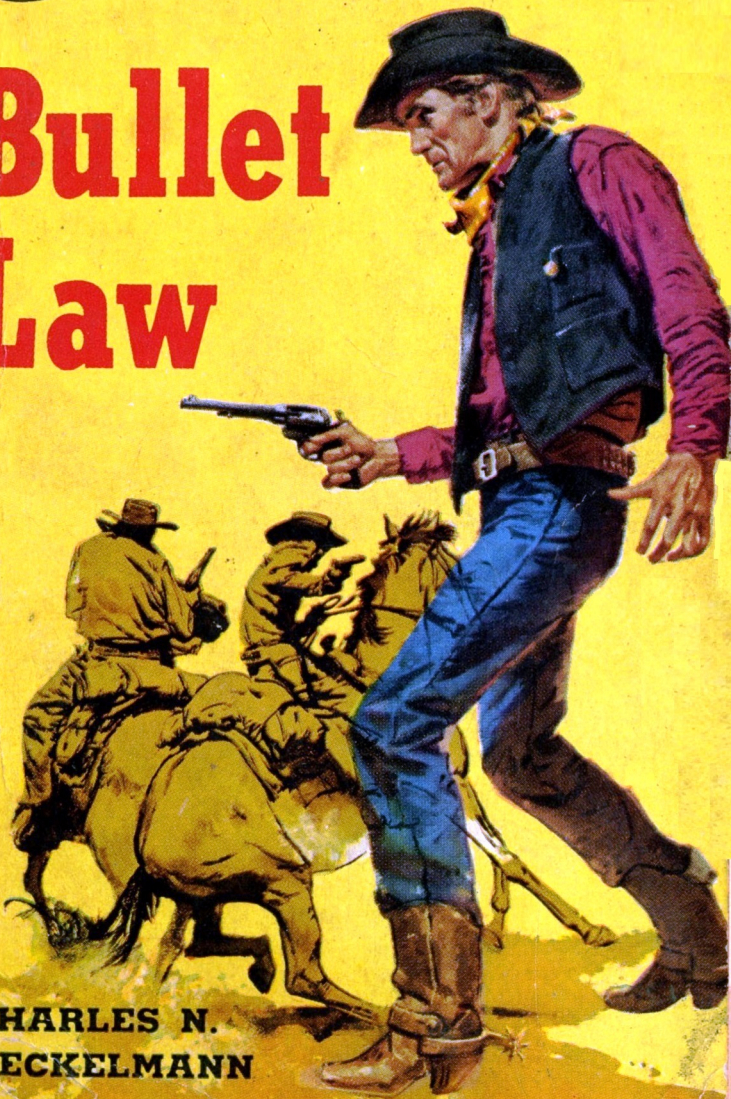


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BULLET LAW

by

Charles N. Heckelmann



A SIGNET BOOK

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To
My Daughter, Lorraine

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Chapter I

DURING THE EARLY HOURS of the afternoon the contours of the land had gradually changed. The gray, treeless alkali flats, seared and steaming under the merciless sun, lay miles behind him. Around him now stretched rolling, broken country, the valleys lush and green after the recent spring rains, the hills green, too, and guarded by thick stands of pine and cedar and aspen.

He was in the lower reaches of the Tumurals and all of this was familiar country to him. His big bay gelding, glad of the respite after the long hours of steady traveling, moved a step or two along the ridge and began to crop at the grass underfoot. He let the horse go, content for the moment to study the panorama of hill and valley that lay before him.

A mile to the north a bunch of cattle grazed in a grassy swale bisected by the narrow silver ribbon of a mountain creek. Pothook beef, he guessed, and looking well fed as far as he could judge from this distance. With rich pastures like the one under his scrutiny Dale Parrish would continue to be the envy of her neighbors.

His dark blue eyes, red-veined with weariness and narrowed to a thin line to shut out the sun's rays, followed the crystal glitter of the stream until he lost it in a high, wooded copse where the Tumurals began their steep climb toward the ramparts of the divide. The sight of that brawling creek brought back memories of cold morning plunges in its racing shallows, of shuffling lines of cattle coming down to water there during roundup time. For Lariat Creek, in its wild journey down from the upper Tumurals, cut through all the major ranches in Loreno, bringing life and richness to a country that saw little rain during most of the year.

East of the creek the land lay banked in a series of rolling ridges and meadows. Once a lone rider topped a low, flat hill, then quickly vanished into the trees. Farther east in a small cuplike valley a cluster of frame buildings, dwarfed by distance and heat haze, marked the town of Loreno.

Almost reluctantly he pulled his glance away. If he wanted to reach Hammer by sundown it was time to move on. He brushed the sleeve of his gray flannel shirt across his sweat-streaked forehead, tipped his battered sombrero back on his head. A faint stubble of beard darkened his tanned, rough-planed face. But covering the beard stubble and all his clothing was the white rime of alkali picked up on his morning ride across the Bowman Sinks.

The gelding answered the touch of the reins and lifted its head. Under the prod of a boot heel the animal moved along the bench. Horse and rider traveled fifty feet, then came to a halt when another rider broke from the trees to the right of the trail. Tom Bracken's hand slid instinctively toward the plain, walnut-butted Colt snugged against his right thigh. When he saw who the rider was he dropped his hand to his side.

"Dale, this is a pleasant surprise," he said. The sight of this girl never failed to spark an immediate emotional reaction in him. He was glad to see her and he noted with a warm feeling of remembrance the rich, red-gold glory of her hair.

"I heard you were coming back," she replied, low voiced. Her eyes, beneath upcurving brows, were a clear, intent gray.

"News travels fast."

"It's a good thing." A sharp, personal animosity swam in the gray eyes that regarded Bracken.

He shifted in the saddle, the easy affability of his irregular features swiftly altering. The change gave Dale Parrish a brief insight into the hardness and strength that reposed in this tall, wide-shouldered man.

"Maybe you can explain that, Dale," he murmured.

"You can call me a reception committee of one," she told him.

"Thanks. It's nice of you." Bracken's words were bland, but his eyes were tight and cool and searching.

"Don't thank me."

He saw that she was bracing herself against him. The friendliness they had always shared was gone. In its place rose a taut hostility completely shutting him out. Yet, even in anger she was lovely and desirable. A colored neckerchief was knotted about the smooth tan column of her throat. She wore a man's open-necked shirt and a pair of breeches hugged her full hips and softly rounded thighs. Despite the rough, working costume, there was no mistaking the supple grace of her figure, the high thrust of her firm breasts.

"Why not?" Bracken asked, lightly smiling. "There are a lot of good times behind us."

"That's where they belong—behind us," Dale snapped. Her sharp glance absorbed the bigness, the solid substance of him

and her blood surged strongly in her veins. But she had come here for a purpose and so she forced her attention away from the vibrant pull of his maleness, funneling her thoughts down a narrow channel of umbrage.

Bracken sensed the heat in her, the antagonism struggling against the warm tug of memories. He asked gently, "Something on your mind?"

"Ride back the way you came," she said tonelessly.

"That's a fine way to greet a man after he's been away for more than a year." He watched her closely, his brows knitting in a frown.

She turned to look toward the trees whence she had come before giving him an answer. "Things have changed."

"I reckon they have." The blunt angle of Bracken's jaw was knotted with a tiny group of quivering muscles.

"We don't want you in Loreno."

"Who's 'we'?"

"Pothook."

The frown between Bracken's dark blue eyes deepened, but he kept his voice level and steady. "Mind telling me why?"

"Hammer is too friendly with Brad Mantle."

Bracken lifted a restraining hand. "You're getting ahead of me. Tell me more—especially about this man Mantle."

The long, full line of Dale's upper lip drew taut and small. She shook her head. When Bracken met her eyes he found himself staring, also, at a short-barreled, nickel-plated .38 revolver she held in her hand. "No more talking, Tom. Turn around and ride out."

Anger began its slow, muddy stir within Bracken. He leaned both hands on the pommel of his saddle and regarded Pothook's young owner with a strict, sober attention. "You really mean what you're saying, don't you?"

Dale nodded, the .38 unwavering in her fist.

"All right," he said. "That's plain enough. You want me to go." His long lips stretched in a grim smile. "I reckon, though, you know me well enough to guess that I won't listen."

At the slight flick of the reins along its neck the bay started forward. Dale's gray eyes darkened with abrupt pressure and she backed along the bench. "Turn around," she ordered in a swift frenzy.

"Not me, Dale," he said inexorably as the bay pushed on.

He was putting pressure on Dale and he wasn't sure which way she would break. He knew her for a firebrand. She had a will of her own and a high pride to go with it. The blood was draining from her cheeks and the hand around the .38 was growing whiter and whiter.

He was a few paces from her when the gray of her eyes

turned bleak. He realized, then, the direction of her thinking and drove the gelding straight at her. The .38 erupted into flame. Bracken saw the barrel of Dale's gun tilt upward at the final instant and knew that she had fired high deliberately. But he wasn't taking any chances of a second shot. As the bay crashed into Dale's mare he leaned forward and got a grip on her gun wrist and twisted hard. She cried out in pain but did not let go.

They struggled silently for a few seconds. Then the mare panicked and reared high, unseating Dale. She skidded backwards over the cantle and Bracken, freeing his feet from the stirrups, went with her.

They landed in a flailing heap on the ground. Bracken jammed his thumb against the hammer of Dale's revolver, thus preventing her from firing a second time. A hard wrench on her wrist and she relinquished her hold on the weapon. He flung it into the brush before he released her and rose to his feet.

He was bending down to help her up when a harsh crackle of brush behind him swung him around. Buck Wykel, Pothook's foreman, pounded into view. There was a long-barreled .45 in his meaty hand and his heavy, florid features were a-boil with rage.

"Hold fast, Bracken!" he said. To Dale, who was getting to her feet and brushing at her clothes, he added, "Say the word, Dale, and I'll teach this bucko some manners."

"It's all right, Buck," Dale said. "I tried to order him off Pothook range, but he didn't take to the idea."

"You put your hands on Dale again and I'll kill you, Bracken." Wykel was a direct man, extremely loyal, and owning no tolerance or humor.

"Take it easy, Buck," cautioned Bracken, trying to keep his own temper under control. "Dale pulled a gun on me. She ought to know me better than that." He turned now to the girl and added, "I'm sorry I had to rough you up."

Before Dale could reply Wykel spoke again. "I've got a gun on you. Why don't you try roughing me up?" The Pothook ramrod's beetling brows drew together above his thick, hawklike nose and his eyes were an ugly thing to behold.

Bracken's lips twisted in a cold, harsh grin. "Maybe I will, friend." Anger had lifted his breathing a notch and he stood a few feet away from the ramrod, considering the man with a stern, wire-drawn concentration.

"Don't do it, Tom," Dale broke in.

It was Dale's intervention that stopped Bracken. Ordinarily even tempered, he was enough of a rawhider to resent being pushed around. And there'd been enough violence in his recent past to condition him to the hard risks that accom-

panied violence. For more than eighteen months he'd drifted through Montana, Idaho and Wyoming on various jobs. He'd been a horse wrangler on a ranch near Billings, then tried a trouble-shooting post with a Nevada railroad. When the road went bankrupt he drifted on to Idaho, picking up a job as town marshal in frontier Boise. A disagreement with the town's influential ranchers had sent him on to jobs with two Wyoming outfits.

In that varied assortment of work he had gained more than a nodding acquaintance with brute force. He'd been involved in his share of saloon brawls, had outgunned three trigger-happy hardcases. Though he never deliberately sought a fight, he was Injun enough to meet trouble head-on whenever it presented itself. Wykel's challenge, therefore, was not an easy thing to ignore.

Glancing at Dale, he was startled by the naked fear shining in her eyes. She, in turn, looked away, coloring under his sharp scrutiny.

"Damn it, Dale," growled Wykel, "do you want him out of here, or not?"

"I want no shooting," she said.

"That thirty-eight you fired at me is no pop gun," Bracken said.

Dale flushed but did not reply.

Bracken faced the Pothook foreman again. "Suppose you tell me what this is about? Dale said something to the effect that Hammer is too friendly with Brad Mantle."

"You know damned well what Dale meant," Wykel retorted. The gun in his fist jerked savagely. "Unbuckle your gun belt and let it drop. Dale, you go over to his horse and grab his saddle carbine."

Once again Bracken debated rushing the Pothook ramrod. He felt the hot wash of rage and recklessness tug at his outraged senses. But a glance at Wykel's evil readiness, the solid set of the big Colt in his hand warned Bracken that resistance was futile.

He freed the worn leather belt that girded his waist and let it slide to the ground. As the belt fell the gun spilled from the holster. He stepped backward a few paces and waited. Dale, meanwhile, removed his rifle from its saddle scabbard and carried the weapon over to Wykel.

"All right," snapped the Pothook foreman. "Get on your horse."

Bracken watched Dale for a sign. But she refused to meet his eyes. He knew, then, that he'd lost the play. Anger was in him, still, yet he kept his tanned, irregular features under strict control as he walked to the bay gelding, thrust a boot in the left stirrup and climbed aboard.

"Anything else?" he demanded, lifting the reins.

"Ride out and don't come back," said Wykel.

Bracken's lips widened in a bleak, twisted grin. With an ironic flip of one hand he tipped his hat to Dale, then kicked his horse into motion. He continued back along the bench the way he had come until the trail cut south by way of a shallow, brush-rimmed defile. He turned the bay into the notch, riding at a canter.

Chapter 2

DALE AND WYKEL remained at their respective stations until Tom Bracken had ridden out of sight around a bend in the canyon. Afterward, the girl remounted, waited for Wykel to retrieve Bracken's gun, then turned her mare north.

Wykel jogged along beside her, his craggy countenance gray and saturnine. He made no effort at conversation. Dale, watching him and understanding his displeasure, said, "Get it off your mind, Buck. You'll feel better."

The ramrod gave an angry tug at his black, flat-crowned hat. "We made a mistake."

Dale's gray eyes clouded. "What else could we do?"

"Shoot him."

"That was out of the question," she reminded him indignantly.

"Sure it was."

"Well, then, why suggest it?"

Wykel slanted a hard, sly glance at her. "I might have prodded him into a fight. He was ready for it."

They came to a ford in the creek Bracken had sighted and paused briefly to let their horses drink before proceeding to the far bank. They climbed the yonder slope, emerged on a great green meadow and rode along the eastern edge.

Dale was silent for a few moment, lost in her own troubled thoughts. "Maybe Tom doesn't know about Ed and Mantle," she murmured.

Wykel snorted. "Hell, he and Ed are brothers and co-owners of Hammer. Tom may have been fiddle-footing around the country the last couple of years, but you can bet your last Pothook cow that he knows everything that's been going on here. In fact, I'm betting that Ed sent for Tom to lend a hand in the game Hammer and Mantle are playing. All of

which makes Pothook's position tougher. We can't fight Hammer all by ourselves."

"Why not? We're just as big as they are."

"You're forgetting Brad Mantle. The outfit that has Mantle on its side will take a lot of beating."

The meadow they were traversing now debouched into a dusty wagon road. They turned into it, continuing north.

"No one's ever been able to prove that Hammer is hooked up with Mantle," Dale pointed out.

"Maybe not proof enough to satisfy a court—but enough to satisfy me."

At the top of a hill the road abruptly forked. One branch swung northwest toward Pothook and Hammer and the higher ramparts of the Tumurals. The other angled northeast, following a slowly descending curve of rolling meadows to the town of Loreno.

Now Dale pulled up at the fork. "You go on to the ranch, Buck," she ordered. "I'm going to town to see if I can catch Slate Cooney. He took the buckboard in for supplies and I forgot to tell him to get some flour and canned fruit."

"All right," said Wykel. "Be sure you ride back with Cooney. I don't like you traipsing around the country alone."

Dale's gray eyes twinkled and a faint smile lifted her mobile lips. "You talk as if we were involved in a war."

"There's one coming, Dale. You wait and see."

She looked at the ramrod. His hawk-nosed face remained cold and forbidding. He was a man utterly without humor. Wise in the ways of the cattle country and wise in the ways of men, he was reading the signs of a land stirring to violence and he did not like what he saw.

Wykel turned away without further ceremony and sent his horse galloping toward Pothook headquarters. Dale shrugged and let the mare run free along the northeast fork to town.

Dust drifted up from the road in a gray cloud, coating horse and rider with a fine, powdery layer of loosened earth. The heat, too, became more intense as Dale left the higher hill country and approached the lowlands. Here the grass was not quite so green and bare patches of ground and long sections of scrub growth extended from either side of the road.

A half hour's steady traveling brought Dale into the outskirts of Loreno and to the first scatter of frame houses. Most of them were battered and weathered by wind and sun with narrow lanes running from the road to the front exposure.

Farther on the number of houses increased until, at last, she found the road widening into a broad, rutted main street walled in by one- and two-storied frame and clapboard business establishments. She passed a huge livery barn and a

wagon repair shop with its adjoining yard filled with a clutter of discarded wheels, axles, singletrees and battered wagon beds. Beyond these two structures was the Ten-Up Saloon, another livery barn, a blacksmith shop, two more saloons, a barber shop and a feed barn.

At the corner of the first intersection Dale moved past the McClellan Hotel, a seamstress shop, the Rawhide Saloon and an empty lot until finally the wide loading platform of Jansen's Mercantile loomed up before her. There were three ranch buckboards drawn up by the platform. Among them she recognized the Pothook wagon.

As she dismounted Slate Cooney tramped out of the store, his arms burdened by a big carton of foodstuffs. He grinned at Dale, deposited his load in the wagon bed, then stopped to remove his hat and wipe perspiration from his face and forehead with a red bandanna.

"Something else you wanted?" he asked. The puncher was a gray-bearded man with thinning black and gray hair, rather nondescript features and bony arms and legs, the latter encased in tight, faded blue levis.

"Yes," said Dale. "You'd better get fifty pounds of flour and a case of tinned peaches. Tell Jansen to add it to Pothook's bill."

"Sure thing," replied Cooney and turned to go back inside.

Dale started down toward the seamstress shop, a small frame structure looking oddly dwarfed beside the two-storied hotel. She paused in front of the shop, noting the blue, full-skirted dress on the figure in the small fly-specked window. She was putting a hand out to touch the door handle when the door swung open and Sherry Oliver emerged.

Both girls looked startled. A frown came immediately to the face of Dale while Sherry Oliver bit her lip in a slight gesture of vexation.

"How are you, Sherry?" Dale asked quietly.

"Fine," said the other girl. "Don't tell me you bring your business to Belle Graves, too."

Sherry Oliver was medium tall, slender and willowy with a sensitive, heart-shaped face that mirrored the swift, mercurial changes of her temper. Her body was firm and well fleshed, the breasts small and high, the waist pinched in, the thighs sleek and full beneath her gay, flowered dress. She had a bright, vivid coloring but her lips were small and not as generous as they might have been.

Dale bridled at the veiled sarcasm in Sherry's words. Accustomed to working side by side with the Pothook crew, she seldom found an opportunity to wear dresses. Now, observing Sherry's sweet and arch femininity, she could appreciate the girl's deep attraction for men. She was a girl who

did not hesitate to play upon men's feelings, to draw them out, to spur and inflame their latent desires.

It was inevitable in a rough land that boasted few eligible males of any financial substance that both girls should have been won over by Tom Bracken's devil-may-care ways. Dale recalled how Bracken had divided his time between them until Ed had begun to make a bid for Sherry. Though Dale's own feelings toward Tom had gradually turned cool because of his stubborn refusal to settle down and take life seriously, seeing Sherry now revived, as always, the deep element of rivalry between them.

"Do you have any objection?" Dale queried acidly. "Or are you keeping Belle so busy she can't take any more dress orders?"

Sherry Oliver smiled. "My, you're sensitive today. Or is it that you're just having trouble keeping up with the Pothook crew?"

Dale flushed in anger. Though Sherry had been brought up on a cattle ranch, she had no liking for the dreary and dusty work of roping, line riding, branding and fence repairing that was the lot of the average cowboy. And she never passed up a chance to deride Dale for participating in the tedious round of ranch chores.

"The trouble," said Dale after a long moment during which she fought down her anger, "was with a friend of yours."

"A friend of mine?" Sherry's face brightened with interest.

"Yes. Tom Bracken."

Sherry's eyes changed and faltered away from Dale's piercing scrutiny. A strange urgency, a quickening of Sherry's breathing told Dale all she wanted to know, and she said, "I see his name can still stir up heat in you."

"That's past and forgotten," Sherry stated.

"I'm not sure. I can remember a time when you were ready to jump every time he showed up in the Crescent ranch yard."

Sherry ignored Dale's pointed remark and plunged right to the heart of the news of Tom's return. "Where did you see him? And what brings him back?"

A mocking expression twisted Dale's features when she answered. "We met up in the hills near Winchester Pass. As to why he came back, you should be able to answer that."

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Hammer and Mantle are probably getting ready to step up their activities, so they pulled in Tom."

Sudden heat rushed into Sherry Oliver's finely drawn features. "That talk about Hammer and Mantle is ridiculous."

"I don't think it is at all," snapped Dale. "That's why Buck Wykel and I stopped Tom up at the pass and told him to go back and do his fiddle-footing on some other range."

A faint note of surprise got into Sherry's words. "If you stopped him as you say you did it means you ambushed him."

Dale smiled. "Some people might call it that. Let's say we used a little persuasion. I figure one Bracken in Loreno is enough."

A swift, violent light flared in Sherry's hazel eyes. She moved a pace closer to Dale and her slender hands knotted. "Seems to me Pothook is taking a lot for granted. Ed Bracken at Hammer is losing stock just like the rest of us."

Dale shrugged. "What's so surprising about that? If Hammer didn't lose beef along with the other outfits they'd be putting themselves on the spot."

Sherry came back at Dale quickly. "You had some gall ordering Tom out of the country. If you were accusing Brad Mantle of rustling it would make some sense. But you're dead wrong about Hammer. As for Tom, he's absolutely in the clear. He's been away more than a year and a half. How could he be involved in the rustling?"

"Your eager defense of Tom is quite touching," said Dale, her features white and stiff with a mixed feeling of anger and jealousy. "Better not let Ed hear you. He might not like it."

Color remained richly in Sherry's cheeks and the riot of her breathing made her voice a little breathless. "Why should he object? Tom and I have never stopped being friends. But my feelings for him have nothing to do with my feelings for Ed."

"Are you sure you're not mixed up?" Dale inquired. She wanted to hurt Sherry. It was silly and childish, she knew, but she couldn't help herself.

But if she hoped to prod Sherry into some further betrayal of her feelings she was disappointed. For Sherry had control of herself now and she said, in a sly, verbal offensive of her own, "I've heard that you intend to join Pothook with the Lazy Link by marrying Dave Peek. With Tom back I'd say Dave didn't have a chance. You wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of trying to run Tom out of Loreno if you weren't in love with him yourself."

Sherry gathered up her long skirts and swung around Dale, moving quickly along the boardwalk. And Dale, for some odd, disquieting reason, found herself speechless and vaguely disturbed.

She turned, conscious for the first time that a couple of men down the street were watching her and that a woman was leaning out of one of the hotel's second-story windows and facing in her direction. A swift sense of shame assailed her. She wondered how many other people had witnessed her encounter with Sherry. Gone now was all thought or desire to pay a visit to Belle Graves. She was in no mood

to go through the tedious bother of being fitted for a dress.

Accordingly, Dale went back to her horse, debating, meanwhile, the advisability of remaining in town for dinner. After a moment she remembered that Sherry would likely be staying and so she vetoed the idea. The only decent eating place was the hotel dining room, and she would surely meet Sherry there.

Annoyed and feeling altogether out of sorts, Dale rode back to the Mercantile. She found Cooney waiting there. She instructed the puncher to tie her saddle mare to the back of the buckboard, then climbed up on the seat beside him and settled herself for the trip back to Pothook.

Chapter 3

THE NATURAL GOOD HUMOR and keen sense of anticipation with which Tom Bracken had spent most of the day's hours in the saddle had been replaced by irritation and a growing sense of trouble and outrage. Each passing mile during the afternoon's ride had shown him familiar landmarks that filled him with a sense of homecoming. That feeling, however, had been dissipated by the reception he had received at Dale's and Wykel's hands.

Now, as he cantered through the lower end of Winchester Pass, intent on making a wide swing to the south, thus to come into Loreno, he thought of that unusual encounter. That Dale had been sincere and straightforward in her actions he did not doubt. Dale would never have made her move without some good reason. What did concern Bracken, however, was the implication of her actions.

Only his brother, Ed, had known of his coming. The telegram from Denver had taken care of that. Yet the news leaked out. That factor alone was not disturbing. It was Dale's virtual admission that Pothook and Hammer were tilting against each other. The two ranches had always gotten along. Old Pete Bracken and Ben Parrish—both of them dead for several years now—had been among the first cowmen to settle in the area. They'd pre-empted the range they wanted and both spreads had grown and prospered through the endless round of seasons.

Something had gone wrong at Hammer. The thought gave more serious import to Ed's failure to answer his last few letters. Dale had not been very specific in her accusations,

yet she had clearly implied that Hammer was involved in operations detrimental to Pothook and other outfits in the valley.

As for the name Mantle, it meant nothing to him. The man was an unknown quantity. If Ed had some working arrangement with Mantle he had not made any effort to communicate the information.

One thing was certain. Now, more than ever, he wanted to be back in Loreno. Not that he was worried about his half share in Hammer. That had never concerned him. But if the ranch was in trouble he intended to do something about it and no ultimatum from Pothook or anyone else could scare him off.

His original plan had been to go right to Hammer and spend the night there. Now it appeared more logical to go to town to see what was in the wind. Though he kept the weary bay at a fast canter his progress was slow. He purposely avoided the wagon road and the well-traveled trails for he wanted nothing to interfere with his visit to Loreno.

At length, near sundown, he rode out of the trees beside the road that entered town from the south and sent the bay straight toward the facing rows of weathered frame buildings. He saw one or two men on horseback, nodded to them without recognition, and continued on to the McClellan Hotel.

He descended slowly from the saddle, letting his sharp glance probe up and down the street. A half dozen horses were racked up in front of the hotel. Among them he noted two Crescent brands and guessed that Ned Oliver and Sherry were in town. The thought of Sherry sent its instant warming response through him. She was a girl no man could easily forget. She was proud and willful and unpredictable but a fully fleshed, warm-blooded woman for all that.

Ducking under the rail, he mounted the two slanting, worn board steps to the hotel veranda. Only then did he notice the two men posted at opposite ends. Both were sprawled in chairs with their booted feet propped up on the railing.

The man to his right was George Bond, Crescent's foreman, a sharp-featured, bullet-headed individual with close-cropped black hair and piercing brown eyes. The other man, a stranger to Bracken, was a tall, lanky fellow with a shaggy, unkempt look about him. He had an undershot jaw, crooked yellow teeth and veiled gray-green eyes which followed Bracken with a pointed attention.

Bracken tipped his head toward Bond and said, "Hello, George." He paused at the top step, ready for a little talk if Bond was so inclined. But the Crescent foreman just stared truculently at him, then turned away and spat over the veranda railing.

A gray, unruly shadow stained Bracken's cheeks. The

affront was deliberate. To Bracken it was like a slap in the face. He felt a wild impulse to stride over to Bond and plant his knuckles in the Crescent ramrod's foxlike features. For the barest instant of time he remained rooted and still at the edge of the veranda struggling with the wicked surge of his temper. Bond, meanwhile, tensed in his chair and his hooded eyes narrowed in speculation. The tension went out of him when Bracken moved on into the hotel lobby.

As he disappeared inside, the lanky stranger with the shaggy hair and long sideburns rose from his seat, tossed his hand-rolled cigarette away and sauntered idly down the walk. A hundred feet from the hotel he quickened his pace until he reached the Ten-Up Saloon, where he turned in and pushed through the slatted batwing doors.

After the bright slash of sunshine in the street Bracken found the musty hotel lobby disconcertingly dark and gloomy. Two moth-eaten easy chairs were scattered at opposite ends of the mahogany-stained counter that served as an entry desk. Josh Willow, the pallid-skinned, watery-eyed clerk, got up stiffly from his chair and spun the dog-eared register around.

"You picked a bad time to come back," he said.

Bracken scrawled his name in the book, put the pen down and placed both hands on the counter while he thrust his face toward Willow. "How come?" he asked.

"Not for me to say," Willow grumbled. He twisted the register around, jotted a room number beside Bracken's name, then turned to a row of pigeonholes behind him and took out a key. "Take number twelve."

He flung the key on the counter. Bracken picked it up, looked at the rusted metal, then transferred his scrutiny to the clerk. "Don't be like that, Josh. What's eating this town? If anyone's in a position to know, you are."

"The McClellan does business with all sides. Your dollar buys a room and a bed. That's all."

Willow met Bracken's glance steadily. There was neither friendliness nor antagonism in the clerk's manner—just a strict neutrality.

Bracken dug in his pocket for a silver dollar, dropped it on the counter and strode toward the stairway. In the small, square, heat-saturated room with its faded curtain and fly-specked window he washed up quickly, then came down to the lobby again.

Outside he found that Bond and the stranger had both gone. He was hungry and thirsty after the day's long ride, but decided the food could wait, so he turned in the direction of the Rawhide Saloon. The sun, by this time, had sunk

far down in the western sky and a breath of cool twilight air from the high hills scoured along the street.

The low murmur of voices and the clink of glasses issued from the saloon. To Bracken it was a welcome sound. He pushed through the swinging doors into the cool interior, blinked his eyes against the dim lamplight and, at the same time, felt a cold ring of silence close around him.

The hum of conversation ceased. Somewhere down the length of the room a pushed-back chair sent a squeal of sound into the taut vacuum, then the stillness rushed back.

Grim lines warped the corner of Bracken's mouth. A humorless light flickered in his eyes as they made a sweeping survey of the room.

George Bond stood near the middle of the bar, a shot glass full of whiskey in his hand. His heavy-lidded eyes gave out nothing when they rested on Bracken. Against the far wall at a round wooden table Ned Oliver, Al Linus and Dave Peek were sprawled in barrel chairs held together by baling wire. Each man gripped five splayed-out cards in his hand. In the middle of the table reposed a small pile of red and blue poker chips.

All three ranchers were inveterate poker players, yet not one of them showed any interest in the pot or their cards. They sat stiffly at attention, their eyes negative and wary. Ned Oliver's rounded paunch rested against the table edge while one nervous, thick-fingered hand toyed with the flabby skin of his jowels. Al Linus was frowning, thus lengthening the raw-boned jut of his angular face. Dave Peek, dressed as neatly and precisely as always, looked serene and contented behind the smooth façade of his evenly tanned face.

Bracken felt the miasma of hostility swirl around him. It was a thick, palpable force in the room. But a rash, hard care propelled him through the blue-gray pall of cigarette smoke and up to the poker table.

"Evening, friends," he said.

For a moment no one answered. Bracken stolidly waited, his gaze resting like a profound weight on all three ranchers. A cold sense of pressure quivered in the smoky air. At last, Dave Peek spoke. "Evening, Tom."

Bracken's hard temper put a cutting edge to his next statement. "I'm glad you haven't all forgotten how to carry on a conversation."

"Oh, we can talk, all right," said Al Linus, his bony cheeks sucking in against his teeth. "But only with our friends."

"Meaning you don't count me a friend?"

"Exactly."

A dark shadow, almost of pain, touched Bracken's eyes. Then he said in a deadly, summer-soft tone, "Since I'm prac-

tically a stranger in Loreno, you'd better make the picture a little clearer."

Ned Oliver waved Linus to silence and hunched his great bulk forward in the chair. "I'll tell you this much," he stated in a thick, wheezing voice. "Hammer no longer buys its drinks in here."

"That so?" There was a harsh, granitelike look about Bracken now. He was holding himself in and the effort of control made him loom big and dangerous over the men at the poker table. "Suppose you tell me why?"

Oliver alone failed to detect the growing harshness in Bracken, the gradual distillation of rage in him, the spirited rebellion that throbbed and pounded for release. The Crescent owner's blue-veined cheeks puffed out and he became bolder in his talk. "This town has changed in the time you've been away. The minute you walked in here you were putting yourself out of bounds."

"So there are sides."

"Definitely. And you're on the wrong side." Oliver's puffy eyelids squeezed tight and the overbearing insolence that had always been so much a part of his make-up prodded him into challenging arrogance. "If you want a drink go down to the Ten-Up. They're not so particular about who they let inside the door."

Bracken's shoulders jerked a little. His head came up. His eyes were suddenly hard and hating. He remembered the Ten-Up as a dingy, poorly kept place at the other end of town frequented by hard-scrabble ranchers from the upper Tumurals and the few nesters who had settled in the bottoms where Lariat Creek made its big swing around the eastern edge of Loreno.

Now Bracken twisted slightly to stare fully at the Crescent owner and his words whipped at the man with the harsh sting of a whiplash. "Oliver, as far as I'm concerned, you're nothing but a tub of lard. Your mouth is big and so is your belly. But you're not man enough, nor big enough to tell me where I'll drink."

The venom behind Bracken's ultimatum shoved Oliver back against his chair. Panic whitened his cheeks. A gusty breath broke from him. Al Linus cursed angrily. Dave Peek, his face still smooth and bland, laughed silently and mirthlessly.

Bracken turned his back on all three ranchers and headed for the bar. Bond was braced at mid-point, the unfinished whiskey still in his hand. Bracken strode straight toward the ramrod, his wide shoulders swinging, his rugged, uneven features set and dangerous. The Crescent ramrod retreated two

steps, watching Bracken carefully while the rest of the room hung limp and lifeless.

To the moon-faced bartender Bracken said, "Give me some whiskey—and none of your cheap rotgut."

The bartender—named Charlie Moon (no one had ever discovered his last name)—looked toward the poker table, then back at Bracken before shaking his head in a wooden, half-frozen gesture.

Bracken tossed a quarter on the bar, the ring of the coin on the hard wood setting up a shrill clarion in the uneasy stillness. He pointed to the back bar behind Charlie. "That bottle marked Saddler's will do."

There was a scuff of movement behind Bracken, but he ignored it. The pressure of his attention was on the bartender, and Charlie suddenly found the courage to answer. "You'll get no drink here, bucko."

All restraint left Bracken, then. He had been pushed around too much and the anger that was in him had to find release in violence. With a swift, unexpected lunge he caught Charlie's shirt, hauled him up against the bar's inner rim and slugged him with a short, chopping right. The blow caught Charlie on the mouth corner, drove his upper lip against a buck tooth and slashed the skin. Blood began to dribble from his mouth and down along his chin.

Linus yelled somewhere behind Bracken and knocked his chair down in his effort to reach the bar. Out of the corner of his eye Bracken saw Bond throw his whiskey glass to the floor and move into action. As Charlie went up on his toes to swing a wild haymaker, Bracken joined both hands in a firm grip on Charlie's shirt front and hauled him across the top of the bar.

Bond was driving in from the left side when Bracken hurled Charlie's half-limp form into his path. The bartender's weight caught Bond full in the chest, knocked him over backward so that his head struck a brass spittoon on the floor on the way down. Bracken turned quickly to catch a looping right-hand punch along the edge of his jaw from Al Linus coming at him in a frontal attack. The sting of the punch put the raw taste of blood lust in Bracken's mouth. He grinned savagely, shot away from the bar and plumped a cruel left hook deep into Linus's mid-section. Breath *whooshed* from the rancher's lungs and he doubled up in pain. Bracken measured him quickly with a short jab before smashing him with a right to the jaw.

Bracken turned away, bringing his attention to George Bond and Charlie, the bartender. The latter lay sprawled in a limp heap close to the battered foot rail. Bond, dazed and shaken, was rising to one knee and fumbling for his holstered

.45. As the Crescent foreman brought the weapon clear, Bracken swept in close, trapped his wrist in an iron grip and wrenched the gun away. Bond cursed and sprang upward. The top of his head caught Bracken in the belly, momentarily taking away his wind. He retreated, Bond doggedly following and lashing at him with two windmilling rights that glanced off Bracken's shoulder. Then Bond lowered his head and drove at Bracken like a battering ram. Bracken side-stepped and lifted the point of his knee to Bond's jaw. The crushing impact of the blow snapped Bond's teeth together and spun him, unconscious, to the splintered puncheon floor.

Without any loss of motion, Bracken whirled, put his back to the bar and leveled the gun he'd taken from Bond at Ned Oliver and Dave Peek. Oliver had plunged up from his chair and his round, ruddy face was mean and murderous. Peek remained seated at the poker table, smiling ironically and, apparently, unmoved by the violence of the events taking place around him.

"Are you fellows in this?" Bracken asked hotly. "If you are, now is the time to make your play."

"You'll gain nothing with rough stuff," said Oliver, his big body in a slight crouch, his right hand swung low near his holster.

"Answer my question, Ned," Bracken snapped. "If you're getting into the game, say so. If not, get your hand away from your gun."

Oliver's huge, bulbous frame shook with rage. He glared at Bracken but slowly straightened and pushed his hand away from his Colt.

"What about you, Dave?" Bracken queried.

Peek shifted into a more comfortable position in his chair, brushed a speck of cigar ash from his fancy blue chambray shirt and smiled amiably. "I'm just a spectator, Tom."

"All right."

Bracken started to turn away. Peek's smooth, oiled voice hauled him around. "You've grown pretty tough."

"You can blame it on your friends," said Bracken.

Peek nodded in agreement. He took a long cigar from his coat pocket, examined it with a critical eye, stuck it in his mouth and lit it. After he had taken a deliberate puff and blown a ring of smoke in Bracken's direction he said, "You may have regrets. There are men who are too tough for their own good."

The lines around Bracken's taut mouth were taciturn and grim. "I'm here if you want to do something about it."

"Violence never held much appeal for me."

Bracken stared at the fancy tooled-leather belt strapped beneath Peek's coat. Though the gun was hidden from sight

Bracken remembered the weapon was as fine and elegant as its owner—silver-barreled with an ornamented ivory stock.

"What's the gun for, then?"

"For protection—when needed," Peek told him quietly.

The man was smooth and hard to rouse but dangerous, nevertheless. Bracken had never been very friendly with him. There was something veiled and cold and secretive about the owner of the Lazy Link ranch that did not encourage warmth or friendship. Though he frequently played poker with Oliver and Linus he somehow managed to remain aloof and remote from them, and beyond his occasional visits to town the Lorenzo ranchers saw little of him.

Bracken, tiring of the verbal fencing with Peek, turned to Al Linus, who was only now getting to his feet. There was a swelling bruise on the side of Linus's long jaw and a splinter from the floor had gouged a bloody furrow in his right cheek. Though he had been thoroughly beaten, there was still some defiance left in Linus. "Well, bully boy, what happens now?"

A quick glance to his right showed Bracken that George Bond was still out. Charlie, the bartender, was beginning to stir and moan. Bracken gestured to Linus with Bond's .45.

"There's usually a pail of water behind the bar. Get it and dump some water on your two friends."

Linus hesitated, glancing toward Ned Oliver.

"Don't look at Oliver. He's out of it," said Bracken. "Get that water."

Oliver's features reddened with rage but he said nothing. Linus shrugged, tramped behind the bar and came back in a few seconds with a tin pail half filled with water. He moved to Bond and Charlie and spilled the contents of the pail on both men. Bond moaned and twisted to one side. Peek rose leisurely and went over to help the Crescent foreman stagger to a chair. Water dripped down his face and onto his shirt and trousers, turning them soggy. Charlie shook his rotund body like a great seal, wiped a shirt sleeve across his face and hauled himself up from the floor.

For a few moments he swayed on unsteady feet, finally grabbing hold of the bar to keep his balance. His eyes were slow in focusing. But eventually his gaze crept around to Bracken. He gave a sudden start and retreated toward the back of the room.

"Hold it, Charlie," said Bracken. There was a severe, challenging light in his dark blue eyes. "I'm still waiting for my drink. Saddler's on that back-bar shelf."

Peek's amused laugh drifted through the room. "Charlie, give the man a drink. He's earned it."

"What's so damned funny, Dave?" Ned Oliver growled.

Beside Peek, George Bond wrenched half out of his chair. "I'll kill the bastard," he murmured through thick lips. His right hand clawed at his holster in a desperate motion.

"Next time, George," said Bracken. "I've got your gun." He turned again to Charlie. His tone was heavier now, more insistent. "For the last time, Charlie. My drink."

The bartender made a wide detour around Bracken and went behind the bar. He took the quart bottle of Saddler's Rye down from the shelf, poured a shot glass full and pushed it toward Bracken. Bracken took the drink in his left hand, sipped it and let his deliberate, goading stare wander over all these men. They waited, their hostile scrutiny like a heavy pressure of air against him.

He finished the whiskey, set the empty glass on the bar and abruptly decided to make one more effort to break through the wall of antagonism and silence that shielded these men from him. "Dave, I'll try again. What's the reason behind all this?"

Linus and Oliver and Bond shunted their eyes in Peek's direction. The Lazy Link owner showed them no interest. He took a deep drag at his cigar and answered, "I'd advise you to ask your brother."

Bracken's rough, wind-hardened features took on an edge of bitterness. He felt suddenly futile and weary, yet knew this was more than just the reaction to the physical violence that had consumed him. It went deeper than that. It was a weariness compounded of muscular fatigue from the long day's ride and the saloon fight and the harsh awareness of greater trouble still to come.

Pushing away from the bar, Bracken strode to the batwings. There he paused long enough to empty the five cartridges from Bond's Colt before tossing the gun toward the middle of the room. Then he shouldered through the swinging doors and out into the twilight street.

Chapter 4

AFTER PARTING FROM DALE, Sherry was filled with an odd restlessness. The news of Tom Bracken's return disturbed her more than she cared to admit. Though many months had gone by since they had seen each other, the thought of him was enough to give a violent tug at her feelings. There

was a volatile quality about him that had never failed to excite her. She realized now that the months she had spent in the occasional company of Ed Bracken had done nothing to change things. The love she had experienced for Ed was only a delusion.

Above and beyond her own feelings was the question of what effect Tom's return would have on the precarious situation in Loreno. The country was teetering on the edge of armed conflict. The slightest alien incident could upset the uneasy, waiting truce that had prevailed during the past few weeks.

Bracken's coming might very well provide the spark to touch off an explosion of violence that would involve every cattle outfit within a hundred miles. And though Sherry was the daughter of Ned Oliver, who had openly declared himself hostile to the Bracken spread, she found her own sense of loyalty wavering.

Now, because it still lacked an hour before the hotel dining room would open for supper, she decided to exorcise the uneasy disquiet of her thinking by riding out to Hammer. In front of the McClellan Hotel she exchanged a brief greeting with George Bond, her father's foreman. On the opposite side of the hotel veranda she saw Gus Hyatt, Brad Mantle's ramrod. Crescent and the BM spread had no use for each other and Sherry's inquiring mind immediately began to wonder if there was any special significance to the presence in town of the two rival ramrods.

Bond's appearance, casual as it seemed, was a masquerade. Despite his air of lazy unconcern, there was a veiled watchfulness about him. It was almost as if he had been posted there as a lookout. Does Dad know about Tom's return? she asked herself. And had he detailed Bond to intercept Tom if he showed up in Loreno?

It was a possibility, she decided, walking toward the livery barn where she had left her saddle mare. For Bond was a man who liked poker and her father had always been democratic enough to let his ramrod play in the weekly sessions held with Al Linus and Dave Peek.

As Sherry reached the shade-darkened arch of the livery and signaled the hostler to get her horse, she debated, also, the reason for Gus Hyatt's posting himself on the hotel veranda. The section of Loreno including the hotel, the Rawhide Saloon and other buildings to the north of them had always, by unspoken rule, been closed to Brad Mantle and his hardcase crew. They were, in general, regarded as an unsavory bunch. Rumor had it that the BM riders were more proficient with guns and running irons than they were with the normal tools of the cattle trade.

For Mantle to assign Hyatt to the McClellan Hotel was a gesture of defiance and contempt to Crescent and its neighbors. Suddenly she sensed something sinister and evil in the strange moves that were being made by both sides.

The bandy-legged hostler trotted out of the hard-packed dirt runway of the stable with Sherry's dun mare. He held the bridle while Sherry mounted. Then he handed the reins to her and, seated side-saddle on the well-groomed mare, she rode out of town.

The ride to Hammer consumed thirty-five minutes. There was a fine beading of perspiration on Sherry's upper lip and a gray film of dust on her long-skirted dress when she came into the ranch yard.

As always on coming here, she was startled by the contrast between the neat orderliness and roomy expansiveness of her father's Crescent ranch and the run-down, seedy-looking buildings that comprised the holdings of the Bracken brothers.

The house itself was a three-room frame structure hastily put together and already sagging in one corner. The walls, which had never seen a coat of paint, were pitted and scoured by the merciless heat and sun. There were three or four bare places on the slightly peaked roof where shingles had been ripped away by high winds and she imagined that in heavy rains water dripped into the rooms through the storm-torn apertures.

The log bunkhouse, the barn and the two corrals were in a similar state of disrepair. Weeds and dust filled the yard and the only shade came from a single cottonwood tree standing near the southwest corner of the house. The well was close by the cottonwood and beside it was a watering trough for the horses.

Ed Bracken, a slighter, gaunter version of Tom, was seated on a broken porch step drinking water from a battered tin dipper when Sherry arrived. He spilled the water remaining in the dipper into a patch of weeds, flung the dipper carelessly to the ground, then got up and came over to Sherry. She took his extended hand and dropped lightly to the ground beside him, offering her mouth for his clumsy kiss.

"What brings you out here, Sherry?" he asked, trying to pull her against him for another kiss. She pushed him away, recoiling a little at the pungent odor of sweat and dirt that clung to him. He noted her involuntary gesture and a slight sneer disfigured his spare, tight-skinned face, then immediately vanished. His jaw line was narrow and there was a slender rawness to the rest of his six-foot frame. But it was his eyes which marked him more than any other facet of his features. They were the same shade of dark blue as

Tom's but more angular in shape and somehow restless and shadowed.

Now, stepping fully away from him and brushing at the dust that clung tenaciously to her skirt, Sherry said, "I've got news for you. Tom is back."

A quick nervousness—almost an obscure sense of apprehension—fluttered in the corners of Ed's eyes. "How do you know?"

"Dale Parrish told me in town a little while ago."

Sherry paused as two of Ed's riders, Joe Larst and Ace Meusel, sauntered out of the bunkhouse and drifted down to them.

"What's this about Tom?" Larst asked. He was a bronzed, square-jawed man with flat hard lips, a twisted nose that had been broken in some long-ago barroom brawl and slate-gray eyes deeply set in a craggy face. The fact that he neither lifted his hat nor bothered to greet Sherry was a measure of the man's hardcase, animal-like nature.

"He's back," said Sherry, glancing briefly at Larst, then letting her attention drift past the thin, dried-out, non-descript shape of Meusel and back to Ed. Both men came up close, placing themselves on either side of their boss, thumbs hooked in their crossed gun belts.

"In town?" demanded Larst with intent interest.

"No," replied Sherry irritably. She was annoyed by the brusque manner in which Hammer's ramrod had taken charge of the conversation. "Dale and Buck Wykel stopped him up at Winchester Pass and sent him back the way he came."

"And he went?"

"So she said."

"That's damned interesting," murmured Larst. He exchanged a quick glance with Meusel, then nodded toward the corral. Both men turned on their heels and walked off.

A sharp frown creased Ed's forehead. "Where are you going?"

Larst answered over his shoulder, not bothering to stop. "Into town for a look around."

"You won't find Tom there," said Ed.

"Didn't say I would. Haven't been to Loreno for a couple of weeks. I've got a thirst I aim to satisfy."

Ed gestured violently with his hand. "Some other time, Joe. If you get wound around a pint of redeye you'll be no good tomorrow morning and we've got a job ahead of us rounding up those two-year-olds."

"Don't worry about those cows. We'll take care of them." Larst kept right on going to the corral. He pushed open the gate, took down a length of rope and moved in among the horses. Spotting the animal he wanted, he got his loop around

its neck and dragged it to the rails while he quickly saddled. A minute or two later Meusel had his own horse roped and ready to ride.

Ed took a step or two in the direction of the corral as if he meant to remonstrate further with his foreman. Larst looked up from tightening his saddle girth, gave Ed a hard, challenging grin. Ed's right fist knotted at his side and his jaw muscles bulged. He said nothing, however, and slowly turned back toward Sherry, who was watching this subtle battle of wills and not liking what she saw.

Larst and Meusel swung into their saddles, rode slowly across the yard, paused to tip their hats ironically to Sherry, then spurred away in a rippling cloud of dust. Ed's attention remained on the jogging shapes of his two riders until Sherry's dry, tart question pulled him around.

"Who's running Hammer, Ed?"

Bracken's tautly thin features seemed to blur and run together. His eyes turned smoky. "What do you mean?"

Her answer came back to him, impersonal and cool. "Don't try to play games with me. One word from you and Larst and Meusel do as they please."

Bracken squeezed out a nervous, fumbling grin. "I've been working them hard. They're entitled to a night off."

"Sure they are. But I don't like the way they took it." Sherry halted, her manner disturbed. She saw how flushed and uneasy he appeared. "What's happening to you and to Hammer? In the last six months you've had a complete turnover among your crew. They've all gone out of the country, except Steve Martin, who hangs around picking up grub-line jobs."

Bracken dabbed at his cheeks with a colored bandanna, then thrust it back in a hip pocket of his levis. "Things have changed, Sherry," he explained. "Like everyone else, we've been hit by rustlers. Most of the old bunch were just forty-and-found cow wranglers. When it came to bucking rustlers and using a gun they pulled their freight."

"Or you let them go," snapped Sherry. Her head was up and something dubious and uncertain showed in her face.

"What difference does it make?" he asked.

"A lot. Larst and Meusel are gun slicks—the kind of hardcases who run with Mantle's BM outfit."

Bracken grabbed Sherry's arm and half shook her. "Damn it, Sherry!" he exclaimed, his voice turning shrill. "Leave me alone. You're as bad as all the rest. Just because I've taken on a few riders who can shoot as well as ride everyone in Loreno has Hammer labeled as an owlhoot spread."

Sherry shook Ed's hands away from her arms. "With considerable reason, if anyone were to ask me," she retorted.

A quick resentment blazed in his eyes. "Now you're referring to the argument between Larst and Bond at the dance last month."

"It was more than an argument," Sherry insisted. She placed both rounded fists on her hips and stared defiantly at him. "Larst was ready to kill George—and just because George got Belle Graves to save him the first dance. Everyone had turned in their guns at the Lodge Hall entrance. But Larst was carrying a hideout."

"I know all about that," said Ed wearily. "Joe was full of whiskey and, besides, he's kind of crazy about Belle."

"He's crazy, all right," said Sherry, "but not about Belle. I'd call it gun crazy. That night at the dance he was just looking for an excuse to kill George."

Bracken shook his head, his expression drawn and worried and placative. "Sherry, if I didn't know you better, I'd say you were interested in George yourself."

"That's not so."

"I know. I know. But stop rawhiding me. The whole town is on edge. The cattle losses have gotten under everyone's skin and your father and Al Linus are looking for the handiest whipping boy."

"Do you blame them?" demanded Sherry hotly. "Linus and two of his riders caught Gurdon trying to run off fifteen of Linus's cows. And Gurdon was on Hammer's payroll."

"But he wasn't," Ed Bracken protested. "I told Al and your father at the time that I'd fired Gurdon two days before because I'd caught him using a running iron on a couple of Hammer critters."

"They had only your word for that."

Bracken's face darkened. "And that's not worth anything?"

For a moment he looked oddly vulnerable and defenseless and Sherry came to him and put her arms around him. "Oh, I don't know, Ed. I'm all mixed up."

He smiled at her, the gesture loosening the tight stricture of skin around his mouth corners. "You worry too much, that's all," he said. "That Gurdon business made Hammer look bad, I'll admit. When you hire toughs you take a certain amount of risk. I guessed wrong on him."

"What about Larst and Meusel?"

Once again his face darkened and he stepped back. "Stop it, Sherry. You've gone far enough."

She was immediately contrite. "I'm sorry, Ed. I see trouble building all around us and I can't help being afraid."

He continued to smile, yet there was a stiffness, a reserve about him now. She lifted her face, staring at him as if she

might find some comfort or solace there. He bent down suddenly and kissed her. She clung to him fiercely for a moment, then pushed him away.

"What will you do about Tom?" she queried.

The question startled him. "If he comes here I can certainly use him," he said. Oddly, there wasn't any animation or feeling behind Ed's words and something almost like strain or fear moved into his dark blue eyes, then slid swiftly away.

Chapter 5

THE TEN-UP SALOON was a cheaper, more tawdry version of the Rawhide. Situated in the scrub section of town and scrupulously avoided by the big cattle ranchers, it had become the accepted hangout for riders from all the shirt-tail outfits in the mountains, saddle bums, drifters and, more particularly, the hard-bitten crew of Brad Mantle's BM iron.

At this moment with the westering sun sinking below the rugged escarpments of the Tumurals and the smoke-blackened coal-oil lamps suspended from the ceiling throwing out a murky yellow light that left deep pools of shadow in the far corners, Brad Mantle emerged from the saloon's back room. He stood for a moment on widely planted boots and surveyed the chipped pine bar, the cluttered tables, the cracked back-bar mirror, the dirty-aproned bartender idly mopping at a glass with a whiskey-stained towel.

Mantle and the bartender were alone in the barroom, yet Mantle stalked toward the room's far corner in a smashing, abrupt way as if he were beating against a wall of men. Swarthy and thick-bodied and hatchet-faced, Mantle had a bright, hard look about him. Despite his bigness, he moved lithely and swiftly.

He kicked a chair away from a corner table and settled his weight in it, afterward yelling for a bottle and a glass. The bartender brought a fresh bottle of rye and an over-size shot glass, set them down without a word and hurried back behind the bar.

Mantle took two quick drinks, wiped his mouth with the back of a hairy hand, then looked toward the batwing doors as Gus Hyatt pushed through them and came into the room. Hyatt spotted Mantle at once and strode over

to the table. Mantle said nothing. Hyatt pulled out a chair and sat down. He glanced suggestively at the whiskey bottle. Mantle watched him with a hard, calculating shrewdness. Hyatt finally shrugged and said, "Tom Bracken pulled in."

Mantle leaned back in his chair, his massive muscular chest filling out his gray checkered flannel shirt. "I figured that."

"Dale Parrish's attempt to steer him away up at Winchester Pass didn't work."

"Of course not," snapped Mantle. He seemed strangely pleased and a ruddy light glowed in his deeply pitted eyes. "He's a hard one. Won't take a bluff. He proved that when he gun-whipped Hank Murad up in Billings."

"Yeah," said Hyatt, his crooked yellow teeth flashing, "I heard about that. Murad was no *hombre* to tangle with." He paused, again looked at the whiskey bottle without stirring any response from Mantle. "You want me to toll Bracken down here?"

Mantle poured himself a drink, picked up the glass, holding it to the light, then tipped the amber whiskey down his throat. "I reckon he'll come of his own accord," he said. "Ned Oliver and his crowd are in the Rawhide. The way they feel about Hammer he's lucky if he can buy a drink there. But if, for any reason, he doesn't come down this way it's up to you to get him."

Hyatt's undershot jaw crept forward and fear muddied his eyes. "Hell, I don't want to tangle with him."

Mantle banged the glass on the table. "Just bring him here. Larst and Meusel can do the rest. You get the word to them I want them in town."

Hyatt grinned knowingly. "They're probably on their way. I saw Sherry Oliver and Dale Parrish meet near Jansen's Mercantile. Afterward, Sherry got her horse and rode out in the direction of Hammer. That means the word about Tom Bracken is going the rounds."

Mantle nodded in agreement. Then he pinpointed Hyatt with a sharp, beetle-browed glance. "Here's how we'll work it. You see that Bracken comes down here. I'll get in a conversation with him, maybe suggest a little poker game. After he goes I want Larst and Meusel to jump him in the alley alongside the abandoned feed barn. He'll have to pass the alley on his way back to the hotel."

Hyatt's thin shoulders twisted and his expression took on a gray note of worry. "You want him killed?"

"No. We can't risk it. But I want him smashed up good." "Anything else?"

"Yeah. When Larst and Meusel are finished with him they're to tie him to a horse and take him up into the Tu-

murals. And they're to let him know he's a dead huckleberry if he tries to come back."

"I'll tell them," said Hyatt. "Reckon I'll head uptown and keep an eye out for Bracken, meanwhile."

The round-shouldered gunman ran his grubby fingers through the frayed brown mustache which covered his upper lip, then swung away and hurried out to the street.

After leaving the Rawhide, Bracken bought a new gun and holster, then picked up his bay gelding and moved on down to the livery barn, where he left instruction for the weary animal to be grained and rubbed down. He handed a silver dollar to the hostler and sauntered out into the street again.

Pausing on the plank sidewalk, he watched the twilight deepen into darkness. Light gradually faded from the sky and the first stars began to shine against the deep blue arch of the heavens. A cool wind, drifting down from the high ramparts of the Tumurals, stirred up tiny granules of dust and whipped them in whirling eddies down the street.

The sight of an empty restaurant close by reminded him that he was hungry. He stepped inside, idly noting the name MAE RONALD stenciled on the door. Taking a seat at the counter, he ordered a steak with potatoes, biscuits and two steaming mugs of coffee.

The meal satisfied his hunger, but did nothing to appease the restlessness and discontent that churned inside him. The massed hostility he had encountered in the Rawhide still rankled deeply. In addition, he was plagued by his ignorance of what was going on in Loreno.

That Hammer was held in suspicion and contempt by its neighbors was fully evident. But the reasons for that joined antagonism were not so easily discernible. One way to get to the bottom of things was to hire a fresh horse and ride out to Hammer and see his brother. That he would do in any case.

Then the single word "Mantle" uttered by one of two punchers huddled at the far end of the counter sent his thoughts off on a wild tangent. The punchers were strangers to him and they showed no interest in his presence. But the name and the further words "Ten-Up Saloon" mumbled by one of them showed Bracken his next move.

Dale Parrish had hinted at some sort of illicit alliance between Hammer and Mantle. With her veiled accusations sharply in mind, he decided to look for Mantle before going on to see his brother. And of all the places in Loreno where the man might be found he guessed that the most likely would be the Ten-Up Saloon. Ned Oliver had referred him to it in a manner that showed it to be the gathering place of the

riffruff and undesirables—and, obviously, Mantle was included in that group.

Once his decision was made, Bracken got up from the counter, paid for his meal and moved into the half gloom of the main street illuminated by alternating patches of darkness and butter-yellow light spilling from the windows and doorways of stores.

A couple of riders galloped in from the north, whipping their ponies through the dust and sending their echoing yells into the night. They slid down in front of the Rawhide and tramped inside. A moment later a settler's buckboard rolled away from the Mercantile, the heavy workhorse team of blacks plodding slowly in their traces.

Bracken passed the hotel and in the bright shaft of light gushing from the lobby he caught sight of the round-shouldered, unkempt little man who'd been stationed on one side of the veranda when he'd first gone in to see about getting a room. The man's beady eyes shifted quickly away when Bracken swung his head to regard him. Bracken continued on along the walk, conscious of a tightening of his back and shoulder muscles. There was a sudden alien feeling in the night. It was a subtle sixth sense warning him of trouble to come. The round-shouldered man had been watching for someone when he'd seen him the first time and now, seen again, he had the same air of watchful waiting about him.

The chances are good that I'm the one he's watching, Bracken told himself. *And, if that's the case, who's paying him?*

A cool prickling of sweat oozed from the pores of his back and an odd dryness touched his throat. He shifted the position of his holster, checked the gun to see that it rode freely. A lamplit store was on his right. He walked past it, crossed a wide alley, his searching gaze intent on the shadows that lingered beyond the street's perimeter.

No sound broke the silence of the alley and he relaxed to go on past an abandoned feed barn, then another alley. Beyond the next intersection the number of buildings began to dwindle. But midway down the line he saw the wide, murky plate-glass window of the Ten-Up Saloon.

There were two ponies racked up in front. He stopped near the knotted locust rail, sent a quick glance up and down the street, then slid into the dust. He came around the rear flank of the first horse, struck a match and examined the animal carefully for brand marks. The light from the second match showed him a BM brand on the rumps of both ponies.

A hard glint brightened Bracken's eyes. He tossed the

burnt match away, ducked under the rail and strode directly into the saloon. The interior was like a hundred similar saloons he'd seen in towns throughout the West. He gave no attention to the pine bar, the scattering of rough tables and chairs. He was interested only in the swarthy, big-bodied man seated at the corner table with a bottle and glass beside him. The man glanced up at Bracken's entrance, his eyes narrowed momentarily, then he went back to his drinking.

Bracken debated going straight to the table. But there was a certain routine one had to follow, so he swung toward the bar. As he reached it and signaled the bartender, the batwing doors squeaked open and the round-shouldered, mustached man from the hotel slid inside. He saw Bracken, shied his eyes away, then dipped his head in Mantle's direction. "Has Andy been in tonight?" he asked.

The man at the table glowered and made a cutting motion with the flat of his hand. The round-shouldered man about-faced and pushed outside.

Bracken turned to face the back-bar mirror. A signal had been passed. He was certain of that. The question about "Andy" had served to tell the big man at the table that delivery had been made. With the BM brands on the two horses outside and the maneuvering that had just taken place, he knew he had found Brad Mantle.

There was a game being played out here and Bracken sensed that he was the target. Tension flickered along his nerves. There was an electric current in the air, eddying back and forth across the still room. He knew Mantle was fully aware of him, yet the big man gave all his attention to the bottle and glass before him.

Bracken wiggled a finger at the bartender. "A glass of whiskey." He watched the bartender reach for a quarter-filled brown bottle and tilt it over a shot glass. Then he took up the glass, wondering when Mantle would acknowledge his presence. He drank half the whiskey, made a wry face and grunted. "Got anything better than that rotgut?"

Before the bartender could reply, Mantle swung ponderously around in his chair. "Rotgut it is, Bracken," he said. "If you want a real drink I suggest you join me."

Bracken swung slowly around. His eyes encountered the indolent but unmistakably challenging gaze of the other man. For the space of two or three seconds they measured and assayed each other. Then Bracken shrugged and walked over to Mantle's table, carrying his glass, which he emptied in the sawdust on the way.

He pulled out a battered barrel chair that had been re-

inforced with baling wire and sat down. "So you know who I am?"

Mantle grinned. The gesture was more of a twisted grimace than a true grin. "The town's been expecting you."

"So I found out."

The cold, mirthless distortion of Mantle's gross features was repeated. He filled Bracken's glass from the bottle in his hand and set the bottle back on the table. "Dale Parrish," he said. "She tried a bluff. It didn't work. I could have told her that."

Bracken sipped at the whiskey. It was a good grade, strong but palatable, and it warmed his insides as it went down. "You know a lot about what's going on," he observed.

"Make it my business to," snapped Mantle, his tone hard and firm.

Bracken leaned forward, his eyes boring like a steel drill into the big man. "Your nose ever get you into trouble?"

"Once or twice. But I always managed to fight my way out."

Impatience tugged at Bracken's restraint. Time was slipping by and the need to get to the root of the trouble that had brought him here now turned him blunt. "What do you want with me, Mantle?" he demanded.

"How do you know I want anything with you?" The dark eyes in the swarthy, sun-wrinkled face mocked him.

"I read the signs." Bracken dismissed his knowledge with the wave of a hand. "Things have changed in Loreno in the time I've been away. You seem to be involved in the changes—only nobody wants to talk. I mean to find out if I have to beat it out of someone."

Mantle laid his huge, hairy hand flat on the table. He stared at it for a moment, then slowly closed it in a fist. That welt-knuckled fist was a symbol of the man's strength and of the pride that was behind it. "You talk tough, friend. The point is, how tough are you?"

Bracken met Mantle's gaze unflinchingly. "Try me and see."

Mantle's upper lip quirked. The acid bite in Bracken's brief statement, the readiness for fight revealed by his truculent manner produced no other reaction in the BM owner. After a leisurely interval he said, "What do you want to know?"

Bracken came right to the point. "What's Pothook got against Hammer?"

"Dale Parrish and Buck Wykel object to Ed's running with me."

"Why?"

"I'm supposed to be a cattle rustler," said Mantle calmly.

"Are you?"

"I've eaten an occasional Pothook or Crescent steer."

Bracken accepted the information, aware that it revealed nothing. Many big ranches closed their eyes to the loss of a cow or two to nesters and shoestring spreads when the latter ran short of meat. Mantle's admission could be so construed. On the other hand, it might also mean full-scale rustling.

"Where are you located?" Bracken inquired.

"I took over the Lacey spread."

"That was a hard-scrabble outfit in the Tumurals. Not much feed for cattle up that way."

Mantle nodded. "True. But I manage to get along."

"In the short time I've been back," said Bracken, "I've received the impression that Hammer hasn't any friends in Loreno."

"Correct. It all started when Al Linus caught one of your brother's riders red-handed with fifteen of Linus's cows. Ed claimed he'd fired the fellow a few days before because he'd tried to use a running iron on a Hammer yearling. Nobody believed him."

There was a sudden sickening stir inside Bracken's stomach. He pounded the tips of his fingers on the scarred table top. "What do you think?"

"I figure Ed was telling the truth. In any event, Hammer and my BM outfit are on one side of the fence while Oliver, Linus and the rest of the big spreads are on the other."

"Anybody else lose cows besides Linus?"

A trace of ruddy color traveled along Mantle's dark skin. "We've all lost beef."

"And Ed and you are being blamed?"

"Yeah. But it doesn't worry me."

Bracken shoved his chair back from the table and got up. Mantle pushed the whiskey bottle toward him. "Have another drink."

"I've had enough. Thanks for the information."

"Sure. Going out to see Ed?"

"Yeah." Bracken hesitated, then added, "Like to come along?"

"No. You two will have plenty to talk about. If you ever need any help you know where to find me."

"Thanks. Maybe Ed's had too much already."

Mantle's thick eyebrows knotted. His words seemed to lunge at Bracken. "Too much what?"

"Too much of your help."

Mantle's face darkened. His broad, flat hands spread wide on the table top. For a moment Bracken thought the big man was going to push the table into him and swing at him.

Then the wild, predatory look went out of him and he turned calm and almost amused.

"Wait and see, friend," he murmured. "We'll talk again."

Bracken swung on his heel and walked to the batwing doors. He shouldered them aside and stepped onto the walk, moving immediately into the shadows before stopping to survey the empty street. There was no traffic at this end of town and only one or two shops still showed light in their windows.

The meeting with Mantle had not been very productive. It told him, however, that the BM owner was a tough and dangerous character. Only time would reveal the man's true role. He seemed to be playing some hard and secret game of his own. And Bracken now was convinced that Mantle had been testing him, though the reason for it was not immediately apparent.

There was no noise from the saloon at his back. Far off in the hills a coyote howled at the night sky and the cry was taken up by some hound at the other end of town. Standing there in the cool stillness Bracken rolled a cigarette, put it in his mouth and set it aflame with a long sulfur match. He took a deep drag of smoke into his lungs, savoring the taste of it and feeling a slow sense of ease creep along his nerves.

When he struck off along the walk his boots set up a sharp rataplan of sound that seemed to echo up and down the street. He moved past a dimly lit hardware store, then a saddle shop with a meager night lamp burning in a darkened rear cranny. Beyond the saddle shop was an abandoned feed barn. He glanced idly at the ramshackle structure and continued on.

A sudden faint whisper of sound reached him from the shadows of the alley to his left. He turned his head in that direction. Instinctively he dropped his cigarette, sliding his hand up his thigh toward his holster. His fingers were scraping along the worn leather of the scabbard when two indistinct man shapes rushed at him.

Knuckles grazed the side of his chin. A powerful set of arms went around him, freezing his own gun arm. He tried to wrench free and found himself dragged off the walk and into the gloom of the alley. A sharp, probing knee jammed into his groin, setting him afire with pain. The muzzle of a downchopping Colt raked the back of his head. He fought down waves of dizziness and nausea, still caught in the bear trap of imprisoning arms.

The driving knee sought his groin again and missed. Bracken stamped his boot heel down hard, catching one man's instep and drawing a hissed epithet of pain from him.

The arms pinioning him loosened. But when he sought his gun he found the holster empty. In desperation he launched himself forward, head down, and caught one of his attackers full in the midriff. The force of his drive carried the man into the wall of the feed barn. Then the second man was upon him, swinging a gun barrel. One blow caught Bracken on the left shoulder, numbing his entire arm. A second blow sliced a groove in his chin and slashed his lower lip so that blood ran warm and salty into his mouth.

Doggedly he shook his head to clear it of pain. A heavy shape careened into him. Bunched knuckles sledged into his ribs. He braced himself and propelled the man away from him with a vicious left hook to the nose. He felt the crunch of broken cartilage under his fist and was savagely glad. Immediately afterward, a smashing fist found his mouth, drawing more blood from his lip. Then a wicked flurry of blows to the body spun him against the feed barn's side wall.

As he sprawled there, a darker shape rushed out of the blackness. He stuck out his left fist, jabbing at the gray blob of a face. Then the second man slid in from the side, slashing at him with heavy hands.

Desperately Bracken tried to fight his way clear of the building wall. But the vicious two-pronged assault kept him pinned tight. He kept swinging both arms though he realized the steam was going out of his punches. All the while neither of his attackers said a word. The silence of the onslaught testified to its brutal and deadly purpose.

The fighting was at close quarters now, wicked and altogether punishing. A large head butted Bracken's chin. He retaliated with a heavy blow to the man's solar plexus that brought a grunt of pain. Then Bracken's head was beaten back against the wall by three bone-crushing jolts.

Redness whirled before his eyes. A lightning bolt of pain struck his crotch and he went down, doubled up in agony. A booted toe lashed his ribs. He rolled away, heard the scuff of a boot and made a feeble grab for an ankle. Even as he did so, the tip of a second boot cracked into the side of his head. Consciousness slid away from him. He was already floating on a dark tide of oblivion when the booted toe slammed once more against his skull.

Chapter 6

THE DEEP, BLACK PIT into which Bracken had descended was cold and wet and alive with weird pressures. A great vise of pain had hold of him, squeezing his insides. At times, he felt that he was being burned alive while all his nerve tissue seemed to be withering and dying. At other times, it appeared that he was locked in a vault of ice and the air that entered his tortured lungs was frigid and lifeless.

The intermittent agony ebbed and flowed about him like a great inland sea. It was a fetid, miasmatic tide seeking to smother him.

Then, without warning, the great flowing mass of agonized and conflicting sensations receded, leaving him marooned on an arid, empty plain of exhaustion. He opened his eyes and was blinded by a shaft of sunlight streaming in through a curtained window. There was heat in the sun, yet a cold band was clamped around his head. He lifted an arm and his blunt fingers came into contact with another hand—a slender woman's hand. His head twisted slowly around. Beside the bed stood Dale Parrish. She was holding a moist cloth to his forehead.

"I'm glad to see you back with the living," she said.

A mist gathered before Bracken's eyes. Dale's figure began to shimmer like heat waves dancing in the sun. "How did you get here?" he asked hoarsely, his voice sounding strange and unreal.

Dale smiled gravely. An aching worry quivered in her throat. Looking at Bracken's battered, swollen features, she felt a terrible urge to cry. When she finally answered him her voice was softer than it had ever been with him. "Tom, you're at Pothook. You've been hurt." She bent down and grasped his big hand in hers. "How do you feel?"

"Not good." He was still having trouble focusing his eyes and there was a dull, persistent ache inside his skull. When he tried to shift his position beneath the sheet hot arrows of pain skewered his ribs and chest.

"The doctor said that the beating you took would have killed an ordinary man."

Bracken tried to grin, but the very effort of stretching out his cracked, torn lips brought its own special kind of agony.

"They did a thorough job," he murmured. "I seem to ache all over."

Dale perched on the edge of the bed, took the cloth from his forehead, immersed it in a basin of water, then replaced it on his brow. "Who was it? Do you know?"

He gave her a slanting, quizzical glance. She flushed and little pin pricks of anger darted along her flesh. "It wasn't Pothook—if that's what you're thinking."

"I reckon not. One warning was enough."

The flush remained in Dale's cheeks. "I guess I've got that coming. Can't say that I blame you. But regardless of how I feel about Hammer, I'd gladly help kill the men who did this to you."

"That's my job—when I find them," Bracken said, his face hardening until it resembled a block of gray, chiseled granite.

"You feel like talking about it?"

"Why not?" He pushed himself up in bed. Instantly a wave of dizziness and nausea assailed him and he sank down. Sweat bathed his body and the dull pounding in his head intensified.

Dale hurried to make him comfortable. "Don't try to sit up. You've had a concussion and you'll feel the effects of it for days."

Bracken waited with closed eyes until the spasm passed. Then, finding Dale still beside him and watching expectantly, he told her of the fight in the alley beside the abandoned feed barn.

"You didn't get a look at them or recognize a voice?" Dale asked.

"It was too dark to see anything and there was no talk at all."

Dale shuddered. "They meant to kill you."

"Either that or make it clear I wasn't wanted in Loreno." A wide crease furrowed the flesh beneath his eyes. "I've had ample proof since yesterday that Hammer is pretty cordially hated."

"Not yesterday, Tom. That was two days ago." When Bracken gazed at her in surprise, Dale nodded, "Steve Martin, a puncher who used to work for Hammer, found you up in the Tumurals on his way back from Bridle Bit, where he'd been riding for the Hashknife outfit. You were tied face down to the saddle of Dave Peek's horse."

"Dave Peek?" Bracken licked his parched lips. "How does Peek figure in this business?"

"He doesn't," Dale replied. "Whoever beat you up must have grabbed one of the horses tied outside the Rawhide and used it to get you out of town. Peek didn't find out about

it till he was ready to ride for home after playing poker with Ned Oliver and Al Linus. He was upset because the horse was his dun gelding and he intended taking it on his trip to the capital on business."

"This is awkward for you," Bracken observed.

"Not at all."

"I'm thinking of our meeting the other day."

Dale's lips drew tight. She rose from the bed, walked to the window, then came back again. "Right now, I'm confused," she admitted. "All of us have good reason to be suspicious of Hammer."

"You mean the Gurdon affair."

"That and Ed's running around with Mantle."

"Mantle's a real bully boy," Bracken admitted. "I wonder if he had anything to do with that beating I got in town."

"It wouldn't surprise me," Dale said. "But, like the rustling that has hit all the outfits around here, you can't prove anything against him."

"Maybe I'll make that one of my jobs," Bracken declared. "But first I'll have to get out of your way. For everything you've done I'm grateful. Believe me."

He took her hand, feeling the slow, heavy pulse beat in their joined palms. A sudden, vivid man-woman awareness sprang up between them. Gently he pulled her forward. She came to the edge of the bed, hesitant and half resisting. He noted how moist and full her lips were. Abruptly he wanted to kiss them, to feel the surging warmth of her body against him. But she divined his intention and freed her hand.

"I'm glad I was able to help." Her voice was trembling and unsure. "And I'm sorry about what happened up at the pass." She paused a second or two, then said, "I'd like to think I've been wrong about Hammer."

She turned toward the door. Bracken knew that she would make no further concessions. Too much time had gone by and too many disturbing memories lay between them. If he was tempted to renew a relationship that had once been gay and warm and vital, he saw that now she was restrained by the pull of events occurring around her and by the tug of some alien loyalty still unknown to him.

At the door she said, "If you want anything, call me. The doctor will be around this afternoon to have another look at you."

He lifted his right arm in acknowledgment and watched her glide out of his range of vision.

Dale walked down the long hall which divided Pothook's ranch house into two equal sections and went out the back door and into the yard.

Buck Wykel rose from a weathered tree stump. "For a

girl who was intent on driving Tom Bracken out of the country you certainly spend one hell of a lot of time nursing him," he growled.

Dale's anger flared. "What would you have me do, Buck? Let him lie out in the hills and die? After all, he was nearly beaten to death."

Wykel rolled a chew of tobacco around in his mouth. His florid sun-wrinkled cheeks pulled together in a gesture of surly discontent. "It just goes to show that someone else had the same idea as you."

"Who could it have been, Buck?" Dale asked.

The Pothook foreman shrugged. There was little tolerance or feeling in him. He spoke tartly. "Could be any of a half dozen outfits which don't like Hammer and don't want another Bracken around. Too bad they didn't finish him."

"Don't talk like that," Dale said hotly. "We've no grounds for thinking Tom is involved in the rustling. After all, he's been away for many months."

"You sure have changed your tune," Wykel grunted. "What do we do now? Make peace with Hammer and tell them what bunch of cows to take next?"

"Stop it, Buck. I'm no longer certain Hammer is responsible for the rustling. Maybe someone wants us to think they are."

Wykel spat in the dust. "This gets more interesting by the minute." His manner was blustery and challenging. But behind the stubborn querulousness of his nature there beat a fierce and unshakable core of loyalty to Pothook and its interests.

"Listen to me a moment, Buck," Dale ordered. "Everyone is aware that one of Hammer's riders was caught with a few of Al Linus's cows. It's possible, however, that the man was working on his own or for someone else. I say we should concentrate our suspicions on Brad Mantle. He's got the owlhoot brand stamped on him. And if Ed Bracken is running with him it may mean that Ed's gone bad. But Tom is different. I'd bet on that."

"Do you plan to notify Ed that Tom is here?" Wykel asked.

"No. He'll find out in good time. Tom will make Hammer his first stop once he's able to ride again."

Wykel slid the callused palm of his right hand back and forth across his beard-stubbed chin. "You make out a good case for Tom, but only time will tell if you're right."

He walked around Dale, then, and headed for the corral, where three other Pothook hands waited to receive their orders for the day.

The morning after Tom Bracken's beating Ed rose early, went through the tedious ritual of washing and shaving and hurried across the yard to the cook shack, which adjoined the log bunkhouse. Since Hammer had never been a large outfit, the bunkhouse was built to accommodate a maximum of six punchers. At the moment, there were only four riders on the payroll. Larst and Meusel had been at headquarters for the past week while the other two men operated from Hammer's line cabin up in the foothills.

Ed stuck his head inside the cook shack with its partitioned-off section which held a plank table flanked on either side by a movable wooden bench. The cook, an ex-bronco peeler whose horse-breaking days had been abruptly terminated several years before by a bad fall in which he'd suffered multiple fractures of the left leg, turned from the stove.

"Breakfast ready, cookie?" Ed demanded.

"The coffee's hot." The cook pointed to the blackened pot on the back of the stove. "And the batter's all mixed for flapjacks. You want it now?"

Ed ignored the cook's query. "Joe and Ace up yet?" he demanded.

"Haven't seen them."

Ed scowled, ducked out of the doorway and thrust his way into the bunkhouse. In the dim morning light he found Larst and Meusel just swinging out of their bunks.

"You buckos sure take your own sweet time about getting up," Ed observed as Larst stretched and scratched his chest through his long underwear.

"What's all the rush about?" Larst demanded. He reached leisurely for his flannel shirt, thrust his arms into it and buttoned it. Then he slipped on his brush-scarred pants.

"Hell, there's plenty to do," Ed snapped. "You both knew I wanted to get an early start today to help Lodge and Hatten look for strays up in the cedar brakes."

With his pants buttoned and the gun belt hitched around his waist, Larst sat down on the bunk and reached for his boots. He glanced idly and indolently up at his boss. "We've got all day. Besides, we didn't get much sleep last night."

Ed's features squeezed tight with irritation. "Your own damned fault. I told you not to ride into Loreno. Neither one of you will be of any use till you sweat the rotgut whiskey you drank out of your system."

Larst's eyes turned a deeper shade of slate. He grunted as he pulled his right boot on his foot. "Don't crowd me, Ed. I'm not in the mood." The curving knife scar in his chest stood out whitely against the darkness of his skin.

The blunt and arrogant challenge in Larst's manner hit Ed Bracken like a weighted fist. He found himself regretting

more and more that he had ever hired these two hardcases. Sherry was right. They were running him instead of taking orders from him. But he was in too deeply to change. If he tried to fire them they'd laugh at him.

Rage churned his insides and he wanted to fling himself at Larst. The latter seemed to sense the wild urge pounding in Ed and remained quietly at ease on the bunk, one boot still in his fist, daring Ed to make a play.

But Ed had already waited too long. He cursed under his breath and walked outside and back into the cook shack. The cook set a steaming mug of coffee in front of him, then returned to the table with a plate of flapjacks and bacon. Morosely he began to eat.

Ten minutes went by before Larst and Meusel wandered in and took seats at the opposite side of the table from him. Ed had finished two pancakes and was starting on a third when he looked up at Larst and noticed an ugly blue-black bruise beneath the foreman's left eye. The lower portion of his nose, too, had been flattened and dried blood caked his nostrils.

"What happened to you?" Ed asked.

There was an amused, half-contemptuous tolerance in Larst's cool rejoinder. "A fight in town."

Meusel suddenly started to laugh. His thin, dry face looked puffy. There was a small cut on his lip.

Ed shifted his glance to the other man, then slammed his fork down on the table. "I might have guessed you'd be involved, too," he said. "Another of your drunken brawls. I'm damned tired of paying bills for saloon breakage. This time it comes out of your pay."

"There'll be no bill," Meusel said in his soft, almost effeminate voice. "This was something special."

Both Meusel and Larst were smiling wickedly now as if they enjoyed some secret joke at the Hammer owner's expense.

"What's so blasted funny?" he demanded, a tiny cold current of fear crawling up his backbone.

"We're just thinking of the fight," said Larst. "The fact is, a friend of yours was involved."

Suspicion set Ed's mind racing like a treadmill. "First I knew Hammer had any friends," he murmured. "Who was it?"

"Your brother, Tom."

The three words left Ed momentarily numb and frozen. His throat turned dry and a hot iron seemed to be stirring around inside his chest.

"That's why you went to town, damn you!" he raged. Neither puncher bothered to answer. Their silence told Ed all he needed to know. "By God, if you've hurt him I'll—"

He broke off and stood up. His right hand clawed frantically for his gun. But the weapon was only half out of the holster when he found himself staring at the round black eye of Larst's big .45 held negligently in the ramrod's fist. Larst's arm rested alongside his plate and the gun barrel was tilted in the direction of Ed Bracken's chest.

"What would you do?" Larst queried in a goading tone.

Ed swayed on unsteady feet, his eyes burning into Larst's. A sense of outrage filled him. But mixed with the anger was a measure of dread that held him fast. He let his Colt slide back into the holster.

Larst looked up and down, sneering all the while, then put his own weapon out of sight. "Any time you feel like burning powder, just say the word," he invited.

Ed shook his head in impotent fury. "What did you do to Tom?"

"We caught him in the alley near the abandoned feed barn and worked him over good with fists and guns," Larst told him. The memory of that beating was a joyous thing to the Hammer ramrod. His eyes burned with an eager yellow light and his lips writhed in sadistic pleasure.

"You didn't—he isn't—?" Ed's voice broke off in a nervous whisper.

Larst turned to yell over his shoulder at the cook for a cup of coffee. He swung slowly back to face Ed, drawing it out as much as he could. "He was alive when we put him on a horse and headed him toward the Tumurals."

Ed shook a tangled strand of hair out of his eyes. A great tremor went through him. "You've gone too far this time," he said. "I'm going to see Mantle about this."

"Forget it," snapped Larst. "Mantle gave us the order. It was the only thing to do short of killing your brother. Can't you see that, you fool? Do you think we can afford to have Tom snooping around here at this time?"

"We may be sorry we didn't kill him," added Meusel.

Ed flicked him an angry glance. His fear of the little gunman was not as great as his fear of Larst. "You'll live to regret that, Ace," he warned.

Meusel jeered at him. "See how worried I am?"

Ed swallowed, his prominent Adam's apple moving up and down in his throat. Then a set, gray stillness came into his face. "I've had enough of my deal with Mantle. This tears it. I'm pulling out."

The cook brought Larst a cup of coffee and some flap-jacks. The ramrod sipped at the coffee, then set the mug down on the table. He leaned across the plank table, riveting Ed Bracken with a completely hostile, heavy-lidded attention. "It's too late to pull out, my friend."

"Hammer is still my ranch!" Ed said.

"Sure, but we run it—for Mantle."

Suddenly Ed couldn't stand it any more. He whirled around, knocking his half-empty coffee mug to the floor. He stepped over the bench and stalked outside into the morning sunlight. Behind him he heard the taunting laughter of Larst and Meusel. That sound was an ugly refrain that remained with him as he crossed the yard and entered the ranch house.

He was sick as he had never been sick before. It was no mere physical agony. Rather it was a deep-seated, blood-sucking illness that drained his body's vitality at the same time that it dulled his brain and clamped a frozen lid on his emotions.

More than once in the past he had cursed his own weakness. If he'd had the guts to stay away from town, where poker losses had steadily taken all his cash and later some of his cattle, he would not be so viciously trapped. With the threat of losing Hammer staring him in the face, he'd taken the easy way out. Mantle with his hardcase crew and his sly rustling forays had offered him a chance to recoup his losses. He'd agreed, gotten money to pay off some debts, and then found himself caught in a web of intrigue from which there was no escape.

He'd been forced to join in on Mantle's night-riding activities. Gurdon's capture by Al Linus's crew had almost been the finish of Hammer. Gurdon took the rap but he'd been saved from a summary lynching when Mantle's crew broke him out of jail in the dead of night.

Now, looking into the future, Ed found it dark and unpromising. Tom, who might have helped, was gone—might even be dying. And there was nowhere to turn for help.

Chapter 7

THREE DAYS WENT BY before Tom Bracken was allowed out of bed. Even then the doctor insisted he confine his activity to sitting on the veranda of the Pothook ranch house and taking a brief walk. The long siege in bed and the little exercise that was permitted him left him restless and irritable. He was anxious to get away from Pothook and see his brother. But Dale, watching anxiously over him, made him hew to the letter of the doctor's instructions.

At the end of the week, however, Bracken was feeling so

much better that he decided he could try getting into the saddle once more. Dale remonstrated with him, but he was adamant about it. Accordingly, she went out to the corral with him, intending to ride along.

The short trip across the Pothook ranch yard showed Bracken that the aching stiffness of his muscles had not abated. His lower ribs had been tightly taped by the doctor and it made every movement awkward and uncomfortable. The cut in his lip had healed, but there was a small ragged scar above his left eye where a slashing gun butt had raked open the skin. The other bruises on his face had faded into pale green discolorations.

Slate Cooney was at the corral and Dale ordered him to rope out her mare and Dave Peek's big-boned dun gelding which had been appropriated by Bracken's assailants. Dale had kept the animal in the Pothook corrals pending an opportunity to return it to the Lazy Link ranch owner.

Now, as Cooney led both saddled horses through the open gate, Dave Peek and a stranger rode up. Peek spurred his horse up to the corral and quickly dismounted, leaving the other man a dozen yards behind him. He went right to Dale, throwing one arm carelessly around her waist and pulling her against him to receive his kiss. She turned her lips to his, but pulled away after allowing only a brief contact.

"Is that the kind of greeting I get after being away all week?" Peek demanded. His handsome, lightly tanned features were suavely smiling, but there was a hidden edge in his voice, sharpening his question.

"Dave, we're not alone," she said, color deepening the bloom of her cheeks as she risked a brief glance in Bracken's direction.

"Do you think I care about that?" Peek swung half around toward Bracken, unable to conceal the surprise and displeasure he felt. "What are you doing here—and with my gelding?"

Bracken peered closely at him. He took his time replying. "I'm a guest of Pothook."

A shadow of irritation drove the light from Peek's gray-blue eyes. "Since when did you start operating Pothook as a hotel?"

Dale smiled in amused disbelief. "You mean you haven't heard about Tom being ambushed in town and beaten up?" When Peek shook his head impatiently, Dale proceeded to give a terse account of the events that had occurred, explaining at the same time how Peek's gelding had been involved.

The faint heat of temper simmered in Peek, ruffling his usual calm. "But why keep him here?"

"He was too badly hurt to move," said Dale, her own

feelings flaring a little. "It was the very least I could do. Besides, regardless of how we both have felt about Hammer, I have no sympathy for the kind of sneaking, cowardly attack that was made upon Tom. If you do, then I've had the wrong kind of opinion about you."

The cords in Peek's neck drew taut and a muscle quivered at the side of his jaw. A hard, rash anger surged up into his eyes. Then he got himself under control and answered, his voice a cool, dry rustle. "I agree with you completely about the beating, Dale." He inclined his head toward Bracken. "Sorry to hear about it. I see your face is still marked up."

Bracken nodded, his eyes searching Peek's features with an intensity that was disconcerting. Peek, noting the careful scrutiny and annoyed by it, said, "What are you looking at?"

"I just wanted to satisfy myself you weren't marked up."

Instead of being enraged by the veiled suspicion Bracken had voiced, Peek showed him an indifferent, half-amused glance. "You're looking at the wrong man. I don't do business that way."

"You mean you pay someone to do that kind of work?" Bracken inquired in a deceptively soft tone.

Peek refused to be baited. "I don't blame you for being sore about the beating. I suggest you look further for the man you want."

Unruliness tinted Bracken's bruised features with a touch of deep red. His lips settled in a grim, narrow groove. "Just what I intend to do," he said. "I don't give a damn what outfit is shielding them. I'll find them. When I do, there'll be another little party."

Dale suddenly moved close to Bracken. She took his arm, shook him a little. "Tom, you must be careful," she pleaded, her deeply warm eyes prodding him with a bitter-sweet force that quickened all his senses. "You've got a lot of enemies here. You can't go barging in everywhere looking for trouble. Whoever attacked you may try again. And this time they may kill you."

"Or get killed themselves," Bracken added, grim lipped.

Peek, watching Dale's sudden display of feeling, was hit by an insidious, crawling wrath. His firm, precise voice reached toward her, aroused and hostile. "For a woman who is engaged you seem to be showing unwarranted attention to another man."

Dale stepped away from Bracken, her fingers trailing down his arm. "Don't be silly, Dave. I'm concerned for Tom. That's all."

"Give me a little of that concern instead."

Bracken hitched up his levis. He felt for his belt and gun, then remembered he'd lost both in the ambush fight.

"Looks like I'm in the way here," he said. An odd feeling of loss and loneliness assailed him. Dale's nearness just now, the touch of her fingers on his arm, the sharp strike of her eyes had sent a wave of heat beating through his body. But the swell of sensation receded, leaving him high and dry and empty of emotion. "My congratulations to you, Dale," he murmured. "I didn't know. All the more reason why I shouldn't have stayed here."

"Nonsense," said Dale, her eyes mutely begging him to understand. "It makes no difference." She turned around, her voice lifting a notch. "With everything else, Dave, did you have to bring that up?"

Peek smiled at her, the gesture obviously another effort at control. "Is there any reason to hide the fact that we're engaged? I figured it would help clear the air."

Bracken gave him a cryptic smile. "And also let me know where I stand." He gestured beyond Peek to the stranger still in the saddle. "Who's your friend?"

Peek gave a surprised start as though just remembering the presence of his companion. He called out to the other man, "I'm sorry, Gil. Damned rude of me. Get down and join us." The man dismounted and walked over to join them. "Dale," said Peek, "this is Gil Fredericks, an old friend of mine. Gil, Dale Parrish, owner of Pothook and my intended wife." Peek emphasized the last three words.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Parrish," Fredericks said and received a smile and a warm handclasp from Dale.

When Peek introduced the stranger to Bracken, Fredericks muttered a "glad to see you" and shook hands in perfunctory fashion. He was dressed much like Peek, in dark trousers and knee-length black coat. Both were wearing white shirts and black string ties. Fredericks was taller than Peek by two inches and the edges of a thick crop of red hair stuck out from the sweatband of his flat-crowned black hat.

"Had some business to transact in the capital," said Peek, "and I bumped into Gil in the Stockman's Hotel. We punched cows together up in Montana some years ago. Haven't seen each other since."

"Are you a rancher, Mr. Fredericks?" Dale inquired.

"I was until six months ago," he admitted. "Sold my place in Montana and I've been taking it easy for a while. Now I'd sort of like to get back into things again."

Remembering the smooth, uncallused feel of Frederick's palm against his own and drawing his own dubious conclusions therefrom, Bracken said, "Good cow country around here."

"So Dave tells me," Fredericks replied. "Know of any outfits up for sale, Bracken?"

"I couldn't say. I've been away a long time and just got back."

"I did hear something about an outfit called Hammer."

Bracken's eyes glinted hotly and somewhere in the background Peek uttered a nervous cough. "That's interesting," said Bracken. "Is it up for sale?"

"I heard it might be."

"And who told you that? Dave?" Bracken's question crackled like lightning in humid summer air.

"Now listen, Bracken—" Peek began, only to be interrupted by Frederick's hurried explanation.

"No, it wasn't Dave," he said. "Just a rumor I heard around the capital. Probably nothing to it." The big man seemed to squirm uneasily in his tight-fitting dark clothes. Tiny beads of moisture began to appear on his brow beneath the brim of his hat.

A flicker of flame burned whitely in the deep, narrowed wells of Bracken's eyes. But his answer was quiet and severely controlled. "Probably."

Dale looked slightly puzzled and she fixed Fredericks with a speculative glance. "Tom here," she explained, "is co-owner with his brother of the Hammer ranch."

"Oh, I'm sorry," blurted Fredericks, his pale-skinned countenance reddening as his confusion mounted. "I didn't mean to imply—"

Bracken cut him off with a wave of his hand. "It's all right," he said. "Those rumors get around. Dave knows how it is."

Peek met Bracken's harsh, concentrated gaze with a stolid, stony impassivity that barely cloaked his resentment. "Yeah, I know."

A swift, precarious silence dropped down upon them as, for the moment, no one had anything to say. There was tension here and unfriendliness, tugging at everyone's nerves. Finally, Bracken spoke. "I was planning to take a ride. Will you folks excuse me?"

He turned his back on them and moved to the corral, where the dun gelding stood with dropped reins. As he was about to lift a boot into the stirrup the Lazy Link brand on the animal's rear flank reminded him that he had Peek's horse.

"This is your dun I was about to ride, Dave," he said. "I reckon you'll want him back. Dale, you don't mind if I take one of your saddlers?"

"Of course not," she said.

"Keep the dun," Peek offered. "You'll be going to Hammer soon. I'll send one of my riders over for it."

"All right. Much obliged," said Bracken and proceeded to mount.

The effort of hauling himself into the saddle pulled a grunt of pain from him as his battered ribs writhed and twisted under their snug bandage. Sweat greased his forehead and a faint sense of nausea roiled his stomach. He fought the sickness down, picked up the reins and called to Dale, "See you later."

She smiled in acknowledgment, then turned to Peek and Fredericks.

Bracken headed the gelding along the slanting slope of a hill at a slow trot. Even the pace took its toll. The gelding was not smoothly gaited and every stride of the horse sent its thud of vibration through Bracken's body.

He'd had the vague notion of riding straight to Hammer. The meeting with his brother had already been delayed too long. But the steady, ragged thrust of movement that was transmitted through the body of the gelding and on through his own insides filled him with a sick distress. The ten miles that lay between Pothook and Hammer would take more out of him than he had to give. He would have to be content with a short jaunt.

At the top of the hill he paused to glance back toward the Pothook ranch yard. He saw that Dale still stood talking to Peek and Fredericks. Ahead of him the ridge twisted away through a thin stand of alder and jackpine. Now and then a cloud shadow drifted across the land. The sun was already hot and there was a smell of dry earth and dust in the air. Far off to his left a blue jay's racous call knifed through the morning stillness.

He prodded the gelding along the ridge, pursuing a faint, beaten trail. The feeling of freedom, of being released from forced confinement soon deserted him as he thought of the uncertain future. The old sense of impending trouble was still with him. The beating he'd suffered convinced him that the situation in Loreno was more serious than he had imagined. Wherever he turned he found the same suspicion of Hammer and his own presence here. Though Dale was more friendly he knew she was still not certain of him in her own mind.

He found himself wondering about Dave Peek and the business that had taken him to the capital. In addition, there was his friend Fredericks—the cattleman with the smooth hands that had never known the burn of a rope.

Buried in his own somber reflections, he forgot the aching pain in his ribs. The gelding traveled three miles, dropping down off the ridge to a wide meadow and cutting along its

tree-lined flank. Suddenly the cry of a familiar voice pulled his head around.

A rider flashed out of the trees. He saw Sherry Oliver's surprised, animated face, the warm mouth red and inviting. Then she wheeled her horse beside him. Her arms went around him. "Oh, Tom. My dear." The vibrant warmth of her lissome body was crushed close to him. He caught the fragrance of her hair, saw the bright, heart-stirring magic of her eyes. Then she pulled his head down and kissed him, clinging to him as if she never wanted to let him go.

Chapter 8

THE EMBRACE left Bracken and Sherry shaken and disturbed. When they drew apart a sudden constraint fell upon them. Sherry was embarrassed by her own temerity in rushing into Bracken's arms. And Bracken found himself stirred and excited by the passion in her kiss.

"Tom," she said huskily, her eyes searching out all the details of his face, "I'd given you up for dead. I heard about the attack on you and when you weren't seen around afterward—" Her voice trailed off and her mouth trembled into a smile.

"They tell me I take a lot of killing," he said.

"It—it must have been terrible."

"Bad enough."

Sherry remained puzzled and she said, "Where have you been?"

"At Pothook," he replied.

He watched Sherry's mobile features for the swift play of surprise on them. He was not disappointed. Her eyes widened and the look of puzzlement in them grew. "I don't understand."

He repeated the story of his rescue by Steve Martin as it had been told to him by Dale Parrish, then added the information about how he'd been kept at Pothook by Dale until he had recovered.

A faint crease ridged Sherry's forehead. "Dale must have had a change of heart. She told me in town last week that she and Buck Wykel stopped you in the hills and gave you your marching orders."

"She did," Bracken admitted. "But, as you can see, some-

body else had to try convincing me that Loreno wasn't healthy for a Bracken."

"And are you convinced?" Sherry queried sharply.

"Sure. But that's all the more reason why I intend to stay."

There was no give, no compromise in Bracken's deeply tanned, bruise-discolored features. He was a man who grew big and strong in the face of adversity—a man who refused to be broken to the will of others. Sherry had always understood this fierce purpose in Bracken and had admired it. But she knew, too, that if he stayed, there would be trouble and violence and, perhaps, death. With that knowledge came another kind of knowledge that was deeply personal. It was a nerve-shaking awareness that whatever happened to him here, or anywhere else he might be, it would make a profound difference to her.

In the many months he had been away she had deluded herself into thinking she had put him out of her mind. There had been Ed with his obvious want and hunger for her. And so she had gradually pushed thoughts of Tom out of her mind. Now that he was back and she was seeing him, the tumult inside her was something sweet and warm and almost beyond bearing.

Suddenly she moved her horse close to his again. She put her arms around him. It was an impulsive, betraying gesture and she pushed herself away, blushing to the roots of her hair. "Tom," she whispered, "why did you ever go away?"

Bracken shrugged, thinking of the restlessness that was so much a part of him and thinking, too, of the very real bounties this girl could bring to any man. "I'm just a fiddle foot, Sherry," he said. "A man's got to see what's on the other side of the hill."

"And is the other side any better than this side?"

His taciturn features softened and relaxed. "No. It's the same wherever a man goes. There are the same dreams, the same hopes, the same sins and violence wherever a man goes. The world never changes. Only the people in it change."

Sherry looked at him directly, the raw edges of her feelings fully revealed to him. "Are you sure you weren't running away from yourself?"

"Perhaps I was," he agreed. "But, as you can see, I've stopped running now."

"I'm glad," she said. A rapid breathing stirred the firm lines of her shoulders and bosom. "I'm also afraid for you. There's trouble brewing in Loreno. The whole range is different. People are tense and uneasy. There is no longer any trust."

"And what about Hammer, Sherry?"

The girl's features stiffened and became almost melancholy. "You've been hearing things?" she asked.

"Yes. Enough to learn that the Brackens don't have many friends. Al Linus and your father gave me to understand that."

Sherry put a hand on Bracken's arm. She smiled but the brightness was gone from her face and she looked a little pale. "They've had reason to be suspicious. If only Ed—" She broke off in sudden confusion.

The light in Bracken's eyes changed. He was all at once acutely attentive and a tough purpose hardened his cheeks. "I've heard several rumors about my brother. No one's been anxious to talk. Do you know anything I should know?"

Sherry twisted her hands in a despairing gesture. "One of his riders was caught with some beef belonging to Linus."

"I heard about that," Bracken said. "What else?"

"Ordinarily that might be enough, don't you think?" Sherry retorted sharply.

"Maybe. Depends which side you're on."

Sherry pulled away, immediately angry. "That's uncalled for. I don't necessarily share my father's views."

A slow remorse filled Bracken. "Forgive me, Sherry. I shouldn't have said that. I'm edgy, I guess."

Sherry acknowledged his apology, toyed for a moment with the reins in her hand, then said, "There's one other thing that's been bothering me."

"Tell me."

"It's Ed. He's different lately—not himself somehow. It's as if there were some hidden pressure upon him. He seems worried."

Bracken considered this information with the edges of his lips pulled together. "That rustling incident might be at the root of it," he said, after a moment.

"I suppose so," Sherry agreed. "But whatever it is, he's changed. And his crew is tougher. All the old Hammer hands are gone. He's got some hardcases he doesn't seem able to control."

"That's interesting." There was a cool expectancy in Bracken's voice. His head was thrown back, his features were rugged and composed and an unmistakable physical power began to flow from him. "I was planning to go back to Pot-hook. The doctor wants me to take it easy. The time for that has passed. I'm going on to Hammer."

"Are you sure you're all right?" Sherry queried, anxiety tugging at her feelings.

"Right enough for whatever needs to be done," he said.

She made a pleading gesture with her arms. In it was all the warmth, the richness, the passionate seeking of a woman offering herself to the man of her choice. A tremor shook

her body and her face was irradiated with a light stronger than the hot beat of the sun.

But Bracken had already gone away from her. His mind was miles away, traveling the dark, troubled road that lay ahead of him. He sensed the fierce, pent-up longing that pulsed inside her like a quivering sword.

"Sherry," he said, "you understand? I must go."

He pulled Peek's gelding away from the mare. Sherry reached for him, crying, "Wait, Tom." But he was past caring now. He kicked the gelding into motion across the meadow, leaving Sherry behind in a cloud of dust.

Hammer headquarters looked as seedy and run-down as Tom Bracken remembered when he came within sight of the unpainted ranch buildings some forty minutes later. There were the same bare patches in the shingled roof, the same weed-littered yard, the same dusty-leaved cottonwood standing at the southeast corner of the house. At least physically nothing had changed.

The door of the log bunkhouse was closed. There was no sign of any working punchers on the place and he had begun to believe the ranch was deserted when the front door opened and Ed stepped out.

Ed peered at Tom as he rode toward the veranda. "Tom, what the hell!" he shouted.

"How are you, Ed?"

Tom watched his brother plunge down the steps, noting that his gaunt cheeks were a muddied mirror of mixed emotions. Ed paused beside Tom's horse. "Glad you're here," he murmured. "I'd given you up. Heard about your being set upon in town and—"

"You've been searching the hills for me ever since?" Tom added caustically.

Ed swallowed nervously and an upsurge of blood sent a ruddy banner of color across his high-cheekboned face. "Well, no, but I—"

He never finished what he was going to say for, at that moment, there was the sharp, scraping sound of boots in the hard-packed dirt of the yard and Larst and Meusel came around the side of the house. Both men pulled up short close to the veranda when they saw Tom Bracken. Their harsh, craggy faces mirrored a brief, shocked surprise, then twisted into masks of aroused, hostile intensity.

Bracken's narrowed and cheerless gaze flicked instantly to the purplish welt beneath the Hammer ramrod's left eye. "A little surprise, bucko," he said. "I'm back in circulation." Savagery whipped around in his belly like a deadly snake uncoiling. He squared his shoulders and the wicked, nerve-

searing rage that was in him struck the two Hammer riders like a wave of flesh-withering heat.

Strain showed in Larst in the stiff, unbending way he held himself, but he tried to bluff it out. "Friend, you're talking in riddles."

"How would you like a lump under the other eye?" Bracken snapped.

"Go to hell," said Larst and slid his hand toward his holster.

Bracken neck-reined the gelding about. With a sharp kick in the flank he sent the animal charging right at Larst. The foreman yelped in fear, dragging his Colt clear. He fired hurriedly, the bullet slamming past Bracken's ear. Then the gelding's powerful, thrusting shoulders struck Larst and flung him off to one side. Bracken freed his feet from the stirrups and followed Larst's falling figure with a headlong dive from the saddle.

The gelding kept running around the side of the house. Bracken landed on top of Larst. The bone-shaking jolt he had received from the gelding's lunge plus the added weight of Bracken's outflung body knocked all the wind out of the big ramrod. He lay stunned and unmoving for a second or two. In that interval Meusel made his move. His own gun in his hand, he leaped at Tom, meaning to smash in his skull with a brutal downchopping blow of the gun barrel.

The scuffling noise of Meusel's approach warned Tom. He rolled to one side. The blow intended for his head slid along the side of his arm. The gun sight rigged a furrow in the flesh, drawing blood. Then Tom rose and brought a knuckled right fist up from his toes and sent it crashing flush against Meusel's jaw. The *segundo* went up on his toes, his eyes filming over, then fell backward to the ground.

Whirling around, Bracken found Larst scrambling to his knees and lunging for his gun, which had fallen from his hand. Bracken stepped close, ground his boot heel along the tips of Larst's fingers. The ramrod uttered a shrill squeal of pain and dropped the Colt. Bracken sent the weapon skidding away with a prodding boot.

"All right, get up, you son of a bitch," said Bracken. He was on fire with temper. There was venom in him and a cold-blooded, unfeeling impulse to destroy and maim. "I'm going to give you a taste of some of the medicine you gave me in town the other night."

Larst hunkered on bent knees, glaring up at Tom Bracken, then suddenly propelled himself forward. Head first he rammed into Bracken's ribs. The sheer agony of Larst's hard head colliding with his battered mid-section turned Bracken lightheaded. He reeled backward, for a second or two, visualizing two wavering shapes before him where there should be

only one. Larst saw his advantage and went to work. He ripped both hands to Bracken's body. Bracken fell against the side of the house, hung there while Larst lashed him with two more solid blows before he slid forward into a clinch. He pinned Larst's arms to his side, wrestled him away from the house. Larst tried to drive a knee into his fork. But Bracken twisted and the blow caromed off his thigh.

He heard a grunt behind him, then a hairy arm circled his neck. Bracken realized that Meusel had revived and had joined the struggle once more. Then Ed's strident yell knifed into the confusion of the fight.

"Stay out of it, Ace, or I'll put a slug in your back!"

Striving to dislodge Meusel's strangle hold, Bracken saw Ed, gun in hand, move into his line of vision. There was a grim frantic look on Ed's face. Meusel muttered a curse and tightened his hold around Tom's throat. Ed's gun roared and a bullet dug up dirt at Meusel's feet. He relinquished his grip and swung around, glowering at Ed.

"Stand back and out of the way!" Ed warned.

"Put that gun away if you know what's good for you," Meusel said, his body hunched over, his muscles straining for action.

Oddly enough, Ed did not back down. He knew Meusel to be deadly with a gun—the kind of conscienceless hard-case who would shoot a man in the back and think nothing of it. But, at the moment, Ed didn't give a damn and it surprised him. He kept his Colt at full cock and kept his attention riveted upon Meusel's slitted eyes and his widely spread hands dangling close to his gun belt.

Tom, seeing that his back was protected, turned once more to the Hammer ramrod. He was just in time to take a smashing kick in the ribs from Larst's swinging boot. Tom went down. Slivers of pain tore through his bruised flesh. He hugged his arms to his middle and weaved away from another kick that glanced across the top of his shoulder.

Weakness flowed through Bracken in an enervating tide. It was like an insidious poison destroying his blood cells, atrophying his muscles. The beating he'd absorbed at the hands of Larst and Meusel, combined with his week-long convalescence, had taken a heavy toll of his strength. He was in no condition to wage a long fight. If he were to win at all, he must be quick about it. Yet, the quivering exhaustion that gripped him was despairingly deep. It seemed to take him ages to climb back to his feet.

Larst, realizing that Bracken was seriously hurt, came in confidently with a looping left that nailed the top of Bracken's head. Bracken reeled backward, struggling for balance, then dizziness caught up with him and he went down.

Larst stood over him, gloating. "Bracken," he said with a slow and malicious pleasure, "this time I'm going to break you in little pieces. Your brother can pick you up with a shovel when I'm finished."

Flat on his back in the dust, Bracken watched Larst lunge toward him. The ramrod's heavy leg with its hard leather boot swung in a pendulum toward his head. At the last second Bracken twisted aside. Larst's boot barely scuffed his cheek. Quickly Bracken gained a purchase on Larst's ankle and pulled the ramrod off his feet.

Rolling away, Bracken got up, still feeling rocky. Larst, shaken by his fall but still full of vinegar, rose and prepared for another charge. The weakness and the half-blind nausea stayed with Bracken. He wasn't sure he could successfully stave off another attack. Then he spotted a three-foot length of dried-out kindling wood lying in the dust nearby. He bent and picked it up and faced around to meet Larst's charge. He took a blow high on the chest and immediately brought the locust club down on Larst's head.

The savage thump nearly drove Larst to his knees. Wind rushed out of his lungs in a wheezing gasp. He dropped his arms. Bracken reeled in closer, swinging the stick against Larst's ribs. He hit the ramrod three times in succession in the same place, then slashed upward and caught him under the ear with another sweeping flail of the club.

Larst collapsed. But, in falling, he flung a hand out wildly, caught the piece of kindling in his fist and jerked it out of Bracken's grasp. He slammed it across Bracken's left shin-bone. It was like a scythe cutting through ripe wheat. One moment Bracken was standing. The next moment he had fallen on top of Larst.

The club swung again in a vicious arc. The raw, slivered edge of the wood tore a shred of flesh from Bracken's ear. He fought against the consciousness of this new pain and deliberately butted Larst in the mouth. He felt Larst's lips mash against his own teeth. Again he drove his head down and, as Larst turned his head desperately, Bracken made contact with Larst's nose. The blow completely smashed the already broken and twisted wall of cartilage. Blood spewed from the wreck of bone and flesh. The stick slipped from Larst's hand. He tried to fling Bracken off. But now Bracken took a new lease on his fading energy and drove his fists into the curtain of blood that hid the ramrod's face. His knuckles opened a thin gash under the left eye, split the right cheek near the ear and still he kept his arms pumping—until Ed's squalling cry pulled him back to the reality of his surroundings.

"Tom, leave off! You'll kill him."

Half sprawled on top of Larst, with blood on his cheeks

and his hair hanging down in unruly fashion across his eyes, Tom craned his head around to look at his brother. "It's what I mean to do," he said.

"Let him go. He's had enough," Ed insisted.

Tom rolled off the ramrod, staggered to his feet. He was physically spent. His breathing was ragged and uneven. His ribs were on fire. A red haze shimmered before his eyes. The raw, salty taste of blood was in his mouth. His shirt was half ripped off his body. He came slowly toward Ed, who was still covertly guarding Meusel. He took a few steps forward, then wheeled toward Meusel.

"You're next, friend," he said in a hoarse whisper.

Meusel's thin lips drew back against his yellowed teeth. "You're ready to drop. I'll wait till another time," he said.

"Now, bucko," insisted Bracken, the rage that had impelled him to fight still blowing hotly through him.

"Tom, you damn fool, cut it out!" Ed shouted, waving his gun. "You're in no shape to fight another man."

Meusel pivoted, his watery blue eyes tinged with red. "Maybe you'd like to pitch in?" he said. He slanted a sharp glance toward his gun still lying in the dust. Then he coolly unbuckled his belt as his eyes lifted to Ed's suddenly strained, uncertain features.

Ed shook himself. A muscle in his face quivered. He put his gun back in the holster. As the weapon slid into the leather Meusel lunged at him with his swinging gun belt. It struck Ed on the side of the face, the cartridge-filled loops leaving their deep impression in his flesh. He cried out in surprise and anger. Sharp knuckles raked his jaw, spinning him against the bole of the cottonwood tree.

There was an odd singing in Ed's ears. His stomach lurched sickeningly. Meusel made a second rush. Ed weaved away from a roundhouse right, then drew his Colt and clubbed Meusel over the head with the barrel.

Meusel dropped in his tracks. Blood winked ruby red from a cut in his scalp. He went down flat on his face. His knees slid in spasmodic jerks through the dust. He managed to prop himself up on one elbow, his head canted sharply toward Ed.

"You got enough?" Ed demanded. A sudden exultation hummed within him. It was not any physical satisfaction in seeing Meusel beaten down. Rather, it was a feeling of freedom, of personal triumph at having shaken off the dread inertia that had so long ruled his daily existence. At last, he had found the will and the courage to fight back.

Blood crawled through Meusel's mussed hair and down across his forehead in a ruddy, uneven track. His eyes were veiled, the world around him dim and obscure. He shook his

head, then fell forward on his face once more and rolled half over on his side.

Tom, seeing both punchers smashed to the ground, wiped a shirt sleeve across his face and lurched over to the well. A bucket stood on the stone rim. Tom found it filled with tepid water that had obviously been standing in the sun for some time. He took the bucket and threw its contents over Larst. Going back to the well, he hooked the handle onto the rope and lowered it into the cool depths. He drew it up and poured the second pailful over Meusel.

Meusel gasped as the cold water struck him and formed a puddle around him. He rubbed his hands across his face, streaking it with mud. Slowly he pushed himself to his feet. A savage string of curses spilled from his mouth. He turned to see Larst stirring, but too badly smashed to rise under his own power.

Tom flung the bucket away from him, then moved over to pick up the weapons both punchers had lost in the scuffle. He came back and stopped a few paces away from Meusel.

"You two polecats are finished at Hammer," he said. A rash, hard judgment glittered in Tom's eyes. "Go in the bunkhouse and collect your gear. Then saddle up two horses and get out of here with your friend."

Meusel swayed like a thin reed in a driving wind. His face looked more pinched than ever. "There's pay coming to us," he muttered.

Tom turned to his brother. "How many days, Ed?"

"Ten, I make it."

"Give it to them."

There was a dreamy, faraway look in Ed's face. But he snapped quickly to attention and went into the house. When he came back Meusel had roped out two horses and had piled his war bag and Larst's nearby. Tom coldly watched the lean-hipped gunman throw blankets and saddles on two cow ponies. When he finished Meusel went over and helped Larst to his feet.

The ex-ramrod looked like a swollen, bloody gargoyle. His nose was mashed flat against his face. He had twin gashes under his eyes and beneath the screen of dust and blood his features were green and ghastly. A dark, vitriolic hatred filled his eyes as he swung his head toward Tom.

Ed moved over to help Meusel boost Larst into the saddle. Larst grabbed for the reins, then half fell against the horse's mane. With a grunted curse he pushed himself upright. Meusel mounted beside him. Ed dumped a handful of gold eagles in Meusel's extended palm.

"That's for both of you," he said. "You're paid up."

"Not yet, Ed," growled Meusel, his voice twisting high

in anger. "You and me won't be paid up until I've cut you to ribbons."

Tom moved around Ed to stand in front of both riders. Hell rolled in his narrowed eyes and in his curtly savage voice. "Get out and stay out. Both of you," he said. "In fact, if you're wise, you'll keep going till you're on the other side of the Tumurals."

Larst's bloody, bruised face swung around. His tongue licked his swollen lips. There was a wild and stormy malevolence clawing at his vitals. If ever a man wanted to kill, it was Larst. He spoke in a strained, rasping whisper, venom dripping from every word. "You haven't seen the last of me. No man can get away with what you've done to me."

"Next time you shave take a look at yourself and you'll see I am getting away with it. Be glad I didn't kill you," said Tom.

The shaggy, bloody mask of Larst's features bent forward. Yellow teeth flashed behind red, puffed lips. "That was your mistake," he said. "From now on the hills won't be safe for you or your brother. I'll be back to carve out your guts."

Tom gave him no answer. He stayed there between the two horses, looking big and strong and thoroughly implacable. And, at last, Larst nodded to Meusel and both men swung their mounts around and, with their war bags strapped to their cantles, rode out of the yard.

Chapter 9

AFTER LARST AND MEUSEL HAD GONE, Tom Bracken retrieved the well bucket and filled it once more. He took a tin dipper, plunged it into the bucket's contents and had a long drink. Then he poured a generous quantity in the trough behind the house and proceeded to wash the blood and dirt from his face. Ed handed him a bleached flour sack with which he dried himself.

Tom tossed the damp towel on a wooden bench beside the rear door, then looked at his brother. "It's time we had a serious talk."

A shadow crossed Ed's features. "Go ahead. But first we'd better get Doc Sawley out from town to look at you."

"This is more important than a few bruises," Tom snapped. He studied his brother's slightly drawn cheeks, the wary eyes. "Where did you pick up those two hardcases?"

"They were drifting through, looking for work, and I hired them."

"What about the old crew—men like Steve Martin?"

"Martin's nothing but a saddle bum."

"Maybe," said Tom. "He's still a good man around cattle." Ed kept his face partly turned away while he stared out across the valley. "Damn it, Ed, turn around and face me." Ed came around slowly, his cheeks crimson with anger. Tom's curt talk beat against him. "I've got an idea you knew those two gun hawks jumped me in town, yet you did nothing about it."

Ed cleared his throat before answering. "At first, Larst told me he'd been in a saloon brawl. Later on, he admitted that he and Meusel had given you a going over."

"What did you do then?" Tom demanded.

"What could I do?"

"You could have made some attempt to find out where I'd gone. But I reckon you weren't anxious to know." Tom's voice deepened and he added remorselessly, "It looks as if Larst and Meusel could do what they damned well pleased without having to answer to you."

"You've got no call to say that," Ed muttered. "I took care of Meusel when he jumped me, didn't I?"

"You couldn't help yourself."

Ed took a step toward Tom, his eyes hurt and angry.

"Go ahead!" Tom invited. "Let's clear the air between us. I don't like the smell of it."

He was recalling a lot of things—Ed's lack of initiative and spark, his laziness, his too great fondness for cards. True, he had stayed with Hammer while Tom had wandered off. But, for Ed, that had been the line of least resistance. He recalled, too, that Ed had never shown much pride about money or how it could be obtained.

Now Ed's petulant voice drove at him. "What do you mean by that remark?"

Tom waved his arm toward the rough scatter of buildings. "Look at the place. It's no better than a nester outfit."

"There's too damned much work to running Hammer and not enough men to do it," said Ed. "Maybe if you'd hung around here instead of wandering all over the map the place would be in better shape."

"I'll grant you that. But don't forget I've never taken a penny out of Hammer. Can you say the same?" Tom paused before framing his next query. "Have we got any cash in the bank?"

"A few hundred dollars. That's all."

"When I left we had three thousand in our account."

"Some of that went to buy blooded bulls and to pay off a bank note," Ed said.

"And the rest to settle your gambling debts?" Tom asked sharply. Ed's eyes chilled and he started to protest. "Never mind," Tom added. "We'll let that go. Now about the cattle. How many critters do we have?"

Ed considered the question for a moment before replying. "According to our latest tally, about seven hundred."

Tom glanced at his brother in sudden strict appraisal. "That's quite a drop. We had twelve hundred a year ago."

"You're forgetting the spring beef drive," Ed stated.

"You wrote me about that," Tom murmured flatly. "It amounted to four hundred head. What happened to the others?"

"Rustlers got them."

"Rustlers or Brad Mantle."

Shock painted Ed's cheeks a muddy gray tinge. After it came anger, putting his teeth on edge. "Now you're running off at the mouth," he said.

"Am I? What's your arrangement with Mantle?"

"Damn you, I've got no deal with anyone." Ed's hands clenched once again and his long, loosely coupled frame tensed as if to spring. Then, slowly, he gained control. "You've been listening to some of the malicious gossip that's going around."

Tom placed both hands on his lean hips and let the full weight of his attention fall upon his brother. Ed met his gaze with a measure of rage and irritation and doubt.

"I hope that's all it is," Tom said. "I wasn't in town more than a few minutes when I began hearing stories about Mantle."

"He's just a two-bit cowman," Ed murmured. He'd made a split-second decision in his own mind that Tom must not find out about his connection with the renegade rancher. Bad enough that he was neck-deep in trouble—trouble that had placed him under Mantle's malevolent aegis. He didn't have the courage to speak out to Tom. For one thing, he did not wish to risk Tom's thorough disillusionment. For another, he knew if he did inform Tom about his predicament, the latter would go recklessly after Mantle—and any such move would be plain suicide.

"He runs a tough crew, and a big one, I understand," Tom said.

A faint, worried light glimmered in Ed's dark blue eyes. "Who told you that?"

"Dale Parrish."

Ed shrugged. "That may be."

"If he's got a big crew he's worth watching," said Tom. "That hill country doesn't have much grass for any sizable

herd of cows. One or two hands would be enough—unless he's night-hawking."

Tom waited, watching for the effect of his words on his brother. But Ed had a grip on himself now and the face he turned to Tom was diffident and almost uninterested.

"One more question," said Tom. "Hammer's name has been linked with the rustling that's going on. That's more idle talk?"

"As far as I'm concerned it is. All of that stems back to a bit of trouble I had with one of my men and some of Al Linus's cows."

"I heard the story," Tom told him.

"Which version? Mine or Linus's?"

"Both. That was a tough break. We'll have to live it down." Tom paused to pull a bandanna from his pocket and wipe his perspiring face. Then he said, "I'll be hanging up my spurs at Hammer for a while. You mentioned that you need help and now you're going to get it."

The sound of travel drummed along the trail. A horseman rode over the hump of a low ridge and came toward the ranch house. Tom studied the newcomer carefully. "Know him, Ed?"

"Yeah. It's Steve Martin. Probably looking for a job."

"He can have one if he wants it," said Tom.

At a sign from Tom, Martin dismounted and walked over to the two brothers. "Howdy, Tom. It's nice to see you up and around."

Tom extended his hand. "I'm obliged for what you did, Steve. As far as I can see, you saved my bacon."

Martin was a dark, gray-black terrier of a man. A few years under thirty, he appeared much older because of a liberal sprinkling of gray in his black hair. Short and wiry of build, he had a quicksilver vigor about him. Now he asked, "Did you ever find out who ambushed you?"

"Larst and Meusel. You may have passed them on your way in."

Martin nodded. "I saw them about fifteen minutes ago. They turned off the main trail when they spotted me. Larst was messed up so badly he looked more dead than alive. Was that some of your work?"

"It was," Tom admitted tersely.

"What was the reason for the attack?"

"That's what I mean to find out. Meanwhile, Larst and Meusel are through at Hammer. We could use a replacement. Interested?"

"Maybe." Martin looked skeptically at Ed.

"Don't worry about my brother," Tom snapped. "He'll

go along on whatever I decide. If you want the job we'll pay you sixty a month."

"I didn't know any of the outfits around here were paying that kind of money for punching cows."

"The extra twenty is for the use of your gun."

Martin's eyebrows lifted. "Sounds like you expect trouble."

"We mean to be prepared if it comes," Tom told him.

Martin grinned, his face genial. "You've got yourself a hand."

"Good. This gives us a start. You know where to bunk. We've plenty of room so help yourself."

Martin stripped off his saddle and blanket, added his war bag to the pile and trudged across the yard to the bunkhouse.

A great pall of dust hung over the crude breaking pen at Mantle's hard-rock spread in the hills. Gus Hyatt and Nelse Crowder, a gray-faced, stiff-jawed man in his mid-forties, were perched on the top rail of the corral watching Brad Mantle rake his spurs along the flanks of a tough, wall-eyed broomtail.

The dun-colored bronc buried its head between high-stepping forelegs and went buck-jumping across the corral. Each time the horse came to earth a savage jolt was sent up through its powerful frame and on through the body of the rider. At the far end of the corral the bronc slammed into the fence and Mantle lifted his right leg out of the way just in time. The bronc swerved quickly and, before Mantle could adjust his position, ducked its head low, lifted its hindquarters in a vicious buck, then came savagely down to the ground with a bone-shaking thud. Mantle's legs lost their grip around the dun's barrel and went skidding off to the left.

He landed in the dust on his shoulders and back and rolled over once, momentarily stunned, as the bronc galloped away. Hyatt and Crowder leaped down from the fence and came trotting toward Mantle. He pushed slowly to his feet and waved them away.

Limping a little, he followed them back to the fence and climbed through the bars. He was covered with dust and there was a long, bloody scrape on his left arm. He beat the dust from his clothes, put his hat back on his head.

"I'll ride that dun if it kills me," he said.

Hyatt shook his head. "You're a damned fool risking your neck with those broomtails."

"A man's got to do something to pass away the time."

"Which reminds me," said Crowder, "we're about due for some action."

Mantle looked at him. "Don't crowd your bit, Nelse."

"Here's action of another kind," said Hyatt, pointing down the long, winding, rock-ribbed slope that led to the BM ranch. "Company coming."

"That's Ace Meusel out in front," said Crowder. His voice lifted a notch. "Hell, what's the matter with Larst? Looks like he's hurt."

Mantle said nothing. His swarthy, thick-boned features were bland and noncommittal. Only the smoke-gray eyes showed any sign of emotion or feeling. They were hard and calculating and somehow completely knowing.

The two horsemen were a long time negotiating the hill. At last they rode around a twin-humped boulder which half blocked the trail, then clattered across the narrow wooden bridge that spanned the mountain creek running almost alongside the house. They came on past the horse corral and halted finally near the gate to the breaking pen.

Meusel got down from the saddle, then went back to give Larst a hand down. Larst's knees sagged and he fell. But Meusel got an arm around him and led him to a crude plank bench close to the gate. Larst sagged down on the bench and a gusty sigh broke from his lips.

"What kind of a mountain lion did you tangle with?" Mantle asked, undisturbed by Larst's ravaged features.

Larst lifted his head slowly, an angry glitter showing in his slitted, swollen eyes. His bloody, torn lips moved to form words, but Meusel took over the immediate burden of explanation. "It was Tom Bracken," he said savagely.

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed Hyatt. "I thought you fellows—"

"He's a curly wolf and howling high," grunted Meusel.

"That's the way I had him figured," said Mantle without anger.

"God damn it, don't that mean anything to you?" Meusel growled. "We should have killed him when we had the chance."

"Where did it happen?" Mantle asked, still unmoved.

"Right on Hammer. Tom rode in and was talking to Ed when me and Joe heard their voices from the bunkhouse. The minute Tom spotted Joe's bruised face he went on the prod."

Mantle canted his head toward Larst. "So he lit into you, Joe."

Larst came out of his weary crouch. "I'll pay him back, Brad." His words had a puffy sound.

"How did he get to Hammer and where was he hiding out all week?" Mantle asked.

Larst's misshapen features slid back and forth in a gesture

of negation. Mantle switched his attention to Meusel. "What were you doing while Tom Bracken was beating up Joe? Don't tell me he took the both of you."

Meusel's thin features crawled with a savage disgust. "Ed pulled a gun on me and kept me out of the play."

"So the boy's beginning to show some fight."

"I'll take it out of him the next time we meet."

"Sure," said Mantle. "He's never had any sand in him. Tom's the one with the guts. Damned few men would take a beating like you fellows gave him and come back for more."

A steady stream of incoherent curses poured from Larst's lips. The man was crazy mad with the urge for revenge. From now on he would live for just one thing: retaliation against Tom Bracken. The cascade of oaths finally ceased and he muttered, "He's mine, Brad. I won't rest until I've cut his heart out."

Mantle's broad chin lifted. A far-seeing, speculative look shot his eyes full of a feverish brightness. "He's yours, Joe. The day you nail his hide to the wall I'll give you two hundred dollars."

A wicked, brutish travesty of a grin warped the corners of Larst's mouth. "That money's as good as earned."

"Don't count it yet."

"He's as good as dead, I tell you." Larst peered angrily and intently at the BM rancher, defying contradiction.

Mantle laughed harshly. "Have it your way, Joe."

"Throw another hundred into the pot and I'll tally Ed for you," said Meusel with harsh, impetuous eagerness.

"There's time for that, Ace," said Mantle.

Gus Hyatt now broke into the conversation, abruptly changing the subject. "Brad, some of the boys up in the cedar brakes are getting restless for a little action. Anything in the wind?"

"Yeah," replied Mantle. "Dale Parrish has a bunch of two-year-olds grazing near her north line. They might be worth taking."

"Except they're under regular guard," Hyatt objected.

"You're not afraid of a couple of forty-and-found punchers, are you?"

"Hell, no. But if there's any blood-letting, Sheriff Bill Webb may be pulled into the picture."

"Don't worry about Webb," said Mantle. "He's got his hands full with a nester-cowman feud that's building over in Mill Creek. The boys will get their action. Just tell them to sit tight until I'm ready."

Chapter 10

THE FIRST THREE DAYS after Tom's return to Hammer the brothers busied themselves making necessary repairs to the house and corral. Ed objected, at first, for he found such routine tasks unpleasant. But Tom's will prevailed. With some spare shingles stored in the barn they patched up the holes in the roof. Then they cut down a few saplings, hauled them out of the woods, peeled off the bark and hacked them into proper lengths for replacements in the corral fence.

The inside of the house was subjected to a thorough cleaning. The cook stove was taken apart while the chimney flue was scoured with a piece of burlap tied around a posthole digger.

On the fourth day Ed no longer could tolerate the confinement. Since Tom wanted to take a look around the range, he and Ed rode out together, leaving Steve Martin at the ranch.

Only a slight ache remained in Tom's ribs when he rode. The discolorations on his face were gradually becoming lighter in tone. Ed had had very little to say during the three days they'd spent working on the house and corral. Tom sensed that his brother resented being forced to do chores normally relegated to members of the crew. However, except for Martin, there were only two other men on the payroll. The latter were stationed at the Hammer line camp up in the hills near Aspen River.

Tom proposed a visit to the line camp. Ed vetoed the idea, insisting the trip was unnecessary because the punchers in charge of the cattle in that area were fully reliable. Tom overrode Ed's objections, pointing out that he wanted to see the country and get a look at the punchers in the line camp.

They passed one small herd of Hammer steers grazing the gentle slopes of a meadow about three miles from the home ranch. Tom paused on the outskirts of the herd to examine the animals closely. They appeared to be sleek and well fed with plenty of tallow clinging to their sturdy frames.

"Nice-looking bunch of beef critters," Tom said.

"Yeah," Ed agreed. "The heavy spring rains we had helped the grass situation. We've got this and three other meadows available for grazing purposes. Then there's more good bunch

grass up around the line camp. That's where the bulk of the cows are."

After a moment they jogged on, the land lifting before them in a series of long, undulating swells, amply covered by trees. As they penetrated higher into the foothills timber became more plentiful and the contours of the country turned rougher and harsher. They traversed several rocky, brush-strewn benches, dipped into a shallow, rock-walled canyon which they pursued for a mile before it emptied into a green upland park hemmed in by scrub oak and aspen.

Beyond the park the hills pitched steeper. They came to a shallow crystal-clear mountain creek, delayed long enough to let their horses drink, then followed the winding course of the stream till it emptied into the broader and deeper reaches of Aspen River.

Low-hanging willows lined both banks of the river and the swift, headlong rush of the larger stream filled the forest with a subdued roar of sound. The air was damp and cool. An occasional spray of mist pelted their faces as they swung northwest beside the river. Two miles farther on the mountain torrent gushed into a narrow, rocky chute. The noise of its passage through the gorge was like a dull, booming thunder. They left the river at this point, cutting inland once more over a long hump of ground pock-marked by scrub growth and a few stunted trees.

Once over the low ridge they found themselves in a wide upland valley. All along the southern edge of the swale they could see scattered bunches of cattle grazing.

"There's the rest of Hammer's beef," Ed said.

The sight of all those cows filled Tom with a feeling of warmth and contentment. For a cowman, born and bred, there was no more stirring spectacle. There were bigger meadows and larger herds on Pothook and Crescent. But, as they rode closer to the stolidly grazing cows, Tom decided that a man would have to look a long time before finding a fatter, lusher bunch of beef on the hoof.

"They look mighty good," he murmured, "and a temptation to owlhooters."

"Lodge and Hatten can be counted on to keep things in line," Ed assured him.

Tom nodded, glancing beyond the herd toward the figure of a distant horseman cantering in their direction. "Yet, I'll wager the last bunch of cows that were stolen came from this sector."

"That's right," said Ed. "But I had only one guard up here at the time."

"Even two men are not really enough to protect the herd.

They're too damned far from headquarters. We ought to move some of them down to the lower meadows."

"Better to save those lower meadows for winter graze after the snows come."

Tom made no answer. He was occupied with studying the approach of the horseman. At the same time he could now see the brown, weathered wedge of the Hammer line shack, its rear wall abutting against a fifty-foot shelf of gray granite. A second rider now appeared from the midst of the trees which partially obscured the cabin.

"These your two riders?" Tom asked his brother.

"Yeah. This is Fred Lodge coming toward us now. The man near the cabin is Bob Hatten."

Lodge rode up with a flourish, jerking his pony's reins sharply so that the animal reared and snorted. He was a lean, hungry-looking man. His sallow cheeks hadn't felt the scrape of a razor in several days and his eyes were black and bright as beads.

"Lodge," said Ed with a gesture toward Tom, "this is my brother Tom. He'll be working with us from now on."

"Howdy," muttered Lodge. He gave Tom a spare, unsmiling glance, then spat a stream of tobacco juice past his horse's neck. Tom decided he didn't like the man, noticing at the same time that he wore his single holster tied down.

When Hatten arrived the introductions were repeated. Hatten was a big, bluff fellow, dark-skinned and dark-bearded. But like Lodge he made no overtures of friendship.

"How are things?" Tom asked.

"Dull," said Lodge. "We're getting tired of looking at nothing but cows all day long. When is Larst going to send someone up to spell us?"

"Larst and Meusel drew their time."

"They quit?" Lodge looked astonished and a sudden, wary intentness sharpened the pointed contours of his face. "What the hell for?"

"I fired them," said Tom. "Does it mean anything special to you?"

Something about Tom's harsh, challenging manner, the long thrust of his jaw turned Lodge still and remote. "Not a thing," he murmured. "Surprised me, that's all."

"You and Hatten will have to stick here a couple more days until I can hire new hands," Ed told both riders.

Lodge shrugged. "Any special orders?"

Ed looked at Tom, who said, "Just ride close herd on these beefs. We don't want to lose any more." Tom jerked his horse around and spoke to Ed. "Come on, let's go back."

The brothers turned back, riding at a canter across the grassy flats. When they were out of earshot Tom said, "I

don't like those two jiggers. Where in hell did they come from?"

"Arizona, so they said," Ed replied.

"They're gun slicks. Both of them sport tied-down holsters."

"What of it?"

"Can you trust them?"

Ed slapped at a horse fly buzzing around his head. "Hell, I don't know. They haven't given me any trouble."

"How did you pick them up?" Tom asked.

Ed hesitated before answering. "Larst recommended them."

"Damn it, no!" exclaimed Tom. "That settles it. First chance we get to unload them we'll give them their time."

Ed said nothing. But a sick feeling assailed his stomach. Once again he had the impression of his horizons closing down around him. He couldn't bring himself to admit to Tom that both Lodge and Hatten were renegades with a price on their heads. They had run with Mantle's wild bunch in Montana and Idaho four or five years ago. They'd been run down by a Montana sheriff's posse after an attempted bank hold-up had misfired. For three years they were out of circulation splitting rocks in a prison chain gang. Then they'd broken out with several other outlaws and eventually drifted into Wyoming to rejoin forces with Mantle. And Mantle, wishing to cement his hold upon Hammer, had forced Ed to hire them in place of a couple of reliable punchers who were summarily dismissed.

As the brothers jogged along the trail toward Hammer headquarters, Ed found his thoughts turning morose and sour. His concern centered on Tom, who would be courting annihilation if he stayed in Loreno. First, he would be compelled to guard against a sneak attack from Larst and Meusel. Neither man would have any scruples about putting a rifle slug in Tom's back. Even without their personal vendetta to spur them on, it was more than likely that Mantle, once he decided Tom was a threat to his ambitions, would send the two killers after him.

Yet there was no way for Ed to persuade Tom to leave the country without exposing his own duplicity. And so a feeling of hopelessness and despair nagged at Ed. They were both trapped and time promised no release for either of them.

The thought of Tom dying, the ghastly picture of a high-powered bullet smashing into the flesh and blood and bone that was his brother, tore at Ed's vitals like the vicious, gutting slash of a bowie knife.

"Tom," he said suddenly, "you ought to—" He broke off as Tom twisted around in his saddle to look at him.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Forget it," said Ed.

"You're looking kind of peaked."

I'm sick, all right, Tom. If you only knew how sick. But don't ask me why—because I can't tell you.

Cold beads of perspiration dotted Ed's forehead. Yet, inside he was hot and parched. Abruptly, the muscle tone seemed to drain way from his limbs so that he had to clamp his legs tightly against the saddle skirt to keep from falling off.

"Forget it, I said," Ed growled. "It's nothing important."

Tom shrugged and turned his head aside. He was aware that something was nagging at Ed. But he sensed that, whatever it was, Ed was too emotionally disturbed to discuss it.

Coming to the breast of a knoll fifteen minutes later, they saw two horsemen sky-lined on the ridge top directly beyond them. Tom noticed the well-dressed rider in the lead.

"Looks like Dave Peek," he said.

"It is," replied Ed. "But I don't recognize the other man."

"Probably his friend, Gil Fredericks."

"Fredericks? Never heard of him."

Tom explained how Fredericks happened to be in Loreno.

Ed sent up a loud halloo. Both riders on the far ridge turned and looked in their direction, then spurred down the far slope and out of sight.

"I reckon they're not looking for company," Ed said.

"They certainly aren't. And the funny part of it is that they're on Hammer range."

A sudden new sensation of worry pulled at Ed's nerves. It was something he couldn't pin down or isolate. "You figure Peek is showing Fredericks the country?" he asked.

Tom's features remained grave and contemplative. "That's one explanation. Except if Fredericks is looking around for a cattle ranch this is the wrong place." He glanced sharply at his brother. "Or is it?"

Once again sweat oozed from Ed's pores and made its greasy shine on his shadowed cheeks. "I don't get you," he said.

"You haven't given anyone in Loreno the idea that Hammer might be up for sale, have you?"

"Damn it, no."

They were silent after that until they reached a well-traveled trail that dipped down out of the timber to their right. Halting at the edge of the trail, Tom cast a look in both directions. There was no smell of dust in the air, which meant that Peek and Fredericks had not been along this way. Ed reined his pony through a low thicket and onto the trail.

"Where are you going?" Tom queried.

Ed stiffened. His reply was curt. "To town. Got to see

about getting some flour and canned stuff and coffee freighted up to the line cabin."

Their eyes met briefly. Tom said, "No poker games, Ed."

Anger moved in over Ed's mind. "You don't run me," he snapped.

"True. I'm just remembering a few things."

All restraint left Ed as he growled, "Go to hell," and kicked his horse into a clumsy gallop down the trail.

Tom removed his hat, wiped his face and forehead with his bandanna, squinted up at the sun, now arching toward its midday position in the bright, blue sky, then slammed the battered Stetson back on his head. The old camaraderie between Ed and himself was gone with the fine, reckless years of their youth. Time and change and the separate habits of living had come between them, making them strangers.

He found himself wishing for a return of the old days when old Pete Bracken had been alive and bossed the ranch with his heavy but understanding hand. They'd worked hard building up the spread from a hundred and sixty acres to the thousands of acres now encompassed by Hammer. But Pete was dead—buried in the small, weed-grown cemetery a half mile beyond the outskirts of Loreno—and Ed and he himself were no longer the carefree, hell-raising youngers they'd been. And he realized that any man was a fool who wished for the old days to come back.

He kicked the sorrel he was riding into a ground-eating canter, angling away from the trail at a sharp tangent aimed at taking him across country toward the rough hills that shielded most of the small outfits. His shirt was sticking to his back and the hot sun was draining the vitality out of his body. He rode down a steep, wooded slant into a wide depression broken, at intervals, by mesquite, prickly pear and hugh rocks.

As the sorrel reached the foot of the grade the horse staggered drunkenly. At the same instant the sharp crack of a rifle shot was borne to Tom's ears. He freed his feet from the stirrups and leaped off the sorrel. He hit the ground, skidded in loose shale and a second rifle slug went screaming past him to bury itself in the trunk of a tree. A third shot drove him flat on his belly and he crawled frantically toward the sorrel now stretched out on its side. Blood pumped in a steady stream from an ugly wound in the gelding's chest. As he scrambled to safety behind the animal's great bulk, the sorrel gave a convulsive heave, then slid down into the black finality of death.

Tom drew his Colt, staring slit-eyed toward the far slope where a thin wisp of smoke curled away from a wedge of gray granite. He would have given his right arm for a rifle

and cursed his own carelessness in not placing a Winchester in the saddle boot. With a six-gun it would be impossible to wage any kind of a duel with the ambusher.

The afternoon stillness shook to another booming shot. The sorrel shuddered as the slug slammed into its hide. Tom burrowed down closer to the ground, his lips grinding together in impotent fury. He waited a few moments, searching the rocks and brush on the slope. The next shot burned savagely close to his head and he realized, with a sinking sensation of despair, that the ambusher had climbed higher. The angle of the last shot told him that the dead sorrel no longer could serve as a barrier.

And he understood something else. Whoever it was up on the slope meant business. There would be no halfway measures. No warning. No beating. This time they would finish him. The sureness of that knowledge set Tom's teeth on edge and sent a wicked, destructive passion through him. And then the ambusher's rifle roared again.

Chapter II

SHERRY OLIVER LEFT CRESCENT late in the morning riding her high-spirited mare toward the lofty Tumurals. Three days of inactivity, of aimless wandering from room to room in the big ranch house, had been more than her restless, mercurial nature could bear.

Ned Oliver, a dour and undemonstrative individual, had always left Sherry to her own devices. He had never gotten over his disappointment that his only child was a girl instead of a boy. While his wife was alive he had managed to find some little time for Sherry every day. But when Macey Oliver died his hope of male issue died with her. From that time on he gradually turned away from Sherry, putting all of his energies into the routine of ranch work.

He spent most of every day out on the range with the Crescent crew and only saw Sherry at supper. Afterward, he would take refuge in his office or ride into town for a few drinks and a game of poker.

Though it was hot, there was a bracing quality to the mountain air and Sherry found pleasure in the wild rush of the mare and the beat of the high mesa wind in her face. She had been riding for fifteen minutes when the impulse came to

her to visit Hammer. Changing direction, she quartered up a long, wooded hill to a rocky bench that ran in an easterly direction. The bench led her to a well-defined trail which, in turn, brought her to Hammer.

Finding that both Brackens were gone, she chatted a few moments with Steve Martin, then headed for the hills once more. She cut across rough, uneven ground, pushing deeper into Hammer's outlying pasture areas. Finally, she crossed over onto Dave Peek's Lazy Link range and stopped beside a rill. She climbed down, led the mare to the water's edge and let the animal drink sparingly. Then she loosened the mare's cinch and sat down on a flat rock. She pulled up a thin green weed stem and nibbled at it.

The rattle of hoofs coming along the trail brought her swiftly to her feet. She stepped to the mare, threw a shoulder against the animal's belly and drew the cinch strap tight. She was in the saddle, reins gripped firmly in her right hand, when Dave Peek and Gil Fredericks spurred into view.

Both horsemen drew up in surprise when they saw her. Peek's smooth, urbane features creased in fleeting displeasure, then planed out in a tight smile. "Sherry," he said, "what are you doing way up here in the hills?"

"Just riding," she replied, her vivid, flashing eyes jumping from Peek to Fredericks and carefully appraising the latter. "I get tired of sitting around Crescent all day."

"You can always ride out with your father's hands and help with the cattle."

Sherry's brows arched. Her answer was flip and curt. "I'll leave that kind of activity to Dale."

Peek frowned, sensing the malice in Sherry's tone. "It seems to agree with her," he said. She shrugged, uncaring, and again her eyes flicked to Fredericks. "By the way, Sherry," he added, "I'd like you to meet Gil Fredericks, a friend of mine who's staying with me for a few days. Gil, this is Sherry Oliver from Crescent."

Sherry smiled and extended her hand. Fredericks pushed his horse close and took her hand. His pale skin had taken on a ruddy hue. "Glad to meet you," he said. His deep-socketed gray eyes mirrored his admiration.

"My hand, please, Mr. Fredericks," she said.

Fredericks hadn't realized he was still holding her warm, slender fingers against his palm. He let them drop suddenly. "I—I'm sorry," he murmured apologetically. "I didn't realize."

"It's all right. Are you a cattle rancher?"

"Yes," replied Fredericks. "Sold out my place in Montana a few months ago. Dave here has been trying to interest me in settling around Loreno."

"I don't think you'll find any outfits for sale."

"Won't hurt to look around," he said. His glance slid boldly up and down her lithe, full-breasted figure. Instead of resenting his scrutiny, Sherry actually seemed to preen herself before his eyes. "In fact," he added warmly, "the more I see of the country the better I like it."

"Well," she murmured, "if you ever find time hanging heavily on your hands, ride over to Crescent to see me. This is lonesome country for women."

"Thank you. I'd like to take you up on that."

Peek shoved his horse almost between them. "Sherry," he said, "that's about enough."

"I don't know what you mean, Dave."

"Yes, you do. Keep your hands off Gil. He's got other things to do."

Sherry favored him with a mocking, sidelong glance. "Any man who doesn't have time for women is a fool."

Fredericks laughed, his cheeks reddening again. "I agree with you completely, ma'am."

Sherry thanked him silently with a smile. It was the kind of naughty, teasing gesture calculated to stir a man's interest. And in the case of Fredericks it succeeded.

The first sight of Sherry had struck immediate fire in him. The only kind of women he'd ever known were painted honky-tonk girls and these had given him but a fleeting, ephemeral pleasure. In Sherry he saw a beautiful, spirited, volatile woman. There was warmth and passion in her and ruthlessness, too. But in his own way Fredericks could be ruthless and he welcomed the trait in a woman. To find her implacability tempered with a breath-taking loveliness made Sherry all the more desirable.

With a woman's keen intuition, Sherry sensed in Fredericks an inner harshness and loneliness seeking an outlet. He was not a handsome man, nor did he possess the rugged, hard-pressing drive that made Tom Bracken stand out among men. Yet to Sherry, plagued by her need for being wanted and loved, Fredericks provided the mysterious challenge that she had always found in the new and the strange.

"Gil," said Peek with an impatience that bordered on rudeness, "let's move on."

"All right, Dave, if you insist." He turned toward Sherry, removing his hat as he did so. "I'll be seeing you again, Miss Oliver."

Sherry smiled and answered, "I'll look forward to that."

The words were jarred from her throat as a huge tumbleweed bowled down the side slope and crossed the trail directly in front of the mare. The spirited animal reared and spun half around. Sherry lost her grip on the reins and in trying to retrieve them, she dropped her riding crop.

By the time she had the skittish mare under control Gil Fredericks had dismounted and quickly picked up the quilt. Sherry took it from him with a word of thanks, then watched him move back to his horse.

When he had remounted he looked once more in her direction, his gaze intent and willful with the pressure of his feelings. Then he turned to follow Peek up the trail.

The two riders crossed the creek a hundred yards away, then pushed on into a heavy thicket of yellow pine and aspen.

Sherry was about to swing the mare around and head toward Crescent headquarters when her attention was caught by a flutter of white paper lying nearby. It had caught on a mesquite branch and the slight breeze ruffled it, threatening to dislodge it from the bush.

She got off the mare and removed the square of paper from the branch. As she unfolded it, her idle curiosity turned to sharp interest for she saw immediately that it contained a crude pencil map of the region. The location of mountains, streams and high passes was noted as well as the areas covered by all the principal ranches.

A wavering double line had been drawn across the paper. The line puzzled her until she read the note written beneath the map. The note was addressed to Fredericks and was signed by a "Josh Bellows."

Gil:

Here's the map I promised you. Wyoming Central has now gotten full clearance to build a branch line from Cheyenne through Mill Creek, Loreno and on to Silver Lode. The papers will be signed in another week. Once that's done we'll be sending agents out to buy up right-of-way. Better move fast.

JOSH BELLOWES

Sherry surmised that Fredericks had been carrying the note in his shirt pocket. Obviously, when he bent down to pick up her fallen riding crop, the paper had slipped unobtrusively to the ground. Now, as Sherry scanned the note again, she divined the purpose of that snakelike line rambling across the map. The line marked the proposed right-of-way of the spur railroad to be built by Wyoming Central. And the surprise in her eyes turned to a quizzical contemplation when she noted that the rails would cut through large segments of Hammer, Pothook, Crescent and a small corner of Dave Peek's range.

She studied the map intently, reread the cryptic note and slowly a strange excitement began to thrum in her mind. Her first impulse was to get back on the mare and return to Crescent and talk to her father. But then a sly, scheming thought

came to her and its sheer audacity was like a rich, intoxicating wine. She hurried to the mare and instead of riding south toward Crescent, she swung northward and struck off toward the hills at a fast gallop.

Chapter 12

TOM BRACKEN FLINCHED and rolled to the right as a bullet plowed up dust and shale inches away from his face. The killer on the slope had found the range. The next shot might be all he needed. Frantically Tom searched the shallow bowl in which he was trapped. The nearest cover was sixty yards away—and in the direction of the ambusher. Yet, unless he wanted to be mowed down like a sitting duck, he'd have to make a run for it.

Gathering his tense muscles for the charge into the open, he looked toward the narrow ledge where thick brush screened his attacker and saw the lazy gray curl of smoke spiraling toward the blue sky. With a wild, frenzied rush he pulled himself to his feet and leaped over the dead horse. The rifle on the ledge cracked and the leaden slug split the air behind his back.

Then he was running in a low crouch. He did not run in a straight line, but darted from side to side in a desperate attempt to jog the killer's aim. He covered twenty yards without another shot being fired. Some odd instinct impelled Tom to fling himself to the ground. The move saved his life. The ambusher, sighting carefully ahead of his victim, had timed his next shot for the exact spot through which Tom would be running. He squeezed the trigger. The rifle's spiteful roar reverberated through the afternoon stillness. And the bullet carried its heavy leaden weight belly-high over the spot where Tom had pitched to earth.

He scrambled to his feet and sprinted off again. Once more the rifle boomed. And this time the ambusher was hasty, sighting too far ahead, and the shot went wild. Then Tom gained the meager protection of a stunted thicket of weeds. He didn't stay there. Instead, he crawled on hands and knees deeper into the thicket while the rifle on the ledge viciously sought him out.

He was now on the same side of the bowl as the killer. As a result, the killer would find his range constricted, though he still had the advantage of height. Tom burrowed as close to

the earth as he could while the rifleman ventured his spleen and frustration with a hot fusillade of bullets. Branches cracked beyond Tom as a stray slug found its mark, and once a bullet ripped into a bush just in front of him.

Then, suddenly, the rifle was silent. Tom, sensing that the ambusher had emptied his magazine and would, perforce, have to reload, moved ahead through the thin screen of brush, climbing higher along the slope.

He covered a hundred fearful yards, climbing over small rocks and an occasional deadfall, without drawing a shot. It occurred to him that the ambusher might have given up. Yet, the very persistence of the attack seemed a warranty of the ambusher's implacable purpose.

Pausing momentarily to wipe sweat from his cheeks with a shirt sleeve, Tom peered up toward the ledge. He did not have a clear view of it since his own escape route was taking him in the direction of the ledge and the screen of brush was steadily thickening.

Somewhere ahead brush crackled and Tom dropped flat on his face. A branch from a thorn bush cut his cheek and the taste of dry earth was in his mouth. The ambusher was stalking him now. He had left the ledge and was prowling the chaparral, ready for the kill.

Tom lay prone and slowly slid his hand down his waist to his hip to pull the six-gun from the holster. He gripped the butt with his hot moist hand and waited for an additional betraying sound.

For a long interval not a whisper of noise broke the stillness. Yet the silence was a taut and straining pressure. All his nerves seemed to be stretched as tight as a drawn bowstring. The slow, dragging seconds were a tremendous weight, lurching through his tortured mind. The dry mordant heat was an added torment.

Then, with a flutter of wings, a bird rose from a stunted pine farther up the grade and wheeled high into the air. Tom pulled himself to one knee, peering in the direction from which the bird had appeared. There was no view, no sign of the ambusher, but obviously his presence had disturbed the bird and sent it winging away.

Thankful that he was not wearing spurs, Tom rose and renewed his climb. Now he proceeded with extreme care. Each step was a measured one. The area to be traversed had to be scrutinized keenly for twigs and dry branches which, if trod upon, would sound an immediate warning to the other man. Tree branches had to be pulled aside gently and as gently released again.

It was slow, tedious traveling. Sweat rolled down his chest and back. His shirt clung wetly to his body and the cloying,

unrelenting heat clamped a rigid band around his head. Each surging beat of his heart boomed like a hollow drum inside his skull.

For fifteen minutes he navigated the brush and ravine-studded hill without flushing his quarry. Stopping behind a clump of thick green vines that had overgrown a rotted tree stump, he surveyed the surrounding thicket. His breathing was ragged and labored. He wiped sweat out of his eyes, then raked the thickets before him with probing, suspicious attention.

He estimated that he had reached the level of the slope where the ambusher had lain when the bird made its precipitous flight into the air. He waited, rigid and alert, his gun half raised. Again the heat-locked stillness rolled in to mock him with a feeling of trouble and peril. And each passing second was crowding him toward rashness. The torrid, searing pressure was almost more than he could tolerate. Never a man with much patience, he preferred to face an enemy in the open and take his chances. He had no liking for this grim, tedious stalking.

At the moment he couldn't begin to guess where the other man was. The ambusher might have climbed to the top of the ridge or gone around him. Or he might have slipped below him. Haggardness cut Tom's rugged, sun-bronzed features into harsh angles. With an angry shake of his head he moved away from his place of concealment and started up the slope once more.

He moved more quickly now and with less caution. If he had to force the showdown by exposing himself, he was prepared to run the risk.

Reaching a steep place, he had to pull himself ahead by means of a twisted sapling whose roots lay half exposed to the elements. He scrambled over the roots, circled a fallen log and came, suddenly, into a small cleared space. The ground here was covered with the accumulation of many years of falling leaves. Rain and sun and snow had pounded the mass into a soft, resilient humus.

Tom took two strides across the clearing, then stiffened when he saw a line of footprints that bisected his avenue of approach at right angles. He swung to the right as brush crackled sharply at the edge of the trees where that telltale spoor disappeared. He was bringing his Colt up and around when he lost his footing in the slippery humus and fell to one knee. A gunshot ripped the silence wide apart. Somewhere behind him there was a solid *thock* as the bole of some tree absorbed a bullet.

Joe Larst came lunging out of a pine thicket. His features were still swollen and ugly. An insane, reddish light glittered

in his eyes. Propped on one knee, Bracken braced himself as Larst's berserk charge propelled him across the clearing in a dark mass of motion—a mass punctuated by a bright ribbon of pulsing flame, each separate burst of vivid color accompanied by a flat explosion.

The second wild shot from Larst's .45 sank into the leaves where Bracken knelt. After that he had no memory of the following shots. He was conscious only of his sweating palm, the heat of his gun, the violent recoil of the weapon as he drove a wicked, answering fire at the target before him.

Gun thunder reverberated in the tiny clearing. It beat against Bracken's eardrums so that he couldn't hear Larst's high-pitched scream. The renegade reeled toward him, his face cast in the mold of a horribly grinning gargoyle. The Colt in Bracken's hand roared twice more. After the last shot he noted the puff of gray dust that leaped from Larst's shirt front. The renegade's gun spewed another banner of muzzle flame. But it was merely the reflex action of a hand that was already dead. Seconds later Larst fell.

Tom rose warily, smoke trailing from the steel bore of his gun. For a long, suspicious moment he watched Larst. The man did not move. His gun, lost in his fall, lay inches away from his right hand. Tom stepped carefully around him, kicked the weapon to one side. Then he crouched down, put a hand under Larst, feeling for a heart beat. There was nothing.

A deep bone weariness struck Tom now that it was over. He had been keenly on edge for the better part of twenty minutes. The strain of that nerve-racking climb through the chaparral plus the savage tumult of action in which the hunt had ended now left him drained and empty and nagged by an odd feeling of regret.

There was no pleasure in killing. Once, on his brief stint as trouble shooter with a Montana railroad, he had had to shoot down a gun tough who had tried to buffalo an end-of-track camp. Then, as now, he had felt oddly chastened and morose after the high beat of violence had abated.

Though Larst had done his vicious best to slaughter him, Bracken took no pleasure in the man's death. The killing had been forced upon him. It was like destroying a mad dog or a crazed mountain lion.

Pushing the spent shells out of his Colt, Bracken added fresh loads from the shell belt around his waist. He returned the weapon to the holster at his hip before going across the clearing and on up the slope. Somewhere along the ridge top he judged he ought to find Larst's horse.

It took him five minutes to negotiate the ascent. Cutting back along the curving ridge in the direction from which Larst

had stalked him, he finally came upon the animal tethered to a young aspen just below the summit. A brief glance showed him a faded, almost indistinct BM brand on the gelding's rump. He spent another minute searching for signs of some other brand but without success. That BM brand definitely tied Larst in with Brad Mantle.

He'd pegged the BM owner as a renegade—a hardcase playing his own secret and brutal game in Loreno. With the speculative talk he had heard about the man, he had guessed that beneath the smoke of suspicion there burned a small fire of actual guilt. He was convinced of it now.

Mantle had ordered that attack on him in town. That much was obvious to Tom. It had been Mantle's way of telling him to clear out. Larst and Meusel, of course, were working for Mantle. But did that mean that Ed was working for Mantle, too? The thought brought a crawling chill to Tom. As for the gun ambush by Larst which had come so close to succeeding, it no longer mattered whether that, too, had been in response to specific instructions or a matter of personal vengeance on Larst's part.

But what did matter was Mantle's exposure as a root of evil. Remembering Mantle's cool and mocking arrogance in the Ten-Up Saloon, the cruel thrust of his will, which showed through in every word and gesture and glance, Tom was moved to a fierce, destructive fury. It was time, he decided, to force Mantle out into the open, to meet violence with violence.

Swinging into the saddle, Tom pushed Larst's horse down the steep descent, letting the animal set its own pace. Reaching the clearing, he dismounted. Larst, when he picked him up, proved heavier than he had anticipated and the gelding shied away twice before Tom could heft his limp burden into the saddle. He shifted Larst as far forward as he could, then tied him down with a length of rope.

The animal remained skittery, pawing around in the dirt all the while Tom made his rope ties. Finally, Tom climbed up behind Larst and sent the BM cow pony up the slope. Once on the ridge he gave the pony its head, figuring the animal would head straight for the BM outfit—which was right where he wanted to go.

Chapter 13

THE CANYON DAVE PEEK WAS FOLLOWING dragged its crooked course through steep granite walls. A shadowed coolness flowed along the narrow hoof-beaten trail. But three quarters of the way up the slope the afternoon sunlight shed its pale yellow banner. Moss and lichen clung to the rocky escarpment and at one spot, thirty feet above Peek's head, a trickle of water seeped out of a crevice to spill down the ragged face of the defile.

As the trail pitched upward the canyon walls grew shallower until at last Peek emerged onto a bare plateau. The sudden hot strike of sunlight after the cool journey through the gulch was startling. But not nearly so startling as the harsh command that turned Peek half around in his saddle.

"Hold up, mister. This is the end of the road."

Peek halted his horse and glowered at the gray-faced man who had ridden into view from the shelter of a big boulder that perched beside the trail. "What do you want?" he asked.

Nelse Crowder had his six-gun out and he rode a little closer before asking a question of his own. "Where are you headed?"

"The BM outfit, if it's any business of yours."

Crowder's jaw jutted out belligerently and he wagged the Colt in his hand. "Anybody riding this trail is my business, friend." A relative newcomer with Mantle he was not too well acquainted with all the ranchers in the area. "Who are you?"

Peek's bland, evenly tanned features hardened in irritation. "The name is Peek of the Lazy Link and I've got business with Mantle."

"All right," said Crowder. He gestured Peek forward. "You go on. I'll ride behind you."

A twisted, ironical smile curled Peek's upper lip. "Things must be mighty tough if Brad's taken to guarding this trail," he said.

"Just being careful."

Peek shrugged his shoulders and sent his gelding on across the plateau. Reaching its terminus, he turned up the slope that led directly to the BM spread. Crowder kept a few paces behind him. At the crest the trail dipped down again for two hundred yards before swinging around a twin-humped boulder. The worn wooden planks of the creek bridge sent up

their booming protest as the two riders crossed and cantered up to the house.

Mantle and Meusel hurried down from the barn at Peek's approach. Mantle grinned and cuffed his dusty hat back on his head. "Well, Dave, are you sure you've come to the right place?"

"Quite sure," Peek replied tersely. "Do I have to remain sitting on my horse?"

"Hell, no. Climb down."

Peek climbed down. Crowder looked at Mantle. "He's all right?"

"Yeah, Nelse," said Mantle. "You get on back to the canyon."

Crowder turned his horse and went pounding back across the bridge. Peek watched him a moment or two, then turned slowly to Mantle.

"Why the business about an armed guard up the trail?"

Mantle's answer was calm and dry voiced. "I'm particular about my friends."

"Didn't know you had any."

"Is that what you hear?"

"Just a personal observation."

Mantle's face hardened. "I'm not interested in your opinion, Dave. If you've got something in your craw, spill it. If not, get on your horse and vamoose."

"Not so fast," Peek countered. "I want to talk to you."

"Go ahead. Talk."

"Not here. And not in front of Meusel."

Mantle tucked his big, blunt thumbs into his gun belt. "If it's Lazy Link cows that you're after, you're free to look."

Peek gave him a frosty, malign glance. "Any Lazy Link beefs you've taken are well across the state line by this time."

Meusel snorted in anger and started toward Peek. Mantle thrust out a beefy hand to stop him. To Peek he said, "That's presuming I've taken any."

"Let's not argue the point," Peek replied.

Mantle's eyes were dark and challenging. "You're in no position to do any arguing, my friend."

"True enough. But I came up to talk—if you're willing to listen."

"Ace," said Mantle, "go on up to the barn."

"Sure you won't need me?" Meusel asked.

Mantle scratched his flat middle and a hard-tempered amusement danced in his eyes. "What do you think?"

Meusel answered with a sparse grin, then swung on his heel and walked back around the side of the house.

"All right, Dave," said Mantle, "come on inside. I'll give you a drink."

The BM owner carelessly turned his back on Peek and led the way into the crudely furnished front room of the ranch house. It was a bare, cheerless chamber. There were no rugs on the floor. The only articles of furniture were a homemade plank table, three hand-hewn chairs, a battered roll-top desk and a torn black leather couch.

Peek sat down in one of the chairs near the table while Mantle walked over to a small waist-high wall cabinet and took from one of the shelves a brown bottle and two water tumblers. He brought them back and set them on the table, afterward pouring each glass a quarter full. He took a seat opposite Peek and without waiting for Peek to drink, gulped down the contents of the glass. Peek took a leisurely sip and the gesture had something so fastidious and proper about it that Mantle sneered.

"What's on your mind?" he queried.

"A proposition that may interest you," said Peek.

"If it's a killing my price will come high."

The statement was made so matter-of-factly that Peek started up in his chair. His gray eyes waxed brighter. "I reckon you've got the crew for that kind of a job." He looked about the room. "Where's Larst? I didn't see him when I rode in."

"On a job."

"The kind that was done on Tom Bracken?"

"I don't know anything about that."

Peek laughed. "Hell, it figures you were in on it."

Mantle leaned his heavy arms on the table and his rugged, swarthy face looked suddenly mean. "Some day you're going to figure your way into a mess of trouble you won't be able to squirm out of." He pounded the table with a fist. The gesture was so violent that his own empty glass fell over and rolled to the floor and Peek's actually bounced, sloshing half the contents onto the planks. "Now, damn it, speak your piece."

"All right," said Peek, lifting a placating hand while a nervous tic started at the corner of his right eye. "This is something that can make both of us a fortune."

In terse, precise terms Peek proceeded to reveal the plans of Wyoming Central to build a spur line through the area. He outlined the general route that would be followed, the amount of land involved in each ranch and the vast sums of money which had been allotted by the railroad to purchase the necessary right-of-way.

"This will be the biggest thing that ever hit Loreno," he said, warming to his subject. "In a few weeks Wyoming Central will be sending men out to buy up land so they can start their grading crews. This place will be booming. The crews

will need beef to eat—which we can supply. But the big money will be in the sale of land. And Pothook, Crescent and Hammer stand to make the biggest profit out of the deal.”

“How do you know all this?” Mantle inquired suspiciously.

“Through my connections in the state capital. I’ve got one of the railroad engineers staying with me. He’s been in on the planning. The railroad owed him a vacation and he’s supposed to have gone east to Chicago for a few weeks. But he tipped me off that the state legislature is going to okay the spur line this week or next. If we can get control of one of the big ranches before the Wyoming Central men move in we stand to make a big profit by selling right-of-way to the railroad.”

“What about your place?”

“The line will cut across only a small portion of Lazy Link. The largest purchases will have to be made from Pothook, Crescent and Hammer.”

“Suppose someone else gets the same idea?”

“No chance of it,” said Peek.

“Don’t forget Tom Bracken. He’s done some railroading. Maybe he’s got connections, too, and knows what’s coming off. After all, he just pulled into town a few days ago.”

“I know. I saw him the night before I left for the capital. The word only came through to this friend of mine while I was in Cheyenne.”

Mantle poured more whiskey into his glass after picking it up from the floor. Again he drained it quickly. His broad, muscle-ridged features were speculative and alert. “Do you have any ideas about which ranch we ought to go after?”

“Pothook is the best bet,” Peek answered without hesitation. “The ranch has been in a shaky position ever since Ben Parrish died. I happen to know they’re strapped for cash. The bank is holding one of Dale’s notes and she’ll never meet it unless she sells off a big bunch of beef. Besides,” he added, grinning at Mantle, “Dale has lost some valuable cattle in a couple of rustling raids. Another good raid will finish Pothook.”

Mantle clasped his hands together and cracked his knuckles. He slanted a heavy glance at Peek. “What about Dale herself?”

“What about her?” Peek colored slightly.

“It’s rumored you’ve been paying her a heap of attention. You could get Pothook by just marrying her.”

“There’s no time to wait.”

“Money talks, I reckon,” said Mantle, then added slyly, “or does Tom Bracken have something to do with it?”

“That’s a lot of rot,” snapped Peek, half rising from his chair.

“Sit down,” said Mantle. “I’ve heard the girl was once pretty interested in Bracken. Maybe she still is.” As Peek was

about to protest again, he said, "Forget her. Women only bring trouble. But if you want her, too, there might be a way."

"How?" The question was eager.

"Smash Hammer, too."

"I'd thought of that," Peek admitted, "but that makes the job just a little harder to accomplish."

"Two ranches are better than one. Hammer is ripe for plucking. Ed Bracken is no damned good to anybody. Tom's the only one to worry about and, take my word for it, he'll soon be out of the picture."

Peek raised his head. "What makes you so sure of that?"

"I'm telling you."

Peek's bland face came sharply alive. "I understand."

"What do you understand?" Mantle asked.

Peek waved him off. "Never mind. Let's get down to cases." His voice turned thin and acute.

"Sure," said Mantle, soft and smooth. "What's your idea of a deal?"

Peek debated the question for a moment or two, then replied, "You use your crew to bust Pothook first. Run off as much of their beef as you can."

"Rustle them?"

"If there's time to swing it: If not, push them over Big Leap Gorge into the Aspen River. The beef won't be worth half what the land will bring from the railroad. After that, we hit Hammer."

"And the Pothook bank note?"

"I'll buy it in," said Peek without hesitation. "Andy Gore at the bank will be glad to have me take it off his hands. It'll be a lot easier than all the red tape involved in a foreclosure. Once I'm in control of Pothook I'll cut you in for half the profit on the railroad deal. The same goes for the Bracken outfit."

Mantle's cheeks grew hard and stony. "Hell, I've been running Ed Bracken and Hammer for the past six months. I don't need you there. I can take it over any time I want."

"Think again," said Peek, leaning across the table, his eyes bright and intent. "You can't risk any open move. All the big outfits have you pegged for a two-bit cowman who rustles their beef on the side. If you suddenly turn up owning Hammer you'll have one hell of a lot of explaining to do. You can have the ranch—I'll have enough with Pothook and my own spread—but you'd better let me front for you."

Mantle was silent when Peek had finished outlining the need for caution. At length, he jerked his shaggy head in a gesture of agreement. "I reckon you're right."

"You want anything in writing—I mean about the split on the railroad money?"

"What for? You won't run away. And if you try you won't get far." Mantle spoke without any rising inflection, yet there was steel behind the words and Peek, despite himself, had to repress a slight shudder.

There was nothing more for him to say so he rose and moved to the door. The bright afternoon sunlight blinded him for an instant. He blinked his eyes, looked back at Mantle, who now lifted himself ponderously from his chair. "When will you move against Pothook?"

"Tonight."

Mantle regarded Peek with an expression that bordered on contempt. The Lazy Link owner was not a man to take personal risks. He would sit back while other men gambled their lives. Yet, Mantle told himself, it was the only way. Peek would be in the way in a fight. Besides—and he smiled faintly at the thought—there would come a time when he wouldn't need Peek or anyone else.

"Good luck—and keep me posted," said Peek.

Mantle didn't answer. Peek waited, thinking the BM owner hadn't heard him, then turned away and hurried to his horse. Mantle remained in the house until Peek had crossed the creek bridge and passed out of sight. Then he came to the door and yelled up toward the barn. "Hyatt!"

Hyatt answered the summons, coming at an awkward run across the yard while Meusel ambled along a few yards behind him.

"What's up, Brad?" Hyatt demanded when he came to a halt near the front steps.

"We're raiding Pothook tonight."

"Damn! It's about time we had a little action."

Meusel came around Hyatt and asked sharply, "What brought Peek up here, Brad?"

"We made a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"I'll tell you later after all the details are ironed out."

Meusel's gaunt features looked troubled. "Can you trust him?"

Mantle laughed harshly. "You mean can he trust us?" He swung back toward Hyatt. "Gus, I want you to ride into the hills and bring the rest of the bunch down here. Better yet, tell them to head down this way pronto and you go on to town or to Hammer and get Ed Bracken."

"What do we want with him?"

"He's going along on the raid."

"Getting him will be tough if his brother is at the ranch."

"Larst is taking care of Tom," said Mantle impatiently. "Your job is to bring Ed here and I don't care how you do it."

Take a couple of the boys with you if you feel safer. And while you're at it, pick up a horse or two from Hammer."

Hyatt gave him a puzzled look. "We've got all the horses we need," he said.

"Not for what I have in mind. Now get going."

Chapter 14

TOM'S OVERBURDENED HORSE was beginning to show signs of strain and weariness by the time he entered the long canyon which emptied out on a high plateau barely a mile from the BM spread. It had been a grueling ride across rough, timbered country from the spot where he'd been ambushed. Except for the temporary relief in the shadowed gorge, he'd traveled in the full heat of the afternoon sun and the combination of heat and sun and fatigue had sucked him dry.

Great as his vigilance had been during most of the journey, his sense of caution gradually diminished under the continued pressure of his exertions. He was taken by surprise, therefore, when the gelding centered out of the defile and a rough voice almost at his back snapped a command.

"Get your hands in the air!"

He stiffened, every nerve screaming its own outraged sense of alarm, and started to turn.

"Up with them or I'll drill you!" the voice growled.

Slowly Tom raised his arms above his head. Then he shifted in the saddle and, staring toward his right, he saw an armed rider appear from behind a tall column of granite. As the two men faced each other, the sentry gave a sharp start.

"Damn it," he blurted. "You're Ed Bracken's brother."

"That's right," said Tom, his tone quiet, his eyes watchful. "Conditions must be real tough if Mantle needs a sentry to guard the canyon."

"Shut up," rasped Nelse Crowder, the six-gun in his hand jerking spasmodically. His dark eyes narrowed as he stared at the limp figure lying a-sprawl Tom's saddle. "Who's that you got there?"

Tom grinned. It was a savage, mirthless grin. "A friend of yours—and Mantle's. Joe Larst."

"You son of a bitch!" Crowder yelled. He spurred his horse closer. His features turned a pallid gray and his finger tightened around the trigger of his Colt. Tom's muscles twitched and crawled, expecting the angry shock of a powder-

driven .45 slug. Crowder stopped a few paces away, took one quick look at the body, then backed his horse away again. "I've a good mind to fill your guts with lead right here," he snarled.

Again the two men faced each other. Tom let his arms slide down a notch. He braced himself, ready to plunge his heels into his horse's flanks and make a stab for his gun if Crowder listened to the wild urging of his temper.

"Go ahead, my friend," he murmured while Crowder licked his lips nervously and savagery gnawed at the man's vitals.

After a moment Crowder spoke hoarsely. "You're either crazy or a damned fool riding in here with Larst."

"He tried to ambush me back about ten miles," said Tom. "He just wasn't lucky."

Crowder seemed more and more amazed and bewildered by Tom's presence. "I don't get it. Why in hell didn't you cut and run?"

"I've got a special sort of feeling for Larst," said Tom. Hard lights glittered in his eyes. His features were taciturn and grim. "I reckon Mantle has, too. Maybe he and I will have a laugh together over the whole business."

"If Mantle laughs, it'll be over your dead body," said Crowder. He leveled his gun squarely on Tom's chest. "Lower your hands and unbuckle your gun belt. Do it slowly. When you've got it open, throw it to one side."

Tom let his hands drop and opened the buckle. For just an instant he toyed with the idea of swinging the belt and gun at the BM rider. But Crowder was staying well out of range and, besides, Tom still wanted to see Mantle and one way was as good as another.

With the belt in one hand Tom let it drop to the ground. Then he said, "Shall we move along?"

Crowder's features were gray and furious. "You'll be singing a different tune in a little while. Go on. Get ahead of me. And remember the steel I've got in my fist."

Tom's lips quirked in bitter humor. "Don't worry about me. I wouldn't miss this meeting with Mantle for anything."

Crowder's only answer was a harsh, clipped oath. Tom pushed the gelding into motion. Crowder followed several lengths behind. Within five minutes they were drumming across the plank bridge and hearing the cool chuckle of the creek passing beneath them.

The noise of their passage brought Mantle and Meusel out of the barn. They took in the situation at a single glance and Meusel came running down to meet them. Mantle, as diffident and unperturbed as ever, took his time crossing the yard.

Tom ignored Meusel and lifted his voice toward Mantle. "I've brought you a body, Mantle."

Meusel, rushing up to Tom's horse, immediately recognized Larst's bloody, bullet-shattered form and yelled at Bracken. "Damn you to hell!" His ivory-handled Colt leaped to his hand and he raged at Crowder. "Why didn't you fill this jigger's guts full of lead?"

"I figured Brad would want to see him."

"Hell, I'll finish what Joe tried to do," said Meusel and lifted the gun barrel.

Tom cringed. A cold, queasy wretchedness ripped through him. He was exposed and helpless before Meusel's frenzied wrath. He saw the round black bore of Meusel's Colt center on him and it was like staring down a long, dark tunnel. Then Mantle came up and swept Meusel's arm aside.

"Time enough for that—later," he said.

Meusel swore, his cheeks furrowing into sharp, vicious angles. He lowered the gun but didn't return it to his holster.

"I nailed Bracken up at the end of the canyon," Crowder told Mantle, "riding as bold as you please."

"It didn't work, Mantle," said Tom as he climbed down, unbidden.

"Come again, friend," said Mantle, his voice carrying a ring of puzzlement.

Tom came around the head of his horse and stood solidly facing Mantle. "Next time you want a man killed you'd better take care of it yourself."

At this point Crowder interrupted. "Brad, he claims Joe tried to dry-gulch him back in the hills and got the short end of the stick."

Mantle's wide, heavily muscled shoulders lifted slightly. "Nelse, you get on back to the canyon. This seems to be our day for visitors." When Crowder hesitated, showing by the brightness of his narrow-lidded eyes that he wanted to see the finish of this meeting between Mantle and Bracken, Mantle added, "We wouldn't want to be interrupted, would we, Nelse?"

The two men exchanged malicious grins, then Crowder swung his horse around and cantered out of the yard.

"What'll we do with Joe?" Meusel asked, pointing to the corpse still hanging face down across Tom's saddle.

"He'll keep until we have a little talk with Bracken," said Mantle with complete and utter callousness. "Joe will be a long time in boot hill so don't rush him."

Mantle gestured Tom inside the house. He seemed unconcerned about Larst. The man's death was just an ill fortune of war. As far as Mantle was concerned, men were easy to come by. Larst would be neither missed nor mourned.

In the bare and cool interior of the room Tom took the chair only recently vacated by Dave Peek. Once again Mantle

sat down at the table directly opposite his visitor. Meusel remained posted near the open door.

Tom noticed the whiskey bottle on the plank table and the two glasses. Both tumblers held a small reddish-brown residue of liquor. He guessed that Mantle had had another guest and he wondered who it was.

Mantle hefted the bottle. "Care for a drink, Bracken?"

Before Tom could answer, Meusel shouted, "Damn it, Brad, what are you trying to do? This is no blasted social gathering."

Mantle's eyes lifted to Meusel in a mild sort of reprimand. "Take it easy, Ace. The least we can do is give Bracken a chance to explain how it all happened." He paused to pour whiskey in his own glass, took a swallow and set the glass down. "Go ahead, Bracken. Let's hear the story."

Tom sensed that Mantle was toying with him, deliberately baiting him, and it evoked a swift outrage in him. His taut lips made a pale scar against the sun-browned mask of his face. "How much did you offer Larst for my hide?" he demanded, both hands braced on the table edge as he leaned forward.

"Not my party," said Mantle calmly, though a faint heat showed far back in his hooded eyes.

"That was Larst's horse I rode in here. Larst got mine with his first shot. Take a look at the brand."

Mantle wrapped his big hand around the tumbler, but he kept his eyes on Bracken. "Plenty of stealing going on in these hills. Horses as well as beef. The horse don't mean a thing."

"But Larst does," snapped Tom. "And he's on your payroll." His cheeks grew redder as his temper pushed him beyond all restraint. "Let's face it, Mantle. You're a liar and a damned renegade."

By the door Meusel grunted and tensed. A kill-crazy fury had hold of him. "Give me the word, Brad," he pleaded, his words vague but their meaning altogether clear.

Mantle sat idle in his chair, his features veiled and slightly amused. There was a sudden brittle, frictional quality in the windless air of the room. Tom was aware of a dull pounding in his chest, the tom-tom beat of blood in his veins. All the fierce, hating urges in him were flowing inexorably to the surface of his mind. The tension grew during each slow second that Mantle held his silence. It was like a calculated battle of nerves and Mantle was riding Bracken, goading him on to see how long it took for him to reach the breaking point.

But Tom, wild as he was, did not break. He waited out the uneasy stillness, beating back the rush of rage with a tremendous effort of his will. And, at last, Mantle said, in flat admission, "I'm a liar, Bracken. That makes you a fool for

bringing Larst to the BM. You should have left him up in the hills for the buzzards."

"How many men on Hammer do you own—not counting my brother?"

"You've got Ed all wrong."

Tom's dark, angry glance struck Mantle with the force of a physical blow. "I can't prove you're a rustler," he said, "but if I had to pick the man who's helped to put the skids under Hammer, you'd get my vote. You're the kind of gent who lives by the hoot of the owl."

Mantle was smiling openly now. "This gets more interesting all the time," he declared.

Bracken's voice dropped a notch, taking on a note of savagery. "You might have gotten away with Larst's and Meusel's attack on me in town. But when you sent Larst to gun me down you went too far. You're through in Loreno as of this minute."

Mantle shoved his unfinished whiskey aside. For the first time his craggy, welt-hard cheeks showed the harsh cut of anger. "Damned if I can understand how you've managed to stay alive so long. All you've got is guts and in a few minutes you're going to be holding them in your hands."

Bracken stiffened. A rush of cold air beat through him. Mantle was right. He had been a fool to come here alone. He'd called Mantle's hand. And now there was only one line of action open to the man.

With a calm indifference that barely masked the tumult raging inside him, Bracken said. "It's your move, friend."

"You're a tough one," Mantle told him, "but you can see how it is. You leave me no choice. You're going out of here—flat on your back." Suddenly he sat up straight and jerked his head toward Meusel. "All right, Ace, he's all yours!"

Chapter 15 •

STEVE MARTIN was repairing and reinforcing a split log in the corral fence when Sherry Oliver rode into the Hammer ranch yard. He spit a couple of nails from his mouth, dropped the hammer in his hand and came over to stand at the head of her horse.

"Looking for Ed?" he asked.

"Yes. Is he around?"

"No. He and Tom left early this morning on an inspection

tour through the upper hills. I don't expect them back until sundown. You might try at the line camp."

A frown of annoyance ridged Sherry's forehead. She picked up the mare's reins and said, "All right, Steve. I'll try the line camp."

"If it's anything important I'd be glad to—"

Sherry cut him off peremptorily. "Never mind, Steve."

There was a sense of impatience, of restrained excitement in Sherry's manner. It puzzled Martin. But, since she advanced no reason for seeking Ed, he did not venture to intrude by questioning her. Sherry swung her horse away and traversed the yard, going north into the higher hills.

The knowledge she now carried filled her with a feeling of restlessness and unease. Restlessness, because she was anxious to put the facts to work for her. Unease, because she feared she might not have sufficient time to act upon the plan that had occurred to her quick, grasping mind.

She reached the Hammer line camp late in the afternoon and was told that the Brackens had stopped there in the morning and then ridden on. Frustrated and angry, she pushed on toward Aspen River, then suddenly changed her mind and reversed her direction. Once again she did not spare her horse as she rode along a rough cattle trail, following it west and then south through country that gradually lost its timbered roughness.

Near sundown she made her second stop at Hammer. Martin had finished his repairs on the corral fence and was seated on a bench in front of the bunkhouse cleaning and oiling his Colt. He was surprised to see Sherry again. He told her she had missed Ed by about twenty-five minutes.

"Where did he go?" she demanded curtly.

"Into town to order some supplies," Martin replied. "You can wait here if you like."

Sherry shook her head, her mouth prim with displeasure. "Once Ed gets into town he won't come back in a hurry. I know him too well for that. I'll go on."

Martin put down the gun. "You look kind of warm. The mare does, too. Why not light down for a while. I'll get you a drink from the well."

"No, thanks. I can wait."

She turned the mare around and galloped off in a cloud of dust. Twilight's long, mauve shadows overtook her as she reached the outskirts of town. Though the day's heat still lingered in the brush and the dry dust of the trail, a refreshing breath of coolness quivered in the gentle breeze that rolled down from the Tumurals.

A few lights had sprung up prematurely in several store windows abutting the main street. Somewhere down a side

alley a dog was barking furiously and this burst of sound was caught up in the shrill yells of several boys playing in the rubble behind the stores.

Because she realized the town's politics ruled out the Rawhide Saloon for Ed, she passed it by and went along to the Ten-Up, a long block beyond the McClellan Hotel. Three saddle horses were tethered to the hitching rail. Among them she instantly recognized Ed's hammer-headed roan. She stopped close to the boardwalk, the day's fading light growing dimmer all the time, and debated the advisability of entering the saloon. A faint murmur of voices reached her, a man's muffled laugh, the clatter of poker chips being tossed down on a wooden table.

A mongrel dog, barking excitedly, dashed out of the alley beside the saloon. Fifty feet behind the animal raced a boy in dirty shirt and jeans. His legs pumping swiftly, the boy endeavored to catch up to the dog. Sherry called to him.

"Billy, can I see you a moment?"

The boy looked over his shoulder at her, then slid to a halt in the middle of the street and shuffled back to her. Sherry found a quarter in her pocket and handed it to the youngster.

"Ed Bracken is inside the Ten-Up," she said. "Go inside and bring him out for me."

"Sure thing, Miss Sherry," the boy said with a grin. He vanished from sight, ducking under the hitching rail, racing across the boardwalk and then slipping into the saloon beneath the batwing doors.

He returned a minute later to shout to Sherry, "He's coming, Miss Sherry."

The saloon doors flipped wide and Ed walked out. "Sherry?" he asked warily, his body in a slight crouch.

"Yes, Ed," she said impatiently. "I want to talk to you."

He went around the hitching rail and came up to her. "Damn it, Sherry," he said, "you interrupted a poker game."

"Forget about cards. What I've got to say is more important." She stopped, glancing up and down the street. "Meet me in Dad's room at the McClellan. We'll have more privacy there."

Sherry didn't wait for Ed to utter an objection. She jiggled the mare into motion and rode away. Ed, after a moment's hesitation, followed along the walk. She was waiting for him inside the room when he came up the hotel stairs. He moved past her, anchoring himself by the foot of the bed while she closed the door.

Ed pointed to the door. "Aren't you taking a chance not leaving it open?"

"I'm not worried about what people think," she said tartly.

"Besides, everyone knows we've been seeing a lot of each other."

"That reminds me," he said, and walked over to take her in his arms.

She let him kiss her but her heart wasn't in it. Her mouth remained stiff and unresponsive under his and finally he stepped away.

"You've got something on your mind, Sherry. What is it?"

Animation returned to her face and her eyes grew bright with a strange, eager fire. "Ed," she said, "I've got news that can pull Crescent and Hammer out of trouble and really make us a fortune."

"Yeah? Don't tell me you've found gold on Crescent."

"Something just as good," she replied. "Wyoming Central is going to build a spur line across this end of the state and the rails will be laid straight across Pothook, Hammer and Crescent. Do you see what that means?"

"Are you sure?" Ed asked, his thin, angular visage suddenly awash with aroused feeling. "How did you find out?"

In response to Ed's questions, Sherry quickly outlined to him how she had come upon the note Dave Peek's associate had been carrying and what the news meant to all the ranches involved in terms of financial profit.

"You think Dave Peek has some idea of grabbing off some extra land in the area?" Ed queried.

"I couldn't say," Sherry replied. She gestured to the crude map which she had opened up and shown to him. "But you can see that only a small area of Peek's Lazy Link spread is involved. It's you and I and Dale Parrish who stand to profit most."

"But I'm in hock to the bank," Ed stated. "If there's any delay in Wyoming Central's buying up land, I might find myself without Hammer. Andy Gore's already given me one extension on my note. If he gets wind of this railroad thing he'll break his neck in trying to foreclose."

Sherry slapped her thigh with the flat of one hand. "There's a way to take care of that," she said. "After all, Crescent isn't in good shape. We've all of us had trouble the last two years, Pothook included." She moved a step nearer to Ed and her voice grew vibrant and intense. "We can get money only one way."

Ed appeared startled and unbelieving. He searched Sherry's face with widening eyes. "You don't mean rustling beef, do you?"

"I mean exactly that," she said. "And don't look so surprised. How do you think Brad Mantle makes his living up in those hard-scrabble hills?"

"What do you know about Mantle?" Ed's query was sharp and there was a note of worry in it.

"I'm just using common sense. Mantle's been living off all of us for the past year. And he's had help on the side."

Ed took a step away from Sherry. In his suddenly taut features quivered a sense of dread, of guarded withdrawal. "How do you mean?"

Sherry approached him again. She put her soft, warm palms against his chest, letting them rest there. Her twisted smile was disconcerting. "Ed, I'm beginning to see something I should have seen a long time ago. You've been friendly with Mantle for months—too friendly, it always appeared to me. There had to be a reason. I think I know that reason. You've been working with him."

"Damn it, Sherry," he protested, pushing her hands away, "you've got no right to say anything like that."

The strange, taunting smile lingered on the warm, red wound of her mouth. "Don't get so excited. A week ago it would have bothered me. Today it doesn't." She moved close until only a hand's breadth separated their bodies. "Do I make myself clear?"

The room was almost completely dark now and Ed could just see the white, faintly luminous shape of her face in front of him. But her nearness was a tangible and upsetting thing. There was a fragrance and a warmth and a deeply sensuous aura about her that made his nerves jump.

"Sherry," he said uncertainly, "I don't know what to say."

"Look," she murmured, the breath from her spoken words blowing hotly against his throat, "you don't have to say anything about what's happened in the past. Let's just think of us—of you and me right now and in the days to come."

"Damn it, Sherry, don't tempt me!" He was trembling violently and his hands came out of the darkness to take her shoulders in a fierce, hard grip. Slowly he drew her in until their bodies touched. The contact, to Ed, was maddening. He seemed to be caught in a wild, warm wind. A queer elasticity took hold of his limbs. There was a burning sensation in his throat. His arms tightened uncontrollably, grinding all the wonderfully soft planes and curves of her body against him.

"Wait!" Sherry whispered. "You've got to listen." She was secretly smiling now. He was hers to do with what she willed. The ache in his voice, the straining of his tall, slender shape against her, the brutal pressure of his fingers digging into her shoulders told her that. He relaxed his hold as she said, "Selling beef is the one way to get quick cash. Pothook is already being crowded toward the wall. We can push them the rest of the way by raiding their beef herd. The cattle can

be sold over the state line and we'll use the proceeds of the sale to pay off the note on Hammer. At the same time, Pothook will be forced on the block. When the bank forecloses, Hammer or Crescent can step in and buy it cheap."

Ed remained silent a moment. The enormity of the proposition, the daring lengths to which Sherry's avaricious thinking had driven her were a little appalling. "But if your father finds out—"

Sherry interrupted. "Something I've never told anyone is that I'm actually half owner of Crescent. Dad made the arrangement after mother's death, thinking I'd show more interest in the ranch. He soon regretted it, but he didn't have the heart to change things back again. Meanwhile, I can do what I please with my share. Besides, Dad is hungry enough to make his bid for Pothook if it goes under—as long as he doesn't suspect I had anything to do with Pothook's trouble."

"We'll be taking a big risk," Ed pointed out.

"Not if we're careful."

"Have you mentioned this to Tom?"

"Are you out of your mind?" Sherry demanded. "Tom's our biggest danger. It's up to you to see he doesn't find out a thing."

"We'll need a couple of men for the raid."

"Take those two gun slicks up at your line camp."

Ed didn't reply at once. Sherry leaned back. Lamplight had winked on in the second story of the building across the way and the room lay in the path of the lamp's reflected glow. Ed could see all of Sherry's face now. She was beautiful—beautiful enough to take his breath away. Yet, at this precise instant, she seemed a stranger. Here was a side of Sherry he had never seen. The change in her was something he would have to adjust to. She seemed exhilarated, keyed to an almost delirious high tension and some of that emotional stimulus was communicated, finally, to him.

"It could work," he murmured, "though another man would be useful."

Sherry came up with an immediate solution. "I'll get George Bond."

"That's crazy," Ed objected. "He'll surely spill his guts to your father."

"Not if I tell him to keep still. George will do what I say. He's ambitious and he's trying to save money to start up a shoestring outfit of his own. He'll jump at the chance to make some extra cash." Sherry stopped a moment, her mind ticking over all the details that would go into launching the actual raid in Pothook. "George and I will meet you at the Hammer line camp around ten. From there we can ride to Pothook's north range."

"You stay out of it, Sherry. I don't want you hurt."

"I'll take my chances," she said. "Every extra gun will count. At least, I can shoot a little and I may prove useful. Ed, this can really make us."

Ed remained a trifle dubious. He was considering the great risks they were taking and trying to assay the possible consequences of failure. "If something goes wrong we'll be in a nasty tight," he said.

"We'll see that nothing goes wrong," Sherry assured him. Her spirits were soaring and nothing Ed might say was capable of dampening her enthusiasm. "You'll admit the stakes are high."

He looked down at her, his expression still reserved and dour. "Yeah, they certainly are high."

She eased back into his arms and she spoke in a whisper, softly smiling. "And don't forget that I'm part of the stakes—if you want me."

"Don't fool with me, Sherry," he said. "God knows, I've wanted you a long time."

She lifted her face to him. In the reflected glow of the distant lamp her eyes seemed to be on fire. But when he bent to kiss her he discovered that the real fire was in her lips. They were hot and moist and endlessly seeking and, as his control broke and shattered, he was drawn down into a weird, nightmare world of pleasure and pain, ecstasy and torment.

Never in all his life had he held a woman in such sweet surrender. Sherry met his ardor with a fierce abandon that startled Ed. He knew that his arms were crushing her harshly against him, yet she made no cry of protest. Her pliant mouth took each savage kiss only to reach out to be once more assaulted and possessed.

It was the sound of heavy, tramping feet in the corridor that finally brought them to their senses. Sherry placed the tips of her fingers against Ed's lips and they stood in close embrace, silently waiting until the steps had gone past the door.

"I'd better go," she whispered, then laughed faintly. "This kind of thing can easily get out of hand."

"I'd like it to," he said boldly.

"So would I," she replied. "But this is not the time. We've both got work to do. You get up to the line camp and I'll round up George. We'll meet at the camp, then go on from there."

She turned toward the door. Ed followed at her heels.

"Let me go down first," she said, still in a whisper. "With what we have in mind, it will be better if no one sees us together. Give me five minutes and be sure no one sees you

coming out of this room. Dad's had this room in the McClellan for quite some time and most people know it."

She raised her lips and kissed him quickly, then opened the door. Peering up and down the dimly lit corridor, she flicked her hand at Ed, then hurried toward the stairway.

The clerk was the only one in the bare lobby and he didn't bother to look up from the frayed newspaper he was reading. Sherry was secretly glad of this and, once outside, went to her horse and galloped out of town.

Back at Crescent she had supper with her father. As usual, little was said between them. Ned Oliver had never been a communicative man, at least as far as Sherry was concerned, and she had long since decided that he'd never forgive her for being a girl instead of the boy he'd always wanted to carry on his name. When the meal was finished Oliver mumbled some excuse about wanting to go over his stock records and disappeared into the small room adjoining the living room which served as his office.

Sherry cleaned everything off the table, set the blackened coffee pot on the back of the stove in case her father wanted another cup later on in the evening, then busied herself with the few dishes.

As the minutes dragged on her excitement increased and before she finished she actually broke a dish. She discarded the shattered pieces, rushed through the rest of her chore, then went out to the yard.

Bond was not in the bunkhouse when she peered inside through a grimy side window. This to her was a good omen. She preferred not having to confront the Crescent crew tonight. Moving along to the barn, she met Bond in the open doorway and was guided to him by the red eye of his cigarette.

"Evening, Sherry," he said from a distance of ten feet.

"Not so loud, George," she cautioned.

The cigarette described a crimson arc through the gloom of the yard as he pitched it away. "What's up, Sherry?" He stood rigid and still until she had moved up beside him.

"I want a favor from you, George."

Bond's black-topped bullet head moved forward and he said in a sudden deep earnestness, "Just name it."

"You mean anything goes?" she asked, lightly chiding him.

Bond remained serious. "You know. Anything."

"Even if it was a little out of line?"

"If it was what you wanted."

Sherry regarded the Crescent foreman closely. There was a wild singing inside her. This man, too, would be hers to do as she willed. Everything was going according to plan. "You really mean that, don't you, George?"

"You know how I feel," Bond said, his voice rough and uneven. "Just give a me a chance, Sherry."

"I will. And you'll have it tonight." Sherry looked over her shoulder toward the bunkhouse. One of the hands had moved out into the yard and remained outlined in the banner of lamplight issuing from the open door. "Let's move back into the shadows," she said and drew Bond with her until they stood just inside and close to the front wall of the barn.

In her clipped, terse fashion she summarized the details of her scheme to raid Pothook's north range, sell off the beef for profit and thus force the Parrish spread into a position where it would be a relatively simple matter to secure financial control of it.

"I'd like you in on the deal, George, for twenty per cent of my share of what the Pothook cattle bring."

Bond scrubbed the palm of his hand across his jaw. "I don't know, Sherry. It's one hell of a risk."

"Don't tell me you're afraid of a little gunsmoke," Sherry murmured mockingly.

"That doesn't concern me. It's the whole plan. It's so damned big. If it ever backfires we'll have to get out of the country."

"Granted," she said calmly.

"And there's your father to consider."

"He won't find out about it if you keep your mouth shut, George. After all, you've got a pretty free hand around here. You come and go as you please. You can invent an excuse for going off tonight. And there's profit in it for you. You'll be that much nearer to getting your own outfit. If Ed and I consolidate Hammer and Pothook with Crescent we can certainly still use you."

Bond's shoulders stirred restlessly. He reached for her hand in the darkness. When he found it and she did not pull away, he said, "And is that all there is for me? Just profit?"

"Isn't that enough?" she asked quietly.

"It might not be."

"Then there's this," she said and suddenly moved tight against him.

For just an instant he remained immobile. Then he gathered her in his arms and kissed her with a bruising and demanding ardor. Sherry let him have his way, feigning a passion to match his own.

She pushed him away, finally, and smiled as she heard the rasp of his aroused breathing.

"What about Ed?" Bond asked, after a moment. "You've been seeing a lot of him the last few months."

"I've been using him, George," she said.

"Like you're using me now?"

"Is that what you think of me, George?" Her voice was soft and chiding. "You know Ed as well as anyone. A man with no substance to him—and no guts."

"And Tom Bracken?"

"A drifter. A fiddle foot. A man who can never stay long in one place. He's tough, all right, but a man needs more than toughness to interest a woman." Sherry's voice sharpened. "Any more questions?"

"No. I'll go along, Sherry. But it had better be good. All of it. You know what I mean." He reached for her again, but she evaded the clutch of his arms.

"It will, George," she promised. "Wait and see."

Chapter 16

BEFORE THE ECHO of Mantle's voice died in the room, Tom Bracken shoved the table hard against the BM owner. The rough, unplanned edge caught Mantle in the belly and propelled him backward out of his chair. He landed on his back, clawing for his gun as Meusel cut loose with a shot at Bracken from the doorway.

The bullet gouged splinters from the table top as it upended and went crashing to the floor. Tom threw himself after Mantle, slamming a fist into his face, then fighting him for possession of the gun. Mantle raked him with two savage, cutting blows to the side of the head that dizzied him, but he managed to wrench the Colt out of Mantle's fingers.

Meusel, meanwhile, lunged away from the doorway and fired again, narrowly missing Tom as Tom rolled clear on the far side of the table. Tom whipped one quick shot at Meusel, but the bullet sped wide of the mark. Then Meusel whirled and headed for the doorway. Tom brought his arm around, seeking Meusel's shoulder blades as a target. But Mantle scrambled up and dived head first into him, jarring his aim. Tom tasted raw blood in his mouth. Mantle's head had smashed into his chin, driving his teeth into his lip. In a momentary daze Tom felt a sledge-hammer blow on his forearm. The Colt went scaling out of his hand across the floor. He realized that Mantle had chopped down on his gun arm with the edge of his hand. Numbness ran along his arm. With it came a dull, gut-squeezing dread as he saw Meusel set himself for a third shot from the doorway.

As Meusel's gun barrel swung down into line, Tom's grop-

ing hand came in contact with the water tumbler from which Mantle had been drinking. His fingers closed around it and he hurled it at Meusel. His aim was firm and true. The glass cracked and broke against Meusel's mouth. The renegade's lips dissolved in a red wash of blood and shredded flesh. He uttered a shrill cry of pain. Reflex action set off the gun in his hand. The slug, tearing from the uptilted barrel, sliced through the ceiling. Then Meusel, one hand clamped to his shattered mouth, reeled into the yard.

Tom scrambled along the floor in a frantic effort to reach Mantle's Colt before Mantle got there. He got a hand on it as the floor rocked to Mantle's heavy passage along it. Then there was a crash of glass behind him. He turned to see Mantle's huge frame catapult through the side window.

Tom got to his feet and stumbled to the door. He rushed outside, crouched low. A bullet whined past, digging into the lintel above the door. Tom whirled, seeing Meusel lunge out of sight around the side of the house. Recklessly he took after him.

There was no shot as he rounded the corner and headed toward the barn. He didn't see Meusel at once and stopped halfway down the side wall as Mantle raced out of the barn on a horse, cruelly lashing the animal with his spurs. Mantle was heading for the far timber and the fact that he had actually been driven to flight so startled Tom that he relaxed his vigilance.

He was brought up short by a slashing shot that ripped through his shirt under the armpit. At the same instant he saw Meusel break from a corner of the corral and go at a running crouch toward the watering trough nearby. The man's face was a horrifying mask of blood. Tom brought up his own piece, gave Meusel the faintest bit of headway and brought him down with a snap shot from the hip.

Meusel stopped three feet shy of the watering trough. He lifted up on his toes, his body writhing and twisting, then fell forward on his face. His gun arm moved convulsively and Tom, running forward, set himself to shoot again. Then a great shudder ran the length of Meusel's stringy frame. Afterward, he lay rigid and still, his limbs locked motionless in death.

Tom looked off to the north and saw Mantle vanish into a thick aisle of trees several hundred yards up the far slope. He debated going after him but had the decision taken out of his hands when he heard the drum beat of hoofs racing over the plank bridge and saw Nelse Crowder galloping toward the house. The guard obviously had not lost any time in investigating the shooting, the sounds of which would have carried easily up to the canyon exit.

Turning away from the corral, Tom sprinted toward the front of the house where his gelding still remained ground tied. He was rounding the side of the house, angling toward the porch railing, when Crowder opened up on him. He felt the breath of the first two bullets going by him and skidded to a halt. Crowder drove his horse right at him, firing as he came. Tom, angered into sheer recklessness, stood on wide-planted boots in the dust of the yard, hesitated long enough to center his gun on that racing target growing larger and larger in his sights, then dropped his hammer.

The flat explosion of the shot smote Tom's ears. He saw Crowder's horse sweep up to him and go on by him in a rush of wind and dust before Crowder's body was flung from the saddle. The man struck the dust and rolled over three times like a limp rag doll. When he came to rest near the side wall of the house all life had already gone out of him.

Tom shook his head and drew a shirt sleeve wearily across his eyes. The sight of Crowder bouncing crazily in the dust of the yard was something he would not soon forget. It brought a chill to Tom's bones despite the lingering heat of late afternoon. The fact that it had been a matter of kill or be killed did nothing to remove the feeling of oppression that now gripped him.

There were two slugs left in Mantle's gun when he broke it open. He removed the spent shells, then moved warily over to Crowder, meaning to appropriate the man's gun belt. As he hunkered down to shift Crowder's body, he remembered that the guard had made him drop his own gun belt up at the canyon. Likely it was still there, unless Crowder had taken it.

He went over to Crowder's horse, which had stopped near the corral. The animal, a little spooked by the shooting, cantered away at Tom's first approach. But a second try proved more successful and Tom found the belt stuffed in one of the saddlebags. He strapped it around his waist, took three fresh loads out of their loops and popped them into the firing chamber of his gun, then snugged it in the holster.

There was no sign of any other BM riders, but Tom realized he could not risk lingering at the ranch. He had no idea of where Mantle might have gone. That there were other BM gun slicks in the area was a circumstance to be expected. In his encounter with Mantle, Meusel and Crowder he'd had luck on his side. There was no point in pushing his luck too far.

Accordingly, he went back to his horse, climbed into the saddle and rode across the creek and on up the trail to the canyon. He traversed the defile at a fast run, keeping his Colt in his hand in the event he was surprised by riders coming in the opposite direction. The precaution proved unnecessary.

He met no travelers in the canyon and, afterward, with dusk closing in fast and flooding the hills and ravines with great pools of shadow, he cut into a narrow trail across the hump of a hogback ridge that would whittle three miles from the distance he had to ride to Hammer.

The ranch buildings were a solid block of formless black color when Bracken reached the yard. The main house was dark and so was the bunkhouse. Bracken pushed forward warily, a faint thread of uneasiness writhing through him. He'd instructed Steve Martin to stick around and wondered what could have happened to pull him off the place. Martin was not the kind of rider to regard orders lightly.

The sound of the gelding's hoofs thumping the dust of the yard seemed inordinately loud in the night's stillness. Keeping one hand near his holstered gun, Bracken surveyed the thick, unyielding shadows, seeking some sign, some rumor of Martin's presence.

He dismounted near the house and paused there. A dry, sibilant current of worry tracked across his mind.

"Steve!" he called sharply.

The night gave back no answer. There was a strangeness here, an invisible thrust of wind that was miasmatic and evil. Bracken's temper broke. Rashness crowded him up the steps of the veranda and on into the house. He barked his shins against a chair, flung it angrily away, moved around the dim bulk of the table and cut through to the kitchen.

From a wall peg he pulled down a storm lantern. He raised the chimney, set a match flame to the wick, then lowered the chimney again. He cruised through the house but found nothing out of the way. Then he went out to the yard. Fifty feet from the corral he found Steve Martin.

The rider lay face down in the dust. There was a dark streak of blood running from the hairline and down the left side of his face. In the lemon-yellow light of the lantern Martin's features held the pale, waxen image of death. But when Bracken set the lantern down and groped inside Martin's shirt he felt the slow, firm stroke of his heart.

He left the lantern beside Martin, then, and hurried to the bunkhouse. From the rack behind the rear wall he took down a soiled flour sack which served as a towel. There was a half-filled pail of water on the bench. With the water and the towel in his hand, he went back to Martin and began bathing his face and scalp.

After a few moments Martin groaned and stirred into life. He tried to sit up, then fell back. Both hands leaped to his head and he swayed dizzily. Bracken steadied him saying, "You'll be all right, Steve."

Martin dropped his hands and stared stupidly at Bracken.

"What happened here?" he asked thickly. "Get that damned wet rag out of my face."

"Take it easy. You've been creased by a slug as far as I can see."

"Creased?" Martin stiffened. He raised the fingers of one hand tentatively toward the shallow furrow that ran along his scalp a short distance above his ear. When he took them away he stared at the blood that stained the tips. Suddenly he swore. "Damn it. Now I remember. I was up in the barn looking over some of that old saddle gear that's been around so long when I heard the horses in the corral set up a racket. At first, I didn't think anything of it. Then I heard a muffled voice and the clink of bit chains. In swinging around I knocked over the lantern I was using and it went out. I went outside and saw three or four riders milling around the corral. They had the gate open and—"

"Did you see who they were?" Bracken queried.

Martin shook his head. "Too dark," he said. "I let out a yell and started across the yard. One of the riders shouted, 'That's Martin,' and the next thing I knew they cut loose on me. I got my own gun going but lost it when something knocked out my lights."

"By the look of that bullet crease you didn't miss by much being knocked out for good. A half inch deeper and you'd have been boot-hill bait."

"Reckon I wasn't much help to you, Tom," Martin said.

"Forget it. I'm just glad it wasn't more serious."

Martin struggled to his feet. He swayed momentarily, then regained his equilibrium. "You think they were after the horses?"

"I don't see why. But let's have a look."

Together they walked to the corral gate, Bracken carrying the lantern to light their way. Though the gate was half open a few horses were visible at the far end. They tramped inside and made quick count.

"Two missing," said Martin.

"Unless they wandered out with the gate half open the way it is."

"Only place they'd go would be in one of the barn stalls. It was dark and I'd forgotten about hazing the critters out of the corral."

Now they drove the animals ahead of them to the barn. The stalls were empty.

"Well, they're gone," said Bracken. "I wonder why they didn't take the whole bunch."

"Yeah. That's what bothers me. Damn it, I wish I'd gotten a glimpse of one of those riders."

"I can give a good guess where they came from," said

Bracken grimly. "The BM outfit in the hills." He went on to give Martin a summary of the events that had brought him up to Mantle's place as well as the fight that followed. "Mantle's our man. I'd bet my life on it. He's pulled out into the open now. If it's a fight he wants, he'll get it."

Martin had just finished leading the last of the horses into the end stall and forked down some hay and grain. Now he turned to face Bracken. "That's a big job. You figure on going it alone?"

"How else?" Bracken's features were gray and taciturn. "We're not likely to get any help from the other spreads with most of them figuring us to be a maverick bunch. By the way, where's Ed? Still in town?"

"I reckon so. He stopped by in the afternoon on his way in. You want to go after him?"

"No. This won't wait."

"Going to be tough trailing those horses at night."

"Don't mean to trail them. I missed Mantle this afternoon. He got away while I was tangling with Meusel and the canyon guard. This time it'll be a different story."

"Okay, Tom. Count me in." Martin's eagerness showed through in the strident ring of his voice.

"Maybe you'd better take it easy after that whack on the head."

"Hell, I'm all right. But I think we'd better stop off at the line camp and take Lodge and Hatten with us. They might come in handy."

"They're hardcases and I don't trust them," said Bracken.

"This job calls for hardcases, I'd say."

Bracken considered Martin's suggestion, then said, "You're right. If we run into Mantle's full crew we'll need more than two guns. Better saddle up two horses. That gelding of Larst's has been ridden hard today. For what we're planning we'll want horses with speed and bottom."

"Leave it to me," said Martin and swung back to the stalls to pick out two rangy and powerful dun geldings.

Chapter 17

ED BRACKEN ARRIVED at the Hammer line camp at nine o'clock. He called out to Lodge and Hatten as the line shack door swung open and Lodge, gun in hand, ducked through to the yard.

"Good thing you sang out when you did," said Lodge, "or you'd be packing some lead in you. Did you see Gus Hyatt?"

"Haven't seen him in days," said Ed. "Was he up here?"

"Yeah. He brought a message that Mantle wanted to see you as soon as possible."

Hatten broke in to add, "He seemed kind of proddy because you weren't here."

"That's too damned bad for Gus." Ed swung down from his horse and tied the animal to a nearby sapling. When he came back he said, "Did Gus say what Mantle wanted?"

"No," replied Lodge, "but from the way he acted I'd say something was in the wind."

Ed laughed soundlessly.

"What's so funny?" Lodge demanded, picking at his teeth with a long, grubby fingernail.

"Something is in the wind," stated Ed. "Something I don't intend Mantle to even get a smell of. I rode up here thinking you two gents might like to get into the deal."

Interest sparkled Lodge's narrow-lidded eyes. "Sure," he said, "if the price is right."

"The job is worth one hundred dollars apiece," Ed told him.

"What's the job?"

"A raid on Pothook beef."

"Mantle will raise hell if we pull off a cattle steal and don't cut him in," Hatten objected.

"So we don't tell him," snapped Ed. "You two jiggers been getting rich helping Mantle on the side?"

"Far from it," said Lodge. "I'm all out of drinking money right now. I'm ready to do business."

Hatten, still a trifle worried, said, "Just the three of us?"

"No. There'll be another gun." Ed turned around as the sound of fast-running horses beat downwind toward them. "Here's help now."

Lodge and Hatten spread out nervously, stepping out of the lane of lamplight. There were two riders and they came on without hesitation. When they were fifty yards away Sherry's taut voice carried to them. "Ed."

"Yeah, it's all clear," Ed called back.

"Damn!" growled Lodge. "That's Sherry Oliver. What's she doing up here?"

"And George Bond is with her," said Hatten, his gun coming out as he faced around toward Ed. "What's your game, Ed?"

"Put that iron away," said Ed. "This is going to be all right."

Sherry and Bond drew to a halt in the shadows near the

line shack. Beyond a high ridge to the west of them a yellow half-moon had appeared riding on a low cloud bank.

"You and your men all set, Ed?" Sherry demanded, her voice breathless from the exertion of the gallop.

"Waiting for you," he said. "But you better stay out of this thing. I don't want you stopping a bullet."

"And we don't want her along for other reasons," said Lodge.

Ed bridled instantly. "And what are they?"

"Sherry is Crescent," replied Lodge. "That's enough of a reason. Since when has Ned Oliver gone in for night-hawking?"

"Not Ned Oliver," Sherry contradicted. "Just me and George here. This is a private party."

"You expect us to believe that?"

George Bond pushed his horse close to Lodge. "You can believe it, friend, because I say so. But I'm damned if I like working with the likes of you two jokers."

Lodge's face grew severe. He dropped a hand to his gun. "Maybe you'd like to do something about it?" he invited.

Sherry reined her mare about and pushed between Bond and Lodge. "There's no need to squabble among ourselves."

"Sherry," said Bond, "these two hardcases are probably on Mantle's payroll."

"What if they are?" she demanded. "Ed can pay them to keep their mouths shut. It's Pothook we're raiding, not the BM." Sherry drew herself up tall and straight in the saddle. "Ed, have your men mount up and let's be on our way."

"I'd still rather have you stay out of this, Sherry," Ed said.

Sherry remained adamant. "I told you how it's going to be. I might be able to make myself useful before the night is over. Come on."

She swung the mare about, nodded to Bond and started away from the line shack. Behind her Ed mounted quickly while Lodge and Hatten moved to the corral for their horses. Ed followed a few paces behind Sherry and Bond. Within ten minutes the two Hammer riders, pushing their ponies hard, came up to them.

With the moon rising steadily in the black vault of the sky they made swift progress across country, following the natural contours of the land and avoiding, as much as possible, being outlined against the ridge tops.

It was a little past ten when they rode past the Pothook line camp and saw the distant gray and white shapes of cattle in a grassy swale a half mile away. There was no light in the cabin. Further investigation showed the corral to be empty.

"They've got guards out on the herd," said Bond.

"I doubt if they'd have more than two men stationed here, though," Ed added. "We should be able to handle it." "Slow up and keep to the trees," Bond cautioned, drawing his mount off the beaten trail and cutting to the edge of the timber, but moving steadily toward the bedded-down herd.

They proceeded to within a quarter mile of the cattle before Bond called a halt and they all got down. The cattle were spread out over a wide area. Here and there a cow rose nervously, cropped a moment or two at a tuft of grass, then settled back to the ground. As they watched, a lone rider came around the far side of the herd. He was smoking and the moving red eye of his cigarette was a clear guide to his progress. It dipped and swayed as the rider's body jerked to the motion of his horse.

"Only one man," said Lodge.

"If there're two, his partner is probably on the other side of the meadow," Bond said.

"All right," stated Ed, nervous and impatient now that the zero hour was at hand, "let's get the night hawk and hit the herd."

"We get that guard, but we'd better look to see if he's got a partner out there before we go at the beef," Bond advised. He glanced sharply at Ed Bracken. "You want the guard? I'll circle around and see if there's another man."

Ed seemed to remain in a state of suspended animation. His muscles were held in a frigid paralysis. Then, as he became conscious of the mute stares of Sherry and the others, he murmured, "All right."

He shuffled to his horse, swung awkwardly aboard. Nearby Bond remounted. He rode up to Bracken. "Don't use your gun unless you have to."

Bracken nodded woodenly and moved on through the fringes of the trees. Bond cut squarely into the brush, fighting his way up a tangled slope, intent on riding around the swale to come up on the rear of the herd from the opposite direction.

Bracken stayed in the saddle until he was just about opposite the first ring of bedded-down cows. Here he dismounted, led his horse into the trees and came out to the meadow again on foot. The Pothook night rider was half-way across the swale and moving toward the trees.

The man moved slowly and the enforced wait made Ed restless. There was a watery, trembling sensation in his legs and he was suddenly short of breath. He drew his gun, crouched low to the ground and watched the Pothook man come abreast of him and drift past. Bracken ran forward lightly, still in a tight crouch.

He was twenty feet away when he trod upon a small dried branch. The wood cracked and split under his weight. Despite the occasional lowing of the cattle, the noise of the breaking twig reached the Pothook puncher. He swung around in the saddle, glancing toward the trees. A second or two transpired before he noticed Bracken's darting shape. His hand flashed to his hip and came up flinging off goutts of red flame as he triggered two rapid shots.

Ed felt a shocking blow in his chest. It seemed that some vicious, unseen force had driven an iron stake into his heart. He fired his own piece, was dimly conscious of the huge dark bulk of the Pothook guard swaying out of his saddle, then heard a far-off blast of gunfire that was immediately followed by a drum of hoofs.

The next thing he knew he was on his hands and knees. There was a warm, terrifying wetness spreading along his shirt. All the energy had drained out of him, leaving him pitted and empty. The thunder of hoofs was louder now—but it was coming from the front quarter. That could mean only one thing. More Pothook riders.

He wondered frantically how Bond had made out and what Sherry and the two Hammer punchers were doing in the rear. Then a great fear welled up in him. And out of that terrible dread he found the strength to rise and go at a staggering, drunken run back toward his horse. It wasn't far to go. But the more he ran the farther away the trees seemed to be and his horse seemed to have vanished.

He ran until his chest went on fire and the ground tilted toward his face and the heavens with the moon and the glittering wash of stars spun in a crazy arc all around him. Again there was a blow—a blow that he felt down all the length of his body. He knew, then, that he had fallen. His brain beat out the frenzied message of command to his muscles, but the spark that gave him life was fading fast and he lay there with his hands only scratching feebly at the hoof-churned surface of the earth.

Chapter 18

TOM BRACKEN and Steve Martin were traversing a raised saddle of grassy earth high above the Hammer line camp when they saw the light in the log shack blink out.

"Lodge and Hatten are hitting their bunks, I reckon," Martin observed.

"We'll roust them out quickly enough," said Bracken and sent his gelding sliding down the steep slant that led from the ridge top.

Rocks and loose shale cascaded down the slope. Then, as they struck the grassy bench below, they cut back in a direct line toward the cabin. Cedars and aspens began to crowd the faint trail they were traveling. They angled into the trees, continuing downslope. The aspens gave way to pines and the humus of dead leaves and pine needles muffled the noise of their horses. Suddenly, they heard the clatter of riders on the trail below them.

"Looks like we've got company," said Martin.

"Three or four riders, I'd say," murmured Bracken. "Let's see if we can get a look at them."

They pushed their horses harder, but the trees were thick and the path was littered with an occasional deadfall or lightning-struck branch. By the time they came to the edge of the cabin trail the riders had swept by them.

Bracken spurred his dun into the trail. His narrow eyes picked out the moving shapes of five horsemen.

"Let's follow them," Martin urged.

"I want to look at the line camp first," said Bracken.

When they reached the shack, Bracken dismounted and went inside. After a moment of groping in the dark for the lamp, he found it and lit it. The cabin was empty, the two wall bunks cluttered with the accumulated gear of the two Hammer riders. Bracken doused the lamp, took a turn around the cabin to verify the fact that the corral and lean-to barn were empty.

He rejoined Martin, saying tersely, "They're both gone."

"That means they were riding with that bunch we just spotted."

Bracken hoisted himself into the saddle, swung his gelding about and spoke over his shoulder to Martin. "Now we'll see where they're headed."

They quickly passed the place where they had debouched from the trees and continued along the trail. The smell of dust from the passage of the other party was still clear and distinct.

"What do you suppose is going on?" Martin queried as they jogged up a steep, wooded slant.

"Whatever it is, you can bet it means trouble for Hammer," Bracken replied. "I tabbed those two line riders for outlaws or ridge runners when I first met them this morning. It wouldn't surprise me if they're drawing pay from Mantle."

Although Bracken and Martin had lost ground by reason of their taking time out to search the line camp, they had no difficulty in pursuing their quarry. The riders ahead of them were making no efforts toward concealment. On two or three occasions they were sky-lined in the bright moonlight as they topped a ridge or high bench. For that reason Bracken did not attempt to close up the distance between them.

They had been traveling for twenty minutes when Bracken murmured to Martin, "Looks as if they're angling toward Pothook range."

"I was thinking the same thing," Martin answered. "Last I heard, Dale was running a big herd of beef up near Winchester Pass. The way we're headed now we'll barge right smack into the critters."

The sense of trouble, of foreshadowed violence, washed over Bracken's mind. His features turned grave and heavy. "Something's going to break tonight, Steve," he said. They were cutting over hard, rocky ground now and there was no telltale scent of dust in the air to betray the recent passage of other travelers. But Bracken no longer cared. He was sure he knew where the other party was going. A silent but vigorous slash of his arm sent them both forward at a dead run.

Bracken maintained the swift pace for ten minutes before slowing down. By this time he estimated they were only a short distance from the upper pastures used by Pothook late in the summer.

A dry wash lay before them and they dipped into it, the horses clattering across the pebble-strewn bottom, then clambering up the sharp shelf on the far side. As they went over the lip the harsh, flat beat of gunfire was carried downwind to them. There were three shots spaced almost together.

"The ball has started," Bracken stated and spurred his horse into a run once more, crashing through an aisle of trees. Martin fed steel to the flanks of his own gelding as they tore through a half-mile stretch of timber, their nerves keyed and straining to catch the sound of guns.

They were almost out of the trees when Martin said, "What were those shots? A signal?"

Bracken didn't answer. He heard the muted bawling of cattle rising slightly in volume as they emerged into the broad meadow that made a lush green swath beyond Winchester Pass. There was a great mass of bedded-down cows—some of them now beginning to stir uneasily—directly before Bracken and Martin as they hit the swale at a headlong gallop.

Then the sight of a riderless horse close to the edge of the herd made Bracken switch direction. He had been angling toward the center of the massed cattle, but he now swung back toward the trees. But before he got close to the horse that had first attracted his attention, he saw the sprawled figure of a man nearer at hand. In the harsh, white glare of moonlight there was something frighteningly familiar about that huddled form.

Bracken pulled his dun gelding to a halt, sawing viciously at the reins. He leaped to the ground while the horse was still in motion and went at a hobbling, awkward run to the fallen man. The beat of approaching hoofbeats vibrated in the night air, but Bracken was too preoccupied to hear.

"Somebody coming!" Martin yelled, swinging in toward Bracken as the latter hunkered down beside the still, motionless figure on the ground.

"Ed!" said Tom with a fierce urgency. He turned his brother over on his back, felt a frigid lump gather and solidify in his chest when he saw the ugly, bleeding wound that was sucking the life out of Ed. "Ed, what happened?"

A tremendous shudder racked the saddle-lean frame Tom held in his arms. The weighted eyelids flickered open, but Ed's dark blue eyes, though they held a brief note of recognition, were taking on the sightless glare that presaged death.

"Tom!" The word was the barest whisper. Even then Tom had to bend down close to Ed's lips to catch the intonation. "My—my fault. I—I've made—a—mess of things."

"Who was it?" demanded Tom. "Who shot you? Tell me what it's all about."

Ed's head moved slowly from side to side. "Not—not important about me," he said in a choking gasp. "I—I'm riding out."

"You'll be all right," Tom said savagely as if by the very tumult of his voice he could make it so.

A meager smile tugged at Ed's pale mouth and was instantly gone. "Not this time." He stopped, choking again, as a great bubble of blood welled from his mouth and gushed over his shirt. The glaze over his eyes became more pronounced. "Get Mantle." The words were a husky rasp

almost lost in the racking cough that ravaged his body. "Mantle . . . Peek."

There was another paroxysm of coughing, a devastating shudder, then Ed went utterly limp.

Dismounted close beside the two brothers, Martin said, "Gone?"

"Yeah." Tom Bracken's face was bleak and his eyes had gone dead. He remained crouched over Ed, one arm braced under Ed's shoulder, while a feeling of utter desolation and futility rolled over him.

"Riders coming this way!" Martin suddenly announced and leaped to his horse.

Tom slid his left arm free and rose to his feet. But everything he did now was in slow motion. All of his muscles were tardy in obeying the action impulses from his brain. He saw a massed group of horsemen bearing down upon him. He saw Martin's horse rearing and pawing at the air. He saw the glint of moonlight on Martin's raised gun. He heard the crash of a shot and a riotous clamor of voices that seemed to swell all around him. His own gun was in his hand as a second shot boomed and a .45 slug drilled into the earth at his feet and Buck Wykel's shrill yell knifed into his consciousness. "Drop your piece, Bracken, or I'll blast you down!"

Tom didn't relinquish his weapon, but his arm lowered and he lifted his head to see Wykel and Dale Parrish in the vanguard of a tight group of Pothook punchers gallop up to his position.

"Let it go, Tom!" Dale Parrish urged and her head swung toward Steve Martin, sitting tense and uncertain in the saddle. "You, too, Steve. You haven't a chance."

Martin flung his gun down, his features tight and angry. After a moment Tom opened the fingers of his hand and let his revolver fall.

"This time we've got you dead to rights, Bracken," Wykel said, swinging down from his horse and marching up to Tom.

"You got Ed, too, I see," Tom murmured.

"The damned sneak got one of our night hawks," Wykel said.

"How do you know?"

"Hell, we were on our way up here when we heard shooting break out. Dale has been uneasy about leaving all these cattle so far up in the hills. We figured on camping at the line shack tonight and starting the critters back to the lower meadows after dawn. There were only three shots. Jandro, one of our newer riders, is down yonder and he's got a

slug in him, and here's your brother full of lead. Do I need to draw you a picture?"

A long, weary sigh broke from Bracken. He looked past the Pothook foreman to Dale Parrish, who was now walking up to them. "It's not like it seems, Dale."

Dale's mobile features were white and drawn. "No? Then how is it?" she asked in a resigned, hopeless tone.

Wykel broke in angrily. "By God, Dale, you're not going to listen to any more of this jigger's stories."

"Wait," she said. "I want to hear. Go ahead, Tom."

"A lot of things have happened since we last saw each other," Bracken said. "I found out that Joe Larst and Ace Meusel were the ones who jumped me in town." He went on to explain his arrival at Hammer, his subsequent fight with Larst and his orders to both riders to clear off Hammer. Watching Dale's face for some break in her cool reserve, he saw that she was listening with a sort of angry tolerance.

"This afternoon," he added doggedly, "Larst ambushed me. He took several shots at me but got my horse instead. After circling around through the brush, I reached his position and nailed him. I rounded up his horse and found that it was carrying the BM brand. I put Larst's body on the horse and took him to Mantle's place."

A sudden spark of feeling brought color to Dale's cheeks. "Tom, what made you go there?"

"Damn it, Dale, don't believe him," said Wykel. "He's just trying to talk his way out of trouble."

"Go on, Tom," Dale said firmly, her face relenting a little.

"I was crazy mad," Bracken told her. "I knew, then, that Larst and Meusel had been working for Mantle all the while they'd been drawing wages from Hammer. No doubt Mantle ordered them to give me a beating as a warning to stay out of Lorenq. Under pressure Mantle admitted it. After that he had to play his hand all the way."

Dale's hand moved involuntarily to her throat. Beside her Buck Wykel growled under his breath, the high-tempered horse beneath him stamping nervously. "You mean he tried to kill you?" Dale asked.

"Exactly."

Wykel snorted in derision. "And you're here to tell us that you shot your way out of that situation, too?"

"Believe it or not, I did," replied Bracken. "Mantle was alone with Meusel. He told Meusel to take me, but I tipped the table over on Mantle and in the scramble that followed I got my hands on Mantle's Colt." Quickly, then, he sketched in for them the details of the gun fight at the BM spread.

"This gets better and better," Wykel said, sneering. "Maybe

you've got an explanation for being on Pothook range in the dead of night."

"If it means anything, I do," Bracken said wearily. "When I got back to Hammer tonight I found Martin knocked out by a forty-five slug and two of our horses gone. Steve didn't get a look at the raiders, but I figured it was Mantle."

"He was trying to draw you into a trap," said Dale. She had warmed to him, now, and the anger she had revealed at first had changed to concern.

"I thought of that," Bracken admitted. "But after all that's happened I couldn't think of anything but settling with Mantle. I took Steve along, planning to pick up the two riders at our line camp and then hit the BM. On the way we saw five riders going along the trail from the camp. After making sure that the cabin was empty, we followed the riders. When we got close to the meadow here we heard shooting. Just three shots. That's all. We rode out toward the herd and I found Ed dying."

"What do you figure he was doing up here?" Wykel demanded.

"I don't know."

Wykel's heavy brows drew together. "I'll tell you what he was doing," he said furiously. "He and his friends were after Pothook beef tonight. Ed's job was to eliminate Jandro, our night hawk. But your brother messed things up and got killed for his pains. The rest of his coyote bunch—all of them Hammer hardcases, I'll bet—took to their heels."

"You may be right about Ed," Bracken admitted, his face stony with grief and fatigue. "I'll grant that he had no legitimate business here. But speaking for the Hammer ranch—"

"That's enough!" shouted Wykel. "I don't want to hear any more. We should have ridden against Hammer the day Linus caught Gurdon, your brother's ranny, with those stolen cows. Your outfit was rustling then and your buckos are still at it—with Mantle giving you help when needed."

"It can't be," protested Dale. "Why should Mantle put Larst and Meusel on Tom's trail if they were working together?"

"Use your head, Dale," Wykel grunted. "All we have is Bracken's word for that business about Larst and Meusel and the fight at the BM. I don't believe a damned bit of it. We've got all the evidence we want right here to show us that the Brackens were set to run off our herd. Jandro probably butted in and Ed cut him down."

Wykel turned in the saddle and spoke to Slate Cooney. "Give me your rope, Slate. There's only one way to handle this situation."

Dale swung her horse against Cooney's. "No, Slate," she

cried. "This is madness. You can't hang Tom. I won't let you." She reached across Cooney's saddle, struggling with the puncher as he freed his lariat from the saddle horn.

Cooney flung an impassioned look at Wykel. The Pothook foreman yelled to the rider beside him, "Keep an eye on Bracken and Martin," then shoved his gelding against Dale's mare. With one deft motion he ripped her revolver out of her holster and flung it away. Then he bent forward and got a grip on her arms and hauled her away from Cooney. Dale fought him furiously, striking at him with fists and nails.

"Darby, Marks!" Wykel yelled. "Get over here, pronto!"

Two riders detached themselves from the milling group and pushed close to the Pothook ramrod. "Darby," Wykel said to one of them, "I want you and Marks to take Miss Dale back to the ranch."

"Buck, you can't do this!" Dale screamed, still fighting him, raking his face with a swinging fist as she tried to break clear from the tangle of men and horses. "This is my ranch and don't you forget it."

Wykel, taking another slashing blow on the face, gave Dale a mirthless grin and finally pinned her arms against her body. "That's right," he said. "I work here and you're the owner. But your daddy told me before he died that I was in charge and could use my judgment in running the spread. And, by God, I'm going to start running it right now. I'm foreman and I'll make the decisions."

"You're fired!" Dale cried.

"You can't fire me," Wykel said. "Your dad told me I had a job here as long as I wanted to stay and you were in the room when he said it." He turned to Darby and Marks. "Get her out of here—and if she won't go get a rope around her and hogtie her to her saddle. The rest of you get back to the cattle in the meadow. Me and Cooney can handle these two coots." He called to still another rider. "Vestal, you stay here, too."

Bracken nudged his horse toward the two punchers who were leading Dale away, but the rider assigned to watch him fired a warning shot inches past his face.

"Keep back, Bracken," the man said. "I'll put the next one closer."

Dale, meanwhile, continued to struggle. Finally, in desperation, one of the Pothook riders looped a strand of rope around her waist, pinning her arms to her side.

"Tom!" she cried out to Bracken. "Don't let them do it. Run for it!"

Wykel spat in the dust. "Dale, get out of here. I'm doing this my way. You and no one else can stop me. When we

finish with Bracken I'm going to Hammer and clean out the rest of the range scum there."

"What about Mantle?" Bracken inquired.

"If I ever get the dead wood on him I'll go after him."

Cooney handed over the coil of rope from his saddle horn. He appeared a little worried. "You sure you want to do this, Buck? Why not call in the sheriff from Mill Creek?"

"This is Pothook's trouble. We can handle it without help from the law. That big aspen over near the edge of the meadow should serve our purpose." Wykel gestured to Bracken and Martin. "Turn your horses around and head for that tree."

A prickly sensation of coldness washed over Bracken. All of his nerves were strung out tight and fine. "You're making a mistake, Buck." His voice sounded as if he'd been running up a steep hill and was out of breath.

"I'll worry about that after you're hung," said Wykel.

The cavalcade moved across the meadow at a sharp tangent, halting, finally, beside the aspen the Pothook ramrod had designated. A big branch extended from the tree's trunk about eighteen inches above their heads.

"This will do," said Wykel.

Throwing one end of the rope over the limb, he caught the tree end and deftly fashioned a noose in it. Then he turned as brush crackled behind him and Sherry Oliver's voice reached him in a fierce, ringing cry.

"Take your hands off that rope, Wykel!"

The Pothook foreman relinquished the rope and stared in impotent fury at Sherry and George Bond, who now rode out of the trees with guns in their hands.

The puncher beside Cooney started to swing his Colt around, but he stopped when he saw Bond's gun barrel centered on his chest. The flat, hard stare in the Crescent foreman's eyes warned the Pothook rider he was looking at death. Reluctantly he let his arm drop to his side.

"Stay out of this, Sherry," Wykel said. "This is Pothook business. We've got a rustler to hang."

"I'm making it my business," Sherry snapped.

"Sherry," Tom intervened, "don't get involved. You'll get hurt."

"It's you I'm worried about, Tom," she said with sudden fervor. "They'll have to kill me first before they put a rope around your neck. Go on. Ride. Both of you. George and I will hold them off."

Bond's sharp countenance turned strange and tense. Bracken looked from him to Sherry and on to Wykel. He picked up his reins. "Thanks, Sherry," he said. With a nod to Martin he spurred away.

A sudden wicked suspicion squeezed Bond's eyelids to narrow slits. Sherry's face, he noted, was a riot of aroused sensation. It was as if she had been stripped naked so that all her secret feelings were laid bare. He understood, then, how thoroughly Sherry had used him—how little she really cared about him. The bright shine of fear in her eyes, her complete absorption in Bracken's flight were a sickening revelation and it drove him berserk.

"Damn you, Sherry!"

Her own frenzied shout to Bracken drowned out Bond's words. "Tom! Don't let them catch you. Remember the cave, Tom—darling!"

The betraying word "darling" pushed Bond over the edge of reason. He whirled on Sherry and his voice beat against her in an ugly diapason of outrage. "You don't give a damn about Ed Bracken lying dead or me or anyone else. It's Tom you really hanker for. I should have known. You got me pretty cheap. Just a couple of kisses. Well, you can have Tom—with a bullet in him."

The long-barreled Colt in his fist sang a deadly tune. Sherry screamed. She spurred her horse toward Bond as he squeezed off a second shot at Bracken's fleeing figure. When Bracken lurched and slumped forward in the saddle, a look of stricken horror distended Sherry's eyes.

For a moment it appeared that Bracken might be flung to the ground. But somehow he managed to retain his seat in the saddle while his arms clung desperately to the neck of his speeding horse, which now carried him out of sight into the trees.

"George, I'll kill you for that!" Sherry raged, turning on the Crescent foreman and swinging her .38 toward his head.

Bond ducked away from the blow, but the barrel struck his shoulder. His horse spooked, rearing and side-stepping. As Bond tried to control the animal Sherry fired pointblank at him, but missed.

"Sherry!" he yelled. "Watch the others!"

But Sherry was past caring about Wykel, Cooney or any of the Pothook hands. She had seen Tom hit by Bond's bullet and, in some perverse way she did not quite understand, it made Tom more dear to her.

Once more she brought her revolver in line with Bond, hysterically intent on destroying him. Before she could fire, however, Wykel drove his horse against her mare. The edge of his hand slashed down on her wrist, compelling her to relinquish the gun.

Behind her there was an exchange of shots. By the time she had neck-reined the mare around, George Bond was top-

pling out of his saddle and Slate Cooney was staring down the length of his Colt at the fallen ramrod.

Wykel roared at Cooney. "You fool! Why did you shoot him?"

"I couldn't help myself, Buck," Cooney muttered. "I started to charge Bond when you headed for Sherry. Bond leveled his piece at me and I saw he was crazy enough to plug me so I had to let him have it."

There was the sound of hoof thunder coming across the meadow from the direction of the bedded-down Pothook cattle herd. Wykel saw four riders sweeping toward them and said to Cooney, "Take a look at Bond."

Cooney got down, crouched beside the Crescent foreman for a moment and said out of the side of his mouth, "He's gone, Buck."

"That really tears it," said Wykel.

"Hell, Sherry was fixing to cut him down herself."

The three Pothook riders came up with a jangling of bit chains and the foremost man yelled, "What's up, Buck?"

"Plenty! Tom Bracken and Steve Martin got away and Bond is dead."

"How did it happen?"

"No time for explanations. We're going after Bracken and Martin. You, Temple, get Bond on his horse and ride back to Crescent with Sherry." He looked at Sherry, but all the fight had gone out of the girl. She sat hunched over in the saddle. She was dry-eyed but broken in spirit. Wykel drove his voice at Cooney and the rest of his crew. "Let's ride!"

Chapter 19

IT WAS WELL AFTER DARK when Gus Hyatt and the two hard-cases he had taken with him—Tut Rivers and Guy Salinas—pulled into the BM ranch yard. Rivers and Salinas were each leading a Hammer-branded cow pony. But they dropped the trail ropes and joined Hyatt in a rush toward the barn where a sudden clutter of activity was going on.

The BM buckboard was drawn up in front of the barn. A brace of storm lanterns stood in the dust and Greg Forrest was pulling several long-handled shovels out of the wagon bed.

"What are you doing with the shovels, Brad?" Hyatt asked.

Mantle's hatchet face swiveled around on his heavy

shoulders. "We just finished burying Meusel and Crowder," he said with a heavy rush of feeling.

"The hell you say!" Hyatt's amazement drove his voice to a high, unnatural pitch. "What happened?"

"Every damn thing," replied Mantle. "Tom Bracken rode in here with Joe Larst dead across his saddle. Joe messed up his ambush attempt and Bracken tallied him. Bracken came in to read the riot act about rustling and BM's share in it. I told Meusel to take him, but Ace missed his shot and Bracken dumped a table over me, stunning me long enough to get my gun and finish off Meusel. I went out the side window to the barn to get an extra gun, but Bracken got away. Later, I found he'd shot Crowder up at the pass."

Hyatt never questioned the veracity of Mantle's story. It sounded plausible enough. But now the nagging edge of worry drew a gray curtain across Hyatt's beard-stubbed cheeks. "Bracken can make plenty of trouble for us, Brad. If he starts talking around—"

Mantle cut him off. "He's got nothing to talk about. All he knows positively is that Larst and Meusel beat him up in an alley in town."

"Yeah, but they were working for Hammer and when he fired them they ran right here."

"That doesn't prove anything."

"There's the rustling angle."

"He can't prove anything there," said Mantle. "He may suspect that Ed's been working with us, but if he talks to Wykel or Oliver or Peek or any of the other cowmen in Loreno he'll be putting Hammer more on the spot than it already is."

Hyatt shook his head. His thin lips crowded tightly together. "He's got to be taken, though, Brad."

"He will be," said Mantle. He swung around to include the entire BM crew in his talk. "I want Bracken dead. I don't care how it's done, but he's got to be killed. I'll give two hundred dollars to the *hombre* who gut-shoots him." He paused as he noticed the two ponies which Rivers and Salinas had brought with them. "I see you got those Hammer horses I wanted. But where's Ed?"

"Couldn't find him," said Hyatt. "We scouted the hills and also hit town. He'd been in town but we missed him."

"All right. We'll let him go for now."

"How about going after Tom Bracken tonight?" Hyatt asked eagerly.

"It'll have to wait until tomorrow," said Mantle. "We've got a cattle grab on for tonight and I'll want everyone along. If you haven't eaten, rustle up some grub for yourselves, then we'll head for Pothook."

Within twenty minutes the BM crew was in the saddle. They stayed off the main traveled trails wherever the nature of the terrain permitted and they were still several miles from Pothook's northern meadows when the brisk night wind carried the faint whip crack of two gunshots to their ears. Mantle, riding at the head of his party, waved the group on at a gallop. Guns were loosened in holsters and a strict sense of vigilance sharpened all their perceptions.

By the time they reached the last rim of trees fringing the northern boundary of the meadow, Ed Bracken and the Pothook night hawk were down and Tom and Martin were gathered around Ed's sprawled shape.

From their vantage point Mantle and his crew had a bull's-eye view of the swift panorama of events that followed on the heels of that twin shooting. As Dale Parrish, Buck Wykel and the Pothook rannies surrounded Tom Bracken and Steve Martin and voices were raised in angry shouts, the entire picture was made immediately clear to Mantle's men.

"Well, Ed is taken care of, at least," observed Hyatt in an aside to Mantle, who was peering through the brush. "I wonder what he was doing up here?"

"The sign is plain," snapped Mantle. "He was planning a rustling job of his own."

"The damned fool," said Hyatt.

"He's better off dead." Mantle's voice was low but sharply incisive. He watched, now, the bypass as Wykel made his bid to go through with the hanging of Tom and Martin. Suddenly he chuckled. "You boys are out two hundred dollars if Wykel gets a rope around Bracken's throat. Maybe I ought to pay Buck for saving us the trouble."

Hyatt's only answer was a vicious oath.

The sudden appearance of Sherry Oliver and George Bond brought Mantle to stiff attention. "What the hell!" he said. "Looks as if this is meeting night for the Loreno cowmen. Now what are Sherry and her ramrod doing up in the hills at this hour?"

No one answered. To a man the BM crew was bewildered. And the rush and confusion of action that swiftly ensued left them even more perplexed. As Tom and Martin dashed away on their horses, Mantle had to restrain Hyatt from grabbing his Winchester from the saddle scabbard.

"Put it back, Gus!" Mantle ordered.

"I'll get that son right now," Hyatt growled.

"Sure and pull Pothook down on us. We'll sit tight."

With as much patience as they could summon, Mantle's hardcases waited in the brush while Wykel's crew hit the trail after the two fugitives. When all sound of their pursuit had dwindled away in the distance, Mantle came out of cover,

surveyed the meadow below him with its nervously stirring herd of cattle, then went back to his horse.

"We're playing in luck tonight, Gus," he said.

"Like hell. Tom Bracken's still loose."

"We'll take care of him later. It's the cattle I'm thinking of. With only a couple of men guarding the beef, they're just asking to be stolen."

"Shall we take the Hammer broomtails along?"

"No. They're no good to us now. We'll just have to be sure we tally those Pothook riders so they don't do any talking afterward."

The shock of the heavy bullet hitting Bracken was like the thrust of hot steel in the soft flesh below the ribs of his left side. Numbness surged over him in a paralyzing tide. The reins slid from his fingers. The ground seemed to rise up to meet him. Then, miraculously, the paralysis left him and his groping hands fastened on the gelding's mane, arresting the downward lurch of his body.

Beside him Martin shouted, "Tom, where are you hit?"

"The side. I—I'll be all right," Bracken gasped. "Keep going."

Martin had slowed down, cutting in close to Bracken. But Bracken forced himself upright and waved Martin forward. Together they galloped across the meadow while a wild clamor rose behind them. At last, the trees swallowed them up and they rode single file along a narrow trail that wound sinuously through the timber.

Bracken could feel blood seeping out of the wound and wetting his shirt. Each lunging stride of the horse aggravated his agony, but he set his teeth and strove to keep close behind Martin.

Behind them came the clatter of pursuit. Wykel wouldn't lose any time getting Pothook on their trail. The ramrod was an Injun. Now that he'd been cheated of a hanging he would be like a madman.

Emerging from the trees, Bracken and Martin followed a rocky bench for a half mile, then dipped into a dry wash. They were a mile and a half along the barranca when they heard Wykel's party swing into the stream bed. Martin twisted in the saddle, saw that Bracken was beginning to lag behind.

"Go on!" Bracken urged. "I'm all right."

"Damn it, Tom, you're in trouble," said Martin, pulling in his gelding until Bracken rode abreast. "We've got to get you off your horse and look at that wound."

Bracken's grim, taciturn cheeks were set in a gray sheath of pain. The spark had gone out of his eyes and the dry hull

of his lips made a dark wedge against the unhealthy hue of his skin.

"No time to stop now, Steve," he murmured weakly. "Got to keep running."

They galloped around a bend in the wash, the banks now beginning to flatten out a trifle. Back in the direction from which they had come was the hubbub of hard pursuit, the racket of steel-shod hoofs striking loose rocks as Wykel's crew roared toward them.

Bracken and Martin went on for another half mile, side by side, Martin watching Bracken with anxious eyes. Bracken was up in the saddle, but swaying now. No effort of will was sufficient to dispel the encroaching wave of impotence that seemed to start at his ankles and slide inexorably up his limbs to his belly and chest and arms. It was a general softening of the muscle tone of his body, a growing stupefaction of all his nerves.

He shook his head, thinking to clear it, to beat aside the dark shield of inertia that covered him. The banks of the wash seemed to be leaping out of their earthen anchor and his body suddenly was light and air-borne. When Martin spoke to him the words reached him as if from a great distance though he knew the man was right beside him.

"Tom, we'll have to split up." There was a fierce urgency in Martin's words. "You can hole up somewhere. Get off into the trees. I'll lead them a chase into the hills, then try to circle back."

"No," said Bracken doggedly, his answer hardly audible in the clangor of their passage through the stream bed. "Too much risk—for you."

"Damn it, there's no other way!" Martin yelled. "Cut out of this wash and head for those trees yonder."

He slashed at Bracken's gelding with his reins, deliberately crowding his horse against Bracken so that the latter's horse hit the rise toward the shelving bank. There was a clatter and fall of loose stones, then Bracken was out of the wash and into the trees that grew to within twenty yards of the barranca.

Martin, meanwhile, dug his spurs into the flanks of his own horse and rushed off around another wide-swinging curve of the gravelly ravine. Only when he was certain that Wykel's crew had ridden past the point where Bracken had left the wash did he make any attempt to throw off pursuit. Urging his horse to its utmost in speed, he clattered on for another three miles before swinging into a side gully which, in turn, led to a twin-forked canyon. He took the right fork, striking upward along the rocky trace till the defile splayed out into a brush-strewn mesa. He traversed the mesa in a

matter of minutes, then sent his weary horse buck-jumping down a shale-strewn slope into a brushy tangle of aspen and cedar trees.

Chapter 20

BRACKEN RODE BLINDLY through the trees after he left the stream bed. With no beaten trail to follow, the gelding had to fight its way through a maze of vine and buckbrush and fallen saplings. Bracken was only vaguely aware of the racket of the Pothook riders going by a few hundred yards behind him. The noise beat against his ears like so much muted thunder, then quickly waned and died.

He knew he had to put as much distance as possible between the Pothook party and himself, yet his senses were too muddled to transmit the wish into action. And so he remained passive in the saddle, at the mercy of every lurch in the gelding's stride. The horse pressed on through the thicket, then came to a narrow aisle in the brush that carried it eventually to a winding upgrade.

Two miles went by. Then the gelding, sensing the inertness of its burden, slackened its pace. Bracken, by this time, had lost all awareness of his surroundings. He was adrift in a dizzying whirl of jolting motion.

Finally, at the border of a small park in the midst of a stand of tall pines, the gelding stopped. The horse remained motionless for a long, waiting interval, then jerked its head forward and pulled the reins from Bracken's relaxed grip. Stepping forward a few paces, the animal began to crop at the leaves of a dusty bush. Its head lifted only momentarily when Bracken fell to the soft carpet of pine needles.

He was stiff and cold when he returned to his senses. For a minute or two he could not orient himself to his surroundings. Then he saw that he was in a small clearing closely guarded by trees. The sight of his horse grazing nearby and the sudden twinge of pain in his side when he moved brought his memory surging back.

Searching the clear night sky, he noted that the moon's position had changed only slightly. By that he judged he had passed out for a very brief time. However, he realized he could not risk staying where he was. If the Pothook riders caught up with Martin or sensed the ruse that had been

played on them, they'd double back on their trail to scour this area completely.

Pulling his shirt out of his pants, Bracken tugged at the thick undershirt which clung to his wound. As he freed the material and pushed it away from the skin he saw a dark trickle of blood begin to ooze down his side. His probing fingers now discovered that there was a narrow gash where the bullet has entered in the back and a wider hole where it had passed out again. Though the pain was intense, he was thankful, at least, that he was not carrying a slug inside him.

With the need to move on nagging at his nerves, he tore a wide strip from the undershirt, folded it into a pad and tucked it against the twin-edged wound. With several more strips which he tied together he bound the pad to his side. He rose clumsily to his feet, setting his teeth against the twitch of distress that jolted him at each movement. The prick of pain became a lacerating infliction of burning agony when he boosted himself back into the saddle. He sat loosely, his shoulders bent, the cold sweat of his exertions making a sharp nettle stinging on his face and neck. After a short delay he got hold of himself and sent the gelding across the clearing.

He had no definite destination in mind. It was imperative only that he push higher and farther into the Tumurals, where pursuit would be difficult.

Once out of the trees, he picked up a dim trail that wandered over a series of gradually rising ridges. He kept traveling for an hour, fighting fatigue and pain every mile of the way. Finally, when he found it almost impossible to maintain his seat in the saddle, he pulled the gelding to a halt in another grove of pines within a few yards of a shallow stream. He swung down to the ground, lost his balance and fell to his knees in the soft carpet of pine needles. By sheer dint of will power he rose again and forced himself to go through the motions of off-saddling and picketing the gelding. Then he took the saddle blanket, rolled himself up in it and fell instantly into a drugged, dreamless sleep.

Gray dawn mists covered the green-clad slopes all around him when he awoke. Again he felt stiff and sore. A damp chill had penetrated clear to his bones. The thought of a hot mug of coffee came as a torment to him, for he had no food of any kind with him.

Going down to the brook, he ducked his face in the water. The cold shock of it dashed the last vestiges of sleep from him. He gulped down a few mouthfuls of water, scrubbed at his face with his hands. He debated the advisability of examining the wound in his side. But with his undershirt

already in tatters and nothing available in which to heat water, he decided to leave the bullet puncture alone.

He wiped a shirt-sleeved arm across his dripping cheeks to dry them, then quickly cinched the saddle on the gelding and went through the tedious and distressing ritual of mounting. The only sounds in the morning air were the far-off cry of a bird and the purling whisper of the brook.

He guided the gelding toward the brook, splashed into the shallows and followed the stream northward for five miles. Where a second narrower mountain branch emptied into the stream, he swung northwest, the gelding climbing the clay bank and striking upward through a sparse thicket of juniper and young cedars.

He rode all of that morning with the sun's heat growing stronger by the hour. The wound in his side, which at first had not troubled him too much, began to ache. He felt, too, the gnawing bite of hunger in his vitals. The last food he had taken had been at noon the previous day. With all the riding he'd done in the afternoon and a good half of the night, he was close to being burned out.

Several times he spotted a rabbit darting out of the brush ahead of him and once he saw the swift, elusive shadow of an antelope go blurring through the trees. But he might have seen an entire herd of antelope without deriving any benefit, for lacking a rifle or even a hand gun, he had no way of bagging any game.

The thought almost made him turn back. But in his weakened condition he realized he would have little chance of running the gantlet of Pothook's roving crew and of the other riders whom Wykel would be sure to recruit for the hunt. More important than food or any other consideration was the urgent need for rest. He remembered, then, Sherry's frantic call to him as he and Martin had fled from the scene of the proposed hanging. She had said something about a "cave" and now it came to him what she had meant.

The cave was a wide, deep fault in a ledge of rock high in the Tumurals. He had taken both Sherry and Dale there on different occasions. It was a desolate place reached by a steep, narrow trail and hidden from the trail by a big clump of bushes. He had stumbled on the cave by accident three or four years ago while on an antelope hunt with Ed. Because he had been struck at the time by the rugged beauty of this high country, he had brought the two girls to see it. Sherry and Dale had found keen delight in the place and for a man on the dodge it would make a perfect sanctuary.

A little past noon when he had off-saddled to give the gelding a breather and to rest himself he saw two separate parties of riders in the lower hills to the south and east of

him. The word had gone out. In one group alone he made out at least ten riders and in the second there were about six or seven. That meant Pothook had been joined by some of the other outfits and it set him to wondering if all of them would fall into line.

There was Dave Peek to consider. Peek's name had been one of the last words to come from Ed's dying lips. During most of the morning's grueling journey he had gone over the previous night's chaotic events. Ed's death had been a stunning blow and the impact had been all the greater for the reason that he had died under circumstances that were suspicious, if not altogether damning.

Though the admission was a painful one, Bracken told himself that his brother was a rustler. Ed's presence on Pothook range, where he had no reason to be, coupled with the shooting of the Pothook night hawk made his mission obvious. But whom had he been working with? Brad Mantle? The BM owner was the likely choice, yet no other riders had appeared on the scene. And then there was the further mystery surrounding the five riders he and Martin had followed from the Hammer line camp. Two of those riders were Lodge and Hatten, Hammer's hardcase hands—of that he was certain. But what had happened to them?

A further problem centered around Ed's mention of Peek's name. Was the Lazy Link owner, rather than Mantle, tied up with Ed's strange activities of the previous night?

No matter in what light Bracken considered these various questions, he found himself unable to reach any kind of satisfying solution. Meanwhile, his own life and the existence of Hammer hung in jeopardy. His back was to the wall. Nowhere in this suddenly hostile country was there a man he could call friend. True, Steve Martin had stuck by him loyally. But he had the doleful feeling that Martin had already been captured. If that were so, then he was really alone without even a gun with which to defend himself.

He remounted after a short respite and continued deeper into the hills. He rode slowly, doing his best to disguise his trail but not at all sure that he would be successful. At three o'clock he came to the lightning-riven pine tree that marked the slanting upgrade leading to the cave. To his left, arching four hundred feet into the sky, was a high, granite bluff. It thrust its ragged, forbidding escarpments against the softer contours of the country for more than ten miles. Fifty feet up the first gradient and hidden by brush was the cave. Hurriedly he pushed the gelding into the narrow, winding trail. Three hundred yards from the sentinel pine, he left the trail and dismounted, leading the gelding up the slope to the clump of brush. He pushed through the thicket and, at once, found

himself in the cool shadowy interior of a twelve-foot vault of rock.

In almost frantic haste, he off-saddled and flung the blanket down on the floor of the cave. He was unutterably weary and the void in his stomach was now more of a torture than his wound, which had opened once more from the long ride. His fatigue, however, overcame his other bodily needs and he fell asleep, only to be brought frighteningly awake at dusk by the faint crackle of gunfire.

Chapter 21

DALE PARRISH was in the midst of a cheerless breakfast when the weary Pothook crew rode into the yard. She left the table and hurried out the back door. Wykel was shouting orders to the two punchers who had brought her back to the ranch the night before. The two men had rushed from the bunkhouse to meet the Pothook party near the corral. Now, as Wykel and the rest of his posse dismounted, the other two punchers went inside the railed enclosure to bring out fresh horses.

"I presume you didn't catch up with Tom," Dale said to the Pothook foreman, who regarded her dourly as he wiped sweat and grime from his lined, fatigue-ridden features.

"No, he got away," Wykel admitted. "But the hunt is just beginning as far as I'm concerned."

"Buck, I want you to stop this chase. If you still think he's guilty of rustling he must be allowed to stand trial."

Wykel stepped close to Dale, his rugged features unrelenting. "I've been a cowman all my life—in Texas and Montana and Wyoming—and I've never had to let a sheriff or a marshal do my work for me. I don't intend to start now. I'm going to get Bracken and I'll give him his chance to talk, but God help him if he doesn't give the right answers."

"I can guess how much of a chance that will be," Dale said. Her face grew severe. "What I said last night goes."

"What's that?"

"If you try to go through with this you're fired."

Wykel drew himself up to his full height. He was conscious of the bright, interested stares of the Pothook crew. In the midst of switching their saddles and blankets to fresh horses they turned to watch this battle of wills between the

girl owner of this ranch and the tough, seasoned ramrod whose orders they had always followed unquestioningly.

"I told you that you can't fire me, Dale," he said with a slow and heavy emphasis. "But since you feel so strongly about this thing, you can give me my time—after I've gotten Bracken." He turned his back on Dale deliberately and thrust his rough, demanding voice at the crew. "Hurry with those ponies. We're due to meet Crescent's and Dave Peek's crowd in an hour."

Dale walked up to the corral, placed a firm hand on Wykel's arm and swung him around. Her face was livid with anger. "So you've pulled them into it."

"That's right," he snapped. "It's going to be a big ball."

They faced each other for a few seconds, neither one willing to yield to the other. Finally, Dale swung around and lifted her voice as she addressed the crew. "Any man who rides with Buck in the posse can consider himself automatically fired as of right now."

"Wait a minute, Dale," said Slate Cooney. "This is a mighty serious business. You can't do that."

"I'll do as I damned please, thank you," Dale countered, "as long as I own Pothook." Her narrow, angry eyes raked every puncher in the group. "Make up your minds. If you ride with Buck, you're through. What will it be?"

There was a nervous scuffling of feet as the men looked at one another and over at Wykel.

"Gosh, Buck," one of them said, "I need the job pretty bad. It isn't easy to pick up good ranching jobs these days."

"Suit yourself," snapped Wykel. He let his heavy-lidded stare bore into each rider in turn. "Most of you when you joined the outfit had a horse and a saddle and some personal gear. Those of you who mean to ride with me, gather up your plunder and come along."

He had uncinched his saddle and now he quickly carried saddle and blanket over to a powerful roan horse which one of the punchers had roped for him. A low murmur of voices around him told him that some of the men were still discussing the issue, but he paid them no attention. When he had finished saddling, he lifted himself onto the roan and looked around. He saw that Slate Cooney and two other men had decided to stick with Dale. That left four men to ride in the posse with him.

A frigid air of restraint held them all speechless. Those riders who were joining Wykel couldn't bring themselves to look at Dale. As they moved up beside the foreman, Dale said in a cold, deadened voice, "You can pick up your money at the bank in town. I'll leave word."

No one answered. Wykel kicked his horse into a run and

with a forward motion of his arm led the group out of the yard.

More than an hour later, while Dale tortured herself with visions of Bracken being run to earth and summarily shot or hung, a dusty bedraggled rider drove a sweat-streaked, spur-roweled horse up to the barn and almost fell out of the saddle as he got down.

The rider was a man named Tucson. He had been one of the two punchers detailed to guard the Pothook cattle herd up in the hills before Wykel had gone in pursuit of Bracken and Martin. Tucson had a bullet in the shoulder and another deep in his side and to Slate Cooney, who rushed to aid him, he blurted out a confused story of a cattle raid. Cooney and one of the other Pothook hands carried Tucson to the bunkhouse and laid him in one of the bunks. After Tucson had been forced to swallow a generous draught of whiskey, and a rider had been dispatched to town for the doctor, Tucson repeated his story.

The substance of the tale was simple enough. Fifteen minutes after Wykel's group had left the meadow, a bunch of riders had struck from the hills to the north. Tucson's partner had been shot down in the first volley. Tucson himself had gotten in a couple of shots before being downed. He had lain unconscious all night, only rousing this morning. Somehow he had managed to get onto his horse to ride back to headquarters to sound the alarm.

Dale, seeing the rider's arrival from a window in the house, heard the story and her reaction was instantaneous.

"Slate," she said, "that raid proves Tom was not a party to it."

Cooney started to nod in agreement, then, as he thought about it, he shook his head. "Maybe you're right, Dale," he said. "But it could have been the bunch Tom was with before we came up."

"You mean they would have waited all that while, running the danger of having Tom hung or shot by our men? It doesn't make sense." Dale moved closer to the bunk where Tucson lay. "Did you get a look at any of the riders?"

"No, Dale," he said, his face twisting in a spasm of pain. "Everything happened too damned quickly."

Dale's face, which had lit up in a gleam of hope, turned gray and somber. She glanced sharply at Cooney. "Slate, I may be all wrong, but I'm betting that Brad Mantle is behind that raid. I want you to take the crew and ride up to the meadow and see if you can pick up the trail of that beef."

"And if we find the trail?"

"Follow it wherever it goes. I want those cattle back. Meanwhile, I'm going to Crescent and to Lazy Link to leave

word about what's happened. In my opinion, this raid changes things."

Leaving one rider at the ranch to take care of the wounded Tucson, Cooney set off with the rest of the crew in the direction of Pothook's upland meadows. When they had gone, Dale saddled a horse for herself and headed for Crescent.

She was too late, however, to intercept Ned Oliver's contingent of riders. The cookie, the only man left on the place, informed her that they had left an hour earlier, planning to bivouac in the hills with the riders from Pothook and Lazy Link.

As Dale started to turn away, Sherry rode out of the barn on a sorrel mare. She came toward Dale, her face set and expressionless.

"Thanks for your help last night," Dale said.

"I didn't do it for you," snapped Sherry. There was a haggard, worried look about her. A nerve in her right cheek kept twitching.

"I realize that," Dale replied. "Your father's joined the man hunt, I see."

"I couldn't stop him." Sherry's voice was listless, then, suddenly, it quickened with feeling. "They won't get Tom."

"Oh, I hope not," said Dale. "But he's wounded. If the wound is serious how can he possibly escape?"

Sherry seemed anxious to get away. She toyed nervously with the reins and the strained weariness in her eyes steadily deepened. "Was there anything special you wanted to see me about?" she asked in a hard, remote fashion.

"I—I was worried about Tom," Dale said. The fire and the spirit had gone out of her. "And then there was the raid on our cattle—after Tom got away from Wykel."

Sherry gave a start of surprise. "What are you talking about?"

Dale repeated the story Tucson had told. "It seems to me that raid tends to prove Tom's innocence."

"That doesn't follow," snapped Sherry, yet the faint stain of color in her cheeks seemed to hint at a subdued surge of hope and her impatience to get away became more pronounced.

"Well, I'm going after Wykel and your father to try to talk some sense into them," said Dale, a faint wildness touching her eyes. "Mantle's the man they should be hunting. Not Tom."

"I agree about Mantle, but you're wasting your time if you think you'll catch up to that posse or can turn them back if you do meet them in the hills."

"It's worth trying," Dale insisted.

Sherry shrugged. "You try your way and I'll try mine."

She neck-reined her sorrel past Dale and started across the Crescent yard.

"Where are you going?" Dale demanded.

"None of your business."

Dale kicked her mount forward, her gray eyes intense. "If you know where Tom is, tell me," she said fiercely.

"I don't know," snapped Sherry. "But if I did, I wouldn't tell you. Let's face it, Dale. We both want him. Let's see who gets him."

"You're forgetting one thing. He'll be no good to either of us dead."

Sherry didn't bother to answer. Instead, she dug her heels into the sorrel mare and galloped away.

Dale, her suspicions aroused by Sherry's talk and apparent eagerness to get away, decided to follow Sherry. The other girl didn't turn around to see if anyone was riding her back trail, yet Dale sensed that Sherry knew, nevertheless.

At first, Sherry seemed to be heading for the hills. But, after covering three miles at a fast canter, she turned into the main wagon road that angled toward town. Dale paused at the fork, debating her next move while she wondered if Sherry might conceivably have some idea where Tom could be. She finally decided that Sherry talked the way she did only because of some obscure desire to hurt her. They had never been friends and as long as Tom stood between them antagonism would color their feelings toward each other.

Morosely Dale turned back, away from town, cutting up a steep, wooded slope which she knew terminated in a rocky bench. Once she reached the bench it was a five-mile ride across rolling country to Dave Peek's Lazy Link ranch.

She was halfway up the slope and out of sight of the wagon road when Sherry, who had seen Dale leave the main trail, swung her sorrel into the brush and rode back in the direction from which she had just come. A grim smile briefly touched her lips before the hard urgency that was growing in her made her whip the mare into a crashing run.

Chapter 22

STANDING IN THE CAVE ENTRANCE, Bracken peered across the distant treetops trying to localize the sound of the shooting which had awakened him. He was not at all sure about the number of shots, but it might well have been some pre-

arranged signal to bring the various arms of the posse together. And if his suspicions were correct, then it meant that Wykel had picked up his trail.

There was no repetition of the shooting and, as the twilight's stillness once more clamped a lid on the high hills, Bracken felt the raw, piercing pinch of fear in his guts. His hand, braced against the granite wall, began to tremble and there was a sharp nerve tingling up and down his chest and back.

Never in all his life had he been more defenseless. His strength was at a low ebb from the toll of his wound and he had been further weakened by going without food for twenty-four hours.

In the fading light of dusk the trail below the slope remained empty of travel. Yet, Bracken found little assurance in that. The gunfire he had heard had come from a distance. If riders were approaching his hiding place it would take some time before they reached the trail up which he had come.

He debated getting on his horse and making a run for it. But a moment's sober reflection told him how foolhardy such a step would be. He had been in the saddle all day and part of the preceding night. Neither he nor his horse was in any condition to continue the chase without rest.

Yet, his forced inactivity, his lack of a weapon grated on his nerves. He felt like a fly trapped in a spider's web. He was immobilized. All he could do was to wait for Wykel and his man hunters to strike. Although the cave was well hidden, he could not remember if he had left any kind of discernible trail at the point where he started to climb the slope.

One thing he was certain of, however, Wykel wouldn't waste any time if he came to the cave. The Pothook ramrod had been thwarted once and the failure would be rankling in him, turning him sour and vindictive. The rangeland justice he brought with him, therefore, would be swift and harsh.

Like a thunderclap out of the deepening blue of the sky another gunshot boomed. This time the flat reverberation of the sound was nearer. It was followed, at carefully spaced intervals, by two more explosions.

Bracken's shoulders rolled forward in a gesture of tired resignation. It was now a dread certainty that the posse was approaching the area.

Grimly he retreated into the darkness of the cave. He struck a match. The flame revealed his saddled horse standing hipshot near the far wall. Going over to the animal, he picked up the reins and led the horse close to the entrance.

If it came to a showdown he decided he'd make a break for freedom rather than give up without a fight.

He waited ten long minutes—minutes that dragged by like hours, minutes that were a torture of tension—before he heard the whinny of a horse. Bracken quickly reached for the gelding's nostrils lest the gelding betray his haven with an answering whinny. Shortly afterward, two riders appeared at the edge of the trees a half mile away. They moved forward a few paces, then stopped as the rest of the group came up.

Bracken counted ten men in the posse. They milled about in a threshing tangle, then one rider pushed ahead. The rest dropped in behind him in single file as the trail abruptly narrowed. They passed the denuded pine tree at the foot of the hill and pressed on, while the towering walls of the butte closed in on their left side.

Watching them approach, Bracken suddenly grew deadly calm. His stare was an incessant greedy pressure on their dim, moving shapes. The sky was turning a muddy gray now with only a faint glow of ruddy color deep in the west where the sun had set.

The leader of the posse came abreast of the cave and stopped. Bracken's blood congealed in his veins. There was a hostile quiver in the still air. The tiny beads of moisture that appeared on Bracken's forehead were the only moving things on his face. The posseman's head swiveled back and forth as he surveyed the talus slope before him. To Bracken, it seemed that the man's eyes lingered on the brush before him. He had to smother the impulse to climb into the gelding's saddle and send the animal charging recklessly down the slope into the posse's midst.

"See anything up there, Buck?" one of the riders queried.

"Just looking," Wykel replied meagerly.

"You sure he came this way?" Ned Oliver called out.

"You saw the sign yourself back there a few miles," said Wykel. "We're closing in on him." There was a pause, then Wykel's voice came again, strong and surly. "Like to take a look up the slope. Might be some crevices in that bluff where a man could hide."

"Hell, there's nothing up there but scrub brush," said Oliver. "With darkness coming on we'd run the risk of breaking our horses' legs climbing that slippery shale. Let's move on."

Wykel made no reply. He gave one last, lingering look up the slope before spurring his horse along the trail.

Inside the cave Bracken felt as if a great weight had been lifted from him. The lost, helpless sensation that had preyed upon him now gave way to relief and renewed hope. That had been a close thing. Wykel's keenly attuned senses had

led him to within a few yards of his quarry. In broad daylight Wykel surely would have detected the spot where Bracken had left the trail. The thick purple shadows of dusk and the anxiety of the posse to move on had combined to betray the Pothook ramrod.

Feeling safer now than he had all day, Bracken took the saddle and blanket off the gelding and flung them inside the cave. Then he picketed the animal to a sapling near the entrance, allowing the horse enough room to crop at the sparse grass and dust-coated bushes that clung to the dry earth.

He squatted down, leaning his back against the wall of the bluff. There was an aching emptiness in his stomach. He knew he'd have to find something to eat soon or he'd never get out of the place. He had used up too much of his energy already. Unless his body obtained nourishment he would grow weaker and weaker. Yet, without a gun to bring down small game he would be reduced to grubbing for berries.

The unmistakable scuff of iron scraping against rock, the faint creak of a bridle chain drew him suddenly to his feet. A frenzy of sick alarm ran its suffocating heat through his vitals. He reached down, his fingers groping along the ground until they fastened upon a loose chunk of rubble. There was no time to go back to his horse. Something dark and bulky moved up the slope. To Bracken it was little more than a vague shadow in the indistinct light that lingered faintly in the sky.

Abruptly the shadow took the shape of a horse being led by its rider and he heard the rattle of shale cascading down the talus slide.

"Tom!"

The low, frantic whisper was a disembodied sound in the uneasy stillness. Once more the cold sweat of relief bathed Bracken's features. He dropped the piece of granite he'd been holding.

"Sherry!" he called. "This way, around the bush."

The girl pushed forward, half running now and pulling her mare after her. Then she was at the mouth of the cave and had flung herself into Bracken's arms. "Oh, Tom, my dear!" she said with a sigh. "I—I wasn't sure if I'd find you here."

Her face was pressed against his chest and he was conscious of the fragrance and softness of her hair. Then she turned her head and her lips crushed hard against his mouth, bruising and seeking and completely open to him.

"Lucky you called out, Sherry," he said, after she had released herself from the embrace. "I was ready to brain whoever it was with a hunk of granite."

Sherry's eyes were bright and feverish. Her voice held a

rushing, breathless quality. "You don't know how I worried about you. All day I kept thinking about you, wondering how badly you were hurt. That damned fool Bond tried to kill you."

"You mean Bond was the one who fired the shot at me?"

"Yes."

"But why? George was with you."

Sherry's eyes flashed angrily. "He was crazy jealous," she said. "I've had trouble with him before. I never told Dad about it because I knew he needed the job and had ambitions of starting his own brand some day. He just lost his head, I guess." The lie came easily to Sherry and somehow, in the telling, she found herself believing it because it soothed her twinges of conscience.

"I'm glad you came, but you took an awful risk," Bracken said. He stared into the darkness beyond her. "Wykel's posse just passed here a few minutes ago. Better come along inside now."

Sherry led the mare into the cave. For a minute or two they fumbled around in the darkness until Tom lit the storm lantern Sherry had providentially brought with her. As she off-saddled she said, "I almost rode into Wykel's bunch. I took a chance that you heard me mention the cave as you rode away from the Pothook crowd at the meadow. I was on my way here when I heard the signal shots. I held back until Wykel took the posse over the other side of the ridge."

From the pair of saddlebags she had brought Sherry took a pint bottle of whiskey, a wide strip of worn petticoat, a tin of coffee, two cans of beans and peaches and a thick wedge of bacon. She set the various items on the ground.

"Sit down, Tom," she directed. "I want to look at your wound. You can't risk an infection at this stage of the game."

He remained standing, but indicated with a gesture of his hands where Bond's bullet had struck him.

Sherry placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed him down. In the feeble yellow glow of the small lantern she proceeded to open his shirt and loosen the crude bandage Bracken had set against the wound. With a piece of the petticoat she bathed the edges of the torn flesh with whiskey. He winced as the alcohol burned into the inflamed tissues. Then she took a jar of yellow ointment and smeared a liberal quantity over the ravaged area of skin and quickly bound strips of cloth around it.

Then she gathered some dry brush and sticks from the back of the cave and started a fire going. She went part way down the slope for additional branches which Bracken subsequently broke by hand. Then she took a dipper and went out of the cave once more. She was gone ten minutes. When

she returned she had a dipper of water from a spring that flowed from a small ledge of rock farther along the trail.

In another fifteen minutes she had coffee boiling on the fire and a pan of bacon and beans frying.

"When have you eaten last?" she asked.

"Not since last night," he said.

She nodded. "That's what I thought." After a moment she handed him a heaping tin plate of beans and bacon. She looked closely at him, noting the empty holster. "God, you didn't have a gun, either. I forgot about that."

He grinned. "Yeah, I didn't figure to do any running after rabbits."

She handed him a tin cup of coffee which she liberally laced with whiskey. He ate some of the beans and bacon first, then took a long drink. The warmth of the coffee and the bite of the raw liquor put a hot glow inside him and his spirits immediately rose. He noticed Sherry staring uneasily at the fire and when she pulled a few long sticks out of the flames and tossed some dirt into the blaze he said, "You don't have to worry about the fire being seen outside. We're half around a bend in the cave and since we're well above the trail no one riding below could see the flames. As for the smoke, there's a vent in the ceiling in back of us that'll carry it off unnoticed."

They finished the bacon and beans and coffee, then opened one of the peach tins and shared the fruit in the can, afterward spilling the juice that was left into the ground.

With his hunger appeased Bracken rested his shoulders against the granite wall and regarded Sherry with intent eyes. "Now we'll talk," he said.

"Can't it wait, Tom?" she asked, shifting her position to sit beside him.

"No. There are too many things to think about. First, what about Steve Martin? Did Wykel's crowd catch up with him?"

"As far as I know he's still loose in the hills," Sherry replied.

"What do you know about Ed and that attempted raid on Pothook beef?"

She gave him a curious, twisted smile. "You sound like a sheriff talking to a suspected rustler."

"Forgive me, Sherry, I've got to know. Ed was—well, I've an idea he wasn't a straight shooter."

Sherry's hands writhed in her lap. A look of embarrassed pity fled briefly across her mobile features. "You're right, I'm afraid, Ed was weak. He told me once that Hammer was in a tight for money. That try for Pothook cattle was the easy way out. You just stumbled along in time to get roped in for part of the blame."

Bracken's taciturn face darkened with feeling. "Damn it,

Sherry, if you knew Ed was up to something why didn't you try to stop him or get word to me?"

"Don't you think I tried?" she flared, the lie once again coming to her with incredible ease. "At first, I didn't even guess what he was up to. He's talked to me a couple of times about his plans to get out of the hole. But he was always vague. Both times we talked he mentioned Pothook. Only after I heard that Dale had moved some prime beef up to her northern meadows did I suspect what Ed had in mind. I rode to Hammer last night and missed you, so I went right on to the meadow."

"Why did George Bond go with you?"

"I couldn't keep him away. He insisted on coming along to keep me out of trouble."

Bracken watched Sherry, but she met his glance unblinkingly. He frowned and she reached for his hand, holding it in both of hers. "Take it easy, Tom. A lot has happened and all at once."

The thought of Ed's ignoble end left a hard lump in Tom Bracken's chest. They hadn't been close on an emotional level for years. But they were brothers and the blood strain was thick and the tie was not easily severed.

"I blame myself for not coming back sooner," he said, after a moment. "Ed was never one for running things. He might be alive today if I'd—"

"Stop it!" Sherry said sharply. "You'll get nowhere with that kind of thinking. Ed was his own kind of man. You can't change that—just as you can't change the way you are."

The flames of the fire had dwindled to a snapping red glow and night's insidious chill began to creep into the cave. In the weird, waning light of the ruddy embers Sherry's sensitive, gently shelving face appeared oddly intent and preoccupied.

"There's something else that bothers me," Bracken murmured. "On our way to the Pothook meadows last night Martin and I stopped off at the Hammer line camp. Right close to the camp we picked up the trail of five riders."

Sudden interest sharpened Sherry's countenance. "Did you see who they were?" She leaned toward Bracken, strangely intent.

"No," he said, not noticing how she leaned away from him then and let out the taut breath she'd been holding in her throat. "We followed them most of the way to the meadows. I've reason to believe—in view of what happened—that Ed was in that bunch."

Sherry shrugged, not trusting herself to make a reply.

"I'm also guessing," Bracken went on, "that Lodge and Hatten, the two hardcases posted at the Hammer line camp,

were in the group because there was no sign of either of them when Martin and I visited the shack."

Sherry swung partly around to Bracken. "Who were the others?" Her voice was strange and unreal to her. Her heart was thudding against her ribs and anxiety cut into her flesh like the prick of driven thorns.

"That's what I'd like to know," he said savagely. "In any event, something went wrong. Ed was alone when I found him. There'd been an exchange while Martin and I were still riding through the timber. But there was no sign of the rest of the bunch Ed was with."

If Sherry was any judge of men, Lodge and Hatten were over the divide and still running. The moment Ed had bumped into trouble they had bolted. No amount of threatening had been sufficient to hold them. As things turned out, they couldn't have helped even if they'd stayed.

As for Bond and herself, there was no reason in the world why Tom should suspect their presence among those five mysterious riders. Once he did, everything would be lost. Because, Sherry told herself silently, she needed him on her side if she intended to profit from the events of the preceding day and night. He was her last hope.

Now, to guide the direction of his thoughts, Sherry said musingly, "It seems to me the logical place to look is to Brad Mantle's BM outfit."

"I have them in mind," Bracken answered.

"It wouldn't surprise me if Lodge and Hatten were secretly in Mantle's employ."

"I've had the same idea ever since I first saw them," Bracken told her. "Do you have any specific reasons for saying so?"

Sherry shrugged. "It's just a feeling I have. That's all."

"If I ever make it out of here," Bracken murmured, "I'll get Mantle. He's got a killing coming to him." Then he told her briefly and succinctly of Larst's ambush attempt and the aftermath of violence that had occurred at the BM spread.

Sherry moved close, her features full of a pleading warmth. "Oh, my dear, you really have been running into trouble. And now this mess. I don't wonder that you want to do something about it."

"And I will—tomorrow."

She gripped his arms, her face mirroring an immediate concern. "Tom, you can't," she protested. "You need to rest for at least another day. Besides, the hills will be crawling with men looking for you."

"I can't help that."

"I won't let you go," she stated fiercely. "It would be plain suicide."

He gave her a rueful grin that was meant to humor Sherry. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"All right. Meanwhile, you'd better see about getting some sleep." She rose. "I'll get the saddle blankets and bring them over close to the fire."

Bracken pushed himself to his feet, feeling a tiny ripple of pain in his side. He walked over to the dying embers of the fire. Sherry came back with the blankets. She spread one on the ground and indicated by a motion of her arm that Bracken should lie down.

"I can take care of myself," he said.

"Nonsense. Lie down and I'll cover you."

He sprawled awkwardly on the blanket. Then Sherry draped the other blanket over him. He shoved it aside.

"You take it, Sherry," he said. "I'll curl up in the one I'm lying on."

Sherry said nothing. She turned her back and went over to the small storm lantern she had brought and blew out the flame. For a minute or two afterward Bracken lost sight of her as darkness closed in on the cave. The only light was the feeble red glow from the embers of the cooking fire. Then Sherry moved into the thin, ruddy band of radiance and knelt down beside him.

Something taut and squirming and heavy turned over inside Bracken. "Good night, Sherry," he murmured huskily.

"Good night, Tom," she whispered.

He turned his head away for a moment and was startled when her slender body settled down beside him on the blanket.

He stiffened and said, "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to sleep."

"But we can't sleep together under the same blanket."

Sherry sat up, facing him, her features almost entirely lost in the shadows. But there was a sensual aura emanating from her, an animal warmth that aroused and disturbed him. Though an encroaching coolness had filtered into the cave, he now began to perspire and there was an achingly sweet heaviness in his limbs.

"Let's be sensible," Sherry said. "We're at five thousand feet and the nights get mighty cold up in these hills. One blanket will never be enough for either of us."

"You take both, then."

"No. With your wounded side and your weakened condition you've got to keep warm. By sleeping together the combined heat of our bodies will help to stave off the night's chill." She stopped, seeing the struggle that was going on inside him and secretly glad of it. "This is no time to worry about conventions or my reputation. It's a simple matter of expediency and common sense."

"All right, Sherry," he said dubiously, the tumult that was in him interfering with his talk. "If that's the way you want it."

He sensed rather than saw her smile. Then he felt her sink down beside him. She reached for the top blanket, drew it over them. In the soft, nerve-tingling darkness Bracken lay with his arms held stiffly at his sides. The deep, labored beating of his heart echoed loudly in his ears.

"Good night, Tom."

Sherry's voice was subdued and low. For a moment Bracken imagined he felt a flutter of heated air against his neck. He turned his head. His mouth came abruptly against Sherry's lips. Her response was instant and electric. She put her arms around him and hitched her body closer. At first, he remained rigid, resisting the bold invitation in her embrace. Then he found himself being sucked down into a dark vortex of pain and pleasure.

Agan and again their mouths met in a passionate frenzy. The pressure of her slender, yielding body against his was both a challenge and an insidious call to his awakened senses. Then, from somewhere deep in the core of his being, Bracken's will took hold. He tore his mouth away from the narcotic, smothering heat of Sherry's mouth. Slowly, reluctantly, he dragged her arms away from his neck.

"This is crazy, Sherry," he said in a ragged voice that he did not recognize as his own.

"But it's crazy nice," she whispered plaintively.

The tumult in Bracken was gradually subsiding. What had at first been all-consuming heat and passion turned to revulsion. He was enraged at his own weakness and surprised by Sherry's wantonness.

"We had our good times, Sherry," he said. "They're gone now. It's too late to try to bring them back."

"You're so wrong," she said, but he turned away from the warm insistence of her hands and deliberately composed himself for sleep.

Chapter 23

THE SMELL OF BACON FRYING woke Bracken in the morning. From his cramped, stiff position on the blanket he saw Sherry crouched near the small breakfast fire she had made. Outside

it was full light though the sun had not yet cleared the rim of the divide.

He got up and came over to Sherry. "That smells good."

Her face, when she turned toward him, held a restrained, hooded look. "It'll be ready in a minute," she said. "There's coffee in the pot."

They were silent while they ate and Sherry seemed to be avoiding his glance. He, too, felt an odd constraint, a strangeness in her company. The memory of her wanton willingness to surrender was still vivid in his mind and he knew that her cool aloofness this morning was an embarrassed reaction. She made no allusion, however, to what had happened. Nor was Bracken anxious to have her do so.

"What will you do now?" she asked later on while they were posted at the entrance of the cave scanning the surrounding countryside.

"There's been no sign of travel up this way since we got up," he said. "I reckon it might be safe for me to go back."

Sherry demurred. "It's too dangerous. If you must go, I'd suggest you wait until it's dark. The additional rest will be helpful."

He shook his head, meaning to answer her. But the sound of horses coming down the trail turned him rigidly still. In a few moments a party of six riders went by below them. Buck Wykel headed the group. They appeared dusty and trail-weary. Only Wykel looked up the slope and his glance was a cursory one.

"Do you believe now?" Sherry asked as the horsemen disappeared from view. "There'll be men all over the hills looking for you."

"You win," Bracken said. "I'll wait."

But the waiting wasn't easy. Time dragged slowly by and the sensation of strained embarrassment lingered between them, making conversation difficult. A little while after noon Sherry cleaned and rebandaged the wound in Bracken's side. It had begun to heal and, though it still ached occasionally, he was able to move around with very little discomfort.

With the coming of sundown Bracken's restlessness grew. He finally saddled his horse and led the animal near the cave entrance. It was then that Sherry, who had grown nervous and increasingly uneasy as the afternoon waned, drew Bracken aside.

"There's something you ought to know before you go," she said.

"What is it?" He was fumbling with the cinch strap and barely glanced at her.

"That raid on Pothook's beef was Ed's idea."

"How do you know?"

"Ed told me about it and I tried to talk him out of it. But he was desperate for money. There's a bank note coming due on Hammer. You knew about that?"

"About the note, yes." Bracken's voice was hard, his face gray and grim.

Sherry appeared contrite. "I know it's bad having Ed dead and it's not making things better to have me tell you he'd turned rustler. But that's how George Bond and I were on the scene—I thought we still might stop Ed before he went too far. I'm sorry, Tom."

"It's all right. It all figures. Ed was always a little on the weak side. Running Hammer alone was too much for him." Bracken paused and his eyes grew somber and reflective. "There's one thing I don't understand. Right before he died Ed mentioned Dave Peek's name. I wonder why."

"It all ties in together, Tom."

Bracken's cheeks sucked in as he drew a harsh breath. "If you know anything else I should know, tell me."

"All right. Your brother wanted to raid Pothook's beef for two reasons. The sale of the stolen cows would help pay off Hammer's note at the bank. But more than that it would ruin Pothook."

"What did Ed have against Pothook? There's never been any trouble between the two outfits."

"That was before Ed got wind of the railroad."

"What railroad?"

"Wyoming Central plans to build a spur through all of the Loreno ranch country," said Sherry. "Gil Fredericks, the man Peek brought back with him from the state capital, is the advance rep for Wyoming Central. Somehow Ed found out about the railroad and decided to make a grab for additional range."

Bracken's lips skinned tight against his strong teeth. "In other words, he wanted Pothook and Hammer so he'd be in a position to cash in when the railroad's land agents came around to buy up right-of-way."

"Exactly," said Sherry, her soft, expressive features oddly serene as she watched the effect of her carefully manufactured lies upon Bracken.

"It's just as well, then," he said heavily, "that Ed went the way he did. If a railroad spur is coming through Loreno every outfit ought to have an equal opportunity to profit by the sale of land."

"It's too late for Pothook now because their beef was raided later on the same night Ed made his try."

"Are you sure of that?" Bracken queried.

"Yes. Dale Parrish told me. Pothook's in real trouble. They've got a big note coming due at the bank and they don't have enough cattle left to sell off to meet the payment."

The expression on Bracken's bleak, irregular features was one of mixed dismay and rage. "That damned Mantle. He's the bucko responsible and he'll pay for it—just like he'll pay for pulling my brother, Ed, into his owlhoot operations. If it's the last thing I do, I'll kill him."

Bracken moved toward the saddled gelding, preparing to mount.

"Wait," said Sherry. "It's not dark yet. Besides, we have more to talk about."

"What else is there to talk about?" he demanded.

"There's everything, Tom! Don't you see it? You think it's tough that Pothook has its back to the wall. Sure it is. But it's no fault of yours or Ed's. But it is a break for you—for both of us."

Bracken frowned. "I don't follow you, Sherry."

There was a vivid and intense color in Sherry's face and her words reached out to Bracken with a pressing sense of urgency. "With Ed gone, you own all of Hammer. If you can raise some money—I'll help you all I can—you'll have no trouble buying up Pothook's note at the bank."

"Hell," said Bracken explosively, "if I could raise the money I'd use it to help Dale hold on to Pothook."

Sherry's face broke. The smoothly tanned, ebullient features warped into unrecognizably harsh lines. "So it *is* Dale. You don't care about me. That's why you didn't want to touch me last night. It's Dale—and I've been a complete fool."

There was a note of hysteria in Sherry's voice and Bracken whirled around to take her by the shoulders. "Talk sense, Sherry. Get a grip on yourself."

"You're the one who's not talking sense," she raged. Her fists beat against his chest. In a sudden frenzy she clutched him, her fingernails raking the front of his shirt. "Tom, don't you see that I love you? Why do you think I came up here? Why do you think I forced George Bond to go with me to stop Wykel's attempt to hang you if I didn't care more than anything else in the world about you?"

She sobbed against his chest. "Take me, Tom. I'm yours to do with what you wish." Her soft, pleading words were a dry heat penetrating through his shirt to his skin. "It's always been the two of us—only we didn't have the sense to realize it. I—I knew it the moment Bond fired that shot at you. When I saw you pitch forward in the saddle I felt as if the bullet had gone into me."

Bracken stared at her tear-streaked face in an odd, bewildered fashion. She reached up and pulled his lips down to hers. It was a moist, bruising kiss. Her mouth, writhing under his, had a feverish life all its own.

"It's no use, Sherry," he said tonelessly. "Kissing you is fine. But we've both changed. There's nothing left for us."

"Don't say that," she protested, crushing her frantic, grinding lips to his mouth once more. "You've got to care. This is our big chance for happiness." She held him with her arms entwined about his waist. A dread sense of loss was in her and she fought against it with all the resources at her command. "If we move fast you and I can gain control of most of the range in Loreno. There's Hammer—which you now own fully—and Pothook ready to be taken. As for Crescent, I control a fifty per cent share. When Dad dies I'll inherit the balance. Married to me you'll own Hammer, Pothook and Crescent combined."

"Is that what you call happiness, Sherry?" he demanded, freeing her arms from around his waist.

"Why shouldn't we take the chance when it's offered to us?" She remained close to him, her slender body rigid, her face fiercely intent. "I love you and you love me. Together we can—"

"Don't talk about love, Sherry. What you really want is power. And you don't care how you get it. I happen to be the best available agent for securing that power."

"That's not true. I've offered myself."

"Sure you did. You're a beautiful woman—beautiful enough to make a man want to give up everything when you kiss him. Sure I wanted you last night—as much as any man would want a lovely and desirable and willing woman. But I don't want to be bought that way. And I don't want any of your schemes. You make me feel unclean."

A great tremor raced through Sherry's willowy, but full-fleshed frame. The softness went out of her and the wicked glaze of malevolence drew a curtain across her hazel eyes.

"I hate you for saying that," she murmured. Her hand rushed to the holster snugged near her right hip. She drew the gun. As Bracken lunged for her, she twisted away and fired three quick shots into the air. She did not resist when he wrenched the weapon out of her hands.

"What's the purpose of that?" he asked.

Several miles away beyond the nearest ridge to the south another gun blasted three times. Sherry stood defiantly before him, her hands on her hips, her long-lashed eyes brimming with childish fury. "If you're going, you'd better go now," she murmured. "Wykel's on his way."

"So that's your answer," he said.

"Yes. If you won't let me love you, then I'll hate you."

Her eyes were fever bright and for the first time Bracken had a clear look into the twisted and neurotically damaged warp of her mind. Always unstable emotionally, with a tem-

perament that shifted erratically from one extreme to another, Sherry was sick—sick with her own dark and selfish desires. To Bracken it was a shocking revelation and it brought home to him the truth that most people wear a mask before the world. Only when some great stress of emotion had them in its thrall did they lift the mask, giving the outside world a glimpse into the dark, secret chamber where they lived.

He saw, too, how easy it was for love to turn to hate. For what he read in Sherry's eyes was a naked, almost malevolent antagonism that completely shut him out.

"Sherry," he said slowly, shoving her .38 into the empty holster snugged against his right hip, "I'm grateful for all you've done for me. I owe you my life, but I can't give you something that is no longer in me to give. At one time there might have been a chance for us, but it's too late."

Once again the flat burst of three evenly spaced gunshots reached them on the wings of the twilight breeze. Darkness was fast approaching, bringing coolness and the solid threat of peril.

Bracken moved to the gelding, gripped the horn and turned to Sherry. "I'm going to try to disappoint both you and the posse." He heaved himself into the saddle, then straightened in surprise as the obscure shape of a rider appeared on the trail below. Without warning the rider swung up the slope, pointing straight for the cave.

Sherry laughed mirthlessly. "You're too late, Tom."

A black, heavy brilliance lay in Bracken's eyes. He eased the revolver from the holster. His thumb drew back the hammer to full cock.

Again Sherry's taunting, hating voice chided him. "Are you going to shoot your way out? You're already beyond the law. A killing will just about finish you."

The same grim thought had already occurred to Bracken. He felt his grip on the .38 loosen. He could make a run for it, try to outflank the approaching rider. But he knew he couldn't bring himself to shoot at Wykel or any of the other men in the posse.

Coming to a sudden decision, he kicked the gelding's flanks and started from the cave, straining to see into the yonder darkness. Where were the others? he asked himself. Then, suddenly, he brought his horse to a skidding halt as Dale Parrish's frantic cry broke the dusk stillness.

"Tom, is that you?"

Bracken whirled the gelding about, turning once more toward the cave as Dale's mare made its labored climb to the lip of the rock shelf.

"Dale, how did you ever come to ride up here?" he asked. She didn't answer his question immediately. Instead, she

asked one of her own. "Tom, are you all right? As you were riding away I know you were hit."

"Got me in the side," he replied. "I'm a little stiff, that's all. But you shouldn't be here. The posse will be coming this way in a matter of minutes. Didn't you hear the shots?"

"I heard them. In fact, I almost rode into Wykel's bunch a few miles back. I was on my way here because I suddenly remembered the cave up here in the Tumurals. You took me here a long time ago. It occurred to me that if you were hard pressed by the posse you might hole up in the cave."

"He brings all his women here," Sherry said, moving out of the shadows to stand between Dale and Bracken.

"Sherry!" Dale's voice was pitched high in amazement. "I had no idea that—" She broke off in confusion, then added, "This is where you were going when I met you yesterday."

"Yes, my dear." Sherry's reply was barbed and unfriendly. "I spent the night with Tom." She saw the shocked wonder in Dale's eyes and her upper lip curled in disdain. "Nothing happened, though I tried hard enough. He seems to be saving himself for you, but—" Sherry's voice dwindled as the clatter of hoofs echoed at the beginning of the ridge trail half a mile away. "I wouldn't say his chances were very good at having either of us right now, would you? Wykel's coming and, if you were to ask me, I'd say he smells the blood of a Bracken."

Dale said sharply, "Tom, who fired those first shots? They seemed to come from this direction."

"I fired them," Sherry admitted calmly.

"Why?"

Sherry sneered. "Ask Tom," she said with a surly vindictiveness. "Maybe he'll tell you—if he lives that long."

There was a shout somewhere below. A quarter mile away a knot of riders swept toward them in a dark, indistinct mass.

"You can't wait here," said Dale, panic-stricken. "They're sure to comb the entire slope. Here, take my gun. It's fully loaded." She thrust the weapon into his hand. "I'll ride north from here. In the darkness they'll think it's you. While they chase me, you can cut back toward the foothills."

"No, I won't let you take that risk!" Bracken cried.

But before he could stop her, Dale had neck-reined her mare about on the shelf and sent the animal plunging recklessly down the steep descent. She had almost reached the trail when the forefront of the posse heard the miniature landslide set in motion by her headlong plunge. One of the riders sent a piercing yell down the full line of the posse.

"There's Bracken now! Close up. We've got him boxed."

Somewhere along the bunched mass of possemen an impatient rider cut loose with a wild gunshot. The flat cannonade

of sound sent a cold chill through Bracken. He knew only too well the dangers Dale was inviting by this daring attempt to lead the man hunters on a false chase. Yes, it was too late for him to do anything about it now.

Behind him Sherry spoke, and her words were completely without heart or feeling. "One thing about you, Tom, your women really go all out for you. It must be a wonderful feeling."

"Shut up!" he said savagely. "She might get herself killed. I should have stopped her."

"But you didn't."

The posse galloped past, every man whipping his tired mount into a furious run. And somewhere out ahead of them a courageous girl rode, taking her life in her hands.

Bracken swore under his breath. Worrying about Dale, he no longer cared whether he stayed or ran. He waited until the last rider vanished in the thickening gloom before he started his descent to the trail and turned south toward the foothills.

Chapter 24

SUNUP FOUND BRACKEN deep in the Tumurals and within easy striking distance of Brad Mantle's spread. He had ridden most of the night, stopping twice for half-hour rests. Sometime after two in the morning, feeling utterly weary and realizing that the gelding needed an opportunity to recoup some of its generously given stamina, he had pulled into a wooded copse and rolled up in his blanket to snatch a few hours' sleep.

He had encountered no horsemen during his long nocturnal flight. As far as he was concerned, Dale's desperate ruse had succeeded. He had gotten away. But what of her? Had some stray bullet from a trigger-happy man hunter cut her down? It was a question that tortured him endlessly. There would be no peace of mind for him until he was assured of her safety. Yet, meanwhile, he had to drive himself to do what had to be done.

Without help of any kind he had to invade Mantle's stronghold. Mantle was the key to all or most of the trouble that had erupted since his return to Loreno. And from what he had gathered from various sources, Mantle had been a strong influence in pulling Ed over on the wrong side of the law. Now Ed was dead, Pothook had been driven to the wall and a

posse was after his own hide. But come hell or high water, he'd settle with Mantle—for Ed and Pothook and a lot of other things.

Now, with the sun pouring its early morning brilliance and promise of heat upon the land, Bracken pulled the gelding to a halt at the edge of a shallow brook. He let the animal drink, then ground-hitched it at the edge of the stream, afterward kneeling at the bank to take a long drink himself and splash some refreshingly cold water on his face.

He took Dale's revolver out of his waistband, removed Sherry's gun from the holster and emptied the two remaining bullets in the chamber into his palm. He transferred the bullets to his pocket, thrust Dale's gun in his holster and tossed the extra weapon into the brush. Then he remounted, set off across the brook and picked up a dim trail that led upward through a vast area of young aspens.

Fifteen minutes later he saw a lone rider on a low ridge to his left. Bracken pulled back into the trees as the horseman paused to scan the country all around him. The horseman spent some time studying his back trail before pushing on. He remained in sight for a minute more, then the descending trail carried him out of view.

From the distance separating the two hills, Bracken could not identify the rider. But, whoever he was, he was obviously heading toward the BM outfit. Bracken immediately put the gelding into motion, setting his course on a tangent that would intersect with the other man's line of travel several miles farther on.

Several times in the next quarter hour he appeared to be riding blindly, but at length he saw his quarry two miles ahead across a wide ravine. He was about to increase the gelding's pace when a second horseman broke out of the brush on the trail of the first rider.

At the same instant that Bracken recognized Steve Martin as the pursuer, the man in the lead became aware of his predicament. He took one quick look over his shoulder, then raked his horse's flanks with his spurs. He surged forward at a full gallop with Martin matching his maneuver.

Bracken stifled an outcry and hit his own mount with the sharp steel edges of his spurs. The trail dipped into the ravine and for a few tense, abortive moments he was compelled to hack a path through a tangle of thorns and brush and hidden potholes. His face was bleeding from several shallow scratches and sweat was greasing the pores of his skin when he climbed out of the gorge and urged the gelding up the far slope.

He came out on a wide rocky bench studded by masses of trees and loosely grouped boulder fields. Around a bend in the trail he heard an exchange of shots, a wild outcry. Once again

whipping the gelding into a run, Bracken sped across the bench. He rounded the jutting edge of a massive lead-colored boulder and in the middle of the trail just fifty feet away he saw a horse down and a man scrambling behind it for protection.

The man down was Steve Martin. The other rider—Bracken saw now that it was Dave Peek—broke from concealment in the lee of a big wedge of granite and rode straight for Martin, firing his piece as he came.

"Drop your gun, Peek!" Bracken roared, charging full tilt toward him.

Peek, startled by Bracken's unexpected appearance, twisted toward the sound of the newcomer's voice. Peek's horse broke stride, stumbled and almost went down. Then Peek swiveled his Colt around and drilled a shot toward Bracken. It was a wide miss and he never got another chance. Bracken came at Peek with Dale's .38 hip-high in his hand. He fired past the head of the gelding. Peek jerked in the saddle. A stricken look distorted his handsome features and he tumbled to the ground.

Bracken drove in close, his gun ready for a follow-up shot. But Peek had lost his gun in the fall and was clutching his lower ribs while blood began staining his white broadcloth shirt.

Jumping from the gelding, Bracken risked another hasty look at Peek, then went over to Martin. The Hammer puncher scrambled to his feet, took a few staggering steps before his left leg gave way and he crumpled.

"Steve," said Bracken, "it's good to see you. Hurt bad?"

"Got drilled in the thigh. Flesh wound, I reckon."

Bracken dropped down beside him. Martin's levis were dark and wet with the seeping flow of blood. Bracken ripped the trouser leg, saw that Martin's conjecture about the wound was correct and made a crude tourniquet to stop the steady loss of blood.

"Tom," said Martin, "I was worried about you up there alone in the hills with those damned jackals of Wykel's hounding the hell out of you. How did you ever get clear of them? And how about that bullet hole in your side?"

"It's a long story, Steve," Bracken murmured, his face gray and somber. "I've got no time for talk. I'm damned glad you didn't run into Wykel's bunch yourself."

"It was nip and tuck for a while. But once I gave them the slip they gave up and concentrated on finding you."

From the edge of the trail Dave Peek's broken voice reached them. "Bracken, damn you! Do something before all the blood drains out of me."

"Just a minutel!" Bracken snapped. He pulled out Martin's shirt, then tore a strip of cloth from Martin's undershirt and

made a pad of it against the gash in Martin's thigh. "Lucky thing I spotted you following Peek. What was the idea?"

"Well," replied Martin, "I've been holed up in this area ever since I got away from that Pothook crowd. Yesterday I saw Peek and Mantle meet up near the canyon at the BM. They appeared mighty cosy and I got suspicious. I tried to ride up on them but I couldn't get close enough to hear anything. But they were certainly cooking up something."

"They have. It's about the railroad coming through here."

Martin's features twisted in surprise. "What railroad?"

"A spur line of the Wyoming Central," said Bracken. "You see anything else while you were ramming around?"

"Yeah. I saw some of Mantle's hardcases chousing a bunch of steers toward the state line. They were too fat to be BM stock."

"You're right. They were Pothook cows."

"Was it the same bunch from the upper meadows?"

"The same." Bracken finished adjusting the bandage on Martin's leg. "Wish I had time to get you to a doctor but I've got to go on to the BM."

"Hell, you can't go in there alone," Martin protested.

Bracken stood up. His rough, irregular features held the firm, unyielding cast of a wedge of granite. "It's got to be done. While I'm still free to ride I'm going to settle with Mantle. You stick here and keep your eye on Peek."

"He won't be running away."

"No. But if I'm lucky enough to come back I'll want Peek to do some talking about the railroad, about his tie-up with Mantle and the whole damned mess in which Ed was involved."

He helped Martin up, put Martin's left arm around his shoulder and helped the puncher to hobble over to the trail, where Peek lay groaning. The Lazy Link rancher was pale, his eyes full of agony and the fear of dying.

"You bastard!" Peek rasped, all of the suavity of his manner driven into hiding by the animalistic urge toward survival. "You'd let me bleed to death."

"I'm not sure you deserve anything else," Bracken responded. He turned to Martin, who had sunk to the ground close to Peek. "Think you can fix him up?"

"I can try," said Martin.

"All right. But first I want that white shirt of his, the black tie and his long coat and hat."

"What the hell for?"

"Mantle always has a guard posted at the canyon exit. If I shoot my way past him I'll have no chance of riding up on Mantle. With Peek's clothes I figure on getting close enough to buffalo the guard without firing a shot."

Although Peek protested vigorously and cried out in pain, as he squirmed away from Bracken's hands, the disrobing was accomplished in a matter of a few minutes. The lower front of the shirt was bloodstained, but the coat covered most of it. Peek's flat-crowned black hat fitted Bracken's head a trifle snugly, but it would do. In exchange Bracken left his own flannel shirt and sombrero.

He climbed back on his horse, reined in close to Martin, who was now engaged in stanching the flow of blood from the torn flesh low down in Peek's side.

"Sorry to leave you like this, Steve, but there's no telling when Wykel's bunch or some other riders will decide to comb this end of the Tumurals. What I've got to do has to be done now or it may never get done."

Martin grinned. "Good luck. Only thing bothers me is that I can't ride along."

The fierce, exultant cry of discovery dinned in Dale's ears as her mare hit the bottom of the slope in a miniature landslide of rock and rubble. Spun off stride by the force and speed of the descent, the mare almost went down. Somehow the animal managed to regain its stride and whipped into a fast run along the narrow trail.

A gun boomed a hundred yards to the rear. The sharp bursts of noise bounced off the high walls of the bluff, echoing and re-echoing in the night. Fear choked the walls of Dale's throat—fear for Tom Bracken as well as the immediate, breath-stopping dread of being smashed to earth by a bullet.

The way wound upward toward the divide in a series of sharp, tortuous turns. Dale rode blindly, trusting to the trail instinct of the mare. On her left loomed the rugged rampart of granite. To her right, hidden by the gloom, yawned an unseen abyss. Two thousand feet below a lusty mountain stream hurled its silvery mass of water through a deep canyon. Between the trail and the stream there was nothing but jutting rocks and hostile empty space.

The racket of the posse's pursuit grew more pronounced as Dale continued the headlong climb toward the summit. Sensing that the posse was gaining on her, she urged the mare on to greater speed. A sudden wicked volley of gunfire erupted behind her and the cool night air whispered to the wind of hot, singing lead. Once again panic bubbled up in Dale's throat. It became an effort to maintain a grip on the mare's reins. A second fusillade ripped the night and a stray slug ricocheted off a rock close to her head.

She twisted around in the saddle. In the gray-black light she could barely discern a darker blot that marked the line of riders closing in on her. Then, as she turned back to examine

the winding course of the trail ahead of her, the mare gave a violent surge. Frantically Dale freed her boots from the stirrups. The mare, mortally hit by two bullets, plunged erratically into the bluff. Dale was thrown to the ground. Her arms outflung, she tried to break her fall. She felt a blow along the back of her skull, a tearing sensation along her side, then plummeted into oblivion.

When she came to she found herself held against the rough cloth of a man's shirt. Someone was sponging her face with cool water. A match flared. In its yellow light she saw that she was lying on the ground in a wide fault of the rock wall that rimmed the high canyon trail. Three men were clustered around her. Beyond them she glimpsed the bunched figures of several more men and horses.

Buck Wykel bent over her. "It's only a miracle that you're not dead," he growled. "What made you do it, Dale?"

There was a dull ache at the back of her head. When she moved, the entire left side of her body seemed raw and bruised.

"To keep you fools from killing Tom Bracken," she murmured.

"My God, Dale," said Wykel, "the way the boys were blasting away you could have been slashed to ribbons."

"There was no other way." Dale struggled to a sitting position. "Tom is not the man you want. It's Brad Mantle—and Tom's gone after him." Her voice grew taut and impassioned. "He's tackling by himself the job you men should be doing. Who do you think stole our Pothook beef the other night? It couldn't have been anyone but Mantle's crowd. It certainly wasn't Hammer—because the Hammer crowd was already on the run. I don't doubt that Ed was dealing with Mantle, but Tom was as surprised to find Ed up at our meadow as we were."

Ned Oliver pushed past Wykel. "Dale may be right," he said.

There was a shout down the trail, the clatter of hoofs, then a rider broke through from the darkness. "Here's Sherry Oliver!" he called.

Oliver's face in the light of a crude pine torch that had been fired by one of the riders turned white as a flour sack. As Sherry rode up to the group he lashed his voice at her.

"What are you doing here, girl?"

Sherry gave him an odd, half-amused grin. "The same thing Dale was doing—trying to save Tom Bracken's skin." She looked at Dale, who now rose, leaning against one of the Pothook's hands. "Well, you got away with it, I see."

"What is all this?" demanded Oliver. "I want an explana-

tion. Damn it, these hills at night are no place for a woman. You mean you've been with Bracken?"

"Yes, Dad," Sherry said. "Don't look so shocked. I've known about the cave for years. It's the only logical place for a man on the dodge to hide out in the Tumurals. I came up here to bring him food and—whatever else he needed. Dale had similar ideas." She gazed past Oliver to Buck Wykel and on to Al Linus of the Lazy Link outfit. "Well, now that Tom has slipped out of reach, what do you intend to do?"

"Go after him," Wykel snapped. "I'm still not convinced that—"

Oliver cut the Pothook ramrod off. "Never mind what you think, Buck. First we'll find Tom and then we'll talk before there's any shooting or any hanging. If he's gone to clean out Mantle's crowd he'll be needing a little help. It's something that should have been done weeks ago."

Wykel growled an unintelligible reply and tramped back to his horse. Oliver waved his hand at the other men and, one by one, they got into their saddles. When all the party was mounted Oliver pushed into the lead and sent his mount cantering down the narrow bluff trail.

Chapter 25

BRACKEN WAS A HUNDRED YARDS from the exit of the BM canyon when Gus Hyatt rode out from behind a rock outcrop and blocked the trail. He had a rifle in his hand. The barrel lifted to center on Bracken's chest.

"Stay where you are!" commanded Hyatt, squinting his eyes to peer at Bracken, who held a bandanna up to his face as if he were mopping at the perspiration on his cheeks.

Bracken slowed his gelding but kept coming. He wasn't afraid of the rifle, but more than anything else he wanted to avoid precipitating any shooting that would be heard at the BM ranch. At the same time, he didn't trust himself to speak because he knew he'd never be able to disguise his voice satisfactorily.

He was fifty yards away when Hyatt lowered the rifle and said, "All right, Peek. Mantle's at the house."

Bracken said nothing. He had Peek's flat-crowned hat tipped low over his features. He was riding in the shadow of the canyon wall and with the bandanna still masking most of his face Hyatt did not detect his real identity.

Not until Bracken was within fifteen yards of Hyatt's position did the BM sentry show any suspicion. Then Bracken noted how his heavy eyebrows pinched together. He saw his hands tighten on the rifle stock. Bracken dropped the bandanna, kicked the gelding into a plunging run.

As Hyatt tried to swing the Winchester in line for a shot, Bracken charged into him. He knocked the rifle out of Hyatt's hands with a sweeping blow of his left arm. Almost in the same motion he clubbed the renegade into unconsciousness with a vicious slash from the barrel of his Colt. Hyatt's horse bucked, spilling him to the ground, where he lay in a limp, unmoving heap. Bracken reached forward to catch the animal's reins, thus preventing it from galloping off and alarming whatever men might be stationed at the main ranch buildings.

When Hyatt's animal had quieted, Bracken dismounted and went over to the renegade. Hyatt lay still, a small trickle of blood escaping from a ragged gash over his ear. He was breathing heavily and would be all right except for a sore head. Bracken removed Hyatt's six-gun from the single holster near his right hip and thrust the weapon into the waistband of his own trousers. The rifle he put in the empty scabbard attached to his saddle. Going back to pick up the neckerchief, he remounted and rode up and over the ridge.

It occurred to him that he might be plunging into a hornets' nest of trouble. But he had come too far—had gone through too much during the last forty-eight hours—to let anything block his showdown with Mantle. If the entire BM crew was at the ranch he'd be at the end of his rope. But he didn't think this would be the case. He was counting on the fact that Mantle would have had to delegate most of his riders to drive the Pothook cattle herd out of reach of any possible search party.

Riding down the last slope toward the plank bridge that spanned the creek at the edge of the BM ranch yard, he noted only a few horses in the corral. In addition, there was one saddled horse, standing ground-tied close to the porch. It was a powerful gelding. Bracken guessed that it belonged to Mantle, whose taste in horse flesh ran to big Percheron or Morgan breeds.

At the edge of the bridge Bracken took Hyatt's bandanna out of his pocket and began to dab at his face. The loosely fitting planks boomed their hollow protest when the gelding made the brief crossing and turned toward the house. Bracken held his breath as the bunkhouse door flew open and a gun-hung hardcase rushed across the yard. He had half expected that two or three men might be stationed in the bunkhouse, but the man was obviously alone for he ripped out a shrill cry for Mantle.

Then he jerked to a halt and his gun came up. "All right, friend," he said. "Who are you and what's your business?"

Bracken pulled the gelding down to a walk. The renegade was someone he had never seen before. Roughly he said, "The name is Peek."

He was within fifty feet of the ground-tied horse when Mantle came out of the house. He tramped across the porch and down the steps, frowning up at Bracken, whose face was partially shielded by the bandanna.

"What the hell brings you here again?" Mantle demanded. "I told you I'd get in touch when we sold off that Pothook cattle."

The BM rancher reached the bottom step and crossed in the dust toward Bracken. The other man was rounding the side of the house, his pace slowing now that the visitor had been identified.

Bracken flung the neckerchief away and drove his harsh, challenging voice at Mantle. "Take another look, Brad!"

Mantle stopped dead in his tracks, his heavy features twisted in shocked surprise that turned quickly to fury. "You son of a bitch!" he roared and dug for his gun.

He fired as Bracken jumped from the gelding, landing on braced feet in the dust. Mantle's bullet went wide and Bracken, drawing his own Colt as he leaped, targeted Mantle's chest and flipped his gun hammer on a squalling shot.

Mantle choked on a guttural curse. He clapped a hand to his chest and staggered forward, falling against his horse. The animal jumped backward, its eyes rolling wildly. Then, as Mantle's Colt went off again, smashing a bullet at the skittishly dancing feet of the horse, the animal whirled and charged right at Bracken.

There was no time for Bracken to duck away. The plunging Morgan struck Bracken a glancing blow with its hard-driving forequarter and drove him backward off his feet. Unexpected as the action was, it saved Bracken's life. For the BM gun slick coming up on the flank had fired two shots at Bracken from thirty yards away. Both slugs missed their mark and struck the plunging Morgan instead.

The panic-stricken, mortally hurt horse issued a trumpeting scream, careened wildly toward the bridge and finally went down in a bloody heap at the edge of the worn planks.

Bracken, meanwhile, groped to his knees. A dizzy red haze flowed back and forth in front of his eyes. The bones of his chest felt loose and bruised. There was a fierce yelling in his ears. When his attention came once more into focus he saw the BM hand dashing toward him. At close range the man looked as big as a barn. Bracken told himself it was a trick of

his imagination, a hallucination brought on by the pain and nausea that clawed through his vitals.

Something hot and hard slammed into his left shoulder, paralyzing the upper half of his body on the left side. He fell forward, vaguely hearing the wicked singing of another bullet going past him. Then he found himself propped on an elbow and his Colt was pounding and the BM gun slick was twisting and falling with the gray look of shock and agony on his face.

Strength was draining out of Bracken like water out of a gourd. It was an effort to keep his eyes open. The act of falling on his face jolted him back to awareness once more. Just fifteen feet away he saw Mantle in the dust, slowly crawling toward him. There was a kill-crazy fire in the BM owner's eyes. The red stain of his life's blood smeared his shirt front and left a dark, moist track in the dust behind him. He was dying, but the maniacal lust to destroy propelled him toward Bracken.

"I—I'm taking—you—with me, Bracken!" he gasped, his voice hollow and strange.

Bracken watched him in a dazed, hypnotic spell. The seconds ticked slowly away and all the while Mantle dragged the wasted, emptying hulk of his body toward the man he wanted to kill.

Mantle was ten feet away when he stopped, resting his weight on his arms. He gagged on the blood that gorged from his throat. His eyes grew dim. A shudder racked his body. Then he stiffened and the gun held rigidly in his fist tilted upward, wavering on the target before him.

Only then did Bracken succeed in throwing aside the shackles of inertia that had held him. He forced his own gun upward. He let the hammer fall on a shot and heard the flat concussion of two explosions. The red haze before his eyes began to change color, going from red to purple and then to a deep black that completely engulfed him, bearing him away on a warm tide of forgetfulness.

A long time later he heard someone say, "I think he's coming around. He's beginning to move and his eyelids just fluttered."

The voice seemed remote and incredibly distant. Bracken climbed toward the sound. But he didn't hear the voice again and the effort of groping upwards was an unbearable strain. Then, suddenly and miraculously, his eyes were open and the hot blaze of sun was in them. He blinked as a shadow came between him and the sun. The shadow gradually took form and shape and he saw that Dale Parrish was bending over him. In fact, his head was cradled in her lap and the soft warp of her arms was around him.

"I was beginning to worry about you, Tom," she said. There was a misty, shining look about her. She smiled and her eyes filled with a brightness and sparkle and sweetness that made the blood flow warm and heavy through his veins.

"Good to see you, Dale," he said. "You seem to be following me around."

He tried to sit up but a wave of dizziness assailed him and he fell back in Dale's arms.

"Lie still," she cautioned. "You picked up a bullet in your shoulder that's going to need some attention. Buck sent to town for the doctor."

"The posse—up in the hills," he said uncertainly. "I was afraid you'd get hurt. I shouldn't have let you lead them off."

Dale laughed. "To tell the truth, I didn't get far."

"Far enough for me to get away, though." Bracken frowned, twisting around despite the throbbing ache in his shoulder to stare about him. He saw he was still in the BM front yard. There were a few saddled horses near the corral and three men posted near the ranch house.

"If you're wondering about Brad Mantle," Dale said, "he's dead."

"He had it coming to him," Bracken said. "But killing a man is a bad thing, Dale. It does things to you inside—makes you want to curl up and die yourself. It's a damned dirty business."

"It's all over now, Tom."

"What about Buck Wykel and Ned Oliver and the others?"

"They've changed their tune," Dale told him. "I rode in with the posse from the hills. We found Peek being guarded by Martin—who also needs a doctor—and Peek was eager to talk. The other BM hand you shot is going to live, too. What Peek couldn't tell us, the BM gunman did. Buck Wykel's taken a bunch over the divide to go after the beef Mantle's crew stole the other night."

"Good. That about cleans up everything then."

"Not quite," said Dale.

Bracken looked up at her. She was gently smiling, her lips turned in a warm, sweet line. His head was held against the soft swell of her bosom and he could hear the swift, aroused pumping of her heart.

He felt an answering surge in his own heart. It was deep and strong and almost overpowering. His throat grew tight with his sudden wanting of this girl.

"What do you mean, Dale?" he asked.

"There's us," she whispered.

Bracken grinned. "You're so right—only it's taken me a long time to find it out." He lifted himself up toward her.

"Careful, Tom!" she cried. "You'll hurt yourself."

"It'll be worth it," he said as her face swayed down to his and their lips met in a long kiss that held all the tenderness and all the love and all the promise of better things that the right woman can bring to a man.

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