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By B. M. Bower

LONESOME LAND
THE RANCH AT THE WOLVERINE
THE FLYING U'S LAST STAND
JEAN OF THE LAZY A
THE VOICE AT JOHNNYWATER
DESERT BREW
BLACK THUNDER
WHITE WOLVES
THE ADAM CHASERS
POINTS WEST
HAY-WIRE
THE SWALLOWFORK BULLS
RODEO
FOOL'S GOAL
TIGER EYE
THE LONG LOOP
DARK HORSE
LAUGHING WATER
ROCKING ARROW
TRAILS MEET

TRAILS MEET

By

B. M. BOWER

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1933

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TRAILS MEET

CHAPTER ONE

DEATH ON THE TRAIL

The wind rocked the flimsy cabin. At times the gale would die, then rain that was half sleet would whip against the one small window facing the storm. Smoke that would not rise above the rock chimney when the gusts came fiercest was buffeted back down into the fireplace and out into the big room.

Jess coughed when a particularly acrid billow surged out into his face. As he turned and groped half-blinded to the door, he stopped and listened. It might have been imagination, or it could have been the far-off ululating howl of a coyote. He thought for a minute that some one shouted. Chuck, maybe.

He pulled open the door and stood there, coughing the smoke from his lungs. It couldn't have been Chuck yelling. Chuck was either at the ranch or he was in town at that moment, and if he yelled at all it would be in the exuberance of his unexpected vacation. He wouldn't be coming back to-night; not if he could help himself.

The door opened toward the valley and was partly sheltered from the wind. The rain and sleet drove past slantwise, silvery needles in the faint light shining through the doorway. A wild night, sure enough. Jess wished now that he had gone with Chuck. He had thought it would be good to have the cabin to himself for a night or two; privacy bought with loneliness. Not much use if this storm kept up. He was turning back into the cabin when a gun roared out somewhere along the trail.

Instinctively Jess ducked aside out of the light. No bullet whined in his ears, however, nor did he hear the thud of an impact against the wall. No one would be shooting at him, anyway; at least, not with any reason he could think of. Still—

Again that shout or call; just what it was he could not tell, with the wind roaring over the roof and the rain hissing past, but there was no mistaking the abrupt pow-w of the shot that followed. Not a hundred yards from the cabin, Jess thought; and when upon that echo of that shot there followed three more in rapid succession, he had a flash of understanding. Some one out there was in trouble, trying to call for help; down around the thicket, or the six-shooter's flare would have shown even in the deluge of rain. A shot would of course carry farther than a shout, though the man was trying both.

Jess took his lantern off its peg and lighted it, stepped to his bunk and pulled his own gun from its holster on the belt hanging beside his pillow; and the second act was quite as natural to him as the first. Darkness made a light necessary. And trouble of which he knew absolutely nothing might need a gun for settlement. His pioneer blood told him that without a moment's hesitation or doubt.

Yet his pioneer blood could not keep his heart from thumping a little harder than usual as he bent his head to the storm and went off down the trail, gun ready in his right hand, the lantern swinging from his left. No telling what he might be walking into. His lips twitched with a passing smile as he thought of the target he was making of himself with that lantern, but even as he thought it, he was observing too the silvery slant of the rain across the moving zone of light, the fantastic bobbing shadows, the dark, writhing blur of bushes as he passed them. He was debating upon the exact shade of lantern light in a storm. He was wondering if Chuck could by any far-fetched possibility be hurt and helpless a hundred yards from camp.

These thoughts did not shorten his stride, so presently he rounded the thicket and halted just where the light revealed a man huddled in the middle of the trail like a bundle of old clothes, one tail of his coat snapping in the wind.

Jess slid his gun into his coat pocket and set down the lantern, which immediately tilted over on its side and threatened to go out. But not before it revealed the man's face and the cringing fear in his eyes; a look strangely at variance with his frantic calls for help.

Jess righted the lantern, turned the wick to a safer height and looked again. "What's the matter, Mr. Parsons? How are you hurt?" He stooped, shielding the injured man as well as he could with his body.

"Rob—young Robison!" Even with the groan that followed the jerky speech, a note of relief was in the voice. "Get me—get me out of this—quick, before—" He groaned again.

"But what happened? Your horse fall with you?"

"Horse? No—they followed—I'm shot. For God's sake do some—get me in—"

"Sure." Jess was sliding the lantern bail into the crook of his arm so that his hands would be free. He hesitated, glanced behind him and blew out the light. Foolish, maybe. If some one had shot Parsons and was following, those last signal shots would tell where he was. Still, it might be as well not to advertise the exact spot with a light. "Can you walk if I hold you up? It's only a short way." He fumbled for the man's armpits as he spoke.

"Traacherous devils—" Parsons groaned. "No, I—my strength's gone. I—I dragged myself this far—"

"Well, all right. I'll pack you, then." Jess knelt on one knee, fumbled for Parsons' arms, hauled the limp burden on his back. Albert Parsons was a small man yet it was not easy to handle him, twisting and groaning, with the gale pushing and tugging with malevolent fury. Jess went tottering under his load, short steps feeling out the way. He knew every inch of that trail, he could have walked it blindfold, yet the storm confused his sense of distance and made it seem farther. He was thinking he must have passed the cabin and was headed for the corral, when his foot struck against the doorstep and almost sent him sprawling. He had a fantastic impulse to laugh when Parsons' head butted against the cabin wall and his groans broke off in a yelp of surprise. He did not like Parsons, anyway.

For that reason perhaps he staggered across the room and let down his burden on Chuck's bed which stood opposite his own. Chuck would raise a howl when he found out about it, but that did not worry Jess now. He wanted to see just what was wrong, how badly Parsons was hurt. It seemed somehow indecent for a grown man to do so much moaning and complaining, no matter how badly he was injured. He was not so sure Parsons couldn't walk if he wanted to.

Nothing of this appeared in voice or manner. "Better get you into bed, hadn't I? Then we can take a look-see. Wait a minute. I think I can scare up a little whisky—just for a bracer."

Chuck would raise a howl about that too, Jess supposed. Chuck valued his eye-opener more than he did the breakfast which followed it, as a rule. He kept the bottle hidden behind the dish cupboard and he never produced it for the refreshment of callers. Jess very much doubted whether Chuck would have brought it forth for Parsons even in this emergency. Chuck didn't like Albert Parsons either. No one did, so far as Jess knew.

But presently he forgot Chuck's little idiosyncrasies, forgot even his own instinctive aversion for the resident manager of the Diamond Slash ranch. When he brought the lamp over and removed Parsons' upper garments, he stared aghast at the hole three inches below his heart. It seemed incredible that Parsons had been able to move at all or to shout for help. Certainly he could not have crawled far. The wonder was that he was alive, Jess thought.

"Say, I'd better try and get a doctor out here," he exclaimed. "Or I could make it to the ranch with you, and have them 'phone—"

"No!" Parsons almost screamed the word. "Give me another—drink of that—whisky." He swallowed the liquor with a gulping greed that curled Jess's fine mouth with disgust. "No—here's where I want—not the ranch, for God's sake!" He gave a groaning sigh as Jess lowered his sleek black head to Chuck's pillow.

"Why not? You're the big chief there. What you say goes, it seems to me. Sure, that's the place for you, soon as this storm lets up a little so I can haul you over there." Jess had brought hot water, a bottle of antiseptic lotion, a package of cotton. "I don't know if it's a good sign, but there isn't much blood now. You bled at first, judging by your clothes, but it's almost stopped. I'll fix you up best I can, and then—"

"I'll stay here," gasped Parsons, taking short, panting breaths. "Traacherous devils—they'd finish me." He swung his little black eyes sidewise until they rested upon Jess. "My boot—the left boot—it's—you—I—take it—"

"All right. Don't you worry, Mr. Parsons. I'll fix it." Jess slowly pulled the soft, expensive riding boots off Parsons' feet, careful not to jerk. While he worked them down off the heels, he watched Parsons' face, ready to ease the pull at the first sign of distress. For that reason he did not see the letter that slid out of the left bootleg and lay just under the edge of the bunk. As the second boot came off he pushed the pair back out of the way. The letter skated under Chuck's suitcase and lay snug and unseen, Jess never suspecting its existence.

"Dirty frame-up," Parsons was muttering. "Trying to double-cross me, too. I—know too much—more than—"

"Sure," Jess soothed him while he washed the wound and made ready a compress. He was not thinking of the things

Parsons said nor could he have repeated the words two minutes after they were spoken. He was wondering what he could use for a bandage and he was thinking how Chuck's eyes would pop open if he should walk in and see what was going on. He didn't like the look in Parsons' face, either, nor a certain rattling sound in his throat when he breathed. Though Jess never had seen death take hold of a man, instinct warned him now that it was coming close to Albert Parsons.

"Wheels within wheels—I told them they couldn't get away with it, and this is—If you can keep your mouth shut—keep quiet—" His beady black eyes bored like twin gimlets into Jess.

"Certainly. And so must you, keep as quiet as you can." Jess stood up, listening to the storm rather than to Parsons. It would be madness to try taking the man anywhere and if he left him here alone while he went for help—

Parsons sensed that thought. "Don't leave me alone—I'm afraid they followed—you stay here, Jess—I've got to tell you —"

Jess moved away from the groping hand that wanted to get hold of him and cling. He hoped he wasn't brutal, but he felt a distinct aversion to being clung to by Albert Parsons either dying or in health. "I ought to get help," he covered his retreat. "You're in a bad way, I suppose you know. I've done all I can do, Mr. Parsons."

"All anybody can do," groaned Parsons. "Stay here. I'll tell you—something big. You can clean up—if you work it right. Sarky—little Sark—"

"You better not talk any more, Mr. Parsons. Maybe if you are quiet you'll—" The lie stuck in his throat. Quiet or not, Parsons couldn't last the night out.

"I want to tell you something—serve the damned fools right."

"Just as well if you didn't. I don't want to know."

"Not if there's real money—all yours if—"

"It's getting cold in here," Jess parried. "I'll have to fix the fire."

While he rebuilt the fire and set the coffeepot close to the flames on the hearth, he revolved in his mind the problem thrust upon him. It wasn't simple. To ride ten miles or more in that storm was an ordeal any man would shun. For one thing, there was Jumper Creek to cross before he reached the valley on his way to town. He shook his head dubiously when he thought of the steep sidling trail down along the bank to the water's edge. Soft soap would be sticky alongside that fifty yards of clay right now, and as Chuck once had declared, it only took a bucket or two of water to send Jumper Creek on the rampage. If the rainfall chanced to be heavier up along its source, the tricky little stream would be a rushing torrent which no man in his senses would attempt to cross in the dark.

Of course, he could ride to the Diamond Slash which was not half as far away as town. He could go along the north side of the creek to the bridge just this side the ranch gate. But Parsons seemed afraid of the Diamond Slash for some reason—his own outfit!—and even if he wanted to go home it would be the deuce of a job to drive a team over that trail in the dark, there were so many twists and turns through the rocks. Even in daylight it would be rough riding for a wounded man. Moreover, there was no rig in camp except the wagon, and that was down by the corral with a load of fence rails—unless they had blown off. The wagon box was up near the cabin and it would be next to impossible for one man to lift the box on the wagon, especially at night. In a howling gale like this—Jess shook his head again and dismissed the thought as useless. Much as he hated it, Parsons would have to lie there on Chuck's bunk for the present.

He looked at the coffee and found it almost hot, poured a cup and carried it to the bed. "Maybe a drink of this will make you feel better, Mr. Parsons—" He stopped abruptly, set down the cup with a startled motion that spilled half its contents, and picked up the lamp for a closer look at the man. And as he moved the light toward the bed, the door was flung open, letting in a whooping gust of wind.

The flame flared up in the lamp chimney and went out, leaving the cabin black for a moment until his eyes adjusted themselves to the dull glow of the fire still eating sullenly away at the fresh wood. Two slickered forms pushing in through the door were blotted out, then became vague shapes halting uncertainly just within the room while one forced the door shut behind them.

"That you, Chuck?" The first figure stumbled toward him.

"No, this is Jess. Wait a minute. I'll light the lamp. I'm certainly glad you blew in right now. Tom Ritchie, isn't it?"

"Blew in is right!" grumbled the second man, giving the door a kick for good measure.

"Oh, hello, Bob." A match flared in Jess's fingers, throwing his face into the sharp relief of a cameo. A fine, sensitive face, sobered now and made stern by the tragic experience thrust upon him within the past hour. He tilted the lamp chimney, drew the flaming match across the hot wick, dropped the chimney into place and looked up at the two. "You're looking for Albert Parsons, aren't you?"

Blank silence for a startled breath or two. Tom Ritchie, foreman of the Diamond Slash, took a step forward.

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody. I just guessed maybe you were."

"Why?" Ritchie demanded. "He been here?"

Jess lifted the lamp again, moved it so that it shone full upon the bunk. "He's here now. Take a look. I think he's dead."

CHAPTER TWO

OTHERS COME SEEKING

Jess heard the sibilant sound of a man exhaling a breath under stress of emotion. It may have been Ritchie or the cowboy, Bob Francis; he rather thought it was Bob. He also fancied that there was some wordless message passing behind his back. Then he pushed the thought away as sheer nerves; the two moved up beside him, wet slickers rustling as they walked.

Ritchie pulled off his streaming Stetson. "My God, he's done it, Bob," he said in a low, shocked tone,

"Only for the storm, we'd maybe have found him in time to stop him," Bob muttered, pulling off his own hat in tardy remembrance of his manners.

It was all Greek to Jess,—Parsons with his frantic terror of some unnamed enemy seeking to kill him, and now these two plainly assuming that Parsons had killed himself. While they stood staring in stunned silence, he studied them with swift observant glances. He noted the sleek gloss of wet hair against temple and cheek, the high light on noses, chins, cheek bones, the shine of downcast eyes glinting between their lids. Caught within the momentary spell of line and color, he forgot the dead man lying in sodden inertness before them. Ritchie's inscrutable mouth was compressed with some sterner emotion than grief for a fellow employee. Bitterness touched those corners, Jess thought. Bitterness, perplexity, certain other hidden things were there—but not grief.

Ritchie reached a long, deliberate arm, pulled a fold of gray blanket over those snaky black eyes staring so fixedly at nothing, and turned sharply away toward the fire. As though released from some hateful restraint, Bob Francis sighed deeply and followed his boss.

"How the devil did he get here?" Ritchie asked with abrupt harshness, and dropped his hat on a bench that he might unbutton his slicker and let warmth in to his chilled body.

Jess set the lamp on the log mantel in the exact position it should occupy to make a balanced picture, and was only subconsciously aware of the effect afterwards. "On my back," he said, and moved an old brass tobacco jar half an inch to the left.

"On your *back*?" Ritchie's voice had a strained sound as if he were holding it rigidly under control.

"Yes. I heard what seemed to be signal shots just down around the first turn. I went down there and it was Parsons, lying all humped up in the middle of the road."

"You heard—down around the turn—" Bewilderment rode Ritchie hard. He turned and looked at Bob Francis, who kicked a brand back into the fire and muttered something under his breath. Ritchie turned back to Jess. "You heard him—shoot himself that close to here?"

"I didn't say that. I said I heard three or four shots. One, and then three more. Just as I came up with the lantern, he fired again, into the air."

"Hunh." Ritchie glanced toward the bunk and lowered his voice in deference to the dead. "I don't get it. Damned if I do. Here's how it is, Jess. This thing has been building for over a week. Al's been drinkin' like a fish lately. Last day or so I thought he was in for a spell of snakes, but he went off his nut about enemies trying to kill him. This morning he got up wishin' he was dead. Said for half a cent he'd blow himself to hell. I didn't think so much of that—he's talked that way before, after a spree."

"That's right," Bob interjected into the pause.

"Most generally Al'd take another drink or two and forget it. To-day, though, he turned sulky. Kept muttering things like how he'd be better off dead, and so on. Right after dinner he ordered his horse and rode off down the valley. Bob, here, knows the frame of mind he was in—" He broke off, glancing at young Francis.

"Yeah," Bob responded, "he sure wasn't in no condition to be off by hisself with a shootin' iron handy. I thought at the

time—"

"You should of come and told me when he went," Ritchie reproached him. "I'd 'a' kept him home if I had to hog-tie him." He looked at Jess. "He must have had a bottle with him. Sure smells loud enough."

Jess moved his head slowly from left to right and back again. "What you smell is some whisky I gave him. Two drinks. Chuck had some in camp."

"Ain't got any left, I s'pose?" Bob hinted broadly, but Ritchie stopped him with a frown.

"Didn't Al have a flask on him? You went through his pockets, didn't you?"

Anger flared and as quickly subsided in Jess's greenish hazel eyes. Probably Tom Ritchie failed to realize how that sounded. One had to make allowance at a time like this.

"No," he said quietly, "I most certainly didn't go snooping in his pockets. I was busy trying to keep him alive." He glanced over his shoulder toward the shadowed corner. "I couldn't do much. No one could, I think. He was too far gone when I found him."

"Wasn't he able to talk—explain himself? Didn't he give any reason for doing it?" Ritchie had his slicker off and was lighting a cigarette. Jess wondered if it were only the match blaze which gave that strange shifty look to his eyes. "He said *something*, didn't he?"

"Not much. A few disjointed sentences—I was too busy to pay much attention."

"Well, what kinda sentences?" Ritchie's narrowed eyes watched Jess fixedly.

"Oh, he called me by name when I found him and he said he was shot. He asked me to get him in out of the storm. Of course he was groaning a great deal. Getting him on my back must have hurt him most damnably. I can see that now. At the time, I thought he was making more fuss than was necessary."

"He must of said more than that," Ritchie objected. "He was able to recognize you by lantern light; what else did he say?"

"Oh, he said his boots hurt him, so I managed to pull them off. It was after that I gave him the whisky. He asked for more. He was muttering—all incoherent, nothing lucid except that he kept telling me to stay with him. I'm sure he felt he couldn't last long, though he didn't say so."

Ritchie's cigarette was cold. He lighted another match and held it up, but his hand shook so that he could scarcely set the tobacco afire. Jess watched him, wondering what thoughts went shuttling back and forth behind that studying frown.

"Damn funny he didn't have more to say than that," he said finally, flipping the burnt match into the fire with an impatient gesture. "You hear what he muttered about?"

"I was on the jump, remember. He was suffering terribly, groaning and moaning. And it really wasn't long; not more than an hour, perhaps not that long. I had no thought of time, just of doing what I could to ease him."

"Nobody to blame but himself," Bob Francis volunteered. "He—"

"Cut that out, Bob," Ritchie growled savagely. "I hate a coward same as you do, and a suicide ain't nothing but a damn coward. But he's gone now—and anyway, he must of been crazy."

"He sure was," Bob made emphatic agreement.

"Well, the thing's done, and what we've got to do is play up. I know damn well the Senator would do anything in the world to keep this out of the papers. His old friend and ranch manager committing suicide would sure look bad right now, just when they're tryin' their damndest to frame something on him."

"That's right," Bob Francis echoed. "It sure would be bad right now."

"We've got to make out it was some accident." Ritchie eyed Jess sidelong. "Out hunting—gun went off accidentally—"

what d'you think, Jess?"

"You might possibly get away with it, Tom."

"We've *got* to get away with it. There's a bunch out to get the Senator any way they can. Knife him in the back, if they thought they'd get by with it. They're afraid of him, that's why. He's too honest and too powerful. They know they can't buy him, so they aim to do the next best thing and bust him. They sure would love to get hold of something like this."

Jess pulled his gaze away from the fire. "I don't see how they could use this against Senator Wolsey. Isn't he still on the Coast?"

"Yeah, but that wouldn't stop 'em. Al and the Senator's been cronies for ten years and more. You got no idea what raw deals they try to pull nowadays. Politics is sure rotten."

"Well, listen here," said Bob Francis. "Far as me and Jess knows, Al was out huntin' and shot himself accidental. Ain't that right, Jess?"

Jess lifted an elbow from the mantel, pushed back an unruly lock of brown hair and said nothing at all.

Ritchie's nostrils suddenly flared like a fractious horse. "He didn't *say* he meant to kill himself, did he?"

Jess's fingers lay still on his right temple. "No. He said, 'I'm shot.'"

"Well, that could mean an accident, couldn't it?"

"Certainly."

Ritchie sighed heavily. "Al was about as careless with a gun as any man I ever saw. For all I know or you know, it *was* an accident. About where—?"

Jess lifted his head and looked at Ritchie. "Do you want to see the wound?"

Something in Ritchie's eyes retreated. He seemed to wince, though Jess saw no movement. A mental flinching, he thought it was. "Where was he—shot?"

"In the side," Jess said simply. "A little to one side and below the heart. Do you want—"

"N-no, I'll take your word for it. Damn it, I hate to think—he was such a—"

"A crazy man isn't responsible for his acts."

"Sure. That's right." Ritchie covered a shudder with a swift shrug. "Sure, that's right." He seemed to be studying something and he seemed to be relieved. "There'll be an inquest, of course. But that's all right. I'll fix that." His spirits rose almost to cheerfulness. "You won't have to be called, even. Unless—how about it, Jess? You want to get mixed up with this, or not?"

"Not if I can help it, Tom. I—never did swear to a thing I didn't believe was the truth." He looked from Tom to Bob. "If I had to testify before a coroner's jury, I'd tell the truth."

"Any different from what you just told us? That sounded like an accident to me; why you so damned sure it wasn't?"

"That isn't the way I put it, Tom. As a matter of fact, I don't know anything except that he was shot and that he's dead. I am entitled to my opinion, I hope. And I certainly don't think it was accidental. Nothing he said gave me that impression."

Ritchie was watching every line and expression of his face, but Jess was well schooled in keeping his thoughts from revealing themselves without his consent. Ritchie turned, baffled, and looked at Bob.

"Maybe Jess didn't tell all of it," Bob shrewdly hazarded.

"Parsons means nothing to me. Why shouldn't I tell all he said?"

"That's for you to answer yourself. Put us under oath and about all we could tell for a fact was that we started out looking

for Al because he wasn't able to ride out by himself. Wasn't safe, rather. We get caught in this storm and head for your camp, and we find Al here dead and you alone with him. He's been shot. Now, that's as much as we *know*. We don't think you had anything to do with it, because we both know you. But a bunch of strange men could take them facts and think something entirely different. So you see, all you can tell us won't be a damn bit too much."

"I've already told you why I went out and brought him in and what he said. He was suffering terribly, remember. I feel sure he was dying when I found him, but at the time I was peeved because I had an idea he could have walked if he had wanted to make the effort. He couldn't. I know that now."

"Didn't he say any more than just what you told us?"

"A little. I told you he mumbled about his boots hurting him, and then when I said I'd get help, he understood that, for he said, 'Stay here!' And again, 'Don't leave me.' And he asked for whisky."

"All that don't prove a damn thing about how he come to do it."

"No, it doesn't." Jess stooped to thrust a fallen stick back into the blaze. "But if it had been an accident, I think he'd have said so. People are always wanting to tell exactly how it happened when they have an accident. The suddenness excites them into talking."

"College notion. Sounds like psychology. But it's the bunk when you come to real life." Ritchie became silent, frowning at the fire. Bob Francis waited anxiously, trying to keep his eyes from straying toward the corner where Parsons lay dead.

"Well, we oughta be comin' to some kinda agreement," he ventured nervously at last.

"Agreement's made," Ritchie said shortly. "If Jess keeps his mouth shut, we'll pack Parsons home and I'll do the rest. How about it, Jess?"

"You asked that once," Jess retorted. "It's your affair, not mine. All I did was carry him in here and do what I could for him; which was mighty little."

"If we handle this like I said we'd oughta, you'll have to forget the whole thing. No need to blab around about carrying him in here. We'll claim we found him out on the trail somewhere. We would of, if he'd been left where he was at."

Jess turned and looked straight into his face. "I'm not in the habit of blabbing what doesn't concern me. And if you think I'd leave a hurt dog out in all this storm—"

"Now, you got me all wrong. No need to get sore. Maybe I spoke outa turn, but this burns me up. Coming right now, it'll do the Senator more harm than murder. The opposition wouldn't like anything better than to say his ranch manager got guilty conscience or something and killed himself. They'd sure spread it all over the front page of every paper in the country."

"I don't see—"

"Course you don't see. You don't know the dirty double-crossing deals the Senator has been side-stepping. He's too many for 'em or they'd have had him railroaded or put on the spot long ago. That's why this has got to be kept outa the papers. I can make it stick with the coroner as an accident. I'll have to pull a fast one, but I can do it if you forget you know anything. Being friendly with the family, you oughta help protect the Senator."

Jess turned away. "I still don't see how this would affect him, but maybe I'm just dumb. Go ahead, call it what you please. I sha'n't say anything unless I'm dragged into it—and I don't suppose it matters to Parsons."

"Be a favor to him. You know that. I'll have to tell the Senator the truth—after the danger's all past. He'd sure appreciate your help, I know that. And I can tell you one thing, old kid, Senator Thomas Wolsey is a man that never forgets a kindness. You may never know just all this'll mean to him, but you can be damn sure you won't lose nothing by it."

"I certainly don't expect to profit anything by it," Jess said shortly. "I don't want to."

"Maybe you will more'n you know. You don't know what it's all about, but politics is a cutthroat game. A man as square

as the Senator has got to keep his back to the wall and both eyes peeled every minute. Enemies on every side ready to knife him in the back—frame-ups—wheels within wheels—"

Jess bent quickly to the hearth, hiding the start he gave. Wheels within wheels—it almost seemed like the dead man's voice repeating the words. He stole a glance toward the bunk as he stood up, but his voice was calm and unconcerned. "Coffee's boiling. A good hot cup will just about hit the spot, I should think."

"Damn right. We've got to beat it away from here with the body, storm or no storm."

"Slackin' up some," Bob Francis grunted. "Better not wait too long. Let the rain wash out our tracks."

"That's right. You got a head on you. Me, I ain't used to these secret p'formances." Ritchie smiled bleakly at Jess. "Wouldn't chance it for anybody else. Hope I'm never called on again for a job like this, but so long as we all think the same, I'm satisfied."

Jess filled two straight-sided white enamel cups with strong black coffee. As for himself, he felt that it would choke him now while that grim figure lay so quiet in the shadowed corner. He wondered how these two could be so unconcerned, and at the thought he lifted his eyes and studied them shrewdly.

Ritchie was still remarking upon the simplicity of covering up the facts so that no harm would come of the suicide, but even while he declared his certainty, Jess noticed that his hand shook like an old man with palsy. And Bob Francis, bending his head thirstily to the cup, was pasty gray and his mouth was loose, his lips trembling. A shock of complete understanding rippled along Jess's nerves. Say what they pleased, Tom Ritchie and Bob Francis were scared, terribly scared of something which neither had mentioned at all.

CHAPTER THREE

JESS WASHES HIS HANDS OF IT

Alloof and silent, Jess stood beside the mantel a passive spectator, while the two Diamond Slash men made gruesome preparation for their departure. The furious gale of the evening had settled to a steady drumming of rain on the roof, adding a melancholy note to the whole sordid tragedy. That they were loyally trying to protect the interests of their employer he had no doubt whatever, though he could not see the necessity of so much secrecy and lying. Even though their motive was honest, he did not like the idea and would have no part in it. There were moments when he might have helped, yet he leaned against the mantel with his hands in his pockets and watched them disapprovingly.

They had removed the bandage and what traces they could of the dressing and were replacing the garments he had pulled hastily off Parsons. They were in a hurry to be gone, he could see that; and yet Ritchie's nervous haste was suspended while he examined one by one each letter, card or scrap of writing which Parsons' pockets contained. He was going through a monogrammed bill-fold when he first felt himself observed.

"Favorite stunt of a suicide is to write some kinda letter telling all about why they done it," he explained, looking across at Jess. "Anything like that on Al, I want to glom it before the coroner gets hold of it."

"If it's there you'll find it," Jess made dry comment.

"I sure aim to," Ritchie retorted gruffly, and boldly dropped two flat keys into his pocket.

"There'll sure be hell a-poppin' if you don't find it," Bob Francis declared. "You through with that coat, Tom? Let's get it on 'im and get goin'."

Ritchie's fingers went questing here and there, feeling out the lining. He did not answer but presently he tossed the coat to Bob.

"Nothin' there. Maybe Jess'll help you put it on him."

"Help him yourself, Tom," Jess refused. "My work begins after you fellows remove yourselves."

"Yeah? What you goin' to be so damn busy about?" Ritchie stood tense, eyeing Jess sharply.

"Well, for one thing, Chuck's bedding will need to be washed and dried. Why? What did you think I was planning to do?"

"Hard to say," Ritchie muttered and turned to help the restive Bob. "Only, if you'll take my advice, you'll stick close to camp for the next few days. When the news gets up in here, you hear it like it's all a big surprise. See?"

"I haven't a doubt it will be," Jess made laconic retort. "Has it occurred to you that a suicide note is usually left at home? I never heard of one being found sewed into a coat lining. Did you?"

Ritchie gave him a black look. "You can't figure a crazy man. Al was a mountain rat for hiding things away."

"Yeah, even when he was sober," Bob gave his habitual confirmation.

Jess let it go. He built up the fire again, lighted the lantern and went out for more wood, lingering over the errand, hating to go back. When he did go in, Ritchie was pushing cartridges into the cylinder of Al Parsons' gun. He shifted his body to block Jess's view, and Jess threw down the wood and said nothing. It was none of his business what they did. He sat down before the fire, his back to the room and his unwelcome callers, and stared moodily into the flames. Let them manage the thing themselves. He would have nothing more to do with it.

He heard them muttering, arguing about which horse should carry the body of Parsons. It seemed to him that Bob Francis was already taking advantage of his position, talking back to Ritchie in a way no foreman should tolerate. Ritchie would have to put up with it now; he would not dare fire Bob. A nasty business, any way you looked at it.

Without turning his head to look, he was keenly aware of each movement behind him. Ritchie gruffly asked him to help

carry the body out and lift it on the horse huddled on the sheltered side of the cabin, but Jess refused to move.

"I carried him in alone," he said curtly. "The two of you should be able to carry him out."

"Oh, to hell with you!" swore Ritchie. "You'd come down off your perch damn quick if we took a notion to pin the shooting on you."

"Do you want to try it, Tom? You'll have to make up your mind pretty quick, remember. Once you get him away from here—"

"Oh, come on, Tom. Don't be a damn fool," Bob Francis expostulated. "You told Jess to keep outa the whole thing, didn't you? Take a hold of his feet, there. For criminey sake, let's get goin'!"

Jess watched them shuffle out into the rain, Bob in the lead with the lantern hung upon his arm, the dead man sagging between them. At the door Ritchie turned his head and looked back. Jess hoped that he could remember his face as it was then; dark, troubled, fierce questioning hostility in his eyes. Then he was gone and Jess was staring at the gleaming lances of rain driving slantwise across the doorway.

He was still gazing abstractedly out into the dark when yellow lantern light came flickering. Bob Francis stood framed in the doorway.

"Here's your lantern, Jess. And say, don't you pay no attention to Tom. His nerves is shot to hell over this thing. He never meant nothin'. You just—"

Off in the dark Ritchie ripped out an impatient oath. Bob set the lantern just inside the door and disappeared. Jess heard the rattle of his slicker and the squashy sound of his hurrying footsteps. There followed the indistinct tones of argument, then the pluck-pluck of hoofbeats receded down the trail.

Until all sound of their going blurred and merged with the drumming of rain, Jess stood where he was by the hearth. Abruptly he roused from listening, looked thoughtfully around the cabin, making up his mind to something. He went over and gathered Chuck's blankets into a bundle, picked up the lantern and went bareheaded out into the rain, carrying the bundle out away from his body as if it were something foul. Carefully, unheeding the storm, he stretched the blankets neatly on the rain-tautened clothesline, pinning the folds securely as he went.

Inside again, he hung the lantern from a nail where it would light the farthest corner from the fire, trimmed the lamp wick and turned it high. Resolutely he got out his drawing board from behind his bunk, unlocked a small steamer trunk and lifted out a roll of pastel paper, a box of French crayons. With frowning intentness he chose a gray-green tinted paper, fastened it with meticulous exactness to the board, opened his pastel box and fingered the crayons, choosing one or two and testing them on the paper.

"Traacherous devils—they'd finish me!"

Jess tensed, looked quickly toward Chuck's bunk stripped to its mattress. So abruptly had he remembered that stark terror of Parsons', for a second it had seemed almost as if he actually heard him utter the words. Nerves, of course; the effect of not knowing Parsons had carried the delusion of enemies. He supposed that was a common enough malady of the brain, though at the time he had been shocked into belief. But of course, if Parsons had been drinking heavily for days, he would be in a condition to imagine any horror, commit any wild deed.

Jess lighted a cigarette, tucked it into a corner of his mouth and squinted at the paper. Absently he lifted a thumb tack from a corner, smoothed an invisible slackness in the sheet, reset the tack in the hole it had first made in the soft wood. He sighed, moved the drawing board abstractedly to an angle where the light struck full upon it, then discovered that his lifted glance fell full upon Chuck's denuded bunk.

That would not do at all. No use in dwelling upon the ugly tragedy now. There was nothing to be gained by thinking about it and he hoped to accomplish something by forgetting it for a few hours. This evening—or what was left of it—was much too rare an opportunity to waste. He had looked forward to it, had hurried his chores so that he would be free soon after Chuck left. The sudden wind-storm that drove smoke back down the chimney had balked his plan at first, then Parsons—But that was over and done with. He would forget Parsons; wipe the whole thing out of his mind.

He moved the drawing board to the other side of the room, set it tilted like an easel on a shelf, held it there with a rawhide thong stretched from nail to nail on either side, rearranged his lights. With the dropping of the wind the room was warm; too warm. He took off his coat, then remembered that the working sketch of the picture he meant to draw was in the little loose-leaf sketch-book he always carried in his pocket. As he held the coat up and fumbled for the book, he had a flashing mental picture of Ritchie feeling along the lining of Parsons' coat, looking for a suicide note. Ritchie's avid intentness—

No, he had to cut out such thoughts. He couldn't afford to give another minute to that grisly affair. There was another picture he must capture and bring into concrete form of color and line. As he pulled out the book and found the small, hastily sketched scene, his lips twitched whimsically, remembering how his father had ridden up and caught him sitting there apparently idle on his horse when he should have been very diligently active.

Not two weeks ago, that had been. He could well understand how it would strike an old cowman to see a fellow deliberately waiting to draw a picture of a cow bogged down to her forequarters in alkali mud, when he should be tossing his loop on her and dragging her out on solid ground. He could see his dad's point of view, all right, though there was more than that behind his torrent of invective. Some of the things the old man had said to him rankled. They had been spoken with the barbed bitterness of narrow-minded injustice. An old rangeman with no understanding nor even a liking for art, Dave Robison had combed his vocabulary for abusive words enough to express the contempt he felt for his oldest son.

Jess pushed the incident from him as he had pushed the thought of Parsons, and studied the sketch with deep satisfaction. There was the cow, true to the life in every pencil stroke. A regular Russell picture she had made, with her drooped horn caked with mud and the slack posture of shoulders and neck accenting the dull resignation of her eyes fixed upon him. Every authentic detail he had drawn with swift accuracy, even to the stringy slaver of her muddy jaws.

While he laid color upon color for his sky effect, blending and rubbing them into the paper with his finger tips, smudging a deeper hue of cloud here and there, touching edges with flecks of orange until sunset glowed splendidly over the blank gray of his middle distance, he forgot Parsons and the shabby passing of his dwarfed soul within that room. He was thinking of some of the things his father had said to him that day. How he cursed the day he ever gave in to Jess's mother and sent such a lazy worthless young whelp to school; how he never would be anything better than a range bum, not worth his grub to any cow outfit.

That Jess had finished his sketch while his father upbraided him, and afterwards had gone calmly about the rescue, had counted for nothing. That he had thrown his rope with a negligent skill that dropped the loop neatly over the cow's two horns, and that he had dragged the cow out to solid ground and loosened the loop like an old hand, went unregarded. The cow had struggled to her feet, stood wobbly for a minute and then had wanted to fight either or both horsemen, but that did not count for anything either. Nothing counted save the enormity of the offense. Jess knew that his father would have given anything for the nerve to lash him with his quirt and that his father did not quite dare the attempt. He never had dared lay hands on him since Jess was a gangling boy of fourteen or so. There was something that awoke and looked out through Jess's eyes at such times; something his father dared not face.

Jess did not know that, but he did know that his being sent up to Alder Spring camp to help Chuck get out corral poles before round-up time was calculated as a punishment for his picture making. No man on the ranch wanted to "bach" with Chuck, who was the nagging kind of bully. Chuck had jeered the steamer trunk, but had he known what that trunk contained, he would have made life unbearable. Artists and poets were contemptible weak creatures, in Chuck's opinion, and he did not make life too pleasant as it was.

Jess worked fast. As the scene grew under his fingers, it caught and held him, shutting out his father, Parsons, Chuck, the darkening coals within the fireplace, the drumming rain, the passing hours. For him nothing existed save that moodily brilliant sunset, the enchanted emptiness of the prairie, the stagnant pool that had become a boghole and the spotted cow with the drooped horn lying there half submerged, too hopeless to struggle, fear staring out of her eyes. For greater dramatic interest he set a wolf upon the nearest slope, thinking that is where Russell (who was his secret inspiration and idol) would have put a wolf to wait.

At three o'clock in the morning Jess rubbed out the wolf, hid drawing board and picture behind his bunk, carefully removed all traces of his work and went to bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

FIVE, AND IT'S SUICIDE

At dawn Jess awoke thinking of those revolver shots he had heard last night. He had not thought much about them before, but now it seemed of vital importance. He began counting, touching a finger tip to the blanket for every shot. "One when I opened the door to let the smoke out. That's when I ducked back inside. One more, then two—or was it three?" He shut his eyes and tried to remember exactly how that sudden fusillade had sounded. The thought persisted that there had been three quick shots, but the wind and sleet made such a whooping noise that he might have been mistaken. The shot Parsons had fired as Jess came down around the thicket he was sure of, and also the first and second. It was those quick shots in between—

"If he fired three shots, that accounts for every bullet—" He turned his head and scowled at Chuck's bunk opposite, trying to remember exactly what had happened. It was like a nightmare, the most vital factors foggy and elusive.

Last night, for instance, he remembered a distrust of Tom Ritchie, an inclination to take everything he and Bob had said with a grain of salt. They both had been pretty badly shaken by the event. Scared, if he were any judge of men's faces. He had watched them, had been guarded and suspicious. Now he decided that their own panic had impelled his attitude; that it wasn't anything except ragged nerves all around. They were all of them rattled, ready to jump at their own shadows.

Ritchie was all right and so was Bob. Probably they had been pretty edgy when they started out. Who wouldn't be, with the Senator fighting a pack of crooks out on the Coast, trusting everything at this end to Albert Parsons, and he lying down on the job? Worse, because he had been hitting the booze until it got him where he was imagining all sorts of fool things. Still—he wished he could get it out of his head that Parsons had fired six shots to call help. That couldn't be true. If he had fired one bullet into his own body, that would leave five in the gun. He surely wouldn't have thrown out that empty shell and shoved a full cartridge in its place. Not after he was shot.

He got into his clothes, started a fire in the old cookstove standing back in a corner of the room farthest from the fireplace, filled the teakettle and set it over the flame. It was still raining with a soft dismal persistency that gave no promise of clearing. Knowing Chuck, he did not expect him back while the storm lasted, and he went down and turned the work team loose in the pasture and fed his saddle horse in the corral. If it kept on raining, he might ride over home. Even his father could scarcely expect him to slop around in the woods, getting out poles in the rain.

As a rule Jess ate with the frank appetite of any other husky young fellow working in the open, but this morning food lay forgotten on his plate. The cabin oppressed him. It looked dingy, forlorn. He did not think it was because a man had died in that far corner last night; he was not particularly squeamish about death. It was something else; something evil hiding itself out of sight.

All that babbling, that wanting to tell him something—something worth money to the man who knew. Had that been sane talk—or delirium? If Parsons had known what he was saying, those broken sentences certainly put a different face on things. It must have been just a crazy notion. There was nothing like that going on at the Diamond Slash. Insane mutterings, that was all. And yet—

Jess pushed back from the table and got up. Those shots bothered him. If he had heard six, then Parsons could not have killed himself. The wound was not that fresh; even Jess could tell that. It had bled too long. Some of the stains on Al's shirt had turned almost brown. Parsons must have been shot much farther down the trail and spent some time getting up to where he had fallen in the road.

Jess went and stood in the doorway, gazing down toward the misty valley. The cabin light would show a long way off. About the only light Parsons could have seen near enough to give any hope of reaching help. Not that it mattered now. Parsons was dead. Just how or where need not concern Jess.

Yet it did concern him, kept him from leaving the place, though the reason for that was obscure even to himself. He washed his few breakfast dishes, made his bed. It was then that he discovered the stains on the floor, the smears along the side of Chuck's bunk. He gave an involuntary shiver and backed away, staring at the spots.

No wonder he had that hunch to stay. What if Chuck came home and saw that? Or his father?

As he was making his second trip from the spring with two sloshing buckets, some one came riding up behind him,—Bob Francis, leading a saddled horse that looked as if it had been out all night. Bob dismounted at the cabin corner and followed Jess inside. His face looked haggard, older than his years.

He went over to the cold fireplace and stood there, leaning an elbow on the mantel, watching Jess empty the water into a zinc tub on the stove.

"Goin' to clean house, hunh?"

Jess nodded. "Going to try, anyway."

Bob began moodily to light a cigarette. "Chuck didn't get back yet, hunh?" he asked, and drew a match sharply along the mantel edge.

"Not yet." Jess was moving things on a high shelf where he hazily recalled having seen a can of condensed lye.

Bob eyed him sidelong, speaking around the cigarette between his lips. "What time did Chuck leave yesterday, Jess?"

Jess glanced back over his shoulder. "Right after we brought down our second load of poles. About four o'clock, I think. Why?"

"A—nothing. I was just wondering. We never got a sight of him. Went to town, didn't he?"

"That," said Jess gravely, "was his ultimate destination, I believe."

Bob grunted. "Hand me over that hatchet, kid. I'll have to bust them words up and take 'em a piece at a time." But immediately he fell back into his somber aspect. "Jess, what's your idea about last night?"

Jess gave him a quick look. "Just how do you mean that?"

"You know. What do you think about the suicide theory? On the square, just between you and me and the gate post." He emptied smoke out through his nostrils. "Let's have the low-down, now we're alone."

Jess backed a step and sat down on the table, pushing back his big range hat and relaxing a little from his studied calm. His lips opened for speech, then closed and tightened. He shook his head. "What do you think about it yourself, Bob?" And he added after a breath, "You know as much as I do."

"Oh, yeah? I wasn't with him. You was."

"You know what led up to it. I don't."

Bob smoked meditatively. "You heard what Tom said."

"Yes, I heard."

"You think there was more to it than that?"

"I don't know. Was there, Bob?"

"Now," said Bob, "you're askin'." He hesitated. "It coulda been that way, all right. Al's been pickled for two weeks. That's straight. But—well, between you and me—not to go any farther, mind—did Chuck ever make any talk to you about Al?"

"Against him, you mean? Nothing in particular; why?"

"Well, nothing. I just got to wondering, is all."

Jess felt in his pocket, got his cigarettes and prepared to light one. "You know Chuck. Maybe you've heard him give a man a good word—I never have, so far." He studied Bob's profile. "Why do you think—?"

"I don't know as I do. Just got to speculating, I guess. You acted to me last night as if you didn't go so strong on that suicide business. Why?" He straightened, faced Jess squarely. "You knew it wasn't no accident—at least you booed the

idea that it coulda been—and you had your doubts about the other. Now I follow your line of thinkin' and make a guess of my own, and you can't see that with a spyglass. Why? What the hell *do* you think?"

"I don't see that it matters what I think," Jess retorted. "You two went ahead and doped out a story to suit yourselves and you asked me to keep my nose out of it. What more do you want?"

Bob gave him a long questioning stare. "I don't know, Jess." Suddenly his voice was disarmingly rueful. "I just can't be satisfied till I know the facts. I wish I'd been here when you found him. I might of been able to do something—find out just how the damn thing happened. I—I kinda liked Al. He was pig-headed as the devil, and I guess I was about the only one in the outfit, outside the Senator, that had any use for him. But he was always fair enough to me and I'd like to have —"

"I don't see what you could have done, Bob. He was too far gone."

"Not too far gone to talk. You said so yourself."

"He could, yes. But most of the time he sounded pretty wild and I didn't take any stock in it. I don't yet."

He hesitated, looked at Bob again. "The thing that's bothering me is not so much what he said. What I'd like to be sure of is just how many shots he fired after he fell out there beyond the point of brush. And there's another thing, Bob. What was Ritchie doing with his gun when I came in with the wood?"

"Al's gun, you mean? Lookin' at it. He wanted to see how many shots had been fired. It was plumb empty. Why?"

"I don't know, Bob—somehow it seems to stick in my mind I heard six shots. If that's right, where did the bullet come from that killed him?"

Bob stared. "You sure?"

"No, I'm not. That's the worst of it. You know how the wind was blowing. It may have been five."

"Hunh!" said Bob. "Five, and it's suicide. Six, and it's liable to be murder. You never said a word about it last night." His eyes asked why.

"I didn't think of it last night. It was this morning when I began to count; or try to. It's damnable not to be sure. A suicide is one thing to cover up as an accident. Murder is something else again. I certainly wouldn't want to—what do they call it?—compound a felony." He pushed his fingers impatiently through his hair. "What were you asking about Chuck for?" he demanded bluntly. "What's your reason for thinking he may have done it?"

"No reason; only he was on the road somewhere. I was just speculating." Bob moved uneasily, changed elbows on the mantel, rubbed his cigarette ash off on the edge of a gray rock. "Al was such a damn ornery cuss, I didn't know but what he might have said something to rile Chuck."

"I wouldn't go speculating like that to outsiders," Jess warned him.

"Think I would, you're crazy! Anyway, Ritchie's called in the coroner and made his report. I don't know's there'll be an inquest, even. Tom's got this county in his pocket; or the Senator has, and that's all the same. He told 'em he'd sure appreciate it if they kept it quiet like, on account of the folks comin' back right away and the missus needin' complete rest, account of nerves." Bob heaved a sigh of admiration. "It sure takes Tom Ritchie to lay it on thick when he wants to. I betcha there won't be more'n four lines in the paper about it. It'll be what you ejuated guys call a closed incident."

"It can't be," Jess said uneasily, "if the facts point to—murder."

"That's what I been tryin' to get at. Do they or don't they? If you've got something you're holdin' up your sleeve, let's have it. Ritchie ain't the man to cover a thing like that. He just didn't want it to get out that the Senator's manager had committed suicide right at this time. Something to do with that oil war—or whatever it is—on the Coast. Maybe if we go over everything Al said, no matter how crazy it sounded at the time—"

"Well, what about somebody framing Parsons somehow? Any reason for some one at the ranch trying to double-cross him?"

"Did he say that?" Bob's stare sharpened.

"Yes, he did. And he wanted to tell me something. He said it would serve the damn fools right if he did."

"You know what it was?"

"No, I don't. I advised him to keep quiet and not talk any more than was necessary. I went after some coffee and he was dead when I looked at him again. That was just as you fellows showed up."

"Nuts," said Bob harshly. "Treacherous as a sidewinder. I always knowed it."

CHAPTER FIVE

JESS REFLECTS

Bob lighted a fresh cigarette with the stub of the last one. "Been talkin' that way for a week," he said more calmly. "Offered to sell me some secret he had—or take me in on it, either one. Some blackmail scheme, I took it to be. Say anything to you?"

"Well, he started to. Did he tell you some treacherous devils were after him and would kill him for what he knew?"

"I'll say he did! Why, I had to hunt the place over with a flashlight the other night. He claimed men was hiding behind the haystack with hand grenades. Next night it was rifles."

Jess looked astonished. "What gets me, Bob, is that a man like Senator Wolsey would have Parsons for a ranch manager," he said.

"Yeah," Bob agreed, "that does look queer till you know the inside. They was friends before the War. Senator was a dollar man. Parsons served overseas. Captain or something. Gas and a touch of shell shock. Senator put him in charge here to kinda keep him where it's quiet. I got to hand it to him, Al Parsons was sure all there when it come to handlin' the books and looking after the business end. Course, he let Tom handle the outside. He didn't know which end of a cow was the front, hardly, but he was hell for figgerin'. I don't guess all this craziness would of broke out on him again if he'd 'a' let the booze alone."

Jess got up, flinging out both hands with a dismissing gesture. "Well, that accounts for the whole thing, doesn't it? Shell shock and whisky. I don't think we need to look any farther than that. Do you, Bob?"

Bob waited while he turned the matter over in his mind. Then he too straightened with an unconscious air of satisfaction.

"You said it, kid. Soon as you told me the way he talked last night, I had him pegged. Same old nutty notion. Lord, we been hearin' that for a week, over at the ranch. Old stuff. No, I don't guess we need to worry no more. He done it his own self, just like he said he would."

Jess tested the water in the tub with his finger, drawing an invisible scroll. His face had brightened wonderfully.

"It certainly takes quite a load off my mind," he confessed, looking across at Bob with a half smile of relief. "I'm sorry it happened, of course. But I won't have to worry about those shots any more, that's one comfort. It's safe to assume that I heard five."

"Sure, that's all you heard. All you could hear. The first time he fired was down the road about a mile. Anyway, that's my guess, and it's as good as any. It's where the trail from here comes into the main road. I thought maybe Chuck had met up with him there and they both stopped and took a few drinks, and maybe had words or something. I was just guessin', understand."

"Pretty wild guess, I'd say."

"Well, I found the bottle there where Parsons had ditched it. Empty, of course, and I know for a fact he started off with a full pint. Didn't look like he'd drink all that in them few miles—not unless he had help. His horse was away this side. He'd tried to beat it back toward home, but a bridle rein got caught in some bushes, so he stayed right there. Dead gentle; Parsons couldn't ride anything else." He flipped his cigarette into the ashes and resettled his wet hat on his head. "Well, I got to be ridin'. You set tight, kid, and don't say nothin' to nobody. Ritchie's bankin' on yuh."

He left as abruptly as he had arrived, and Jess went to work on the cabin floor man fashion, sprinkling condensed lye on certain gruesome splotches, sloshing on warm water with a basin and scrubbing the boards vigorously with the stubby broom. He brought in Chuck's blankets and hung them before the fireplace, built up a hot fire and watched them steam while he cleaned the cupboards. He whistled and sang over his work, because he did not want to think. Yet the day dragged interminably. By late afternoon the rain ceased. Chuck could come at any time he pleased. His blankets were dry and his bunk made up ready for use, the floor was clean, with no glaring stains, and there was nothing whatever to rouse curiosity or comment, so far as Jess could discover.

Drying those blankets had used up the cut wood and Chuck hated an empty woodbox, probably because it suggested cutting more, which he abhorred. Jess went out to the woodpile, glad of a valid reason for leaving the cabin for awhile. He wished he could think of as sound a reason for riding home that evening, and he stood debating with himself while he gazed down through the low pass and out across the misty level. Pale sunlight threw a delicate radiance upon the hills beyond, giving to the wide arms of the JR coulee a specious smiling look of invitation, as if they waited expectantly, ready to welcome him home.

Jess sighed. Whatever welcome there was for him there would be as inarticulate as the hills, he told himself. And whatever there was of harsh disapproval would be expressed with look and word. In twenty-four years Jess had learned quite well what to expect and had built a barrier of aloofness between himself and his home. Unless he knew his father was gone, he would not ride without reason through his own gate.

And it was his own gate, though his father chose to ignore the legal fact. It had been his grandfather's ranch in the first place, and his grandfather had stood protectively between Jess and the father who hated him. Dave Robison had wanted a girl child. He did not like boys, he said. He wanted a girl, and he meant to name her Jessie. It happened that Jess was born. He got the name and his father's displeasure along with it. A few years later that became hate when Jess inherited the ranch, to be held in trust for him until he was twenty-five. Grandfather Robison, meaning to be prudent, unwittingly left his favorite a bitter gift when he added that clause.

Jess had never seen a copy of that will. No one except his mother had ever talked of it. But he remembered in a general way what his grandfather had wanted. The home ranch was to be held in trust for Jess until he was twenty-five, then turned over to him with all cattle and horses running under the JR brand. In the event of his death, or if he should prove to be unworthy or incompetent to own and manage such a piece of property, then the title should pass to his father if living, or to his other heirs.

An odd arrangement, Jess thought it. He remembered thinking it was queer when he heard it read just after his grandfather's funeral. He was only ten and his father had ordered him from the room. But an old man who held the paper—the lawyer, he later understood—had looked over his glasses and said, "If that is the boy named Jesse, he has a right to be present. The will concerns him intimately."

So Jess had stayed and had listened with the big ears commonly supposed to belong to little pitchers like himself. He heard that Grampaw had given him the JR ranch and stock, only his father would be boss just the same for years and years. His father had the ranch over on Birch Creek, and all the Lightning cattle, and some mortgages and things. He knew that his father was terribly angry at Grampaw. He didn't have to say so, his looks showed that. He hoped that anger would not include himself, because he wasn't to blame if Grampaw wanted to give him the ranch. He guessed Grampaw had a right to do what he pleased with his own things.

Even at ten Jess had understood perfectly why his father led him into the big empty barn that afternoon and whipped him until his shirt stuck to his back. It wasn't because he had been caught in the act of feeding his colt a handful of oats; it was because Grampaw had given him the JR ranch.

Later on, his understanding grew to a broader comprehension of the situation. His grandfather had meant to demonstrate his faith in the boy who had not been wanted. He wished to encourage Jess to grow up with an ambition in life, to be an honest, industrious young man altogether worthy of the gift that waited for him. As it worked out, Jess was rated a black sheep without having earned the title. And he was stubborn—that much at least he had inherited from his father. He knew that his faults were magnified to others, that even the JR riders thought and spoke of him slightly because his father set them the example. He knew that his father treated him as if he were a born fool; that he was called lazy, shiftless, stubborn as a mule.

But he also knew what he wanted, what he meant to accomplish, and that without forfeiting his right to his inheritance when the time came. Let them talk, let them think what they pleased. The hard years had taught him self-control, patience. Behind his barrier of reserve he stood invulnerable, biding his time. Lizbeth stood by him, and his mother as much as she dared. Little Joe, his younger brother, was a weather vane, turning whichever way the wind blew. Joe was just a kid, anyway, and didn't count much. Sixteen and aspiring to be a champ rider. But Lizbeth—for a girl she certainly showed good stuff. Brains, grit—she seemed to be wise to everything and everybody.

It was Lizbeth whom Jess particularly wanted to see. He could tell her about Parsons and see what she thought about it.

And he wanted to show her that picture he made last night and see what she thought about putting that wolf back in again. Lizbeth was keen. She seemed to get right to the heart of a thing.

But there was no reason why he should ride over home now when the storm was over, and he would have to get up early and cut poles. Jess picked up the ax and went to work chopping alder branches and trunks too heavy for poles. The task appealed to him, gave him a satisfaction difficult to express in words.

He liked the quick deep bites of the sharp blade into the gray-barked sticks. The clean woodsy smell of the fresh cuts, their creamy shade against the gray struck a pleasant note in the dreary mood that had held him through the day. He admired the smooth glitter of his ax when he lifted it up into a slanting bar of sunshine. His father would have snorted and called him a half-wit when he raised the ax and held it poised in mid-air while he studied it, tilting his head this way and that and squinting along its dazzling surface.

Even Chuck would have chortled when he described that performance to the other boys as proof that Jess was not all there mentally. But Jess had long ago learned discretion. He did not hold an ax up in the air and turn it this way and that to catch the light when he was likely to be observed.

Alone, he was likely to behave strangely. Just now he took the trouble to toss the chopped sticks over against a dwarfed juniper bush growing out from under a huge brown boulder, because it had suddenly occurred to him what an effective color combination that would make. At least, he wanted to try it out and see just how it would look—and he thought how Lizbeth would be the only one in the family he would want to know of the experiment.

He chopped with intermittent zeal, building a shapely gray cone with touches of old ivory against the green and brown. Now and then he would stop and stand for some minutes motionless, staring steadfastly at the heap. Though he would presently tear it down and carry it inside, it seemed to be vitally important just now to shape the pile just so; important enough to send him over there twice to turn certain sticks so that the split sides were uppermost.

Working so, Jess chopped wood enough to keep the fireplace going for three full evenings. It took that much wood to build the pile as high as he must have it, in order to balance the other objects in his simple still-life composition.

He believed he had struck an unusual note there, particularly in the effect of the orange-tinted sunlight on rock and bush and the gray-and-old-ivory woodpile. The color contrast in that scraggly bush growing out from under the rock fascinated him. The gray of the wood was just the right tone, only he didn't want a woodpile—

A gray wolf. That was it. Or wolf pups sunning themselves just about where the woodpile stood now. Three or four of them, with perhaps one sitting up against the juniper, looking out across the prairie, watching for their mother. He'd put the den just down there where that low branch lay along the ground; paint out the branch altogether and show an edge of gravel bank and the hole, the kind of place a wolf would choose for her den. That creamy tint of the inside wood—he would need a touch of that in the foreground. Not wood, of course. You wouldn't be likely to find any sticks of freshly split wood beside a wolf den—

Bones! Of course, he thought with a sigh of relief. Ivory white joints of a calf's leg, fresh and smooth—those little devils of pups would have polished and gnawed till the shanks were clean as a whistle. That's why they'd be watching for the old lady to come bringing more meat.

He sent a questioning stare into the sun. Old lady wolves, he remembered, would not be coming in at sundown. Not likely, anyway. They did their hunting at night. If she ranged out a long way from home—and she'd be pretty apt to—she might be getting back a little after sunrise. This yellow light on rock and bush—well, if the den faced west instead of east, the early morning sun would look like that. Just about as soft a yellow, almost orange.

Jess sighed without knowing it. That picture should be done in oil. That's what Russell would use as a matter of course. But what was a fellow going to do when he had no easel, no canvas, no paint—worse still, when he had no place where he could work on a picture and be safe from prying eyes and the jeering comments of a fellow like Chuck, who was always trying to be funny at some one's expense? Crayon it would have to be. He could work faster with the pastels, of course, but they would not bear much handling afterward except when framed under glass, and that was quite as impracticable as paint. It seemed as though he must struggle along handicapped at every turn, with some of his best work smudged and spoiled because he must slip around and do it on the sly and carry it hidden like bootleg liquor. There were moments when Jess boiled up almost to the point of exploding into rebellion, yet somehow he never did explode.

An indefinable scuffing noise up near the top of the hundred-foot slope pulled his thoughts away from the problem. He turned and looked up that way, but the sun dazzled him and he could see nothing. The noise stopped. A rabbit, probably, rattling the brush. He brought his gaze back to the juniper bush, the boulder and the stack of wood, but the picture he had visioned was gone, elusive as the wolf pups he had almost seen sitting there, watching for the old she-wolf to come trotting up with her kill.

For another full minute he stood trying to recapture his artist's mood, but to no avail. The spirit, the atmosphere of the picture was gone. He could no longer imagine a group of perky-eared pups sitting there on their haunches, licking hungry chops, the tooth-polished bones of earlier feastings scattered at their feet. He could see no half-concealed den mouth showing at the top of a gravelly bank; nothing except a pile of wood that must be carried inside for his supper fire.

Up among the rocks the rabbit, if rabbit it was, scuffed again with a stealthy sound and a handful or so of fine gravel came sliding down, but Jess did not look that way again. His picture mood was gone, he was back to the unpleasant facts of his surroundings. He walked over to the juniper bush, knelt on one knee with his back to the bluff and began piling sticks across his left arm.

He was just tensing his leg muscles to rise with a full armload when something struck his hat down over his eyes with a vicious blow that knocked him forward. It seemed as though the whole hill came down on top of him. He was dimly aware of the noise of rocks, wet earth and snapping brush rushing over and around him, then he sank into a velvet blackness where even dreams could not follow.

CHAPTER SIX

LIZBETH TO THE RESCUE

A brooding silence followed the last whispering trickle of sand, as if Nature had hushed her world and was holding a finger to her lips. The sun lingered to look, then sank behind the hill. Only the shadows moved out away from boulder and bush, reaching and dulling the gray pile of dead alder lying just as the shorn boughs had been flung from the wagon before the storm. The ax blade took a faint rosy hue from the brightening clouds, then darkened imperceptibly as the glow faded. Finally, when the long shadows had merged into dusk, a weasel in his new spring coat of brown flashed out from under the far side of the boulder and halted to stare, his beady little eyes coldly appraising Jess.

Probably fifteen minutes had passed in this seeming serenity, when the scuffing noise was renewed on the precipitous slope; an indefinable sound, irregularly spaced. To Jess, hearing it with one side of his head close to the ground, the noise was like slow cautious footsteps. As he lay there, half dazed and not quite realizing what had happened, he believed it was Chuck coming to the rescue.

With that vague thought he felt a languid impulse to call out, but the effort seemed not worth while. His numbed brain refused to reason why. Then a second wave of blackness flowed in upon him, engulfed him, carried him back into a dreamless lapse of all thought.

When next he opened heavy eyes, it was with something of a shock that he took a sidelong view of his immediate surroundings. He was still lying prone upon the scattered sticks he had gathered into his arm when the slide came down. An enormous weight pressed him down and there seemed to be stick ends poking at him from every side. It was dark and Chuck had not yet come.

Slowly his reasoning faculties returned, but haltingly and with intervals of dazed drowsiness which left him as suddenly as they came. During the first minutes of clear thinking, he remembered that Chuck was in town and was quite likely to stay another night at least, if he happened to be winning. Poker was Chuck's chief entertainment when he helped himself to a vacation; Jess remembered that now with a bitter certainty.

So it was not Chuck's footsteps he had heard or thought he heard. He tried to think who else might be up on the bluff, but a hammer of pain was beating in his head and he let the matter go for the present. He shouted, but with his mouth pressed against a wide smooth chip, his voice was muffled and would not carry far. He tried to pull himself free, but with his first movement he felt an ominous shifting and settling of the load and he was afraid to try again. He did not feel as if any bones were broken and he decided to let well enough alone for the present. Except for that terrific hammering in his head and a dull ache somewhere in his body, he felt all right. Only he couldn't move with that weight on him. And presently he drifted off somewhere and forgot the whole thing.

Another time he thought he was fighting some one who was trying to push him under a road roller. It seemed to be his father and then it was Albert Parsons. It was all a confused jumble and he never got out from under the roller at all. He was like a bug under a man's boot.

So the night passed, mercifully shortened by the stupor that held him. He was aroused at last by the sound of uneven chopping. He thought it was young Joe hacking kindling wood and he was not particularly interested. His head ached intolerably and the sun was shining in his face, so that he kept his eyes closed. It was hardly worth while moving, he thought. And he never saw such heavy bedding in his life. These blankets weighed a ton. Then he dozed again while the childish hacking went on and spaced some vague dream.

Abruptly he awoke, his breath caught in his throat. The slide was moving with a grinding rattle and the sharp cracking noise of breaking wood. Instinctively he clamped his jaws together and braced himself for the crash. It did not come. The rattle ceased. He could feel something pounding in his throat and he knew that for the first time in his life, almost, he was scared.

Some one had him by an arm, tugging at him. "Jess! Can't you move at all? You're so heavy I can't—you'll have to help yourself as much as you can."

Jess opened his eyes and saw Lizbeth in riding breeches, shiny boots astraddle, both hands gripping his wrist. Her face

was pale, with beads of perspiration around her mouth. "Do try!"

"There's a rock—big as a house—on top of me—"

"Silly!" Lizbeth gave a hysterical giggle. "If that's all that's holding you down—That rock was on the juniper bush and the bush was on you. It was balanced pretty—darn—precariously, let me tell you—so I chopped the bush and slid the rock off the other way. There isn't a thing holding you down. Unless," she added with studied flippancy, "you like sleeping on the woodpile." She braced herself, gave another long and steady pull. "Come, get up! Don't you know it's morning?"

Jess tried. His legs were sticks, his side when he moved stabbed him with hot knife blades. But Lizbeth kept urging, coaxing, berating him. By her very insistence she fought the lethargy that had him. She got him up where she could take his leaning weight on her slim shoulders. Tottering under the load, she impelled him forward to the back door, where her wabbling knees nearly failed her; over the low sill, across the scrubbed floor to the bed.

Jess fell again into blackness. For how long he never knew. His next conscious sensation was the hot and twangy trickle of coffee into his mouth. He gulped, swallowed until the cup was taken away from his lips and his head found the pillow again. Presently he blinked, opened his eyes and looked at Lizbeth.

"You been tapping Chuck's bottle," he charged reproachfully.

"Anyway, it worked," she retorted unashamed. "Coffee royal. I had some myself, if it's anything to you. I sure needed *something*, after that siege! Do you realize the predicament you were in? A rock as big as that table over there was just *teetering* against a juniper bush beside you, ready to come down on you at the slightest excuse. The bush was splintered down near the root, almost broken off. I was afraid it was going to give, any minute. If it had—" She shut her eyes, shivering at the bare thought.

"I thought I heard chopping. Was that you, Sis?"

"I'll say it was! It was darn risky business, but I saw how I could cut off a couple of main branches that were sort of holding the rock forward, and its weight would tip it backward, once the support was removed. I was scared to death, Jess. I was afraid the chopping would tilt the rock. But the woodpile and the bush together kept it from crushing the life out of you, and when the rock slid back onto the ground, the bush snapped up away from you and I could drag you out."

"I could have dragged myself out, maybe, only it was too dark to see what I was doing—"

"Dark when it happened?"

"No, dark when I came to. Something knocked me in the head."

Lizbeth made an expressive sound with her breath. "I'll say it did! There's a lump half as big as my fist on the back of your head and your scalp's cut and bruised. I used some of the whisky on that. I hope," she added darkly, "it's good stuff and not some of that ungodly brew the old Frenchman makes up in the hills somewhere. That's rank poison. I had to take a chance and douse it on. I never thought about the quality while I was working on you."

"I don't know. Chuck claimed it was bonded stuff."

"We'll hope so. How do you feel, Jess? I mean, do you think you're badly hurt?"

"Maybe a broken rib. Feels like it, but it may be just a bruise. I'll be all right;—what I want to know is, how you got here. Anything wrong at home?"

Lizbeth was sitting on Chuck's bunk, watching Jess with an anxiety she did her best to hide.

"It's positively weird," she declared. "Honestly, Jess, it is the weirdest thing I ever heard of."

"That landslide? I can think of other names for that."

"No, not the landslide—and I've got something to say about that too, when you're better able to cope with the situation."

"Cope. That's a high-class word, Sis. Use it a lot, why don't you?"

Lizbeth frowned. "Jess Robison, has that hopped-up coffee gone to your head? I'm serious, I'll have you know."

Jess fumbled with the bandage on his head, pushing it off his right eye. "I give up. You're serious. What's weird, then? Me?"

"Oh, you! You're always weird. Never mind, now—the way you're holding your breath and squinting up your eyebrows, I think I'd better beat it and get a doctor out here. You can't fool me, old dear. You're hurt worse than you let on." She picked up her gloves and stood up, tucking silky blond hair under her soft felt hat pulled low over her eyes. Lizbeth was like an impish child, until one looked into her steadfast gray eyes and saw the cool intelligence there.

Jess stretched out a hand to her. "Don't go making a fuss—getting a doctor out here and all that, Sis. A cracked rib hurts like the devil but it doesn't amount to anything. My head isn't so good, either, and I'm sore as a boil all over—I suppose from lying all flattened out for so long. But heck, I've felt worse when a horse unloaded me; lots of times. I'm tough. You ought to know that by this time. I'd feel like choking you if you peddled this little accident and let Dad get to hear about it. You know—"

"Oh, I know. He'd say it was your own fault and it served you right. But really, Jess, you are hurt and you've got to have help." She watched him worriedly.

"Forget it. Sit down there and unburden your mind. What's weird about this?"

"Well, I'll tell you and then I must go. I really must. I—well, I'll tell you how it started. The Wolseys are back, you know—anyway, you know it now. Peggy called me up last night and said they'd just got in and her cousin Sara is with them; going to stay all summer, by the way. She wanted to come right over, but her mother was all to pieces with the trip and the news and everything, so she wanted me to come over there. Peggy did. You know Mother—anyway, I promised to ride over for breakfast. So up gets little Lizbeth at daylight, glugs a glass of milk, leaps to the saddle and away she goes, all merry and bright. So—"

"What's the matter with the car?"

"Oh, bearings or connecting rod or some darn thing, according to Joey. Just an alibi, I expect. He's about due to spread its insides all over both running boards, especially if he thought I wanted to drive it. I'd rather ride, anyway. Better for the boyish figure."

Jess grinned wryly at that and Lizbeth drew a long breath of relief. She weighed a few ounces more than a hundred pounds and she had been trying to make him laugh.

"Anyway, you can see my mind was all on seeing Peggy and that new cousin of hers. I'm afraid she's going to gum up our summer for us, though Peg says she's a perfect peach. She would. Peg is the loyalest thing—"

"Weird," Jess pronounced remindingly and not with any reference to Peggy Wolsey.

"Oh, yes. I'm just coming to that. I was hurrying, of course, and thinking about seeing Peg again—and all of a sudden, when I came to where the trail turns off for here, I turned right into it. I suddenly felt as if I must see you right away, and I knew I didn't have time, because Peggy would be expecting me. But I kept right on coming, just the same. Wasn't that positively weird, don't you think?"

"Queer, maybe, but—"

"You don't know the fix you were in, Jess. You said a minute ago you could have pulled yourself out if it hadn't been dark. Well, the way that rock was, with only that bush holding it, if you had moved you'd have brought the whole thing right down *on* you. It certainly is a mercy you didn't try."

"I guess it is."

"I knew something was wrong when I saw the team turned out and your horse in the corral wanting his breakfast, and no smoke. I thought you must be sick or something, because Dad fired Chuck when he caught him in town drunk yesterday."

"That wouldn't make me sick. I'm darned glad of it."

"Silly, I knew Chuck wasn't here. Anyway, I started looking for you, and—I saw your hat—" Lizbeth blinked and bit her lips.

"You were a peach, Sis. You always are. You couldn't let a fellow down if you tried. Don't go worrying—" he halted abruptly, staring at the bunk opposite. "Did you take Chuck's blankets off that bed, Lizbeth?"

"Blankets?" Lizbeth jumped up, startled by his tone. "There weren't any to take off. It was just like it is now. Why? What's the matter, Jess?"

"Nothing, I guess. Chuck must have come and got his stuff last night." Jess stopped, trying to force his aching head to remember certain vague impressions. Those footsteps—if the sounds really were footsteps—might have been Chuck coming after his belongings. "Take a look under the bunk, will you? He had an old suitcase under there. See if that's gone."

Lizbeth leaned and looked. "There's nothing there; nothing except dirt and trash." She straightened and looked curiously at Jess. "If he came back, why did he leave you out there like that?"

"He wouldn't know the fix I was in. Not if he just came after his stuff."

Lizbeth looked unconvinced. "He'd see your horse in the corral and he'd see there was no sign of you here. You'd think he'd wonder and look around a little."

"You said yourself he was drunk."

But that explanation did not satisfy Jess, though his aching head precluded much thinking about it just then. He was chiefly concerned over Lizbeth being late for her breakfast date and he lied manfully about his own condition and fairly drove her off.

"But I'll be back," she declared, as she was putting on her gloves. "I'm only going because they'd be sending out searching parties if I didn't show up. I don't see why Dad won't have telephones in all our camps, so I could call up and explain. He's getting stingier every day of his life. All the other ranches have 'phones."

"Beat it!" growled Jess, setting his teeth against a bad twinge. "Tell Peggy hello for me—and I love her just the same."

"Oh, all right," Lizbeth yielded, that last sentence having done much to reassure her. "I won't be long."

Jess lay for a long while after she left, wondering why Chuck had been in such a hurry for his blankets. The thing didn't jibe, somehow. It nagged him like a shadow lying out toward the sun in a picture. Chuck always drank and he always would. In ten years he had been riotously drunk in town many, many times, and he had never been fired for his misdeeds. It occurred to Jess that if Chuck were drunk yesterday, he wouldn't care whether he had any blankets or not. He would play poker as long as he could see the pips on the cards, and when he was too far gone for that, he would pick a fight with some one or, if the whisky happened to be of a certain quality, he would crawl off and sleep. There was something fishy about his coming last night for his stuff—

"Forgot his bottle." Jess suddenly pronounced the words aloud. That was it, that was what kept nagging for attention. It absolutely settled the matter in Jess's mind; because drunk or sober, Chuck certainly would not leave his bottle behind him.

Jess turned his aching head slowly on the pillow and looked at the bottle standing boldly on the table, where Lizbeth in her innocence had set it down alongside the coffeepot. It was still almost half full.

"It wasn't Chuck," Jess told himself and relaxed. He hated mysteries, couldn't let one alone until it was solved to his satisfaction. Now that he had solved this particular puzzle, he lay very quiet and presently dropped into a doze without asking himself who had come last night and removed Chuck's bedding and suitcase. That question could wait.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JESS DEFIES THE LIGHTNING

Alder Spring camp was an out-of-the-way place. Tucked back in a fold of the foothills across Jumper Creek, few riders ever had occasion to travel the three miles of rocky trail that zigzagged up across a barren flat to the brushy broken land where the spring made a woodcutters' camp seem logical. During spring and fall round-ups the JR made a perfunctory circle up through the foothills, but for some reason the cattle liked the country north of Jumper little better than did the men. Probably they dreaded the small sharp rocks and rubble scattered over the weedy land, and certainly the grazing was not attractive.

The JR men hated the place for its loneliness, though it was not four miles from the main road that ran down Rainbow Valley to the little town of Rainbow, twelve or fifteen miles farther east. No one ever seemed to have the inclination to ride up to Alder Spring for the fun of it and men who camped there needed small excuse for riding down into the valley. Chuck had not even pretended to give any reason. He had said that he was going to town and that he might ride around by the ranch on his way in, and had let it go at that. And in ordinary circumstances Jess might have lain under that slide of rock and gravel for a week or two before any one found him—when it would have been too late.

But with the coming of Parsons—in itself an inexplicable incident—Alder Spring trail was scored with many strange hoof marks. First Ritchie and Bob Francis, hunting Parsons and never troubling to explain why they extended their search to Alder Spring; then Bob alone the next morning, and within twenty-four hours Lizbeth, riding up to the camp in obedience to what she called a positively weird impulse, and before her the man who came in the night and carried off Chuck's belongings—probably Chuck himself, in spite of his unusual lapse of memory concerning his bottle.

After Lizbeth there came others and in a manner quite as unaccountable, at least to Jess.

He had slept soundly for some time. He was awakened by the quick eager whinnying of his horse Rambler in the corral and was smitten with a feeling of guilt. Here he was, lying in bed, and his horse neither fed nor watered yet this morning. Lizbeth probably never thought of Rambler, she had been so fully engrossed with Rambler's master. Girls never did think of feeding or watering a horse, any more than they thought of gas and oil for a car. They never could remember that a horse must eat now and then.

Jess pushed the bandage off one eye, then pulled it off altogether. Exploring finger tips revealed a sizable lump and what he decided was a cut in his scalp. Lizbeth had mentioned something of the sort, he remembered. Though his head ached abominably he ignored that discomfort and sat up. There was that pain in his side again, when he moved, but he chose to ignore that also; it would not be the first time he had gone around with a cracked rib or two. He didn't know how he was going to use a pitch-fork, but he'd manage somehow, he supposed.

He was sitting on the side of his bed, waiting for his head to clear, when voices and men's footsteps approached the cabin. With his two hands clasping his thumping temples, Jess turned bloodshot eyes toward the door. It opened and in stalked his father. Behind him came Otto and Gus, two cowboys who had learned that they could be pretty sure of their jobs so long as they carried tales to their boss, and that tales about Jess were always certain of a hearing.

Dave Robison advanced to the table and stopped there, his glance having fallen upon the bottle. He stared hard at Jess, lids tightening over bleak, light-blue eyes.

"You drunken lazy hound, this is how you get out corral poles, is it?"

Jess reached dizzily for his boots, which Lizbeth had removed, and barely escaped pitching forward. He straightened, looked at his father standing there with Chuck's bottle clutched accusingly in his hand. He looked at Gus Larsen with his mean little eyes hugging his high thin nose, and he looked at the short, beefy Otto Jessup, leering knowingly back at him.

Jess laid himself carefully down again so as to hurt his ribs no more than necessary.

"This is how I cut poles to-day," he stated coolly. "One of you boys feed and water my horse, will you?"

"If they do, they're fired," old Dave shouted bullily. A blast of profanity followed. "Got to the point where you're too lazy to feed your horse, have you? Lay there like a hog in a wallow and let him starve! Swill rotgut moonshine when

there's work to be done!" Vile epithets choked him for a moment. "I didn't think you could get any more worthless than you was—but by—what little sense there was in yuh, that damn college took out! You had your chance. This settles it!" There was a sharp crackle of glass breaking against the edge of the table.

Jess opened his eyes at the sound. "Now you've done it," he said wearily. "That was Chuck's bottle you busted."

"You're a damned dirty drunken liar!" stormed old Dave. "Get your lazy carcass outa that bed and get off this ranch before I kick you off! I've stood enough!"

Forked veins stood in blue-branched ridges on Jess's temples. "I'll get up when I get ready," he retorted, his mouth twisted with pain. "And you'd have a hell of a time kicking me off my own ranch. Put that idea out of your head right now."

Dave Robison's jaw dropped. Never before had Jess defied him. He took a step forward, the neck and upper part of the bottle lifted to strike a ferocious blow. Jess's steady gaze stopped him midway.

"*Your* ranch!" he shouted. "It ain't yours yet, and the way you're going, it never will be. You'll walk outa here a bum, like you've been since you could talk. You won't own more than the clothes on your lousy back! Loaf on the job all your life, lay around drunk half your time, and then—" He swallowed, shaking the broken bottle in his gloved fist. "You've got to *earn* this ranch before it's yours, remember that! And so far you ain't earned your salt. Anybody can see—" He broke off to swear. "You go shooting off your mouth again about *your own ranch* and I'll have your head examined!" He laughed insultingly, glancing over his shoulder at the two cowboys for agreement.

"I call you boys to witness how this two-legged hog spends his time when he's supposed to be workin'," he bellowed. "I have to work and I'm an old man. Your mother has to work—she ain't above doing a day's washing—"

"You mean, you aren't above bullying her into thinking she has to. If she hadn't let you take the spirit out of her—"

"You hear him, boys—abusing his own mother behind her back! I oughta whale the stuffing outa you for that. Get up on your hind legs and look like a man, even if you ain't! By ——, I've a good mind to—"

"But you won't," Jess cut in. "You happen to have a couple of witnesses who'd squawk their heads off, if a lawyer got after them. You couldn't afford to let the word go out that you manhandled me when I was lying down and not lifting a finger at you."

Old Dave grunted, and Jess closed his eyes again, trying to steady the whirling in his head. When he opened them, his father's towering bulk wavered like a reflection seen in water where a pebble has been dropped. What would happen if he tried to get up, it was easy to guess.

Dave Robison, running the full gamut of blasphemy, subsided into a more coherent form of abuse. Jess lay there with closed eyes and tightened brows and heard himself called a drunken sot, a brainless would-be artist, a half-witted coward, and worse. He took it because he had to, the sneer on his mouth his only retaliation. He knew that nothing he could say or do would madden his father more than that contemptuous silence. He was also vaguely conscious of the astonishment of the two cowboys at his attitude. No doubt they were wondering at his nerve.

Finally, when the diatribe spent itself in aimless threats, Jess opened his eyes. "That's what *you* say," he made unmoved comment. "Now you've quit frothing at the mouth a minute, I'll make a few remarks.

"Boys, I want you to get an earful of this too. You might be called upon to repeat it some day. You heard your boss say he's through with me. Far as he's concerned, I'm all washed up. I've got no more job than a jackrabbit. You heard that?"

"Yeah—we heard," Otto replied uncomfortably. Gus only shuffled his feet.

"All right. That goes both ways. I'm about forty times as fed up with you, Dad, as you are with me. It never seems to have registered with you that I'm away past twenty-one and just as much my own boss as you are. And I'm a fool—I admit that much. I've been a fool not to declare myself before now. I did, so far as school was concerned. You didn't 'let' me go, because mother put in a good word for me. If you ever did a thing in your life to please her, it must have been before I was old enough to take notice. I went to college because you didn't dare refuse me the money, and because you had a sneaking hope I'd bust out and do some fool thing that would give you a strangle hold on the JR ranch. You have done

everything in God's world to make a bum out of me and you've got just a little more than a year left to paint me black enough for your purpose."

"You damned lying whelp—"

"Hold on there," Jess warned curtly. "It gets under the skin because it's the truth. I've taken it on the chin, so far, and I never cheeped, so you've got in the habit of thinking I'm too damned dumb to see through you. But let me tell you something. I've been wise to you ever since I was ten years old and that old lawyer got on his ear and wouldn't let you hustle me out of the room when the will was going to be read.

"So I give you fair warning now, old man. Make one move to throw me off the ranch, and I'll get an attorney to ask for an accounting of your trusteeship."

"You dirty sneak! You skunk!" Old Dave's stubborn jaw worked oddly, trying to voice the turmoil within him.

"Maybe so, but that's exactly what will happen if you don't lay off. I say it before these boys. I don't say there's anything wrong in your accounts. I don't even think it. But just one more outbreak from you, and I'll call for a showdown. After all, there's only a year to go, and I ought to be getting a line on things, just as a matter of business. I've let things slide along because you happen to be my father. If you'd treated me even once as a human being, I never would have taken over the ranch as long as you were alive and wanted it. But as you say—"

"I say you're the most ungrateful hound—"

"As you say, things have come to a showdown. You're through with me. You said it with trimmings. Didn't he, boys?"

"Uh—yeah—"

"Now, get this. I'm through with you. From now on you're no father of mine. You're just old Dave Robison, the meanest foul-mouthed brute in Montana. You happen to be trustee of my estate, and so long as you behave yourself I shall not take steps to oust you. I'll let you alone simply for the sake of the family. I'd hate like the deuce to have the public find out what a roughneck old devil we've got for a father.

"And as for you two," he added, turning his fevered gaze upon Gus and Otto, goggling at him open-mouthed from the doorway, "watch your step. You may stand in with the old man and hold your jobs for another year or so, but lay off me, do you hear? I'm not drunk and the three of you know it. I'm not going to stand for any more stool pigeons on this ranch, and the sooner you know that, the better off you'll be. Now, get out of here."

"You dare tell *me* to get out—"

"I certainly do. Shove off. All of you."

"Boys, I call you to witness—"

Jess raised to an elbow and never felt the pain of his ribs. His eyes held an ominous gleam. "You'll witness something that won't look so good in about a minute," he stated, with a savage kind of calm.

"Keep on, keep on—you're showin' your true colors now," snorted old Dave, his voice cracking on a note of triumph, and herded his two henchmen out of the cabin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SARA

Into the reek of spilled whisky walked Lizbeth, a little breathless and with mud on her riding boots. Jess pulled his savage gaze away from the ceiling, glared at her and relaxed when he saw who it was.

"Oh. You're back," he grunted.

"Yes, I'm back," said Lizbeth. "Furthermore, I've been here quite a while. I put Monte in the stable so he and Rambler wouldn't try to eat each other alive. You were asleep and I didn't want to waken you, so I thought I'd do a little sleuthing around while the patient rested."

Jess forced a cheerful tone. "Have a good time?"

"Sleuthing? Not particularly. But at any rate I was off out of the way when Dad showed up, and I think I managed to find out a thing or two. Jess, what on earth started you two on the warpath? I thought you knew better than to attempt any argument with him. I could hear Dad hollering, clear up on the bluff; and believe me, I was glad I wasn't any closer. What started it, for goodness' sake?"

"You did. You left Chuck's bottle on the table. Now I'm a booze-hound on top of everything else he's pleased to think me. Not that it matters, Liz. We were about due for a showdown, anyway."

"It may matter a good deal. I heard you tell him to get out. Jess, I wish you hadn't done that. Now he's taken Rambler and the team and left you afoot—so far as he knows. They overlooked Monte in the stable, it happens. So it doesn't matter in the least. I'll get your horse back whenever you want him."

Jess said a sentence under his breath. Lizbeth sat down on the side of his bed and gave his hand a pinch and a pat, in token of her sympathy and understanding, although she said no more on that subject.

"I'll start a fire and fix you something to eat in a minute, but I want to talk first. Jess, have you any idea what made that slide come down on you last night?"

"No," said Jess. "The rain, I guess, softening the ground. Something just happened to break loose up the hill."

"Just happened to have help," Lizbeth stated with a grim certainty. "Do you know what rock it was that almost landed on top of you? Sir Walter Scott. And you know yourself he was perfectly solid up there. At least, he wasn't ready to roll down hill."

Jess looked at her dumbly. He had a touch of fever from his ordeal of last night and the clash with his father had not lessened it. For the moment he had no recollection of the boulder oddly resembling profile pictures of Scott.

"I thought it was queer when I was getting you out from under," Lizbeth went on. "I've sat on Sir Walter dozens of times to look at the view down through the gap, and he happened to land face up, so I couldn't help noticing what rock it was. So I just thought while you were asleep I'd go up and see what jarred him loose all of a sudden." She stopped, staring hard at Jess.

"Well, what did?"

"I wish I knew *who* did," Lizbeth answered obliquely. "If you had an enemy in the world, Jess, I could understand it better, maybe—" She bit her lip. Her gaze slid uncomfortably away from Jess. "Oh, I don't mean Dad. He's just naturally hostile and mean and ornery and all that, but he wouldn't—of course, it's unthinkable. And this was before he got all stirred up to-day—"

"You needn't defend him to me," Jess said harshly. "Mean as he is, he's straight from the shoulder. Go on. What did you find out?"

"Well, tracks. And two cigarette stubs flattened under some one's boot heel. Whoever it was, he must have waited up there for just the right minute to roll that rock down on you. The tracks were sort of scuffed over, as if he tried to hide

them. There's a fringe of currant bushes up there and he was behind them, so you wouldn't have seen him, even if you'd looked. Jess, have you been having trouble with any one?"

"Not a soul that I know of. I've been right here working all the while, and Chuck and I got along all right. He had his own way in everything. No reason in the world to want to bump me off. I think your imagination—"

"Oh, that reminds me of the bump on your head," said Lizbeth, ignoring his doubt of her theory. "I can't for the life of me see how any rock bounced up and hit you in the head when the slide came down. That juniper bush and the Walter Scott rock held back all the loose rock that rattled down, and the rest was just gravel. I looked just now to make sure."

"You can't argue me out of that bump, Sis. It hurts like the very devil." She was so game, so eager and so loyal, that Jess was trying his best to play up.

Lizbeth clasped her hands around one knee and stared solemnly back at him. "Sure. Do you know what I think? I'm perfectly certain in my own mind that the guilty party up on the hill shied that rock at you first and heaved Sir Walter down on top of you afterwards. He wanted to make sure you wouldn't hear it coming and jump out of the way."

Jess gave a start. Now that she mentioned it, he hazily recalled his impression of having been hit on the head and in the next instant hearing the crash of rocks coming down. It was all so vague that he did not like to mention it at all. Lizbeth would literally pounce upon the sensations of an instant and build them as facts into the fabric of her melodramatic plot.

"Pretty keen," he mocked her. "Look for a man with a mania for rolling rocks down on unsuspecting citizens." He tried to laugh, but laughing jarred his ribs so that he stopped with a grunt.

"Serves you right. Just the same, Jess Robison, some one did start that slide straight down at you. Just you let me find out ___"

"Baloney," said Jess.

"What about the tracks? What about those two cigarette stubs? Are they baloney? I should think you'd have heard him up there. You would, probably, if you hadn't been so busy chopping wood."

Jess gave her a quick, guilty look. Certainly he had heard—and thought it the scuffing of a rabbit in the bushes. And he had not been so busy chopping wood. But he did not say these things.

"Fine theory," he told her gruffly. "Too bad you're shy of facts to bolster it up. What was that you said about fixing something to eat?"

Contrition seized Lizbeth. She pulled off her soft felt hat, shook back her blond hair, found a flour-sack dish towel which she tied around her slim waist to protect her dove-colored riding breeches and went to work. That was one of the nicest things about Lizbeth; she could stop talking, no matter how full she was of things clamoring for speech.

Jess stared up at the low ceiling again, his eyes following a crack in a pole rafter just over his head, while his thoughts went ranging here and there like a hunting dog, trying to nose out the answer to his most important problem. His father's enmity troubled him more than he would admit. It was all very well to say he was glad they had come to an open break, but his feverish brain harried him with small worries concerning this crisis thrust upon him.

Pole cutting was over, unless he chose to go begging his father to put him back on the job. Even if he did that he would probably be insulted for his offer of a truce. Dave Robison hated a person who couldn't stand up to his own words. He had served notice on Jess when he took the team away—and had added a gratuitous insult by setting Jess afoot. So there would be no riding on round-up when it started, either. There would be nothing for Jess on the JR except perhaps a roof over his head. He would be practically ostracized; he knew the men his father kept on the payroll; they would take the cue from their boss.

Maybe he could get a job on some other ranch; the Diamond Slash came into his mind at once and the thought that Tom Ritchie could hardly refuse to hire him if he asked for work. But he turned from that idea. No, he wouldn't leave the JR. That would be exactly what his father hoped he would do. He wouldn't give him that advantage. He was entitled to his living—his dad as trustee would be compelled by law to make him an allowance until his time of probation expired. Not much, perhaps, but enough to live on.

Jess drew a long, careful sigh. He hated to take any legal steps against his father. Always oversensitive concerning his personal affairs, he dreaded to start gossip about the estate. It did not seem right to drag his grandfather's dying wish out under the public eye, and yet it might be necessary, he thought, in order to bring that wish into fulfillment. Maybe, if Senator Wolsey came up to the ranch this season, he'd better go and have a talk with him. He wouldn't have the nerve to ask the Senator to take charge of his interests, though he certainly would like to. Every one said that Senator Wolsey was the shrewdest lawyer in the State of Montana, but—

No, he couldn't ask the Senator to take the case, but at least he could ask for advice and the name of a good man. According to Ritchie, the Senator would be only too glad to show him some little favor. Not much—maybe an hour of his time and the benefit of his experience; but a big thing for Jess that would be, just the same.

He had just arrived at that fairly satisfactory decision when Lizbeth came with his breakfast neatly arranged on a piece of board Jess had brought to camp, thinking he might some day stretch a canvas over it—when he got hold of a piece, and the paints to go on it.

"Feel you can sit up long enough to eat?" she asked briskly. "Maybe it'll hurt your ribs, though. I'll fix it on this box. And I want you to hurry up and eat, Jesse James, because the girls said they might ride over after the inquest."

"Inquest?" Dismay jarred the word from Jess, but to Lizbeth he sounded merely astonished.

"Why, yes. Don't you know the terrible thing that happened? I thought every one knew. But of course, unless you met some one—Anyway, Albert Parsons is dead. He'd started out hunting—at least, that's the story—and he'd been drinking as usual, and they think he shot himself accidentally somehow. So they weren't going to have an inquest and then they decided they would.

"You know Peg. If there's anything going on within a hundred miles, Peg has got to be right in the middle of it. And she says she never saw an inquest and she wanted to stay and see what they do and if the coroner does really sit on the corpse—"

"Sister!"

"Well, I'm only telling you what Peggy said to tell you. She's terribly sorry you're hurt and she'd fly to your side at once —"

"She never said that."

"Call me a liar, would you? She'd fly to your side, says Peg—and if you don't believe it you can ask her—only she feels she ought to stay and see the coroner sit on the body first. And then she can tell us all about how they do it. Hold an inquest, I mean."

"I thought—" Jess caught himself in time. He had been on the point of saying he thought the Diamond Slash had the county in its pocket, politically at least, and there wouldn't be any inquest. But Lizbeth was no mind reader.

"What did you think? That Peggy would come back and try to high-hat you just because you're only a cowboy this year? If you only knew it, you're her biggest heart throb. She actually turned pale when I said what had happened to you."

"You went and told that?"

"Just to Peg. And her cousin, the Sara person, of course. They were together, and Peggy says she's the one who taught clams how to shut up and stay shut, and I could speak with perfect freedom, so I did."

"You would."

"So would you, if Peggy Wolsey wanted to know things." Then, without warning, Lizbeth's shoulders sagged dejectedly. She looked at Jess and her eyes filled.

"It's no use, I can't bluff it through," she said in a choked tone. "I'm just worried sick and so is Peggy. Here you are, almost killed by somebody, and for no good reason whatever, and there's no way on earth of finding out who did it. And you and Dad disowning each other and both so stubborn you'd choke before you admitted you were wrong—"

"I don't see how that should give Peggy a headache," Jess gruffly cut her off, hoping to divert her from the subject.

"Well, you can't expect her to feel highly elated over it; you getting hurt, I mean; she doesn't know about Dad yet. But things are just awful over at her place too. There's her mother, a complete nervous wreck over what happened. Shut up in her room with her maid bathing her brow and shushing the girls if they so much as speak above a whisper in the house."

"All baloney. She's strong as a horse."

"Everything's baloney to you. Of course, she's trying to uphold her Senator's ancestry by being highly sensitive to shocks—every one knows that. But she manages to make it darned disagreeable for Peg, just the same. And the ranch is all on edge without her pulling a nervous breakdown. I tell you, Jess, the atmosphere over at the Diamond Slash is so thick you could cut it with a knife. You'd think they're waiting for something to explode."

"Imagination," growled Jess, gently feeling his unbandaged bump.

"No, it isn't." Lizbeth shook her head, lips pressed together. "And that cousin of Peggy's said the strangest thing—"

Jess's glance swung to the doorway. He looked startled. Lizbeth turned around to look, forgot what she was saying and jumped up.

"Oh, it's you, Peggy!"

"Hello, Jess, and how are you, and I've got to talk fast because the sheriff will be along presently and I must give you the low-down before he comes." A dark, stunning girl moved quickly over to the bed, talking as she advanced.

Jess heard her, sensed the full import of her words, yet gave her no heed. His eyes slid past her to the girl standing just within the room. A tall girl of wispy slenderness, her golden brown riding clothes oddly matching the gold brown of her eyes which stared back at him. She was bareheaded, and the midmorning sun shining in through the doorway behind her painted a deep tinted halo over her hair. The most incredible hair Jess had ever seen in his life—or so his dazed thoughts ran. Glorious hair of a coppery red that framed her face in deep loose waves filled with glowing shadows. Her lips were full with a childish softness, slightly parted while she gazed.

The dark girl, standing beside the bed quite unregarded, turned her head. "Come on in, Sara, nobody's going to bite you," she said, with the faintest edge on her voice. "This is Jess Robison. My cousin Sara, Jess. For goodness' sake, Sarky, sit down on that bunk and come out of your trance. Jess, didn't you hear me say the sheriff is coming after you?"

"Tell him a horse kicked me in the ribs and I can't go," said Jess. But his eyes never left the girl with the coppery red hair sitting quietly there on the bunk where Albert Parsons had died.

CHAPTER NINE

"AL PARSONS WAS MURDERED"

Patricia Wolsey gave an exasperated little laugh and deliberately placed herself between the two. "For heavens' sake, Jess, have you never seen a red-head before? This is plenty serious and I want you to take that goofy look off your face and listen to me."

"I don't want to be skun," Jess protested, instantly on guard against the something in her tone that betrayed her. "Let me listen and keep the goofy look, won't you?"

"What's the sheriff coming here for?" Lizbeth cried in a panic. "Jess, he can't drag you into anything, can he?"

"Will you listen to me?" Peggy demanded fiercely. "I want you to know exactly what happened, so if they try any of their third-degree traps you'll know what's what. Sara and I listened outside the window—they held the inquest out in the bunk-house club-room. Parsons had added that elegant touch to the cowboys' quarters just last summer, of course you know. He never thought the coroner was going to find it a handy place to sit on his remains before the year was out, I'll bet.

"Well, we girls got into our riding clothes soon as Lizbeth left, and had our horses brought around and started out for a ride. That was to keep Tom Ritchie from giving us the gate when the inquest started. I'd asked him when it would begin and his reply was such that I saw a little finessing was going to be good." She sat down in the most carelessly unconscious way possible on the bed beside Jess, and walked the first two fingers of her right hand up and down the blanket near his arm while she talked.

"How many jumps did you say you're ahead of the sheriff?" Jess asked, by way of a hint.

"Not enough for Peggy's preamble unless she cuts it short," Sara of the copper-red hair remarked unexpectedly, in a slow vibrant voice that lingered in the mind like a strain of unheralded music.

"I was just showing how we got in on the inquest without being seen," Peggy explained stiffly.

"Leave it to you, Peg," Jess had the sense to say, with a smile.

"Well, I had to be keen to give Ritchie the slip, and the clubhouse is backed right against the grove, you know." The walking fingers walked their faddishly manicured nails up onto Jess's wrist and lingered there a moment before they turned and walked down again unmolested.

"Hurry, Peg, and tell us!" Lizbeth implored, her teeth set for endurance.

"Well—not to keep our poor sick boy waiting—I could see Ritchie was all hot and bothered over something; that's why I stayed. He'd told mother and me last night that the inquest was just a formality that wouldn't take ten minutes, and then this morning, after Lizbeth left, the coroner and sheriff came, and a lot more men, and they got Ritchie off to one side and they went into a huddle. And it was after that I noticed Ritchie throwing away cigarettes as soon as he lighted them, almost. It's a sure sign."

"Peggy!"

"All right," said Peggy, with a lurking fire in her dark eyes, "take it on the chin, then. The coroner claims that Al Parsons was murdered. He was shot from behind and the bullet came out in front and he couldn't possibly have done it himself —"

"Then I did hear six shots!" The words slipped out before Jess could stop them, and though he bit his lip with vexation, they were said and could not be recalled.

"What? You heard—oh, Jess!" The hand of the walking fingers closed over his wrist. "I thought Bob and Ritchie were lying. You—oh, I'm afraid!"

There was movement behind her. Sara Barrett stood up and looked down gravely into Jess's eyes that turned to meet her

gaze.

"I think you'd better hear exactly what was said at the inquest, Mr. Robison. The coroner seemed to be rather hostile and suspicious toward Ritchie and Bob Francis. He wanted to know why they had reported an accidental shooting. Ritchie said because he thought it was suicide and he wanted to protect Albert Parsons and keep the public from finding out how Parsons drank himself into a temporary insanity. He sounded very convincing, I thought."

"That's what they told me," Jess confirmed the statement. "He convinced me too."

Peggy slid her fingers down and clasped Jess's hand. Her shoulders twitched impatiently. "Oh, Sarky, do go back and sit down! I'm telling this."

"Then tell it before the sheriff comes," Sara said composedly, and backed to Chuck's bunk, seating herself calmly as before.

"What did Bob say?" Jess tried to keep his eyes away from her and fix his attention upon Peggy, but his glance wandered again and again. "Where do I come in?"

"Well, it was when the coroner was digging for details of just how and where they found Parsons," Peggy took up the story. "They stalled quite a bit, both of them. He had them in one at a time, you know. And before he was through, he pinned each one down where they said they found him here. Dead."

"He died on that bunk," blurted Jess, his eyes on Sara's face.

Both Peggy and Lizbeth, he noticed, jumped and exclaimed with horror. Sara sat still, quietly regarding him.

"I thought that must be the reason why the blankets are off," she said. "They seemed to be telling the truth when they said here is where they found him."

"That's right. They came just after he died. I found him down the road, and that's the six shots I heard. He fired them to call help. What else did the boys say, Peggy?"

"Nothing much. They didn't have a chance, because your father—he came just before the inquest started, so the coroner put him in as foreman of the jury, you see—he said they'd better get you over there to explain what part you played in the killing." She gasped over her blunder. "Oh, I don't mean that, you know; not that you had anything to do with it. But he wanted you to tell how Parsons happened to be here."

"That's easy. Nothing to be scared of in that," Jess said. "They want me for a witness, is all."

"Well, it sounded like something more than that. Tones and looks and so on—we were scared stiff, weren't we, Sara? So we sneaked back to our horses and beat it over here to warn you. If that sheriff knew—"

"Then you'd better ride off somewhere out of sight before he gets here," Jess advised. "You too, Lizbeth. No use getting your Dad all worked into a temper over your being here. You know the trail above here that leads back up on the bench? Take that and make it snappy."

"And leave you here alone?" Peggy gave his hand a little shake of reproof. "We wouldn't think of it!"

"Mr. Robison is right," said Sara unexpectedly again, and stood up. "I hope it's as simple as he says, but you can't tell where all this will lead to. You don't know what's back of this killing, but there'd be plenty of crookedness where Albert Parsons was involved, you may be sure of that. You girls can do a lot more good if you are not found here with the suspect."

"Suspect?" Lizbeth's voice was shrill with horror. "You mean Jess is suspected?"

"Not definitely. It was in the air, though. I suppose suspicion will fall on nearly every one more or less, just at first. I shouldn't worry about it. Come on, girls." With a serene assumption of leadership, she laid a hand on Peggy's arm and drew her to her feet and towards the door, signaling to Lizbeth as she passed.

Without a word Jess watched her go. At the door she paused and looked back at him, gave him a swift, heartening smile and was gone. After a few minutes of tense waiting, Jess heard them riding past on the rocky trail behind the house, and

he lifted himself in the bed for another glimpse of that amazing girl called Sara. But all he got was a stab of hot daggers in his side and he lay back panting with the pain.

Nothing to do but wait for the sheriff. They suspected him, did they? He didn't see how that could be, unless Ritchie and Bob deliberately lied—well, the truth would come out; it was bound to. If they were going to play that game, he'd tell all he knew; what Parsons said about treachery, for instance.

He was feverishly trying to remember exactly what Parsons did say, and finding that he could remember nothing much except the color of that girl's hair and the soft, pouting curve of her mouth, and the strange tawny light in her eyes, when once again he heard the clink of shod hoofs striking rock in the trail.

This time it was the sheriff riding a big Diamond Slash gray which looked as if it had traveled fast. As a matter of fact, the sheriff had followed the road south of Jumper Creek because Ritchie and Bob Francis had said that Parsons had started for town and must have changed his mind when he came to the Alder Spring turn-off. This had not quite borne out their first report that Parsons had gone hunting, and the sheriff was curious about the route followed by the man whose body had been found so far from where he had evidently intended to ride.

It was not exactly his duty to turn detective, but the sheriff of Wolsey County frequently disregarded official routine and did things because he wanted to. Sometimes the result was made use of by his supporters before election to keep him in office. Occasionally his enemies magnified the blunder he made by overstepping the mark. But since he was now serving his fifth term of office, it may be assumed that his natural curiosity concerning crime had netted him more triumphs than defeats. At any rate, he persisted in hunting down criminals in his own way.

CHAPTER TEN

THEN CAME THE SHERIFF

His first name was Job, though he did not look so patient. He was a big man who chewed strong cigars which he seldom lighted, and lawbreakers were frequently misled by the comfortable purring note occasionally heard in his voice. Men had also made the mistake of thinking that because he weighed over two hundred pounds he was slow. Twice that mistake had been fatal, yet Job Witherspoon was a man who loved peace and worked hard to keep it. Because his thoughts were seldom revealed in his face, voice or manner he was generally feared by the criminal class and trusted by few.

He came into the cabin, ducking his head lest his hat crown collide with the lintel of the doorway. One slow sweep of his eyes took in the long low room at a glance. A tenth of a second—surely no more—was given to the broken bottle; then his gaze moved on to Jess, lying flushed and staring in the farthest corner.

"Dad broke that bottle. He said I was drunk."

"Um-hmm. Well, ain't you?"

"If you can't see for yourself, Sheriff, what's the use of telling you?" Jess had not meant to say that. It was not the attitude a man with any sense would take toward Job. But somehow his tongue refused to be guided by his wits just then.

"Poor stuff, by the smell," the sheriff observed disparagingly and walked around the broken fragments on his way to the bed. He stood looking down reflectively at Jess, rolling the remains of a cigar in the corner of his mouth.

"What I can't see," he rumbled in leisurely tones at last, "is how a man shot on the road into town would cross the creek and make it clear up here to die."

Jess held his breath until a jab of pain subsided. "Parsons? I don't know where he was shot—I know I found him just down around that line of brush."

"Yeah? How come?"

"I heard—shots. Several. Like signals. So I got the lantern—and went down there."

"Hmm. What time was that?"

"Evening. Just after dark. After the storm struck."

"Um-hmm. What's the matter? Colic?"

"No. Broken ribs—don't know how many. Rock fell on me." Jess wondered dully why the pain was worse since the girls—that girl with the red hair—had gone.

"Didn't your father do anything about it?"

"No. He came—and said I was drunk. I let it ride."

With one twist of his lips the sheriff slid his cigar to the other corner of his wide mouth and leaned forward, pulling down the single blanket that covered Jess.

"Hmm—you've been up and dressed to-day," he murmured with the purr in his voice. "Got worse all of a sudden, hmm?"

"I lay out all night," grunted Jess. "My clothes haven't been off since yesterday morning." And he added grudgingly, "My sister came and found me. Out by the woodpile. She helped me in."

"Gone for a doctor?" The sheriff had pulled up Jess's shirt and was feeling a puffy purple area with finger tips surprisingly gentle.

"I wouldn't let her. I don't want Dad to know."

The sheriff gave him a searching look of inquiry which Jess felt constrained to answer.

"He'd only think I was playing off or something."

"Hm-mm." The sheriff lifted the other hand to Jess's smooth white torso and pressed in two places at once. Jess clenched his teeth, sweat standing on his forehead. "Three," Job muttered, and laid an ear like a young elephant's close to the injury. He pressed again, slowly. A groan forced its way through Jess's teeth.

"Hm-mm. No playing off there," said the sheriff, holding his big palm flat on the discolored skin while he looked meditatively at Jess. "Anything I can use for a bandage?"

Jess was near fainting from the agony. He shook his head, then forced himself to speak. "My sister—brought something—from Wolsey's. She went to see—Peggy. I—look on the table."

Job Witherspoon was no doctor. Nevertheless he had ministered to many a hurt man and beast during his fifty years along the frontiers of several rough sections of the country. He gave his inarticulate murmur, found a neat package of first-aid items including adhesive tape, bandage and a small flat bottle of aspirin. With no more torture than was necessary he did a very creditable piece of work, using all of the tape, all of the bandage and two aspirin tablets dissolved in water.

It was when he went to help Jess up so that he could swallow the sedative, that he discovered the broken bruise on his head. He was so surprised he did not even say "Hm-mm." He stared hard for a moment, held the cup for Jess to drink, then cradled the hurt head in his left arm while he examined the wound more closely. When he let Jess's head down on the pillow his eyes looked different.

"Your father thought you was drunk, hm-mm?"

"Yes, and he raised the very devil. We had a regular run-in. It's what he's been hoping for—that I'd go to the dogs. I told him so. He hates to give up the ranch. He's got a year to show me up as a complete washout so I can't inherit under the terms of the will. Now he's fired me; took my horse out of the corral, tried to order me off the ranch; only I won't go. I pulled a fast one, but it shut him up. I told him if he made a move to get me off the place I'd call for an accounting—or whatever it is. I can't go over to testify at that inquest, because he set me afoot, and I don't feel like walking six miles just to say I don't know how Parsons got shot. He died right there in Chuck's bunk; scared to death of somebody he thought was after him. Treacherous devils, he called them, but he didn't say who they were."

"Didn't, hm-mm? Say, young feller, if you had two tongues, you could talk just twice as fast, don't you s'pose?"

Jess gave him a queer, startled look, but he refused to take the hint. "Maybe I could. I never had two tongues to try out. I suppose you came to make me talk, didn't you? Nothing else to bring you," he added with febrile cunning, wanting to protect the girls. "Albert Parsons died right there in that bunk. Right behind you. There was blood on the bedclothes and I washed the blankets. Chuck's bed—I knew he'd be sore if I didn't. I kind of expected the sheriff would be showing up before long. You've got an instinct like a turkey buzzard for dead men. Sure, you'd come. I'm surprised you didn't show up before now. Sorry I can't tell you much, Sheriff. I heard some shooting and I took the lantern and went out to see—"

"Mm-hmm. You said that once."

"It's about all I can say. I found him curled up in the road, scared to death. I packed him into the house on my back, in that howling storm. He died."

"Mm-hmm," said the sheriff gravely, with his fingers dropped carelessly upon Jess's wrist. "Yes, you told me he died."

"Right on Chuck's bunk. I had to wash the blankets. The way I did, I hung them out on the line and left them all night in the rain. That washed them, see?"

"Mm-hmm. I guess it would, all right." The sheriff's voice had the purring note that could mean so much—or so little.

"Next day I scrubbed the floor. It had a few spatters of blood from the door to the bed, but I got them out all right. Had to use nearly a whole can of lye, though."

"Um-hmm. I've known it to take more lye than that to do away with bloodstains. Human blood, that is to say. Animal

blood is easier to get rid of."

"Well, I got them all out. I didn't want Chuck to notice and get to asking questions. He's funny that way. Suspicious as the devil of every little thing. And if he'd ask me, I couldn't tell him the truth because I promised Ritchie I wouldn't say anything. He thinks it would hurt the Senator somehow if the papers got hold of the story. I can't see it myself—I don't know the ins and outs of politics. Wheels within wheels, Parsons said. And then Ritchie said the same thing."

The sheriff stood looking reflectively down at Jess. "Well, I expect we'll know what makes the wheels go round before we quit," he said dryly. "I oughta take you along back with me, but I don't s'pose you'll run off. Not with them ribs. How they feel now?"

"I can breathe a little easier. But you've cinched me up so tight I'm liable to start buckin' and bawlin' in a minute." Jess tried to laugh. "If I could trouble you for a drink—"

"Bottle's busted." Job's eyes were vacant of expression, his face a meaty mask.

"I meant water. I don't drink whisky and Dad knows it. My sister found Chuck's bottle and gave me some in coffee. I lay out all night under a landslide. I was about all in."

Job got the water, saying nothing at all but solemnly watching Jess drink thirstily and let himself carefully down into the bed again. He omitted even to grunt when Jess looked up and thanked him for the service. He strode with surprisingly little sound to the door, threw out what water was left in the dipper, went to the bucket and dipped silently, drank and flung away what was left. He hung the dipper on its nail above the water bench, wiped his wide, humorous mouth and went outside.

He stood for a minute staring down the road, thinking deeply; shook his head and made his way to the woodpile. There he stood for some time studying the Walter Scott boulder, the juniper bush haggled off and lying amongst the litter, all its picturesque ugliness gone. Just a bush hacked off near the roots. The sheriff noted the inexpert chopping and gave it no more attention.

He squinted up the bluff, marking the course of the big rock. It seemed as though the scored hillside intrigued him, for he made a slight detour and started climbing, noticing everything with quick sharp glances as he climbed. He stopped once and stared for a full minute at a small boot track, then glanced down at the sprawling juniper, grunted and went on thoughtfully to the fringe of currant bushes.

Where Lizbeth had stopped to study the little telltale signs, Job Witherspoon stopped also. Lizbeth had wisely left things exactly as she found them, except that she had left her own tracks unthinkingly in the loose soil. Job noted these while he pulled a fresh cigar from his pocket and set it absently between his lips.

When he finally came down off the hill near the stable, he paused once more, this time to scan fresh horse tracks in the trail which ran past the back door and the woodpile and so up along the base of the bluff. "Three," he muttered, just as he had spoken the number of Jess's broken ribs. Then he turned aside and looked into the stable, shook his head with a slightly puzzled look and returned to the cabin.

Jess was moaning in a tired, discouraged way, but he stopped instantly when he heard the sheriff come in. "I thought you'd gone hours ago," he said irritably, his eyes looking almost black with the worry and pain. "I've told you all I can —"

"Right now, maybe. Your sister come back with company, hm-mm? The Wolsey girl and that red-headed cousin, hm-mm?"

"How'd you know that? Did you see them?" Jess was losing his keenness. He did not realize that he had practically admitted it.

"Where'd they go from here; you know?"

"No, I don't. For a ride somewhere. What the heck do you want of them?"

"Nothing. Not a thing in the world. How you feel? Think you might maybe sleep a little?"

"Might, if I were left alone."

"Mm-hmm," Job amiably assented, ignoring the snub. He set a cup of cold water on the box beside the bed, casually took Jess's gun from the belt holster hanging over the box, turned it over studiously in his hamlike hands and finally dropped it into his capacious coat pocket. "Well, I guess I'll be going," he purred. "I s'pose your sister will be coming back to stay with you for awhile, won't she?"

"I didn't ask her."

"Kinda thoughtless, goin' off horseback riding with you flat on your back and not able to help yourself," he observed. "Well, you can maybe get a little sleep. Take another aspirin after a while, if the pain don't let up. Bottle's right there alongside the water."

He sent another scrutinizing glance around the cabin and went out in cat-footed silence, Jess's six-shooter sagging the pocket of his shabby gray coat. This time the gray took the shorter trail along the north side of the creek and he scarcely broke his steady lope in the whole six miles.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LINK WHELAN TAKES CHARGE

Alder Camp was beginning to show a trail well beaten to its door. The next to ride along it was a lean little man with a high beak of a nose, diffident brown eyes and a ten-gallon hat perched on the back of his head. Worn so, the hat proclaimed him a care-free individual who faced the world with the unsophisticated trustful friendliness of a pup. But the nose warned you not to take too much for granted, and that a hat worn carelessly on the back of the head might be very misleading. The eyes looked sorry that a wicked world made such precautions necessary, and the thin-lipped, dryly humorous mouth waited to see what you were going to do about it.

The horse he rode seemed quite as contradictory, if one knew how to read the signs. He came single-footing up past the corral as if there were no hurry at all and his master's errand was quite unimportant. Yet, on a day not noticeably warm and with a cool breeze blowing, neck, shoulders and flanks were plastered to his hide with sweat; as if he had traveled at top speed until he rounded the brushy bend in the trail where Parsons had lain.

The man's actions were as odd as his appearance. He pulled up at the corral and swung off; went up and peered into the stable through the window, then led his horse inside and closed the door upon him without removing bridle or saddle. He came out and studied the cabin for a minute, eyed the steep bluff behind it and finally went up the path. Before he reached the cabin corner he squinted up at the sun, waited for a puffy gray cloud to drift before it and then walked up to the door with no betraying shadow of himself sliding ahead of him across the open doorway.

The precaution was wasted. Jess lay asleep and breathing with a faint whimpering sound. The stranger stood with his left hand braced against the door jamb, sizing up the place with darting sidelong glances, then went in, walking on the toes of his spur-marked boots.

He tiptoed across the roomy place and stood looking long at Jess, then removed his coat—but not his hat—folded it neatly and laid it across the foot of Chuck's bed. With his coat off, he looked slight and small and his nose more prominent. The holstered forty-five on his sagging gun belt seemed too heavy for him and a slight bulge under his armpit indicated the probable presence of a second gun.

His behavior was oddly at variance with his armament. It had to do with broom and cookstove. An hour later, when the girls returned, the high-nosed stranger with his hat still riding the back knob of his head and his forty-five swinging at his hip was hunkered down before the oven, gravely inspecting a pan of biscuits nicely browned. The table was set for four.

He glanced up at the three staring wide-eyed in the doorway. "Howdy, howdy," he greeted amiably around a cigarette, one eye squinted against the smoke. "Come right in; you're just in time. I shore do hate to keep hot biscuits waiting."

"My goodness!" gasped Lizbeth. "Who—"

"Now, now, you know who I am—or you oughta. Folks ain't in the habit of forgetting a face like mine. Link Whelan. Met you in town a coupla weeks ago. Miss Wolsey I've saw before, too."

Peggy only stared, but Lizbeth stammered, "Why—y-yes, I—"

"Shore, you remember me. Set right down, all of you, and I'll pour the coffee. Reckon maybe I oughta wake up the prisoner. He oughta get in on these biscuits while they're hot."

"P-prisoner?" cried Peggy and Lizbeth in chorus, turning white.

"Aw—that just slipped out. Force uh habit." He crooked his forefinger toward the deputy sheriff's star on his vest. Not a large star, indeed a very unassuming one, but it carried a tremendous significance to the girls. "I got to look after him till after the inquest, is all. Set down, set down! Grub's getting cold." He lifted a stove lid with the handle of a table knife, dropped his cigarette into the fire and turned, belatedly remembering his hat.

Their voices awoke Jess. With a forced indifference he watched Link coming toward him.

"Hello, Link. Did I hear you say you're in charge of me?"

"Yeah, I am, kinda. Till you're able to appear at the inquest, anyway. Job sent me over. How about a plate of mashed p'tatoes with bacon an' flour gravy, and a biscuit or two baked to the queen's taste?"

"I'm here to take care of my brother," Lizbeth announced with much dignity. "You've no right to come here and—and take charge of Jess."

"He certainly hasn't. I just wish Dad were here," Peggy said fiercely. "He'd have that badge off you so quick it would make your head swim." She began pulling off her gloves with vicious little jerks to match the snapping anger in her dark eyes. "Here, Lizbeth, you let me fix Jess's lunch for him."

Sara smiled unexpectedly at Link. "I'm simply mad about hot biscuits, Mr. Whelan," she said, and sat down with that serene way she had of seeming to do the only possible thing. "I do hope these are real sourdough. Are they?"

Link's diffident brown eyes thanked her. "No, they're bakin'-powder, and I don't back down from no woman on earth when it comes to making biscuits," he declared, lifting the coffeepot on his way to her. "Oughta have honey by rights, to go with 'em. Wild sage honey. You bet."

"Wild sage?" Sara poised a buttered half of biscuit while she looked up into his face. "It sounds simply marvelous. Really wild honey, or just the wild sage?"

"Both," grinned Link, pouring coffee and handing her the cup as if she were of royal blood. "You get it out of the rocks. Caves, as a matter of fact. I wisht I'd 'a' known what was before me, I'd 'a' brought out a jar from town. Some I got last fall, back up here above Rainbow Canyon. There ain't no kind of honey in God's world can beat it."

"I'd love to go and find some," Sara declared with convincing enthusiasm. "Could I, some time?"

"You shore could, Miss Barrett. I'll take you myself, if you don't mind going under custody of the law."

"I don't mind in the least. I think under certain conditions the custody of the law is a very good thing to be under. Does the law keep track of the wild bees' nests?"

"We don't call 'em nests. You bet, I know right where there's a swarm getting ready to make them up a new crop. Too early to rob 'em yet; but take it along later—you aiming to be here till fall, say September?"

"I—think so. Uncle Thomas didn't tell me how long I was to stay. He only told me I must come."

Link gave her one of his swift sidelong glances. "He tell you why you had to come?" His eyes were on the girls feeding Jess—yet he was aware of the long, studying look Sara gave him.

"Senator Wolsey never tells any one why anything," she said, and sipped coffee from her spoon.

"Guardian, ain't he?"

"Sole arbiter of my fate," Sara nodded indifferently. "Even the law must get the Senator's consent, I'm afraid."

"Seems like we oughta be able to slip over a bee hunt on him," Link said, staring intently into his cup.

"Did you ever try slipping anything over on my celebrated uncle?" Sara lifted her glance to meet his briefly, and a smile was in her eyes and on her mouth.

Link made a grimace. "Lots of things I never tried that I'd like to," he drawled. "I've never flew, but I shore aim to tackle her one of these days."

Sara laughed. And Jess, at the far end of the room, with Peggy and Lizbeth talking excitedly in low, rebellious tones, nevertheless heard Sara's laughter and had a swift symbolical vision of a shady brook with ferns and bluebells nodding on the banks. For the moment he completely forgot the hot, biting ache of his hurt body. He wanted to go over and hear what Sara was saying to Link Whelan, but no one—not even Peggy—suspected that. He lay still and smiled while Peggy buttered a biscuit for him.

Sara was saying, "You smoke them out, don't you?"

"Bees? Yeah, that's right. Bees are like humans. You raise a big enough smoke and it kinda takes their mind off from stingin' you."

"And does it always work? With humans, as you call them, it doesn't always come out that way. They slip in under cover of the smoke screen to do their fanciest stinging, I am told."

Link gave her a long attentive glance. "My, my, you sure made a center shot that time, Miss Barrett. How come a little gal like you has got the low-down on human nature?"

"Not all human nature; just at its worst. How come you know my name, Mr. Whelan? Peggy was too excited to remember her manners and introduce you."

"I introduced myself," grinned Link. "Sure, I know all about you. I make it my business to know things; kind of a nosey cuss."

"And is that how you came to know where the wild bees live? Do tell me how you do it. Get the honey, I mean."

Link went rather exhaustively into the subject of robbing wild bees of their honey. He was so absorbed in explaining all of the details to Sara that he remained quite unconscious of the silent animosity of Peggy and Lizbeth. He even forgot to pour their coffee or take up more biscuits from the pan in the open oven. He ignored the haughty tilt of their heads, the occasional contemptuous twitching of Peggy's shoulders when she passed behind him. It was with open reluctance that he left them finally to go and attend to his horse, still standing saddled in the stable.

"Well! You certainly made a killing, Sark," Peggy cried with some resentment, when he went outside. "Of course, it wouldn't mean anything to you, I suppose, that he's holding Jess practically a prisoner for something he had nothing to do with. But I must say you have a strange taste for knick-knacks."

"And a great thirst for information," Sara added, her voice as melodious as the gurgle of a mountain stream. "I learned simply fascinating things about wild bees. Aren't these biscuits perfectly gorgeous? Try one with this syrup, Peg. You don't know how good it is."

"I think it's perfectly ghastly, his coming over here and practically arresting Jess," stormed Lizbeth. "What am I going to do, I ask you? Here I've gone and fixed it up with mother to let me stay; and now—"

"My nice new minion of the law has gummed up the works," Sara supplied in a grave voice but with a laugh in her eyes. "I'm sure your brother is in good hands. Any deputy sheriff who can cook like this could hold me prisoner just as long as he fed me."

"Sarky! How perfectly horrid!" Peggy looked genuinely shocked.

"Compose yourself, dear, and finish your lunch. I'm going to talk to the patient," Sara observed, and let her smile be her peace-maker.

Jess lay with his eyes shining full upon her as she walked smoothly toward him. Again he was thinking oddly of some cool shady nook with ferns and bluebells growing beside a mountain stream. He did not know why. It did not matter. Sara suggested cool, sweet bits of wilderness—and yet she was modish to the exact point where good breeding left off and affection began. The laugh in her eyes had sobered by the time she reached him. They seemed faintly troubled as they met his intent gaze.

"I want to talk with you," she said. "But not now—in the way I mean. Could I come to-morrow morning, quite early?"

"Yes." There was so much Jess wanted to say—wild, foolish things about her beauty, her smooth, flowing movements, her serene naturalness that was like an unspoiled child. So much to say that one word seemed all he dared. Yet after all a word may carry a world of feeling.

For the first time Sara seemed not quite so serenely sure of herself. A faint flush stained her cheeks, though her voice was even and her eyes did not falter in their level gaze.

"It's about—all this that has happened," she explained in a low tone. "The girls are so excitable, I'd like to talk with you alone."

"Of course. I want to—" Jess's gaze shifted to Peggy who was coming over to them.

"You're not to worry at all," Sara went on smoothly. "I'm sure everything will come out all right, and I think you are really lucky to have this sheriff person here to look after you. He's nice."

"Says you," Peggy mocked, and lifted a curl from Sara's forehead with a playful tweaking. "Did you ever see such a red head, Jess? Sarky thinks she's cut out for a—what was it you said you wanted to be?" Her hand slid down and cupped Sara's chin with a caressing movement. Jess thought her nails resembled drops of blood on Sara's neck. "A lawyer, wasn't it?"

"I said I'd like to be the prosecuting attorney when they tried these oil pirates. That was a mood of the moment."

"Because all those nice, juicy millions of yours—"

"Oh, here you are, Mr. Whelan," Sara said clearly and with deliberate intent to choke off Peggy's untimely revelations. "Is it against the rules to talk with your prisoner?"

"Call me Link. You can talk any time and all the time if you want to—in my presence." Link grinned shamelessly at her and as shamelessly lowered an eyelid at Jess.

"I'm going to see to it that Dad hears about this," Peggy stated decisively. "Some folks won't be quite so officious around here when *he* knows what's going on."

"I ain't a doubt in the world he knows about it already," Link told her good-naturedly. "There ain't much gets past that dad of yours, if you ever stopped to notice."

"I notice a great many things," Peggy retorted with ice in her voice.

"Well, then, maybe you've noticed that I've got to put Jess to bed—get his clothes off, and so on. You ladies will excuse me, but I ain't had a chance yet to do anything much for him. I hated to wake him up when I got here, and he slept right through till you girls come busting in—"

"Well, of all the nerve!"

"—so I'm afraid I'll have to send you on home now, if you don't mind."

They did mind. Peggy and Lizbeth made it perfectly plain that they considered Link's presence and behavior an outrage and that they did not intend to stand for it. Just what they meant to do about it was not so clear, except that Peggy was in a hurry to reach a telephone and tell her father.

They went away, quivering with rage. But Sara stopped in the doorway and looked back with the smile that always had the effect of being wholly unexpected and of somehow brightening the room.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LINK TAKES A CHANCE

Jess slept little that night, but not because of his hurts. He was afraid he might not be awake when Sara came. She had said "early," and all through the night he speculated upon a girl's interpretation of the word. For him, "early" meant dawn. He did not expect her at daylight, but he thought she must mean to come soon after sunrise—since she expressly stated that she wanted to talk to him alone. Apparently she knew things about Parsons which the others did not know, and perhaps she wanted to hear from him the details of Parsons' death. A gruesome subject for a girl like Sara to be following up, but she seemed remarkably level-headed and she must have reasons of her own, he thought. The whole thing was growing too complicated for him.

So hour after hour he lay awake, his thoughts revolving around the past forty-eight hours and the amazing events they had contained. Principally his interest focused upon the girl with the copper-red hair and her promise to ride over early to see him alone. He had not hinted his expectations to Link Whelan and he was obsessed by the fear that he might be asleep and that Link would not awaken him when she came.

He need not have worried. Breakfast was over and Link had washed the dishes and made the cabin as neat as any woman could have done. He was sitting on the doorstep with his big Stetson—Hollywood vintage—on the back of his head as usual, smoking and staring contemplatively out through the gap in the hills, when Sara rode up to the door.

Jess clamped his jaws together and looked sour. Peggy had come along, and she sat on the edge of the bunk and felt his pulse with make-believe solemnity, and would have dropped her pearl earring close to his chest in pretense of listening to his heartbeat. But Jess groaned loudly and told her to be careful how she mauled him, so she sat up and merely held his hand commiseratingly while she talked in the confidential murmur usually given to secrets.

As for Sara, she only looked in at him and said, "Hello, and how are you?" in that maddening, shady-brook voice of hers. Then she sat down on the doorstep beside Link Whelan and tried on his big hat. Her cool, melodious voice made a tantalizing background to the things Peggy was saying. And Jess was wild inside. He did very well to appear only tired and sulky.

Peggy eyed him with concern. "I've been pulling all the strings I could get hold of," she told him. "I talked to the coroner and I almost went on my knees to that hippo of a sheriff, trying to get him to call off his dog." She threw a malevolent glance over her tailored shoulder at the oblivious Link.

"He's not so bad. I'd rather have him here than Chuck."

"Oh, it's the principle of the thing I can't stand for. Having you in custody. It's perfectly outrageous. I should think your father would do something about it."

"He probably thinks it's a good thing. Material witnesses are trotted off to jail as a general rule. I'm having special consideration. But then, look who I am."

"Yes, look who you are—and a deputy sheriff sitting on your neck! Well, I 'phoned Dad last night. Talked about thirty dollars' worth of well-known Peggy persuasion. Of course he's simply swamped with business down there, but I got his ear and held it till I'd said my little say."

"I hope you didn't do that on my account, Peg. I'm making out fine and dandy. There isn't a thing the Senator could do about it."

"Oh, *isn't* there!"

"Oh, I know—he's got power enough. I reckon he could turn the old Missouri around and make it empty into its own headwaters instead of the Mississippi if he wanted to. But—"

"He can certainly turn this county upside down and shake a few incompetents out of office. That," Peggy declared with filial pride, "is about the best thing he does. Anyway, it's the easiest."

"But why should he? There's no occasion—"

"There's plenty. Why doesn't the sheriff get busy and find out who killed Al Parsons? What's he wasting his chief deputy's time like this for? If he had the intelligence of a rabbit, he'd know you had nothing to do with it—except just taking him in out of the rain to die."

Jess moved his head impatiently on the pillow. He had just seen Link and Sara leave the doorstep and stroll away toward the corral. There had been some discussion of horses, and from the little he had been able to overhear, Jess understood they were going to see Link's horse. Which was quite all right, except that the patient immediately began to show an irritability quite foreign to his nature.

"I wish you wouldn't bother," he said crossly. "Calling your father on long distance and trying to get him to do whatever it is you think he should do."

"I think he should give this trick sheriff the air," said Peggy, with fine simplicity. "That's what he'll do, too. He practically promised before he hung up."

"Hung up to get rid of you, I'll bet. Old Job Witherspoon is a darned good sheriff, Peg. He's held office here ever since —"

"Too long," Peggy interrupted him. "It's time we had a real one in this neck of the woods."

In spite of his mental unrest, Jess grinned appreciatively. Peg Wolsey always had amused him with her intense partisanship. They might not last long but they were to be reckoned with while they did last. Still, in this case—

"Job has the name of always getting his man," he said. "He's on the trail of something, you can bet on that. Better lay off him, old girl, and call off your dad. Our constable has a brain. Take it from me, he'll come leading somebody in by the ear—and it'll be the guilty party. You wait."

"I don't know what ails you, Jess. Do you *like* to have people think you're a killer?"

Jess gave a short laugh which he regretted because of the jar it gave to his sore ribs. "Be your age, Peg. No one thinks that."

"They do. It was in the news flashes over the radio. I heard it myself last night. 'Suspicion points to a young rancher of the neighborhood who is now in custody.' For the love of Pete, what do you suppose I've been raving about?"

"That's all baloney. It doesn't mean a thing." But a new look came into Jess's eyes and his mouth tightened.

"Well, it may not mean anything," she retorted savagely, "but it certainly does sound like the devil coming right out of your own loud speaker. They didn't say custody, come to think of it. 'Under surveillance' was the term they used. It means the same thing."

"Not quite. And I may not be the young rancher under surveillance. The country's full of young ranchers."

"You're the only one being guarded by an officer," snapped Peggy. "And every one knows Al Parsons was found dead here with you—that's gone all over the country. Of course you're the one. That's why I called up Dad. Why do you suppose? He promised to help—either come or send some one if they had the nerve to arrest you."

"Nonsense!" Jess said sharply. "That's all rot. The sheriff knows his stuff, Peg."

"Oh, *does* he! If he's so bright, what is that doing here?"

The object indicated was Link Whelan standing on the doorstep that Sara might precede him into the room. Jess did not see Link at all. His eyes were on Sara as she walked to the bed and stood there, regarding him with the clear-eyed attention of a child.

"I hope Peggy hasn't got you all bothered over that radio gossip," she said. "It didn't amount to anything really, you know. Peg took it altogether too seriously, I think."

Peggy flashed back at her impatiently, "A lot you know about it!"

"A lot I know," Sara repeated equably, looking at Jess. "I do happen to know that you aren't doing Mr. Robison any good by talking him into a fever. And since this funny country has such an archaic road system, I think we'd better be going."

"Archaic?" challenged Jess, chiefly to keep her talking.

"In some ways, yes. One can drive a car down the valley or across the valley, it seems, but if one needs to go around the edge, it must be on horseback. And since we wanted to come around the edge and make our morning sick-call, it had to be horses for the valley too." She paused for a moment, absently smoothing the quill in Peggy's hat.

Abruptly she looked straight into Jess's eyes. "Hasn't it occurred to any one that Al Parsons could not have started for town, that last afternoon? He'd have taken one of the cars, don't you think? He was rather vain of his ability to step on the gas and beat the record."

"Good Lord!" Jess sent a quick glance toward Link in the background, looking very detached and yet not missing a word.

"For heaven's sake, don't go broadcasting that bright thought, Sark," cried Peggy, getting up to go. "You do say the most impossible things! What are you trying to do? Make out that Al came over here to pick a quarrel with Jess?" Then she caught sight of Link sitting with his arms folded on the table, smoking a cigarette while he studied a worn spot in the oilcloth. Her face flushed and paled. "Those boys got rattled and lied. Al started out hunting, just as they said at first," she stated clearly. "Come on, Sarky dear. We've a long ride before us."

Jess lay staring at the doorway after they had left, trying anew to guess what it was that Sara had wanted to talk about. Something she did not care to have Peggy hear, he surmised. His glance turned to Link and met those diffident brown eyes regarding him contemplatively.

"How about it, Link? You may as well come clean. I can't run out on you, anyway. Am I under suspicion?"

Link took the time to rub the ash off his cigarette. "Now why do you want to bring that up? Don't you like my grub?"

"Hell," said Jess. "I'm entitled to the truth, I should think. What are you afraid of?"

Link studied him for a long moment. "You," he said dryly at last.

"That's flattering." But the tone did not sound pleased.

"Yes, ain't it? You take young fellows of a certain age, and about all they think of in a tight place is provin' to the world that they've got the innards of a he man. As a matter of fact, guts don't amount to much unless there's a head to back 'em up." Link carefully pinched out the last spark of his cigarette and tossed the stub through the open doorway. Then, with an odd inconsistency, he got up and followed it as far as the stone step outside, where he stood idly gazing about him.

"Well, what's the answer to that?"

Link gave one last look around and came inside, closing the door behind him. He did not speak until he was sitting on the edge of the bunk where Peggy had perched herself, and even then his voice was pitched low.

"The answer is what I'm here to find, and boy, I wish I had it right now."

"Come into the open, Link. I'm not a kid. I wasn't more than ten years old when I learned how to keep my mouth shut in fourteen languages. What's on your mind?"

"You not only got to keep your mouth shut now, Jess; you got to keep your head level."

"Well, I never did stampede very easily," Jess told him with a faint smile. "I know darned well you and Job have got something up your sleeves. You're not camping here because you think I shot Parsons—at least, I don't think you are. And it's the first I ever heard of you taking a job as trained nurse."

"Yeah? And what else?"

"Well, I've had broken ribs before. If you asked me, old Job pulled a fast one when he counted three."

"Yeah? How's that?"

Jess gave an exasperated laugh. "You old high-binder, that stall got over yesterday when I was all in, but you can't make it stick to-day. One side of me got a bad bruise from all that rubble coming down on me, but if I've got a broken rib, you're blind in both eyes. I'm going to get up."

"You try it and I'll have to bust a rib or two just to keep yuh quiet."

"Like hell you will."

"Say, listen, feller. For all practical purposes, you're laid up with three busted ribs and a bad crack on the head. Sorry, but it can't be helped. Them's Job's orders and what Job says goes."

"It wouldn't slip a joint if you explained, would it?"

Link eyed him attentively. "I dunno. Might slip something worse'n a joint. Job'd sure hold me responsible if anything went wrong—well, I'll take a chance on yuh—"

"You can," Jess said quietly, when Link hesitated.

"I believe yuh. Well, answer me this question, Jess. What was Parsons ridin' over here hell-fer-leather to see you about?"

"You—what? Parsons hadn't a thing to see me about, that I know of."

"Yeah? You don't think much of the little Barrett girl's idea, then. She's dead right about him, though. Parsons wasn't no great shakes at ridin' horseback—you know that, Jess—or you oughta. He always drove that Cad coop when he come into town and he lifted the dust, now I'm tellin' yuh. Drunk or sober, he sure could handle a car."

"I—yes, I guess you're right. I hadn't thought of that angle. I'm in the saddle so much myself, it seems the natural way to travel." Jess lay scowling thoughtfully at a knot on the log wall. "But I can't think of a thing he'd want to see me about, Link. That's straight. I hardly knew him at all, except by sight, of course. We spoke when we happened to meet—which wasn't often. I don't suppose I'd ever said a dozen sentences, until the other night."

"Yeah, well, I don't doubt that in the least. But he was on his way over here, just the same."

"Maybe he wanted to see Chuck."

Link gave a snort not unlike the sheriff's well-known grunt. "Maybe so, but I doubt it. I'll bet he never asked a word about Chuck, did he?"

"No, he didn't. But—"

"It wasn't Chuck he wanted; it was you. No place else to head for, over this way. Trail ends here. That huntin' stall—" Link waved a disdainful hand "—that's all poppycock. He started for here and he was shot on the way. Figure that out if you can."

"I can't," Jess helplessly admitted. "I've thought round and round in circles, ever since it happened. It just doesn't make sense. I'm not so important around here that the Diamond Slash manager should ride six miles to see me. He'd have sent word over by Bob or one of the boys—and in any case it would be Dad he'd want to see. I've no more authority on the JR than a jackrabbit." He gave a bitter laugh, remembering yesterday's scene with his father. "No, I certainly don't rate that much notice," he summed up his opinion.

"Yeah? You rated a damn slick attempt to kill yuh," Link said softly. "Kinda looks as though you had some importance around here. How do you figure that out?"

"I don't. I think you're all wet." Jess frowned. "That slide was an accident."

"Boot tracks up where it started wasn't any accident. Evidence enough up there to hang a man on, almost. If you'd tell me the answer to them two questions—what Parsons wanted over here and who rolled that rock down on yuh (or tried to)—I'd maybe go on off and mind my own business."

Jess shook his head. "Parsons is dead and can't tell his errand, if he had any; which I doubt. And I'm not in anybody's

way—except—nobody's."

Link gave him a look of deep disgust. "Now that's a bright answer, ain't it?"

"Not very." Jess grinned sheepishly. "It's the best I can do though. Far as I'm concerned, there's no answer to either of your questions."

Link grunted. "There never was the question lived that didn't have an answer. The hell of it is to find the right one."

And all the while, the answer to the first lay within three feet of him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ROCKS FOR THE HORNETS' NEST

"They're going to hold the inquest over here," Link announced without warning next morning. "Ten o'clock. It's nine now. That'll give you an hour, Jess."

"An hour for what?" Jess was surly after another wakeful night.

"For plain an' fancy thinkin'," Link said gently.

"All right. What about?" Jess looked at his custodian with a steady stare born of some emotion he would not reveal.

Link pushed his big hat farther back on his head and drew a long breath. "Well, you might try thinkin' about how much you aim to tell," he suggested, with misleading diffidence.

"You all but drew a chart last night, Link, showing me how to keep my mouth shut. Now what's the big idea? Do you want me to spill everything I may think I know?"

Link carefully inspected his cigarette. "I ain't a mind reader," he mildly protested. "I wish I was. I shore would like to look into yours right now and read what all took place right after you packed Parsons in here—before he cashed in. We know he was on his way over here to see you about something. We think it was something pretty important; or he thought it was, anyway. We know he was shot, back down the road here a ways, and kept on comin' till he played out. He shore musta wanted to see you bad, don't yuh think?"

"I don't know."

Link gave him a patient look. "Anyway, he got as far as he could make it and then emptied his gun, tryin' to call yuh out. He knew what he wanted, all right. He could talk when you found him—you said so yourself. You told Ritchie and Francis he talked."

"Yes, but I didn't tell—" Jess shut his teeth on the rest of the statement.

"You didn't tell all he said. They was kinda anxious to know, wasn't they?"

"Anxious? Well, interested is a strong enough word to use there. It was a shock to all of us."

"Yeah," Link agreed with a quick downward pull at his lips, "it shore musta been, all right. Point is, you held out on 'em, same as you held out on Job—same as you're tryin' to hold out on me."

"That's just your notion, Link."

"Yeah—maybe. It was their notion too, yuh want to remember."

"I don't see that."

"Yuh don't? Not after havin' that *accident* with the rock?"

"Good Lord! You don't think Rob or Ritchie rolled that rock down on me, do you?"

Link appeared to be pondering his reply. He sighed before he spoke. "Tom Ritchie an' Bob Francis are nice boys, both of 'em. I'd hate like hell to think either one of 'em would do a thing like that."

"You know damn well they didn't."

Link's mild brown eyes changed expression. "I been a peace officer too long to know anything about any man till the evidence is all in and the jury's filed out," he said cryptically. "After that, I got a right to draw my own conclusions."

"I don't know Ritchie so very well; that is, I never bunked with him. I have, with Bob. I'd as soon think my own—"

"Yeah?"

"Nothing. I still think that was an accident." Jess's mouth tightened stubbornly.

"Well, all right. Won't hurt nothing if you go right on thinking that way—till the coroner's through with yuh, anyway. And you're so damn good at keepin' things to yourself, go right on doing it." Link gave his hat a twitch and started for the door. Halfway there, he stopped and turned. "Bear in mind one thing, though. You're laid up with three busted ribs and a gash in your skelp; and don't you forget it!"

"Why, damn it, man—"

"Them's the sheriff's orders," Link admonished grimly, and went stilting out on his high heels, thumbs hooked in his belt.

When he returned, half an hour later, the sheriff was with him, and the coroner with three of the jury-men followed close behind.

The roomy cabin filled rapidly. Men nodded to Jess, eyeing him curiously as if they too would give much for the power to read his thoughts. Several of the JR boys were present, Otto and Gus keeping close together and looking everywhere save at Jess. His father pointedly ignored him; he expected that. What he had not expected, and what filled him with a dogged resentment, was the intangible acceptance of his probable guilt. Had he been haled into court to be tried for his life, he thought the atmosphere of the courtroom would have been much the same.

If this was the result of Bob and Ritchie's testimony the other day, Jess could see trouble ahead and plenty of it, no matter what he said or did. It recalled vaguely his bleak childhood when he walked under the shadow of his father's black moods. He could almost hear the swish of that damnable quirt his dad always kept handy.

The effect was to drive him back into his old reserve. From under heavy brown lashes he watched Link bring order out of confusion. Another deputy was present, he noticed; three officers besides the coroner. Smith was the second deputy's name, he discovered; a lean brown man who moved quickly here and there, helping to find seats for the jury, the sheriff and the more important men in the gathering.

Jess was young enough and angry enough to find some satisfaction in staring Otto and Gus into an uncomfortable shifting of feet. He eyed Ritchie and Bob Francis with deliberate intent and forced them both to avert their faces. He listened carefully to the proceedings however, trying to see where he came into the picture. And behind his resentment and his distrust, that other self of him saw profiles, shadowed cheeks, the gleam of eyes turned toward the light. He saw the picturesque limpness of wide hat brims that had been pelted by wind and rain of the high prairies. He noted the quiver of a nostril here, the deep-scored line beside another mouth; the flash of teeth when a young rider over by the door grinned at something the man beside him had whispered; and he saw Joey and Lizbeth at the far window, peering in with quick nervous glances this way and that, trying to see their father that they might thereafter avoid him as the plague.

He heard the official pronouncement that Albert Parsons had come to his death because of a bullet fired into his body from a point to the left and slightly to the rear. He saw the bullet held up by the sheriff for all to see and heard it stated that the gun Parsons had carried was of a smaller caliber than the bullet taken from his body after death. That, he thought, settled the suicide question; knocked it galley west.

He heard Ritchie repeat his story—and tell the truth so far as Jess himself knew it. Bob Francis followed with the same essential facts colored by his own mental attitude toward them. Jess lifted his right hand, when he was asked to do so, and took the oath in a voice of cold composure. He told of hearing the shots, of going down with the lantern in the storm, and of finding Albert Parsons lying huddled in the trail. He repeated the story of what transpired after that, using almost the identical words he had used in telling Ritchie and Bob—and he knew the men held their breath lest they miss a word.

He was conscious too of a cynical satisfaction in knowing that his Dad was obliged to sit within six feet of him and listen, and that Otto and Gus knew their boss had been altogether too ready to believe the worst. He saw the look of relief that flashed between Tom Ritchie and Bob Francis and suddenly his own stubborn reticence swung aside like an opening door within his consciousness. He drew a long, relaxed breath (much too long and deep a breath for a man with three broken ribs, had any one been thinking of it) and almost smiled. He knew what was coming next and he knew exactly what he was going to do. He was conscious of Link's warning glance. He chose to disregard it.

As if he had heard it before, he knew the coroner's next question before it was uttered.

"Did Albert Parsons speak—say how or why he had been shot?"

And Jess turned his head on the pillow so that he faced the jury and replied, "Yes. He said the treacherous devils had shot him. He was terribly afraid they'd finish him—those were the words he used. He also spoke of some dirty frame-up and said he had to tell me something."

Even the coroner appeared slightly stunned. There was a blank silence of several seconds' duration before he asked the inevitable question:

"And did he tell you what it was?"

"That," said Jess deliberately, "I cannot say."

"You can't say? You are testifying under oath, young man."

Jess moved his head slowly with a sidewise motion. "What he said—he was dying, and he asked me to keep my mouth shut. He didn't name the murderer, I'll say that much. I don't know who killed Parsons. I doubt whether Parsons knew, though he may have."

"And you refuse to repeat what it was he told you?"

Jess smiled. "I don't like to put it that way," he said.

The coroner lifted a paper from the table and laid it down again with an annoyed gesture. "Will you explain how you do expect to put it, Mr. Robison?"

"Well, I might ask a hypothetical question, Doctor Sanger. Would you betray the confidence of a dying man?"

The coroner shifted his body as if the wooden chair he occupied had suddenly become uncomfortable for him. "In the interests of justice—" He paused significantly.

"I have thought of that aspect of the case," Jess observed coolly. "The interests of justice will be served by keeping the last words of the deceased inviolate."

"Unless we know what those last words were—what it was he told you—"

"I'm afraid," Jess countered politely, "I shall have to be the judge of that for the present. When the time comes to speak, I shall be glad to do so. For the present, I ask you to believe that I am thinking of the best interests of justice when I withhold the information."

And that was as far as he would go, let the coroner twist and turn the question as he would. Heads went together for cautious whispers. Men craned necks to stare at Jess. A cloud had fallen upon the face of Tom Ritchie, and Bob Francis was chewing a corner of his underlip and staring intently at a point just over Jess's head.

Jess saw these things and tucked them away for future thought. Furtively he studied his father and thought how old he looked all at once. But then, it seemed to him that new lines had come in the faces of half the men he looked at, and he could not understand that at all.

"Well," Link observed grimly, when the crowd had gone and they were left alone again, "you shore as hell managed to cook up a fine mess for yourself, didn't yuh?"

Jess looked at him with a peculiar expression in his eyes. "Why, Link?"

"I thought you was the feller that could keep his head level and his mouth shut." Link's tone was aggrieved.

"I had to answer their questions. The coroner asked me point-blank how I got hurt, you remember. I thought I was mighty diplomatic. I didn't call the sheriff a liar, nor you either. I said I was out chopping wood right after the storm, standing close to the foot of the bluff, and a landslide caught me. And I was tactful enough to add, just careless like, that Sheriff Witherspoon examined me and only counted three broken ribs. And I pulled a face every time I moved. Did you notice that?"

"Yeah. I noticed all that and a damn sight more."

"So did I, for that matter. I helped you and Job make a sick man out of me, and the verdict was 'Persons unknown.' You've no excuse now for close-herding me in this cabin, so what am I supposed to do? Pull a faith cure, or what?"

"You're supposed," said Link with heavy sarcasm, "to use the brains Gawd gave yuh. If any."

"Under official direction, I take it. Well, what am I supposed to think with my God-given brains?"

Link suddenly exploded. "You damn fool, what you want to pull that highbrow talk for, about the unviolet words of a dyin' man?"

"Because that horse doctor of a coroner was trying to high-hat me. I wanted to show him I'm an educated guy. I also thought it would be a good idea to make him so mad he wouldn't think of examining my shattered frame trying to count those three alleged fractures—"

"Aw, hell!" Link took a forward step and stood with his hands knuckled on his lean hips, glaring down at Jess. "Know what you done? Only for your dad bein' one of the jury, it's a ten-to-one shot they'd have recommended that you be held pending further investigations. Didn't you get that?"

"No. And if you think my father would use his influence for me—"

"Shore, he wouldn't. The rest of the jury was too polite t' say anything; that's what."

"Well, anyway, I'm being held here pending some damned idea you and the sheriff have got in your heads; that ought to satisfy every one—except myself. My side's sore as the devil, but I don't have to stay in bed with it, and you know that as well as I do."

"Say," Link questioned exasperately, "ain't it percolated yet that whoever killed Parsons is right on the warpath now agin' you? The murderer is goin' to get that message outa you, if he has to roast your damn feet off to get it. It ain't anything to grin at, young feller. The man that fired that shot don't give a cuss how unviolet that message is s'posed to be. You might as well face the facts right now. He didn't feel himself safe, even when he just suspicioned maybe Parsons had talked. Now he knows he did—well, figure it out for yourself, kid."

Jess gave a short and reckless laugh. "Well, you and Job have kept me in bed here, trying to coax them out of the brush into the open. They'll come a-running now, after I bounced that rock off the hornets' nest right behind them."

"Yeah!" Link snorted. "Bright lad, you are! Bounced a rock off the roof uh hell, more like."

Jess grinned. "As you prefer. Whatever the figure of speech, the basic fact remains the same. You maintain that the murderer—plural, murderers—rolled that rock down on me just in case I might know too much. Now, all you have to do is watch who plants the bomb under my blankets and nab him." His eyes twinkled. "You and Job oughta eat him up. That's right in your line."

"Yeah, that's all right so fur," Link gloomily admitted. "The trick is git him before he gits you."

Jess yawned. Three bruised—not broken—ribs protested and he followed with a groan. "Well, do your own worrying. That's what sheriff's deputies are for."

"Yeah. That's easy said." Link hesitated. "It would help a lot just to know what that damned unviolet message was," he hinted.

Again Jess grinned. "Inviolat from the coroner's rabbit ears," he said. "No secret from you, Link."

"Hunh?" Link brightened amazingly.

"Lean down here, officer. 'Way over, so I can whisper—"

"The truth now, so help yuh?"

"Pos-i-tively. Parsons said—" Jess whispered the rest "'If you can keep your mouth shut—I've got to tell you—' and that's all, Link."

"All?" Link stared, his eyes six inches from the unreadable gray eyes of Jess.

"Every bit. On my word of honor, Link. I went for coffee and when I got back he was gone. Then Bob and Ritchie came bursting in, looking for him. Now you've got the whole yarn." (Link hadn't, but neither suspected that.)

Link sat down on the bed as if his knees had weakened under him.

"Well, I'm damned," he whispered. "Might as well have blowed your own brains out, almost—and all over nothin'."

"Oh, no." Jess's eyes hardened. "I knocked down the hornets' nest; now watch who jumps outa the brush."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SARA DISAPPEARS

For the rest of that day Jess stayed in bed. It was a good place for quiet thinking, because he could pretend that he was asleep and so escape much fruitless conversation. He needed to think and think straight. No use dodging facts. Whichever way he turned, there one stared him in the face. He had to meet it without fear or too much resentment and he dared not delude himself with foolish optimism. If Job Witherspoon and Link Whelan were anxious, he knew that the situation must be serious. They were too old in the game to be easily worried; that much he could be sure of.

The sheriff came and talked for a long time with Link outside, and Jess knew that Job speedily learned just what the "unviolet" message amounted to. Probably they were devising ways and means of protecting him, but Jess did not want protection. What he wanted was to bring the murderers out into the open. That there was more than one man involved he felt sure. Parsons had said "treacherous devils." Granting that his talk had not been delirium, as Jess had at first believed, then he had been followed and attacked by at least two men. Everything he said bore out that theory.

Bob and Ritchie? He hated to think so, and yet—

Abruptly he called to the men outside. "Oh, Sheriff! Link! Are you busy?"

Whether they had been or not, within a minute they were in the room, eyeing him questioningly. Link motioned to Chuck's bunk.

"I haven't told all Parsons said," he began without prelude. "A man says things sometimes when he's out of his head—he gets facts all twisted. If his words are taken seriously, they may do a lot of harm. That's why—one reason, anyway—I wouldn't repeat everything."

"Don't hold out a thing," Job warned him. "Albert Parsons knew what he was talking about, far as I can discover."

"They said he'd been on a spree—"

The sheriff made an impatient clucking sound with tongue and teeth. "Parsons was a steady drinker and he was a man that carried his liquor. If he was on a spree, it's something new; I never heard of him being what you'd call drunk. Go on."

"At any rate, I didn't pay much attention to what he said, he was so wild and excited—"

"Maybe you'd be wild with a bullet in you," Link commented dryly.

"Maybe. I know he had a horror of going back to the ranch. He said, 'Any place but there. They'd finish me.' And he said, 'Treacherous devils, they tried to double-cross me too.'"

"Mm-hm—you sure of that *too*?"

"Yes, Sheriff, I am. I can hear him say it. 'They tried to double-cross me too.' And he said, 'I'll tell you something—big. You can clean up, if you work it right. Sarky—little Sark'—why, Sheriff, that meant—The name didn't mean a thing to me at the time, but now—"

"Mm-hm. That little Barrett girl. What else did he say?"

"Well, I have to reconstruct the scene mentally, you know. It was all disjointed, a sentence or a few words—you know how it is, when you're hurrying to do things in an emergency. When I came to the bed he'd say something—" Jess closed his eyes and lay quiet, thinking back; why, it seemed impossible that it was only three or four nights ago!

"I pulled his boots off for him and he was saying something about a dirty frame-up. I didn't pay any attention, because it did sound as if his mind were wandering. Then I was looking down at him and thinking he must be dying, and he said—let's see. He was saying, 'Wheels within wheels—I told them they couldn't get away with it, and this is—' something or other. He just mumbled the rest. And then he said he'd tell me something, if I could keep my mouth shut. I told him he ought to keep quiet, but he kept right on muttering and groaning. It was all rather incoherent. I know he said it would serve the damn fools right if he told me something, and that there was real money in it, and it would be mine if—

something or other. I don't remember that he spoke at all after that; or if he did, I didn't hear him. I was trying to heat some coffee for him."

"Hm-m," mused Job, thrusting out his lower lip and catching the other beneath it. "Kinda seems like he said a mouthful. You got it down, Link?"

Link nodded. Jess was rather astonished to discover that Link had jotted down each sentence of Parsons in shorthand in a tiny book concealed in his palm.

"Stringin' it together like he was thinkin' it, prob'ly; it sounds clear enough that he was sore because somebody was trying to double-cross him in some big deal with money in it. Didn't say he was headed for here when they followed him up and shot him—" He broke off, looking at Jess; and his eyes were not diffident but keenly searching. "Or maybe he did say he had started for you."

"No." Jess shook his head. "No, he didn't say that or hint it. He just said they followed him—he was afraid they'd follow him here and finish him."

"Mm-hm. Go on, Link."

"Yeah. Well, he said it would serve the damn fools right if he told Jess, and there would be big money in it if Jess could keep his mouth shut. Kinda complicated business—wheels within wheels—"

"Ritchie made the same remark," Jess said quickly. "It struck me at the time, coming so soon after Parsons had used the expression. Ritchie was talking about politics."

"Politics?" Link looked at the sheriff. "How was that?"

"He thought Parsons had killed himself and he said it would hurt Senator Wolsey if it came out just now that his manager up here on the ranch was a suicide. I couldn't quite see it and he went on to say that politics were a tangled mess—'wheels within wheels,' he put it."

"Hm-mm," said the sheriff.

"I wouldn't attach too much importance to that, though," Jess went on in a tone of anticlimax. "Probably that's a common expression at the Diamond Slash. Sounds to me like the Senator. If he used it a time or two, the rest would pick it up. You know how it is. A certain group will take some word or phrase and ride it to death."

The sheriff gave him a lazy glance. "You afraid this might tie Ritchie in with the murder?"

Jess winced. "I'd hate to have it do that. It looks as though Bob and Ritchie were the 'treacherous devils' Parsons was afraid of, but I don't believe it. I do think they may know or suspect—" He stopped short, not liking the possibilities of that line of reasoning.

"What's that you think they might know or suspect?" The sheriff had dropped his mask of lazy placidity and spoke with a curt insistence. "If you hold back a thing now, you're liable to find yourself obstructing the law. You're the only witness we got that saw Parsons die and saw them two when they found it out. You ain't any dumbbell. What do you honestly think about it?"

Jess saw the force of that reasoning. After all, he thought, justice was what he wanted to see, and if by any possibility Sara of the deep eyes and the copper-red hair were involved somehow in those "wheels within wheels"—Peggy had let out something about Sarky's juicy millions—big money—That gang in California was trying to break Senator Wolsey, politically and financially; he had heard echoes of the fight for months. Maybe Sara's fortune was in danger somehow, through investments the oil pirates were attacking.

"Wheels within wheels is right, I guess," he said, opening his eyes and looking from the sheriff to Link and back again. "It does look as if Parsons was up to something, all right."

"What did you think of Ritchie and Francis?" Job persisted.

"Well, it seems to me they probably knew or got wind of something. Parsons used to run with a bunch of high rollers

over in Rainbow—I suppose you know more about that than I do. All I ever got was the dust of their cars hitting fifty and sixty on the valley road. Used to start my horse pitching every time I met one.

"So I think that's where it ties in. Bob and Ritchie may have found out something and were worried about Parsons, just as they said—only not on account of his drinking, but the company he was keeping. He might have started over this way to meet some of the bunch back up here in the hills; on the quiet. It's plenty wild back here a few miles; you know that. He could have met them, all right, and quarreled with them—"

He drew a sharp breath as a fresh possibility occurred to him. "If he did have a rendezvous with some of his town cronies, back here in the hills, he'd very likely make the excuse that he was going hunting, just as the boys said. I believe they were shooting straight, Sheriff, except in one detail."

"Hm-mm. What one's that?"

"I believe they were worried about his pulling something crooked against the Senator. Albert Parsons was a rat—I'll say it, even though he is dead. They'd try to stop him if they could without blowing the top off and letting a lot of publicity loose. So I think they lied to me about the reason why they followed him. It wasn't because he was crazy drunk. It was because he was helping frame the Senator. They came here to get out of the storm; not to find Parsons."

"You sure of that?"

"Practically certain, Sheriff. When I asked them—I did, first thing—if they were looking for Parsons, Ritchie came back with, 'Why? Is he here?' They were both knocked for a goal when they saw him lying there dead."

"Does kinda tie in," Link muttered thoughtfully.

"Of course it does. I believe this is the right trail. They wanted to hush it up—maybe afraid of the gang that killed Parsons, or afraid they may pull off whatever deal it is they're framing against Senator Wolsey—so they pulled that gag about Parsons being crazy from drink. I felt at the time they were kind of making that up as they went along, but they weren't faking the shock they got when they saw him lying here dead. They were worried to death over something."

"What?" Job prompted, when Jess lay in frowning silence. "Got any idea what it was worrying 'em?"

"I don't—yes, I believe I've hit the trail of that. Ritchie—well, both of them—tried their damndest to sell me the idea it was suicide, and that it would hurt Senator Wolsey in the fight he's making against those oil pirates if it were known. They were keen to pass it off as accidental shooting when Parsons was out hunting, and I told them I'd keep out of it and let them put it over if they could; but I wouldn't perjure myself if I were called for the inquest. Ritchie said there wouldn't be any. He said they had this county in their pocket and he'd fix it up okay."

"Humph!" Job grunted.

"Yes. I see that pocket of his had a hole in it."

"Yeah—the hull bottom rotted out of it," Link grinned sardonically.

"That what was worrying 'em?" Job's mind clung to the main issue and would not be diverted. It was that quality of tenacity that made him such a terror to fugitives.

"No," Jess returned to the subject. "He was worried because Parsons may have written a suicide's note—the conventional last message—and the coroner might find it." He laughed shortly. "I thought at the time he was devilishly thorough. He went through all the pockets, even felt all over the lining—looked everywhere. He made me sore, the way he quizzed me about whether I'd taken any papers or letters out of Parsons' coat. I told him a suicide always left a letter in his room or somewhere easy to find, and I'd never heard of one hiding his last message in the lining of his coat. I can see now that Parsons was somehow working against his boss—his best friend in the world, at that. Ritchie and Bob certainly think a lot of the Senator and they wouldn't stand for any one framing him." Jess hesitated. "They might even shoot Parsons, if that was the only way to stop him. But I know they didn't. They were too surprised. No, the one thing in their minds was how they could protect the Senator. I'd almost stake my life on that."

"Hm-mm." The sheriff gave him a swift enigmatic glance. "Don't ever bank too hard on any man except yourself—and don't be too dawgone sure of him. You might get let down. This—alleged suicide note, now. Ritchie find anything?"

"Not a darned thing that he was looking for. Bob was about as anxious as Tom was. I remember Bob telling Ritchie there'd be hell to pay if they didn't find it. Well, they didn't; at least, not while they were here. They may have, later on."

"They show any interest in what Parsons might of said to yuh?" Job inquired with elaborate carelessness.

"Well, yes, they did. And Bob came back next day. He'd been hunting Parsons' horse. He went over the whole thing again and got me to thinking it was suicide, all right."

"You tell him what you've just told us, about the talking Parsons did?"

"No, I don't believe I told him much of anything except what he knew already. I laid all that rambling talk to delirium, you see. I didn't repeat it. For some reason I just didn't want to, and I wouldn't let them pry it out of me."

"But they wanted to find out what he said. Both of 'em?"

"Well, yes, Sheriff, they did." Jess's face sobered. He looked questioningly from one to the other.

"That shore don't sound like they was so damned innocent themselves," Link pointed out.

"It certainly doesn't, on the face of it," Jess admitted. "But you must remember they wanted to hush everything up. They didn't want it to get to the papers—"

"Yeah, I know—"

"And it stands to reason that neither Ritchie nor Bob Francis rolled that rock down on me. That looks more like the gang Parsons was trailing with, don't you think? They knew Parsons had died in here alone with me and they didn't know how much he told me. Bob and Ritchie—well, I satisfied them; I know I did. They weren't afraid of me. They know me too well."

"Mm-hmm," Job purred agreement with that. "Well, you've got a good head on you, Jess. Cleared up two-three points I been wanting to know about. Looks now as though Parsons wasn't comin' here after all, maybe. That idee of meeting the town gang back up here in the woods some place—that sounds reasonable. We'll—"

The drumming of swift hoof beats coming up the trail halted his speech. With amazing nimbleness for a man of his age and size, Job reached the door on the heels of Link. Both men had their guns in their hands, though Jess had not seen either man draw his weapon.

A winded horse stopped in three stiff-legged jumps before the two officers. Peggy Wolsey flung herself from the saddle, rushed between them and into the cabin, making straight for Jess, who was sitting up in bed and looking around for his clothes.

Peggy caught him by both shoulders. "Jess! Jess! Something's happened to Sara! Oh, I'm half crazy—" She began to sob.

"Peg! Stop it and talk! What happened? Where?"

"Back up here—" She waved a hand toward the hills. "Sarky wanted to scout around back there—she said she wanted to hunt a wild bees' nest. She—we came to a grove—and she said we'd take different sides, and we did—Oh, Jess, she's *gone!*"

"Here, let's get this straight," the sheriff rumbled behind her. "Gone where?"

"Oh, I don't *know!* If I did, do you suppose I'd be—"

"Where did you see her last?"

"Right where we separated to take different sides of the grove—back on the flat this side of the big canyon. I rode—clear around the darned grove!" wailed Peggy. "I called and I waited—and that was *hours* ago! Oh, I don't *dare* go home and tell Mother—Oh, what do you suppose *happened?*"

Jess caught her and held her away so that he could look into her face. "Was there—did you see anybody up there, Peg, anywhere around there—where you left her?"

"No, not a soul. There were a couple of riders—cowboys they were, I think—but that was before we reached the flat. They were crossing a ridge and they rode out of sight in a gulch. We didn't see them after that."

Link whirled and was gone, sprinting for the stable and his horse. Job waited to ask another question or two concerning the exact location of the grove where she had last seen Sara, and to try and get some description of the two men; then he too hurried out. Link was already on his horse and taking the steep trail that led to the benchland, his horse plunging like a mad thing up the slope.

Peggy turned frightened eyes upon Jess. "Oh, what shall we *do*?" she cried. "Jess, what do you think ha-happened? Do they think those men—?"

"Turn your back or go outside," Jess commanded her brusquely. "I'm going to get up."

"Oh, you mustn't! You can't!" But she retreated to the door-step and stood there crying helplessly.

Jess brushed past her and picked up the dragging reins of her sweat-roughened mount. "Sorry, Peg. I'll have to take your horse. You stay here till somebody comes." Then he, too, tore off up the hill trail while the dust was yet settling behind the sheriff's galloping horse.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A CASE OF RANSOM?

Jess knew that wild and lonely stretch of open plateau gently sloping up to the mountains behind it and dotted here and there with pine and alder groves. Seamed as it was with ancient water-courses, it made rough traveling, unless one followed the meandering stock trails that threaded it here and there. These he ignored for the most part, cutting straight across to the grove a mile or two back from the bluff. So he arrived at the point described by Peggy, losing little time, in spite of the jaded horse he rode with stirrups six inches too short for him. Job was loping down the trail from the opposite direction and the two pulled up their horses as they met.

Job looked surprised and not too pleased. "What're you doing up here?" he demanded. "I thought you was supposed to be laid up with a bunch of broken ribs."

"Not in a case like this," Jess retorted. "Where's Link?"

"I'm askin' you," Job grunted. "Oughta be around here somewhere. See any tracks as you come along?"

"Plenty. There's been a bunch of JR horses running up here lately. Round-up horses mostly, that the boys haven't gathered yet. I wish you'd let me take your horse and rope for a few minutes, Sheriff. I'll have to catch up a horse. Dad took mine away from me—and this mount of Miss Wolsey's is nothing to brag on except for looks." As he talked, Jess was dismounting. He walked toward the sheriff expectantly, leading Peggy's horse by the bridle reins.

Job eyed him grimly. "Young feller, nobody asked you to get out on this case. Anybody see you riding around, you're meat for any of that gang's guns. You get back to bed—that's what you can do."

"You go to the devil. Think I'm going to hole up like a rabbit when—in a time like this? Let me have your horse. You're just wasting time. The bunch is grazing back here about a quarter of a mile—it'll only take me a minute or two. I've got to have a good horse under me."

"Humph!" But the sheriff swung a leg over the cantle and came grumpily to earth. "I'd oughta put you under arrest. You're liable to gum up the whole case—"

"Oh, go chase yourself!" Jess muttered impatiently, as he took the reins and reached for the saddle horn. "Excuse me, Sheriff, but you make me so damn mad with your protective policy—" As he slid into the saddle, his lips twisted with pain otherwise ignored. He rode off at a sharp gallop, his weight in the stirrups to ease the jar in his bruised body.

He was absent a surprisingly short time, and when he returned, he was leading a deep-chested blue roan with heavy black mane and tail and bold intelligent eyes. The sheriff, ranging back and forth for some sign of Sara, spared one keen, appraising glance for the new horse.

Jess also looked back over his shoulder, following the sheriff's glance. "He's one of the best and fastest horses the JR owns," he said casually. "Been running out to rest up for round-up. The cow don't live that can dodge him. Find any trace, Sheriff?"

Job shook his head. "Hard to trail anything on this kinda ground," he answered. "Maybe this ain't the grove that Wolsey girl meant."

"It's the one she described," Jess stated and looked around him in a baffled way. "I don't believe Sara just rode around and got lost," he added half to himself. "What about Link?"

"Link'll look after himself," growled Job. "Now you got your horse, what you expect to do with him?"

Jess had swung down from Job's saddle and handed him the reins. He stood for a moment staring around him as if he were making some decision, while he sought rather hopelessly for some view of the girl whose face and voice never left his consciousness.

"Well, I'm going back to camp first thing and give Peggy her horse and get my own saddle and a few things. Then I expect to get back up here and—stay till I find her."

"You ain't able," Job said bluntly. "Even if you was, you're taking a big risk and laying me in a lie besides."

"I don't give a whoop for the risk and you can say you made a mistake. You're no doctor. I thought myself I had a broken rib or two, that first day." He took a deep breath and tightened the reins of Peggy's horse ready to ride away. "I'm all right now, though."

"You ain't all right and you won't be till that gang's rounded up in jail." Job mounted his horse and swung him to face Jess for a last word. "After that evidence you gave yesterday, you oughta be locked up yourself for safe keeping." He slapped a big bluebottle fly on his horse's neck and left a fleck of blood on the sweaty hide. "They'll kill yuh like I killed that fly," he said grimly. "You'll be no more'n that to 'em, if they get a sight of yuh."

"Which reminds me I'd like to have my gun back, Sheriff."

Job grunted and took Jess's gun from a saddle pocket, handing it over butt first. His eyes were keenly scrutinizing as Jess leaned to grasp the six-shooter.

"Won't do yuh much good if they meet up with yuh," he glumly observed. "That's a hard bunch you're goin' up against. I'd put the irons on yuh right now and turn yuh over to Smith—only—damn it, I know how I'd feel if it was my girl wanderin' around up here alone."

At the moment Jess was too distraught to wonder at the sheriff's discerning mind, though he thought of it afterwards. He was in a hurry to be gone.

"Shall you be here when I come back ready to take the trail—say in an hour?"

"Mm-hmm—I s'pose likely I'll be somewheres around—if I ain't on the way back with Link and the girl."

Jess nodded and loped away, the blue roan trotting with long, effortless strides behind him.

Peggy was toiling afoot up the bluff and refused a ride back down to the camp, yet was wild with resentment because Jess rode on and left her. He had saddled the roan and was tying an emergency camp outfit behind the saddle with his slicker topping the roll, when she arrived, and her black eyes were sparkling with the rage she was in.

Though well aware of her mood, Jess questioned her while he tied the last knots and mounted. It had seemed to him incredible that anything could have happened to Sara without Peggy's knowledge or at least some suspicion. So he asked her what she thought.

"Think? I think you have completely lost your mind," Peggy flared. "I wish to heaven that girl had stayed in Los Angeles where she belongs. You've been absolutely ga-ga ever since you first set eyes on that red head of hers. It's a pity she didn't break a leg when she broke the cinch strap and took that spill—"

"When was that, Peg? Don't be a nutty child. Tell me." Jess forced himself to grin. "You know how it is with me, Peggy."

Peggy decided that she did know and softened toward him. "Well, I simply loathe having my love tested on Sark," she justified her anger. "I know she's a striking creature, but she really is a dear, and I was simply petrified when we were galloping along up there, and all at once Sara and her saddle went all in a heap on the ground. A strap or something gave way, but Sara fixed it up somehow and got on."

"Who saddled your horses, Peg?" Jess held in the blue roan which danced in a circle, eager for the trail.

"Why, I don't know. One of the men. Of course, it was a piece of carelessness on somebody's part, and I mean to report it to Ritchie when I get home. Sarky could easily have been killed. She rides like a red Indian—learned it in Texas before all that land turned oil. I've got to hand it to Sara, Jess. The girl knows her stuff, all right, when it comes to horses and riding." She reached up to pat the blue roan's nose and sent him ducking backward. "She just cut off a saddle string and mended the cinch and went on hunting bees' nests as if nothing had happened."

Jess quieted the roan, thinking swiftly. "You'd better get on home, Peg, and tell Ritchie to get the boys together, in case we don't bring her home in an hour or two. I'll have to be going now. Every minute counts."

"Why? She's got two sheriffs looking for her, hasn't she? Just because she's got more millions than she is years old, every

one breaks his neck to do things for Sara. Poor little girl'll get along; don't you worry about that." Her eyes and smile lured him to linger.

"I promised the sheriff I'd be right back. He'll be waiting," Jess evaded. "Sorry, Peg. I'll be seeing you."

"Well, take care of those fifteen broken ribs," Peggy taunted him, as the roan, released at last, leaped forward on the trail.

Jess only waved his hand. He did not look back. Already he had forgotten Peggy and was thinking of Sara thrown from her horse with a broken latigo strap. Even though she had not been hurt, Jess felt goose flesh at the narrow escape she had. He could not rid his mind of a conviction that some sinister design lay behind that broken strap. He could almost seem to hear Parsons muttering "Sarky—little Sark—" and he wondered if her millions were the object and the lure of the mysterious gang's activities. Probably they were somehow involved, though Senator Wolsey's wealth would be sufficient in itself to inspire the cupidity of any gang, even in these days of vast fortunes.

Despite these distracting thoughts and Peggy's frank desire for conversation, he arrived at the grove well within the stipulated hour. The sheriff was there waiting for him, with no purr left in his voice nor any placidity in face or manner.

"D'you see Link?" he demanded sharply, as Jess rode up.

"No. Have you found any clue?"

The sheriff's reply was profanely explicit. "Good deal like huntin' the needle in the haystack," he added glumly. "Can't tell what happened here. She coulda gone off of her own accord—just ridin' aimless and not realizing what a stranger's up against; or she coulda been waylaid—carried off. There's plenty of cover back up that draw. A girl's liable to go dreamin' off by herself and get lost. Then again—" Job pushed out chin and underlip as if the possibilities of misfortune were limitless.

"I learned a little more from Peggy Wolsey," Jess offered. "Sheriff, did you know Miss Barrett is worth several million dollars—oil property?"

Job sent him a quick glance. "Twenty-one million," he said dispassionately. "Senator Wolsey is her guardian. He's s'posed to have about the same amount, maybe more. Texas land, most of it. It ain't s'posed to be generally known about the Barrett girl. That's why she's got no business ridin' around like this. Too good a chance—"

"She had an accident to-day," Jess further informed Job. "Her latigo—Peggy said a strap on the cinch, and I suppose it was the latigo—broke and threw her off, saddle and all."

"Hm-mm. How was that?" The masklike placidity descended upon Job's large and florid countenance.

Jess, telling all he knew about it, was struck anew with the incredibility of the accident.

"Mm-hmm—" Job was purring again. "You was sick in bed. You didn't see the saddle that little girl rides. Special make. Plain but elegant. If there was a snide piece of leather in that saddle, I'll eat it. Mm-hmm. Throwed off, you say. Hurt her? Or didn't the Wolsey girl say?"

"She said Sar—Miss Barrett wasn't hurt. She cut a string off the saddle, mended the strap and rode on. She said Miss Barrett is an expert rider and that she learned on the Texas ranch before her folks found oil there."

"Hm-mm." Job's head moved sidewise. "There ain't any folks. This girl's father tried to argue with the fast mail at a grade crossing. Wiped out the whole family, except the red-headed one and the mother. Girl was off to school. The old lady lingered along for over a year in a sanatorium. Sister of Mrs. Wolsey. Senator handled the property—had the ranch prospected for oil, struck it just about the time the mother died. That was two-three years ago. This girl's had the best schoolin' money could buy—just come back unexpected from Europe some place, last winter. Wanted to be with her own folks, seems like. The Wolseys are all she's got. Nice, quiet, well-behaved girl—all I've seen of her. Different from most girls nowadays."

Jess held in his horse and listened impatiently, in spite of the absorbing interest of the subject. Now he seized upon the chance to interrupt the sheriff's monologue.

"Do you think it's a case of—ransom?"

"Might be. If the gang that killed Parsons has got hold of her. They'll send some word in to the ranch, most likely."

"Looks queer to me, Sheriff. How could they know the girls would separate up here, and Sa—Miss Barrett would be alone? I can see how they'd know the girls rode off together, but I don't see how they could plan on their separating—"

Job eyed him half-pityingly. "They'd as lief take both as one, for ransom," he reminded Jess. "The Senator would punge up half a million if they worked him right. He thinks his eyes of that girl of his. You oughta know that."

"I do," Jess admitted restively. "Well, what are we going to do, Sheriff? We can't just sit here on our horses as if we were day-herding this damned grove." His very intenseness contributed impatience to his horse. The blue roan reared and stood poised on his hind feet before he leaped. Jess brought him up again, facing Job. "Which way had I better ride?"

"Home," grunted the sheriff with brutal frankness. "If she was kidnaped a coupla hours ago, we'll get word at the ranch. If she just rode off and lost herself, Link'll round her up and bring her in. No use gettin' in a sweat till we know something's wrong."

Jess stared at him with hard eyes. "You mean you're not going to do anything about it?"

"Mm-hmm. If a sheriff goes huntin' all the mares' nests reported in to him, he'd have a standin' army of deppities on call. It's broad daylight, will be for two hours yet. Fine weather, no sign of a storm and not a clue to work on. Link's trailin' her; that's enough for the time bein'."

"It's not enough for me," Jess retorted sharply. "You can do as you damn please, Sheriff. I'll do the same."

The blue roan wheeled and streaked it for the brushy draw a furlong or two away, Jess riding low and never looking back.

The sheriff watched him out of sight, gave a sweeping glance around and turned his horse to the eastward, riding swiftly toward the trail which met the highway at the head of Rainbow Canyon and so would lead him to the town of Rainbow and his office. His face was brooding and his eyes were watchful as he galloped along. He did not look in the least as though he thought Sara Barrett's disappearance the trifling incident he would have had Jess believe, nor did he seem to think that Link's efforts would be sufficient to find the girl. He looked as his deputies had seen him look when he started on a man hunt with the full expectation of running into gunsmoke at the end of the trail.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

YOU CAN BANK ON LINK

A suffocating sense of futility swept over Jess. While daylight lasted, he had ridden with tireless abandon on the quest. He knew every gulch, knew the twists and turns, knew all their branches and where they led. He should know—he who had wandered through these wild places during all the lonely years of his boyhood, seeking solace from the beauty, gaining strength and endurance from the brooding serenity of the everlasting hills. He was used to riding these hidden trails with bruised body and now he thought little of his hurts. A certain way of bracing himself, of throwing more weight on one stirrup than on the other; he knew all the little makeshifts, all the tricks of easing an ache somewhere.

But never before had he ridden with such an agony of fear in his heart. Never had he felt the yearning anxiety he felt now; never the bitterness he felt toward the sheriff for his heartless abandonment of the search. A hundred times he rode boldly out into plain view and stopped the roan while he scanned the surrounding country, making of himself a wonderful target for any lurking enemy who cared to lift his rifle and squint along its barrel at Jess. He never gave a thought to himself and the risk he ran. If he escaped, certainly it was through no discretion he showed that late afternoon.

He had thought he could guess the trail kidnapers would be most likely to take,—a certain long and shallow depression behind a ridge, easily gained by following the draw not far from the grove. This way led almost directly to Rainbow Canyon and he felt certain that was where a gang would hide out. He took that trail, watching for signs.

For a time he was certain that he had found a clue. There, in a sandy patch of soil, were plain imprints of shod hoofs; two horses; he was sure of that. But a little farther on he saw other tracks and presently he came upon a dozen horses feeding upon either slope of the draw. So that clue was useless.

He climbed to the crest of the ridge and waited there, searching for a lone rider. In imagination he saw exactly how Sara would look riding out into plain view. He could vision the coppery sheen of her hair under the soft hat she wore and he knew just how her brown riding suit would look against the new green of the grass. In that mood he had the feeling that Sara would know exactly where she was going and why she wanted to go there. He could not believe that she was simply dreaming along with no particular object in view nor any clear idea of the way home again. Sara of the copper-red hair was not the kind of girl who gets lost. Certainly not if she had learned to ride on the plains of Texas.

Now, when the day was spent, he rode slowly along a ridge tapering neatly down to the benchland just above the plateau. The sky was a riotous mass of dull orange and purple, and the distant hills were coldly withdrawing themselves, wrapped in their mantles of indigo. Beneath him and not far away, the alder grove where he had left the sheriff stood blurred in deep shadows. The land was empty, steeped in a melancholy calm which the breeze whispering up the slope could not destroy.

And Jess felt oppressed beneath the futility of his search. For perhaps the first time in his life he had ridden for hours in the midst of beauty and never saw it. Even now the moody splendor of the darkening clouds meant to him only the near coming of night. If Sara were abroad when darkness fell—if she were lying hurt somewhere—His heart contracted painfully. Until this moment he had been spared that new and agonizing possibility. A girl's toggling repairs to a broken cinch—another fall—Jess shivered.

But then, her horse would show up somewhere. He would have seen it, surely. And he had seen no other searchers. Surely, if Sara were still missing, Peggy would have given the alarm at the ranch and the Diamond Slash boys would be out. Perhaps his worry was needless. Perhaps she was safe at home, had been for hours.

He was just beginning to accept that hope as a probable fact when he glimpsed the vague outline of a rider emerging from behind a little knoll and starting across an open space where the fading light was strongest. Whether it was man or woman he could not tell, nor the color of the horse. But it was the first sign of human life he had seen since he rode away from Job. With a reckless disregard of the risk he was taking, he sent the blue roan charging down the slope.

The rider must have heard the headlong rush even before he saw Jess coming at him. He whipped in amongst a clump of bushes out of sight as Jess came thundering up.

"Stop where you are! I got a bullet here that's askin' who you are."

Jess gave a jerky laugh. "That you, Link?"

He heard a ripping oath and Link rode out, the pliant bushes parting and swaying before him as he came.

"Jess? What the devil you doin' out here?"

"Same to you and many of them. Did you find—anything?"

"Plenty riding," Link grumbled. "I been hittin' the high spots ever since that Wolsey girl come tearing in with her story."

"And you didn't see any sign of her? What do you suppose—"

"You can search me," Link forestalled the question he knew was coming. "Any searchin' parties out from the ranch?"

"I haven't seen a soul till I spotted you. But I've been off over toward the canyon."

"Rainbow? Any sign? But there wouldn't be," Link immediately corrected himself. "If there had been, you'd been follering it till you was shot off yore horse. Looks like she most likely backtrailed to the ranch and the Wolsey girl missed her somehow."

Jess exhaled a breath of relief. "I've been thinking that myself, Link. That's what the sheriff thought, after he came up here and looked around for awhile. He rode over to the Diamond Slash to find out for sure."

"Yeah? Then I'd best git over there myself, I reckon."

"I'll go with you."

"You'll do nothin' of the kind. You say you never saw anybody but Job? Then you git back to camp quick as the Lord'll let yuh."

Jess leaned and spoke with savage determination. "I'm not going to hole up and fake a bunch of broken ribs, not for you or the sheriff or the President of these United States! If anybody wants to call me, on that Parsons business, fine and dandy. I'll be waiting for 'em, ready to hold up my end of the argument. So make up your mind to it, Link. That little girl had something she wanted to see me about, alone. She never had a chance yet. I know as well as that I'm alive there's something wrong—"

"Yeah?" Link leaned and spat into the grass. "I told you it might percolate through your head one of these days that things didn't look just right."

"I've been dragged into this business, whatever it is. I'm in to my neck—"

"Yeah, you sure are, boy. So don't let it pull yuh down fer the third time. You got t' keep yore head up and yore eyes open. It's a deeper river than you reelize—"

"All of which doesn't mean a damn thing to me, Link, except a string of words. If she's in trouble—if there's anything I can do, I go the limit. I certainly don't crawl between the blankets and play I'm sick, so some hypothetical enemy won't shoot me."

"Yeah, that's fine—up to a certain point. But when yuh come to them hypothetical enemies yore talkin' about,—well, it shore won't be no hypothetical bullet, I tell yuh those." Link reined his horse around a dimly seen bush in their trail. Jess took the opposite side. When they came together again, Link spoke from a new angle.

"I ain't been dry-nursin' yuh, Jess, just because I like your looks. Git that idee outa yore head and keep it out. I'd shore hate to see yuh git bumped off, far as that goes. It'd be makin' you the goat for something yuh know nothin' about. But the main reason for protectin' yuh right now is you're our main witness to the Parsons murder. More'n all that, we aim to use you fer bait, t' coax the head crook out into the open.

"This little Barrett girl—don't you worry too much about her. We're lookin' after her—"

"Like hell, if that bunch has kidnaped her—"

"They ain't." Link's voice carried conviction, at least for the moment. "They ain't goin' to, either."

Jess hesitated between doubt and belief. "Oh, of course, if you have inside information—if you *know* she's at the ranch —"

"I didn't say that, exactly. I'm going now to see for shore. What I'm tellin' you is not to worry. You go on home and git you some rest. Then if you should possibly be needed, you'd be able to do some good."

There was sense in that. Jess was more tired than he would admit. Now that he had found Link, he seemed to be letting down all at once.

"If you'd give me your word you'll tell me—"

"Say! If that little girl has fell into the clutches of them human hyenas, I'll git word to you quick as God'll let me," Link promised earnestly. "You go on home and crawl into bed. Will yuh do that?"

"Y-yes—but if you double-cross me, Link Whelan, I certainly will—"

"You'll have my permission, kid. And say, Link Whelan never let a friend down in his life. Just bear that in mind, will yuh? And go to sleep with your mind at ease."

"Well, all right. Be sure you let me know first thing if anything goes wrong." Already Jess's tone was flat and lifeless.

"You can bank on me," Link fervently assured him. "Come hell or high water, you can bank on old Link."

They had reached the place where their trails separated. With scarcely another word, each rode his own way. And Jess was tired to the point of exhaustion; so weary he could scarcely force himself to stable the blue roan and fill his manger with hay for the night. He dragged himself to the cabin, found it just as he had left it, and drank what cold coffee was left in the pot. Then, without undressing—without so much as unbuckling his spurs—he dropped full length across his bed and slept as sleeps the dead.

The next he knew, the sun was shining. Several men were in the room and one stood over him, shaking him by the shoulder.

Jess pulled himself up on the bed, staring stupidly around the room, trying to remember something desperately vital and pressing, something that would account for the presence of—

"Senator Wolsey!" he cried in abrupt recognition and got unsteadily to his feet. "Why—what—"

The Senator stopped him with a slight imperious gesture. His glance ranged round the room. "You boys go and wait outside," he said in a deep and pleasing voice that nevertheless carried the weight of authority. "Better still, get up there on the mesa and comb that country. I'll have a talk with this young man—alone."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JESS RIDES ALONE

Jess had been dreaming vividly of Sara Barrett. A sweet and foolish dream, in which they had been racing down a smooth and winding trail beside a river and the stakes were kisses. Sara was bareheaded, laughing because she had lost her hat and neither would stop for it and so be the loser. The wind of their flight whipped her copper-red hair into a shining halo above her head and he thought how right Peggy had been when she said Sara rode like a red Indian. "Look out, or you'll be in over your head!" Sara had called out in sudden inexplicable fear....

That was ten seconds ago. Now he was standing groggily before Senator Wolsey, listening to instructions that stunned him with their ominous import. And Sara's warning repeated itself over and over in his brain. It was strange, but the dream seemed much more real and far less improbable than did this awakening. Senator Wolsey had been in California yesterday, Jess knew. Peggy had said that her mother talked with him on "long distance" and he had said he could not possibly leave for another week, because the oil case was coming up. Yet unless he were still dreaming, or had suddenly lost his sanity, the element of time and distance had been miraculously removed.

The Senator looked real enough. He was dressed in dove whipcord riding breeches, polo boots, gray sweater of fine wool and a beautifully fitted, perfectly tailored suede coat belted snugly. His face had deep lines around the mouth; much deeper than last year, Jess thought. At a less tragic time, he would have smiled to himself at the odd mixture of garments, which seemed to indicate that the Senator had dressed without quite knowing what he meant to do afterwards. The boots which belonged to polo, the sweater of athletic fields, the coat of a flyer—With a flash of enlightenment he saw that the Senator must have flown from Los Angeles and had reached the ranch and there taken to the saddle at once.

That could mean only one thing. Sara had not been found.

The Senator watched the last man outside before he turned and met Jess's steady gaze. "Sorry I had to pull you out of bed, my boy. I heard you'd had a rather serious accident." His eyes questioned Jess.

"Better now. I'm all bandaged up, but I was out yesterday. Rather did me up. What's the latest, Senator? Didn't Miss Barrett get in?"

The Senator shook his head. "That's what I wanted to talk with you about—partly. It's damnable. There was a plot in Los Angeles to kidnap Sara. That's why I hustled her off up here to the ranch with the family. I warned Albert to take precautions—and now he's dead and the girl's gone. The blasted fools told me it was suicide or I'd have guessed what it meant. Never occurred to me that his death had any connection—" He stopped abruptly, glancing at Jess as if he that moment realized how he was letting himself go.

"Did it have any connection, Senator?"

"That's what I'd give a million dollars to find out." A peculiar expression swept the Senator's ruggedly handsome face. Jess, intuitively quick to read the fleeting moods of a man, would have called that look one of swift terror, mastered the moment it assailed the Senator. "Jess, they tell me Parsons died here in this cabin and that you were alone with him at the time. Since the coroner's verdict was murder, it may be he knew who did it. And that," he summed up concisely, "may point to the perpetrator of this outrage."

"I don't think he knew, Senator."

"Sit down, Jess." The older man's tone was friendly, inviting confidence. He motioned Jess to the rumpled bed and placed himself opposite on Chuck's bunk. "This thing's got me in a way you couldn't realize. Forgive me if I seem to be abrupt or bullying, but I've got to know exactly how the land lies here before I start the machinery." He brought one strong fist down with a smack in the palm of his other hand. "And I'll get the devils who did this if I have to turn this county inside out and spend every dollar I possess!"

"I certainly will do all I can, Senator Wolsey."

"The testimony you gave at the inquest indicated that Albert made a last statement to you—"

"Don't depend on that, Senator," Jess said and flushed uncomfortably. "That coroner badgered me into asking him if a dying man's confidential message should not be held inviolate. I didn't say he'd told me anything in secret. You're just wasting time, going over all that now. Parsons died almost at once. He didn't say a word about this—" Jess got up, wincing involuntarily as he straightened. "What's the plan of search, Senator? Is the sheriff in charge? I'll get out and ride wherever you say."

Senator Wolsey was watching Jess with frowning interest. "The sheriff and a deputy have a posse out," he said and rose to go. "I admit I'm bitterly disappointed. I had hoped you could help."

"I certainly want to," Jess reiterated. "I rode almost to Rainbow Canyon yesterday and watched from every ridge. Senator, do you know that your niece was thrown yesterday, because a strap broke on her saddle? Peggy could tell you. It sounded very much as if that accident was planned by some one on your ranch."

"Impossible!" Senator Wolsey's face reddened. "There is not a man on my ranch—"

"Oh, Senator," Link Whelan interrupted from the doorway, "I'd like to see you a minute. One of the boys just brought a message—" He tilted his head backward with a beckoning gesture. The Senator looked at him, started to speak, thought better of it and went out hurriedly, Link standing aside to let him pass.

Link stepped inside, an intent commanding look in his eyes, though his voice was mildly cheerful. "Sheriff aims to use yore camp as a kinda field headquarters for the boys up this way, Jess," he said. "If you feel able to be up and around, you might start a fire and have some hot coffee ready when they come in. They's a bunch been out all night and they'll likely be showin' up pretty soon now."

"You said you'd let me know right away if she wasn't at the ranch." Jess was bitterly reproachful.

Link glanced at the door, saw that it was clear, and lowered his voice to a murmur while he clattered the stove lids to cover the sound. "Don't tell him nothin'. He's—headstrong—got his own way of doin' things—we got ours, see? Job knows his stuff. You let us do the thinkin' for awhile."

"I don't see what's to be accomplished—"

"You don't have to see. Just keep your mouth shut." With his face turned toward the doorway, he raised his voice. "You ain't able to ride, so you can do more good right here in camp, feedin' the boys as they come in. Ain't that right, Senator?"

"As you think best. I shall have to get back to the ranch—stay close to the 'phone. I'm ordering several planes out. When you can spare young Robison, here, send him over to me, will you? I want to have a talk with him. I believe," he said, with a friendly look at Jess, "he holds the key to this hellish atrocity and doesn't even suspect it."

He turned and hurried away, and Jess, looking after him, wondered why he himself could not have thought of "hellish atrocity" which so perfectly expressed the enormity of the crime. The Senator was an orator, though. His silver-tongued eloquence was known wherever a dedication ceremony drew national interest. Jess had more than once sat on the edge of his chair listening to a fifteen-minute broadcast of Senator Wolsey's eloquence, and cursing mountain static when a telling phrase was lost. He was no hero worshiper—life had schooled him too harshly for that—but he was conscious of being honored by the Senator's manifest friendliness and trust.

All this in a flash while the great man's shadow was yet on the doorstep. Link's soft drawl as he pushed dry sticks into the firebox brought him back to his surroundings.

"Planes—yeah? Shore, he'll have planes thick as blackbirds in a cornfield. He'll call out the state militia too, like as not. The Senator's shore thorough. When he makes up his mind to do a thing, you can bet he'll do it in a big way, as the sayin' goes. Well, seein' I'm here, I'll rustle some breakfast. Then maybe I'll take me a ten-minute snooze. I been up all night."

Jess told him to take the snooze now while he had the chance. He filled the biggest coffee boiler and set it on the stove, poured in coffee lavishly from the can, and went outside, taking the water bucket with him. He wanted to get away from Link for a few minutes and pull his courage and his wits together. He felt the warning of his dream fairly dinning at his mind. "Look out or you'll be in over your head!"

That had been Link's warning last night. Now it seemed to be Sara, whose solicitude was all for him. Thank God the

Senator had come. He'd mighty soon straighten things out. Link didn't seem to like it much, but Jess set that down to professional jealousy and so discounted the half-resentful attitude Link was showing.

It wasn't that which gave Jess his unaccountable sense of discomfort in the situation, nor was it the heartsick fear he had for Sara. Yesterday's solitary searching had shown him exactly where and how that blow had fallen upon him. He knew that he had loved Sara from the moment she stood in the doorway and looked at him. He knew it was not her beauty, not her inimitable grace and poise, that attracted him. It was the Sara who looked out of those quiet, golden-brown eyes at him and gave him that unspoken pledge of perfect understanding which is old as humanity—and is newly discovered in each meeting such as theirs.

He loved Sara and Sara knew that he loved her. He almost believed that Sara loved him, though of that he dared not be sure. His artist's soul had always known such perfect love exists, but it had been like the warm translucent magic of the afterglow upon a mountain top; beautiful beyond words and very real, but never to be caught and held by human skill or good fortune. At least, he had never expected such an experience to come into his own life. He had rather taken it for granted that the whimsical, half-amused and thoroughly sophisticated emotion he had felt for Peggy Wolsey was as ardent a love as he would ever be capable of feeling. Until the other day when Sara appeared before him, he would have laughed at the thought of being swept off his feet like that. Now, he knew that neither the Senator, nor Peggy nor her mother could suffer half the anguish he would suffer if any harm came to Sara; and that strange, foolish, vivid dream of his had somehow implanted within him the conviction that she was not in any great immediate danger. There was no logic in it, he knew; but there was anodyne for his nerves in the belief and he rather inclined to foster it.

Thoughts are swift as light, we all know that. Jess had not reached the spring before he accepted these as fairly accurate portrayals of his mental and emotional reactions. There remained his own personal decision to make. Link wanted him to stay in camp and cook for such riders as came in. He wanted to keep Jess hidden away from some unknown enemy, the man who had murdered Parsons. The Senator wanted him over at the Diamond Slash, where he could draw from his memory every word and look which Parsons had given that night. It wouldn't do any good, Jess felt sure of that. It would be a waste of time, as he had told the Senator. But no man had ever been able to persuade Senator Thomas Wolsey into anything, so far as Jess knew. Much of his power and popularity lay in his habit of assembling his own facts and forming his own conclusions.

While he washed his face and ducked his thick mat of brown hair into the spring pool, he debated the question of which master he should serve. The Senator meant to worm from him everything he knew or surmised. Link and the sheriff had urged—even commanded—that he keep everything strictly to himself. Link had even risked the Senator's suspicions by warning him again a few minutes ago. Professional jealousy was a trait he had not expected to see crop out in Link Whelan. It could raise Cain, Jess foresaw, if he ignored the warning too pointedly.

The sting of cold water on the newly healed scalp wound came as the final spur to his decision. He filled the water bucket under the tiny waterfall and returned to the cabin, knowing exactly what he meant to do.

Leaving the bucket beside the path, he went on to the stable and fed and watered the blue roan. Link was asleep with his big hat over his face, the front of the high crown riding his nose. Jess set the full bucket carefully upon its bench and went quietly about his simple breakfast preparations. Bacon, sour-dough pancakes, fried potatoes whose sprouts must be rubbed off before he peeled them. The hot strong aroma of the bubbling coffee presently filled the room. The smoke of the long pancake griddle freshly rubbed with a swab of bacon grease rose upward, incense of the range camps.

Link abruptly sat up, sliding his hat expertly to the back of his head and yawning prodigiously, while he reached mechanically for his package of "tailor-mades."

"You won't have time for that, Link. Stack of wheats coming up. Better get ready—I hear voices, and these cakes will last quick when that hungry bunch gets here."

Link shot him a glance of surprised inquiry. "What yuh so damn cheerful about, young feller? Any good news come in?"

"Not a word. You haven't been asleep more than fifteen minutes or so."

"You shore changed the look on yore face, kid." Link went over to the water bucket and began dipping water into the wash basin. "Yeah, you shore look different," he clinched his first statement after a second look.

"I washed my face," Jess said laconically. Then, because he knew Link too well to leave him unsatisfied, he added, "No use trying to buck you, Link. No use crabbing about it, either."

Link held the dipper suspended over the bucket while he stared frankly at Jess. "Yeah? That mean you ain't goin' over and spill all you know and then some to the Senator?"

"Just that. He can ask Ritchie or Bob for all he need know. I may be making a mistake, but—Hurry up and start on these cakes before somebody beats you to it."

Four weary riders, two of them JR men, came trooping in. Their eyes brightened at the sight of breakfast and the talk became general. There was no clue to the Barrett girl. They didn't believe she was up in the foothills at all. If the Senator was wise, he'd get busy with the trains, airplanes, tourist automobiles. It was a waste of time to ride the hills for her.

Jess listened, baked hot cakes, poured coffee. The riders ate their fill and were off again, this time for fresh horses. Link went with them, giving directions.

Jess ate his own breakfast, surprised at the appetite he suddenly developed. He replenished the coffeepot, filled the firebox with wood, closed the draughts and covered the food neatly with a clean cloth.

Then, with something of eagerness in his face, he sorted and packed what things he wanted, making one more compact bundle for the saddle. He rummaged for an extra box of rifle shells, which he dropped into his pocket, took up his package and went out, closing the door behind him. Two minutes later he was riding up the trail behind the cabin, headed for the high country by a roundabout route he hoped would protect him from observation.

He was going to look for Sara, following the urge within him to seek her alone. Just once he glanced back, and that was at the point where the trail turned on an obscure switchback, where all sight of the camp at Alder Spring would be lost. Let the sheriff use it for headquarters if he liked. Jess knew he would not come back until he found her—Sara of the copper-red hair.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TRAILS MEET

On the third day of his solitary wanderings, Jess rode late in the afternoon down a steep cow path into the head of a well-farmed coulee. Against the shelter of the northern wall, plum and cherry trees were in bloom. Lush meadows lay shadowed by the hills that hid the sun from this snug homestead a full hour before its warm light left the broad valley beyond. Across that valley, framed in the coulee's rock-lipped mouth, the town of Rainbow lay like a child's toy village flung down upon the farther slope. Penciled along the valley's edge was the railroad, and drifting like eagles high against the blue Jess counted four airplanes, part of the squadron called to the search by the Senator.

Many times in each weary day had he seen those planes darting and dipping low over the foothill country. With no vital necessity for doing so, when those planes came roaring overhead, Jess sought cover and waited until they were gone. So had he dodged other riders. Without particularly tabulating his reasons, he knew that he would be questioned and interfered with. Let Link or the sheriff once come within hail, and he would in all probability be ordered back to Alder Spring camp. Furthermore, the Diamond Slash men would be on the lookout for him, Senator Thomas Wolsey having earned the reputation of a bulldog tenacity in having his own way. There was a third reason upon which he did not dwell, yet which more or less governed his actions. This was the danger he was in from the murderers of Albert Parsons. No use belittling it, since those two seasoned man hunters, Link Whelan and Job Witherspoon, took pains to protect him from it as much as he would permit. Jess might laugh at their solicitude; his common sense nevertheless made him cautious. So in three days of exhausting solo search he had managed to escape notice; or he thought he had.

So far he had failed to find the slightest clue to Sara's disappearance. Hoofprints were everywhere, but they told nothing of her except that searching parties were combing the range; cowboys riding a grim round-up of suspicious characters, straining bloodshot eyes for a glimpse of one slim girl with clear, shining eyes of a tawny brown and hair like burnished copper.

After three days of frantic search, no one had discovered her; the circling, questing planes told Jess that with heart-breaking certainty. Not all the Senator's millions had availed in restoring Sara to her anxious relatives, nor all the political influence he could command, nor the vaunted power he was said to hold in business circles. Jess could easily picture the vast invisible machinery at work trying to solve the mystery, and he watched with strained attention the telltale activity in the sky, his heart sinking lower with every droning sound he heard. To-day, he noticed, they seemed to have left the high country and were sweeping the valley. He wondered if a clue had been revealed there.

The blue roan nipped along, meticulously avoiding the small stones kicked into the trail by the scuffing feet of cattle. Since morning he had been limping a little, favoring his feet as sore-footed horses will. Before turning him out on the range, Jess had pulled the roan's shoes, and since the likeliest places for hideouts were only to be found among the rocks, Jess could do little to save the tender feet. Except in dire need, he would never have dreamed of riding a barefooted horse where the roan had gone. As it was, he would soon be afoot unless he got shoes on the horse.

So now he was making for Rainbow and a blacksmith shop. In his careful search of every possible hiding place, he had crossed the mountain divide well above the head of Rainbow Canyon, swinging in a wide arc back to the valley. Rainbow Canyon lay to the south, the highway running through it to the county seat. He had carefully avoided all roads. That is why he followed the stock trails and so came finally to the last deep wrinkle in the edge of the benchland north of the mountain, and suddenly looked down upon this little coulee home.

Tired and heartsick though he was, Jess drew rein just where the trail dipped down the last declivity and sat for a few minutes gazing down upon the scene below. Peaceful it looked, and homelike. The contour of the surrounding hills, the creek meandering down through the young green of willows, reminded him of the JR home ranch. Yet even up there on the rim he felt a different atmosphere in this place. The house half hidden within the lower line of orchard trees looked snug and as if people loved it and lived there happily.

Presently he sighed and sent the blue roan on down the narrow trail. This wasn't the JR ranch, he told himself with some bitterness, so he might be permitted to camp overnight down there by the creek, below the house somewhere. Then he could make an early ride across the valley to the blacksmith shop he knew at the edge of town. He would leave the roan there to be shod, and would go on to some store where he was not known, and buy fresh supplies. He could pick up the

latest news and be back in the hills again before noon. After that, he did not know exactly where he would go or what he would do; he only knew that he did not mean to go back to the Alder Spring camp and listen to the arguments and discussions amongst the riders who were making it their headquarters. A little more of that and he would go crazy.

In the cushiony dust of the trail down alongside a meadow fence the roan found easy traveling. He shook his head gayly and broke into a lope—until he found one foot too sore and his master not at all in favor of galloping. Three days in the saddle, with three nights rolled in a blanket on the ground, had not helped Jess's bruised side. He looked haggard, older than his years, with hollow eyes and a stubble of brown beard left to grow since the day of the inquest. But he gave no thought to his appearance; only of what he meant to do on the morrow and of his needs for to-night. A place to camp and rest his horse and himself—it wasn't much that he would ask, and he could pay.

As he rode up to the yard gate and swung stiffly down from the saddle, two great dogs rushed from the shadowy porch, baying fiercely. Jess backed a little and spoke to the roan, which jumped away the full length of the bridle reins as the lead dog lunged against the gate.

"You can fork your cayuse, feller, and prepare to drift," a vaguely familiar voice spoke drawlingly behind him. "Strangers ain't welcome here."

Jess whirled, peered, astonished. For a second he had thought it was Link Whelan speaking. This man was old, his shoulders noticeably bent. He had a gun balanced easily in his hand and the two huge dogs squatted before him, grinning with lips lifted at one side—an unpleasant way for a dog to look—but Jess spared only a passing glance for these details. He was staring at the high beak of a nose, and the mild brown eyes that yet held a cold kind of menace, and at the twisted smile beneath the short, graying moustache.

He gave a short laugh. "What's the matter? Are you ashamed to meet strangers, or something?"

"Ashamed or not, I'm asking their name and business—these days." The last two words seemed to have been added as a special concession. "You can give yours or you can travel—and be damn quick about both."

"Why? What's the grand rush?" Then Jess smiled wearily. "I can't say I blame you, at that. I bet you're some relation to Link Whelan; his father, if he's got one."

"That's got nothing to do with you," the old man told him bluntly. "It's who you are that I'm waiting to hear. And I ain't going to wait very damn long."

"Well, I'm Jess Robison of the JR, over beyond the Canyon. I'm out looking for the young lady who disappeared from the Diamond Slash. You must have heard something about it—Senator Wolsey's niece."

"Heard it over the radio. Who's ridin' with you and where are they?" The old man's eyes never wavered from Jess's face.

"I'm alone. I was staying at one of our camps—JR camp at Alder Springs. Link Whelan was there when we got the word. He—well, it was the sheriff mostly, I guess—wanted me to stick in camp and cook for the boys as they rode in to report and so on. I couldn't see it that way. So I pulled out alone."

"Did, ay? What you doin' way over here?"

"Well, this horse I'm riding—I caught him up right off the range and he's barefooted. I was hunting up around the head of Rainbow, in the rocks, and he's gone lame. So I was cutting across to town to get him shod. Followed a cattle trail down off the bench and here's where I wound up."

"Mm—sounds plausible enough, so fur—"

"Plausible? Hell, it's the truth!" Jess flared irritably.

"Well, s'pose it is? What you stop for? This ain't inside the city limits."

Jess gave an exasperated laugh. "You certainly must be related to Link! Well, since you want a complete analysis of my motives, I stopped to ask if I may camp down there by the creek somewhere. I'd like to rest my horse and I could stand a little rest myself, far as that goes. I thought I'd ride across the valley early, so I could get the shoes on my horse and get out of town before Link or old Job Witherspoon get sight of me. I expect they're pretty peeved because I didn't stay in

camp; Link, anyway."

The old man very calmly and deliberately put away his gun. "You see that big cottonwood down there beyond that closest hay c'rell? You can camp there, I guess. Nice swimmin' hole in amongst them willows. If you're a mind to stop at the chicken house as you go by, you might pick up what fresh eggs you can eat for supper 'n' breakfast." His mild brown eyes twinkled briefly.

"Why—thank you. I certainly appreciate—"

"Shucks," grinned the old man, with an unexpected relaxing of his caution. "I guess you're all right. Link's my youngest boy. If you've managed to give him the slip, I guess you've earned what few eggs you can eat."

He spoke to the dogs, turned his back and started up the path. Suddenly he turned and came back. "I'd jest as soon you wouldn't have a fire after dark," he said. "Can't tell what tough fellers might be ridin' around in the hills—huntin' or bein' hunted. Build your fire small and put it out as soon as you're through with it. I'd ask you in, but my wife ain't feelin' well."

"Oh, it's quite all right," Jess assured him, more touched than he would have owned. "I certainly appreciate what you've done. I don't think there's any one in this vicinity, but I'll be careful, of course."

In the saddle again, he reined the blue roan closer to the gate. "Oh, Mr. Whelan!" he called. And when the old fellow halted and faced about— "You spoke of hearing about the—kidnaping, over the radio. Is there anything new? I see the planes are scouting up and down the valley to-day."

Link's father spat out to one side of the path and retraced the few steps he had taken. His eyes turned toward a distant drone like the buzzing of a giant bumblebee.

"They're afraid now the girl's been murdered," he stated baldly. "Uh—what's the matter? You—specially interested? Oh—sorry I blurted it right out like that—" He laid a gnarled hand on the gate fastening.

"It's—all right." Jess steadied himself by gripping the horn, but he still looked as if he had been shot. "I—know the Wolseys. They're neighbors of ours—when they're at the ranch. I—I don't believe that. I—*don't believe it!*" He looked as if repeating his unbelief in a fierce stubborn tone would somehow make it true.

Whelan helped. "I don't believe it either," he declared. "Don't believe a word of it. Didn't when I heard it come in over the radio yestiddy. You hear all kinda rumors. Why, every red-headed girl f'm one end of the country to the other's been gettin' her name in the papers. This Barrett girl's got red hair. S'pose you've met her though—if you're a friend of the family." His eyes were startlingly like Link's when he squinted them half-shut for scrutinizing Jess's ghastly face. "Ever meet her?"

"Yes." Jess's teeth clamped shut. He swallowed, fighting a choking sensation in his throat.

"Well, don't you worry a minute about all the stories goin' round," Whelan gave reassuring advice. "You mark my words, that little girl's alive an' all right. The Senator's got every law officer in the country lookin' for 'er. Clues are croppin' up—why, yesterday there was a long piece in the paper that she'd eloped with an aviation flyer. Claimed they'd had it all made up before she left Los Angeles and she jest slipped off to a place where he lit and took her in his airplane—"

Jess glared. "That's a lie!" He caught himself up. "What became of her horse, then?" he demanded less violently, but still with more truculence than a mere searcher should logically have felt at the possibility of a romantic solution of the mystery. "They didn't take her horse along, did they?"

With a swipe of his palm, old man Whelan smoothed down the corners of his mouth. "That's right," he admitted meekly. "Airplanes don't hitch on trailers, do they? Don't seem like I ever heard—"

Jess muttered something between his teeth and wheeled the blue roan away from the gate. If Link Whelan's father had deliberately intended to lift him out of the sick horror of thinking Sara dead—wantonly murdered by some unbalanced fiend—the drastic means he used had been effective. Jess rode off, shaking with futile rage against the rumor and the old man who had garrulously repeated it.

"I'll send yuh down a bucket of fresh milk after awhile—soon as I get the milkin' done," Whelan called cheerfully after

him.

Jess lifted his hand in signal that he had heard. He would not trust himself to speak, even to thank the old fellow. In the past ten minutes he had received a swift succession of shocks. Perhaps it was merciful that the last grotesque suggestion served for the time being to nullify those gone before. While he staked out the roan in a patch of white clover, even while he bathed in the still pool rimmed with tangled willow branches, he was haunted by a vision as fantastic as any nightmare.

He kept seeing Sara riding down a certain little draw he knew which opened upon a half-mile stretch of level prairie. With nerves frayed ragged with fear, stretched to the breaking point with all he had endured, he began with tense seriousness to analyze the bizarre situation conjured by old man Whelan. The elopement could have been accomplished. The thing that puzzled Jess in his present mood was Sara's horse. He could not see how the horse could possibly have disappeared so completely.

By the time he was dressed and had flung himself down against his blanket roll under the cottonwood tree, he was vainly fighting an absurd picture of Sara with her red hair blowing straight back—as in his dream—sailing off with her goggled and helmeted lover in an airplane, and the senseless feature of the picture was the winged trailer bearing Sara's horse.

The curious attitude of the blue roan brought him back to his surroundings. Head up, sloe-black ears tipped forward, the roan stood looking toward the farmhouse. With a painfully stiffened movement, Jess lifted himself to an elbow and sent an inquiring glance behind him. A half-grown boy carrying a small tin bucket was coming across the strip of meadow toward him, the two dogs trailing close behind. Jess stood up, waiting the boy's approach. The thought crossed his mind that he had never heard Link speak of a younger brother and he hoped the kid was not going to hang around and talk.

The next moment Jess was staring breathless, incredulous. The boy's figure wavered like an image seen in wind-rippled water. "My God!" he exclaimed under his breath, as his knees buckled under him. "Sara!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

IN THE MEADOW

"This," said Sara, while she dabbed her wet bandanna daintily upon Jess's temples, "is what I call criminal. You weren't fit to be out wandering around alone. With those broken ribs—Link should have stopped you; tied you to the bedposts if necessary."

Jess reached up and caught her hand and held it, wet bandanna and all. "There weren't any," he said in a husky unnatural voice and tried to make light of it. What he thought was that her voice was lovelier even than his memory of it.

"No broken ribs or no bedposts?" Sara pulled her hand free, but not as if she were displeased with the contact.

"Neither." Jess grinned wryly and drew himself to a half-sitting posture, his back against his rolled blanket. "It doesn't matter about me. I'm all right. What I want to know is—you—"

"Yes, of course. Well, that's what I came to tell you. I was watching through the curtains while you talked with Dad Whelan—isn't he a dear?—and when he was going to bring you some fresh milk, I said I'd bring it, and that you were one person who should be told."

"I certainly am." Jess fumbled for cigarettes, his hand still shaky. But somehow he managed a tone as casual as Sara's when he added, "You see how I caved in at the sight of you. I certainly think I rate an explanation."

Sara had been kneeling; now she sat down cross-legged in the grass and looked at him gravely. "Yes, I'm sorry I startled you so. It hadn't occurred to me what a shock I'd be. I'm afraid I spilled most of the milk. I tried to catch you, but I was too far away. You just wilted down before I could reach you."

"Sorry. I thought I had more backbone. I'm discovering a good many things about myself lately. What I can't understand is how you come to be here."

"No, of course you wouldn't. Link brought me here."

"Link!"

"Yes. You see, it's quite long and complicated. Almost as bad as any thriller you buy to read on the train. Link came into it when he met me up by the grove where I hid from Peggy."

"You—hid?"

"Yes. It sounds mean and hateful, but I had to do it, really. Peggy wouldn't take the hint when I said I loved to ride alone. I felt I must have a talk with you, Jess; or at least with Link. Forces I couldn't identify have been at work, and I've been tricked and lied to so much that it's hard to tell who can be trusted. I felt from the very first that Link Whelan could be and I knew of course that you were absolutely all right."

Jess glowed inwardly, but in the little pause she made while she was apparently choosing her words, he only said, "Why couldn't you talk with the Senator?"

Sara gave him a level, studying look. "I'm afraid you don't really know Uncle Thomas very well," she said. "I really came home without his consent or approval and I'm what Peggy calls in bad with the Senator. But he wanted me to stay and study my music and I wouldn't. I'm essentially an American girl—western preferred. I lived all my life in Texas until Mother—went. I was afraid in Europe. At any rate, odd things were happening, and when I told Uncle Thomas, he pooh-pooed me and called me fanciful, and—hysterical."

"Hysterical—you?"

"Exactly. You do see, don't you? Once, the last time I tried, he said he had trouble enough trying to take care of my money; he'd go crazy if he had to humor my hallucinations."

Jess sat up straight, staring at Sara. In the old bib overalls and gray gingham shirt she wore, and with an old hat which

manifestly had once been the pride of Link's heart; with her tawny eyes meeting him so honestly, she did not look as if she had ever had hysterics in her life or suffered from anything approaching an hallucination.

"I don't—get it at all," he said. "What was it you told him, to make him say that?"

"Oh, about several narrow escapes I had. It started in France. The first time, I was standing at a crossing, waiting for the traffic to open, and some one pushed me off the curb in front of a great heavy truck. Some man in uniform snatched me back or I'd have been killed. As it was I had a lame ankle for awhile.

"That was the beginning. I distinctly felt some one push me—I felt that it was deliberate. But you know, Jess, there are so many things one is perfectly sure of without having an atom of proof to offer. For instance, I often felt sure that I was being followed about. I never saw any one, I never could prove it—but that is what made me afraid.

"I wrote to Uncle Thomas and told him about it and asked to come home—and the reply I got was from his private secretary, saying that Senator Wolsey was deeply engaged in affairs of vital importance and had instructed the writer to urge me to give my full mind to my studies and not to indulge myself in unreasoning fears." Sara gave an ironical laugh. "Of course, it was said much nicer than that," she amended, "but that was the gist of it. The letter added a reminder that I was very well chaperoned."

"It certainly doesn't sound like the Senator," Jess made shrewd comment. "Some swell-headed secretary of his perpetrated that."

"The swell-headed secretary was practically my only means of contact with the Senator," Sara said dryly. "I replied to that letter in person. I sailed on the next boat with a ticket for Los Angeles. I ran a gauntlet of clerks and undersecretaries and personal representatives and a guard or two before I reached the august presence of my uncle. We are very simple and unassuming here in Montana but you should see us in Los Angeles!" Sara lifted her eyes in a pretended exaltation that made Jess laugh.

"I'd rather see you here, if you don't mind."

"I'd rather be here, if you don't mind," Sara mimicked him. "However, I saw Uncle Thomas eventually, of course. I told him about that traffic experience and about being followed—everything that had worried me. Uncle Thomas just laughed at me." She looked off across the meadow, full underlip caught between her teeth. "He said he hoped I was not suffering from a persecution fixation."

"Good Lord! Didn't he believe you?"

Sara gave him an odd look. "I think he believed that I believed it," she said whimsically. "Uncle Thomas never did know me very well. I was off at school most of the time after he took charge of our affairs. Mother thought he was wonderful, but I haven't felt very friendly toward him since he very gently hinted that I am slightly—er—unbalanced."

Jess looked absently at his cold cigarette and flung it into the creek. "I shouldn't think you would," he remarked.

"Well, things weren't any better in Los Angeles. I don't think I'm cowardly, but I admit that I was afraid to go anywhere alone. Even when I went around with Peggy and her friends I had the uncomfortable feeling of being watched and followed. I even got the notion that my maid whom I'd had all the while I was in France—a stodgy old widow who answered as chaperon also—I got a horrible feeling that she was a sort of spy. So—" Sara flung out both hands in an eloquent sweeping gesture—"I fired her one day when I caught her watching me in the mirror."

"Good work!"

"Yes, I thought so too. Only, I tried three new ones and had the same feeling about them all. So I stopped having maids—and I wouldn't explain why, when Peggy and Aunt Olive protested with tears in their eyes. I wouldn't say a word to Uncle Thomas, either. I simply can't endure being laughed at and pooh-poohed when I know I am right. And that 'persecution fixation' hung over my head too. You see, Jess, I got to thinking perhaps Uncle Thomas is right; perhaps I really have an obsession."

"You're crazy!" Jess blurted, indignant at the very thought.

"So Uncle Thomas thinks," Sara agreed with deceptive meekness.

"You know I didn't mean—"

Sara's throaty chuckle stopped him. They laughed together with the sudden abandon of youth which yields so easily to mirth and to love. And though their laughter was brief, they were the better for it. One of the dogs created further diversion by coming up out of the creek and shaking himself vigorously between the two. Sara slapped his jaws, which the dog seemed to consider a mark of affection, for he barked joyfully and wanted to play.

Jess watched Sara with worshipful eyes, but in the back of his mind he was nevertheless reflecting upon the startling disclosures she had made. When both dogs finally flopped down in the grass beside her, he abruptly reopened the subject.

"Do you know what the Senator told me, the day I left camp? He said there was a plot down there in Los Angeles to kidnap you. He said that's why he hustled you off up here to the ranch with Peggy and her mother."

Sara stared. "Kidnap me? I never heard anything about it."

"Maybe not, but that's exactly what he said. It looks to me, Sara, as though the Senator laughed at you just to keep you from worrying about those things. He doesn't know you very well or he'd have taken a different line. He could kid Peggy out of having nervous fits over a thing like that, so he tried to kid you."

"Well," Sara said skeptically, "as Peggy would say, he certainly made a complete flop of it then."

"He's such a prominent man, with so many different interests—all of them important—that he takes life pretty much as a serious proposition. Having you come home all of a sudden and spring all that on him—But I still don't know why Link brought you over here and made all this great mystery." The cloud of the past three days swept down again upon Jess for a moment. "That isn't giving any one a break, Sara."

Sara flushed, but her red mouth compressed itself into a thin line. "Link couldn't see anything else to do, Jess. It seemed a case of life or death, for me. Some one had cut my latigo strap at the ranch that day. I showed Link. The horse I was riding is a nervous, flighty creature—a bright chestnut with one 'glass' eye. Do you know him?"

"Good Lord!" Jess turned white. "Who put you on that brute?"

"Why, a dark little man with a Texas drawl. I don't know his name. Some Mexican blood, I imagine. His eyes show it."

"Pecos, they call him. Always seemed a decent sort—"

"You mustn't think he recommended the horse. Peggy took a fancy to him at first. Then she chose a sorrel and suggested I take the chestnut. He really is a honey, just to look at, you know."

"Tracherous," Jess stated succinctly. "All right until something happens, then he blows up; lunges and kicks—" His eyes widened with horror of some sudden vision. "When your saddle came off—" He leaned and caught Sara's hand in a fierce grip, as if to convince himself that she was actually there unharmed before him. "The wonder is you weren't killed!"

Sara shivered. "You see what I mean, Jess. I wasn't killed, simply because I learned to ride almost as soon as I could walk. I felt the saddle give and I jumped. We were loping along through a shallow dip in the prairie and there weren't any rocks—though I did pick up a cactus thorn in my knee. The horse jumped, but I had the reins still in my hand, and I was on my feet before he realized what had happened. So I quieted him and fixed the strap and saddled up and went on. I do get along very well with horses."

Jess's face had hardened. "A Diamond Slash man!" he muttered. "It seems unbelievable. Of course, Pecos probably thought it wasn't his place to argue with the boss's daughter or niece. But he should have warned you the horse is tricky."

"Not if he's the one who tampered with my saddle. Jess, I—I felt as if the whole world wanted me dead! I even suspected Peggy of going along to see what happened. I wanted to talk with you—and Link. I wanted to tell you all about France—the close calls I'd had. And about Uncle Thomas thinking I'm a nut—and—" Sara glanced nervously to right and left—"about Al Parsons."

"Parsons?" Jess looked at her sharply. "What—"

"We'll go into that another time. I want to tell you how I managed to shake Peggy. We agreed to take different sides of a grove—"

"She told all about that, and how you had disappeared when she got around. Peg was scared half to death."

"She went straight to you. I hoped she'd go on home. All I did, Jess, was ride into the center of that thicket and get off my horse and hold his head down so he wouldn't whinny. Peg called and called, and in a few minutes she rode off somewhere. It was lovely and still in there, with green branches all around me. I felt safe. But after a little I went out and started for your camp. But I met Link before I'd gone very far, and told him about the saddle, and other things."

"And Link kidnaped you."

Sara smiled faintly. "He did, with my consent. It was the first time," she added wistfully, "any one had really wanted to help me, except for pay. I supposed of course he'd tell you all about it when he saw you again. I know he meant to tell the sheriff. He said it was really the only way he could think of to protect me and at the same time discover who is back of it all."

Jess studied the matter, picking small pebbles from among the grass roots and tossing them into the water. Sara sat fingering the fancy stitching on one of Link's cast-off boots which she was wearing.

"It's probably some of the crowd that's been fighting the Senator for a couple of years now," he said at last, looking over at Sara. "They've tried every way in the world to break him—put him down and out."

"Still, I don't see how doing away with me would hurt Uncle Thomas particularly," Sara objected. "After all, I'm coming of age next summer, and the guardianship and trusteeship and all that sort of thing will be over and done with. Still, I don't suppose that is generally known."

One of the dogs lying beside Sara lifted a lazy eyelid and turned an ear toward the house. The blue roan, hungrily grazing at the end of his picket rope, also turned to watch, clover blossoms dangling from his mouth.

Sara gave no heed, but Jess turned and glanced back over his shoulder. Link's father, a rifle cradled in the crook of his arm, was coming toward them across the meadow.

"My wife sent me down to tell you kids supper's ready," he drawled, in the voice so surprisingly like his son's. "Better take the rope off your horse and let him run loose to-night. And you might as well pack your stuff up into the house. No sense sleepin' out—Ma says you can have Link's room."

"Yes, we may need reinforcements before we're through with this," Sara said cheerfully, as she got up and stood before him, once more looking like a half-grown boy wearing a hat very much too large for him. "You'll love Link's mother, Jess. She's a dear. Will you drink what's left of the milk, or shall I carry it back?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

IN WHELAN COULEE

It is astonishing to see how quickly a young man recovers his strength and courage under certain favorable conditions. Sitting across the table from Sara Barrett worked wonders with Jess. Strained lines in his face relaxed. For the first time in many a day his mouth revealed a natural tendency to tilt upward at the corners in a humorous quirk that softened his face wonderfully, and his greenish-hazel eyes looked out from under their heavy lashes and straight dark brows with a new clarity and poise. Sara was safe. She was there before him, where he need only lift his glance to meet her golden-brown eyes in a serene look of complete understanding. Whatever came now, Jess felt ready to meet it—and the exultant thought that sang in his soul was that Sara should never again be afraid. His own problems had somehow merged with hers; and without going into the details, he felt that from now on they were going to fight through together. Parsons was somehow mixed up in it, but until he could talk with Sara, he did not know just where Parsons came in.

He thought that Link must have inherited much of his shrewdness from his father. The old man kept eyeing him appraisingly, as if he were trying to decide just where Jess fitted into the picture.

"That roan horse of yours mean to catch?" he asked abruptly, when the meal had reached the stage where Jess had lifted his fork and was about to take the point off a wedge of quivery custard pie.

Jess looked up, surprised. "Well, he's a young horse and he won't let you walk up to him and put a rope around his neck," he replied. "But he isn't mean, either. I can usually toss a loop on him without much trouble." His look asked why.

Whelan glanced across the table at his wife, then back at Jess. "Strikes me as a good idea for you to camp right here," he answered the unspoken question. "I was thinkin' maybe I'd better get that roan in out of sight. He's a kind of unusual color and somebody might spot him for a JR horse."

"Link and old Job are about the only ones who know I'm riding him," Jess said. "Of course, any of the JR boys would know the horse—probably the Diamond Slash men would too. I rode him last fall on round-up. It will be just as well not to take a chance."

Link's mother pushed her tall shining percolator to one side so that she could look at Jess. "Just before you folks came in," she began, "there was something came in over the radio about another mysterious disappearance. I didn't hear all of it—I was making gravy and I had to keep on stirring it, so I didn't catch the first of the news. All I heard was that a general alarm was being sent out to searching parties in the foothills, and that it was feared the young man had met the same strange fate as the Barrett girl. Would that be you, Mr. Robison?"

Jess darted a quick glance at Sara. "It probably would," he admitted with some reluctance. "Even Link and the sheriff had no idea I was going to leave. And Senator Wolsey wanted me over at the Diamond Slash for a conference about Parsons. He thought I might know something that would shed a little light on Parsons' murder. I didn't go, though. I started right out looking for Sara. I knew Link didn't want me to talk about Parsons, even to the Senator. Besides, I didn't think I knew anything that would be of much help, and finding Sara was—more important."

"Ma, why didn't you leave the radio goin'?" Whelan demanded in the half-querulous tone of a spoiled husband. "What you want to turn it off for?"

"Well, my land!" Link's mother retorted defensively. "You always make me go and turn it off when you're eating. You say it takes your mind off your victuals so you can't enjoy a meal. Anyway, it went on about some furniture sale in Salt Lake, and I knew well enough we wasn't going to buy no consoles or floor lamps, so there wasn't any use hearing what they was like."

"I really think you heard all that was necessary, Mrs. Whelan," Jess hastily reassured the old lady. "I'm the mysterious disappearance, all right. I certainly hope it wasn't the sheriff who gave the alarm. Perhaps I ought to get word to him somehow and let him and Link know where I am."

"Can't do that," the old man instantly vetoed the suggestion. "Can't take a chance. Link wouldn't hear to it if you was to ask him, which you can't. Him and me, we talked things over and made up our minds just what was to be done. P'int is,

we got to keep it an absolute dead secret that Sary's here with us. Link an' the sheriff together, they got some idea who's doin' all the skull-duggery that's goin' on, and what they want is to make 'em tip their hands; give theirselves away."

"Well, of course, if they think they know—"

"They ain't tellin'," Whelan cut in. "Link wouldn't even tell me a word about it. What he did say is this: If they been tryin' to git their hands on Sary, havin' her drop outa sight like this is the quickest way in the world to smoke 'em outa their holes. What he's aimin' to do is git the gang fightin' amongst theirselves. Accordin' to their way uh thinkin', some are here, some are out on the Coast.

"What Link's hidin' Sary here with us for is to git some of the gang to thinkin' the rest is double-crossin' 'em; make 'em think some of the gang has got Sary and is holdin' her for a big ransom or somethin', without givin' the rest a whack at it. That way, Link figured that some one's goin' to start a fuss; maybe give the hull thing away. Seems kinda tough on her folks and it shore is pilin' up the expense on the county and State. But—"

"But I told Link that I'd be very glad to pay back whatever it costs the public," Sara supplied in her calm, sure way. "Of course, Uncle Thomas would do it too, but I'd rather it came out of my own pocket. It will be well worth any amount of money to be rid of that feeling some one is creeping up behind me with a knife for my back."

"Oh, don't, child!" Mrs. Whelan shuddered. "Don't talk like that! It gives me the shivers to think an innocent young girl should feel—"

"Innocent young girls are fair game for the gangsters nowadays, Mrs. Whelan, if they happen to have a few million dollars. To me, they are only so many figures on a piece of paper, but to some men those millions mean a flock of fine cars and the chance to gorge and guzzle like pigs in a gold-plated sty." Sara's lips expressed utter contempt. "To sum it all up in a few words, they'd sell their souls for the chance to root with diamond-studded snouts." She drew a deep breath and sent a smile of apology at the three, her glance lingering longest upon Jess. "I'm sorry. It's a disagreeable subject. But I've had a very disagreeable time of it for the last year and more. And I've made up my mind to one thing: I don't intend to stir outside this coulee until Link says its perfectly safe and all the gang are in jail."

"Well, them's the orders Link left," his father stated matter-of-factly. "Jest as well you're agreeable. I'm goin' to git that JR roan in under cover 'fore somebuddy gits to snoopin' around and spots 'im. Seeing the word's gone out that Jess, here, is missin', we got to figure on keepin' yuh both outa sight."

"I'm safe enough," Sara declared, smiling down at her blue denim bib. "I'll be chore boy. Jess, you'll have to borrow an apron and help Mother Whelan with the housework." Her eyes danced at the prospect.

"Nope, you stay inside the house," Whelan ordered. "Any of my neighbors ride along on top and look over, they might git to wonderin' who you was. Ma and I've been makin' out alone here since the snow left and somebuddy might wonder who the boy was."

"Pshaw!" Mrs. Whelan ejaculated. "We could pass her off for Willie Saunders, easy as not. He spends about half his time over here, and long as nobody sees her close to, she can go around in the yard as much as she's a mind to. Folks up on the rim couldn't see enough to do any hurt. It's them pesky air-o-planes sailing overhead we want to look out for. They make me think of chicken hawks hanging around a barnyard." She made a shooing gesture with her plump hands. "Go on out and set on the porch," she smiled; "it just gives me the fidgets to have somebody trying to help."

Whelan followed the two outside. "Jess, you might as well set here with this rifle and kinda keep an eye out, while I do the chores," he said. "Guess maybe I'll bring in the rest of the horses and c'rell 'em along with yourn. Anybody watchin', they wouldn't think nothin' of that. You two stay right in under this porch till dark."

"Why?" Sara sent a quick anxious glance at the craggy hills across the coulee. "Do you think any one is up there now, spying down on us?"

Whelan gave her a sharp look. "Long as you take it fer granted there's a feller with a spyglass every fifty yards up there, you're tol'able safe," he retorted. "It ain't fer you to say whether you're bein' watched or not. Yore job is to see to it they'll have their trouble fer their pains."

"Yes, sir," Sara answered meekly, and boylke straddled the porch rail, balancing there with her old boots braced

against a post. "I'm being Willie Saunders," she calmly announced, "just in case I was seen before supper."

"He's overcautious, but I can see where he's quite right," Jess told her, when the old man went out the gate and on down the path to the corrals. "Link doesn't do things just for the fun of it. He staged a complete disappearance for you and he was afraid to hint to me that he knew where you were. He didn't even tell the Senator your disappearance was just a stall. It must be pretty bad when he'd let the Wolseys worry themselves sick over you. All we can do is play up."

"I'm playing up," Sara murmured. "Does Willie Saunders smoke? I don't, as a rule, but if you don't mind, I'd like a cigarette now. I'm feeling pretty edgy and we still haven't gone into the Parsons subject."

She accepted a cigarette from the package Jess instantly offered her and leaned to the match-blaze he held, keeping well back within the shadows.

It was well that he did so, for while he was finishing his piece of pie, two riders had climbed to a vantage point near the head of the coulee where the trail dipped down and were taking turns with a pair of field glasses focused upon the house—with occasional slow sweeps to corral and meadow. It happened that Sara had caught up Link's old hat and was wearing it now; and since her back was toward the watchers they only saw an under-sized youth loafing on the porch and smoking an after-supper cigarette.

"I'm going to be like Uncle Thomas," Sara said, breaking the silence that had fallen between the two. "Jess, I wish you'd tell me what it was you refused to tell at the inquest. We had the whole story from Lizbeth. Did Al Parsons really tell you something under the seal of secrecy? Or did you just say that?"

Jess gave a short and mirthless laugh. "I've got to hand it to you, Sara. You're the first person to suspect that was just a stall."

Sara regarded him inquiringly. "Then there's nothing to tell?"

"Plenty. Nothing much that you don't know, I guess—at least nothing that has any bearing on your trouble. There is one thing I'd like to ask you, though. Why would Parsons say, 'Sarky—little Sark?'"

Sara gasped. "Al Parsons said that? How, Jess? Tell me just how and why he said it."

Jess leaned back in the old cane rocker where Mrs. Whelan did the weekly mending on pleasant days. "Let me see," he mused aloud and closed his eyes. "It was when I wanted to go and get help. He wouldn't let me. He was afraid the 'treacherous devils,' as he called them, would come and finish him. So then I told him I had done all I could do. If I remember correctly, he said, 'Stay here and I'll tell you something big. You can make a clean-up if you work it right.' And then he said, 'Sarky—little Sark.' It didn't mean a thing to me then." Jess opened his eyes and stared fixedly at Sara. "Just a little over a week ago," he marveled, "I didn't even know you existed."

Sara slipped off the porch rail and moved to a chair back in the shadows, where her face would not be quite so revealing. "A lot has happened in a short time, hasn't it?" she parried nervously. "Al Parsons used to work for Father years ago, when I was just a little tad. I wished that nickname on myself. I couldn't say Sara Katherine—I got it Sarky. So they called me that.

"Father owned a feed store and a livery stable—and I think a blacksmith shop, in the little town near our ranch; on our ranch, it really was. Al Parsons kept the books and looked after the store and all that sort of thing. He was working for Father when Father was killed, and that's when Uncle Thomas got to know Al. They sent word to Aunt Olive, of course, and she and Uncle Thomas came right on down. Uncle Thomas took charge of things and with Al's help got the estate settled.

"So you see, Al Parsons knew me almost all my life until Mother died. I didn't go back to the ranch after she was gone. I hated the place, especially since Uncle Thomas started drilling for oil right in the part of the ranch I always liked the best. I don't know why he ever took such a fancy to Al Parsons. None of us liked him and I know Father had to watch him all the time—he was such a cheat. But Father was easy-going and Al always had some smooth explanation, or else he would beg so hard for another chance that somehow he always managed to hold his job. I can remember now Father was always threatening to discharge Al, but Uncle Thomas never seemed to see anything wrong with him. I was so surprised when I came back from Europe and heard that Al was Uncle Thomas' ranch manager. He didn't know anything at all about ranching, unless it was the bookkeeping."

Jess moved his chair so that he faced her. "Sara, do you suppose Parsons was one of the gang that's out to get you—and the Senator?"

"Why—" Sara paused "—he may have been."

"Don't you suppose he balked at—harming you? The way he spoke your name—Sarky—sounded as if it worried him, whatever it was he had in mind to tell me."

"But there are others of the gang here. It may be that Al did weaken at the last, when it came to the point of doing whatever they had planned. I think he probably liked me, back in the old days. Yes, I can understand how Al would not want to see me harmed. That's probably why he was shot, don't you think?"

"It could be. There was money in the scheme he tried to pass on to me. But what a rat he was if he pretended such a friendship for the Senator and still was ready to knife him in the back!"

"And yet," Sara carried the thought further, "the rest of the gang are worse than he was. They'd have killed you, just because they thought Al told you more than he really did. Jess, it would be a load off Link's mind if he knew you're here, safe. I wish we could get word to him. Don't you suppose we might manage it somehow?"

But Jess was not thinking of Link just then. He was watching the vague profile of Sara's face in the twilight and dwelling rather exultantly upon the fact that now he was here he must stay and help guard her from danger.

"Last night at this time," he said slowly, "I was lying under a rock ledge up by Old Baldy, trying to believe you'd be found and that I'd be the one to do it. This morning I saddled up and rode over this way and finally came right to the place where you were." He sighed. "I keep thinking I'm going to wake up and find it's just a dream."

Sara laughed a little. "You're half asleep this minute. I don't believe you heard a word I said about getting word to Link. And if you expect to see us both safely out of the woods, Mr. Jess Robison, you'd better go to bed and get a good night's rest." She leaned and whispered mysteriously behind her hand, "Feather beds, Jess! After sleeping under a rock ledge, that certainly ought to sound tempting!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WATCHERS ON THE HILL

To the watchers on the hill dawn came slowly. Sometime in the night a high wind from out the west came whooping down through Old Baldy's rugged passes, howling across the high levels with a fifty-mile velocity that laid the new grass flat upon the ground and sent gravel and the coarser pebbles scuttering before its more vicious blasts. In a near-by swale still moist from rain and melted snowbanks, two horses grazed uncomfortably, backs humped to the wind, tails whipping between their legs.

Sheltered in a nest of boulders well back from the coulee's rim, a man fed crooked sticks of dry sage to a tiny campfire and swore when the pungent smoke billowed into his face. The appetizing aroma of boiling coffee brought the second man shivering into the drafty cleft.

"If this wind don't drop, it's going to be hell on the planes," he said glumly. "You don't s'pose he got away in the night, do yuh?"

"What he prob'ly done was ride on through, yesterday evening. That's what I been sayin' all along." The man crouched beside the fire laid four strips of fat bacon in a frying pan and set it over the blaze, holding it there with the aid of a stick toggled to the handle with a short piece of baling wire. "Them tracks of his was two hours old when we picked 'em up back up there on the flat. He went into the coulee, all right—I ain't arguin' that point. But we never seen 'im around there, did we? He kep' right on travelin', if yuh ask me."

"Not the way that horse of his was limp'in'," the other contended stubbornly. "And yuh mind the old feller drove in a lame horse last night, don't yuh? Same color as the Robison kid's horse, too."

"Yeah, you been harpin' on that. Grab your cup, Shorty, and throw me over the other one. Here's your sow-belly. Bread's in the bag there. If yuh want anything more'n what you see, you might open a can of beans. There's a couple left."

Shorty did as he was bidden. Presently the two sat huddled back against the wall of their rocky niche, eating their scanty breakfast. Shorty drew the back of his hand across a wind-watered eye.

"She's goin' to blow the hinges off'n hell t'day, Pete," he made pessimistic prophecy, "and if we don't find that feller before night, we'll be outa grub. Can't bank on Tex droppin' us down some. Chances are he won't go up at all to-day."

Pete grunted. "You're so damn sure he's down below, here, what you worryin' about grub for?"

"Well, he coulda borrowed a fresh horse and went on. It's possible, and I ain't going to starve myself for anybody. That all the bacon we got?"

"Held back enough for another meal," Pete informed him. "Say, I'd be willin' to miss a good many meals to make good on this job. Ten grand ain't picked up every day, boy."

Shorty made no reply to that, but poured himself a second cup of coffee.

"And, boy, if we could get the jane! A hundred grand in that—and me for them Honolulu babies, and quit this game."

Shorty gave him a hard, unblinking stare. "Oh, yeah? You'll never get a nickel of that hundred grand. Forget it." He snorted. "Them that's got her are layin' low till the time's right. When they do spring her on the old man—say, a hundred grand won't be carfare to bring home the jack they'll ask for; and get. Boy, I wish I was stringin' along with that mob. They sure are due to clean up a nice piece of change."

He drained the cup and tossed it over to where their meager outfit was piled against a rock. "Put out your fire and come on," he directed gruffly. "It's gettin' light and we don't want to miss 'im if he's down here. These rubes are sure early birds."

Pete swore at the wind and at the necessity of perching like carrion birds on the coulee rim in the chill of dawn. Each man carried a high-power rifle equipped with telescope sights. Shorty had a pair of good field glasses in his pocket.

For a long while they sat hunched and shivering against the rocky pinnacle which gave the clearest view of the house through an open space in the grove which surrounded it. They saw the dawn flush gloriously, then dull to a curdled gray. They missed all of the beauty, though they caught the import of the cloudy sky.

"Looks like a change of weather," Pete grumpily observed. "Maybe a few of them damn rescue planes'll stay down t'day."

"Yeah. Give us a chance."

After a time Pete spoke again carpingly.

"Thought you said rubes was early birds; that guy down there ain't even crawled outa the hay yet."

In the stronger light Shorty was inspecting with his glasses the half dozen horses moving about in the corral. "Don't see that JR horse with the rest," he grumbled. "I'd 'a' swore it was in the bunch last night."

"Yeah? You couldn't read a brand this fur, even with them glasses."

"Hell, don't yuh s'pose I'd know the horse? If you hadn't got the wild idea he was goin' to meet the Barrett girl, we'd 'a' had him yesterday. Saw him plain as I see you right now."

"Yeah? If you was so damn sure you got the low-down on the Barrett jane, what yuh trailin' this boob for? Whyn't yuh git 'im when yuh had the chance?"

"I s'pose," said Shorty, with elaborate sarcasm, "you wouldn't muscle in on their party, even if yuh got the chance! You'd pass up the big money and take the few grand on this mark and call it a day."

"Aw—" Pete changed his tone abruptly and pointed. "They're up! There goes a smoke up from the chimney. Put your glasses on the door, Shorty, and see who comes out."

Shorty watched. When his arms wearied, he handed the glasses to Pete and took up his rifle. "Say when," he said grimly. "Sure yuh know 'im by sight?"

"Hope t' tell yuh," Pete grunted, focusing the glasses to suit his own vision. "Yuh want to allow for wind, remember. And you're shootin' down. And—"

"Tell me something I don't know," snarled Shorty. "I could give you the range in feet—and pay a buck for every inch I was off the tape. My Gawd, they must be all dead in there!"

"Here comes one—don't git in a rush, now. Wait till I see—" He gave a grunt of disgust and settled back. "It's the old man," he reported. "Gonna do the milkin'. Got a coupla tin buckets."

"Hell, I ain't blind," Shorty grumbled. "I can see the buckets, plain enough." He scowled down into the coulee, turning something over in his mind. "Something funny about that," he muttered. "Why don't that kid get out and do the milkin'?"

During the next hour, Shorty spoke his mind freely concerning the general worthlessness of the younger generation. He told Pete of his own boyhood and how he had milked six cows before breakfast every morning, summer and winter. He frankly wished he had the training of that kid in the coulee for a few months—he bet there'd be a change in that damned lazy whelp.

He took the glasses from Pete and in the intervals of spying on the house he snatched moments of absorbed interest, watching Link's father milk two cows and turn their bandy-legged calves into the cow-yard to nuzzle for their depleted breakfasts. He declared in all sincerity that if he had a little place like this, with a few head of cattle running back up here on the bench, so he could ship—oh, maybe half a carload of steers every fall (putting them in with some big stockman; he wouldn't want a big outfit himself; didn't want the responsibility), and could have him some good horses and plenty of meadow; well, if he had a place like that down there, and some cute little wife that knew how to cook,—say! He wouldn't trade places with the big boss man himself.

"There's somebody comin' out again," Pete's unmoved voice cut short his daydream. "Who's that, now?"

Shorty came back to the job. "That," he said boredly, "is the old man again. And there comes the old lady, followin' him

down as far as the gate. Don't see the lazy kid nowheres. Maybe he ain't there—Yeah, he must be. Them two dogs foolin' around the steps, waggin' and wavin' their damn tongues at somebody back in under the porch where I can't see. Must be the kid we seen on the porch last night.

"Old man's backin' a car outa that shed—"

"I can see that much, myself," Pete snubbed him.

"Yeah? S'pose you can see it's a Ford, too, can't yuh? A heap too, if yuh ask me. Funny—man with as nice a little ranch as he's got, drivin' a wreck like that. Bet if I had a little ranch, I'd have a snappy car to go with it. . . . Maw, she's got a grocery list, looks like. . . . I'll be damned if she ain't got a basket of eggs there for him to trade in for grub! Didn't s'pose that stunt had been pulled, outside the movies, for twenty years.

"Now she's goin' back inside. Yeah, she's talkin' to somebody on the porch... Gawd, I wish't I could hear with these damn glasses as plain as I can see! Must be either the kid or the Robison guy."

"I got a mind to ride down there and find out," Pete said indecisively. "This here stallin' around a mile off is burnin' me up."

"Mile? One thousand yards, air line. Wait a minute and I'll tell yuh exactly—" He dropped one hand to the rifle lying across his knees.

"Say, either gimme them glasses or use 'em yourself!" Pete grumbled. "Somebody's on the porch. If it's him, he's liable to step down in sight any minute. We got t' stop 'im—or we'll git stopped. You was so damn anxious to make yourself solid with the big boss yesterday, you had to go and give Tex the high sign that we got our man on the spot. Now we got to rub 'im out or it's flowers for the both of us. I'm goin' down there. If it's him on the porch—"

"You'll stay where you're at. Ride down and let the old lady look yuh over, would yuh? If he's there, he'll show himself sooner or later. Stands t' reason he's there. That's what's keepin' the boy at the house. He'd be out rangin' around the place like a chipmunk if there wasn't somebody new around to kinda take his fancy."

Shorty shifted himself to a new position where he was a bit more sheltered from stray gusts whipping gravel around the rock where he had crouched.

Pete crawled back beside him. "You got it doped out so fine, maybe you got it figured out why our man's huggin' the house so close. He never ranged the hull damn' country and wound up away over here jest to visit with a coupla old farmers. His folks lives off the other way. Figure that out, why dontcha?"

"That? I seen through that a long time ago," Shorty stated conceitedly.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. Sure I did. He got wise to us on his trail, that's why. He's playin' foxy, holin' up till we get tired waitin'—or he makes up his mind he was mistaken. That's easy. Ask me another one."

Convinced that Shorty was right, Pete had no other question. "I wisht this damn wind would let up a little," he complained, and after that futile statement relapsed into silence.

Toward noon the wind lulled perceptibly, though it still blew hard with occasional wild gusts.

"Guess Tex don't want t' tackle it," Pete roused himself to say. "Think it's any use gettin' ready to signal?"

"Better. You'll have to pile rocks on the tarp or she'll blow away on yuh. And get the saddle on your horse. Just in case. Clouds don't show as much wind up next the ceilin' as there is down here. Tex'll come, all right. He will if them damn search planes don't come snoopin' around over this way." Shorty spoke without moving the glasses from the closed house down in the wind-whipped orchard.

"Way they acted yesterday, the posses all musta swallowed the bait the boss man throwed out to 'em, all right." Pete eased himself stiffly up from his place. "Long as I'm liable to have t' wait fer Tex," he said, "I'll make us some coffee and fry the rest uh that bacon. Then when I get back, you can go 'n' eat."

Shorty nodded, his eyes glued to the glasses. He had found a comfortable way of holding them without tiring his arms.

"Don't let 'em slip nothin' over on yuh," Pete gave perfunctory warning, as he climbed over a jagged pile of rocks to level ground.

Shorty did not answer. Link's mother had come out with a gay scarf tied over her head and was on her way to the stable. A faint misgiving seized Shorty. Was it possible that the old lady was alone on the ranch after all? Then he remembered the behavior of the dogs that morning and settled himself to patient spying.

Had he been able to look through the brown weathered walls into the old-fashioned living room (which Mother Whelan frankly called the sitt'n' room), he would have wished more than ever that he could hear as well as see at long distance.

The radio, a very good set which Link had given the old folks last Christmas, was telling the public all it was permitted to know concerning the double mystery up in Wolsey County, Montana. The two featured in the news flash were listening with intense though much embarrassed interest.

Jess, his ears a bright crimson, heard himself called "The handsome young heir of the vast JR holdings, adjoining the picturesque Diamond Slash ranch, bought a few years ago by Senator Wolsey in the hope that it would be a quiet retreat where he and his charming wife and beautiful daughter might live for a few weeks each year in restful retirement. Young Robison, a graduate of the University of Montana, had shown marked ability as an artist—"

"I meant to ask you about that, Jess," Sara cut into the effusive chatter calculated to fill space left by a dearth of news. "I'd like to see your pictures. Peggy has talked a lot about them." Sara was living up to her masquerade. She sat sprawled on the stool of the high-backed parlor organ with her booted feet thrust straight out and her elbows on the silent keys, and she was gently swinging the stool from side to side. She was all dingy black leather and faded blue, to the buttoned collar of the shirt she wore. Above it her face rather took one's breath, it was so vividly beautiful framed by those tumbled waves of coppery hair. "Peggy says you're a genius. Are you?"

"Baloney. You ought to know Peg. The best thing she does is ballyhoo her friends. Listen. You're it, now."

"—No clue to the fate of the girl whose rare beauty and culture, to say nothing of her vast wealth, make this a crime mystery of the century. And now a word about the New Era Furniture Company's wonderful bargains this week only—"

Sara reached a long arm and choked the announcer with the twist of thumb and finger. "Beautiful girl, handsome young man have met an awful fate, we don't know what, ladies and gentlemun, and the New Era is selling Rapid City Oriental rugs for thirty-seven fifty, this week only! Doesn't it make you squirm?" She whirled herself around to the keyboard, planted Link's boots firmly on the pedals and began to pump and play with exaggerated labor, as if she were riding a bicycle uphill.

Jess watched her, shining-eyed. Only for that vast wealth of hers—

"I know how to make the most gorgeous chocolate pie," she broke off her foolery as suddenly as she began it. "I want some absolutely fresh eggs, though, warm out of the nests. I think it will be safe enough just to run down to the chicken house, Jess."

"Certainly I'll go. If you want fresh laid eggs—" Jess got up eagerly.

"Not you. The gal of rare beauty is going." She spread her arms and pirouetted like a tulle-fluffed dancer before him. Her tawny eyes had imps of mischief in them.

"You can't. I wouldn't—" Jess took a step toward her, his arms half outstretched to catch and hold her close.

"Jess, you mustn't." Whether she referred to the imminent embrace or to his venturing from the house, Jess didn't know. "My disguise is perfect. I—I want to. I haven't gathered eggs from a nest for ages." She caught up Link's old Stetson. The flaming glory of hair was extinguished completely. "You stand on the porch with your rifle. I'll take the dogs along. What could possibly happen?"

Jess could not imagine anything happening, yet he felt uneasy. He watched Sara run braced against the wind, head bent and old hatbrim slapping her right cheek. The dogs leaped alongside, yelping joyously. A boy and his dogs, any stranger would have sworn.

But at the gate when she started to untie the rope fastening, her hat blew off and went bouncing across the yard. Sara's copper-red hair was lifted and tumbled for a minute or two, until Jess ran and retrieved the hat and crammed it on her head before he ducked back.

But up on the rocky pinnacle, Shorty dropped his glasses to dangle by their strap around his neck and ran leaping to where Pete was nursing a tiny blaze under the coffeepot.

"Got 'em both! They're down there—Robison and the girl. Hidin' out—she's the boy we seen."

Pete sprang up, reaching for his rifle. "D'ja git 'im?"

"Hell, no! Use your bean. They think they're safe as Gawd's pocket. You know the code for callin' help, don't yuh? Get your horse. When Tex comes, give 'im the good word. Boy, there's a million dollars down there, if we work it right. Blast the Robison guy and grab the girl—oh, boy!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LINK SWEEPS UNDER THE BED

On that windy day Link rode in to Alder Spring Camp looking bone weary and utterly dejected. He found the sheriff standing in the middle of the floor, with his hands on his hips, gazing around at the dirty, unkept room. The sheriff's under lip was thrust out, the upper tucked behind it.

"Hmm," he grunted as Link came in, "this headquarters, or hog-pen?"

Link kicked the door shut, pushed his hat farther back on his head and sent a quick glance around, measuring the full extent of the disorder.

"Looks to me like somebody's ready to move in or out," he commented in a flat, lifeless tone unlike his usual kindly drawl. Then, as his attention focused upon the scene, his glance sharpened. "Somebody's been snoopin' through Jess's things. How long you been here, Job?"

"Just come. Snoopers, hmm-m? You'd know better than I would. You've stayed here and I haven't. Well, how far'd they go?"

"Far enough to bust open his trunk, there." Link went over and lifted the lid, giving a brief inspection to the broken lock. "Any cowpuncher done that," he stated, "he's either been in the pen or he's headed that way. No amateur ever busted that lock. Hunh. Take a look here, Job. All the kid's picture-makin' truck. Don't look like anything's been taken out. I kinda wondered myself what it was he kept locked up so careful in that little trunk and now I know. So does the other feller."

Job took a hand, examining Jess's strapped suitcase of cowhide. "Most likely went through this too. The kid'd know. Hm-mm. Looks to me like somebody's doing considerable worryin'."

Link gave him a quick look. "Senator is, for one," he observed. "I don't believe the man has et or slept, scarcely. Drinkin' pretty heavy too. That shore su'prised me, Job. I never expected to see him cave in like he's done the last day or two."

"Mh-hm, kinda surprised me too. Hadn't ought to, the way everybody's doing it these days. But a man with his public life and responsibilities—Anything new over there, Link?"

"Not a damn thing, except the Senator panned hell outa me and the sheriff's office for not findin' Sara Barrett yet."

"Good enough. No clue at all, hm-hm?"

"Well," Link said, with a quirk of his lips, "they did get a clue from Chicago that she was seen there in the company of a coupla gangsters. Senator's got some high-priced detectives workin' on it. And he called in a flock of extra good secret service men to-day."

"Mm-hm—they're liable to turn up something that'll help us. What'd he think about young Robison? Say anything about him?"

"Not a darn thing."

"No clues at all?"

"No more'n we've got." Gloom settled on Link's homely countenance. "Job, if we don't get something we can go to work on pretty darn soon—damn it, I like that kid."

His words reminded the sheriff of something. "Met his dad to-day; old Dave Robison. Not so old, either, I guess—but that's what they call him, he's such a grouch. Pretty hard hit. Mh-hm—aged ten year in the last week or so."

Link had straightened the blankets on the two bunks and was coming with the broom. He stopped short, his expression skeptical.

"Not over Jess, he ain't aged. I been hearin' it awn every side, he hates the kid's guts." Link walked over and spat angrily into the fireplace. "You mind the day of the inquest over here? He never spoke to the kid. He never even looked at him."

Set there lookin' down his nose all the time he was here. Wouldn't let the kids come over here to see Jess—and for all they knew he was bad hurt. Did the old man offer to send out a doctor? Did he come himself to see how bad off the boy was? He did not!"

The sheriff was starting a fire, looking rather helplessly at the array of dirty dishes left by the last ones to eat there. The search was not being conducted with the orderly system Job was accustomed to require in all posse cases. It occurred to him that he would probably get an official black eye for the way he seemed to be falling down. But it also came to his mind that no one was paying much attention to the activities of the sheriff's office, anyway. Senator Wolsey and his army of investigators were very much in the limelight of publicity just now. Job was glad of it. He wanted publicity about as much as a mole wants the noonday sun in his face.

He looked across at Link, vigorously plying the broom between the two beds. "Old Dave had a run-in with the Senator, yesterday," he said cheerfully. "Couple of them secret service men are makin' out to earn their wages. Mh-hm, pretty good boys; doin' good work over there, both of 'em."

"What was the argument about? They find out?" Having swept more than a week's accumulation of dust from under Jess's bunk, Link paused for his answer before tackling the other. "I thought them two was ready to fall on each other's necks; best of friends, from all I heard."

"Hm-mm. Ready to go at each other's throats. Set down, Link. The boys'll be in to report in half an hour. What'd you say to this? Dave put a big pile of money into oil. Now he wants t' pull out and he can't."

"Can't? How's that?"

"That," said the sheriff, "is what the boys are tryin' to find out. Robison went in and boned the Senator for it; wanted to turn in his stock and get his money back, as I understand it. Senator blew up. He was tellin' old Dave by hand when they was interrupted. One of my boys—that the Senator is payin' too—is finding out about it."

Link absently polished the broom handle with his palm. "Bet it's the kid's money old Dave put in. Got cold feet now and wants t' pull out. It'd be a hell of a note if—" He broke off abruptly, which was not his way, and looked anxiously at Job. "I wish to God I knew what's become of the kid," he blurted. "Job, d'you s'pose old Dave—? No-o," he negated his own surmise; "that's kinda far-fetched, I guess. But I tell yuh right now, if his dad or anybody else has done away with that boy—"

"Mh-hm. I'm with yuh there, Link. But you're jumpin' at conclusions now. Them that's after him are still worried about what Jess knows; or what they think he knows. That goes t' show it's Parsons' murderers—if there was more'n one, and I guess there must of been. You've kinda lost your stride. Guess you let the Senator get your goat, hm-mm?"

"Fact is, there's two things you got to bear in mind. One is, Jess is stuck on the Barrett girl and he started out with a blanket or two and some grub—according to you—to hunt her up. I know myself the way he took the news that she was gone. He may be huntin' back up in the hills and everybody's missed him. It's a dang big country, yuh want to recollect." The sheriff turned deliberately back to his coffee-making. "And the other thing is, his stuff has been pawed over since he left. That don't look much like they got him."

Link's brown eyes were neither mild nor confiding. "Looks like they did and want to make damn sure they left no incriminatin' ev—"

He broke off as if he had been choked. With a vicious swipe of his broom under Chuck's bunk he dragged out the letter Parsons had hidden in his boot and sent it skittering toward the sheriff.

Face up, it lay on the dusty board floor while both men stared at it in silence. They saw the postmark with the date unsmudged, and they recognized the strong, angular handwriting. The letter was addressed to Tom Ritchie.

"Well, whadda yuh know about that!" Link breathed in an awed whisper, as he leaned and picked it up.

"Mh-hm," purred the sheriff, taking the letter from Link and turning it over in his hand. "Parsons had it on him. Dropped outa his pocket, probably, when the kid laid 'im on the bed. Mm-hm—looks as though we'd most likely got our evidence, Link."

Link pushed back his hat and ran his fingers bewilderedly through his hair. But all he said was, "That's what comes of havin' a good mother, Job. Maw always learned me to sweep under the bed!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

TROUBLE TIGHTENS

Jess shifted his rifle into his left hand and pulled the door open, letting in Sara and leaving the dogs outside. His mouth was tight, his eyes full of worry.

"Perfectly simple," Sara laughed, showing her bandanna gathered up at the corners to hold six brown eggs. "See how circumspect I was? I wanted to carry these eggs in my hat, but I didn't. I remembered the look on your face when you slammed the hat down over my ears, so I left it there. I suppose I shall go through life looking like a brindle bird dog, and whenever I look in the mirror, I shall think of you trying to peel my ears off my head with Link's hat."

Jess did not laugh. His mouth remained stern and compressed at the corners. "I was a fool to let you go in the first place. You certainly gave any one with field glasses an eyeful, there for a minute. So did I, for that matter."

Sara looked at him with grave attention for a minute. "Baloney," she said then, exactly as he would have said it, and swaggered past him into the kitchen.

Jess followed her, carrying the rifle. In the kitchen he stood the weapon deliberately beside the sink, stepped across the space to the work table and caught Sara by the shoulders, whirling her to face him.

"I could shake you!" he gritted, and did so—gently. "It isn't baloney, and you know it. If I were a storybook hero, I'd break my neck trying to protect you from the very thought of danger. I feel more like breaking yours. You've got to realize that this is no joke. You're being hunted by men who would murder their own mothers for the money they expect to get for you, Sarky Barrett."

"I—wondered," Sara said meekly.

"Wondered what?"

"When you'd come down to calling me Sarky. It—well, it's my homey name. And after to-day, if we aren't homey with each other, we never shall be—"

"Brat!" Jess whispered between his teeth and caught her close and kissed her twice on her pouting red mouth. "Go throw your millions in the lake and I'd—"

The front door slammed. He released Sara so abruptly that she staggered against the table. He was in the doorway with his rifle at half aim when Mother Whelan came into the dining room.

"For conscience' sake!" she gasped. "What in the world's happened?"

"Nothing—yet. Except that Sara's hat blew off and her hair blazed out like a bonfire down by the gate, and I had to get out and round up the hat. So we both managed to advertise ourselves pretty thoroughly to any one who might be watching up on the rim."

Mother Whelan sat down weakly on the nearest chair and fumbled at the knotted silk scarf on her head. Her eyes moved anxiously from one to the other.

"Too bad!" she sighed helplessly. "Pa and Lincoln would be real put out if they knew that, I expect. All the time he was here, Lincoln kept telling us not to let Sara show herself, except as a boy, and not any more'n we could help, even then." All at once she brightened. "We might hide her in the old apple cellar back up in the orchard, if any one should come," she said hopefully.

"Where is it? In sight of the rim anywhere around?"

"Why, I never noticed," the old lady confessed, with the distressed look of one who had committed a grave error. "It's right in the orchard, so I don't s'pose it can be seen—except in winter when the trees are bare."

Jess looked at Sara, who was tying one of Mother Whelan's checked gingham aprons around her (wrapping it twice

before she tied, because the owner was a plump old lady with the sweetest face in the world but plenty of girth). A new expression had come into Jess's eyes within the past five minutes. Though Sara met it calmly enough, a betraying flush crept into her cheeks. She picked up two eggs, tapped them together and put down the unbroken one.

"You'll have to lay off the chocolate pie," Jess said grimly. "We're going to take a look at that cellar—now, while we have the chance."

Sara looked at him over her shoulder. "Pounds and pounds of baloney," she said sweetly and broke the egg into a basin.

"Sara!" Jess stepped closer, hating himself for the argument he meant to use, but resolved to use whatever method would move her.

"I'm sure no one saw us," she added quickly, forestalling his speech. "I feel so utterly safe here. This is the fourth day and not a soul has come near. Do sit down, Jess. You're making me forget the recipe. A famous chef told me and I'm carrying it in my head, you know."

"It's time you carried something else in your head," Jess said implacably. "I'm being hunted down myself. I don't hold with all this optimistic cooking stuff when I'm liable to feel a bullet in my back any minute."

Sara dropped an egg on the floor. "Idiot!" She began untying the apron. "It feels so peaceful here; so safe," she repeated wistfully. "But if you think we aren't, I'll go."

Contrition seized Jess. "It's just that we can't take any risk we can possibly avoid. I'm responsible, Sarky."

"Yes," she assented softly, and hid herself under the big hat with a docility utterly maddening to Jess.

Mother Whelan opened the back door. "I'll stay here and keep the dogs back. They'd give you away if they were let tag along," she said, with a flash of Link's shrewdness. "You go right along past the well, under the trees. There ain't much of a trail. The cellar's dug into the hill back there. I don't much believe it shows at all, except from this direction."

She was right. They walked under a canopy of wind-tossed fruit blossoms to the dugout. Jess lifted the door, slanted in its heavy plank frame against the hill itself. They leaned and peered down into apple-scented dusk.

Sara drew back. "If you think I'm going to bury myself in that hole, you're mistaken," she said with decision.

"If it came to the worst, Sarky—"

"This is the worst. But I'm glad we came, Jess. Isn't it marvelous?"

Jess looked at her, looked away. With her face upturned to the blooming branches overhead, she was a menace to any man's peace of mind, however full the moments were of other deadly hazards. He could not answer. He moved on, edging farther from the temptation to take her in his arms.

"Don't rush off, Jess. Where are you going?"

"Nowhere—much."

"I wish," said Sara, "you wouldn't be so jumpy. Even if any one saw us, what could they do?"

"Plenty."

"But we'd be doing plenty, ourselves. I wish," Sara said tentatively, "I had a gun. I used to shoot, long ago on the ranch. Twice I bought guns, in places where I could without a written permit. The first one was stolen from me. The second—" she stopped with a curiously hard note in her voice, "—do you know what happened to the second? In Los Angeles, right in my aunt's house—almost under Uncle Thomas' nose!—some one got hold of that gun and filed down the firing pin so it wouldn't explode a shell. That looked like a masculine mind at work, but I couldn't imagine who did it. It did open my eyes to the fact that Uncle Thomas is probably surrounded by spies and traitors. I know he has a bodyguard all the while, but they can't protect him from spies amongst the servants."

"And yet," Jess said bitterly, "you imagine you're safe here—just because Link Whelan brought you here."

"No," Sara said simply. "I think it's because you're here. I know I've felt safer since last night."

There was only one answer to that and Jess refused to give it. He had faced a certain cold, inescapable fact since that mad moment in the kitchen. He stood with a stony face turned toward the house. "Was that a car?" he questioned desperately.

"Probably Dad Whelan. Shall we go back?"

The dogs were barking a welcome. They listened outside the door, heard Whelan's voice, and went in to find him piling packages on the table. His wife stood watching him, a haggard look on her face, as if she had just received bad news of some sort. But she managed a smile for the two.

"Well, how'd you like the cellar?" she asked, with forced cheerfulness.

"Very nice as an apple cellar," Sara answered. "As a retreat—"

"Not so hot," Jess supplied. "I couldn't get Sara into it."

"Ma says you kinda tipped your hands." Whelan looked at them keenly. "Well, I didn't see Link, but I got word to him. Wisht I'd known what was goin' on here; I could have made it a mite stronger, I guess."

"We certainly made a bad break for a minute. But nothing happened, so we probably didn't do any harm," Jess said with sudden optimism.

"Didn't, ay? Don't you fool yourself, young feller. There's been some strange goin's on in the last few days, and looks like there'll be stranger 'fore we're through with the mess." He looked at Jess, made some mental decision and jerked his head toward the other room. "We might's well go in an' set down, I guess. I got some news right fresh. Fact is, I was settin' in the district attorney's office when it happened. Might as well tell it an' git it off m' mind, I guess. Radio'll be yawpin' it before long, anyhow."

Warned by the look in Whelan's eyes, Jess braced himself. "We certainly want to hear anything you've found out," he said, placing a chair for Link's mother. "If it concerns me especially, don't beat about the bush to spare my feelings."

Whelan gave him a quick glance. "Well, now, that's a funny thing to say—unless the radio folks have got it already—" He looked inquiringly at his wife.

"We didn't hear it over the radio," she answered the look. "Tell him, Pa. He's got t' know it sooner or later."

Jess squared his shoulders. "The sooner the better. Let's have it, Mr. Whelan."

"Well," the old man began reluctantly, "it ain't so bad it couldn't of been worse. While I was settin' in the office, talkin' to Jack Spellman and kinda thinkin' maybe Link might show up, your pa walked in and give himself up."

"Gave himself—up?"

"Yeah. Said he's the one that killed Albert Parsons. Claimed he shot in self-defense. Had some proof too. Took us down outside, where he'd tied up his horse, and showed us where a bullet hit his saddle fork just a hair's breadth above where his rope's tied on. Matter uh fact, a strand's half cut through by the bullet as it went past. Jack's got the saddle locked up and is goin' to dig the bullet out and see if it come from the gun Parsons had on him. Guess maybe you could identify the gun, couldn't yuh, Jess?"

Jess wet his dry lips. "Parsons' gun? Not positively; not among others of the same make. I know the kind, yes."

"Yeah. Well, yore pa says he'd been up lookin' over the work you'd been doin' cuttin' poles up in the hills, an' he met Parsons headed for yore camp. They had a few words—seems Senator Wolsey's big oil company's purty close on the rocks. Yore pa put a lot of money into the company and wanted it back and couldn't get it—anyway, he accused Parsons of knowin' the company wasn't safe; somethin' like that.

"Anyway, the upshot of it was, Parsons said yore dad was tryin' to get him in bad and double-cross him, and he was goin' straight an' tell you how yore dad was wastin' yore money 'n propitty. He's plastered the ranch an' cattle with a mortgage, it seems. So they had it back an' forth, and they was both gettin' pretty hot under the collar, I guess, before they

separated.

"Well, they did start t' ride on, and Parsons whipped out his gun and took a shot at yore pa, and turned to run, and yore pa pulled his own gun and fired one shot. Parsons didn't quit his horse, though, and yore pa claims he thought he'd missed him.

"Anyway, he said he never knew Parsons was dead till the next day. It was give out as an accident, first. Then he heard it was suicide. He didn't say nothing, just let things take their course. Then next day after that, he went over to the Diamond Slash, not knowing what he better do, and they called him to set on the jury.

"He says he kinda made up his mind he wouldn't say nothing unless they accused somebody in particular. Looked for a while like it might be laid at your door. Then it was left 'persons unknown' and he still didn't say nothin'. Till t'day. He said he couldn't stand it no longer. He feels he was justified—Parsons shot first. But he's heard folks say you done it an' skipped out, so he made up his mind he'd tell how it happened. He said maybe you'd come home then an' settle down an' behave yourself."

Jess did not say a word. He was hearing again that sinister rattling of rocks on the hill above him, and he was thinking of his father, mortgaging the JR ranch—and not wanting to face the music. He dropped his face down upon his two hands, shuddering a little at the grisly thought. His own father!

"Yuh don't want to worry," Whelan said encouragingly. "Jack—the district attorney, said he didn't think they'd do much about it; not if the bullet in yore pa's saddle came outa Parsons' gun. He said they'd make it self-defense, all right."

Jess shook his head. "It—ain't that," he said huskily. He could not tell them what it was.

"Listen!" said Sara, her soft, vibrant voice unlike itself now, it was so strained and tense.

Out beyond the grove the dogs were barking with fierce intermittent growls. The crashing roar of a six-shooter, a yelp and the sudden scream of a man in mortal pain or terror came so quickly it was impossible to tell which was first.

Jess sprang up and rushed for his rifle. Old man Whelan turned and picked up his Winchester from the corner by the radio.

"Ma," he said with calm authority, "you git down suller and take Sary with yuh. There's liable to be bullets flyin' around in here, and me and Jess don't want to be worryin' about you."

Sara laid a hand on Jess's arm. "If you'd—may I have your six-shooter?"

Jess turned and looked deep into her eyes. "You won't need it—Sarky. Just keep down below, dear. I'll do the fighting for us both."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE ATTACK AT WHELAN'S

"Any way to lock this door?" Jess stood with head tilted, listening to Sara's reluctant steps down the cellar stairs.

Whelan's lips puckered. "Don't have to. Ma'll keep 'er down there if she has t' hog-tie 'er."

"You see that she does, then. Better barricade yourself right here in the kitchen. I'll lock all the doors out front—"

"Front door's locked a'ready—but that won't stop 'em if they wanta git in very bad. Kinda sounds like the dogs is holdin' 'em off, anyway. Them's bear dogs. They don't back down f'm no kinda varmint."

"If they tackle the house, it'll be at the back. Say, if you get in there behind the range, you can hold off a dozen. You've got both windows and the two doors where you can watch 'em, and the stove'll protect you."

"Yeah, that's right. And where'll you be?"

"Outside. In you go—"

"Left word for Link to come on out, quick as he could. Thunderation!—snagged m' britches on one uh ma's skillet nails."

"All set? Say, is there an outside cellar door?" Jess halted with his hand on the doorknob.

"Yeah, but it's right under that window, there. Can't nobody git to it with me seein' 'im f'm here." Whelan wriggled his lean body into a more comfortable position. "Windows in the sullen ain't been opened up yet. Couldn't nobody git in that way—ain't big enough. Sary's all right down there, Jess. Ma'll look after 'er."

"Hold it, old-timer," Jess said laconically and jerked the door open.

"Till hell's no bigger'n a bullet ladle," Link's father made quaint response.

Out in the orchard the dogs were snarling with throaty barks at intervals. They seemed to be worrying something; at least, one of them did. Jess could not quite make it out, until he ran clear of a tall row of gooseberry bushes and come suddenly upon the scene just beyond.

He saw a man standing with his back against an old apple tree, fighting a dog off with his knife. Another lay curled up on the ground, shielding his face with his arms. He was moaning and there was blood on the grass, blood on the dog that lay crouched with his head on his paws, watching his fallen foe with eyes already filming, as death crept in upon him. Dog and man by the apple tree were slashed and bleeding, and it was from them the battle sounds came spasmodically as they fought.

At the moment Jess did not consciously think of the picture they made, though the artist in him must have registered instantaneously the smallest details down to the slightest movement of the wounded man on the ground or the labored breathing of the other, who was Pete. Because always after that he could have reproduced the scene line by line—and with accurate sound effects, had the means to do so been discovered. He used to see and hear it in his sleep sometimes. It was not a pleasant memory at its best.

Jess ran in with his gun ready for action. "Sandy! Come here! Down, you brute!"

Sandy turned one savage eye toward Jess, recognized him as one having the right to command, and with one slash of teeth that brought away a fragment of coatsleeve which he spat out disgustedly, he backed off and sat down, snarling and growling.

"Them damn—dogs—" gasped Pete, ready to drop.

"They certainly know their stuff. What were you fellows doing here in the orchard, anyway? Wasn't the road good enough?"

Pete took refuge in panting, gasping and feeling his hurts. "I'd ruther go up agin a mess of wildcats," he muttered,

pretending not to have heard the question.

"Mac, this other dog, is dead," Jess said harshly. "Get down there and see what's the matter with your partner. You brought it on yourselves, prowling through the orchard. Why didn't you stick to the trail?"

Pete had the beginning of a plausible story vaguely in mind. "We—aw, we're part of a searchin' party. We—"

"Well?"

Pete sparred for time. "Aw, we never meant no harm. Good Gawd, look at what that blasted cur done to Shorty! Ain't yuh got any heart? Let 'im lay there an' bleed t' death—" He was turning Shorty, fumbling for a better hold. He seemed sickened at the torn throat of his partner.

A sudden furtiveness, a plain attempt to mask with his own body the work of his hands, warned Jess. But not quite soon enough. His gun was up, he was just deciding what was wrong, when Pete fired. Jess staggered backward, recovered his balance and with his left arm hanging limp he aimed deliberately at Pete's head.

Pete jumped up and started to run, but the dog Sandy was after him in a flash. Pete stumbled and fell, howling for mercy.

"Call off your damn' dog!" he shrieked.

"Throw that gun away, first. Far as you can send it. Now your own."

"I ain't got one. The dog knocked it outa my hands when he jumped me first time. Call 'im off! He's chawin' my shoulder like it was beefsteak!"

Sandy wasn't. He had been schooled too sternly by Link. He knew that when men began fighting, good dogs sat on the sidelines and waited the outcome. Jess called him off and Sandy retreated watchfully, rumbling his deep note of warning.

"I think your partner could walk if he wanted to. If he can't, you'll have to carry him. Any more of you birds around here?"

"No. We came alone," Pete answered, so unthinkingly that Jess believed him.

"Well, get him on his feet somehow and march to the house. Quick, or I'll go on back and leave the dog to take care of you."

"Aw, give a man a break!" Pete whined. "I'm so chawed up m'self I can't hardly stand up."

"Well, hurry up," Jess admonished him. "You managed to cripple me so I couldn't help if I wanted to; which I certainly don't. All right, if you can't make it. I'd just as soon leave you with Sandy—"

"Hell's bells, I'm a-comin'," groaned Pete, and heaved Shorty to his feet. Then, half carrying, half dragging him, he managed the slight distance to the house, Jess and Sandy watchfully following.

Jess was feeling sick. His knees wobbled alarmingly and the issue of the encounter was growing hazy. He had an uncomfortable impression that he had failed in some manner, though for a time he could not think just how or why it was.

It seemed only a few minutes before his brain cleared, but it probably was longer, because Mother Whelan had finished bandaging his arm and was at work on Shorty's neck, when he remembered what it was that bothered him.

"I certainly made a mess of things, letting that rat shoot me in the arm," he complained. "Now we're only a man-and-a-half here on guard. Sara, can you shoot a rifle? If you can, take mine."

Sara, gazing at him with tears in her eyes, brightened a little. "Do you think we'll have any more trouble, Jess?" She shuddered as she looked at the torn wound in Shorty's neck, which Mother Whelan was preparing to bandage.

Fortunately the dog Mac had missed the jugular, taking his bite farther back. Shorty would go with a wry neck the rest of his life, Jess thought with some satisfaction. Pete, sulkily waiting his turn under the watchful eye of Dad Whelan, had been able to ward off Sandy with fair success. Cheek and arms were bitten and bleeding and his coat was in tatters, but Jess thought none of the wounds were serious. In the aggregate, they were probably painful enough. He hoped so.

"Do you think we'll be attacked again, Jess?" Sara repeated her question.

Pete gave her a surly look. "Hell, you wasn't attacked this time," he grumbled. "We was just walkin' along in the orchard an' them dogs sneaked up on us. They jumped us 'fore we knowed they was comin'."

"And that's exactly what will happen to the rest of your party," Sara told him sternly.

"There ain't any more." Pete growled. "I wisht there was. But no—Shorty, he got to countin' all that jack and decided we'd pull it alone—"

Shorty, slumped on a chair with his arms sprawled across the kitchen table and his head resting upon them, moved painfully.

"Shut your trap!" he mumbled thickly.

"Oh, yeah? Say listen, feller, I'm goin' to talk an' talk fast. After you draggin' me inta this—"

"You're talkin' outa turn," Shorty warned him, scarcely able to speak.

"Oh, yeah? Then I'll make it my turn. You folks are witnesses. I wasn't in on no killin', in the first place. Not even you," he stated with amazing frankness, looking at Jess. "When I started out, I s'posed it was on the up an' up—jest a search party lookin' fer the jane. All this killin' business was shore news t' me when Shorty sprung it. He said—"

"Y'r a liar!" snarled Shorty, lifting his head in complete disregard of Mother Whelan's half-finished work. "You been workin' on the case long as I have. You—"

Mother Whelan was a patient, kindly woman, but she had her limitations. She shut off the half-intelligible tirade by the simple process of tightening the bandage. Shorty subsided.

"That ain't so," Pete earnestly declared, his strained, anxious gaze upon Jess. "It was Shorty told me the orders was to stop yuh with a bullet. That was yesterday. Then t'day he got the idee of grabbin' the jane ourselves an' collectin' on her. When he seen 'er down here with you," Pete further explained, "we was s'posed t' signal Tex—only name I know 'im by—when him an' his pardner flew over t' git our report and drop down grub. Yes, and I c'n tell yuh how it was done. They was a set uh signals. We'd spread a tarp an' when Tex flew low enough t' see, we'd ride a circle around the tarp—one to the right if we—"

Shorty heaved himself up from the chair, shaking off Mother Whelan's hands that would have held him. His left hand jerked out from under his coat an unsuspected gun and he fired before any one in the room—least of all the panicky Pete—guessed his intention. And Pete never knew. A bullet in his brain wiped it clean of all thought.

"The dirty welcher," Shorty rasped, as Pete toppled from his chair. "I always knew he was yella. And as fer you—"

He got no farther than that. Mother Whelan slipped her plump fingers under the neat bandage and gave it a vigorous yank. With a strangled squawk, Shorty's hands flew up, clutching for air, and the wicked little automatic clattered to the floor.

"Durn me, I'd oughta be kicked inta the middle uh next week!" Whelan censured himself, when the first excitement had subsided and Shorty, thoroughly trussed with a piece of clothesline, lay on the kitchen floor with a porch cushion under his head. "I'd oughta known he'd have an extry gun hid on 'im. Them kind always does." He gave his wife a covert look. "Kinda mussed things up, but there's one less cutthroat fer the county t' spend money hangin'."

"Pa, I do wish you wouldn't talk so bloodthirsty," Mother Whelan reproved him. "I guess the county's willin' to pay whatever's necessary to clean out the lawless element. I do wish Lincoln would hurry up and come," she sighed. "Seems as though we've had about all the shootin' and killin' I can stand for one day."

Over by the couch, Sara looked up from her self-imposed task of bathing Jess's forehead with violet water left over from Mother Whelan's Christmas gifts.

"I think we should have a doctor as soon as possible," she gravely announced. "Jess seems to be getting a temperature. His face is quite flushed and I'm sure he has a high pulse."

From under his shaggy eyebrows Link's father stole a sly glance at his wife, who scowled and shook her head at him. But

the corners of her mouth twitched a little.

"You just go on bathin' his head, Sara," she said encouragingly. "That helps him as much as anything would, I guess."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A PROMISE IS A PROMISE

It was long after dark before Link arrived in the elegance of a dark blue limousine with a liveried driver (who was sent speeding back into Rainbow for an ambulance and police car when Link saw what had happened).

"This shore has been one busy day for the law," he sighed, leaning back in his chair after a most satisfactory supper. "Have any wind out here t'day?" he interrupted himself to make casual inquiry.

"Have we!" From her chair beside the couch, Sara spoke with eloquent brevity.

"Shore blew like Billy-be-dam over our way. Kept all the airplanes pegged down—regular dust storm and what they call a low ceiling. Good thing too. Give us a chance to make a clean sweep; finish up the job and be done with it."

"Clean sweep of what, Link?" One heavy lock of hair kept falling on Jess's temple and Sara pushed it back for the hundredth time that day.

"Clean sweep of all your troubles," Link generalized. "Most of 'em," he amended, after a shrewd glance at the six feet of trouble on the couch. "It's a long story. Kinda complicated in spots, till yuh get hold of the right thread. Makes me think of these danged flour sacks, the way they're sewed up. You start to rip out the seam and make yourself a dish towel, and you can stand and pick and pull at the dang string you *think* is the one, and the more you pick at it the tighter it gets. And then all at once you just happen to ketch 'er the right way, and z-zip she goes clear down the hull seam. Ain't that right, Ma?"

"That's right, Lincoln. I've been rippin' up flour sacks ever since they quit makin' 'em of paper, and I don't know to this day just how to take a hold, to make it pull right out. I don't know as anybody ever does. There's a right way and a wrong way, but I never know which is which till I've about wore out my patience tryin'."

"That's it. That's what Job and me was up against. We got some of it unraveled and then the dang thing stuck."

"Speaking of flour sacks," said Sara in her slow, cool voice, "do you mind just unraveling the mystery and letting the flour sacks wait until another time?"

"Shore. That's what I come out here to do; tell yuh both the hull story and let yuh get used to it before you go back and mix into the mess yoreselves. Jess gettin' a bullet in his arm, that gives him a kinda natural alibi. And uh course, Sara, you bein' in mournin' for your uncle—or maybe we better say you're upset over losin' all your money—"

"Lincoln!" Mother Whelan's tone of rebuke would have been no different had Link been fourteen instead of forty. "How often must I tell you to start at the beginnin', when you go to tell a thing, and go right ahead, and don't wander all around Robin Hood's barn?"

"Yes, Ma. But I wanted to break it gradual. It's bound to be a shock to Sara, best I can do—"

Sara, leaning over Jess, spoke without looking up. "No, Link, I don't think anything you can say would shock me very much."

Link sighed with relief. "Well, that bein' the case, I'll go on and say that Job and me have had an inkling all along that the Senator wasn't as much of a public benefactor as he was cracked up to be. We couldn't say anything, but we've been kinda workin' on the quiet with the secret service investigators that's been checkin' up on the Senator for quite a while. He ain't any relation of yours, so it ain't slurrin' you none to say he was about the biggest crook I ever had any dealin's with."

"I was afraid so," Sara said in a low tone. "It was such a terrible thing to think about my aunt's husband that I tried to believe he was all the grand things people believed. But—"

"Yeah, that's the way we felt. Give him the benefit of the doubt right up to the last ten days. When Parsons was killed, we thought we had something to go on. But we was both away off."

On the couch the long shape that was Jess, covered to his chest and bandaged arm, stirred uneasily. "I know all about Dad. Don't mind me, Link. Go ahead with the story."

"Yeah? Well, that wasn't what we figured, uh course. We thought Ritchie and young Francis most likely killed Parsons, and we thought maybe they was carryin' out the Senator's orders. But we didn't have any evidence, more'n that they tried to cover up the killin'—even tried to buy off the coroner so we wouldn't order an inquest. But we put the fear uh the Lord into Sanger, so he went on accordin' to law and the findin's of the autopsy.

"We found out that the bullet that was taken outa Parsons wasn't fired from Ritchie's gun, or Bob's or yours, so we didn't know what to think. Your gun," Link explained apologetically, "was a matter of form. We both knew you never done it. Or we didn't think so."

"I should hope not!" Sara indignantly exclaimed.

"Well, Parsons was on his way to see Jess. We was satisfied of that much. The thing that bothered us was what he wanted to see you about. That's what bothered Ritchie and Bob too—Oh, by the way, Jess. It was Bob Francis rolled that rock down on yuh, that next night. Job got that out of 'im in jail to-day."

"He did?" Jess sat up without warning. "I certainly am glad to hear that! I thought—"

"Yeah, I know," Link gently interrupted him. "We thought the same thing for awhile. Bob said he hated to do it, but they was afraid Parsons had told you about the Senator lettin' your Dad in for about all the JR is worth. And they was afraid, too, that he might of let out something about the raw deal the Senator was fixin' to put over on him."

"What was that?" Jess asked.

"Well, we found a letter under your bed that musta dropped outa Parsons' pocket. Senator wrote it to Ritchie, tellin' him Al would have to be fixed, because he was going to welch on the other job. And that Ritchie and his men would have to go ahead and carry it out themselves, because everything was tied up in the big deal and it would ruin them all if S. called for an accounting.

"Course, you can see what was underneath. Parsons found out he was expected to do away with Sara somehow—just how don't matter—and he balked on it. So they was ordered to kill Parsons to shut him up and go on with the job."

"That's what he was trying to tell me then," Jess carried out the solution. "Trying to tell me 'Sarky—little Sark' was—in danger." The last words he whispered, holding Sara's hand tightly in his good one. "Damnable—"

"Yeah. And then some. Well, how Parsons got hold of that letter we don't know. I don't s'pose Ritchie knows, himself. It had come in the mail that day, accordin' to the postmark, or he'd have destroyed it. Probably saved it to read it over a time or two extra before he burned it. So after Parsons left, Ritchie musta missed it, and him and Bob went after Parsons." Link paused to relight his cigarette. "They didn't kill Parsons," he added dryly, "but that's because they didn't get the chance. Yore dad met up with Parsons and they had a fuss—you know all about that. Yore dad told me himself, just a little while ago, that Chuck was ridin' down across the creek about the time him and Parsons met up with each other. Yore dad got t' thinkin' afterwards that Chuck probably saw 'em—no reason why he shouldn't of—so when he run across Chuck in town drunk, he fired him and sent Otto over to camp after Chuck's stuff, so you and Chuck wouldn't get to talkin' about it—just one of them things a man does when he's upset and scared, and tryin' to cover up his tracks."

"So that was it! I wondered about Chuck." Jess sighed. "And Dad, I suppose, was on the warpath with me because he thought maybe Parsons had told me about the ranch."

Sara withdrew her hand from Jess's clasp and put that rebellious lock of hair back in place.

"You said Uncle—the Senator—that I'd be in mourning for him; because he's a thief and a murderer?"

Link hesitated. "No," he said finally. "Because he shot himself when we went to arrest him."

Stunned silence followed that statement. Sara trembled, felt the firm, protective pressure of Jess's handclasp, and steadied again.

"We got it over the wire this evening that his company's gone into receivership. They think it's a complete smash. It's

goin' to take months, they say, to get things untangled. He sure left things in a mess, what I mean."

"Poor Aunt Olive!" Sara said after an appreciable pause. "Still, I've been with her long enough to know she saw very little of Uncle—the Senator. Too popular and too handsome; too many interests outside, and practically none at home. I firmly believe Aunt's nervous breakdowns were mostly on his account. She was proud because he claimed descent from Sir Thomas Wolsey, English cardinal and so on. But I don't believe Aunt Olive loved him." And she added with the restricted vision of a young person in the throes of a first romance, "I don't see how any one could love him. He certainly never appealed to me."

"Peggy did," Jess said, slightly ashamed because he had nearly forgotten her. "This will hit Peggy pretty hard."

"She's got a terrible case on an ex-lieutenant Something-or-other, that's been handlin' the Senator's private airplanes. Four planes he kep' runnin', doin' his dirty work—carryin' messages and so on. Yeah, he was a big gun, all right—till he blew up. They always do, though, 'fore they're through. The girl, she's been flyin' around with this head pilot. Lookin' for Sarky—so she said." Link cast a wistful eye toward the couch.

"Well, we glommed him and the rest of the flyin' crew, right at the ranch. Senator made a big showin' with them four planes parked down in that flat alongside the creek. Played 'em up big as his private flock of airplanes, chartered for the search. Yesterday there was a regular dust storm blowin' over their way, and so quick as we got the letter, we beat it right over to the Diamond Slash and arrested the hull kit and caboodle. All," amended Link, "except the Senator. And I'm kinda glad he did take the quick way out. Saved another big scandal in the courts."

"This Tex, that Pete spoke of—did you hear anything of him?" Jess remembered to ask a little later, as three cars arriving called Link to the door.

Link kept on going. "Yeah, we got Tex, all right. He was over there with the bunch."

Jess sat up, felt his bandaged arm, adjusted the sling—which was Sara's red bandanna—and gave her an enigmatic look.

"Well, I suppose here's where we get off. Are you going to town in those overalls—Sarky?"

"I don't mind. However, I have my riding clothes. Are you going to town, Jess?"

"Why—yes. I want to see Dad, if they'll let me. And then I'm going to get some kind of a car and go out to the ranch. Mother and Lizbeth are having a pretty tough break." Jess stood up—Sara helping him, which was entirely unnecessary but wholly delightful.

"It won't take me a minute to change. Lizbeth is much shorter than I am, but I suppose I can borrow something of hers to wear." She had not taken her arm from around his shoulder. "Or I can send your brother over after my clothes."

Jess caught his breath. "I thought—aren't you going back to your aunt?"

Sara shook her head. "I'm sure my presence would be very embarrassing to Aunt Olive—and as for Peggy—" Sara shrugged. "She's hated me ever since that first day when you and I first looked at each other."

Jess slipped his arm around her. His voice was not steady when he spoke. "Listen, Sarky girl. I can't say what I want to say—you understand, don't you? You heard what's happened to the JR; plastered with a mortgage, and I'll have my work cut out to save it. I know that. So I can't—"

"You heard what happened to me, didn't you? Those darned millions you objected to are—dumped in the lake, as it were." She looked at him with a warm glow in her face, in her golden-brown eyes. "Should I go jump in the lake too?"

Evidently she shouldn't. Fully five minutes after that, Link opened the living-room door for the second time—just a crack, quickly closed again—and went to find his mother.

"Ma, you'll have to go in there and tell them darn kids we're ready to go. Hell of a time to start pettin'!"

He did not recover his usual good spirits until late that evening, when he held the sedan door from the outside, waiting for a last word with Jess and Sara before he closed it and let them go.

"Well, so long, kids. Make yoreselves easy about things here in town; me and Job'll look after Dave's interests." He

started to close the door and thought of something else. "Oh—Jess or no Jess, you an' me are goin' to have that bee hunt next fall, ain't we, Sara?"

"I should say we are!" said Sara in her happiest shady-brook voice.

"That's a promise?"

"That's a promise."

"We'll be married before then," Jess stated significantly.

"A promise is a promise. Drive on, feller."

He closed the door with a decisive slam and watched the sedan slide out from the curb. Through the rear window he saw a copper-red head and a brown head lean together. Link pushed his big hat farther back on his head, thrust his hands deep into his pockets and turned away with a lonesome look in his diffident brown eyes.

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

hyphenation, spelling and grammar have been preserved as in the original

Page 88, dozens of time ==> dozens of times

Page 167, door-step ==> doorstep [Ed. for consistency]

[The end of *Trails Meet* by B. M. Bower]