildings and the ranch now belongs to Green River Cattle Company."

Toby paused and looked at Jason, shaking his head. "Wiley, he just sorta looks at the feller and says the ranch is not for sale. About that time, a bunch of rannies come barreling down out of the timber a-shooting. Wiley went for his gun and this dude pulls a little gun out of a shoulder holster

and shoots Wiley. I grabbed Wiley and the horses and got them around the corner of the barn."

The boy's face tightened, staring into the fire he continued his tale through gritted teeth. "They musta got Carl right off. He was laying by the wagon, dead as could be. And he wasn't even wearing a gun. Wiley and me held them off for a while but when Wiley took another bullet, I figured it was time to go. I got Wiley up on his horse and we taken off. They chased us a ways, but I hauled up and dusted 'em a mite and they backed off."

His head came up and he looked at Jason, his eyes wide and uncertain. "I wanted to head for South Pass but Wiley wouldn't hear of it. Said you'd be along and we had to wait. I hope I done right."

"You did, Toby. Wiley probably wouldn't have stood the trip. Looks like you've done a damned good job of taking care of him."

Toby flushed. "I wish I could have done something for Carl. He hadn't oughta died like that." He met Jason's eyes. "What we gonna do now, Boss?"

"Reckon the first thing is to find a better place to hole up. Been a long time since I was up here but I got a place in mind. I'll check it out first thing in the morning."

Long after the kid was asleep, Jason sat by the fire. In some places in the west he was known as

a bad man. Not an outlaw, he'd never taken that route although he'd had plenty of opportunity, but a bad man to lock horns with. He'd never wanted even that reputation. He'd sure never worked at it but he had exceptionally keen eye-hand coordination and a way with guns. Behind him lay eight dead men, each killed in a standup fight Jason hadn't been able to avoid.

Moira had once said the west brought out the best or the worst in a man. Jason supposed he was somewhere in the middle.

Moira. He'd been seventeen when he'd met Moira Moriarity, but a man grown, or at least so he'd thought. He'd left Texas after killing his first man in San Antone and come to Westport, the start of the Oregon Trail, lured by tales of the free land to had in Oregon. But no one had wanted to hire a kid and he'd had no money to buy a wagon and team.

Moira and her husband had taken him under their wing, providing him passage in exchange for helping to drive the wagon. But Moira had done even more for him, although it was several years before he realized it. Ma had taught him to read, but it was a skill that had withered since her death. Moira had not only sharpened that skill but had introduced him to books, books by great thinkers

of the past, books by Washington Irving and Josiah Gregg that taught him about his own country. Even more important, she'd reinforced the earlier moral teaching of his parents.

Then Shamus had been killed in an Indian attack and Moira had left the train at Ft. Laramie. Five years later, he had found her in Denver City, taking in washings and living a hand to mouth existence. Jason had convinced her to take a loan to start a boarding house.

He hadn't expected, hadn't wanted to be repaid. But she'd paid back every cent. Closing his eyes, he pictured her as he'd last seen her. Her white hair in a neat bun, her short, plump figure encased in a huge white apron, her blue eyes still bright and sparkling. He wished she was here now. Wiley could use some of her no-nonsense mothering. Moira and Wiley, the only two people in the world he felt close to.

When they got the ranch back, maybe he could convince Moira to come and live with them. She wasn't getting any younger. It was time she had a chance to sit on a porch in a rocking chair and take things easy. He liked the thought of Moira sitting on the porch of his dream cabin.

When they got the ranch back. He tossed his cigarette in the fire, stretched out and slept.

Jason awoke to the fragrant smell of coffee boiling. He rolled out of his soogans and walked over to check on his partner. Wiley was awake and grinned up at him.

"How you feeling this morning, partner?"

"Hell, I feel too old to suck and too young to die."

Jason laughed. "Hang on there, horse. You're a long way from sprouting grass. All you need is a little rest and your nose in the feed bag."

"What we gonna do now, Jason?"

"I'm going to find us another hidey-hole this morning. Think you can stand a little jaunt?"

"Hell, yes. I been laying around so long waiting for you, I'm getting saddle sores on my shoulders."

"Okay, partner. I should be back by noon."

It took Jason a longer than he thought to locate the cave he remembered. When he finally found the small lake and the cave above it, it was late afternoon. By the time he got back to camp, it was after dark.

They traveled slowly the next day. Jason led with the mares. Toby rode beside Wiley. As soon as they reached the cave and had Wiley settled comfortably, Jason took his rifle and settled near a beaver pond in the next valley. At dusk, he was able to bring down a three-point buck.

Back at camp, Jason cleaned and staked out the hide, while Toby made a venison stew. After

they ate, Jason sorted out the provisions.

He badly wanted to scout the ranch, to make some effort to drive Corning's bunch out. He had no intention of letting them get away with stealing his ranch. He had dreamed too long and he and Wiley had worked too hard to give up. Still, it wouldn't do to go off half-cocked. He needed a plan and most of all, they needed more supplies.

"Toby, what else can you tell me about this Green River Cattle Company?"

"Not much. I never heard of them. When they came rushing out of the trees, it seemed like there was about a hundred of them, but since I've had time to go over it in my mind, I don't guess there was more than seven or eight. If they brought in cattle, I suppose there would be more with the herd."

"They brought in a herd, all right. I saw them from the ridge but there was only a couple of riders. I only counted nine horses in the corral and half a dozen with the herd."

"Did you see that white stallion of mine?" Wiley asked, struggling to sit up.

"Lay back down. Yes. He's in the small corral by himself. Looked to be in fine shape."

"Sure hate to lose that horse," he said with a sigh as he settled back down in his blankets.

"You ain't gonna lose him, Wiley. We'll get him back. Him and the ranch, too."

"Jason, two of those horses would be ours. The ones Carl had hitched to the wagon. Then there would be the team the dude drove. That just leaves three riders besides the two you saw," Toby said.

"Five riders. Of course, there could be more in the hills, that I didn't see," Jason mused. "Or this Corning could have paid off his trail drivers. Wish I could remember where I'd heard that name. Describe him again."

"I was closer to him so I reckon I saw him the best," Wiley said. "He was tall, I could tell from his legs, even sitting down. Blond, with sort of funny looking blue eyes. Had an accent, kinda like the way that gambler from New Orleans talked. Remember the one we met on that trip back to Kentucky? And Jason, he knew about our ranch. I mean, he knew right where to come and he knew the buildings were up. Knew our names."

"Corning. Corning." Suddenly, Jason had a mental picture of the man. He sat up. "I know him. Met him briefly in Denver. He was talking to Jed Mellinger in a saloon. Can't remember, but I think Jed mentioned that Corning represented some English outfit. We didn't really talk. Just introductions but I remember I was telling Jed about your letter and the work you'd done."

"So this ranny just decides to walk right in and take over." Toby spat into the fire. "When are

we gonna go after him?"

"We will, boy, we will. First thing is to lay in some supplies. I'll head for Gilbert's Trading Post at South Pass Station in the morning. Toby, you stay close here and take care of Wiley. Better cut some hay for the horses and bring in plenty of wood. You should have enough grub to make out till I get back. If not, you can probably get a deer over in the next valley. I'll leave you some ammunition. Watch yourself, though. I'll get back as soon as I can and then we'll do some reconnoitering."

"Pack me in a pretty nurse, along with those supplies." Wiley said. "I'm getting tired of looking at that ugly face of Toby's."

Jason sat by the fire long after the other two were asleep. They had to get the ranch back and soon. Winter was on them, and even if he could bring in enough supplies, they'd never survive in this cave. There were at least five men and a woman. Whatever he did, he'd have to do alone for Wiley would need Toby's care. What could one man do alone?

Chapter 4

Jason pulled out early the next morning, riding Dapple and leading the two mares. Following Bench Creek, he crossed the Green and circled the north side of Square Top Mountain. He rode warily, rifle across his lap, every sense alert. The last thing he wanted was to run into any of Corning's outfit. That would come later. Now, it was imperative that he get out and back with supplies. Supplies they would need to survive the winter, whether they were able to retake the ranch or not.

When he crossed the ridge, he continued to hug the foothills until he was well down the valley. He picked his campsites with care, kept his fires small and put them out as soon as he had cooked a meal.

The weather worried him. It had been spitting snow for an hour or so nearly every day. A heavy snow could prevent him from getting back to their camp before Wiley and Toby ran out of grub. By rights, there should have already been several heavy snowfalls.

Heavy clouds were building over the mountains as Jason finally rode into Gilbert's Trading

Post. He stabled the horses and rubbed them down. Climbing into the loft, he pitched down hay to fill the mangers, then gave them each a bait of grain.

A bitter wind whipped him, stinging his face and cutting through the heavy coat he wore, as he made his way over the frozen ground to the station. He hunched deeper into his coat. Ice encrusted the week's growth of beard and he paused before entering to brush it away. One thing he'd do before he headed back-shave. He'd never cared for facial hair the way most men did. He didn't even wear a mustache.

His face stung as the warmth of the room greeted him. He paused for a moment to survey the trading post. Pulling off his gloves, he headed for the bar at one end of the big room. He ordered a rye whiskey and downed it. Then stood, leaning against the bar, waiting for the warmth to seep through his body.

He poured himself a second drink and sipped it slowly. He really didn't care for whiskey; never tasted it without remembering the first man he had killed, back in San Antone. He'd been a seventeen-year-old kid then, fresh off the west Texas plains. It was the first and last time he'd ever been drunk. But right now, he needed a drink to drive away the bone-deep cold and relax his tired muscles.

Jason surveyed the room as he sipped his drink. In the corner, an old man sat with his back against the wall, eyes closed. There were a couple of travelers at the bar. At the far end a puncher stood hunched over his beer. Jason studied him covertly. There was anger and cruelty in the thin face and hooded eyes.

The bartender wandered back down, automatically wiping the bar top as he came

. "Looks like we'll have a storm by morning." "Hope not," Jason replied. "Got to get back with a load of supplies."

"Left it kinda late, haven't you?"

"Not by choice. Bunch of land grabbers jumped me after they shot up my partner and drove him out of our place."

The bartender paused in his polishing to take a closer look at Jason. "Your partner wouldn't be Wiley Carr, would he?"

"Yeah. How did you know?" Jason looked up in surprise.

"Hell, there aren't that many outfits in the area. Besides, Wiley's been in here several times this summer. Always talking about his partner. You must be Jason Locke. My name's Wilt Dollar."

The bartender extended a beefy hand. Jason shook it, surprised at the strength in the grip. He

took a closer look at the man and saw that what he had taken for fat was all solid muscle. A broken nose, disfigured ears and scarred knuckles betokened experience as a bare-knuckle fighter.

"You say Wiley's been shot?"

"Yeah. He's in pretty bad shape but if I can get back with supplies, I reckon he'll pull through. You know anything about an outfit calling themselves the Green River Cattle Company?"

"Not much. They came through here about three weeks ago. I heard they're an English outfit. I heard tell some English outfit was looking to start ranch but that was over in western Kansas. Don't reckon it's the same outfit. Hope they got more judgment than this outfit. I guess these Britishers got more money than sense."

Jason's interest quickened. "What makes you say that?"

"Their manager and his wife stayed here a couple of days. Struck me more like a Mississippi gambler and his doxy than a cattleman. Can you imagine, they come all the way from Ft. Laramie in a surrey." He shook his head. "Can't figure any cattleman bringing three thousand head of cattle into this country at this time of year. Hell, any grass will be three feet under snow in another couple of weeks. Besides, they'd have no time to throw up more than a shanty and that fancy woman ain't gonna want to spend a winter in no tent, not even that fancy one they got."

Jason grimaced. "They had that figured out. They just planned to run us out and take over our buildings. You don't know how many men they had with them, do you?"

"Not for sure, but I reckon about twelve. They ain't got that many now, though." He answered Jason's questioning look. "Half a dozen of them came back through here last week, heading back for Texas and points south. Seems they'd only signed on for the drive."

He paused a moment in his polishing and leaned across the bar. His voice lowered, he said, "Feller at the end of the bar was with them. I'd stay away from him, he's in a mean mood. Says he's riding back to the ranch in the morning and I sure hope he does. He ain't nothin' but trouble."

Jason mulled over what the barkeep had said. He cast another quick look down the bar. If this puncher had a grudge, maybe he could use him. His eyes narrowed as they studied the other man. Their glances locked as the man looked up and Jason felt a shock run through him. Flat, reptilian eyes stared back at him. Jason felt not fear but revulsion. The eyes held no spark of human feeling. This man was no puncher, he was a killer. Not a gunfighter, but a killer.

The bartender interrupted his thoughts. "Say, you didn't happen to see anybody pushing a hand cart up the road, did you?"

Startled, Jason pulled his glance away and looked back at the bartender. "Pushing a cart? Who

the hell would be pushing a hand cart in this country?"

"Oh, a lot of Mormons tried it a few years ago. These weren't Mormons, though. An old man and his daughter. They're from Poland or Roosia or one of them furrin countries. Said they was peddlers heading for San Francisco."

Jason shook his head. "They'll never make it. Not this time of year and not across that desert." He shrugged. "Well, that's their worry. I'd best be getting my supplies. I want to head back come first light."

The bartender moved away and Jason turned his thoughts back what he had learned about Corning's outfit. His estimate of the enemies seemed about right. The four that had ridden into his camp and a couple with the herd. The odds still weren't all that good, but with a little luck...he grinned, suddenly feeling better.

He finished his drink and headed back to the store side of the room. He purchased two new pack saddles and selected supplies: lard, meal, flour, salt, coffee, slabs of bacon, jerky, dried fruit, and molasses. He was sure glad those rannies hadn't found the pack he'd hidden. Sugar was hard to come by and he had ten pounds in that pack.

"Still got some potatoes and some onions I can let you have," the storekeeper said. "I even got

a few apples left."

"Add them to the pile! Tell you what, give me a box of that black pepper and a can of that there cinnamon. Better throw in some more beans. Reckon I'd better have a couple of those wool blankets and two pieces of canvas."

Jason had just finished paying for his supplies, when a booming voice shattered the peace. "Who rides that Rafter LC horse?"

Jason turned. The man who stood in the door filled it completely. Well over six feet tall and half that wide, he seemed to dwarf the big room. He moved farther into the room and surveyed the bar with laughing blue eyes. "I want to talk with the man who rides the gray horse," he said. "By golly, I do."

He turned as Jason spoke quietly behind him. "That's my horse."

He stomped towards Jason, his big face split with a happy grim, his hand extended. "By golly, you must be Mr. Carr. My brother, Carl, he says you one damned fine man. I'm Gunnar Johanson, but you just call me Swede. Everybody, they just call me Swede. You just holler, Swede, I come running, yes sir. I come out from Minnesota to see Carl. You tell me where I can find him?"

His grasp was firm but surprisingly gentle as he gripped Jason's hand and pumped it up and

down.

"Well, Swede, I'm not Wiley, I'm his partner, Jason Locke. Reckon we'd better sit down. I'll tell you about your brother."

Jason led the way to a table and ordered beer and a meal of beef and beans for them both. He told Johanson about the attack on the ranch and his brother's death. They nursed their beers in silence as Johanson assimilated the news.

When he finally looked up, Swede's eyes were colder than the northern seas from which he came. "These men who killed my brother, they are still on your ranch?"

"Yes."

"You gonna let them stay there?"

"Hell, no. I'm heading back in the morning with supplies and I don't plan to leave till I've driven them off or killed them."

"Good. I go with you."

"Wait a minute. This isn't your fight."

"They killed my brother. I make it my fight. I go with you. We show this Green River outfit. By golly we will."

"Just what you planning to show us?"

At the softly spoken words, Jason felt a chill race up and down his spine. He looked up into the cold, flat eyes and felt a heavy weight settle in his gut. He knew what was coming and his eyes turned bleak. Eight dead men, dead white men lay behind him. He was sick of killing.

Why the hell couldn't he be left alone? By inclination he was a right peaceable man, only wanting to be left alone. He never hunted trouble. Still, trouble seemed to follow him, to lie in wait for him. The inevitability of it both irritated and depressed him.

"Reckon we're going to show them that you can't steal another man's ranch and get away with it."

The flat eyes began to glow and the thin lips curved in an anticipatory smile. His voice was even softer as he said, "Start by showing me. I work for Green River. Show me how good you are at dying."

Jason shoved his chair back and stood up slowly, his hands on the table. He was only peripherally aware of the tense silence in the rest of the room. He didn't see the old man in the corner stand up and move quietly forward.

When Jason shoved his chair back, reptile-eyes had taken a couple of steps backward. Now

Jason stepped back a few feet to increase the distance between them.

"Scared?" the other taunted. "Tell your sodbuster friend to say his prayers. I'll take care of him next."

Jason didn't bother to answer. He stood, relaxed, watching the other's eyes. A flicker warned him and his hand flashed down. Splinters peppered his face as a bullet slammed into the wall only millimeters from his head. Then his own gun bucked in his hand.

The hooded eyes flared open, shock and surprise flickered and faded. Slowly his legs buckled and he fell forward. His body twitched a couple of times and went limp.

Without thinking, Jason punched out the shell casing and reloaded before holstering the gun. He swallowed down the bile that burned the back of his throat and forced himself to breathe slowly and deeply. Anger began to replace depression. Would they never leave him alone? How many men would he have to kill before he could have the peace he craved?

He cast an angry glance around the room. Johanson still sat at the table, a stunned look on his broad face. As Jason watched, he licked his lips and essayed a weak smile. "I tink, boss, we already start getting that ranch back."

His voice broke the spell. Dollar came around the bar and looked down at the dead man, then

cast a quick glance at Jason. "Reckon he had it coming. Been asking for it ever since he's been here." He motioned to one of the men at the bar. "Want to help me haul him out?"

Jason turned back to the table and sat down. He pulled out the makings and rolled a smoke, noting absently that his hands were steady but he knew reaction would set in later. It always did. But he knew he could hold it at bay until he was alone.

He looked at Swede. "You sure you want to tag along with me? This is only the start."

"Damned right I do."

"Then I suggest you get some shuteye. I figure on pulling out at dawn."

"Sure, boss." He grinned. "We'll drive those buzzards clean out of the state or bury them." He stood up and walked away.

Jason finished his beer and smiled grimly. The odds had lowered. Only two to one now. He motioned for another beer.

When the barkeeper brought it, he was followed by a wiry old man in a buffalo coat. Shrewd eyes gleamed in a face that was as weathered and wrinkled as a burnt boot. Stringy gray hair fell past his shoulders and his ragged gray beard was stained with tobacco juice.

"I'm Buffalo Kinnon. Mind if I sit?"

Jason shoved a chair out with his foot. "Light, old timer."

"You been in these parts before. I recollect you from somewhere."

"I scouted out of Ft. Laramie about five years ago."

The old man bent forward and studied Jason's face. "Nope, warn't you. You got an older brother in the army?"

"No. Come to think of it, Ma had a younger brother who was, though."

The old man chuckled and slapped his knee. "Knew it. Never forget a face, white or red. Captain Callaghan. Yessir, boy, you're the spitting image of him. Best officer I ever scouted for. So you're Michael Callaghan's nevvie. If you was at Ft. Laramie five years ago, you must of just missed each other. He was stationed up in Montana for a while, but he's back at Laramie now."

They talked for a while. Kinnon told stories of his experiences as a scout with Michael Callaghan and of his trapping and buffalo hunting days. He drew Jason out about the take over of his ranch.

"So you aim to get it back. What I'd expect of a Callaghan. Where 'bouts you holed up?"

Jason told the hunter of the cave, and the old hunter nodded. "Up above Bench Lake. I know right where it is. I've trapped all over these mountains. Fact, I got me two-three nice snug little

cabins scattered around through those mountains. Figured on setting out the winter over around Provo, but maybe I'll just take a little pasear up in the Winds."

"You come up that way, you ride careful. That's a mean bunch." Jason yawned and pushed his chair back. "I'm turning in."

It was a cold, bleak morning as Jason and Swede rode away from the station. Flakes of snow, driven by a bitter wind, stung their faces. Jason tied his hat down over his ears with his bandanna. The wind picked up and by the middle of the afternoon, Jason knew they were in trouble. The storm had become a true Wyoming blizzard. Unless they could find shelter, they would die.

Then, out of the blinding storm, Jason heard a woman's cry.

Chapter 5

Jason pulled up, the hairs on the back of his neck quivering, every nerve alert. He heard nothing but the fury of the wind. Maybe it was a cougar. Their scream sounded uncannily like that of a woman. It had to be a cougar. Still, he waited, ears straining.

He brushed away the snow clinging to his eye lashes and tried to peer ahead. The snow was thick as a blanket. Looking back, he could barely make out Swede behind him. He motioned, and waited until Swede rode up beside him.

Leaning over, he shouted over the howling wind. "Did you hear anything?"

The big man shook his head. Jason shrugged. Must have been his imagination. He shook out his lariat and tossed the end of it to Swede and signaled him to fasten it to his saddle horn. He tied the other end around his own horn and gigged Dapple forward.

They had only gone a few yards, when Jason saw a vague movement ahead. He unlimbered his rifle and rode forward warily. A sudden gust of wind whipped the snow aside and in that moment Jason saw them clearly. A two wheeled hand cart lay canted, half on its side while two

black-clad figures struggled to right it. Then the white curtain of snow descended again, blotting them out.

Sheathing his rifle, Jason rode forward. The fury of the storm covered the sound of their approach, and they were upon the two figures before they were seen.

Jason was startled and appalled at the strangers' reaction. Instead of grateful relief, their expressions held utter terror. They cowered against the cart, arms covering their heads.

Their obvious terror bewildered and irritated Jason. He dismounted and stalked forward. Without speaking, he took in the broken wheel and the spilled cart. He motioned to Swede and then turned to face the cowering couple. It was sheer stupidity to be trying to push a handcart through this country, particularly at this time of year, and Jason had never had much patience with stupidity. He spoke more roughly than intended. "Stand up, damn it. What the hell are you doing out here in that contraption?"

They straightened slowly, continuing to stare at Jason, their eyes dark with fear. Some devil within prodded him. "Stop looking like that. Anybody would think we were wild Indians or something. Who are you?"

The man jerked off his wide brimmed flat hat and approached Jason warily. He was a small

man with a full black beard and ear curls. His brown eyes were as big and sad looking as those of a hound dog, but he held himself in rigid dignity. "I am Avram Kleinfeld. We are going to San Francisco but the wheel has come off, as you can see. We are trying to fix it."

It was Swede who answered. "Hell, ain't no way this can be fixed. The axle's broken and the hub is split."

Jason walked over to where Swede was examining the cart. It only took a glance to see that Swede was right. His first thought was to ride on and leave them, but knew he couldn't. He'd have to take them with him. The last damn thing he needed was to be saddled with two helpless greenhorns. He turned back to Kleinfeld.

"No way to repair this. You'll have to leave it and come with us."

"No. No. This is all we own. We cannot just leave it," the old man wailed, tugging at his beard.

"Look, you try to stay here and you'll die. This blizzard can last for days. We got to find shelter and find it fast."

The old man looked helplessly at the cart, then back to Jason. "But we can't just leave everything here. Besides, where will we go? We have seen no farms, nor would anyone take us

in."

"There ain't no farms in a hundred miles. We got to make our own shelter and there's no time to waste."

"Please, mister. We must take a few things. Come, Papa." The girl stepped forward, placing a hand on the old man's arm. They were of a height and in the heavy coat and shawl over her head and shoulders, was as shapeless as a sack of meal. Only her voice was young. She looked imploringly up at Jason. "We must have a few things."

"Okay, but we can't carry much. Hurry it up. If you've got any food in that cart, you'd better pack it. Blankets, too."

"Thank you. We'll hurry. Come, Papa."

She climbed into the cart and pulled out several blankets. As she rummaged through the their belongings, the old man moaned continually, but didn't protest again. When she had all Jason thought they could carry, he stopped her.

"That's all the horses will carry." He eyed the girl's pinched face. "Your Pa got an extra pair of pants?"

She looked at him in bewilderment and nodded.

"Good. Put them on."

The old man lunged forward like a spring coming unwound and threw an arm around the girl, placing himself between them. "My daughter is a good girl. She does not wear men's pants. What you say is an insult."

Jason swore softly and fought for patience. "Look at the bottom of her skirt. Half an hour with that wet cloth against her skin and she'll likely lose her legs to frostbite. Besides, she's going to have to ride astride. The pants will reduce the chafing." He looked past the old man and met the girl's eyes. "Choice is yours, Ma'am."

Their gaze locked, then she looked shyly down. Patting her father on the arm, she climbed back into the cart, located the trousers and disappeared behind the cart. She reappeared, head down, stuffed the wet skirt into one of the bundles and picked them up. Jason took them from her and tied them on top of the mares' packs.

Swede swung into the saddle and extended a hand to the girl, pulling her up behind him. Jason mounted and pulled the old man onto Dapple's rump. He reined in beside Swede.

"If I haven't lost my bearings, there is a grove of trees a couple miles northwest of here. If we can make it, we'll hole up there till this blows over."

They fought their way through the wall of blowing snow. Jason lost all sense of time. The raging storm and the cold dulled his body and his mind. Only dogged determination and the certain knowledge that they would die if they stopped before they found shelter kept him going.

He jerked back to full awareness when Dapple stepped off a bank and pitched forward into a snow-filled draw. The old man toppled into the snow, almost dragging Jason with him. Jason struggled to keep Dapple from falling. When the big horse had regained his footing at the bottom, Jason dismounted and helped Kleinfeld back up into the saddle. The old man eyes were unfocused and dull and he moved in a stiff trance. Jason turned upstream and walked ahead, breaking a trail for the horses. He was staggering with exhaustion when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll break trail for a while," Swede said.

Jason thankfully turned the job over to him and walked behind, leading Dapple. As the stream climbed, the banks grew higher. Soon, they were able to ride beneath the lee bank where the snow drifts were lighter.

Then they were into the trees and Jason located a large deadfall. Tying the horses, he and Swede set to work cutting branches and building a lean-to against a huge root ball. While Jason constructed a movable windbreak that could be shifted if the wind changed, Swede unloaded the

horses and built a fire.

Jason dug out the new coffee pot and spider, filled them with snow and set them over the fire to melt. He dug out a slab of bacon and handed it to the girl.

"Reckon you can start some grub. Swede and I got to build a windbreak for the horses."

The old man came out of his trance and stared in horror at the bacon, then took it from the girl and handed it back to Jason. "We do not eat this. It is against our religion. We will prepare our own food."

Jason looked at him in disgust. "What kind of religion won't let a man eat when there's food?"

There was fear and a kind of weary desperation in the old man's look, but there was also a quiet dignity as he replied quietly, "We are Jews. The meat of swine is forbidden to us. But we thank you for your generosity. My daughter will be happy to prepare anything that is not forbidden."

Jason stuffed the bacon back in the pack and pulled out some of the jerky. He tried to stifle the irritation and antipathy he felt for the couple. He tossed the jerky to the old man.

"Anything in your religion against beef?"

Kleinfeld hesitated, then handed the package to Sarah. "Actually, any flesh that is not killed according to our laws, is forbidden. However, I think we can make an exception in these

circumstances."

Jason stomped out to help Swede rig some protection for the horses. When the horses were safely huddled in the lee of the windbreak, the two men staggered back to the shelter. The smell of hot coffee and cooking food greeted them. Jason dug out a couple of mugs and filled them from the coffeepot. They sat huddled around the fire, warming their frozen hands on the tin mugs.

Jason's attention was drawn to the young woman and he watched her silently as she worked over the fire. She worked quietly and efficiently. This surprised him and then he wondered briefly why it should. Most women this far west had long since learned to cook over a campfire. The spider and a kettle were bubbling away, sending up a delightful aroma that soon had his mouth watering and his stomach rumbling.

When the meal was ready, Sarah served then a savory stew from the spider. Then filling two bowls from the other kettle, she retired to the back corner with her father, where they ate in silence.

Swede was the first to break the silence. "By golly, that was good eating," he said as he refilled his plate from the spider. He lifted the lid on the other kettle. "What is this red soup? It sure smells good."

Sarah said, with a shy smile, "It is called borscht. Would you like to try some?" She rummaged

in their pack and pulled out two bowls. Filling them, she handed them each one.

Thinking of the tales he had heard about Jews, Jason eyed the bowl suspiciously. His reaction was not lost on Sarah. She stiffened and looked at him with mild contempt. "It is made with beets, not blood."

"Sarah!" her father said, shooting Jason a look of apprehension. "Where are you manners? That is no way to talk."

Sarah shrugged her shoulders scornfully and sat down beside her father.

Embarrassed and a little ashamed, Jason tasted the soup. He was surprised at the deliciously tangy taste. "Hey, this is good."

"Yah, boss. This lady sure knows how to cook." Swede grinned good-naturedly at the Kleinfelds. "Where you folks come from?"

"We come originally from Germany but our family has lived many years in the Ukraine."

"How come you to leave and come here?"

Jason saw a shadow pass over Kleinfeld's face and Sarah turn her face away at Swede's innocent question. He wondered what they were running from, then brushed the thought aside. Half the population of the west was running from something. A man's past didn't matter here. A

man was judged on what he did, not who or what he had been.

Finally Kleinfeld answered, his voice so low that Jason had to strain to understand the words.

"There was nothing left for us in there."

"What about your family?" Jason asked, vaguely irritated.

"Gone," Kleinfeld replied, simply.

"What do you mean, gone?" Jason asked, his voice more brusque than he intended.

"Dead. That's what he means." Sarah said, her voice husky. Her eyes filled with tears. "Killed in a pogrom. Our whole village was wiped out. Like you, the good Christians of the neighboring village, thought we drank the blood of children. So they came, early one morning, and killed everyone; men, women, children, even babies and grandmothers. Slaughtered us as you slaughter your swine." Her voice broke in a sob.

"Hush, Sarah, hush." The old man cradled the weeping girl in his arms. He looked apologetically across the fire at Jason. "Only the few who were not in the village at the time survived. Sarah and I had gone to Minsk to replenish our trade goods. It is not easy for one so young to accept or forget such a happening."

Jason and Swede stared at each other in horror and disbelief as Kleinfeld tried to quiet the girl's

tears.

"You mean a mob just came in and wiped out a whole town?" Jason asked, incredulous. "Where the hell was the sheriff or the army?"

Kleinfeld looked at him tolerantly. "There are no sheriffs in the Ukraine. As for the army, those who did not participate simply looked the other way. This was not something new, it happens to Jews all of the time in Poland and Russia."

"But doesn't the government protect you?"

"No. It is handy for the government to have the Jews to blame whenever there is famine or depression or other problems in the country."

"I can't believe what you are saying." He hadn't meant to call the old man a liar. In this country, where a man's word was his bond, calling a man a liar was a killing offence. Hastily, he retreated. "Not that I'm calling you a liar. But, surely the churches would raise hell, I mean...."

Kleinfeld gave a bitter laugh. "In eastern Europe, the churches consider it an act of faith to kill a Jew."

Jason shook his head in disbelief. Things like that just did not happen. The old guy had to be making it up. Besides, there was something about their subservient attitude that seemed to bring

out the cruelty in a man. Probably, he thought, it wasn't all that bad. A bunch of toughs just beat up a few of these fellows and it was likely their own fault for not fighting back.

Jason poured himself another cup of coffee and sat back. It was Swede who continued the conversation.

"So you decided to come to America. This is a great country. We came over from Sweden when I was just a kid. Here a man can do whatever he wants to. You'll like it here." He thought a moment, then asked, "How come you trying to push a cart all the way to San Francisco? It can't be done."

"In the Ukraine, we were peddlers. Always, we have pushed a cart over the country, selling our wares to the villagers and farmers. In Philadelphia, we heard of some people called Mormons who had pushed carts across this country. So, if they could do it, why not us. Pushing a cart is not a new thing for us."

"Yah, but this is a bigger country."

Kleinfeld grimaced, then nodded in agreement. "Much bigger than we expected. It has taken us the better part of a year to come this far. Surely it cannot be much farther to San Francisco."

Jason's head came up and he glared at the old man. "Mister, you can just forget about San

Francisco. If you was to make it over this pass, you'd still be facing a stretch of the driest, most miserable desert you've ever seen. No water, just alkali dust and heat."

"But there is a lake. We heard there was a huge lake just over these mountains."

"Oh, there's a lake all right. A salt lake. The water's so salty you can't even sink in it." Jason rolled a cigarette and lit it before he continued. "Even saying you did make it across the desert, there's still the Sierra Nevada mountains to cross. Hell, one party had to resort to cannibalism to make it. That's if you aren't killed and scalped by Indians."

He leaned back and looked at their faces. "Anyway, all that's beside the point. That storm out there has buried that cart of yours so deep it won't be found till spring thaw. Nope, no way you're going to get to California till spring."

The Kleinfelds sat in stunned silence as Jason's words sank in. It was Sarah who voiced what was in both of their minds. "But what are we going to do?"

"Only thing you can do. You'll have to come with us."

He tossed the cigarette in the fire and went out to check the horses. He stood, stroking the big stallion's nose, cursing himself. *Your big mouth's sure got you in trouble now. What the hell are you going to do with a girl and an old man?* This was a responsibility he sure as hell didn't need.

Chapter 6

They huddled in the lean-to for two days while the storm raged around them. Sarah and Swede took turns with the cooking. The Kleinfelds huddled together in a corner of the lean-to and Jason ignored them as much as he could. He clung to his patience, knowing there was nothing he could do, but worry over Wiley added to his frustration.

On the third morning, Jason awoke and immediately sensed a change. It was quiet. Quiet and cold. He crawled out of his blankets, jerked on his boots and hurriedly built up the fire. Shaking with cold, he pulled his boots off and dived back into the blankets. He burrowed down until only his eyes showed. Glancing across the fire and saw that the girl was awake. The laughter sparkling in her eyes surprised him and made him aware that he had been beetling around in his longjohns. Embarrassed, he rolled over and hunched even lower into the blankets, waiting for the lean-to to warm. Damn the girl.

He knew it had to be well below zero, but at least the snow and wind had stopped. The snow crunched loudly in the stillness as he walked out to relieve himself and check the horses. The cold

air stung his nose and made his eyes water.

He heard a step behind him and turned to see Sarah. She was staring down the hillside at the pristine snow that stretched as far as the eye could see. The pines, flocked with white, resembled stately matrons dressed for a ball. Bare branches, encased in ice, glistened like rows of diamonds as the first rays of the sun struck them.

As Jason walked up to her, she turned. Gazing up at him, her face glowing, her eyes soft and luminous, she murmured, "It's so beautiful."

For some reason, the innocence and joy in her face irritated him. "Yeah. Beautiful. Get some grub started, then get packed. We got to get going."

He turned abruptly from the hurt that flickered briefly across her face before she turned away. Disgusted with himself, he stomped into the shelter and nudged Swede awake with his foot. "Let's go. Snow's stopped and we got to make tracks. Looks like there's better than two feet of snow on the ground, more where it's drifted. Reckon we'd better rig a sled for the supplies."

While Sarah cooked breakfast, Jason and Swede cut down a couple of young lodgepole pines and Swede shaped runners while Jason cut branches for the bed.

They made short work of breakfast. Jason shot Sarah a look of disgust as he swallowed the

mush, his taste buds longing for bacon. She returned his look, her face bland. But Jason didn't miss the tiny spark of laughter in her eyes as she lowered her eyelids. He decided he didn't like her at all.

Jason loaded the supplies on the sled while Swede fitted blankets on the pack saddles to make more comfortable seats for the Kleinfelds. Jason glared as Swede helped Sarah into the makeshift saddle with old world courtesy. "Come on, old man," he growled as he helped Kleinfeld to mount.

The going was slow as Jason led out, seeking the best trail. Frequently, they had to dismount and to take turns walking ahead, breaking the trail for the horses. After a quick break for coffee and jerky, Kleinfeld insisted on taking a turn at breaking trail. In less than an hour, the old man was staggering with exhaustion and Jason made him get back on the mare. It was cold, grueling work and by evening, they were all exhausted.

They ate quickly, huddled around the fire for warmth. Jason checked the horses and stood for a moment studying the mountains. He called Swede out. "We'll turn up into the mountains tomorrow, probably about noon. You ever used snowshoes?"

Swede hearty laugh echoed through the night. "Hell, yes, boss. I was practically born on a pair. Why do you ask?"

"We start up those mountains, tomorrow, it's going to be hard on the mares. We won't be able to use the sled. I figure to put those two on our horses and we'll have to walk. Snowshoes would make it a sight easier."

"You're right, Boss. I seen some willows over by the creek. I'll fetch some."

While the willow branches warmed, Jason sipped coffee and considered the country they would have to cross to reach the cave. The crossing between the lakes would be the shortest, but it would also take them closer to the ranch than Jason thought safe. In the snow, they would leave a trail even a blind man could follow. A trail that would lead straight to their hideout. He couldn't risk that, he decided. Not with Wiley in the shape he was in and now the old man and the girl. No, they would have to go over the ridge the same way he had come out. It would be a damned hard ride, especially for the girl.

He stole a glance at her, watching her hands as she cleaned the cooking utensils. They were slender with long tapering fingers and though red and chapped he noted how strong and graceful they were. He lifted his gaze. Her face was pinched and drawn from the cold, but her eyes were alive with a hint of laughter in their depths. He glanced quickly away. What did she have to be happy about?

Shadows still clung to the mountainside as they struggled through drifts towards the ridge. Jason leading, followed by the Kleinfelds. Swede brought up the rear.

It was past midday when they stopped to rest the horses before heading up into the mountains. Sarah quickly threw together a hot meal while Jason, Swede and Avram Kleinfeld unloaded the sled and repacked the supplies on the mares. They ate quickly and struggled on through the snow, following Jim Creek south of Salt Lick Mountain.

They camped that night just below the crest of a ridge above Porcupine Creek. They found a small park that the wind had blown clean of snow and staked the horses out to graze on the stem-cured grass. Huddled in the lee of a boulder, they ate quickly.

"Swede, I doubt if Corning will have men out in this weather but we'd best not take chances. From now on, we'll post guard."

"You are guarding against wild Indians?" Kleinfeld asked.

"Nope. Indians got more sense than to be out in this weather. We're guarding against the land grabbers that stole Jason's ranch and killed my brother," Swede said.

"So," Avram said, with a sidelong look at Jason. "In this country, too, there are bad men. Why is not your sheriff or your army driving away these men?"

"'Cause, in this country, we stomp our own snakes," Jason snapped, tossing the dregs of his coffee into the fire.

"This is still unsettled country. Ain't no sheriff and the army has all it can do, riding herd on the Indians," Swede explained.

"If you have no ranch, where are we going?" Sarah asked.

"My partner and one of my hands are holed up in a cave over on Bench Lake," Jason said impatiently. What did she expect, a fancy New York hotel? He shrugged the thought away. Why should he feel embarrassed? She and her old man would have died, if he hadn't found them. A warm cave was a hell of a lot better than dying in the snow.

"You are taking us to live in a cave?" Sarah stared at him, her eyes wide and unbelieving.

"For now. Wiley's bad hurt and they were out of grub. As soon as we get back with this load of supplies, I'll be able to do some reconnoitering and make plans. We'll get the ranch back."

"You betcha, boss. You want me to take first watch?"

"I also can watch," Avram said, quietly.

"You! Hell, you probably don't know one end of a gun from the other," Jason said.

"That is true. Never in my life have I held a gun in my hands. However, I could watch and

wake you if anyone approaches."

"Yah, why not, boss? He could take the middle watch."

Jason looked at the old man and shrugged. Why not? It would be the least likely time for an attack. He nodded, rolled into his blankets and was soon asleep.

Their slumbers were not disturbed and the next morning they were on the trail again soon after daylight. They dropped down and followed Porcupine Creek, then cut over a ridge and followed a runoff creek down to the Green River. They crossed the river and camped that night near the bank.

The snow that had been falling fitfully all afternoon stopped but a cold wind howled down the canyon slicing through their clothing. They huddled under a deadfall, too cold to more than doze fitfully.

Jason stayed awake, nursing the small fire. One more day should see them at the cave. Was Wiley still alive? Would he be too late?

A gasp from Sarah brought Jason's head up, his hand reaching for the rifle at his side. Then he relaxed.

"Are they deer?" Sarah asked, "I have never seen ones so big."

"Not deer, elk."

They watched the herd of a dozen or so elk drift silently down the river, pausing occasionally to paw away the snow and graze. When they were out of sight, Jason said, "Better try to get some more sleep. It'll be dawn soon and I want to move out as soon as it's light."

The next morning they headed up the final ridge. Both Kleinfelds had difficulty breathing in the high atmosphere. Even Swede seemed to slow down, tiring easier. They were all weary and frozen when they finally approached the lake below the cave.

A quarter of a mile from the cave, a figure detached itself from the shadow of a tree and stepped forward. Jason pulled up as Toby Lang slid down beside them.

"Seen you from the rocks up there. Took me by surprise. Figured you were Corning's bunch till I recognized your horses. Wasn't expecting company." He eyed the others curiously, his eyes widening as his glance settled on Sarah.

"I'll explain later," Jason snapped. "How's Wiley?"

"He ain't so good but he's still hanging on."

Jason felt his gut twist. Wiley had to make it. "Let's get these supplies unloaded and the horses taken care of."

At the cave, Jason and Swede pulled off their snow shoes with relief. Jason helped Sarah

down and motioned her to go on in the cave.

"Toby, this here is Swede Johanson, Carl's brother. Ran into him at the Station. This other fellow is Avram Kleinfeld and that was his daughter, Sarah. Let's get these supplies inside. Explanations can wait. Did you get any hay cut?"

"Sure did, boss. At least there should be enough for another week or two."

The three men unloaded and carried in the supplies, then rubbed down the horses. As Toby and Swede led them away to the valley where they had left Toby's and Wiley's horses, Jason went inside. Avram followed.

Sarah was already kneeling over the supine Wiley. Jason walked over and knelt beside her. She looked up, her brown eyes worried and a little frightened. "This man is very sick."

Wiley's harsh, stentorian breathing echoed through the cave. He was unconscious and his face flushed with fever. Jason picked up Wiley's wrist and felt for a pulse. It was thin and rapid. He gently brushed a lock of brown hair back and laid his hand on his friend's burning forehead.

Jason felt a light touch on his shoulder and looked up into the sad eyes of the old Jew.

"Your friend is very ill. My daughter knows something of nursing. If you would like, she will do what she can."

Jason turned and looked at Sarah. He read the compassion in her eyes and hastily looked away, ashamed of the way he had been acting. "Do what you can for him," was all he said. He stood, and after another look at Wiley, walked to the mouth of the cave, and stood staring out into the gathering dusk acutely conscious of the woman.

"Papa, bring me the bundle of herbs, then build up the fire and heat some water."

She shed her cumbersome coat and pulled back the blankets to look at the sick man. Avram handed her the package of herbs and stood looking down at her.

"You know he will probably die. If he does, they may kill us. Perhaps I was wrong to say anything."

Sarah shook her head. "No, Papa. It would be wrong to let him die without at least trying. I will do what I can."

"Yes. You must try and I must pray. There is nothing else we can do."

Jason turned back into the cave when Toby and Swede returned. He found Wiley with his head hidden under a tent of canvas and Sarah redressing his wounds. Avram sat swaying in the back of the cave, a shawl over his head, chanting softly.

Toby started a pot of coffee, while Jason walked over and knelt beside the girl. "How is he?"

he asked quietly.

Sarah finished the bandaging and covered Wiley before answering. "He is very ill. It is not the wounds. They are healing and there is no inflammation. It is his lungs." She looked up at Jason. "I'm afraid that he has pneumonia. I will do what I can, but it is now in God's hands."

"What's that around his head?"

"In the Ukraine, it is a remedy we use. The leaves of the eucalyptus tree are boiled in water and the canvas traps the steam where he can breathe it."

"Will it help?"

She looked at him, her large eyes luminous and sad, and slowly shook her head. "I don't know. Sometimes it seems to help, not always. We can only wait and see."

"Well, then I guess that's what we'll have to do. Can't you get your father to shut up that singing?"

Jason felt the blood rush to his face as she answered in a low voice, "He is praying for your friend."

Jason could think of no reply. He stood up abruptly and stalked back to the fire. He hunkered down and poured a cup of coffee, avoiding the eyes of Toby and Swede. He felt like an ass. He

poked viciously at the fire. He did not understand why he felt so antagonistic towards the Kleinfelds. Hell, he had worked around Mexicans a lot and some of the best punchers he knew were Negroes. He had never felt this hostility towards them.

He rolled a cigarette and snapped at Toby, "You gonna fix some grub or not?"

Toby looked at him in surprise. "Why sure, boss."

Toby rummaged through the supplies and pulled out a slab of bacon.

"No, not bacon. Fix something else."

Puzzled, Toby replaced the bacon. "Reckon there's enough venison left to make a stew."

By the time they had eaten, Jason was in a better mood. Sarah had taken her father a bowl of the stew and had eaten hers sitting beside Wiley. The three men sat back, smoking.

"Gosh, boss, this 'baccy sure is good. I been out for days," Toby said as he lit up. "What are we going to do now?"

"Reckon we'll start planning to get our ranch back. Swede, I want you to stay here and guard the camp. Toby, tomorrow, you and I will go take a look-see. I want to know just how many men Corning has and how the cattle are handling this snow. Reckon we'll be gone at least a couple of days. I'll take first watch, then you, Toby, then Swede." He glanced at the old man. "Kleinfeld can

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stand the last watch."

Chapter 7

Sarah watched the two men depart with apprehension. In spite of Jason's antagonistic attitude, she somehow felt safe in his company. Intuitively, she felt he was a good man. In Swede she saw, not his slow good nature, but one of the Ukranian peasants who had so frequently attacked her people.

She sat huddled quietly next to her father in the back of the cave. Her heart raced in terror when Swede arose and looked towards them. In the confines of the cave, he loomed like a giant over them.

"I'll be up in the rocks." As if sensing her fear, he smiled suddenly. "You'll be safe if you stay in here. Some of that beet soup sure would be good, come night."

Her father sighed and patted her hand. "I think he, too, is a good man."

As soon as Swede left the cave Sarah went to Wiley. He was still unconscious and feverish, but she thought his breathing sounded a little easier. She put more eucalyptus leaves to boil.

"Father, may I have your nightshirt? I'm sure he would rest easier in something clean." As

Avram handed her the shirt, she asked, "Will you help me?"

By the time they had Wiley bathed and in the nightshirt, the leaves were boiling. Sarah arranged the canvas tent over his head again and sat back. "Do you think he will live, father?"

"You are doing all you can, child. Leave it now in God's hands."

She sat beside Wiley, reheating the herb potion whenever it stopped steaming. Finally, restless, she set to work sorting and stacking the provisions. When that was done, she used some of their few remaining beets to make the borscht and set it near the fire to simmer. The spicy smell of cooking soon permeated the cave.

She sat gazing into the flames, going over in her mind all of the things she had experienced since leaving her home. On the whole, she decided she liked America. There was such a feeling of vitality, of change and opportunity in this land. Such freedom. So little persecution. It was all so new and unbelievable that it had frightened her for the first few months.

Now she felt only a wild exhilaration. These magnificent mountains awakened a desire in her. A desire to stay, to conquer them. Instead of frightening her, she drew strength from them. They gave her a feeling of confidence and worth. Life here might be rough, even dangerous, but it would

be a noble struggle. Looking out across the little lake, she felt a quickening inside. Her thoughts drifted to Jason.

He was a strong man. Was that why he held them in such contempt? Not because they were Jews but because he thought they were weak?

"Sarah. Come."

Her father's voice broke into her thoughts and she scrambled to where he sat beside Wiley.

Wiley was tossing fitfully, his hands tearing feebly at the canvas tent. Hurriedly she stripped it away and bent forward. She picked up a dampened cloth and began to gently pat the hot brow and dampen the fever-parched lips. His eyes fluttered open and she found herself gazing into his deep blue eyes.

"He...brought me...an angel," Wiley whispered. He struggled to sit up.

"Please, you must lie still. You are very sick. Please." She pushed him gently down.

"I...told Jason to...bring...me back a...pretty nurse. He brought...me...an angel," Wiley said, never taking his eyes from hers.

"Please, don't talk," Sarah said, blushing deeply. "Try to sleep. You are still very sick."

"You...won't...go away, will you?"

"No. I will be here when you wake up. Please go to sleep, now."

Wiley drifted in and out of a feverish sleep the rest of the day. Avram relieved Swede in the afternoon. Sarah left Wiley just long enough to give him food. After he had eaten, he came over and squatted beside her, looking at the sick man.

"My brother, Carl, said Wiley was the best boss he'd ever had," he waved a big hand towards the sick man. "You reckon he's going to die?"

"I hope not," she murmured. "He needs a doctor. I don't know anything else to do for him."

She trembled as Swede brushed her arm when he leaned forward to pull the blanket tighter under Wiley's chin. If he sensed her fear, he gave no notice. After a moment, he moved to the back of the cave. She didn't relax until he was snoring in his blankets.

She fed Swede again before he went out to relieve her father and was both surprised and gratified when he complemented her on the soup. His voice was so gentle and warm that her fear of him fled.

During the night, Wiley's temperature rose still higher. Listening to his feverish ravings, Sarah learned a great deal about his lonely life in west Texas, the death of his family in an Indian raid, his longing for a place of his own, even his shyness with women. As she nursed him, she felt her

heartstrings plucked.

Frightened by the feeling, she looked at his pale, pain-racked face and tried to see an enemy, or at least a threatening stranger but she could not. She could picture him as a laughing chubby baby but not as an oppressor. He was a gentile, an enemy. Wasn't he? She knew suddenly, that it didn't matter, that she wanted him to live more than anything in her whole life. She felt inextricably drawn to him. Without thought, she reached out and took his hand, clasping it tightly, willing him to live.

Avram woke and urged her to rest but she only shook her head. Her joints ached from the cold, her back bowed in weariness but she could not relinquish Wiley's hand. It was as though she could feel his spirit fluttering and only her grasp kept it from slipping away. When Swede came in, she hardly noticed his presence.

Towards dawn, Wiley's fever broke. His breathing quieted and he fell into a natural, healing sleep. Weary beyond belief, she sat, giving thankful prayers. She was barely aware when Swede lifted her gently to her feet.

"Go and sleep. I will sit with him now."

She rolled into a blanket and was asleep before her head more than touched the sack of flour

she was using for a pillow.

When she awoke several hours later, Avram was sitting by the still sleeping invalid. Worry sent her scrambling out of the blanket, but Avram held up his hand. "His fever is gone and he is sleeping naturally. Eat, child."

She poured a cup of coffee and made herself eat. An unfamiliar aroma assailed her and lifted the lid on the pot simmering by the fire. She stirred it and discovered beans cooking with bacon. She looked inquiringly at her father.

"Swede made that before he went on guard. Said it had to cook all day."

She got out the meal and made a gruel, leaving it close to the fire to keep it warm.

"You had better get some rest, Papa. I will sit with him, now." She carried her coffee over and sat beside the sleeping figure as Avram sought his blankets.

She was dozing lightly when a slight movement awakened her. She opened her eyes to find Wiley's blue eyes fixed on her.

"So I wasn't dreaming," he said, his eyes still feverishly bright. "Jason... really...did bring me an...angel."

Her heart raced and she felt herself responding to his weak smile with one of her own. "Hardly

an angel, sir."

"You...look like one...to me. What's your name?"

"Sarah Kleinfeld. Do you think you could eat a little something?"

"Darned right. Fact is, I'm so...hollow I could probably...hold a whole hog."

Sarah had to help him to sit up using his saddle for a backrest, then dished up a bowl of the gruel. The exertion of moving, had sweat running down his forehead and he was too weak to hold the bowl. She fed him a spoonful and grinned as he gave her a look of disgust.

"What's...this? Tastes worse...than...than dandelion stew."

"Come now, it is better that you have something light at first."

"Ain't eating...carn-sarned...baby pap." He tried to push the bowl away. "How...do you expect me...to get my strength...without some...victuals in...my belly?"

"Well, if you eat this for me first, I will fix you whatever you would like."

At his mournful look, she couldn't keep from giggling. He looked at her reproachfully. "Ain't...no way...for an angel...to treat...pore sick man."

"But I am not an angel and I made it especially for you," she quipped back, then flushed deeply. She couldn't believe she was actually flirting with this man.

As she fed him, she tried not to notice the sprinkling of freckles across his nose or the way a lock of hair fell across his forehead. She felt the heat rise in her face whenever their glances met. His warm, admiring gaze made her uncomfortably aware of herself as a woman. She hadn't felt this shy and uncertain in years.

"Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?" she asked when he finished the bowl.

He grinned weakly. "You sure are a slave driver. Didn't know angels could be so mean. Reckon you were right...seems I'm a mite weaker than I thought."

She helped him to lie back down, her heart fluttering at the feel of his body under her hands.

"Sleep for awhile. You'll feel better when you wake up."

"Yes, ma'am. You won't...forget your promise?"

"No. What would you like to eat when you wake up?"

"How 'bout...a pound of bacon...fried up nice and crisp...and...and a bunch of biscuits...and...."

His voice faded as he drifted off to sleep. Sarah sat holding his hand and looking at him tenderly. How like a little boy he was.

Jason and Toby worked their way around the side of the mountain and dropped down to where they had a good view of the valley. The snow was not as deep here in the valley as it had been on the pass. Still, it was obvious that the cattle were beginning to suffer. They were spread out, bawling. Only a few were pawing the snow for feed and were finding barely enough for subsistence.

"If Corning doesn't move them cattle down to a lower range, he's gonna lose most of them in the next snow," Toby said.

"Looks like he's already lost a few," Jason said, nodding towards a couple of carcasses near the river. "Let's see if we can work over nearer the ranch. I want to get an idea of how many men he's got and where he's working them."

They spent most of the rest of the day working their way around the valley, trying to stay under cover and hide their back trail. It was late afternoon when they found a spot to camp that gave them a good view of the headquarters.

Stretched out under a low growing pine, Jason studied the bunkhouse and barn through a pair of binoculars he had bought off an officer at Ft. Laramie five years before. He watched for over an hour before he saw the first signs of life. A man came out of the barn, crossed to a pile of wood and

set to work splitting kindling. Jason watched him carry an armload to the bunkhouse and kick on the door with his foot. A woman opened the door and they both disappeared inside.

A few minutes later, the man came out and gathered another armload of wood and returned to the barn. Puzzled, Jason turned the glasses on the barn and studied it carefully. After a moment, he spotted where a hole had been cut in the end of the barn and a stove pipe extended out and up, a thin trickle of smoke drifting lazily in the cold air. Obviously Corning had relegated his crew to quarters in the barn. He wondered how they were liking that kind of accommodations. Not much, if he knew cowhands.

When he was thoroughly chilled, he crawled back to the fire and let Toby take his place. They alternated between the fire and the lookout the rest of the day. It was dark when the riders came in. Too dark to see how many or what kind of men they were. Jason and Toby took turns on guard through the night.

Jason was back on watch at first light. He saw Corning come out and go to the barn. Not long afterwards, he saw Drayton come out with another man. Jason studied the other man intently as he caught and saddled his horse. He didn't recognize him but he knew the type from the way he wore his holsters. A gunman, for sure. He watched them head out around the lake and felt a little niggles

of worry. Would they find their trail? Backtrack them to the cave?

He shook his head as Corning came out and waited while the man Jason recognized as Curly caught and saddled Corning's horse, then his own. They rode out across the valley towards the herd and were soon out of sight as they followed the river.

The remaining man crossed to the woodpile and repeated the same routine as the night before. When he came out of the house, he pitched hay to the four horses in the big corral and then fed Wiley's white stallion. Jason chuckled as the horse reached over and tried to nip the man.

Jason slipped back to the fire and poured a cup of coffee. "Toby, they've all left but one man. I think he's settled down in the barn. I'm going to try to work my way down to the bunkhouse and talk to the woman. You keep watch up here. If you see any of them coming back before I leave, fire one shot in the air." He pulled the binoculars from around his neck and handed them to Toby. "When you see me leave, head towards that lightening blasted pine. I'll meet you there. If I run into trouble, you light out for the cave."

"Just pull out and leave you?"

"Yeah. Get back to the cave and take care of Wiley and them."

Toby obviously didn't like the idea, but one look at Jason's determined face convinced him not

to argue.

Jason saddled Dapple and worked his way slowly down through the trees. When he was as close as he felt safe, he dismounted and tied Dapple. At the edge of the trees, he hunkered down and studied the ranch yard, selecting a route that would take him out of sight of the barn and the windows of the bunkhouse.

He worked his way slowly down the slope, crawling the last few feet to the corner of the bunkhouse. He stood up and inched his way along the end to the window. Removing his hat, he risked a glance inside.

He saw the woman at once. She was seated at the table with her back to him and he took a moment to study her. Her blond hair was piled fashionably on top of her head and he could see the curve of her cheek as she laid out a game of Patience. There was a restlessness in the way she slapped the cards on the table. An open bottle of liquor and a half-filled glass were at her elbow.

He ducked under the window and to the corner of the building. He peered around but there was no one in sight and the barn door was closed. He ran in a swift crouch to the door. Pausing only for another swift glance at the barn, he drew his pistol, opened the door and stepped inside.

"Don't make a sound," he barked harshly, as the woman jumped up.

She wasn't as young as he had first thought, he decided as he looked at her more closely. She was attractive, all right, but there were lines of discontent around her mouth and a hard look in the too narrow eyes. He decided the barkeep at South Pass Station was right. She did look more like a gambler's doxy than a lady.

"Well, do you plan to shoot me or just stare at me all day? Who are you and what do you want?"

"Sit back down and put your hands on the table where I can see them. I don't make war on women, less'n they force me to. You sit quiet and you won't get hurt."

She sat down and spread her hands on the table. Jason looked around the room. The first thing he noticed was how well the bunkhouse had been built. Although it was big, it was snug and warm. It had been divided into two large rooms.

Along the far wall stood a large cast iron range. On the wall behind it hung a selection of cast iron pots and skillets in various sizes. Along the front wall a long, wide shelf had been built holding an inside pump and stone sink. He noticed that the sink was stacked with unwashed dishes. He glanced at the woman with disgust. She caught the look and made a little moue of distaste.

Fluttering her fingers, she gave him an arch look and said, "Washing dishes is so hard on the

hands. I have no intention on ruining mine."

He looked past her at the back wall. Neat shelves had been built and fitted with doors. He walked past her and opened them, rapidly calculating the supplies they held. Below the shelves were bins filled with potatoes, onions, beans and flour.

He stepped back to the door into the other room. Standing sideways so that he could keep the woman in view, he shot a quick look around. Three bunks lined each side of the room. At the far end, a potbellied stove crackled and popped. Along the inside wall, clothes pegs were neatly arranged, but women's clothes were strung out around the room. He noticed that the two bunks in use were still unmade.

He walked over to the shelves above the sink and found a clean cup. Unhurriedly, he poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot on the range.

"Kinda making yourself at home, aren't you?"

"Reckon I got the right, considering it is my home."

Her face registered surprise, then insolence. "But you couldn't keep it, could you?"

"Reckon I'll have it back before long," Jason said, taking a sip from the cup. "You or your man ever spent a winter in these mountains?"

She looked at him appraisingly. Uncertainty flickered in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"What's your name?" he asked

"Dorinda Corning."

"Well, Dorinda, I think you and your outfit are in for a big surprise. Where are you from?"

"Natchez, if it matters. What kind of surprise? What are you talking about?" She ran the tip of her tongue over her lips. "What do you mean?"

"Natchez under the Hill, more likely. I recognize your stripe. Who owns them cattle?"

Her eyes flashed and her fingers curled like talons. "Listen, mister, I don't have to take your crap. My husband already run you out once and he'll do it again. When he gets back, he'll have Dutch Muller kill you for this."

"Dutch Muller, huh. Can't he do his own killing? Now you just sit back and listen. I got a message for your husband and you better give it to him. First off, I ain't leaving. This is my spread and I aim to have it back. If he's got the sense God gave a goose, he'll start pushing those cattle out tomorrow. If he don't, he's gonna lose every damn one of them."

"Hah. You talk mighty big. You think you can just take them away, you're crazy."

"I won't have to, the weather will do it for me. Another two weeks and this valley will be three

to six feet under snow and it won't be gone much before May. Why I've seen it snow up here in June. This is high country, too high to winter cattle unless you know what you're doing."

"You're lying. You're just trying to scare us into leaving," she said, snapping the words. She leaned back, lips twisted in derision. "If what you're saying were true, you wouldn't have built a ranch here. Why, Wes picked this place to take over because he'd heard in Denver and Ft. Laramie about how smart you are. Guess you aren't as smart as he thought you were."

Jason shook his head. "I'm not lying. There's just a couple of things your man didn't take into account in his scheming. I'm not planning to try to raise cattle here, not yet. I figure to raise horses. Second, I didn't bring in a herd of horses 'cause I knew there wouldn't be any way to hold them over the winter without storing up plenty of feed."

"You got feed. I heard Wes and John Drayton talking. You got to have hay cut somewheres. They're out looking for it now and they'll find it."

"Dorinda, there ain't enough hay cut to last them cattle a week. Now, I'm not rightly what you could call a patient man. You tell Corning he's got three days to get them cattle started off my range. Three days and then I come looking for him."

Jason carried the empty cup over and put it in on the stack of dirty dishes.

What Jason said had scared her. He could read her face as if she was speaking out loud. If they did lose the herd, they would lose everything.

"Wait," she said. Summoning up a smile, she reached out a hand invitingly. "Perhaps, we could talk this over some more."

Jason looked at her, letting his gaze travel over her body and come to rest on her face. She flinched at the contempt in his eyes.

"We got nothing more to talk about. You give my message to your...husband. Now, go to the door and call that cowhand in here. You do it real nice or I'm just likely to mark up that face of yours with this gun barrel."

He stepped back where he would be out of sight when she opened the door. She hesitated a moment and Jason saw the hate in her eyes. He raised the gun towards her face. She swept the door open and called. She had to call several times, before the man came out of the barn.

"Tell him to bring another load of wood,"

"Jim, bring me another load of wood," she called.

"Okay, now step back the other side of the table and keep you mouth shut."

As the man stepped through the door carrying the wood, Jason moved forward and brought his

gun barrel down on his head. He dragged him farther into the room, tossing the kindling aside. In the bunk room, he found a coil of rope and tied him up.

Holstering his gun, he rapidly filled an empty grain sack with potatoes, onions and cans of fruit from the pantry shelves.

At the door, he turned and looked at Dorinda. "Clean this place up before you leave. I don't care much for moving in after a bunch of pigs."

He shut the door and dashed around the end of the bunkhouse and up the slope to Dapple. He mounted and walked the horse through the trees until he neared the end of the barn. He trotted the big horse to the barn door. Dismounting, he drew his gun again and pushed open the big door. Stepping in, he saw where one corner had been partitioned off for the crew.

He approached the door quietly. He listened a moment but heard nothing. Throwing the door open, he took a quick glance around the empty room. Hurriedly built bunks lined one wall, a rough board table with plank benches stood in the center of the room, and an old wood range along the outside wall did double duty for cooking and heating.

Closing the door, he walked back and led Dapple into the barn. He soon found what he was looking for. One of the stalls was filled with sacks of grain. He heaved one up behind the saddle

and tied it there. Mounting, he rode out of the barn.

As he crossed the yard, the bunkhouse door flew open. He saw Dorinda raise her arm, saw the derringer in her hand. Touching the spurs to Dapple, he threw himself forward and the bullet sailed harmlessly over his head. Before she could get him in her sights again, the big horse had carried him around the corner and out of sight.

Safe in the trees, he slowed the horse and patted his neck. "That's a mighty mad woman back there," he told the big horse with a laugh.

Jason found Toby waiting at the blasted pine. He handed him the sack of grub.

"You was in there so long, I was beginning to get worried," Toby said.

"Figured I might as well pick up a few things we could use. That grub there and a sack of grain for the horses. With the riding we're going to be doing, they'll need it."

Chapter 8

Drayton and Muller split off from the rest of the group, rode around the lower lake and into the mountains. Muller took the lead and soon drifted out of sight, Drayton rode slowly, his gaze searching the terrain. He was more interested in finding feed for the cattle than in hunting down Locke. While his eyes never stopped looking, his thoughts were elsewhere.

Drayton had his first doubts about Corning when the man had insisted on bringing his wife and that damned surrey on the drive. And that fancy tent. Most trail bosses slept with the men, but not Corning. The chuck wagon was ancient and continually breaking down and the cookie, well, less said about him the better. He'd certainly been no loss when he went back to Texas. The trail hands had been only too happy to take their time and leave as soon as the herd was thrown on the grass.

Another thought nagged at him. Why had Corning sold almost the entire remuda? The remuda hadn't been big enough to begin with; on a drive like the one they had made from Texas,

each rider should have had at least ten mounts, not the five that Corning had provided. True, the horses were in bad shape, but a few weeks of rest and feed would have put most of them back in shape. Corning would have to pay a hell of a lot more to replace them in the spring. He shrugged. That was Corning's business.

It hadn't taken Drayton long to realize that Corning knew little or nothing about cattle. He'd always prided himself on his loyalty. When he took a man's money, he rode for the brand and did whatever was necessary. He'd taken Corning's money but he was beginning to feel troubled.

Somehow, Corning just didn't shape up square. Drayton had never been given to deep reflection, but now he began to wonder just where his loyalty should lie. Absently, he ran a hand over his thick mustache. The whole deal was beginning to smell worse than a polecat in a rainstorm.

Drayton's thoughts shifted to Jason Locke. The incident with Locke hadn't set well at all. Locke hadn't looked like a nester that had squatted on land belonging to Corning's English backers. During the fist fight, Drayton had begun to wonder just what kind of game Corning was playing. It went against the grain to leave any man afoot and without supplies, which was why he had ordered the boys to saddle Locke's horse and drive off the stock, rather than taking them.

And Locke hadn't left. Corning had been so sure of himself. That in itself puzzled Drayton. Corning had said that he had met Locke and that he was just a down at the heels squatter who would run at the first show of force. Either Corning was no judge of men or... Drayton frowned. Was that why Corning kept Muller? To hunt down and kill Locke?

If so, Muller had better watch himself. Locke struck him as being tougher than a wounded grizzly and smarter than a lobo wolf.

He cast an anxious glance at the sky. They had to find hay and find it fast or move the herd out.

In the cave, Sarah brushed a lock of hair from Wiley's forehead and turned her thoughts to the food she had promised. What were biscuits?

She walked out of the cave and looked up towards the rocks above. In a moment Swede appeared and climbed down.

"There is something the matter? Wiley is worse?"

"No, no. He is much better. He woke up and ate some gruel. He is sleeping again now. I think he will get well. I was wondering, do you know what are--biscuits?"

He looked at her, then laughed. "Sure. You want I should show you how to make them?"

"Would you please? Wiley asked for them."

Swede showed her how to make them and then went back to the ridge when she settled the Dutch oven in the coals. She was slicing bacon into the spider when Avram woke up.

"Sarah, what is this you are doing? Bacon. A daughter of mine is preparing bacon?"

His shocked tone sent a wave of shame through her. Still, she steeled herself and looked at him. "Yes, Papa. In order to get Wiley to eat the gruel, I promised to fix him what he wanted when wakes again. I...I didn't know...didn't think about his asking for bacon." Her chin came up. "I promised."

"Nu, and I suppose you will eat it with him. What kind of daughter have I raised?" He shook his head. "What would your mother say?"

"No, Papa. You know I wouldn't! Papa, we owe these man our lives. I think that it is only right that I prepare for them the food that they eat."

She extended a pleading hand toward him, but he turned his face away.

"Do not touch me with the hands that have handled swine." He backed away, pain and revulsion lining his face.

Sarah dropped the knife, grabbed her coat and ran out of the cave. Not wanting Swede to see her tears she slipped quickly between the trees and around the edge of the outcropping that hid the cave.

She felt shamed by her father's words and emotionally torn. Could she really be attracted to this man, this stranger, this...this gentile? How could a pair of blue eyes twist her heart so? No. No. No. It was wrong! She walked faster. How could one pair of warm laughing eyes make her forget, even for a moment, what gentiles had done to her family, her people? They were cruel, deceitful. Not Wiley, her heart told her. Yes, even Wiley argued her mind.

For seventeen of her eighteen years, her life had been infixed by the tenets of her religion. Its laws prescribed the very fabric of her daily life. Now that fabric was beginning the shred. In the past year there had been so many new experiences, new thoughts, new ideas buffeting her. So many things to confuse and disorient her. Now this strange experience, these new feelings. What was happening to her?

The blood rushed to her face as she thought of Wiley then drained away as her father's angry

face floated before her. It seemed her whole life was being torn apart and shifted like the pieces in a kaleidoscope. She no longer knew who or what she was.

Unaware of the snow soaking her feet or of how far she was walking, she stumbled along immersed in her own distress.

"Well, now ain't this something. A pretty little prairie chicken just looking to be plucked."

The harsh voice sent a terror through her that drove out all other thoughts. She stared up into the cruel, bearded face, frozen with fear as the man dismounted. She backed away as he reached for her; screamed as a dirty glove clamped over her shoulder. She screamed again as she was pulled against the filthy, stained coat. Fear lent her strength and she got an arm free. Fingers bent like talons, she clawed at his face as it bent over her own. Revulsion filled her as his wet lips covered hers, his tongue forcing open her teeth.

She bit down then gagged as his blood filled her mouth. As his grip slackened, she struggled a step backwards and slipped. Her falling saved her from the full force of the blow as he struck her along side the face. Even so, the blow stunned her and she lay helpless as his rough hands ripped at her coat, tearing it open.

She tried without success to knee him in the crotch. He slapped her again.

"Real feisty, ain't you. Won't be so full of ginger when I get through with you."
She screamed again as his hand clutched at her breast.

Drayton was shocked out of his thoughts by the scream. A woman here? He kicked his horse into a run. Where was Muller? The thought sent a chill up his spine. He charged through the trees, whipping out his pistol as I reined in a few feet from the struggling couple.

"Dutch! Let her go."

The hold on her loosened slightly and she struggled to sit up. She was pushed down again, but rolled away, breaking his grip, and staggered to her feet.

"Hell, Drayton. She ain't nobody. I just figure to have me a little fun."

"Let her go. We don't know who she is or where she came from. We'll take her back to the ranch."

"She's mine. I found her and I'll do what I want with her. You figure to stop me?"

Drayton ignored the challenge and kneed his horse closer. "We'll take her to Corning. He's the one who will decide."

"Hell, she may be hooked up with Locke and Carr."

"Don't matter. We take her back to the ranch and let the boss decide. Come over here, girl."

Muller's hand hovered over his gun while hate and caution warred on his face. Finally he shrugged. "This ain't the end of this, Drayton."

Drayton ignored the gunman. Reaching down, he swung Sarah up behind him.

Muller mounted and rode off. Drayton turned to the girl and started to speak but the glazed look of terror in her eyes stopped him. Best get her to the ranch fast.

Disgust and anger burned in his belly as he headed down the mountain. Muller was an animal. A hired killer. Why hadn't Corning let him go along with the trail hands? For that matter, why had Corning hired him to begin with?

Like most men in the west, Drayton had been brought up to respect decent women, and he assumed all women belonged to that class unless they showed him different. Now he was shamed and disgusted by Muller's actions. A very deep anger was kindling in him

.

Jason and Toby circled around, riding for a while in the tracks of Drayton, to hide their own. Jason was suddenly anxious to get back to the cave. It was well after dark when they got back and

unsaddled their horses.

Jason knew something was wrong as soon as he entered the cave. Avram was sitting before the fire, his shawl over his head, swaying and moaning.

Jason's glance immediately sought his partner's pallet anxiously. "Wiley?"

The slight figure that detached itself from the shadows wasn't Sarah, but Buffalo Kinnon. The old man walked over to the fire and said, "If you mean your partner, he's doing just fine. His fever's broke and he's on the mend."

Jason had not realized he had been holding his breath. He let it out now in a sigh of relief. "Thank God." He tried to pierce the shadows. "Where's Sarah?"

No one answered for a moment. Avram only moaned louder. It was Buffalo who answered. "She's gone."

"What do you mean, she's gone? Where would she go?"

"Seems she slipped out sometime this afternoon. Swede didn't see her. I found her tracks. Didn't look like she was going anywhere special, just walking."

"If you found her tracks, why didn't you follow her and bring her back?" Jason anger exploded. "Hell, she'll die out there"

"Jason, I did follow her tracks. She's been taken."

"Taken! Indians?" An old dread welled up in him. Old memories.

His little sister had been taken by Indians. He'd been responsible for her the day she had been taken, but he'd been angry. Angry and heedless as only a ten-year-old boy can be. He's stomped away from Cassie, leaving her alone. They'd been less than a quarter of a mile from the house; he'd been sure she would head straight home. Instead, she'd wandered down a wash to pick wild flowers. He hadn't even realized she was missing until after chores that evening. He and his Pa had saddled up and started the search. They'd found the wilted flowers and her cornhusk doll, trampled in the mud by unshod hooves. Three days later, they'd found Cassie. As long as he lived, he'd never forget the sight of her broken, violated little body. A wave of sickness shook him. Was he never able to protect his womenfolk?

Buffalo's voice brought him back to the present. "Not Indians. Two shod horses. I followed them a ways. They headed back towards your ranch. They're part of that bunch down there. I seen the same tracks when I skirted your place coming up here."

Jason turned towards the cave entrance. "We'll have to go after them."

"I reckon," Buffalo said, "but not tonight."

"Why not?"

"Cause we don't know for sure that's where they've taken her. And, 'cause there ain't no moon and I cain't see in the dark. We'll leave out first thing in the morning."

"We've got to get her back. No telling what they've already done to her."

"What's been done has been done, boy. No sense going off half-cocked. We stumble into them, they'll likely kill her, if they've had their pleasure. If not, there's a chance we can get her back tomorrow. Use your head, boy."

Jason shrugged, helplessly. He knew the old man was right.

In the morning, as Jason was throwing together a quick breakfast, he heard Wiley call his name. Hunkering down beside his partner, he was pleased to see that the flush of fever was gone and that his eyes were clear, if worried.

"Bring her back, Jason. She's...she's an angel. I figure to marry her, if'n she'll have me."

"Whoa up, old son, you don't even know the girl. Why...why she's one of them Jew people."

Wiley's hand gripped Jason's wrist. "I don't care. She saved my life. She was sent, Jason, sent just to me."

"Sent, hell! She and her old man were caught in the blizzard, trying to push a damned fool

handcart to San Francisco. If I hadn't found them and dragged them along, they'd be laying out there, frozen stiff."

"That's what I mean. They was sent for you to find and bring here. Yep, it was pure providence. Now you go find her and bring her back. I'm counting on you, Jason. Don't let no harm come to her."

Jason shook his head in disgust. He knew from past experience that there was no arguing with Wiley when he was in this kind of mood. Ninety-nine percent of the time Wiley Carr was as easy going as an old boot, but when he had his mind set on something, Wiley could be as cantankerous as an old Missouri mule.

He looked away, unwilling to meet his partner's eyes. "We'll try, thing is ... well, she's likely to be ... damaged goods."

There was no smile on Wiley's moon face now. "Don't say it, Jason. Don't ever say it. Don't even think it. I heard y'all talking last night. She was taken. She didn't go of her own will. She ain't that kind. Don't you even think that way. Now, you find her and bring her back. She'll need care and tenderness and I aim to provide it."

"Wiley--"

"You just find her."

Jason forced a smile. "Okay. We're heading out as soon as it's light enough to track. I'll bring the girl back to you, but don't go getting your hopes up. Ain't likely she'll have a broken down, no-account bronc stomper like you."

Wiley lips smiled a cherubic smile but his eyes were cold as ice. "You just bring her back."

Chapter 9

Drayton rode directly to the ranch house. He dismounted by swinging his leg over the pommel, then turned and lifted Sarah down. She staggered and he held her shoulders for a moment. Even through the thick coat, he could feel her trembling. She seemed as tiny and fragile as a baby bird. He wanted to apologize for Muller, to somehow reassure her but, a taciturn man, he simply couldn't find the words. He took her hand, and placing it on his arm, escorted her to the door.

It was Dorinda who jerked open the door at his knock. From the look on her face, he figured they were fighting again. With a mental shrug, he stepped back to allow Sarah to enter.

The attack and the long ride had left Sarah in a state of numbed shock. As the warmth of the room hit her, some of the shock faded and she began to take in her surroundings. What had this man said? Something about Jason and Wiley. Her brain began to function. This must be their ranch. And these must be the people who had stolen it. She was surprised and relieved to see another woman.

Dorinda stepped back and Sarah was able to see most of the room. She looked around with

interest. So this was Wiley's home. It buoyed her and gave her courage. Unconsciously she lifted her head and squared her shoulders.

Wes Corning started up from the table where he had been sitting and was the first to break the silence. "Who the hell are you?" His glance shifted to his foreman. "Drayton, where'd you find her?"

"Up the other side of the river. Don't know where she came from. Muller found her and was getting rough with her. I put a stop to that mighty fast. Didn't know what to do with her so I brought her on in."

Sarah, aware of Dorinda's narrowed and appraising stare, was still stunned as the woman spoke, "Well, why didn't you let him have her? Why drag her back here?"

Drayton's shock and disbelief were only too evident to all. His weathered face darkened and he eyed the older woman with a contempt he didn't try to hide.

Corning rushed into speech. "You did the right thing, John." He shot a warning look at Dorinda. "My wife doesn't know what you meant or she wouldn't have said what she did."

Drayton's expression clearly showed that he knew Dorinda had understood all too plainly what he had meant, but he kept his mouth shut. He cast an apologetic look at Sarah.

"I'll be over to talk to you and Dutch in a few minutes. I don't think it's something we should discuss in front of the women."

Drayton looked at Corning for a moment, his face cold and expressionless, eyes bland. They weren't bland when he turned and looked at Dorinda as he went out the door. They blazed with so much contempt that Dorinda's hand came up, as though to ward off a blow.

Drayton had no more than closed the door when Dorinda whirled on Corning. "I want you to get rid of that man! Did you see the way he looked at me?"

"For God's sake, Dorinda. You know I can't get rid of Drayton. He's the only one who knows anything about cattle. I need him. Now sit down and shut up." He turned to Sarah who still standing near the door. "Come on over here, girl. You look half frozen." He pulled out the chair nearest the stove and motioned her to it. "Dorinda, why don't you pour the girl a cup of coffee?"

"Pour it yourself," Dorinda snapped and stalked into the bunk room, slamming the door.

Corning sighed aloud, found a clean cup and poured coffee from the pot on the range. He set it down in front of Sarah and then took a seat across the table.

"What's your name, young lady?" He gave her a charming smile, but Sarah noticed his eyes held the same appraising look as Dorinda's had. She instinctively distrusted and disliked the man.

"Sarah," she replied. "Sarah Kleinfeld."

"And how did you come to be out in the mountains alone?"

"I wasn't alone...." she stopped, afraid of where her answers would take her. This man was Wiley's enemy. She mustn't give him any information that could be used against Wiley and Jason.

"So. Well, I didn't really think you were. Where is the rest of your party? What are you doing here?"

"My father...we are on our way to San Francisco." She hesitated, trying desperately to think a story he would believe.

He looked at her skeptically. "You'll have to do better than that. The trail is too far south of here for you to just gotten lost. I want to know who you are with and what you are doing here."

"It's true. My father and I are on our way to San Francisco. We met a mountain man at Gilbert's Trading Post and he said he knew a shorter route."

"I don't think so." He leaned back, his knowing glance taking in the delicate oval of her face, the large luminous brown eyes and lingered on the delicate curve of her upper lip and the sensuous fullness of the lower, making her uncomfortable. "Well, it can wait. You aren't going any place. Take off that hideous shawl and let me see your hair."

Hesitantly, Sarah obeyed. Her dark brown hair, pins loosened in her struggle with Muller, tumbled about her shoulders, gleaming like polished mahogany in the lamplight.

Corning sucked in his breath, his eyes lighting with desire. He leaned towards her.

The bunk room door opened and Dorinda paused in the doorway, her eyes glittering with anger.

"If you think I'm going let this little tramp stay here so you can make eyes at her, you can think again. Send her out to the barn."

Corning slowly withdrew his glance from Sarah. "Shut up, Dorinda. She stays here. Get her something to eat. I've got to see Drayton." He stood up and put on his coat. At the door, he turned back to Dorinda. "I mean it. I want her here. See that she has something to eat."

Sarah inwardly shrank from the hate in Dorinda's eyes as the older woman approached.

"Listen, you little baggage, that's my man. If I catch you making sheep's eyes at him, I'll tear your eyes out. You want something to eat, get it yourself. I ain't waiting on you. There's some stew on the stove."

Dorinda poured the remains of a bottle of whiskey in her glass and sat down at the table. Sarah wished heartily that she could decline the food and stalk out, but she knew it was only common

sense to eat while she could. Besides, her stomach reminded her that she hadn't eaten since morning. Reluctantly, she found a plate and fork and helped herself from the kettle on the range. She set it on the table but before she could seat herself, Dorinda spoke.

"Get me another bottle of whiskey. They're under the sink. You better learn right now, I'm going to expect you to earn your keep. There'll be no free rides, sweetheart."

Sarah found the bottle and handed it to Dorinda. While she ate, Dorinda poured herself another drink and sat staring at her. As Sarah was finishing, Dorinda spoke again.

"There's hot water in the reservoir in the stove. You wash up them dishes. When you finish, make up a batch of bread. You'll find the flour and stuff in those bins."

Sarah rose and took off her coat. She was so tired even her bones seemed to ache, but welcomed the distraction. Completely ignoring Dorinda, she went to work collecting and scraping the dishes. As she worked, she tried to assess her situation. She felt again Muller's rough hands on her, his thick lips on hers. Her hands trembled and her knees weakened as fear rushed over her again. Would she be safe as long as he stayed in the house? She feared Dorinda also. If Corning went out to the range, would Dorinda give her to Muller? And Corning? Was she safe here in the house?

She wanted to find a way to escape, to find her way back to the cave but she was paralyzed by fear. She tried to push it away, forcing herself to think of Wiley. His pale face flashed into her mind.

Was he all right? She felt he was now out of danger and would soon regain his strength. Somehow, just being in his house gave her a warm, comforting feeling. She took pleasure in the feel of his dishes in her hands, his table she scrubbed. Her pulse slowed and the trembling stopped.

She wondered if they had missed her yet. Would Jason come for her? No, she mustn't count on that. She would have to get out of this by herself. Well, she was too tired to think about it now.

She had just put the bread dough to rise, when the door opened and Corning came in. He tossed his hat on the rack and shrugged out of his coat. Pulling out a chair, he sat down and poured himself a drink.

"Well, what did you learn from those animals in the barn. Did they find that bastard, Locke?" Dorinda's voice was harsh with hate.

"They found some tracks. I'm taking the whole crew out in the morning."

"The whole crew? What if he comes back? Who's going to protect me, I want to know?"

"He's probably gone. If he isn't, we'll find him and kill him. He's up there alone, he can't do

much."

"Not do much! He walks right in here, threatens me, knocks Jim McGill out, then just helps himself to whatever he wants and you say he can't do much. What if he's met up with that puncher that got away?"

"That kid is long gone, his partner's dead and he can't hang around for long in those mountains. His threats were just so much bravado. Let's hit the hay. I gotta lot of riding to do tomorrow."

He turned to Sarah. "Grab yourself some blankets from the bunkroom. You can bed down by the fire."

Wordlessly, Sarah followed Dorinda into the other room and collected blankets from one of the unused bunks and carried them back into the kitchen.

Corning paused in the doorway. "Don't get any ideas about trying to run off. Muller's on guard at night." His smile, as he turned away and closed the door, made her shiver.

She spread the blankets in front of the stove, removed her shoes and lay down. Moments later she bounded up and grabbed the butcher knife from the shelf. Hugging it to her, she rolled up in the blankets, determined to stay awake.

Chapter 10

Jason and Buffalo saddled up in the dark. Jason threw his rig on Wiley's line backed dun.

"How come you ain't taking your gray horse?" Buffalo asked.

"He was favoring his left front leg a mite last night. Seems all right this morning, but he could use the rest. Old dun here can use the exercise."

As Jason swung into the saddle, the dun humped a time or two out of habit but Jason soon had him settled down. They rode around the mountain until Buffalo signaled a halt. They dismounted and studied the churned up snow.

"You can see where one of them rode up on Sarah. You can read where he grabbed her, where her feet slid forward and they scuffled. He had her down, boy. The other rider came up during or after the scuffle. See how these tracks lay? She walked over here and rode off pillion on this second horse."

"Drayton!" Jason said. "He and that gunslinger rode off this way. If I size Drayton up right and he got here in time, he won't let anything happen to her. Let's go."

In the snow, the tracks were easy to read and they were able to follow without difficulty. Buffalo kept an uneasy eye on the sky. Storm clouds were roiling over the peaks and the wind was heavy with the scent of snow.

They were half way around the mountain when the tracks split up. Those of the horse carrying Sarah continued on towards the ranch. The other set turned off to the south.

Jason halted and turned to Buffalo. "Looks like he's taking Sarah straight to the ranch. You follow on and see what you can. There's a good spot to watch the ranch up on the ridge behind. Reckon you'll spot where Toby and I camped. I'm going to see where this other jasper was going. I'll meet you up on that ridge."

"Better not take too long. Reckon we're in for a blow. We'd best get under cover soon."

They parted and Jason followed the tracks, worry knotting his belly. The wind picked up and the first flakes settled on Jason's coat. He pulled out his bandanna and tied his hat down over his ears.

He found what he had feared. The rider he was following had come up on the trail he and Toby had made the day before. Found it and followed it. Jason continued to follow, saw where the rider had pulled up. Jason looked ahead, knowing what he would see. Even through the blowing

snow, he could see their trail heading towards the cave.

He sat for a moment, debating. He finally decided that Swede and Toby would be able to hold off any attack. His first concern had to be for the girl. Reluctantly, he turned back towards the ranch.

Suddenly the dun jumped sideways with a squeal of fear, lost its footing and fell, throwing Jason. He hit the snow, slid down the slope and slammed into a tree. Stunned, he lay for a moment fighting for wind. Sliding back one step for each two forward, he finally struggled up the slope. The dun was nowhere in sight, not that he could see far through the now heavily falling snow.

Doggedly he trudged back down the rapidly disappearing trail. Finally, unable to see the trail or distinguish any landmarks, he was forced to seek shelter.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a furtive movement. He turned, studying his back trail. He saw the animal drop to its belly, and as he watched, slink a few feet forward. Wolves!

The sound of the door banging open brought Sarah awake and she jumped up, knife in hand. The pale light of dawn was filtering through the windows and door.

"So you're the gal Drayton brought in last night. You're kinda cute. Hey, you don't need that knife. I ain't gonna hurt you."

The cowboy, his arms full of kindling, kicked the door shut with his heel and advanced toward her, grinning. "Name's Curly, what's yourn?"

She backed away as he dumped the wood in the wood box.

"Ain't very friendly, are you?"

When she didn't answer, he shrugged, still grinning and left. When he closed the door behind him, Sarah put down the knife, built up the fire, and put the coffee pot on. Peering out the window, she located the outhouse. She was slipping on her coat when the bedroom door opened and Corning stepped out. He stopped when he saw her.

"I hope you're not planning to run away."

Embarrassed, she shook her head and motioned towards the outhouse. He hesitated a moment then nodded. "But you get yourself right back here."

The coffee pot was bubbling when she returned. Ignoring Corning, she threw in a handful of coffee and started breakfast. They ate in silence. When he finished, Corning rolled a cigarette and leaned back, studying her.

"Now, I think you'd better tell me the truth. Where did you come from?"

"I have told the truth."

"Like hell. Are you with Locke? How many others are with him?"

She kept her eyes on her plate, determined to give nothing away. "I don't understand. I know no one by that name. My father and I are on our way to San Francisco. At the trading post my father hired a man to guide us over the mountains. He said he knew a short cut through the mountains that would save us two weeks. My father believed him." She paused and forced herself to meet his eyes. "I ...I think he wanted to rob us."

Corning leaned forward, his eyes bright. "You were carrying money? How much?"

"Not much. Less than a hundred dollars. I think he thought we had more." She shrugged and spread her hands.

"What were you doing out there alone?"

"He said he wanted to check the trail for snow. I was supposed to wait in camp, but I became frightened when he and my father were gone so long. I tried to follow them." She lowered her head and raised a hand to hide her eyes. "I fell off the horse and it ran away."

There was nothing false about the shudder that seized her. "Then that man found me."

"And you don't know anyone named Locke or Carr?"

She shook her head. "I know no one here."

"You didn't see anyone else out there?"

"No. It was so frightening."

"Well, you stay in the house today. Dorinda's not feeling well so don't go bothering her. And don't go trying to leave. Dutch will be on guard. You won't see him, but he'll see you if you try to leave."

Corning got up and paused beside her chair. His hand clamped down on her shoulder. She forced herself not to cringe.

"You'll be safe as long as you stay in the house. If you go outside, well...I'm afraid there will be no one to stop Dutch from having his way."

She sat at the table long after he was gone, too frightened to move. She was still sitting when Dorinda called from the bedroom.

The older woman, propped up in the bunk, glared at her. "Get this fire built up and fix me some breakfast."

Sarah spent the day in a state of numbed terror, jumping at every sound from outside. Would

Muller stay outside? Or, with Corning away, would he come in after her? If he did, could Dorinda stop him? Would she even try? Sarah doubted the older woman would care.

Dorinda spent the day in bed and kept Sarah busy washing and mending her clothes, fetching food and drink.

The day dragged. Sarah was light-headed with relief when Corning came in demanding dinner. Dorinda joined them at the table, dressed only in an exotic robe, her hair carelessly tied back. Throughout the meal, she harped on Locke's visit and her fear of being left alone.

Corning finally snapped at her. "For heaven's sake, will you shut up about Locke. He's gone. He won't be back. He's probably half way to Laramie by now."

"I don't know, Wes. You think he was lying about not having enough hay? Have you found any, yet?"

"No, but we will. He's got to have it somewhere."

There was a knock on the door. At Wes's call, John Drayton came in. "Boss, that dun that Carr rode out of here on just came in. It was wearing Locke's saddle and the reins were dragging but not broken."

Wes and Dorinda exchanged looks of relief. "Well, sounds like he was throwed or something.

If he's afoot out there, he won't last long," Corning said.

Sarah's heart seemed to stop. Jason dead? No. It just wasn't possible. She thought back over the competent way he had brought them through the storm and into the mountains. It would take more than a fall from a horse to stop Jason Locke. Her heart began to beat again so hard she was sure the others could hear it.

Drayton stared at him in exasperation. "He wasn't riding that gray stallion of his. He was riding Carr's gelding. He must have teamed up with that kid that got away."

Apprehension flitted across Corning's face, fleeing as rapidly as it had come. "Well, now the kid is out there alone again. He'll either run or die. If he was really going to fight, he wouldn't have run in the first place."

Drayton watched Corning pour another drink and Sarah saw contempt flare in his eyes before his face settled into its usual bland expression.

"I reckon that's the least of our worries, boss," Drayton said noncommittally. "I don't know this country, but I sure don't like the looks of the sky. I think the snow we've had is just a forerunner. I figure we're in for a hell of a storm and soon. We've got to do something about the cattle. We've already lost half a dozen head and we're going to lose more, if we get much more snow."

"Damn it, Drayton, you've got to find that hay. Locke has to have it cut and stacked somewhere."

Drayton turned his hat in his big hands, his brow furrowed. "Boss, I'm beginning to doubt we'll find any hay. Leastways, not enough to winter the herd."

"If there wasn't hay, how do you figure Locke planned to make it through the winter?" Corning asked in disgust.

"Don't figure he did."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Look, how many cattle did we find when we got here?"

"Locke wasn't raising cattle, he was raising horses!"

"Well, how many horse did we find? Just that white stallion and the work team. They rode out of here on two saddle horses. That's five. Locke just had that gray stallion and two mares. A total of eight horses. And look at this place. Just the bunkhouse, the barn and two corrals. This ain't no working ranch, it's just the start of one."

"Damn it, Drayton, I was told in Denver and Ft. Laramie that this Locke had a lot of savvy and a good ranch."

"Yeah, a lot of savvy, all right. Too much savvy to come in here with a big herd until he was set for it."

Corning flushed at the implied criticism. "We'll find that hay tomorrow! I want every man out looking, come daylight."

"What about Locke?" Dorinda asked, her voice high-pitched and shrill. "You said you were going to have everyone out looking for him."

"Shut up, Dorinda, finding that hay is more important."

Drayton sent a questioning look in Sarah's direction as she stood silently by the stove. She nodded slightly, correctly interpreting the look, to indicate that she was all right. Drayton clamped on his hat and headed for the door. "I'll see you in the morning, boss."

"Sure," Dorinda screamed as Drayton closed the door. "Those cattle are more important than I am." The whiskey was making her incautious.

"That's right. Those cattle are our stake. We lose them and we're back where we were before we met Lord Beasley-Rawlings. And don't you forget it."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot what a great schemer you are. Lose all our money to that fancy Englishman, then convince him you're a big Texas cattleman, moving to Wyoming. Hah. These

English lords ain't fools. You think they won't be sending someone to check out what you're doing? How long will it be before they wise up to you? You don't know anything about cattle and even less about this country. God, how I hate it here! Oh, Wes, lets go back to the river boats where we belong."

"Not without a stake."

"You never did tell me just how you plan to get a stake out of this. The cattle aren't yours. All you get is a salary for managing the ranch. Some stake!"

"Shut up you fool. You've been hitting the bottle too hard. Go on to bed. I'll be there in a minute." He took the bottle and put it away. As Dorinda went sulkily into the bunk room, he turned to Sarah.

With a smile, he shook his head. "She doesn't like it here, so don't pay any attention to what she says, it's just her way. You go get your blankets."

Sarah was conscious of his eyes on her as she followed Dorinda. Ignoring the half drunken woman, she picked up her blankets and carried them back into the kitchen. Perhaps, when they were asleep, she could slip out and find her way back to the cave.

As if he read her mind, Corning said, "I wouldn't go outside tonight, if I were you. Dutch

Muller ain't forgot about you. He'll be prowling around all night, just looking for a chance to catch you. I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to stop him, if he found you outside."

He paused in the door to the bunk room and looked at her. She read the lust in his eyes and quickly turned her back to him. She heard him laugh softly as he closed the door.

She could hear Corning's angry voice as she spread the blankets. Slipping off her boots, she crept on tiptoe to the connecting door and pressed her ear against the wood.

"You stupid bitch. You were going to blab everything in front of the girl!"

"Everything, that's funny. That's real funny. You never have told me how you plan to get this big stake."

"Damn it, Dorinda. You think I went into this without a plan? I already got the beginning. Bought those cows from Al Markle. He rustled them down in East Texas. He sold them to me for ten dollars a head, but the bill-of-sale Al gave me shows fifteen. That's over twelve thousand in our pockets and it's just the beginning."

Sarah heard a boot drop, then a second. For a moment there were only muffled sounds, then

Corning's voice came through the door loud and clear again.

"That E-Bar-F brand is easy as hell to change into a Rafter B-Bar-B. When we stopped in Cheyenne and I registered it in the name of Bob Bennett. Al's coming up. We're going to run off at least half the herd this fall and the rest in the spring. Al's a wizard with a running iron. When he gets the brands changed, we'll take them over to the Mormon settlements and unload them. We should clear another fifteen thousand, even after we split with Al. Then Bob Bennett will disappear and we'll be sitting pretty in San Francisco."

"Wes, why can't we just take what we've got and go now? I hate it here. Besides, I don't trust Al Markle."

"Jesus, woman. This is the chance of a lifetime. With the kind of money we'll have, I can buy my own gambling parlor. A fancy place in San Francisco that will cater to those big railroad and mining barons. No more penny ante games. You'll have a stable of the finest girls. I tell you, Dorrie, we'll never have a chance like this again. Come here, woman."

Their voices dwindled to a murmur. Sarah heard Dorinda giggle and, embarrassed, crept back to her blankets. She lay there thinking about all she had overheard. She hadn't understood it all but it was obvious, even to her with her limited knowledge of things American, that something very

crooked was going on. Now she had to get away, had to tell Jason. Perhaps what she had heard would mean more to him than it did to her. It might be something he needed to know in making his plans. But the thought of Muller, waiting in the dark, terrified her. She fell asleep before she could think of a plan of escape.

Chapter 11

Wolves! Jason experienced a moment of panic, then forced himself to calm down and appraise his situation. The first thing he needed was shelter, but shelter that he could defend. A vague impression nudged him and he closed his eyes, trying to visualize every foot of the trail. There was a fallen tree not more than a quarter of mile back down the trail. He plodded on through the deepening snow.

He almost missed it. It was farther off the trail than he had remembered. A giant pine, blown down in some long past storm, its roots balled with dirt reared a good ten feet into the air. Falling to his knees, he dug the snow out from under the trunk, making a shallow cave against the root mass. Following the trunk, through the heavily falling snow, he broke off branches and piled them within easy reach. When he felt he had enough, he crawled into the hole.

With his knife, he shaved the dry bark from the underside of the trunk for tinder. He added twigs, gently blowing until the fire was burning. Gradually he added larger sticks as the flames licked up greedily. When the fire was going good, he sank back and rolled a cigarette.

Now he knew what spooked the dun. He wondered where the fool horse had gotten to. Just his luck, it would head back to the ranch. Well, at least the snow would destroy any old tracks. He wondered if Buffalo had made it to the ridge. Had the snow come in time to prevent the rider, he assumed it was Muller, from back tracking them to the cave?

The heat from the fire penetrated his hole. Exhaustion overcame him and he dozed. As he slept, the fire burned lower and the four gaunt wolves crept closer.

Only the instinct acquired from years of living in wild, harsh country saved him. Jason awoke, his hand automatically reaching for his gun. Four pairs of hungry eyes gleamed red just beyond the dying fire. He threw himself to the side and fired as the first wolf launched himself. The momentum of his leap carried him into the hole on top of Jason, the great jaws snapping over Jason's leg even as he died.

Jason kicked the body off with his other leg, then turned his attention back outside as a second wolf sprang at him. He fired again, catching the animal right in the snarling mouth. It dropped like a stone, scattering the embers of the fire. The smell of burning fur nearly gagged him.

Jason fired two more quick shots into the swirling snow. The remaining wolves darted away. Jason heaved the dead wolf out of the fire and dragged it a few feet away. Returning, he dragged the

second one out and stopped to gather more firewood.

Scraping the scattered embers together he nursed the fire back to life. Pulling off his boot and sock, he rolled up his pant leg. The wolf's teeth had penetrated the heavy cord material and scraped but had not penetrated the skin. He scrubbed the wound with snow, wishing he had some way of heating water, and prayed the wolf wasn't rabid.

Jason sat hunched over the fire, trying to ignore the hunger pangs that rumbled in his stomach. Hours later, he heard the wolves growling as they fought over their companions' bodies. If it had been a cougar, he might have fought them for it, he thought. Most mountain men, he recalled, claimed cougar was prime eating, preferring it to venison or bear meat.

By dawn, the storm had eased. Jason crawled out to find more than a foot of new snow on the ground. He needed snowshoes but had no way of making them. He picked his way with care, searching out where the wind had swept most of the new snow away. Cautious as he was, he still could not avoid all of the drifts.

He struggled out of a drift, heard the creak of leather, then the whoosh of the rope as it settled over his shoulders. He was jerked off his feet and dragged backward through the snow. When the rope slackened, he rolled on his belly and struggled to his feet.

Jim McGill grinned down at him from the back of his horse. "You don't look so tough now, mister. Reckon you need taught some manners. You got to learn it ain't nice to go breaking into houses, scaring women and hitting people over the head. I still got a lump where you pistol whipped me. I'd finish you off right now, only I reckon Corning wants to talk to you."

"You got that saddle on the wrong horse. Since it's my house, reckon I'll go there anytime I want."

"Ain't yours no more."

"Will be again, sooner than you think."

"We'll just mosey on down and let you tell that to Corning."

Jason had to run to keep from falling as the puncher trotted his horse down the trail. He was soon dizzy and gasping for breath in the thin air. He knew he couldn't keep up this pace for long. Knew too, that if he fell, Jim would delight in dragging him.

He saw his chance as Jim passed between two trees. Desperation gave him the extra surge of speed he needed to dash forward slacking the rope and throw himself around the tree on his left. He doubled his knees up as he fell, snubbing the rope around the tree. His hand grasped the knife from his boot, and the razor sharp blade severed the loop.

Free, he rolled behind a rock, hardly bigger than a washtub. Stabbing the knife in the snow, he groped under his coat and came up with his pistol. Rock chips stung his face as Jim fired. Without raising his head, Jason fired two quick shots, then lurched up in a staggering run to his left, firing as he ran.

He threw himself over a snow-encrusted log and crawled, crabwise, up the hill. Tearing off his hat, he peered over the snow-covered trunk.

Jim had dismounted and was crouched behind a tree. He saw Jason, just as Jason fired, and ducked back around the tree.

Jason slid back down along the log, then leaped towards the tree, firing as he ran. Jim fired too fast, his bullets passing to the right of Jason as he back-peddled. Jason lined up on the cowboy and pulled the trigger. It clicked on an empty chamber.

Jason threw the empty gun at Jim's grinning face and followed with a tackle that tumbled them both in the snow. Jason grabbed for Jim's arm and managed to grip his wrist. Jim tried to gouge Jason's eye, but Jason twisted his face away, then butted him under the chin.

Jim got a knee under Jason's belly and shoved him to the side. Clinging to the gun hand, Jason carried Jim with him and they rolled down the slope, the gun flying from Jim's grip.

They broke apart, Jim scrambling uphill for the gun. Jason charged after him and kicked the gun away from his searching fingers. Reaching down, he grasped the cowboy by the hair and raised his head with his left hand, his right following with a hard punch to the chin. Off balance, Jason tumbled after him as Jim fell.

They both lunged to their feet. Jason ducked a wild swing and landed a heavy blow to the belly and followed with a short chop to the chin. Jim shrugged it off and landed a blow that shook Jason. They closed and exchanged punches. Jim tried again for Jason's eyes. As Jason ducked to the side, his feet slid out from under him and he landed heavily. Jim leaped, trying to stomp him, but Jason rolled away and came up fast.

Jim tried to kick Jason in the groin but Jason twisted to take the kick on the thigh, caught the boot and dumped Jim in a snow bank. Jason staggered back, gasping for breath. He knew he was about done.

Jim came up, Jason's knife in his hand. They circled, each looking for an advantage. Jim lunged suddenly, slicing through Jason's coat sleeve as he twisted away. Jason backed away slowly, warily. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jim's gun. He dived for it as Jim lunged again, the knife flicking out as deadly as a snake.

Jason grabbed up the pistol as he rolled away. Whipping it up, he fired. The bullet caught Jim under the chin and the back of his head exploded as the bullet exited.

Jason lay in the snow, his guts heaving, his breath labored. Slowly he crawled to his feet and stood swaying for a moment. He bent over and picked up the knife, returning it to his boot. He caught up Jim's horse and leading it, he walked slowly back up the trail until he found his gun. He took time to check it thoroughly, reloaded and slipped it in his holster. Stuffing Jim's pistol behind his belt he mounted and headed for the ridge.

Near the upper lake he spotted the elk herd grazing. Doubling back, he rode in their tracks for a while, then headed up the ridge.

Buffalo slid down from his lookout under the pine as Jason rode up. "See you traded horses. Figured you'd run into trouble when that dun showed up at the ranch just before dark."

"Just a mite. Wolves spooked him last night. He threw me and took off. I holed up till this morning then headed over here afoot. Borrowed this horse off'n one of Corning's men."

"From the looks of you, he put up a little argument."

"You could say that. Anyway, he won't have any more use for this cayuse. What's going on down below?"

"Nothing, now. Sarah's there all right. I been watching since daylight. One feller took off by himself, real early. About an hour later, the rest of them took off in a bunch. Didn't even leave anyone with the cattle. Nobody at the ranch but the two women."

Jason grinned. "Then I reckon we should go calling, don't you?"

Sarah awakened early on the second day of her captivity. Determination to escape was paramount in her thoughts. A lifetime of fear and oppression was not easy to throw off, but in the months of traveling across America, a sense of freedom and self-determination had been building. She disliked and distrusted Corning, not an unusual reaction. She distrusted most goyim. But the contempt she felt for Dorinda was so entirely new, it almost scared her.

She always thought better when she was busy, so she folded her blankets and stoked the stove. Dipping water from the stove reservoir, she bathed her face and neck and braided her hair, pinning it up out of her way.

She refilled the reservoir and started a pot of coffee. Exploring the cupboards, she found a small canister of tea. Delighted, she made herself a cup. She was sitting at the table sipping it when

Corning came out.

He was obviously in a bad mood and had little to say. He drank coffee while she fixed him breakfast and left the house as soon as he had eaten. Sarah watched from the window as the crew saddled up and left. A ripple of excitement raced up her spine as she saw Dutch Muller riding away with the rest of the crew.

She cast a quick look toward the bunkroom. Should she leave now? What if the men hadn't ridden far? What if she ran into them? Dorinda might come out at any minute. She would be sure to call after them. Perhaps she should wait, let them get far enough away that they would not see her or hear Dorinda calling.

She fixed herself a bite to eat, and then, disgusted at the filthy condition of the room, began to clean. Poor as they had been in the Ukraine, at least their homes had been kept clean. Her contempt for Dorinda grew.

As she worked, she tried to picture the route Drayton had taken to bring her here, tried to remember landmarks that could guide her back to the cave but she could think of nothing. She wanted to escape, to get back to her father--to Wiley, but still she hesitated, afraid of the cold and snow.

Sarah had the bread baked and was just taking two apple pies out of the oven, when Dorinda appeared and demanded a cup of coffee. Dorinda was wearing just a robe over her night dress, her hair loose and uncombed. Her eyes were red and bleary as she sent Sarah for the whiskey bottle and added a shot to the coffee.

"Regular little housewife, aren't you. Well, it won't do you any good. Wes won't look at you."

Sarah didn't bother to reply, but she made no attempt to disguise her contempt.

"Oh, get out of my sight. Go in there and clean up the bedroom."

Glad for the excuse to get away from Dorinda, she went into the bedroom. She made up the bunks and began to sort and hang up the clothes that littered the floor and furniture. She discovered a pile of clothing and personal items shoved under one of the unused bunks. Pulling them out and examining them, she decided they must belong to Wiley and Toby. She folded the clothes neatly and replaced them. Among the items were two razors and a beautifully tooled quirt.

She stuffed the razors in her pocket. If she ever got back to the cave, she felt Wiley would appreciate his razor. Unlike most men of their time, both Wiley and Jason were clean-shaven.

She was admiring the quirt when Dorinda came in.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? I didn't tell you to go through our things. Give me

that."

She jerked the quirt out of Sarah's hands and threw it into the kitchen. "Get out of here while I dress."

Sarah left the room, closing the door behind her. Automatically, she picked up the quirt and laid it on the table. The anger that had been building in her since her capture exploded. She wouldn't stay here another minute. She would rather chance the mountains than spend another day with Dorinda. With all of the men gone, she'd never find a better chance to escape.

Slipping into her coat and picking up her shawl, she rushed to the cupboard and grabbed up handfuls of jerky. Seizing a loaf of bread, she wrapped the food in the end of the shawl and slipped out the door.

Outside, she paused uncertainly. Which way was the cave? It had been dark when they had ridden in and she had still been too shocked to notice much. The first thing to do was to get out of sight. She must get to the trees. The snow had drifted making running difficult. It caught at her skirts, slowing her. She tripped over a hidden branch and fell to her knees.

A hand gripped her hair, jerking her backward. She lay, prone and winded, looking up into Dorinda's angry face. The woman reached down and slapped her, the stinging blow bringing tears

to Sarah's eyes, but didn't blot out the sight of the derringer pointed at her heart.

"Get up, you slut. You ain't going anywhere till Wes says you can."

Humiliated and despairing, Sarah struggled up and walked back to the house with Dorinda behind her. She unwrapped the food and put it on the table.

"So, you're a thief, too."

Too angered for caution, Sarah whirled on her. "You're the thief. That's Wiley's food and this is his house. You have no right to either of them."

"So, you are with them!" Dorinda suddenly smiled, but it was the smile a cat might give a mouse. "Where are they?"

Chagrined at her unintentional betrayal, Sarah glared back, her lips tight.

"Oh, you'll tell. Just wait till Wes gets back. You'll tell or we'll turn you over to Muller. Who knows, you might even like it."

Sarah bit back the cry of horror, but she couldn't keep the fear from her eyes. Dorinda threw back her head and laughed. "That scares you does it. Good. Get that coat off and get to work. You like playing the little housewife. I want both these floors scrubbed with a brush, on your hands and knees." She lifted her skirt and tucked the derringer into the top of her stocking. "Well, what

are you staring at? Get to work."

Defeated, Sarah hung up her coat and set to work. Dorinda sat at the table, drinking and watching her. When Sarah finally finished, her back and arms ached from exhaustion and her knees were stiff and swollen. She emptied the last of the scrub water out the door and put the bucket away. Dipping some warm water, she washed her face and hands.

"That's right. Get all prettied up. I'm sure Muller will appreciate it. Go empty the slop bucket."

Sarah's control snapped. "Empty it yourself. I'm not your maid."

Dorinda jumped up, knocking over the glass of whisky. "You're whatever I say you are," she screeched, her eyes bright with hate and jealousy. She grabbed up the quirt and lashed at Sarah.

Surprised, Sarah jumped back, caught the heel of her boot in the hem of her skirt, and fell against the table. Dorinda was on her in a flash, bringing the quirt down across Sarah's unprotected back.

Rage, suppressed for years, swept through Sarah. She rolled away and straightened. Grasping the wrist that held the quirt, she twisted with all her strength. With a cry of pain, Dorinda released the quirt. With her free hand, she tried to scratch Sarah's face.

Sarah ducked away from the long nails and delivered a stinging slap across Dorinda's face. Dorinda got a handful of Sarah's hair, pulling viciously. Sarah retaliated in the same manner, then thought the better of it. Releasing Dorinda's hair, Sarah doubled her right fist and took a wide swing. The blow connected with Dorinda's chin and the older woman crumpled to the floor.

"I'll have to tell Wiley to watch out for that wicked right."

Sarah whirled. Standing in the door was Jason Locke. He stared at her, surprise widening his eyes. "Why you're feistier than a she-bear and prettier than a new born calf when you're mad."

Behind him, a bewhiskered old man cackled gleefully.

Chapter 12

That same morning, John Drayton saddled his horse and one for Corning. He led them up to the bunkhouse, left them ground hitched and mounted the steps. From inside, he could hear Dorinda's voice raised in anger. It grated on his already taut nerves. Did they never stop fighting? He hammered on the door. He could hear her plainly, as Corning jerked the door open.

"You bastard! You can't leave me here alone again."

Corning answered her as he stepped out the door. "You got the girl to keep you company. Locke's shot his wad, even if he's not dead. He won't be back."

Dorinda's voice followed them, high and piercing. "Much you care. Damn you, Wes."

Corning's face was set as he swung into the saddle. "Let's go," he snapped. He jerked the horse around and trotted to the barn where Bull, Muller and Jim were already mounted. "Where's Curly?"

Surprised, Drayton looked at him. Did he think the cattle would take care of themselves? "I sent him out to the herd."

"Oh. Yeah." He pulled up and looked at his foreman for the first time that morning. A crack

appeared in Corning's urbane facade. Uncertainty flickered in his eyes and there was a hint of desperation in his voice. "John, we've got to find that hay."

Drayton took a deep breath. "I ain't at all sure there is any hay. Leastways not enough to winter this herd."

Corning's face reddened, his eyes flashing. "Damn it, John, I don't want to hear that from you. There is hay. We've got to find it. You take Muller and head southeast. Check every damned draw and valley. I'll take Jim and Bull and work northeast." His voice rose. "And I don't want any excuses, do you hear me? Get out there and find me that hay!" His mouth settled into a petulant line. "If you were any kind of a foreman, you would have found that hay by now."

Drayton kept his face inscrutable but inside he seethed. Corning had no right to talk to him that way, not in front of the other hands. He motioned to Muller and rode away, his back rigid. Jaw muscles bulged as he fought down the anger inside him.

For two cents, he'd tell Corning where to go. The thought pleased him. Then he mentally shrugged. He couldn't walk away, much as he was beginning to want to. He had exactly thirty-two dollars in his pockets. No other outfits would be hiring until spring roundup and he was just too old and tired to ride the grubline.

And there was the herd. It was only too obvious that Corning knew nothing about cattle. The kid, Curly, had the makings of a good hand but he was too young and inexperienced to handle the herd alone. It was a shame the boy was hooked up with an outfit like this. Jim McGill had the know-how but was far from being a top hand. Besides, he was lazy and just didn't give a damn.

Drayton glanced at Muller and then away. Muller hadn't pulled his weight from the first and never would. He'd been hired for his gun. Neither Muller nor Bull were cattlemen. All of Bull's brains were in his muscles.

No, he couldn't leave. He had a responsibility to the herd and to the English owners. He shifted in the saddle. How the hell had he gotten himself tied up with an outfit like this?

His thoughts drifted to Locke. Corning could believe whatever he pleased but Drayton was darned sure Locke was still alive. Alive and out there planning more mischief. They hadn't heard the last from him, not by a long ways. The man had determination and guts and...right on his side. The thought hit him like a blow to the stomach and for a moment he felt sick.

Muller's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Want to try this draw? I think this is where that kid and Carr disappeared."

"We're hunting hay not Carr."

Muller was grinning, a predatory look in his eyes. "Maybe we'll find both."

They turned up Crystal Creek, pushing through drifts, until they reached the meadow below Slide Falls. Drayton pulled up, scanning the area. Muller slipped his rifle out of its scabbard and held it in readiness as he continued to follow the creek.

He returned a few minutes later, some of the eagerness gone from his face. "They ain't here. I'm gonna check the other side of the creek."

Drayton waved him on without answering, his attention caught by a mound of snow at the edge of the trees. He rode over, dismounted and began to brush away the snow. Uncovering a pine bough, he studied the neatly cut end, then heaved it aside. A tiny smile played at the corners of his mouth. Swiftly he uncovered another branch and pulled it away. Underneath was a pile of hay. He picked up a handful and smelled it. Fresh and sweet. Dry without a hint of mold. They'd cut it, let it cure, then stacked it and covered it with pine branches to keep the rain off until they could haul it in to the ranch.

"Smart, Locke. Real smart." He recovered the stack and rolled a cigarette. His gaze searched the edge of the meadow as he smoked. Two more possibilities caught his eye. When he finished his cigarette, he examined both mounds but found only brush.

He mounted and crossed the creek. Again, he found only one small stack of hay. He surveyed the meadow estimating how much hay could have been cut. Not much, probably not more than one more small stack and to find it, he'd have to check out every snow mound. Even if he found it all, there wouldn't be enough. It was obvious to him now that what hay had been cut would be in small meadows like this scattered throughout the mountains. They could search from now to Christmas and not find it all.

His eyes were bleak as he watched Muller coming back across the meadow. The hay he had found would not feed half the herd for one day. And even if they found every stack, there wouldn't be enough to save the cattle.

Muller rode up, his eyes mean. "They ain't here."
He gestured towards the mountain above Slide Creek. "Locke went up there."

Drayton glanced at the mountain and his stomach tightened. "That's crazy."

Muller shook his head. "There's a pissant trail. I found tracks in a couple of spots where the snow has blown away. That big stallion and the pack horses."

Drayton stared at the mountain side and shuddered. A new respect for Locke surged through him. Too bad they were on opposite sides. In that moment, he decided to say nothing to Corning

about the hay he had found. At least not yet.

"There has to be another way up there," Muller said. "Let's find it."

"Forget about Locke. Corning sent us out to find hay."

They rode back down the creek without speaking, each wrapped in his own thoughts. By the middle of the afternoon, they had covered a lot of ground but had not found any more hay, nor had they found any further sign of Locke. Muller was in a sullen mood as they stopped to water their horses in a small mountain lake.

Drayton ignored him. He had hoped the stream they were following would lead to another, larger mountain meadow. Instead they had found only this lake. If Locke's partner had cut any hay here, it wouldn't be enough for more than one or two cows. Still his gaze moved restlessly, searching.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of movement. He began to search the side of the ridge. It could have been an animal but his gut told him it wasn't. A hint of a shadow on the rock face behind a cluster of pines intrigued him. A cave?

He crossed the creek and urged his horse up the ridge. He had climbed less than half way when a bullet threw up snow in front of him. The echo of the shot reverberated off the mountains.

His horse gave a frightened whinny and reared.

Feeling exposed and vulnerable, Drayton wheeled the horse, and jerking his rifle free, headed back down the slope. Muller was dusting the ridge to his left as fast as he could fire. Then the gunman was charging past him up the hill. Drayton threw a couple of shots into the pines that fronted what he thought was a cave and raced after him.

A man broke cover and raced across the ridge. Muller pulled up, took careful aim and squeezed the trigger. The man threw up his arms and tumbled into a nest of boulders.

"Got him. Got the bastard."

The gloating triumph in Muller's voice turned Drayton's stomach. He could kill, had killed, when necessary but he had never enjoyed it. Taking the life of another man had always left him feeling diminished. He gigged his horse and nudged by the gunman. As he rode up the ridge, he found himself hoping it wasn't Locke.

He edged around the boulder and stared down into the face of the young puncher they had driven from the ranch. The kid's head a bloody mess. Muller crowded up beside him and drew his hand gun.

"Put that away and save your lead. He's dead."

Muller's lips parted in a wolfish grin. "Just figure on making sure."

"Yeah, shooting into dead bodies is just your speed."

Muller jerked around, pointing the gun at Drayton's belly. Drayton met his angry look with a cold, deadly stare. For a long moment neither moved. Then Muller glanced down at the rifle in Drayton's hand. It was aimed at his own stomach.

Beads of sweat broke out on Muller's forehead. Licking his lips, he holstered his gun.

Drayton motioned him to ride on. "We better head back and let Corning know we haven't found any hay. Maybe he's had better luck."

As Drayton turned his horse, he cast a quick look at the body. He could have sworn he'd seen an eyelid flutter. He looked again. Nothing. He rode away shaking his head. He decided this was the last time he'd ride with Muller. And if Corning didn't like it... He sighed, thinking of the long, cold days ahead. At least a man could soothe his conscious and still keep his pride, even riding the grub line.

Chapter 13

At the ranch, Jason looked at Sarah with a new awareness. Gone was the silent, cringing girl that had so irritated him. The woman before him, with her proud carriage and defiant eyes, pleased and intrigued him. This was a woman worth getting to know. For the first time he realized that she was beautiful.

Buffalo pushed past him, jerking him out of his thoughts. "Well, girlie, we came to rescue you, but it looks like you don't need no help."

Jason looked down at the unconscious Dorinda. He bent down and pulled her up over his shoulder. Sarah and Buffalo followed and watched as he dumped her on the bed and tied her wrists and ankles.

"That ought to hold the hellcat for a while." Turning to Sarah, he said, "Go through and sort out a week's supply of food for six people. Then start packing all the rest. Come on, Buffalo."

Outside, he turned to Buffalo. "Let's get these horses out of sight in the barn. Then you catch up that dun and the wagon horses. I'll get Wiley's stallion. You know any place safe that's close

where we can cache supplies for a week or so?"

"Yeah. What you planning? That's a wicked gleam you got in your eyes, boy."

"All those supplies are mine. I didn't issue no invite to these bastards, so I don't see where I'm the least obligated to feed them. I figure to haul all I can out of here, right now. We'll cache them until Corning and bunch pull out."

Jason picked up a halter from the barn and went out to the corral. It took all of his persuasion and not a little patience to catch the white stallion. He finally got an old packsaddle on the horse and loaded it with grain.

When he got back to the house, he found that Sarah had most of the supplies packed. He helped her with the rest. Buffalo brought up the wagon team, and together they loaded them. As they were finishing, Sarah came out with another bundle.

"These are clothes and things that belong to Wiley and Toby. I thought you might want to take them, in case the Cornings should...well, be vindictive."

"Thanks, Sarah. I wouldn't have thought of it. Buffalo, bring up the horses. I want a last word with the lady."

He walked into the bedroom and looked down at Dorinda. She glared up at him, her face made

ugly by her hate.

"We're leaving you just enough food for a week. It'll get you to South Pass. I'd suggest you start tomorrow. If you don't, you're going to get mighty sick of beef. I'm going to loosen these knots a might. You'll be able to work yourself loose before the fires die down."

As he walked back into the kitchen, the smell of baking finally penetrated his senses. He stopped and sniffed again. Sarah, standing near the door, laughed.

"I baked bread and a couple of apple pies, this morning. I have the bread here," she said, holding up a flour sack. "I couldn't figure out how to carry the pies."

A wide grin split his face. "I know just how they carry best." He opened the door and called to Buffalo. When the old man came in, Jason had the pies on the table. "Grab a fork, Buffalo. You got a whole apple pie to eat, if you can do it in five minutes."

Sarah poured two cups of coffee and carried them over to the men. Jason offered to share his pie with her but she laughingly declined. When they had finished, she picked up the pie tins, but Jason stopped her.

"Leave them right there on the table. Let them know just what they missed."

Buffalo chuckled. "Locke, you're a mighty mean man."

Jason helped Sarah to mount McGill's gelding. Buffalo led out around the lower lake and into the mountains. An hour later, they came to a fissure in the face of a short granite cliff. It was formed in the shape of an inverted V, the bottom high enough to be out of reach of wild animals.

"I've cached supplies and pelts here, many a time. We just pile some loose boulders in front."

They unloaded the two horses and hid the supplies. Jason quickly built a small fire and left it to burn down. With branches, he and Buffalo brushed out their tracks and then tossed snow over the branch marks. Sarah looked at him questioningly.

"If they track us, they'll just think we stopped for coffee. I don't want them wondering what we were doing here."

It was late in the afternoon, when they approached the cave. Jason pulled up suddenly and motioned Buffalo to join him. The trail of riders was plain to see in the snow.

"I make it two riders. They're headed right between the cave and the horses," Buffalo said.

"Way I read it, too. Let's swing off and come in above the valley. It'll give us more cover. They might still be around."

"Think we should leave the girl here?"

"No. They might come back this way."

They rode on slowly, using every bit of cover. From the trees above the little valley, they saw the horses standing quietly in the secluded cove. Jason got out the binoculars and studied the area, foot by foot.

"Don't look like they found the horses. Sarah, you wait here. Buffalo, scout those rocks. Someone should be on guard up there. I'll check the cave."

As he crept along the ledge in front of the cave, hidden behind the screen of pines growing along the foot of the escarpment, he saw a few scuffled tracks. Crouching, he inched forward and peered in. Only silence and emptiness greeted him.

He entered, hugging the wall. The bedrolls and supplies were gone. He walked over to the fire ring. It contained only cold ashes

He whirled at the sound of crunching snow, his gun coming up. He lowered the gun as Sarah entered the cave.

"I thought I told you to stay with the horses!"

Her eyes seemed to glisten in the dim light and her glance searched the cave. "Papa? Wiley?" she whispered. Her imploring gaze settled on him and he shrugged.

"I don't know what happened. Stay here. I want to cast around for sign. This time I mean it, stay here. I don't want you messing up any tracks. Understand?"

She nodded, silent tears streaming down her cheeks.

On the ledge, he hunkered down to study the tracks more thoroughly. He didn't think there were any strange foot prints. The snow, filtering through the pine branches, though relatively light, had drifted in, making them hard to read. Whatever had happened, had happened after the storm, or they would have completely disappeared.

In the lee of a boulder that half blocked one end of the ledge, he found one set of clear prints. He followed them until they disappeared, blown away by drifting snow. He paused and let his eyes search the mountainside above him. He picked out the nest of rocks that was their lookout point and climbed up.

From this vantage point, he had a clear view over most of the valley below. It took only a moment for him to spot the tracks of the two riders. From their angle of approach, he knew it was the same trail they had stumbled across earlier. One horse had started up the incline at an angle that would have brought him to the ledge. But the rider had stopped a little over half way up and had returned to join the other rider.

Jason pulled out the binoculars and trained them on the tracks below. Both horses had been ridden at a run off to Jason's left. He turned the glasses to study the side of the mountain to his left. He thought he knew what had happened here. Whoever was on guard had fired to distract the riders, then had taken off along the mountain to lead them away. But that didn't account for the disappearance of the others.

He moved off along the side of the mountain, following the route that afforded the most cover. A quarter of a mile away, he saw a boot sticking out from behind a boulder, and his fears were confirmed. He found Toby, sprawled on his back in the snow, blood covering the side of his face, rifle a few feet away.

He knelt beside the body, only to have the eyelids flutter open and a weak voice say, "'Bout time you got here, boss."

Toby passed out as Jason tried to wipe away the blood. The bullet had literally parted his hair. Only the upward angle of the bullet had kept it from blowing his brains out.

Jason got the boy up and over his shoulder, collected the fallen rifle and struggled back through the snow. It took him nearly half an hour to reach the cave. Sarah was huddled against the wall. She jumped up as he staggered in with his burden.

"See what you can do for him while I get a fire going," he snapped.

Jarred out of her despondency, she rushed to Toby's side, kneeling to examine the wound. "I'll need some hot water," she said, "and something for a bandage."

"We've got no way to heat water. Here, use this." He pulled off the bandanna. "I'm going to find Buffalo."

He checked their horses as he passed and then followed the old man's tracks up the mountain. He hadn't gone far when he saw Buffalo scrambling back down the mountainside.

"I found their tracks. Looks like they hid out up there under a low-growing pine for a while, then headed down the mountain at an angle. There's only three of them."

"Yeah, I found Toby. He's got a bad head wound and probably a concussion. He's back at the cave. Buffalo, you said back at South Pass that you had a couple of cabins up this way. Any of them close?"

"Yep. Best we move over there. Them three is headed roughly in that direction."

"Okay. You get their horses and saddle them. Saddles are cached under that deadfall at the edge of the clearing. I'll go back for Toby and Sarah and meet you in the valley."

He left the stallion and the two geldings tied and led the dun and Sarah's horse close to the

ledge. When he reentered to cave, he was surprised to find a fire going and water heating in the spider. Sarah looked up from bathing Toby's head.

"I found most of the supplies and things in the back of the cave, hidden under a blanket that was covered with dirt."

Jason went back and looked at the hastily covered pile. He pulled out the supplies and began to sort them into packs.

"Buffalo found tracks. Looks like Wiley, Swede and your father took off for some reason. Buffalo has a cabin not far away. We're going to move over there. We'll hunt them as we go. I'll bring up the other horses. Can you have him ready to ride in a few minutes?"

"But he's unconscious. He couldn't stay on a horse!"

"We'll tie him on your horse. We can't stay here."

Jason finished making up the packs and carried them out. When he had the horses loaded, he came back for Toby. He carried the young man out and sat him in the saddle. Tying his feet under the belly of the horse, he let him slump over the horse's neck and withers and tied him there.

He helped Sarah to mount, then led them back to the clearing where Buffalo had the other horses saddled.

"Buffalo, you lead out and see if you can pick up Wiley's trail. Sarah, you bring up the rear and haze these horses ahead of you. I'll ride beside Toby and see that he stays in the saddle."

It was almost full dark when they heard a *halloo* and Swede emerged from the trees, followed by Avram. Sarah was off her horse in a flash, running through the snow to the old man.

"Where's Wiley?" Jason asked Swede.

"He's up under that tree. We're mighty glad to see you, boss. He's about done in."

"Bring him down. Let's get out of here as quick as we can. Buffalo's got a cabin not far from here. The way the wind is kicking up, we may have another blow before long."

Sarah left her father and ran to Wiley, as Swede helped him down the hill. She rode beside him, keeping a motherly eye on him, as they rode on through the dark.

The cabin was tucked against the mountainside, hidden from view by a clump of spruce and pine. A pole corral with a brush and daub shed abutted the cabin. Buffalo swung down and headed for the cabin door. Sarah jumped down before Jason could help her and rushed to Wiley's side. Taking some of his weight on her slender shoulders, she hurried him towards the cabin.

"Swede, you and Avram start unloading, then put the horses in the corral. Give them each a bait of grain," Jason said as he untied Toby. Heaving the boy on his shoulder, he carried him into

the cabin and laid him out on one of the three bunks.

Buffalo had a fire started and Sarah was rummaging through the pack that Avram brought in. Jason took the spider away from her and went out to fill it with snow. When he returned, she had found the coffee pot and he took it out to fill. He carried in the last pack as Swede and Avram began unsaddling the horses and leading them into the corral.

They ate the quick meal Sarah prepared and then sat around the table sipping coffee. Toby regained consciousness, staring at them with dazed eyes.

Jason crossed the room in quick strides as Toby tried to sit up. "Take it easy," he said, gently pushing Toby back down.

"What ...happened?"

"You've taken a nasty blow to the head. You just lie still and take it easy."

"I ain't no invalid." He wanted to join them at the table but both Sarah and Jason had overruled him. Sarah brought a bowl and fed him. When she finished, he lay on his side, listening to the conversation.

Jason smiled to himself at the way Sarah appropriated a seat next to Wiley and kept an eye on his drawn countenance. He recounted the events at the ranch, then asked, "What happened at the

cave? We saw the tracks where you tried to lead them away, Toby."

"Yeah. They must have spotted something. They pulled up and fired several shots up towards the cave. When one of them started to ride up, I dusted them with a couple of shots then, took off trying to draw them away. One of them got in a lucky shot, I guess." Toby fingered the bandage on his head, with a rueful grin. "I was sure I was done for when they rode up. One called Muller wanted to put another shot in me to make sure, but the other fellow told him not to waste his lead. Then I must have passed out. Came around once... and did some right... hard praying. Sure was... glad... to see your... ugly face, boss."

By the time he'd finished recounting his story, his face was white and sweat had broken out on his forehead. His eyes closed.

Sarah moved to his side and felt for his pulse. Jason was beside her, his forehead creased. "Is he--"

"He's unconscious. His pulse is strong. He'll need a lot of rest. There isn't much we can do except keep the wound clean and keep him warm and quiet."

She tucked the blankets around him and they returned to the table. Wiley took up the story. "That lead was ricocheting around that cave like a nest of angry hornets. Liked to scared the

bejesus out of me. I decided right then that cave was no place to stand off an attack. As soon as those two pulled out, we threw together what we could carry, hid the rest and took out. Figured they'd be back with the whole crew."

"How come you didn't head for the horses?"

"They might have found them and I didn't plan to go traipsing into any ambush. Figured to ease on around and come up on them from the other side."

"What we gonna do now, boss," Swede asked.

"I think we'll just lay up here for a couple of days. Way the wind is blowing out there, the drifts should cover our trail. I don't know about you boys, but I could use a few good meals and a warm bed. Besides, I want them to stew a little bit and use up a little more of their grub. Let them think maybe we've given up. Then we'll hit them and hit them good."

"You got a plan," Wiley asked.

"Yeah, I think I do."

Chapter 14

It was after dark when Drayton and Muller rode into the ranch yard. Bull and Curly were standing in front of the bunkhouse.

"What's going on?" Drayton asked as he dismounted.

"Locke was here again."

"What!" Muller whirled and gripped Curly's sleeve. "When?"

"Let go'a me. This afternoon. He took the girl and all of the supplies."

Drayton's gaze shifted to the corrals. The white stallion was gone. Undoubtedly the harness team was gone, too. He handed the reins to Curly. "Unsaddle for me. I want to talk to Corning."

He gave a peremptory knock and walked in. Corning was seated at the table, glass in hand. Dorinda was at the stove. The odor of the bacon she was frying didn't quite hide the aroma of spices that still hung in the air. Saliva began to flow and he spoke without thinking. "Apple pie!"

Dorinda whirled, waving a fork at him. Her face was red with rage, her eyes flashing. "Shut up. Just shut up." He ducked as she threw the fork at him and ran into the bedroom. He stared

after her, mouth hanging open. Now what the hell was that all about?

"Sit down, John. Pour yourself a drink." Corning shoved the bottle across the table as Drayton sat down. "Don't mind Dorinda. She's a little upset. The girl baked a couple of pies but Locke and them sat right here at the table and ate them before they left. Guess you heard. Locke came back today. Took the girl."

"That ain't all I heard he took. Did he really take all the supplies?"

"No. He took some but there's plenty left. No need to worry about that." His hand tightened around the glass. "The bastard emptied out all of the whiskey." A sly smile played fleetingly across his face. "At least he thought he did. Dorinda had half a dozen bottles hid under her bunk."

Drayton's glance searched the room noting the empty shelves, the open bins. Rising, he walked over and looked in the bins. Only the flour bin was full. In the others only a couple of dozen potatoes and onions remained and a few pounds of beans. He had to admire Locke's nerve even as worry clutched his gut. "Looks like he cleaned us out pretty good."

Corning slammed his glass on the table. "We got plenty of beef. And we'll get the rest of the supplies back when we get Locke."

"Was he alone?"

Corning hesitated. "No. According to Dorinda, he had some old mountain man with him. Just some old trapper, nobody to worry about."

Drayton stared at Corning. Could the man really be as stupid as he sounded? The old man that Corning dismissed so contemptuously probably knew these mountains like the back of his hand. These old trappers were tough as grizzlies and twice as mean; had to be or they wouldn't have grown old out here. It took a hardy man and a smart one to outwit the Indians and to survive in these mountains long enough to grow old.

They would need one hell of a lot of luck to catch Locke now and Drayton had never had much faith in luck. Whether the boss liked it or not, he was going to have his say. He moved back to the table and took a deep breath. "Corning, I think we'd better move out. We ain't gonna catch Locke now and if we don't move that herd out, we're gonna lose every head."

Corning's knuckles whitened as he picked up the bottle. "Damn it, John, I ain't paying you to think and I sure as hell ain't paying you to argue. Did you find any hay?"

"No. You?"

Corning poured himself another shot and sipped it before answering. "No." He pounded the table with his fist. "But it's there. It has to be. We'll find it. Do you hear me? We'll find it."

Drayton shuffled his feet trying to think how to reach the man. There wasn't any hay. He was sure of it. There were bound to be more of those little stacks but they would be well hidden. And even if they found them all, there would be barely enough to feed their horses. They had to move the cattle out and do it soon or they were going to lose the whole herd. But how to convince Corning? "Boss--"

Corning looked up, his red-rimmed eyes glittering with anger. "Shut up. I don't want to hear anymore. It's here. You find it. Get out of here and go find it."

Drayton stood up. He'd get out all right. Maybe he'd just get out for good. Corning was coming apart at the seams. No, he couldn't leave yet. He had a responsibility to the cattle and the English owners.

He stomped out the door, passing Muller on the steps. He was half way across the yard, when the door flew open and Corning called him back. Reluctantly, he returned to the room.

Corning glared at him. "Why didn't you tell me you found Locke's hideout?"

Drayton shrugged. "Didn't figure it meant anything. Muller here killed the kid so Locke's alone, except for that trapper."

"Now's our chance to get him. Tell the boys to saddle up."

"Boss, that's plumb crazy."

Corning stiffened. His voice was soft and deadly. "You calling me crazy?"

Drayton stared at him for a moment, unwilling to make an issue of it but even more unwilling to let it ride. "No. I'm calling the idea crazy." He waved a hand toward the window. "It's too dark to go charging off through those mountains and the wind's come up. Can't you hear it? Besides, by the time we got up there, Locke would have found the body of that cowboy and be long gone. We can't track him in the dark and by morning any trail he would have left will be wiped clean."

Muller sneered and asked, "Sure it ain't cause you're scared?"

Drayton tensed and slowly turned to face the gunman. He'd wanted out but not this way. But this wasn't something he could duck. His eyes were cold and bleak as he said, "We'd better go outside to finish this." He saw surprise flash in Muller's eyes and caught the shocked expression on Corning's face.

"Wait." Corning's voice cut through the air like a knife. "Muller, you had no call to say that. John's right. We got more to do than chase down one man. We've got to find that hay. You got no call the question John's courage."

Drayton continued to meet Muller's eyes, waiting. Finally, with an impatient wave of his hand,

Muller said, "Okay, Boss. Whatever you say." Turning, he stomped out.

Drayton's gaze followed him into the night. He knew a showdown had only been postponed.

Chapter 15

Jason's group stayed in the cabin the next two days, sleeping and playing cards. Swede taught Sarah to make bear sign, and she made a couple of dried apple pies. Avram still refused to eat anything made with pork, but Sarah maintained her stand that she would cook the things the men were used to eating.

Sarah hovered over Wiley. He was slowly regaining his strength, but was still too weak to do much. Toby drifted in and out of delirium as his fever fluctuated.

On the third morning, Jason rose early, stoked up the fire and started the coffee. He punched Swede and Buffalo awake. Both Toby, who was rational but weak and Wiley wanted to join the raid on the ranch but Jason wouldn't have it.

"Look, this is just the first skirmish. I'm going to need you both in good shape when we're ready for the final strike. Wiley, I want you to teach Avram and Sarah to shoot a rifle while we're gone."

As soon as breakfast was over, they made up their bedrolls and packed supplies for several

days.

"We should be back in two or three days, but don't look for us until you see us coming," Jason said.

Dapple greeted Jason with a whinny, then tried to buck him off when he mounted. "Jealous, are you?" Jason said, laughing. "And here I thought you'd enjoy the rest." He slapped the horse's neck affectionately as he settled down.

They headed north, keeping to the hills under cover of the trees. They camped that night in a grove of aspen on Roaring Fork Creek.

"What you figure on doing, Boss?" Swede asked.

"Not much, this time around."

"Why not?" Buffalo asked. "There ain't that many of them. Why don't we just bust in and roust 'em out?"

Jason hesitated then said, "I'd like to do it without any more killing."

The old buffalo hunter eyed him skeptically and spit a stream of tobacco juice. "You reckon it can be done that way?"

Jason shrugged. "I don't know but I plan to give it a try."

"So what are we going to do?" Swede asked.

"We'll start hazing the cattle down the valley tomorrow. I want to draw them away from the ranch again."

"You figure to pay another visit?" Buffalo asked.

"Yeah. Only this time, I plan to turn out that bunk room in the barn."

They rode along the top of the ridge the next morning, until they found a good view over the valley. Again, only one man appeared to be riding herd.

They followed the creek downstream, hugging all the cover they could find. They crossed the Green River and split up. Jason swung wide, crossing the valley at a lope, starting the cattle moving downstream. He had almost reached the far side of the valley when the rider raced towards him.

Jason pulled up his horse and sat waiting. He recognized Curly before he was himself recognized. He grinned inwardly, as the cowboy pulled up, anger and fear warring on his face. Abruptly, Curly jerked his horse's head around and took off for the ranch at a dead run.

Jason let the man go. Drawing his revolver, he fired three quick shots into the air. The cattle he had been drifting, bolted down the valley. He punched out the spent shells and reloaded as he

heard Swede and Buffalo fire, then watched the rest of the cattle begin to run, hazed on by the two men. As soon as the cattle were moving, Swede and Buffalo hightailed it up the ridge.

Jason rode on across the valley and into the trees. It wasn't long before he saw Corning and his men charge down the valley. When they were past, he rode on along the base of the ridge to the ranch. He waited for a few minutes, but there was no sign of life about the place.

Staying under the cover of the trees, he angled down towards the barn. Leaving Dapple out of sight from the house, he slipped in and entered the bunk room. Working without wasted motion, he first collected all of the men's tobacco into a small sack. A man without his tobacco can get mighty restless, he thought, chuckling.

He systematically collected each man's personal gear in the blanket from his bed. Carrying the bundles two at a time, he broke the crust of ice that had formed and dumped them in the horse trough in the corral. Filling a feed bucket with water, he doused the fire in the stove. He found a piece of paper and a stub of pencil. When he finished writing, he tacked the note to the door.

GET OUT WHILE YOU CAN. THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING.

He stuffed the sack of tobacco in his saddlebags, mounted and rode back into the trees and up the ridge. He found Swede and Buffalo waiting for him. They found a spot where they could watch to activity in the valley and hunkered down. The cattle had rounded the bottom of the fishhook at a run and were just now being milled in a circle a mile down the shank. They watched a while longer, then retreated to the camp site above the ranch buildings.

Swede crawled up under the pine to watch while Jason got a hat full of fire going and a pot of coffee started. They drank coffee and chewed on jerky. Buffalo left to find another spot that overlooked the ranch and Jason went to the lookout.

Lying under the tree, Jason looked out over that valley and thought back to the first time he had seen it. Something had tugged at his heartstrings and he had known this valley would be home. It had been over five years, but he had never faltered in his dream.

He studied the barn and bunkhouse. Wiley and Carl Johanson had done a damned good job of locating and building. The memory of two little kids he'd met in Colorado and a dream he'd had, flooded over him. In the dream he had seen a snug cabin with a woman waiting in the door and two kids running to meet him. Looking down on the ranch, he felt a great longing for that cabin. A picture of Sarah, standing triumphantly in the kitchen of the bunkhouse, flashed through his mind.

Riders swinging around the point of the ridge, interrupted his thoughts and he pulled out his binoculars. He recognized Corning. He looked cold, tired and disgusted; a long way from his usual dapper self. Bull, Curly and Dutch Muller looked every bit as unhappy as Corning. Thinking of the surprise that awaited them in the barn, Jason chuckled.

He slid down to the fire and poured a cup of coffee. Turning to Swede, he said, "Keep a watch on the place. Drayton didn't come in with the rest. I'm going to try to find him and have a talk."

He finished the coffee, tightened Dapple's cinch and headed back over the ridge. He spotted Drayton checking the cattle. He eased down through the trees and waited until Drayton's swing brought him within a few hundred feet of where he waited.

Tapping Dapple lightly with his spurs, he walked the big horse out of the trees. Drayton's attention was wholly fixed on the cattle and Jason was within a hundred feet before Drayton was aware of him.

"Locke. I should have known this was your doing."

"Reckon so. Maybe I'm wrong, but I take you for a cattleman and one that rides for the brand."

"You're not wrong."

"You ride for Corning or for the owners?"

Drayton gave him an intent look as he answered, "Figured they were the same."

"Not necessarily. Sarah overheard Corning and Dorinda talking. You're from Texas, ever here of an hombre by the name of Al Markle?"

"Hell, yes. He and his gang are said to be the biggest rustlers in east Texas. How does he figure in this?"

"According to what Sarah overheard, Corning bought this herd from him for five dollars a head less than the bill-of-sale shows and pocketed the difference. Corning and Markle plan to rustle at least half of them, run the brands and sell them over in the Mormon settlements. Are you in this crooked scheme with them?"

Drayton stared out across the valley for a few moments, his homely face bleak. Slowly, he shook his head. "Reckon not."

"Why don't you pull out?"

Again Drayton shook his head. "Don't reckon I can do that. I hired on to nursemaid these critters. Guess I'll have to stay and do just that."

"You're going to lose them all, if you don't move them to lower range. You've never spent a winter in this country. I have. In another couple of weeks, this valley is going to be snowed in until

spring. Snow so deep, you can't even imagine it unless you've seen it."

Jason could tell that Drayton was worried but still skeptical.

"If it's all that bad, how do you figure to ranch here?" he asked.

"First of all, I don't plan to winter cattle up here. Wiley and I plan to raise horses. We plan to start small and build. That's why we only brought in the two stallion and a couple of mares this year. We don't plan to bring in more mares until next summer, when we'll have a chance to put in some hay meadows."

"You got hay somewhere."

"Sure, we got a little but you'll never find it."

Drayton looked at Jason speculatively. "Maybe you'll tell us."

Jason grinned. "Don't count on it." Then he sobered, his gray eyes as cold as steel. "Drayton, the hay we've got wouldn't last that herd a week. Besides, we'll be needing it for our horses when we move back in."

"You seem mighty certain you'll be moving back."

"Oh, we'll be back. Inside of a week, most likely. When those cattle start dying, there won't be any reason for y'all to stay. We're going to make it plenty hot for all of you. Corning will pack up

and run."

Drayton didn't answer. He stared at the cattle, his face suddenly drawn and old. Jason turned Dapple back towards the ridge, then paused.

"Drayton, I think you're a good man. Stay with the cattle. Start them drifting back down the valley and maybe, when this is over, you'll be able to save some of them."

He kneed Dapple and rode towards the ridge. Drayton called after him, "Locke, keep an eye on that girl. She's a real lady. Muller wants her bad and he's a mean bastard."

Jason raised his hand in response and put the big horse into a gentle lope up the ridge.

John Drayton didn't bother to watch where Jason went, he didn't really care. He pulled out the makings and rolled a cigarette. He had been a cattleman all his life. He'd never known or wanted to know any other life. Suddenly he felt every one of his forty-five years.

He studied the cattle with experienced eyes. They were losing weight. He looked at the heavy clouds hanging low over the mountains. He knew in his heart that Jason was right. This was no country to winter a herd, not without proper preparation.

He'd had his doubts about Corning from the beginning. Doubts and not a little contempt. Still, he'd worked for absentee owners before and had met his share of incompetents and he'd needed a job. He wished suddenly that he was back on the old Circle W. Old Tom Whaley had been a cantankerous bugger, but fair and honest. Too bad he'd died and the ranch split up and sold. He hadn't had a decent job since.

Was Locke telling the truth about Markle being involved? His eyes narrowed. He'd never met the man but he knew him by reputation. Word had it that his Pa, Abner, had been a Liverpool brawler who had gone to sea to escape the hangman's nose. Abner had jumped ship in New Orleans, worked as a bouncer in a whorehouse and had raped a young Cajun girl. After bearing Al, Abner had sold the girl to the house, where she had soon died. Al had grown up in the whorehouse. At seventeen, he had killed a well-known businessman and had headed for Texas ahead of a lynch mob.

In Texas, Markle had soon built a reputation for theft and murder. He was said to be completely without conscience. A man who gloried in his viciousness, who enjoyed killing.

If Markle really was on his way to Wyoming, there would be hell to pay. Drayton clenched his teeth. Was Corning really that crooked or was Locke lying? If it was true, who else was in on it?

Curly? No, he didn't think so. The kid might be naive but Drayton would stake his life that he was honest. Bull? Possibly, but he doubted it. Not that it mattered. If he wasn't all ready in, he'd throw in with Corning without a thought. Jim? Probably. Muller? Yes, definitely. It would be just Muller's cup of tea.

He took a drag on his cigarette and stubbed it out. Where did that leave him?

Damn Corning and his slutty wife. This looked to turn into a war and he wasn't being paid fighting wages. His fingers reached automatically into his shirt pocket, pulled out the Durham sack and began to roll another cigarette as he stared down the valley, lost in thought.

If what Locke said was true, just where did he stand? Corning paid him but the cattle were owned by those Englishers. He tossed the cigarette away without lighting it. He'd hired on to take care of the cattle and that's what he would do. To hell with Corning. His responsibility was the cattle. He giggered his horse and started drifting the cattle slowly down the valley.

Jason rode back to the camp. Buffalo was back, so he called Swede down from the lookout.

"I found a good place up the way where we can have a good field of fire at both the bunkhouse

and barn. Not quite as good as here but good enough," Buffalo said as they sat drinking coffee.

"How come we don't just dust them from here?" Swede asked.

"Because this is the best place to keep them under surveillance and I don't want them staking it out. I want to be able to use it again. How'd that bunch like their welcome?"

"Shee-it, you should have seen them! They came out of that barn mad 'nough to eat the devil with his horns on. What the hell did you do down there?"

Jason told them, then said, "I also took all their tobacco. It's in my saddlebags. Help yourself."

Buffalo looked at Jason with awe. "Now, I'd say that was a right mean thing to do. Man can get along without most anything but his 'baccy. Yes, sir, boy, that was a right mean thing to do. In fact, plumb wicked." He cackled gleefully.

"When do we hit them?" Swede asked.

"With that fire out, I figure they'll have to wait up at the house until the barn warms up again. Dorinda ain't gonna like that one little bit. They should be heading back to the barn in another half hour or so. When they do, we'll dust them good. Don't plan to kill, just harass them. We'll fire into the doors and keep them pinned down for a while. For Pete's sake, don't shoot out the windows if you can help it. Don't forget, we got to spend the winter there."

"What if they break out the windows?"

"Well, then we can pepper them good, I guess, but I sure hope to hell they don't."

They rode down to the spot Buffalo had found and dismounted. Tying the horses behind a nest of boulders, they took up firing positions and waited.

They didn't have to wait long. Bull was the first to come out. He was almost half way across the yard when Curly came out, followed closely by Dutch Muller. Jason's shot peppered Muller with splinters as the bullet slammed into the door jamb, just inches from his face. Buffalo's shots had Bull hopping like a ballet dancer as he tried to get back to the bunkhouse.

Muller dived back into the room, Curly on his heels, and the door slammed. Bull beat against the door as bullets slammed into the door and walls around him. He finally got the door open and stumbled in.

They fired a few more rounds into the door, before Jason said, "Don't waste your bullets. We'll wait and let them think we've gone and try the same trick again."

It was nearly thirty minutes before the door opened again. After a minute or two, Bull appeared in the doorway, fired a few quick shots at the hillside and ducked back. Jason signaled them to hold their fire.

After a few minutes, the door opened again. Still they waited. At last Bull and Curly came out, diving into the shadows on either side of the door. Buffalo watched Curly and Swede took Bull. Jason kept his gaze fastened on the door. When Muller finally came out onto the step, Jason sent a shot into the wood between his feet. Swede and Buffalo dusted the ground and wall around the other two men. There was a mad scramble as they all dashed back into the bunkhouse.

Jason sat back and rolled a cigarette. "They won't try that again for a while."

They took turns firing an occasional shot into the door, keeping them pinned inside. It was Buffalo who saw the shadow on the bunk room window. Taking careful aim, he sent a bullet slamming into the window sill and the shadow disappeared.

When it was too dark to shoot accurately, Jason signaled them to pull back. Mounting, he led the way back between the two lakes and they camped on the other side of the valley.

In his blankets, Jason lay staring up through the branches at the clouds and thought about Sarah. He tried to reconcile his feelings about her. His initial contempt for her had faded. She had withstood the rigors of the journey into the mountains without complaint. She had settled into the cold and discomfort of the cave without a murmur.

It came to him then, the reason for his dislike. It was their fear, their cringing attitude that

irritated and revolted him. It brought out the worst in him.

He mulled this over in his mind for a while. They weren't cowards, he decided, just conditioned by circumstances he couldn't even imagine. Their ways were just different. Well, he could accept that. They had both certainly showed fortitude and dignity under what had to be a frightening situation for them. In fact, he decided, there was a lot to like about them.

He smiled as he remembered Sarah in the kitchen. She could be feisty when she wanted to, that was for sure. He hadn't really noticed how beautiful she was, until that moment in the kitchen. Now, he couldn't get it out of his mind. Unbidden, another picture floated into his mind. The picture of her rushing to Wiley on the hillside. And he remembered his partner's feverish declaration. His intention to marry her. Was it just the result of fever or had Wiley really lost his heart?

Wiley and Sarah. Why did the thought cause a sharp little pain in his gut? Surely...no...he couldn't be...jealous? Jealous of Wiley? That was crazy. Wiley and Sarah? Sarah and Wiley? Sarah? Did he want her for himself?

He sat up, rubbing a hand over his face. He didn't want to think about this, but it was something that had to be faced. He rolled a cigarette and sat staring off into the night, forcing

himself to examine his feelings.

False dawn was breaking when Jason, tired but at peace in his mind, crawled out of the blankets and went to relieve Swede on watch.

Chapter 16

Back at the cabin, Wiley Carr watched the three men ride away, his eyes following them until they were out of sight, then went inside. Sarah read the frustration in his face and silently refilled his coffee as he sat down at the table. She longed to gather him to her and smooth away the frown or at least offer some comfort but sensed his need to be left alone.

She filled a basin with hot water carried it over to the bunk where Toby had fallen into a fitful sleep, felt his brow and found it hot with fever. He woke at her touch.

"I'm going to cleanse the wound and change the dressing."

After soaking the bloodied cloth loose, she gently washed the wound, applied an unguent she had mixed from herbs in her pack, and covered it with a clean bandage.

Returning to the fire, she poured a cup of liquid from a pot at the edge of the fire and carried it to him. "I've prepared a tisane that will help your fever."

Toby took a swallow, then pushed the cup away, his face twisted in revulsion. "You trying to poison me? Frog piss 'ud taste better'n that stuff."

Wiley's head came up. "Toby, you watch your mouth. That ain't no way to talk in front of a lady."

Toby's cheeks reddened and he gave Sarah a sheepish look. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. Give it here, I'll drink it."

This was said with such a tone of martyrdom that Sarah laughed. "I know it tastes terrible, but it really will help your fever. Now go back to sleep."

"Yes Ma'am."

He rolled over to face the wall. Sarah pulled up the blanket and tucked it around his neck, then gathered the pan of dirty water and cup, carrying them back to the table.

"Sarah, let's see if your father needs any help feeding the horses."

She looked at Wiley in surprise. "My father doesn't...." Wiley motioned her to silence and nodded towards the bunk. Smiling, she said, "I could use some fresh air and we'll need more wood. Let me get my coat."

Outside, they strolled towards the wood pile.

"How is Toby?" Wiley asked.

"I think he has a concussion. Maybe even a skull fracture." She shrugged and lifted her hands,

palm up. "I am not a doctor."

"But you have some knowledge of medicine."

"Only the remedies that have been passed down in our family. The use of herbs, certain folk remedies. I have had no formal training."

"Do you think he'll be okay?"

"I don't know." She hesitated. "There is a theory among some of my people that such a blow causes swelling of the brain. If the swelling goes away, the person recovers. If it does not...." She gestured again with her hands. "All I know to do is to keep him quiet for a few days, see that he sleeps as much as possible, keep the wound to the skin clean and...wait. It is in God's hands."

Wiley placed his hands gently on her shoulders and turned her towards him. Cupping her chin, he tilted her face up and looked into her eyes.

Her heart began to pound and she felt the blood rush to her face. Her hands began to tremble.

"Sarah, I--"

"Sarah!"

Avram's voice shattered the stillness. She wrenched away and stumbled towards him, her heart and mind tumbling in confusion.

"Yes, Papa?"

Avram glanced apprehensively at Wiley who had turned and was picking up an armload of wood.

"Are you all right? What did he want?"

"I'm fine. He was asking about Toby. He's a good man, Papa."

"He's a goy."

"Are there no good goyim, then?"

Avram sighed and drew her to him, placing an arm around her shoulders. "Yes, Sarah. You know there are good goyim. Where would we be if not for the help of Adam Susrovski? Without his help we would never have escaped from the Ukraine. But these men, we don't know them."

"I like him, Papa. I like him very much."

"Don't, child. You will only be hurt. Respect, yes. Friendship, possibly. More than that, never. There are too many differences."

Sadly she nodded. Her father was right. Her heart told her that Wiley felt something for her but her mind told her that it could never be enough. Why, in some places in Eastern Europe, for a gentile to marry a Jew meant death for them both. The ache in her heart was almost a physical pain.

She wanted, needed to be alone.

Patting her father on the arm, she said, "Go on in, Papa. There is hot coffee on the stove. I think I would like to be alone for a moment."

He hugged her gently and left her. Sarah wandered into the lean-to out of the breeze. One of the horses nickered. Absentmindedly, she stroked its nose.

She wished they could leave for San Francisco immediately. Perhaps there, among her own people, she could forget Wiley. She leaned her head against the horse's neck. Almost, she wished they had never left the Ukraine. No! Not after what had happened. She could never wish that, not when this country had so much to offer.

She looked out across the valley at the mountains. They seemed to talk to her, to call to her. Here she felt an entirely different person, someone she barely recognized. No, she didn't really want to go to San Francisco. She wanted to stay right here. She wanted...she wanted Wiley.

"But he can be my friend," she whispered, burrowing her face into the horse's mane. "And I can be his friend, can't I?" Even as she said the words, she knew friendship would never be enough.

In the afternoon, Wiley showed Avram and Sarah how to load and unload the rifles and pistols and to clean them. Both were awkward with the guns but Sarah, eager to please, soon had it

adequately if not perfectly mastered.

"Now, let's go outside and see if you can hit anything."

They practiced for over an hour. Sarah, at first, closed her eyes when she fired and tended to jump when the gun went off.

Wiley laughed at her. "Sarah, you'll never hit anything with your eyes closed. You got to look at what you're shooting. That ball ain't got eyes of its own, you know."

Stung, she settled down to mastering the skill with determination. Avram, overcoming his ingrained revulsion for firearms, showed a natural ability that brought a look of surprise to Wiley's face.

"Hey, you really got the knack, Avram. Let's see what you can do with a pistol."

When Sarah went back in the cabin, Wiley was teaching Avram the fundamentals of a fast draw. She watched from the window for a while. How strange it seemed to see her father handling a gun. Her father, who had always counseled patience and submissiveness to the many persecutions, seemed to have a natural aptitude with these deadly weapons. Again the mountains drew her gaze. Perhaps they were working their magic on her father as well.

Sarah had supper nearly ready when Wiley came in. One look at his drawn face and she flew

to his side. "Take off those wet clothes. Are you trying to kill yourself?"

His face crinkled into a grin, his eyes twinkling. "Now, Sarah, I'm just fine. Just let me up to that fire for a minute and I'll go help your Pa with the horses."

"You'll do nothing of the kind." She whisked a blanket off a bunk and shoved it in his hands. "You get those clothes off this minute. I'll help Papa."

Toby sniggered from his bunk. "Boss, you look just like a henpecked husband."

"Toby, you just shut your mouth."

Blood suffused Sarah's face as she grabbed her coat and dashed for the door, Toby's next words following her into the darkness.

"Yessir, Boss, I can see you're starting to molt," Toby quipped as Wiley started to undress. He ducked, chuckling, as Wiley threw a boot at him.

As soon as supper was over, Sarah ordered Wiley to bed. He put up only a token resistance. To make sure both men got a good night's sleep, she made them drink an herb tea laced with a few drop of laudanum.

She handed Avram a cup of coffee and set about making the cabin ready for night. As she worked, she thought about her father. Since the gun practice, he seemed different. She paused, her

hands still in the dish water, watching him in the shard of mirror tacked to the wall.

He had always been a man of dignity, but tonight he seemed to have grown in stature, his bearing straighter, more self-confident. Was that what having a gun did to a man? No, it wasn't just the gun. She stole a quick glance over her shoulder. What was it she saw in his face? Assurance. That was what she saw in his posture and eyes. Assurance and determination and pride.

The thought startled her and she looked at him again. It was the quiet pride and self assurance of a man who had discovered new depths in himself. Her heart swelled. It was this country that had given him this new awareness. If only her mother could see him now.

She finished the dishes, poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Zitsen, Sarah-leh."

She sat down across the table, rotating the mug between her palms. "Papa, do we have to go to San Francisco?"

"And where else would we go?"

"Couldn't we stay here?"

"In a cave, perhaps?"

She laughed. "Oh, Papa. I'm serious. I like it here."

He reached over and patted her hand. "He will break your heart, child. No matter what he thinks he feels now, he will marry a goyeh."

"It's not just Wiley, Papa. It's this country, these mountains. They are so big, so strong. They make me feel strong, free. I...dread the thought of being shut up in a city."

"But there is nothing for us here. Trading is all I know. Even if we hadn't lost all of our goods, whom is there to trade with here?"

"Couldn't you trade with the Indians?"

"Nu, can one trade with a man who wants to tear off your hair?" He held up a hand. "I know, I know. I heard the same stories in St. Louis. How many men became rich trading for furs, but those days are long over. There is no market for beaver skins now that the wealthy are wearing silk hats."

"Couldn't we go back to Cheyenne or perhaps to Ft. Laramie? Or perhaps we could farm."

Avram laughed. "And what do we know of farming? Child, your heart is filled with dreams. Come, let us talk of other things. We will be going nowhere until this ranch matter is settled. Is there more coffee?"

Sarah filled his cup and sat down again.

"Do you think those men will find us here?"

"It is possible. I think it is best that we be prepared. We will take turns staying awake."

"You go to bed, Papa. I'm not sleepy, yet."

Avram finished his coffee and stood up. "Sarah, I like this country, too, but...." He shrugged. "Got vaist. Good night, child."

Sarah turned down the lamp and poured herself another cup of coffee. Pictures danced through her mind, as fleeting and insubstantial as the shadows that danced on the walls. Her mother sitting in the doorway plucking a chicken for Shabbat dinner. What would her mother think of Wiley? She knew: distrust and fear.

The picture shifted to her sister Zitta, gazing shyly at the rabbi's son, her eyes warm with love. Perhaps Zitta would have understood.

An aching sense of loss washed over her as she saw again the ruins of their village, heard the keening wails of the few survivors as she and her father stumbled towards the remains of their home.

The cabin seemed to close in on her, imprisoning her. She stumbled to the door, blinded by tears. Throwing on her coat, she grabbed the rifle and slipped out the door.

The cold stung her wet cheeks and she hastily wiped away the tears. Her gaze drifted across the black and white landscape, so peaceful in the starlight. She lifted her eyes and stared for a long time at the mountain's looming bulk.

Slowly a sense of peace filled her, quieting her turbulent emotions. Her gaze fell to the scene before her. It was no longer seemed all black and white, but varying shades of gray as well. Like life. She turned and entered the cabin.

Chapter 17

In the morning, Jason, Swede and Buffalo saddled up and headed back for the ridge above the ranch. They rode first to where they could watch the cattle. Sitting his horse under the cover of the trees, Jason studied the valley below with the binoculars. Corning and Drayton appeared to be having an argument, if the expression on Corning's face was anything to go by. Dutch Muller, off to the side of the two men, seemed to be lost in his own thoughts.

Jason swept the area with the glasses and picked out Curly circling the herd. He spotted another saddled horse, hidden in the trees and assumed it belonged to Bull Jackson. Lowering the glasses, he turned Dapple back over the ridge.

Buffalo pulled up beside him. "You planning some more devilment on them pore rannies?" he asked, grinning.

"Oh, I got another little trick or two scampering around in my skull."

"Yeah. Wouldn't do to let them get too comfortable."

They rode to the campsite above the ranch. Jason crawled up under the pine and studied the ranch through the glasses. Smoke drifted lazily from the bunkhouse and barn. He saw Dorinda come to the door and throw out a pan of water. Only the buggy team stood, hipshot, in a corner of the corral. Jason watched for some time, but there was no other movement below.

He crawled back down and joined the others around the campfire. Pouring a cup of coffee and lighting a cigarette, he explained what he planned to do. When they mounted up, Buffalo rode off to keep watch on Corning and his men. Jason and Swede worked their way down the ridge and approached the barn.

They left their horses out of sight and slipped in the barn door. The darkness of the barn, after the snowy brightness outside temporarily blinded them. Jason automatically took a quick step to the right and stopped.

The hoarse, triumphant roar startled them. Jason's gun leaped, almost of its own accord, into his hand as he heard two bodies collide. Bull Jackson had charged Jason just as he had stepped aside and Swede had stepped in the door.

Bull, unable to stop his forward rush, bounced off the blond giant and landed on his butt, his

face a picture of surprise. With a muttered oath, he came off the dirt floor and charged again. Swede, a grin on his face, stepped to the side and tripped him as he passed. Bull landed hard on his side, but rolled and came up fast.

Swede met him with a solid blow to the cheek that split the skin, but didn't stop him. He landed a heavy punch on Swede's ribs and followed with a left to the chin. Swede absorbed the punches and slammed a ham-like fist into Bull's belly. They clinched and exchanged short blows. They were almost evenly matched, being about the same weight and height, but Swede's years of swinging a double-bit axe gave him an advantage.

Bull brought a knee up, but Swede twisted to take it on the thigh. Swede brought a powerful blow up from gut level, catching Bull on the point of the chin, and dumped in on the floor. Bull kicked out with unexpected speed, catching Swede on the shinbone with his heel.

Swede's leg went numb and he staggered back as Bull lunged up, his big arms grasping Swede in a bear hug. Swede ducked and brought his head up under Bull's chin in a Liverpool Kiss. Bull's grip loosened as blood gushed from his mouth, the tip of his tongue bitten through.

Still limping, Swede stepped forward, taking a heavy blow on his left arm as he slammed a wicked right into Bull's face and felt the man's nose crunch. He followed with another blow that

mashed Bull's lips and loosened his teeth. As Bull stood swaying, his eyes unfocused, Swede landed a heavy blow to the belly that doubled him over and followed through with an uppercut that straightened Bull up and dumped him on the floor.

Bull rolled over, made a feeble effort to rise, then slumped back, unconscious.

Jason grabbed a couple of piggin' strings from a bundle on the wall and quickly tied the fallen man's hands and feet. He led the still limping Swede into the bunk room and motioned for him to sit down. He found a piece of toweling, dipped it in water and handed it to Swede, who began to wipe the blood from his split lip. Leaving the big man to nurse his bruises, Jason again gathered up the men's belongings and hauled them out to the horse trough.

He doused the fire in the stove again with a bucket of water, then went back outside. He fished a wet blanket out of the trough and, mounting Dapple, he rode over to where the stove pipe came out of the wall. Standing in the saddle, he removed the rain cap from the top of the pipe and stuffed the wet blanket as far down in the pipe as he could reach. They'd get a rude surprise when they tried to rebuild the fire. Replacing the cap, he dismounted and led Dapple around and in the barn.

"Help me lift this hunk of meat over the saddle, then get your horse and come on up to the bunkhouse," he said to Swede.

When they had Bull balanced, belly down, over the saddle, Jason led the horse up to the bunkhouse. He tried the door and found it locked. He lifted his foot and slammed a boot against the door. The lock sprung with the first kick and the door flew open. Off balance, Jason fell forward as a bullet whined over his head.

Jason rolled, came up into a crouch and lunged forward. His shoulder hit Dorinda just above the knees and toppled her backwards in a flurry of skirts and petticoats. His big hand clamped down over the little derringer, ripping it roughly from her hand and tossing it across the room.

Mouthing obscenities, she clawed at his face, her fingernails leaving two bleeding furrows along one cheek. He slapped her hands away and stood up, conquering an urge to kick her and stalked back to the door. Fighting women went against the grain, but Dorinda was beginning to try his patience.

Swede was heaving the unconscious Bull off Dapple. Jason grabbed a hold of his feet and together they carried him inside. Jason kicked open the door to the bunk room and they dumped Bull on one of the unmade bunks.

"Bring the woman in here. Watch yourself, she's a real hellcat."

Dorinda marched in ahead of Swede, her eyes flashing and mouth tightened in a sulky line that

made her almost ugly. "You son of a bitch. Wes will get you for this. He'll gut shoot you and give that little slut of yours to Dutch."

Jason had never wanted to strike a woman so bad before and it was all he could do to keep from slapping the venomous face in front of him. He stepped back and looked at Swede. "Throw her on the bed and tie her up. I'll stoke up the fires."

He found a piece of paper and a pencil, wrote a note and laid it prominently on the table.

CHANGED MY MIND. GET OUT TOMORROW

They met Buffalo as they rode up the ridge. "Corning, Drayton and Muller are headed back to the ranch. You pulled out just in time." He took a closer look at their faces. "Looks like you two ran into a catamount back there."

Jason touched his cheek. "Yeah. That Dorinda is some she-cat, all right. Swede here whipped the hell out of Bull Jackson. We left them both hogtied. Let's get over there and watch the fun."

They took up their firing positions of the night before and waited. It wasn't long before three men rode into the yard. Jason studied them through his binoculars. Drayton and Muller headed for

the corral and began to unsaddle. Corning rode directly to the bunkhouse.

A few minutes later, Corning rushed out onto the step and yelled. Muller and Drayton both ran across the yard to the house and they all disappeared inside. Half an hour or so later, Muller and Drayton came back out and went to the barn.

It was only moments later that Muller rushed back into the yard, rifle in his hands. Through the glasses, Jason could see the anger swelling his face as his glance raked the ridge. Drayton came out, and ignoring the gunman, walked around the barn. He was back in a few moments, carrying his wet soogans.

Jason saw Muller turn and say something, saw Drayton speak and continue on towards the door. Jason dropped the glasses and grabbed his rifle as he saw the muzzle of Muller's rifle raise to cover Drayton's back. He drew a quick bead on the gunman's back and his finger was taking up the slack when he saw the rifle lower again.

Slowly Jason released the breath he hadn't even realized he had been holding. He also realized, with a little start of surprise, that he liked and respected John Drayton.

Jason instinctively ducked as Muller whirled around and emptied his rifle, dusting the top of the ridge. It was a moment before Jason realized that the shots were fired at random. A release of

anger and frustration. None of the shots had come anywhere near where they were lying.

His rifle empty, Muller stalked around the barn, returning moments later with an armload of wet belongings. Jason swung his attention back to the bunkhouse as the door opened and Bull Jackson walked slowly across the yard. His arrogant swagger was gone, replaced by an almost diffident shuffle.

Bull had barely entered the barn door when it swung open again and all three men dashed out, followed by a billowing cloud of smoke. Jason heard Buffalo's quickly suppressed chuckle and had to stifle his own laughter.

They watched the men until they stopped coughing. Jason lifted his rifle and sent a shot into the dust between Muller's legs, and then another into the barn a few inches from Drayton's head. Buffalo and Swede had opened up, dusting the ground and making the three men dance and jump. They could hear Muller's howl of rage as he dived back into the barn. Seconds later he reappeared with his rifle in his hand, dashed for the corral, and began to saddle up.

"Enough," Jason called softly to Buffalo, who was on his right. "Let's get out of here."

They eased back to the horses, mounted and rode back up the ridge. They crossed over and rode through the trees until Jason found a spot overlooking the cattle. They dismounted and took

up positions where they could shoot into the herd.

"Hold your fire till Curly gets out from in front in case they stampede. Try not to kill any of them cows. We just want to spook them a little, maybe start them moving again."

They waited until Curly was safely to the side of the herd, then emptied their rifles into the ground behind the herd. They heard the bellowing of the frightened cattle as they started to mill. Curly had spurred his horse and was racing towards the trees for shelter.

"Let's go home, boys," Jason said. "We've given them enough to think about for now."

They cut back over the ridge and headed around the upper lake. When they reached the creek, Jason pulled up.

"You boys head on back to the cabin. I want to swing on around, and maybe, have talk with Curly."

"Don't you reckon we'd better come, too? Those boys are likely to be feeling a little mean, should they catch you," Buffalo said.

"No, I plan to stay out of sight. Y'all get on back. I won't be all that long behind you."

Jason sat the big horse, carefully studying their back trail as Swede and Buffalo rode on. He'd had a spooked feeling for the last hour or so; as though hidden eyes were watching him. He pulled

Dapple farther back into the trees and rolled a cigarette.

He was just beginning to think his instincts had led him astray, when Dapple suddenly whinnied and danced forward. Jason felt his hat jerked from his head and threw himself sideways out of the saddle, before he even heard the report of the rifle.

He hit the ground rolling, scrambled across the snow and threw himself flat behind a rotten log. He peered over the top. Dapple stood a few yards away, head turned and ears pointed, looking up the hill to Jason's left. Jason swivelled his head and saw Dutch Muller walk out of the trees.

Chapter 18

Muller leaned his rifle against a tree and took a couple of steps into the clearing. His revolver was in his holster. Jason studied the mountainside but saw no movement, nothing suspicious. Warily, he stood up and stepped over the log. "You looking for me?"

"Been waiting for you," Muller said. "Spotted some tracks over this way a couple of days ago. Just had me a feeling you'd circle around this way so I cut across between the lakes. Been sitting up on the hill."

"How come you didn't just pick us off, then?"

Muller shook his head. "Nope. I want you to know who did you in. I'm gonna gut shoot you. Won't take long to catch up to your friends. They'll never know what hit 'em. Then I'm gonna ride up there and take your woman. I want you to lie here and hurt and think about me with that brown-haired filly. She's right feisty and that's the way I like 'em. I'm gonna enjoy breaking her to the saddle."

"I always heard you had more wind than sand," Jason said, eyeing him with contempt.

Jason saw Muller's eyes narrow, saw the minute shift of the killer's shoulder and his hand flashed down. Muller was fast, too fast. His first shot kicked up the snow near Jason's feet. He never got a second shot. Jason's first shot slammed him back, puncturing his heart dead center. His second shot was redundant.

Jason located Muller's horse and tied the gunfighter's body over the saddle. Wrapping the reins around the saddle horn, he gave the animal a slap with his hat and watched as the animal bounded down the trail. He mounted Dapple and rode on up the creek.

It was nearly dusk when he spotted the fire and found Buffalo and Swede drinking coffee. Swede looked up with a grin. "Want some coffee, boss?"

"Reckon I could use a cup. Thought I told you boys to get on back to the cabin."

"We just had a hankering for some coffee. Did you get him?" Buffalo asked.

"How'd you know?"

"Man spends his time in the wilderness, he just sorta gets an itchy feeling when he's being watched. Figured you had that same feelin'. Who was it?"

"Dutch Muller."

"Figures. Don't have to ask if you got him."

"Sent him home over his saddle. Boys, I think the time has come to finish this fight. Let's get on back to the cabin and hold a war council."

It was well after dark, when they arrived. Avram stepped out of the shadows as they dismounted. They unsaddled and cared for their horses quickly, anxious to relax in the warmth of the cabin. The others were asleep. "We'll talk in morning," Jason said. "Get some sleep."

Jason slept long and deep and woke the next morning with a feeling of confidence and anticipation. Sarah was already up and had the coffee perking. Crawling out of the warm blankets, he clapped his hat on and stomped his feet into his boots. Shrugging into his coat, stepped outside to relieve himself.

The air was crisp and cold. The cloud cover was gone and the first rays of the sun danced over the mountain peaks, turning the snow a rich gold. A blue jay scolded him from a nearby tree.

He picked up the axe and began chopping wood. As he swung the axe, he could feel his muscles loosening, unwinding. Unlike most cowboys, he had always enjoyed the feel of tools in his hands. He split a rick, put the axe aside and carried an armload inside.

Sarah gave him a smile and poured him a cup of coffee. The others were crawling out of their blankets. He slapped Wiley on the back.

"Today we're getting our ranch back, partner. Are you feeling up to it?"

"Hell, yes. Have you got a plan?"

"Well, I've got some ideas to throw out. We'll talk about it after breakfast."

Sarah cooked and served breakfast. After the days of eating their own camp cooking, Jason, Swede and Buffalo kept Sarah busy filling their plates with flapjacks and bacon. Finally replete, Jason sat back and rolled a cigarette. He looked at each of them in turn, consideringly.

"Well, come on, Jason. Let's hear what you have to say." Wiley said, impatiently.

"Yeah, boss. Are we really going after them today?"

Jason took a sip of his coffee before he answered. "Yes. Toby, I want you to stay here with Sarah and Avram. The rest of you get ready. I want to leave in an hour. We'll circle around and come at them just the way they came in, from the ridge."

"Damn it, boss, you can't leave me here. This little ole scratch ain't nothing. I want in on the action, too," Toby complained.

"Toby, someone has to stay here and you're elected." Toby would have continued to argue but a look from Jason silenced him but didn't remove the scowl from his face as the others made ready to leave.

They pushed through the day, arriving at the lookout above the ranch well after dark. Wiley and Swede built a small fire and put on the coffee pot while Buffalo went to check the herd. Jason crawled up under the pine and lay watching the ranch through the binoculars. Everything was still, the bunkhouse dark.

He crawled down as Buffalo rode up and dismounted. The old hunter filled his cup and rolled a cigarette, before looking up at Jason. "Only that Curly fellow is with the herd."

Jason nodded. "The three of you work your way through the trees and come up on the barn from the other side. If we can catch them asleep, we can finish this without any killing. But watch yourselves and don't take any chances. I doubt if Drayton will fight."

"If he does?"

"I hope he won't, but that's his decision. Do what you have to. I'll give you time to get in position, then I'll take the bunkhouse. Luck, boys."

Jason watched them disappear into the trees, then rolled a smoke and poured a cup of coffee. He followed them in his mind as he smoked. At last, he rose, threw the last of the coffee on the fire and kicked snow on it until it was out. Packing away the pot and mug, he tightened his cinch and mounted.

He was almost to the spot where he'd left Dapple on his previous visit when a movement in the shadows caught his eye. Did Corning have a guard out? Who? Had to be Drayton or Bull. Corning sure as hell wouldn't be out himself, not in this cold.

Jason dismounted and began working his way toward where he'd seen the movement. He hoped it was Drayton. He might be able to talk the foreman out of giving warning. As he paused beside a tree, letting his shadow blend in with that of the pine, the man stepped out into the moonlight and Jason's gut clenched. The man was a stranger. He swayed closer to the tree trunk as a second man appeared from around the corner of the bunkhouse and joined the first. Their voices carried clearly through the cold air.

"Got the makin's?"

"Al says we ain't supposed to be smoking."

"Shit. Who's this jasper Corning's so all fired scared of, anyway?"

"Some homesteader."

"Homesteader! You mean we're freezing our balls off out here on account a some nester? Hell's fire. I ain't never seen no plow pusher that wouldn't run from a mad billy goat. Shee-it, I figured we was set to ambush some of that Hole-in-the-Wall gang. I'm goin' to tell the rest of the

boys."

Jason watched the cowboy toss away his cigarette and stomp off towards the barn, then began easing his way back towards his horse, his mind racing.

Corning had gotten reinforcements from somewhere and now the boys were walking into a trap. He had to warn them. How many men did Corning have posted around the place? Where were they? Al, the man had said. It had to be Al Markle.

Mounting, he rode turned Dapple up the bench, working his way through the trees. Could he get to the boys? There had to be some way of warning them. There had to be.

Something moved ahead. Jason leaned forward in the saddle, straining to see through the darkness. Horses. At least a dozen. The chill that swept through Jason had nothing to do with the temperature. My God, how many riders did Corning now have?

The animals moved out of the trees and into a patch of moonlight and Jason sucked in a breath. Not horses. Elk. The herd he'd seen a few days ago. An idea burst, full blown, in his mind. The wind had picked up and was blowing from the herd towards him.

He guided Dapple up the ridge and eased around them. Could he get in position before they scented him? He'd never been much of a hand at religion but now he found himself wishing he

knew a prayer.

The herd moved slowly down the bench. Once a big bull elk paused, sniffing the air and Jason's heart stopped and didn't start beating again until the bull moved on. Minutes, that seemed like an eternity, later he was in position, his scent blowing directly towards the herd. They began to trot, their heads moving, ears twitching nervously.

Jason kept his distance, letting his scent keep them moving. The herd entered the clearing, dancing skittishly. Jason drew his gun and fired over their heads. Screaming a Comanche yell, he raced toward them, firing into the air.

The herd charged across the clearing heading straight between the bunkhouse and the barn. The clearing exploded with gunfire. Dropping his empty pistol into his holster, Jason grabbed his saddle gun and began firing at muzzle flashes. A man dashed from behind the wood pile and fired at him. Jason snapped a shot and saw the man tumble. "Back, boys," he yelled at the top of his voice, praying they would hear him over crash of gunfire. As he turned, he thought he spotted Wiley dashing for the trees.

He giggered Dapple and dashed into the shelter of the trees, reloading his guns as he rode. Working his way up the forested slope, he headed for the lightning blasted pine. Tying Dapple out

of sight behind a berry thicket, Jason settled down to wait.

Sooner than he had expected, the three men rode into the clearing. He hurried forward. "You boys okay?"

It was Wiley who answered. "I reckon. What the hell happened back there? We was just getting ready to injun up on the barn when all hell broke loose. Thought you said there was only three of them skunks left."

Buffalo's rusty-hinge laugh echoed through the still air. "Was you ran that herd of elk through the yard?"

"Couldn't think of any other way to let you know about the welcoming party."

"Yeah but how many of them was there and where'd they come from?" Wiley voice queried peevishly.

Jason shrugged. "They must have come in today. The two I almost bumped into mentioned Al. Must be the Markle gang up from Texas. You boys head back. I'll do some scouting and see you back at the cabin."

Buffalo hung back as Wiley and Swede rode off, slumped in their saddles. "I'll tag along, if'n you don't mind. You got them glasses with you?"

"Sure, why?"

"I'm thinking we'd best find another lookout and I know a spot over on Big Sheep Mountain. A snug little cave where we can have a fire and get some sleep. I gotta feeling that's something we won't be getting much of in the next few days."

He sent a stream of tobacco juice into the snow and squinted up at Jason. "Still figuring to get your place back without any killing?"

Jason looked at the old man through bleak eyes. "No. I guess we'll give them what they're asking for."

Chapter 19

The cave was at the edge of a slope, wiped bare of any growth by some long ago avalanche, reached through a crack between the mountainside and a house-sized slab of granite balanced precariously on an almost nonexistent shelf. The passage was so narrow they had to dismount and tie up their stirrups.

Buffalo fumbled in the stygian darkness while Jason tried to calm the nervous horses. The clink of flint sounded loud in the darkness, then a pinpoint of light flared and Buffalo held up a flickering candle. "Hang onto them horses a mite longer while I get a fire going."

A few minutes later, light flared from the fire and Jason looked around in surprise. The cave was small, barely high enough for the horses but a sight of work had been done.

Buffalo handed him a pitch-dipped brand. "Take them horses behind the wood pile. I gotta get the baffle in place and then I'll start coffee."

Jason led the horses around the pile of firewood that reached nearly to the ceiling and was surprised to see that the cave opened up into a larger room. Across one side were rough manger

and a tie rail. An iron bracket had been set in the wall and he slipped the torch into it. In the far corner he saw a pile of hay. Water trickled into a rock basin, then dropped down to flow through a wooden trough, the overflow splashed and disappeared into a crack in the floor of the cave. After stripping the horses, watering them and rubbing them down, he filled the manger.

Retrieving the torch, he returned to the front of the cave. A wall of woven cattails now covered the entrance. He held the brand high and stared around the room. On one side the rock wall had been chipped into rough shelves that held an assortment of cooking utensils, tools and tinned goods. From pegs driven high in the wall hung a few articles of dust-covered clothing and three ratty buffalo skins.

Buffalo chuckled at Jason's look of astonishment. "I done tole you I had a bunch of hidey-holes in these mountains. I found this one nigh onto twenty years ago, running from a passel of Blackfoot. They killed my pack horses and got an arry into me and figured they had me. Fooled 'em. Hid out here for most two weeks. I warn't much more than a skeleton by the time they finally gave up and I got away. Kept the place stocked with grub ever since. Man never knows when he might need a hidey-hole. Well sit, boy. I'll have some grub rustled up in a minute."

Jason tossed the brand into the fire and settled with his back to the wall. Weariness and

depression drained his strength, his eyes closed and he slept. He came half awake when Buffalo shoved a plate of food in his hands, ate without tasting it, rolled up in the hide Buffalo handed him and went back to sleep.

Jason was awakened by a single gunshot, followed by a volley of shots. Grabbing his rifle, he crawled outside and found Buffalo ahead of him. "What's going on?"

"Cain't tell. Too dark to see. Maybe them thieves had themselves a falling out."

"You been up all night?"

"Nope. Just crawled out and now that I'm up, reckon I'll sit here a spell. Seems the older I get the less time I want to spend sleeping. Be daylight afore long. Get yourself some more shuteye."

A couple of hours later, Buffalo nudged him awake. "Get up and eat, boy. Wind's died down and the air's as clear as glass. We'll be able to see what's going on at that ranch of yours."

Buffalo was right. When Jason crawled to the edge of the scree, settled himself at the edge of the boulder and trained the binoculars across the valley, the ranch buildings leaped into view, appearing in minute detail. He counted half a dozen men saddling up and he recognized none of them.

The door to the bunkhouse opened, and he centered the glasses on the three men who emerged.

In the clear air, he could even see their expressions. Drayton wore a closed, tight look. He strode towards the corral without a backward glance.

Corning and the third man continued to talk for several minutes, then Corning went back in the house. Jason studied the other man as he walked towards the corral. This had to be Al Markle, the Texas outlaw. He was thin to the point of emaciation, his face as narrow and sharp as a hatchet. A luxuriant walrus mustache graced his upper lip. He stroked it as he walked.

Markle saddled his horse and joined the other six men. Jason watched them ride out towards the cattle. A few minutes later, John Drayton also rode away from the ranch, but up towards the lake.

Jason crawled back into the cave. "Drayton just rode off alone. I want to talk to him. You keep an eye on the ranch. If I'm not back by Mid-afternoon, go back to the cabin and wait for me."

An hour later, Jason spotted Drayton. Puzzled, he stopped in a grove of aspens and watched the foreman pick his way slowly along the side of the hill. Every few minutes Drayton would stop, studying the terrain. He wouldn't be hunting for hay here, what was he searching for?

When Drayton had passed out of sight around the shoulder of the hill, Jason dropped down to follow and pulled up in surprise. The trail the foreman was following was plain to see. The night

wind would have scoured out any tracks left by Jason's party. These had been made early this morning and the horse that made them had obviously been hurt.

Jason rounded the shoulder of the hill and saw where the first horse had stumbled. Drops of blood stood out like scarlet petals on the white snow. The horse was badly hurt, maybe the rider, too. Who was the rider and why was he heading away from the ranch?

He sent Dapple up the side of the hill above the trail and worked his way through the pines. A few minutes later he spotted Drayton again and followed. Half a mile further the trees thinned out and Drayton kicked his horse into a run across the small glade. On the far side, Jason saw the dead horse. Drayton dismounted and began stripping off the saddle.

Angling around the clearing, Jason came across boot prints heading up the draw and pulled up. He dismounted and worked his way to where he could see the tracks. The prints told their own story. The man had panicked, running blindly, stumbling, falling repeatedly.

The sound of a shod hoof striking rock alerted Jason and he faded back into the trees as Drayton appeared, leading his horse. Leaving Dapple, Jason drifted from tree to tree, following. At the click of a gun being cocked, he froze. Slowly he turned his head, his gaze searching the area to his right. It took him only a moment to spot the man crouched behind a tree.

Even as the man's rifle raised, Jason was shucking his pistol. Before the bushwhacker could take aim, Jason shouted, "Drayton, down," and snapped a quick shot. The bullet struck the tree, showering the man with bark and he whirled, slipped in the snow and tumbled sideways, dropping the rifle.

The man's hand grasped for the gun and Jason sent another bullet into the snow inches from the reaching fingers. "Don't try it."

Gun drawn, Drayton dashed up the hill, slid to a stop beside the cowering man. "What the hell? Curly, you all right?"

Jason stepped from behind the tree and walked down the hill. Drayton stared at Jason, surprise and confusion on his face. Jason gestured towards Curly. "He was figuring to bushwhack you."

Curly's head shot up and he glared at Drayton. "Wasn't! Just figured to stop you and take your horse. Besides, you was hunting me. I ain't going back." The boy's face crumpled. "What you figure on doing to me?"

Jason and Drayton exchanged a look over the boy's head. Jason broke the silence. "Y'all hunting me?"

Drayton holstered his gun. "No and ain't likely to be. I was hunting Curly. Thought he might

be hurt and need help."

"You...you ain't come to take me back?"

Drayton sighed. "Don't reckon either of us will be going back." He looked at Jason. "You were right. That bunch is planning to steal the cattle. I ain't never used a running iron and I'm too danged old to start."

"What do you plan to do?" Jason asked.

Drayton pulled out the makings and rolled a smoke then handed the sack to Curly. "I been thinking on that." He hesitated, eyeing Jason. "You really own that ranch? I mean, you ain't just squatting?"

"I leased that land from old Chief Washakie five years ago. It's mine."

Drayton nodded. "Figures. Man don't put that much work into a place he's just squatting on. You still plan on taking it back?"

"Damn right."

"You're gonna have your work cut out. Al Markle came in yesterday with six men, all hard cases." His thin lips quirked. "But I guess you found that out last night. What you figure to do with the cattle, if'n you do drive Corning's bunch out?"

Jason pulled out his own makings. "They do be a problem. Wouldn't mind having a couple of head for winter beef, but the rest... I figure they owe me a couple of head for all the trouble I been put to but I sure ain't got no use for the rest of them."

Drayton nodded. "I'd need some help getting out of here."

"Well now, if a man was to help me get my ranch back, it'd be only fair to give him a hand, leastways as far as South Pass."

Drayton tossed away his cigarette. "Good enough. You got hideout around here? We'd best get moving."

"Hey! What about me?" Curly scrambled to his feet. "Y'all just going to leave me here afoot?"

Jason looked at him. "Was you up here hunting me?"

"Hell, no. I was running away from those bastards. I ain't no rustler and I told them so. I reckon they was fixing to kill me but I got away."

Jason glanced at Drayton who answered the questioning look. "He's telling the truth. They tried to shoot him down when he cut out this morning."

"You throw in with us, you're likely to get shot at again."

"I know but it's better than running into a rustler's noose."

Jason sighed. This wasn't the kid's fight. "We can let you have a horse and enough grub to get you to Gilbert's at South Pass."

Curly scrambled up. "That's white of you, but if the boss here is throwing in with you, then I reckon I will, too. If you'll take me, that is?"

Jason studied the set look on the boy's face. "Okay, let's go. You can ride double with me."

They reached the cabin just before dark. Wiley burst through the door, gun in hand, glowering at Drayton and Curly. "What are they doing here?"

The click of cocking guns drew Jason's attention to the cabin. Rifle barrels poked through the window and the edge of the door. He held up a hand. "It's okay. They're on our side, now. Wiley, you want to show Curly where to put up the horses? Is Buffalo back yet?"

Still glaring suspiciously, Wiley holstered his gun. "If you say so. Ain't seen Buffalo since last night."

As soon as Curly slid off Dapple, Jason dismounted. Slapping his partner on the back, he said,

"Take it easy. We need all the help we can get so pry that burr from under your saddle. I'll explain as soon we take care of the horses."

"Go on in, we'll take care of them."

Jason and Drayton entered the cabin in time to see Sarah putting aside a rifle, before heading for the stove. The sight of the rifle in her hands sent an odd little thrill up his spine. How often had he seen his mother carrying a rifle as she went about her chores. It wasn't only men who defended their homes. If Wiley won Sarah, he'd be a lucky man. Someday, maybe, he'd find the one woman to walk beside him. He could wait.

Jason glanced around the cabin. Avram was sitting on a bunk, rifle across his lap. "Where's Swede and Toby?" he asked, as she placed two mugs of coffee on the table. He motioned Drayton to sit as he straddled a chair.

"Swede is up on the hill standing watch. Toby saw a deer at the other end of the valley. He's gone to see if he can get it."

Drayton sipped his coffee and studied the cabin. Sarah dished up plates of stew then set a pan of cornbread on the table before pouring herself a cup of coffee and taking a seat. Wiley and Curly came in and helped themselves. There was no talking while the men ate.

Wiley pushed his plate away and leaned back. "Well?"

Jason rolled a smoke. "Let's wait till Buffalo gets here."

The door opened, a gust of cold air following Buffalo into the room. "I'm here. What are you waiting for?"

"A war council. We'd best get Swede and Toby here, too."

"Toby's hanging a deer in the shed. He'll be in soon."

Avram left the corner of the bunk where he had been sitting silently and went out the door, saying over his shoulder, "I vill call Swede."

When they were all gathered in the cabin, Jason related his experiences of the night before and explained the presence of Drayton and Curly. Drayton told of the arrival of Al Markle and his gang, the attempted killing of Curly and their decision to throw in with Jason.

Wiley ran a hand over the stubble on his chin. "So, counting Corning and Bull, we've got nine men and that hellcat of woman against us."

"Yah," Swede said, "but there's six of us now."

"Seven." They all turned at Avram's quiet voice. "We are seven. I do my share."

The rest stared doubtfully at the little Jew but Jason nodded. "What went on at the ranch after I

left?" he asked Buffalo.

"Not much. They rode out and looked at the cattle, then rode back. The woman came out and she and Markle and Corning had what looked like an argument in the yard. Markle and the boys went on to the barn. Corning and his woman carried grub over to them. 'Bout an hour later, Markle went up to the bunkhouse and his boys headed out to the cattle and began running brands."

"What are we going to do, boss?" Toby asked. "There's too many of them to challenge head on."

"We might have some help comin'," Buffalo said. At Jason's look, he continued, "I left word for your uncle at South Pass afore I left. 'Course, he might not get it. Then, too, them soldier boys don't much like to get involved in personal squabbles."

Jason shifted in his chair. "This is our fight. I don't plan to count on the cavalry." He looked at Toby. "You're right. What we need to do is whittle the odds down a little bit. This is what I have in mind."

When he finished talking, Wiley let out a whoop. "What are we waiting for? Let's get started."

Chapter 20

"Wait a minute," Jason said. "I want someone to stay here with Avram and Sarah."

Avram started to protest but Jason cut him off. "Corning may have some of those rannies out hunting for us right now. If my plan doesn't work, we'll need this place to hole up for the winter. We can't take a chance on them taking this cabin away from us. Now, who wants to stay?"

When no one volunteered, Jason counted out five matches, and turning his back, snapped off the end of one. Holding out his hand, he said, "Small match stays."

Toby drew the short match and tossed it disgustedly into the fire. Jason slapped him on the shoulder. "Sorry, boy."

The others trooped out of the cabin and saddled up. Curly threw his saddle on the horse taken from Jim.

Jason led out at a fast pace, taking the most direct route. When they reached the lower lake he pulled up. "It's beginning to cloud up. We'll give the horses a breather."

While they waited Jason rolled a smoke and studied the men. He had no doubts about Wiley.

Buffalo was a man to ride the river with but this wasn't his fight. Why had the old man stuck with them? He wasn't worried about Swede, his brother's death gave him a stake in the fight. Drayton's concern was the cattle but what about Curly? Would the kid stay the route?

He tossed away the cigarette. He'd soon know. "Wiley, you take this side of the valley with Buffalo and Swede. We'll meet at the pine. Let's go."

The two parties split up and Jason led the way across the river between the lakes and climbed the ridge. At the top, Drayton and Curly headed down to the cattle in the valley, staying under cover of the trees.

Jason worked his way down towards the ranch. Tying Dapple in a stand of aspen, he inched his way towards the bunkhouse. When he had a close view of ranch, he settled down to wait. Removing the glove from his gun hand, he slipped it inside his coat and under his armpit.

Finally he saw movement near the woodpile. Replacing his glove, he injunned down the hill to the edge of the clearing. He swore under his breath when he saw the guard seated with his back to wood, facing him, a good thirty feet of bare ground between them.

He glanced up at the sky. Why hadn't the clouds moved in? His gaze swept the clearing. To his left was a half-trimmed deadfall. Slowly, step by step he worked his way back and to the left

until he was a couple of feet from the end of the log. It was barely a foot in diameter but beggars couldn't be choosers. Any cover was better than none.

Taking off his hat and drawing his gun, he lowered himself to the ground and stretched out. Using his elbows, he dragged himself through the snow. His heart was in his mouth. If the guard stood up, there was no way he could avoid seeing Jason.

The man shifted position and Jason froze, trying blend into the length of the log. The man tossed away a cigarette and settled back against the woodpile. After a few minutes, Jason began his slithering progress again. He reached the near end and squirmed along behind it until he reached the butt. Taking a deep breath he stretched his neck and peered around. The guard was less than three feet away. Jason resisted the urge to jerk his head back and studied the ground between them. Could he reach the man before he cried out?

He withdrew his head. In his ears, his breath sounded as loud as a tornado. There was no way he could get to his feet and charge the man before he could give warning. He needed a way to distract him but a way that wouldn't alarm him. There were bound to be chips of wood under the snow, but if he tried to throw one, his arm movement was bound to be seen.

Jason was wet and cold, but he'd been wet and cold before and he could have waited for hours

had the circumstances been different but now he couldn't wait. He stretched his neck and peered around the log again.

He saw the guard prop his rifle against the woodpile and pull out his tobacco sack. Jason watched him roll a cigarette then shift sideways, his back half to Jason, as he struck a match and brought his cupped hands towards the cigarette in his mouth.

With the agility of a mountain cat, Jason drew up his legs and threw himself across the intervening distance. The match and cigarette flew in different directions as the guard grabbed for his rifle. Before his hand closed on it, Jason was on him, the barrel of his gun descending on the man's head.

Ripping the man's bandanna from his throat, Jason gagged him, then tied his hands and feet with piggin' strings he'd stuffed in his pocket for just that purpose. Propping the guard in a sitting position, he emptied the rifle and propped it beside the unconscious man.

Fading back into the trees, he retrieved his hat, then worked his way completely around the clearing. He found no other guards. He made his way back to his horse and rode to the dead pine. Drayton and Curly were already there. Within minutes, Buffalo rode up.

"The boys are ready when you are," the trapper said. "You'll have one less to worry about. The

jasper on our side of the valley made a mistake. He figured a gun was faster than a knife. He won't be making that mistake again." He shot a look at Drayton. "Reckon you took care of your man."

Drayton nodded. "He's tied up behind that chokecherry patch."

"You're too soft. Shoulda killed him."

Drayton stiffened but before he could speak, Jason said, "Forget it. We'd better get moving. Be daylight soon."

The five rode back towards the ranch in silence. On the ridge above, they separated. Buffalo and Curly worked their way through the trees to the corral while Jason and Drayton eased down towards the bunkhouse. Dawn was a pale gray line silhouetting the mountain tops by the time they were all in place.

Jason crossed to the woodpile and found a pitch-laden piece of kindling. Lighting it, he carried it into the center of the yard, waved it above his head a few times to signal Wiley, then doused it in a snow bank. He retreated to the corner of the bunkhouse and hunkered down behind a rain barrel.

A few minutes later the ranch started to come alive. One after another, the cowboys made the trip from the barn to the outhouse and back. Jason scrunched lower and chewed at the inside of the cheek. Where was Wiley?

Bull left the outhouse headed for the barn when he stopped and stared down the valley. Jason heard him muttered, "What the hell," and heard him running towards the bunkhouse. A moment later there were scrambling sounds from within the house and the sound of feet pounding out the door.

Jason bit back a grin. The sound of hooves and the lowering of cattle echoed through the morning air as Al Markle sprinted across to the barn. By the time Markle and his men dashed out of the barn, the cattle were streaming into the yard.

One of the men yelled and drew his gun. Jason stood up in time to see splinters fly from the corner of the barn. He saw Swede drop off his horse and disappear into the trees as Markle and his gang began shooting wildly.

From the trees, Jason's men returned the shots. Pandemonium increased as the cattle began to mill and bellow. One man went down in a hail of gunfire, another under the hooves of a pain-crazed steer.

Markle ducked into the milling herd and squirmed through the bovine mass and ran towards the bunkhouse. In the cleared space before the door he turned in time to see the last of his men throw down his gun and raise his arms. Jason stepped around the corner just as Markle, his face

twisted in anger, lifted his gun and shot his own man in the back.

"I always heard you were a skunk, Markle, but I never figured even you to be that low down."

Markle whirled and fired. Expecting the shot, Jason was already dropping sideways. As his knee hit the ground, he fired. Markle staggered back, found his balance and fired again but his shot went wild as Jason's second bullet shattered his skull.

Jason scrambled to his feet and stared down at the dead gunman. How many dead men did this make? Too many. Would the killing never end?

Buffalo came around the corner of the house. The old man's grin made Jason's stomach roil. Death, no matter how needful, shouldn't be a source of pride or gratification. It was a relief to turn away from the trapper as Wiley rode up, followed by Swede.

"We'll move these cattle on back down the valley. Where's Corning?"

Jason shrugged. "Still holed up in the bunkhouse. I'll roust him out now."

"Need any help?"

Jason shook his head. Wiley and Swede rode off and Jason turned to Buffalo. "How about you bring in that man the boys left tied up down the valley."

"If'n you say so but if it was me, I'd let the buzzard freeze." At Jason's cold look, he spit and

said, "Okay, okay. I'm going." At the corner of the bunkhouse he turned and grinned. "You watch out for that hellcat, Locke. She's meaner than a rattlesnake on a hot skillet."

Jason reloaded his revolver, mounted the step and slammed his boot against the door. As it swung open, he dived in, rolled, and came up covering Corning who lunged up from the table where he had been sitting nursing a bottle, hand reaching towards his holster.

"Go ahead, if you feel lucky," Jason said.

He could read the indecision in Corning's eyes, read the wild urge coupled with fear. Caution prevailed and Corning slowly raised his hands.

"Unbuckle that belt and drop it. Use you left hand and do it real slow."

As Corning complied, Jason sent a hasty glance around the room. Dorinda's hand still clenched her glass, her knuckles white and her eyes blazing with hate.

"You just sit right still and you won't get hurt," he told her, his attention focused on Corning. "Now kick that gun over this way."

Corning nudged the gun belt towards him. Keeping his eyes fixed on Corning, Jason reached down and picked up the belt and tossed it in the corner. "Now, take off that coat and let's see if you're wearing that hideout gun."

His lips split in a grim smile as he saw Corning tense in surprise and irritation. Carefully he took off the coat and laid it over the corner of the table. He pulled the derringer from the shoulder holster and laid it on top of the coat.

As Jason reached forward to pick it up, Dorinda suddenly hurled the contents of her glass in Jason's face, blinding him. Jason swept up the gun, even as he backed away, his right arm automatically coming up. He staggered backwards, dragging his sleeve across his eyes, as Corning tackled him. They fell with Corning on top, trying to wrench the gun from Jason's hand.

Blinking rapidly to clear his eyes, Jason held on to both guns, managed to get a knee under Corning and levered him up enough to roll out from under. Corning let go of Jason's wrist with his right hand and slammed a fist into the side of Jason's head. It was a glancing blow and it threw Corning forward. Jason butted Corning hard under the chin.

Corning's grip loosened and Jason rolled away and came to his feet as Corning reared up. They circled each other warily. Jason dropped his pistol back in his holster and jammed the little gun behind his belt.

Corning suddenly smiled. "I'm going to tear you apart and feed you to the wolves, you stupid bastard."

"Reckon you can try," Jason said. "Don't think you'll get very far."

Corning feigned several punches, then aimed a swift kick at Jason's crotch. Jason twisted and the boot merely grazed his thigh. He stepped in quickly and landed a solid blow to Corning's gut. The man grunted and doubled over. Jason locked his hands and brought them down on the back of Corning's head as he brought his knee up to meet his descending face. Corning toppled sideways, hitting the floor with a jar.

Before Jason could make another move, Dorinda launched herself at him, fingers reaching for his eyes. Jason threw up an arm to ward her off and took a step backwards. She followed, screaming obscenities, her fingers, like talons, clawing at him.

He got a hold of one wrist and whirled her around, bringing the arm up behind her back. "Woman, if you don't behave yourself, I'm likely to forget your sex and belt you one. I'm about out of patience with you."

He gave her a shove that sent her stumbling across the room and into the wall, as Corning hauled himself up and charged. Jason deflected the wild punches with his arms and backed up a step. They traded short, swift blows and then Jason found an opening and slammed a rock hard fist into Corning's nose. He felt the cartilage crunch and saw the blood spurt.

As Corning backed away, Jason followed, slamming punches into Corning's belly, driving him farther back. Corning's blows became weaker and less effectual. Jason closed in and threw a right uppercut that raised Corning onto his toes, then dumped him like a sack of grain on the floor. This time he didn't get up. He lay on the floor, eyes glassy and unfocused.

Jason whirled as Wiley appeared in the door. Wiley took in the room with one swift glance, then leaned against the door jam. A wide grin split his pale face. "Well, partner, doesn't look like you need any help here."

"Thought you were moving those cattle out?"

"Drayton and Curly took over."

"What happened at the barn?"

"Everything went just like you planned. We got Markle's man you hogtied stuffed in that bunk room. Curly found Bull hiding behind a stack of grain. Swede sure whipped all the sand out of that bully. We put him in there, too. Swede's guarding them."

"See if you can find a lock for that bunk room. We'll let these fine people spend the night out there, too. Then tell Swede to rig some runners for that surrey."

Jason found a piece of rope and bound Corning's hands behind his back, leaving him lying on

the floor. Turning to Dorinda, he said, "Go pack whatever personal stuff you want to take with you. You can take whatever the surrey will hold, but I'd suggest you leave room for grub to get you to South Pass."

He ignored her as she stomped into the other room. He stoked up the stove and put on coffee water. When Dorinda came in with two grips and set them down, he said, "Might as well just haul them right on down to the barn." He heaved the half conscious Corning to his feet and marched him towards the door. "You just go right on ahead. We'll be behind you."

"If you were a gentleman, you'd carry these."

"Well, I'm no gentleman and you're no lady. I'm not a damn fool either. You want them, you tote 'em. Move."

She picked up the bags and went out. Jason supported the dazed Corning, but kept his gun hand free. He didn't trust either of them.

In the barn, Swede had two of the wheels off the surrey and was busily planing a runner. Wiley came out of the bunk room. He had to jump to avoid Dorinda who stalked past him into the room, her head high. Jason dumped Corning on one of the bunks. He checked the wood pile and decided there was plenty for the night.

"You can untie him. I'd suggest you get plenty of rest. I figure to have you out of here early and you'll have a hard trip ahead of you."

"Thanks a lot, you bastard."

Jason walked out into the barn, locking the door after him.

"Let's bring that team in and grain them. They'll need it. They're good horses and I'd hate to see them suffer. We'd better throw a sack of grain in the surrey, too."

By the time Buffalo returned with the half-frozen cowboy Drayton had left tied up on the range, Swede had finished mounting the runners and they had loaded surrey with supplies for the trip.

Jason made a pot of coffee and they sat at the table, letting the tension drain away. Buffalo was the first to speak. "There's a party coming up the valley."

"Indians?" Jason asked.

"Doubt it."

"How many?"

"I figure about a dozen, but they was too far away to tell. If'n I was to guess, I'd say they was soldier boys."

"Cavalry here and this late in the year? Don't make sense. Unless they was chasing Indians, and that don't make sense either. We'd have seen some sign if there was a raiding party out."

"Don't think they're chasing anybody. Not the way they were moving. Anyway, I don't think they'll get here tonight. They'll camp at those warm springs and come on in the morning, if they're planning on coming this far and I 'magine they are."

Jason raised an eyebrow.

Buffalo stood up. "It'll be that uncle of yourn. Looks like he got my message after all. Well, less'n you need me for something, I reckon I'll catch me a little shuteye. These old bones ain't as young as they used to be."

Swede followed the old man out, leaving Jason and Wiley alone. Jason refilled their cups and settled himself in his chair. "Well, partner, we got our ranch back. We get shut of those cattle and all these unwanted visitors and we can settle in for the winter."

Wiley rolled his cup between his hands and didn't answer.

Jason studied him for a moment and said, "Okay, out with it. You look guiltier than an egg-sucking dog."

"Jason, I figure to marry Sarah, if she'll have me."

"You serious about this? I thought it was just the fever talking. You ain't known her long."

"Long enough to know all I need to know. She's a mighty fine woman, Jason. A real lady."

"Well, I got to agree there. Mighty pretty, too."

"More than pretty, she's a real beauty. Strong, too. Ain't many women could have stood up to all this the way she has and never a word of complaint. Don't know as she'd settle for a short, homely cuss like me, though. Woman like that could have anyone she wanted. One of them rich mine owners or such."

Jason didn't know what to say. He had come to like Sarah. If Wiley was serious, and it seemed he was, then Jason wasn't about to throw a rub in his way.

Wiley married. The thought made him uncomfortable. But then he'd been thinking about it himself, hadn't he? Still, it would take some getting used to. Their relationship was bound to change. No more evenings of cards and stories and masculine camaraderie. The thought depressed him, left him with an empty, lonely feeling.

Wiley interrupted these uncomfortable thoughts. "Jason, if she should say yes . . . well, I'd like for us to get married as soon as possible."

"Hell, there ain't no preacher around here."

"No, but there's sure to be an army chaplain at Ft. Laramie. If we was to leave with the cattle, we could help Drayton push them through."

"You leave now, you probably won't be able to get back before spring."

Wiley's face fell. Jason slapped him on the back. "Let's sleep on it. Reckon we can figure something out. Besides, she hasn't said yes yet." Maybe she wouldn't.

Chapter 21

"Sarah, wake up."

She rolled over and opened her eyes. The cabin was still dark, lit only by the feeble light from the guttering lamp. She shoved her father's hand away and sat up, reaching for her boots.

"What is it? Is someone out there?"

"I don't know. There are weird sounds. Come and listen."

She followed him across the room and pressed her ear against the door. Then she heard it, a soft dripping sound. She jumped, when Toby spoke.

"What's wrong?" he asked, crawling out of his bunk.

"Come and listen."

She backed away as Toby pressed his ear against the door. Whirling, she picked up the rifle, waiting, fear cramping her gut.

A moment later, Toby chuckled. "You won't need that," he said as he opened the door. "Come and see for yourself."

The three of them crowded into the door and watched the melting snow drip from the eaves. The breeze that buffeted them was warm, almost sultry.

Sarah gazed up at Toby in amazement. "But it's warm. How can that be?"

Toby chuckled again. "I heard tell of this. It's called a chinook. A warm wind that comes, sometimes. Lasts a day or two and then dies away."

They stood in the doorway for a few minutes, enjoying the warm breeze. Toby broke the spell.

"Now that we're up, how about some coffee?"

Avram took a lantern and went out to check the horses while Sarah started breakfast. Toby paced the floor, stopping frequently to stare out the oiled paper window.

"What is it, Toby?"

"I just feel like we should be at the ranch. They might need us."

"Who needs us?" Avram asked, coming in the door and blowing out the lantern.

"Jason. I think we should leave for the ranch as soon as we eat. I just have a feeling that they need us."

Sarah looked from one man to the other. "Father?"

"I think Toby is right. I think we should go."

Sarah looked at the younger man. "Your head, how does it feel?"

"Hey, I'm fine. No fever, no headache."

She felt his forehead, then nodded. "Sit down and eat. Then we will go."

"Toby, can you draw a map to find the ranch?"

"Sure, why?"

"I will leave now. You and Sarah should bring the supplies and horses. Whatever happens at the ranch, I feel sure we will not be returning here."

The drip, drip, drip of melting snow woke Jason before daylight. He stirred the fire up and started coffee. The old trapper came in and started breakfast.

"Buffalo, you want to head back to the cabin and bring Sarah and her father down? Bring down all of the supplies."

"Sure. I'll stop and bring in the rest we cached, too."

Wiley came in while Jason and Buffalo were eating. He looked better after the night's rest. When he had eaten, Jason sent him out to relieve Swede.

The big man came in grinning from ear to ear. "That snow, she's a melting fast. You want I should put the wheels back on that surrey?"

"Guess you'd better, as soon as you've eaten. Be sure to throw the runners in, though. This chinook won't last very long and they'll need them. I want the Cornings out of here as soon as possible."

"Sure, boss," He poured a cup of coffee and took a couple of sips. "Reckon you won't be needing me, now that you got the ranch back."

"What makes you say that? Hell, Swede, you got a job here as long as you want it."

The big man grinned. "Well, I'd like that just fine. Thing is, with no more stock than you got, you don't really need another hand to feed this winter. If it's all the same with you, I'll just ride out with the herd. Drayton can use the help. When I came looking for Carl, I didn't bring nothing but the necessities. I'd kinda like to go home for the winter. Reckon Ma would take it better if I told her about Carl, personal-like. It's sorta hard to put news like that in a letter."

Jason nodded his understanding. "I hate to lose you, Swede, but I guess you're right. Meant what I said. You got a job anytime you want it."

"Figured I could come back in the spring. Bring my carpenter's tools, too." He grinned and

waved his arm. "I done taught Carl all he knew. Don't reckon he did too bad a job."

Jason slapped him on the back. "You do that. Unless I miss my guess, we'll probably be needing another cabin come spring."

Jason carried a pot of coffee and a plate of flapjacks over to the barn. Balancing them on a sack of grain, he unlocked the bunk room door and shoved it open.

"Y'all come get this food. After you eat, get ready to leave."

He backed out and relocked the door. Together, he and Swede got the runners off surrey and the wheels back on. By the time they had finished and got the team hitched, the sun was well up.

Drayton rode in and Jason strode out to meet him. Together they went into the bunkhouse. Jason nursed a cup of coffee while Drayton ate. When the foreman finished, he rolled a smoke and sat back. "We'll cut out a couple of head for you. Where do you want them."

"In the corral. Swede wants to ride out with you. Buffalo will be in later today with supplies we cashed. You won't have a chuck wagon but you can take the extra horses. Markle and his men won't be needing them."

"What about those you got locked up?"

"I'll send the Cornings out in their buggy. I'm hoping the army will take the other two off my

hands."

"You figuring to press charged agin 'em?" Drayton asked.

"No. I just want them out of here."

"How about I talk to Bull? He ain't much but every extra rider will be a help. I don't think he'll be causing any more grief for a while. Not after the licking Swede gave him."

"Sure. When you planning to pull out?"

"We'll be moving before daylight in the morning."

"Send Curly in for some hot food. I'm going to get the Corning started on their way."

At the barn, Jason unlocked the door and motioned the Cornings out. It irritated him to see that Corning let Dorinda carry both carpet bags. Corning stood to the side, looking off down the valley as Dorinda struggled to heave the bags into the back of the surrey. With an oath of impatience and disgust, Jason grabbed one of the bags and lifted it into the back.

As he turned to pick up the second one, he felt a tug on his coat and heard the snap of the little pistol. He whirled, dropping to one knee, reaching for his gun. Dorinda was all over him, clinging to his arm, screaming, "Shoot him, Wes, shoot him." Corning's second shot passed harmlessly above his head as the gambler spun and fell face down in the muddy snow. The sound of a rifle

shot echoed off the mountains.

Dorinda scrambled away from Jason and to the gambler, kneeling beside him in the snow. Jason whirled, as Avram walked out of the trees leading his horse. The old man's face was white and his hands shaking as he leaned the rifle against the back of the surrey.

"He was going to shoot you in the back. I...I have never killed a man before." He gave Jason a plaintive, bewildered look. "A killer. I have become a killer."

Jason put an arm around Avram's narrow shoulders and gently led him towards the bunkhouse. As they crossed the yard, Jason caught Swede's eye and motioned with his chin towards the body. Swede nodded, and tying the horses, he went to Dorinda.

Jason seated Avram at the table and poured them both a cup of coffee. "How'd you get here," he asked. "I just sent Buffalo up for you."

"It was not right that you should not have help. You have done much for us. The melting snow woke us and we decided that we must come. Toby and Sarah are coming but more slowly. I came ahead."

"That was a fool thing to do. You could have been lost in these mountains."

Avram shrugged. "Then it would have been God's will." He stared at his hands. "Instead, I

have become a...a gunfighter."

Jason's laugh rang through the room. "Avram, you'll never be a gunfighter. But, I'm mighty glad you showed up when you did. That was darned good shooting for someone who has never handled a rifle before."

"I just did as Mister Carr explained. Point and pull the trigger."

Jason refilled Avram's cup and handed it to him. "You just sit here a while. There's plenty of coffee. I got to get these people moving. I'll be back."

Swede had carried the body to a clearing up the ridge where Drayton had buried Carl. With picks and shovels, they attacked the frozen ground.

They had just put away the tools, when Swede spotted the riders.

"Company coming, boss. Looks like a cavalry patrol."

The patrol rode into the yard and pulled up. The captain sat for a moment staring at Jason. Then his face broke into a grin, and he dismounted.

"Well, and there's no doubt about it. You'd be Kathleen Mary's boy. You've your father's fine strapping frame, but there's no hiding the Callaghan in you. I'm your uncle, Michael Callaghan."

Jason returned the warm handshake, silently.

"Cat got your tongue, has it, lad. Well, we'll have time to talk later. With your permission, I'll have my men camp down by the lake."

"Sure. Then come on up to the house."

Dorinda ran from the trees, yelling, "Arrest that man. He murdered my husband. Arrest him."

Callaghan quirked an eyebrow at Jason before turning and doffing his hat as Dorinda reached him. "Good day, Madam. You'll have to excuse me while I get my men into camp. I shall be back shortly."

"But, you've got to arrest him! He's a murderer and a thief. You can't leave."

"Calm yourself. I will be happy to listen to anything you have to say, once I have my men settled."

Callaghan tipped his hat again and swung up into the saddle. As the soldiers rode away, Jason turned to Swede.

"Better unhitch that team. Doesn't look like you'll be leaving until tomorrow, after all. Then ride out and tell Drayton that Mrs. Corning will be going with him." He turned to the woman. "Dorinda, you'd better go back in the house. Put on another pot of coffee."

"You want coffee, fix it yourself," she said and flounced away.

Jason busied himself chopping wood and doing other chores around the ranch yard the rest of the afternoon. He had just finished washing up, and was considering starting dinner when the party from the cabin rode in, hazing the remuda ahead of them.

Sarah saw him as soon as he stepped out of the door and rode up quickly. "My father...."

Jason reached up to help her down. "He's fine. Got here this morning, just in time to save my life."

"Father? How?"

"Never mind. You'll hear all about it later. Go on in. If you feel up to it, how about getting a meal together? We've got an Army captain coming to dinner."

"Wiley?"

"He's fine, too. He's out with the herd. He'll be in for supper."

She flashed him a radiant smile and disappeared inside. Jason carried her things and put them inside the door. He led the horse to the barn and cared for it, then helped the other men unload the supplies and carry them inside.

Dorinda had one of the bottles that Jason had missed and was sitting at the table nursing a drink. She caught Jason's look and tilted her head defiantly. "Do you plan to throw this out, too?"

He grinned. "Reckon not. However, I think I'll just confiscate the rest of this bottle for now. Got any more hidden away?" He reached over and picked up the bottle, swinging it up out of her reach as she grabbed for it.

Sarah was busy putting away the supplies. A kettle of stew was already bubbling on the stove.

When Callaghan came in, Jason called them all together. Seated at the table, the captain first heard Dorinda's charges. When she had finished, he listened calmly to Jason, Wiley and Toby as they gave their story. Then to Drayton.

"The army doesn't involve itself with civilian affairs unless the general peace is disturbed. That doesn't seem to be the case here. Sounds like an attempted land grab that didn't come off. If either of you have any complaints, I'd suggest you see the civilian authorities in Cheyenne. I will take those gunslingers off your hands, though."

"What about my husband? They murdered him," Dorinda said, her voice strident.

"From what I've heard, it sounds like he was the one attempting murder." He turned to Jason. "We'll be heading back towards Ft. Laramie in the morning. I'll be happy to escort Mrs. Corning that far. Now then, I'd like to hear about my sister's death and what you've been doing these last few years, boy."

Jason retrieved the bottle he had taken away from Dorinda, poured them both a drink and handed the bottle to Wiley. "You boys have earned a snort. Captain, let's take our drinks in by the fire in the other room."

"Michael, lad, Michael."

Picking up their drinks and chairs, they settled by the fire in the bunk room, and were soon deep in conversation.

Wiley joined Sarah at the big kitchen range. He watched and waited while she put two dried apple pies in the oven and turned around.

"Sarah, would you like to take a walk down to the barn?"

"But, it's almost dark," she protested absently.

"Thing is, there's something I'd like to talk to you about without all these other jaspers listening."

She shot him a questioning glance and felt her cheeks redden at what she saw in his eyes. "Well, maybe a little fresh air would be nice." She untied her apron and put on her coat.

Outside, they strolled leisurely towards the barn. Leaning on the corral poles, Wiley watched the white stallion, for a few moments. Without looking at her, he began to talk of his past, then his

plans for the ranch. She stood silently, waiting.

"I guess what I'm trying to say...well, this may not seem like much of a place now, but it will be, someday. Thing is, well, I'd like you to share it with me." He turned to look at her then.

"Sarah, will you marry me?"

This time she looked away. "I don't know, Wiley. There are such differences between us. My father...I don't know."

He slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. Gently he raised her chin until their eyes met. "I love you, Sarah." He bent his head slowly.

"Oh, Wiley, I love you, too."

She returned his kisses, then snuggled her face against his chest and he held her close.

"I'll talk to your father. As long as we love each other, that's all that really matters."

"I hope so, Wiley. Oh, I hope so."

Chapter 22

Only Dorinda's sullen expression marred the happy meal. Wiley was grinning like a possum eating a yellow jacket. Toby and Buffalo tried to outdo each other showering compliments on Sarah's cooking. Avram was obviously uncomfortable in Captain Callaghan's company but even he soon relaxed. Drayton had declined the offer of dinner, electing to stay with Curly and Bull and herd.

Only Jason seemed to be aware that there was an uneasiness behind Sarah's happy expression as he caught the intimate looks that passed between Sarah and Wiley. *So he's asked her*, he thought. He saw her look at her father with uncertainty. *And that's where the problem lies.*

Wiley took Avram into the bunk room, while Jason poured another cup of coffee and sat down to talk more with his uncle. He tried to ignore the raised voices in the other room. When Avram stormed out, threw on his coat and stomped outside, Jason excused himself and followed.

He found Avram in the barn, pacing back and forth and muttering to himself. He leaned negligently against a stall and rolled a cigarette.

"Reckoned you had seen it coming," he said quietly.

"My daughter! MY daughter wants to marry a goy. Never would I have believed such a thing could happen. It is this country! Never could such a thing have happened in the Ukraine."

"Well, is it such a bad thing?" Jason asked.

"You, you are a goy. You do not understand," Avram shouted.

"Nope, don't guess I do. Wiley is a mighty fine man. Your daughter could look a lot farther and not find one who'd be any better to her."

Avram quieted a little. "Yes, he is a good man and I believe that he does love her." He shook his head sadly. "But he is a Christian! Such a thing is not done! Why in eastern Europe, for a Christian to marry a Jew can mean death for both."

Jason straightened. "This ain't Europe. There sure as hell ain't no such laws in this country."

"But still, how could such a marriage work? No. No, I say. It can't be done."

"Avram, they love each other. Would you stand in the way of your daughter's happiness?"

"But would they be happy?"

"Why not? They love each other."

Kleinfeld stopped his pacing and stared at Jason. "You say this? You are his friend, his

partner. Could you look upon this marriage with complacency?"

"Well, I ain't quite sure what that word means, but if you mean, do I approve, why it ain't for me to say one way or the other. I reckon Wiley has a right to marry anybody he wants. Hell, I like Sarah. More than that, I respect her. I reckon she'll make Wiley a right fine wife."

Avram moved closer, staring intently up into Jason's eyes as if to draw the very thoughts out of his head. "You do not object?"

"Nope. Like I said, I think Sarah will make him a good wife and knowing Wiley, why he'll take good care of her."

"But she is a Jewess. Surely you would prefer him to marry someone of his own kind."

"If he loves her, then I reckon she is his kind."

Avram stood quietly, searching Jason's face. A sigh escaped him. "Nu. They will have many problems."

"I reckon they will, but none they can't overcome if they want to bad enough. Way I see it, the thing is not to put any more on them than's necessary. Maybe you better stay here and think on it a little more."

Jason stubbed out his cigarette and walked back to the house. Wiley cornered him as he

walked in the door.

"Did you see Avram?"

"Yeah. We had a little talk. Reckon he'll come around. Let him think about it a little while."

Wiley's eyes lit up. "Thanks, Jason. Don't know what you said to him, but thanks."

"If you're planning to head out with the Army in the morning, reckon you'd best be getting your things together."

"We'll try to get back before you're snowed in. Don't like leaving you here alone all winter."

"I won't be alone. I'll have Toby and there's not going to be that much to do, once we get the hay hauled in. I'd like you to head back east this winter and see if you can pick us up two or three more good broodmares. I'd better tell Michael that there will be three more traveling with him."

"Sarah can share the buggy with Dorinda and I can give Drayton a hand with the cattle." He grinned. "I can start teaching Avram about cow punching."

Wiley crossed the room and was soon deep in conversation with Sarah, who was busy washing up the supper dishes. Dorinda was laying out a game of patience at the table. Jason caught Toby's eye and signaled him.

"We'll let the women have the bunk room tonight and we'll bed down out here. Let's haul in

some blankets."

Michael Callaghan was still taking his ease beside the big stove. He looked up as Toby and Jason entered.

Jason gave him a wide smile. "Reckon you'll have a couple more with you on your trip. Seems like my partner wants to get married. There still a chaplain at Ft. Laramie?"

"No, but there is a preacher and his party that are wintering there. I imagine he will be happy to perform the ceremony." He stood up and stretched. "Guess I'd better get back to my men." He looked at Jason for a moment. "I'm pleased at the way you've turned out, lad. Kathleen would be proud of you, too. Now that we've found each other, we'll have to stay in touch."

Jason clasped the other man's hand. "I'd like that, sir."

The next morning, Jason helped Sarah into the surrey beside Dorinda and stepped back as Avram hugged his daughter.

Jason looked on in surprise. "Ain't you leaving, Avram?"

"No. They don't need an old man on their honeymoon. I vill stay here, if you permit."

Jason grinned. "Glad to have someone besides Toby to jaw at this winter."

The surrey moved out and Sarah turned to wave. Jason was aware of the other man's distress

although Avram tried to hide it.

"She'll be all right. Wiley will take good care of her."

"Yes. I'm sure he will. Still, perhaps I should have gone."

"Hell, Avram. We got a lot to do this winter. By the time they get back, we've got to make you into a full-fledged horse wrangler and we gotta get a cabin planned and built for them. Yep, we've got plenty to do."

"You will teach me to be a cowboy? This is better than being a gunfighter, nu?"

Jason's laugh echoed through the yard. He slapped Avram on the back. They stood together, watching, until the surrey was out of sight.

~ The End ~