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# ***TRAILING TROUBLE***

*An adventure-mystery  
about a young game  
warden, his pinto  
pony, and Smoky,  
the dog with  
"a nose for trouble."*

*By Jim Kjelgaard*

Holiday House, New York

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*FOR EDITH SCHOLL*

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# CHAPTER I

## HORSE THIEF

When Tom Rainse awakened, dawn was just breaking. Tom lay in his dew-wet sleeping bag, still half asleep, but uneasily aware that something was wrong. At last he stirred, realizing what was wrong and, at the same time, knowing that it was not serious. Smoky was gone.

Of late, Smoky, Tom's big dog, half Plott hound and half bloodhound, had taken to prowling by himself. Tom suspected that he had a sweetheart somewhere, probably one of Bill Tolliver's pack. Last night Tom had tied him with a rope, but this morning the rope was neatly chewed in half and there was no evidence of Smoky. Well, when he was good and ready he would come back, find Tom's trail, and follow it.

Tom yawned, savoring the last few seconds of warmth and comfort before crawling out into the wet, cheerless morning. Then he crept unwillingly out of his sleeping bag, drew his boots on, tilted his battered hat on his head, and took his hunting knife from its sheath. He shaved the wet outer bark from a pine faggot and discarded the bark. Then he peeled down the dry inner portion of the stick until he had a handful of shavings. Laying them on the sleeping bag to keep them dry, he chopped firewood with a hand axe.

He laid a foundation of broken sticks, placed his tinder on them, and lighted it. Carefully he put smaller sticks on top, saw them catch fire, and added more wood. When the fire was blazing to suit him, he opened his pack, took out a skillet, a knife and fork, and an empty tin can. Ramming a crotched stick into the ground near the fire, he filled the can at a nearby spring, placed a generous handful of ground coffee in it, and hung it on the crotched stick to boil. From his pack he took ham, jelly, bread, and butter.

Yesterday, when he had set out on this patrol, there had been a variety of sarcastic comments from Buck Brunt, his fellow game warden. Any man who couldn't live off the country, Buck had said, was a fancy-pants who should take his out-of-doors in city parks. What was the matter with his hardihood? What had happened to the old pioneering spirit? If a man was too dumb to catch a few trout, and broil them on sticks, he could always scare up a mess of wild onions and June berries. If he couldn't do that much, he had no business going into the woods.

Tom smiled as he ate his ham from the skillet and drank hot coffee out of the tin can. Buck, true to his red hair and hair-trigger temper, was again yearning for violent action. Now that they had broken up the Black Elk's poaching ring, about all that remained was an occasional routine patrol like the one Tom was now on. He finished his breakfast, scrubbed his can and skillet in the sandy spring, and repacked them. Putting out his fire, he went to bring Pete in.

Last night Tom had slept high on a timbered mountain where there was not much good grazing, so he had staked his black and white pinto about two hundred yards from the more sheltered place where he himself had slept. Pete wouldn't mind the cold, and it was important that the tough little horse have all he could eat. It was thirty miles back to camp, and Tom wanted to get there early.

He broke through the thick stand of quaking aspens that shielded the meadow, then stopped in his tracks.

The meadow was there, and so was the picket pin to which Pete had been staked, but the black and white horse was not. Tom grunted his disgust. He should have been more careful; the pinto had broken picket ropes before. Pete was an exceptionally good mountain horse, fast and rugged, but he was also capricious. If he felt like working, he would come to Tom at once. If not, he would merely kick up his heels and run farther away.

Tom glanced at the circle of cropped grass around the picket pin. It was a wide circle, and closely eaten, therefore Pete had not broken away until early this morning. Perhaps he was still within hearing distance. Tom put his fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly. For a moment he waited, and when nothing happened he whistled again. There was no response. Tom walked to the picket pin, and stopped to pull it up. Anger flared within him.

The picket rope had not been broken, but cut!

For a moment he stared unbelievably at the clean break that could have been made only by a sharp knife. Some of the mountain men would steal horses, or anything else they could get their hands on, but it was highly improbable that any of

them had stolen Pete. He was too well known as Tom's horse, and no mountain horse rustlers could hope to keep him even if they did steal him. Besides, before Tom bought him, Pete had been known far and wide as an outlaw. And even now, although almost anyone might lead Pete, no one else except Tom could ride him.

Tom got down on hands and knees to study the ground. Pete had been trampling on it most of the night, and the only tracks Tom could find had been left by the horse. Carefully, still on hands and knees, he circled while he continued to watch the grass closely. He reached down to pick up a long piece of thread.

It was heavy blue thread, of a type that might well have unraveled from a pair of blue levis. Unfortunately levis were worn by almost everyone in the mountains. Tom examined the thread carefully, then put it into his pocket. It did not tell him anything, but it was all he had.

Pete had been in the meadow most of the night; the closely eaten grass was proof of that. Probably he had been gone an hour or two at the most, but an hour was a long start when Tom would have to trail the horse thief. Meanwhile the rustler, if he led Pete and didn't try to ride him, could be putting more distance between himself and pursuit. Tom strode back to camp.

Smoky had not yet returned. Obviously he had left camp before Pete had been stolen; otherwise he would have scented the rustler and given warning of his presence. The big, smoke-colored dog had a bloodhound's miraculous sense of smell. Although he would not hunt game, he was unexcelled as a man-hunter, and Tom had known him to wind a man a quarter of a mile away, and to follow a hundred-hour-old trail. If Smoky were only here now, trailing the horse thief would be no problem at all.

Reaching camp, Tom took his rifle out of its waterproof canvas cover, inspected it carefully, and leaned it against a tree. He slipped a small can of oil into his pocket, for the rifle was sure to get wet and need attention before he could return it to the sheath. He put a bit of cloth, to be used for cleaning patches, in the same pocket, and stuck half a dozen fishhooks through his hat band. Then he coiled a hank of fish line in his shirt pocket, hung axe and knife on his belt, made sure he had waterproof matches, and took a final look around the camp.

Everything was all right. Pete's saddle and bridle hung on the same limb over which he had draped them last night. His sleeping bag he hung over another limb, making sure that it was loosely spread. Rain would penetrate stretched fabric when it would only wet the surface of any loose material. Tom knelt beside the pack, took an extra box of cartridges, and tied the pack to another branch.

He was ready. Any camp he made tonight would satisfy even Buck's idea of roughing it. If he ate at all, he would eat what he took from the woods or waters, and if he slept warmly it would be beside a fire. It was better that way, even if he went cold and hungry, because if he hoped to get Pete back he must travel fast and light. Tom returned to the picket pin where he had left Pete last night.

It would be a slow trail and a difficult one, but it had to have a beginning—and an end. When he came to that end, Tom decided grimly, there would be the sort of reckoning he wanted with the man who had stolen his horse. Eyes to the ground, he circled the picket pin. Then he found what he was looking for.

It was a single imprint of a horse's hoof, in a muddy place beyond the distance that the picket rope might have reached. Marking it carefully, Tom swung along in the direction the track pointed. Continuing to study the ground, using the single track he had already found as a starting point, he sought more sign.

As soon as he found out a bit more, he might be able to travel faster. But a lot depended on the man who had stolen Pete. A greenhorn, after stealing a horse, might be expected to take the most direct route away from its former owner. An experienced rustler, or mountain man, would make every effort to hide his getaway route. Trying to outguess the thief before he discovered the getaway pattern could mean losing the trail entirely. Tom moved slowly in what he thought was the right direction. He stopped, frowned, and walked back down the slope.

Something had registered when he passed a blackberry bush, but it had not registered strongly. He returned because, after he was well past, it seemed that there had been something unnatural about the bush. Stooping, he pulled it out of the ground.

It came easily, slipping from its bed into his hand, and when he examined the end he saw that the bush had been sliced

with a sharp knife and thrust into place to cover another horse track. The leaves were still fresh and green, not yet wilted in the cool morning air, but the bush had leaned at a slightly unnatural angle. Tom held the bush in his hand for a moment, thinking, then cast it aside.

Obviously the rustler was no amateur, but a man who knew how to hide his trail. Probably he had had reason to hide other trails, and was accustomed to working outside the law. For a moment more Tom stood still, a look of annoyance on his face.

Tracking Pete down would be a slow job, and of all the times Smoky might choose to be away, this was the most inconvenient. The big hound was a superb man-hunter, and would make short work of this fresh trail. But wishing would not bring Smoky back. He would return when he had finished whatever business had taken him from camp. Meanwhile, to wait for him would be to lose valuable time.

Tom lined up the two horse tracks he had found, then struck at a fast walk toward the top of the mountain. On a little bench, well beneath the summit, he found a row of hoof marks leading across a rain-softened meadow. Beside them were the tracks of a man. They headed directly up the mountain, but now Tom walked very carefully.

The line of tracks was too plain, too inviting, and too easy. No horse thief, so careful to hide his trail in the beginning, would expose it like this without good reason. Tom left the bench and ascended the little pitch that led to the next one. He stopped again. To the left was soft ground, ahead the ground was covered with scuffed, wet leaves, but to the right an almost solid bed of granite boulders made a stone path that stretched indefinitely among the trees.

Tom hesitated, and murmured under his breath as a distant clap of thunder echoed. Last night's rain was not yet finished, evidently, and a heavy downpour such as often deluged the mountains would go a long way toward wiping out whatever trail existed. He would have to hurry. On sudden impulse Tom turned right and picked his way over the granite boulders.

He did not look at them as he stepped from stone to stone. Pete, who did not know what it was to travel a paved road, was never shod. It was useless to look for sign on the boulders because a shoeless horse would leave no indication of his passage across them. Tom walked as fast as he could.

Thunder blasted again, and again, nearer each time. Brilliant flashes of lightning struck through the gloomy morning and, overhead, rolling black clouds surged like an angry sea. Tom went on at a dogtrot, and emerged from the end of the boulders into a little open meadow. He stopped, sure now that his guess had been the correct one.

The meadow, like all mountain meadows, had been carpeted with grass and spotted with alpine flowers. But now it was chewed into black mud. Flowers were trampled, and broken bushes and shrubs trailed shattered branches toward the ground. As Tom read the signs, a grim satisfaction rose within him.

The thief, whoever he was, had considered himself far enough from Tom's camp to try riding Pete. Doubtless he had made a hackamore of the picket rope and had tried to control the horse with it.

Tom looked again at the destruction in the meadow. Pete had never been ridden by anybody except Tom, and obviously still didn't intend to be. Almost the entire meadow was churned up, and every bush bordering it had at least one broken branch. Pete had shown his mettle.

But so, Tom admitted, had the man who had tried to ride him. Pete wore neither saddle nor bridle, and anyone who could stay on his bare back, with only a hackamore as control, long enough to let Pete do as much damage as he had done, was a horseman in every sense of the word. The fact that he had managed to hold onto Pete after he was thrown, provided additional evidence that he knew his way around horses. A tenderfoot would have let Pete go.

Lightning appeared almost continuously now, and each brilliant flash was closely followed by its blast of thunder. Rain began to fall.

It came in great, sluicing sheets that pounded the earth and beat savagely at the trees. Tom buttoned his coat around his neck, and faced grimly into the storm. He knew several things about the horse thief now.

He was not a tenderfoot, a casual passer-by who had seen a good horse and impulsively stolen it. He knew how to ride and he was not a stranger to these mountains. But he had not been in them recently. If he had been, he would have known about Pete. Every native of the mountains knew the little horse, and that only Tom could ride him.

With painful slowness, Tom worked out the trail. The horse thief, knowing well that he had left a plain story in the glade for anyone who had eyes to read it, had resorted to cunning again when he left. A cluster of broken columbine showed Tom where he had swerved from the bench to strike across the mountain's summit. Tom followed, and as soon as he knew definitely that the thief had led Pete over the summit, he left the trail and ran.

Panting from the steep climb, he stood on top of the mountain and stared ahead. Keen disappointment stabbed him. The mountain top commanded an unsurpassed view of other peaks. One behind the other, they stretched in a seemingly endless panorama of almost virgin wilderness. It was glorious, unspoiled country, one of the few such places remaining. Ordinarily it thrilled Tom, but now he was disappointed because the rain was still falling furiously. He could see the peaks, but sheets of rain fell like dense mist into the valleys and obscured everything there. Tom had hoped to see Pete on one of the adjacent hillsides. On a normal day, his white color would have shown plainly, but today the rain hid everything except the slopes' indistinct outlines. Tom stood uncertainly.

The horse thief must have an objective, but just what was it? What was he doing in the mountains at all? Why had he kept a horse which he could not ride? Tom shifted the rifle from his left hand to his right, and bent his head against the slashing rain. Those were all questions that must be answered, but where would he find the answers?

Since he did not know the rustler's destination, and the man had held to no set pattern, Tom did not dare get off the trail or make any assumptions as to where the other man might be going. He must follow exactly, and the heavy rain was making that harder every minute. Slowly, letting nothing escape his probing eyes, he followed Pete's trail down the slope. Sometimes pausing several minutes to determine whether a pile of scuffed leaves had been left by the rain or a horse's hoof, occasionally back-tracking to straighten the trail out, he clung doggedly to it. He knew that the thief, leading Pete, could travel faster than he and that irritated him. He could do nothing about it, for to go plunging blindly on would only result in failure.

Twice more he found where the thief had attempted to ride the stolen horse, and where he had been thrown from Pete's back. Both times he had gone on, leading the horse. Maybe he had come close to riding Pete, and thought he would ride him if he tried again, or perhaps he hoped Pete would get used to him. Tom furrowed his brows. If the rustler could get a saddle and bridle somewhere, he might be able to ride Pete. Certainly he had already proved that he was a good horseman.

Then the heavy rains stopped, the sky cleared, and a short time later, twilight fell.

Curbing his impatience, Tom stopped beside a little stream that bubbled down a valley. It would be futile to go on at night; he had had difficulty enough following the trail by daylight. However, the thief could not travel at night either if he hoped to hide his trail. Tom looked sourly up the valley.

He had had to work the trail out and doubtless the rustler had increased his lead. But tomorrow was another day and a lot of things could happen. Sooner or later the rustler was sure to consider himself safe, and when he did he would grow more careless. Also, it was certain that, if he kept on, he would meet some mountaineer, and a lot of the mountain dwellers were Tom's fast friends. If the thief met somebody like old Bill Tolliver, it would be to his sorrow. Tom's friends, finding Pete in the possession of a stranger, were apt to shoot first and ask questions afterward.

Tom set about making camp. With the night, the cold had again returned. Tom cut a pile of firewood, enough to last until morning, and built a small fire against the face of a large boulder. Heat, reflected back from the boulder, would keep him warm. He drank from the stream, then kicked a clod of dirt aside and picked up half a dozen wiggling worms he found beneath it. Taking a hook from his hat band, he attached it to the fishing line and baited it.

Almost as soon as the hook hit the water, a trout struck. Tom lifted out a fat, nine-inch brook trout, and cast again. He had not stopped for lunch and was ravenous, so he fished until half a dozen trout lay on the stream bank beside him. Tom cleaned them, cut some green sticks, impaled a trout on each, and thrust the sticks into the earth near the fire. He licked his lips in anticipation. Unseasoned fish, under normal circumstances, were not the best of fare. But hunger was indeed a wonderful sauce, and flavoring that seemed necessary when it was available was not needed when hunger was intense.

Tom walked into the forest, found a patch of leeks, and grubbed a dozen out of the ground. He peeled off the outer layer and ate them with his fish. Hunger satisfied, he leaned quietly against the boulder.

By the fire's leaping light he set about cleaning his rifle, wiping all the outer metal parts thoroughly so that they would



not rust, leaving a thin film of oil on them, and using a piece of fish line to pull an oily patch through the bore. In the mountains, when a man was alone, his rifle was his best and sometimes his only friend.

Suddenly Tom shoved six cartridges back into the rifle's magazine, and slipped away from the fire.

He had sensed, rather than heard or saw, something coming. Under the circumstances, it had better receive due attention. More than one man who otherwise might have lived to a ripe old age had failed to get out of a campfire's light. Tom lay still in the darkness, the rifle across his arm and his hand on the lever. What he did next depended upon what happened next, but he was ready to shoot if necessary.

A shadow moved against the fire, there was the bubbling sound of heavy jowls working, and the shadow halted. A second later the thing hurled itself across the intervening space straight at Tom. He grasped his rifle in one hand.

"Smoky!" he said delightedly.

The big hound stretched full length beside him, panting audibly and thumping his tail like a wind-hammered shrub. He sighed heavily, and laid his huge head on Tom's lap. Smoky had been on a long journey, clear back to old Bill Tolliver's house, to see how things were there. He had run half the night and all day, and now he was supremely happy to be back with his beloved master. All resentment forgotten, Tom tickled his ears.

"You big mutt," he crooned. "You useless old hammerhead. You would be away just when you were needed, wouldn't you?"

Smoky wagged his tail faster, and licked Tom's hand with his big tongue. He wriggled a bit closer, and grunted happily. Tom continued to massage his ears gently. It was good to have the great hound back with him.

"Bet you're hungry," he murmured. "I'll just bet you could eat. Well now, how'd you like a mess of trout? The commissary is all out of everything else!"

Smoky followed closely as Tom moved back inside the circle of light cast by the fire. He needn't fear anything now. Should an enemy come, Smoky would scent him and give warning while he was a long way from camp. With his near-miraculous power of scent, Smoky could detect a man three times as far away as the ordinary dog could.

Tom grubbed about in the dirt, scratching furrows with a sharp piece of firewood and picking up the worms he uncovered. When he had enough, he moved back to the stream and cast his baited hook. Smoky sat beside him, waiting patiently. Two minutes later, when Tom caught the first trout, Smoky ate it greedily. He ate another, and another, until he had had seven. When Tom caught the eighth, the big hound turned his head aside to signify that he had had enough. Tom disengaged the hook and returned the wriggling fish to the water, then moved back to the fire. Smoky padded closely beside him.

As Tom sat down, back against the boulder and one hand resting on Smoky's big head, an exultant little thrill gripped him.

All day long he had worked at a tremendous disadvantage. Now, with Smoky's return, the odds were again with him. The trail was only a few hours old, and despite the rain that had pounded into it, a bloodhound could still pick up the scent. Tom kept his hand on Smoky's head.

Both he and the dog had hit a long trail and both were in need of rest, but they would not require much. A few hours of sleep would suffice, then they could start out. Undoubtedly the horse thief thought himself safe. If he hadn't known Pete he wouldn't know Smoky either, and it would never occur to him that he might be trailed in the dark. If they started out shortly after midnight, Tom decided, they should gain back all the time he had lost and perhaps even surprise the thief in his camp.

His head pillowed on a block of wood, Smoky curled beside him, Tom lay down in the welcome heat cast by the fire. A woodsman who had often slept this way, he had no trouble sleeping now. Smoky edged a bit closer, and put his big head across Tom's stomach. Drowsily Tom reached out in the darkness to caress him.

He did not know what time it was when he awakened, but the fire had flickered to a few glowing coals and the resulting chill had ended slumber. Tom pitched a few more sticks on the fire and watched blue flames creep around them. The fire

flared, and Tom went back to sleep. He replenished his fire again, and a third time. The fourth time he was awakened by the cold, he got stiffly to his feet.

The sky was completely clear, and filled with stars. The moon was a thin crescent, ready to sink behind a peak. Tom shook the final remnants of sleep away and picked up his rifle. There was no way of telling exactly what time it was, but he guessed it to be somewhere between midnight and one o'clock. He kicked dirt over the embers of his fire, then, taking the fish line from his pocket, he doubled it and tied one end to Smoky's collar. The other end he held in his hand.

"All right," he said softly. "Hunt him up."

Smoky wagged an amiable tail and snuffled at Tom's hand. Then, slowly, he went directly to the trail that led up the valley. He had known of the strange scent as soon as he came into camp, and stored it away with the maze of other scents within the recesses of his brain. Now he knew he was supposed to find the man who had left the trail.

Smoky swung up the valley, traveling just fast enough to keep the fish line taut. This was the way he was supposed to hunt, and he knew it. Man-hunting hound and master must never be separated. Should the dog get too far ahead, he probably would run into serious trouble. Most fugitives knew bloodhounds, and were aware of the fact that there was no escape from them. They would take any measures to thwart such deadly pursuit.

Straight up the valley Smoky went, and over the saddle at its head. He curved and twisted, over rocks and through thickets, so Tom knew that the fugitive was still trying to hide his trail. Had Tom been forced to work it out by himself, he would have needed hours to cover the distance Smoky could lead him in half an hour.

They dipped into another valley, then angled up a mountain slope. Despite the precautions the fugitive was taking, he had traveled fast, and a grudging admiration arose within Tom. Obviously he had pitted himself against a first-class woodsman.

Dawn broke slowly, and a half hour afterward they found the horse thief's camp. It must have been abandoned very recently, but the rustler furnished further proof that he was an experienced woodsman. The fire's dead ashes were thoroughly soaked with water.

Leaving the camp, they broke over the crest of a low hill on a course that led toward a mountain trail that Tom knew. If the thief had taken that, he was heading deep into the wilderness.

Smoky stopped suddenly, and bristled. He looked inquiringly around, while a low growl bubbled in his throat. Tom sank to hands and knees, crept cautiously toward the trail, and hid himself in a laurel thicket. Not moving a muscle, Smoky crouched beside him.

Three minutes later a man on a smart black horse appeared. Behind him, on a lead rope, was Pete.

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## CHAPTER II

### TWO STRANGERS

The stranger rode easily, as though he belonged in the saddle and was thoroughly accustomed to horses. His mount seemed a part of him, an extension of his own body and muscles, and so fine was his control of the horse that he had to pay almost no attention to it.

Perfectly motionless, but ready for instant action, Tom studied the horse and rider as they approached.

The black horse was a fine animal, lacking the rugged blockiness of the local mountain horses. He had the arching neck and small head of a thoroughbred. His legs were slender, his hooves small and dainty. But he was not a show horse. There was that about his ribs and chest that bespoke endurance, and the black handled himself very well on this rough trail. Obviously he had been in such places before. Tom turned his attention to the rider.

He was, Tom decided, in his early fifties. But there was about him none of the paunchiness and flabbiness which are often the mark of middle-aged men who do sedentary work. His age showed in his lined, weather-beaten face, and in the graying hair that lay neatly beneath an almost white sombrero. His feet rested lightly in the stirrups, and one hand barely gripped the reins. The other was nearly concealed by the full sleeve of a light jacket. The man wore riding trousers that were neatly tucked into riding boots, and a white shirt graced by a black bow tie.

Tom looked his astonishment. The strange rider fitted no category with which he was familiar. He was apparently at home in the mountains, but he looked as though he would be at home anywhere, as though he were a man able to grace a campfire or a formal dinner.

Still, he had Pete, and anybody who had Tom's horse had also better have a plausible explanation.

Tom waited until the stranger was only five yards away, then walked into the trail. Smoky walked with him, and pressed against Tom's side to await the next move. The big hound had lived amid violence so much that, when a stranger approached, he never decided what to do until the moment came to do it. Like Tom, he must make snap decisions and they must be the right ones.

Tom lifted the rifle so that the stock was beneath his elbow and the muzzle pointed at the stranger. His right hand played about the breech, ready to cock and shoot the rifle should that be necessary. The rider reined his black horse to a halt, and Pete nickered gladly when he recognized Tom. There was a moment's silence.

"Good morning."

The stranger's voice was the pleasant, well-modulated one of an educated man. He sat easily on his horse, with no trace of fear or alarm about him. Yet he must know that people who blocked mountain trails might not have the friendliest of intentions. He was, Tom decided, a man who knew how to take care of himself.

"That led horse belong to you?" Tom said quietly.

"Unfortunately, no. I found him wandering by himself about two miles back. The picket rope was dragging from his neck. I think he must have been staked, and broke his rope."

"I see."

It was an honest explanation. Besides, the stranger who sat his black horse so well could not be the horse thief, since he was already mounted. Evidently the rustler had tried to ride Pete again, been thrown, and Pete had made good his escape. Tom lowered his rifle, and the stranger smiled.

"I cannot help wondering why you were pointing that muzzle at me. Do you do that to every rider you find on this trail?"

"Only to special ones."

"In future, you should make a more careful choice of your victims."

The stranger raised his right hand, the one that had been concealed by the flowing sleeve, and a small pistol appeared in it. Tom gulped. He had had this man covered, but in turn, and without even knowing it, he had been covered, too. And who would have shot first had it come to shooting? Tom looked quizzically at the little pistol.

"Does that thing really shoot?"

With a quick motion, the stranger raised his arm. The pistol barked, and ten yards away a bit of fungus growing on a tree shattered. Tom looked more respectfully at the rider, knowing that he had selected his target and hit it. Anyone who could shoot like that was a bad man to start an argument with. The stranger spoke again.

"What's really on your mind, young man?"

"That's my horse you're leading."

"You have proof of that?"

Tom's anger rose, but subsided again. The stranger was within his rights. Anybody could claim a horse, and almost anybody, if he thought he could get away with it, would be glad to acquire a horse as fine as Pete.

"He was stolen from my camp yesterday morning," Tom said. "I've been trailing him ever since."

"Plausible, but hardly more than circumstantial evidence. Have you any other proof to offer?"

"Yes."

Tom walked up to Pete, and the little horse arched his neck and snuffled happily. He bent his head to sniff noses with Smoky, then began to nibble Tom's arm with his lips. The stranger smiled.

"That's what I meant, and you've proved your point, worse luck! I was hoping nobody would claim him."

Tom grinned. "Pete would be of no use to you."

"And why not?"

"You couldn't ride him."

The stranger sat erect, his gray eyes flashing. "Care to say that again?"

"Sure. You couldn't ride him."

With effortless ease the stranger dismounted. He came forward, and Pete tipped his ears in a friendly fashion as he let the stranger stroke his nose. Taking the picket rope, the stranger looped it around Pete's jaw, passed it over his head, and brought it down on the other side to pass it through the jaw loop. Thus he had a hackamore with two reins.

"Happy landings," said Tom, still grinning.

The stranger put one hand on Pete's back and vaulted astride. For a moment Pete stood still, waiting until the stranger had a good seat. Then his head went down and his heels went up. He kicked, and almost in the same motion he reared. Then he went sideways, twisted his body, and twisted again. Daylight showed between Pete's back and the stranger's seat. He tried to tighten his legs, but once more Pete twisted. The stranger went up and out, described a little arc, and landed in the leaves. Pete looked around to see where his rider had gone, then crowded close to Tom.

Not at all disconcerted, the stranger rose and brushed the seat of his pants.

"Quite a horse. Some time I'd like to have a go at him when he's wearing a saddle and bridle. Can *you* ride him, son?"

Tom mounted easily, and Pete stood perfectly still. Then he pranced a little, just to show that he could. Of all the men in the world, Pete wanted to carry only one, and that man was on his back now. He made a happy little circle, neck arched and hooves dancing. Tom reined him to a halt. The stranger smiled pleasantly.

"I'll definitely concede the point. He's your horse all right."

"Thanks for returning him. Now would you mind telling me just where you picked him up?"

"Not at all. About two miles down this trail. There are three small pine trees very near the trail to the west, and a stand of white birch to the east. Why do you ask?"

"Got a date with a horse thief."

"Oh! I see and I don't blame you. But it will be rough trailing."

"Not when Smoky's along."

"Man-hunter, is he?"

"The best."

"Very convenient, and I take it you're some sort of law enforcement officer." The stranger smiled and extended his hand. "So we'll know each other should we meet again, my name's Orsway, Mark Orsway."

"I'm Tom Rainse." Tom shook the extended hand. "Stick around when you get to the cabin down on Rainse's Creek and I'll see you there."

"I may do that. Good luck."

The man who called himself Mark Orsway mounted his black and started down the trail. Tom swung Pete back. The little horse had already hit a hard trail, but there was plenty of fire and spirit left in him. He wanted to travel, and Tom let him go at a fast trot while Smoky loped easily beside them. Coming to that place which was flanked on one side by three small pines and on the other by a stand of white birch, Tom dismounted and studied the trail.

This was it. Beyond, only one horse had walked in the trail. From here on, the tracks of two intermingled. Leading Pete, Smoky pacing at his side, Tom cut a wide circle on the east side of the trail. He found where Pete, dragging his picket rope, had emerged from the forest and presumably been picked up by Orsway.

With no man to hide it, Pete's trail through the forest was an easy one to back-track. Besides, here and there were many places in which Tom did not even have to look for tracks. A horse, having open forest or an elk path to walk on, naturally would not crash through thickets or brush. A man who knew horses could almost tell by studying the brush where they were likely to travel. Two miles along the back trail, Tom emerged in a little meadow.

It was now a familiar scene: a small mountain meadow carpeted with grass and flowers, but plowed and chewed by the hooves of a plunging horse. It had to be the place where the rustler had made his final attempt to ride Pete. Leaving only enough for the hackamore, Tom cut the picket rope. He slipped it under Smoky's collar, mounted Pete, and directed the big hound quietly.

"All right. Hunt him up."

For a moment the tawny hound stood still, snuffing heavily while he got his bearings. He started out slowly, across the meadow and into the forest beyond. Smoky looked back once, and Tom waved him on. The tawny hound broke into a trot. Pete matched the pace. A very smooth-running horse, Pete at a trot or gallop was as steady as a rowboat.

The trail wound through trees and brush. Smoky was running with his head up now, taking his scent from shrubbery to which odors clung. He never used his thunderous, rolling bay on the trail, and that was now a distinct advantage. A noisy dog telegraphed his whereabouts to whatever he was chasing, but not Smoky.

They ascended a ridge, cut down the other side, and swung back. Tom exulted. Yesterday the rustler had had things all his own way. Today the situation was reversed. No man on foot could stay ahead of a man on a horse for very long. They should overtake the fugitive before too much time had passed, and Smoky was certain to give warning when they came near. There was no chance of being bushwhacked as long as the big hound ran ahead.

Suddenly, to the west, a rifle cracked. Tom stopped Smoky gently, with a little tug on the rope, and reined Pete to a halt. He looked in the direction from which the shot had come. It told him nothing, but Tom marked the spot. Nobody had any business using a rifle at this time of year because no hunting season was open, but some of the mountaineers still shot

whatever they cared to whenever they pleased. Later, he would investigate the shot. However, he had no time now.

"Go on," Tom told Smoky.

They climbed a slope, cut through a grove of huge pines, and started down the other side. Tom marveled. Whoever the horse thief was, he knew how to travel. Only a man of great endurance could have stayed ahead of Smoky this long. Certainly the horse thief kept himself in good physical condition.

Coming among the open trees, Pete broke into a canter and Smoky increased his pace accordingly. Suddenly the trail took a right-angle turn and Tom pulled up, puzzled.

A dirt road, one of the very few roads in the mountains, cut across the side of this mountain. North, it led past Rainse's Creek, and the cabin Tom shared with Buck Brunt, into the mountain town of Hilldale. South, it wended its way across mountains into the smaller mountain community of Bigelow's Cut. Far to the west of the road, accessible only by trails, the Gistache River snarled its foaming way through virgin white pine, the finest stand of untouched pine left in the country. Tom's frown deepened.

The rustler had already proven that he was no fool and no tenderfoot. Furthermore, though it was true that outlanders in increasing numbers were coming to the mountains to hunt, fish, or simply because they liked mountains, not many came this far back. Anybody except a native would draw attention and be marked. Why was the rustler swinging back toward a road, where he risked discovery? Resuming the trail, Tom got his answer.

Coming to the road, Smoky loped straight across it and into forest on the other side. The rustler had no intention of lingering near the road; he merely wished to cross it so he could get into timber again. He had edged through the forest and onto a trail that led to the Gistache region. Tom touched Pete with his heels, and the little horse stepped briskly out.

The Gistache, noted for its fighting rainbow trout and its unique beauty, was in the deep wilderness. Even a bloodhound might have difficulty in trailing any fugitive able to reach the river, and Tom wanted to overtake his man before he got there. Ordinarily he would have had no worries; the Gistache was almost a day's ride away. But he was chasing a man whose woodcraft matched his own.

Running ahead, Smoky came to a halt so abruptly that Pete had difficulty in stopping before he ran the hound down. Smoky stood still, head up and tail stiff behind him, as he tested the wind. The big hound turned to look at his master.

Tom dismounted cautiously, and watched Smoky. When he snapped his fingers, the tawny hound glided in to him and stood beside his master. He remained alert as he continued to test the winds. Tom led Pete off the trail into a thick copse of young hemlocks whose needle-clothed branches formed an effective shield, and tied him out of sight of the trail.

Pete stamped restless feet as Tom shortened the rope on Smoky's collar and drew the big hound very close to him. Rifle ready for instant action, never taking his eyes from Smoky, he soft-footed out of the thicket and back toward the trail. Keeping one or more trees between himself and anything that might lie ahead, he tried to work out a practical plan of action.

Evidently the rustler knew that he was being chased, and that the odds were against his escape. Therefore, Tom guessed, he had stopped to lay an ambush which Smoky had detected. Now, without exposing himself, Tom tried to locate his enemy.

He stopped behind a big tree, and flicked an arm around the trunk. There was no response, no shot thudded into the tree's opposite side. Either the rustler hadn't seen him, or he was too smart to fall for any such ruse. Tom looked intently at Smoky.

The tawny hound was still tense, sniffing, and he kept his nose turned toward the same place. Lowering himself to the ground, Tom peered around the tree. He saw only more trees, and bit his lower lip perplexedly. Undoubtedly the rustler was lurking behind one of the trees he saw, but which one? It took only one shot to kill, and probably the rustler would not hesitate to shoot. Tom dared not expose himself.

Reaching down, he picked up a stick and snapped it between his fingers. Tensely he waited for any reaction, and when none was forthcoming he crawled backward, away from the tree. Smoky, still interested in the grove they were leaving, paced reluctantly by his side. Tom circled among the trees, keeping Smoky beside him, and cut around so that he

approached the same grove from the back. Carefully, watching Smoky all the time so that he could not be surprised, he stalked from tree to tree toward the place where Smoky indicated the rustler was hiding. Then, finally, Tom peered furtively around a tree trunk and saw his quarry.

He was a tall, thin man dressed in a soft gray shirt, black trousers thrust into high boots, and a gray hat that perched crookedly on his head. He was plastered close to the tree trunk, now and again peering around it at the place where, he supposed, Tom hid. Tom stared in amazement.

Presumably the rustler had been armed; somebody had certainly fired a rifle very near this place. Yet the man behind the tree had no visible firearms, nor any weapon at all except a short hunting knife which he held in his right hand. Tom stepped out from behind his tree.

"All right," he said clearly. "You can drop the knife."

The man whirled, surprise and dismay written across his thin face and showing in his eyes. His fingers tightened around the knife and he took a forward step. Tom's voice sharpened.

"I said drop it!"

Slowly the fingers unclenched and the knife dropped to the forest floor. The stranger stood still but, though he seemed uncertain of himself, there was no trace of panic about him. Tom's astonishment mounted.

He had definitely determined that the rustler was a mountain man, but the stranger who awaited him was not. Even though he was dressed in outing clothes, there was a certain air that stamped him as an outlander. Tom hid his feelings. Lots of people who didn't look the part were capable of stealing horses and of laying a hard trail afterward.

"Why not finish your job?" the stranger said. His voice had the polish which only formal education can impart.

"What job?" Tom said shortly.

"You have a good open shot. You can't possibly miss."

Tom snorted. "I'm not in the habit of shooting people. Even horse thieves."

"Horse thieves?"

"It's a good act," Tom said. "But it won't work. And I suppose this is the place to tell you that anything you say may be used against you."

"Are you arresting me?"

"You guessed it."

"Are you an officer of some kind?"

"I'm a game warden."

"Well, good heavens!" There was obvious relief in the other's voice. "If you had mentioned that in the first place, we might have avoided a lot of melodrama!"

"What are you talking about?" Tom snapped.

"This slinking around behind trees. When I suspected you were coming—I heard your horse—I also suspected that you had the same unpleasant habit as an earlier passer-by on this trail. He shot at me."

"Shot at you?"

"Yes." The stranger removed his hat and pointed at a hole through the crown. "He didn't do so badly, either, considering the fact that he seemed to be in a hurry. What is going on here, anyhow?"

Tom wavered, trying to determine the joker in this situation. There seemed to be none, anyhow none that could be detected at once, but there were many things that didn't tally. He had been tracking a hill man, he was sure, and the

person who stood before him was certainly not a mountaineer. He was too educated, too well-dressed, and he lacked the hill man's mannerisms. But just who was he, what was he doing here, and what, if anything, did he have to do with the man Tom had been chasing?

"Maybe you should do some talking, Mister," Tom said pointedly.

"I've nothing to hide. My name's Lashton, Alex Lashton. I went into the Gistache to do some fishing. Only I didn't do any."

"Why not?"

The man who called himself Alex Lashton shrugged. "I got into the Gistache yesterday. Ten minutes after I started making camp on the river, one of those house-sized boulders that are stuck all over the cliffs rolled past within five feet of me. I went to gather firewood, and nearly stepped on a six-foot rattler. That was two near-misses in half an hour, and I thought it was all. But an hour later, another boulder did its best to smash my camp and me with it. I started back then. The Gistache's too jinxed for me. Finally, half an hour ago, this character came trotting up the trail and took a shot at me as he passed."

"Did you know him?"

"I had never seen him before, and hope I never do again."

Tom's head whirled with the many riddles that confronted him. Who had really stolen Pete? Orsway? Lashton? The man who, if Lashton was telling the truth, had shot at him? *Was* Lashton telling the truth? As Lashton had said, what was going on here, anyway?

"Well," Tom said, "as long as you're going out anyhow, Mr. Lashton, let's walk together. I want you to meet and talk with my partner, Buck Brunt."

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## CHAPTER III

### COLD TRAIL

Alex Lashton retrieved his pack from the thicket where he had left it when he hid, and swung it to his shoulders with practiced ease. As he settled it comfortably on his shoulders, Tom noted with interest that the pack had not been made up by any greenhorn. It was not too heavy, and its weight was properly distributed. Two fly rods were lashed to the back. Lashton turned to Tom.

"All set now."

"We don't have far to go," Tom assured him.

Tom said nothing more, but he was doing a lot of thinking. Alex Lashton, to all outward appearances, was just what he said he was. There were still things going on that should not be happening, things game wardens should know about. Maybe Lashton knew more than he admitted about the rustler. Or about Orsway, for that matter. Tom fretted because he had not also detained Mark Orsway, or at least made a definite arrangement to see him again. Still, he and Buck should be able to find Orsway if they needed him.

Pete nickered a glad greeting when Tom approached, and nibbled Tom's jacket with his lips.

"Looks like a good horse," Lashton observed. "Do you always ride him with just a hackamore and no saddle?"

"No," Tom grinned. "My saddle and gear are in the hills. I cached them when somebody swiped Pete from my camp. I just got him back this morning, and I've been on the rustler's trail ever since." As he mentioned the rustler, Tom glanced sharply at Lashton.

"Stealing a horse from a game warden seems rather stupid," Lashton remarked.

"We have some stupid characters in these hills," Tom agreed. "Also some sudden ones who act first and think later."

"I found that out. I assume that you were on the trail of this rustler when you ran across me?"

"That's right."

"Then there is a logical explanation for the shot, at least. The horse thief knew he was being trailed, thought I was you, and took a quick shot at me."

Tom kept his doubts to himself. Even rustlers, in spite of the fact that they might be closely pursued, did not take random shots at anybody they ran across. And any hill man would know very well the direction from which pursuit would come. Tom glanced sideways at Alex Lashton. There was something about this fisherman that needed further explanation. Maybe Buck could put his finger on it.

Leading the horse, with Smoky trotting placidly beside them, they walked down the trail and back onto the road. Alex Lashton began to perspire.

"Pete will carry your pack, Mr. Lashton," Tom offered.

"Thanks, but I'll manage."

Tom was now thoroughly convinced that Lashton had not stolen Pete. The rustler, the man he had chased, was in superb physical condition. He could have carried Lashton's pack and another like it without sweating. Satisfied on that score, Tom tried another lead.

"I met another outlander in the hills this morning. He said his name was Orsway, Mark Orsway. Ever hear of him?"

Lashton looked surprised. "I've heard of Mark Orsway and, to my sorrow, locked horns with him. Before he supposedly passed on the business to his sons, Mark Orsway was Mr. Lumber himself. What did this man look like?"

While Alex Lashton listened attentively, Tom described the black horse's rider. Lashton nodded.

"That's Mark. Retired now, he says. Giving all his time to conservation work, apparently. But he's the slickest trick there is in the lumber business. I should know, because, in a small way, I'm in it myself. Any good timber around here?"

"One of the finest stands of virgin white pine in the country is centered around the Gistache."

Alex Lashton nodded again. "I saw some of that, and it is fine. I imagine it would be hard to get out, though if there is a way Mark Orsway can find it. For their sake, I hope that whoever owns the Gistache pine has a good tight hold on it. If not, it's apt to end up as part of the Orsway interests."

"It's part of a National Forest," Tom said.

"That wouldn't bother Mark Orsway," Lashton asserted. "Don't get me wrong on that. He has his principles, but he knows all the tricks, and has a great deal of influence. Well, more power to him."

As they neared the cabin, Smoky ran ahead of them and disappeared in the timber. Pete, knowing he was returning to his comfortable stall, pranced at the end of the hackamore. When they left the road and started up the grassy trail leading to the cabin, Pete reached down to snatch mouthfuls of grass. They broke out of the forest into the clearing that surrounded the cabin and Tom saw his red-headed partner tickling Smoky's ears.

Buck straightened and came forward. To outward appearances, the red-haired warden was reserved and dignified, but Tom knew him well enough to know that he was making an effort to conceal a grin, and Tom also knew why. When he had started out with Pete, he had been equipped with a saddle, bridle, and bed roll. He was coming back with only his rifle and a hackamore, and Buck would find no end of amusement in the fact that Tom had lost more than half his outfit. When Buck spoke, his words had a double meaning.

"Hello, Tom. I see you met somebody."

"Yes." Tom grimaced at his partner as Alex Lashton stepped forward. "This is Alex Lashton, Buck Brunt. I thought Mr. Lashton might be able to clear up a few points for us."

"Glad to know you." Buck gripped the other's hand. "What needs clearing up, Tom?"

"Irregularities." Tom stressed the word he and Buck always used when they wanted to tell each other to look out for possible trouble and, at the same time, did not care to let anyone else know too much. Then he told Buck of losing Pete, of his search, and of Mark Orsway. He spoke of continuing the trail, and of meeting Lashton. Buck looked keenly at the stranger.

"How'd you get into the Gistache, Mr. Lashton?"

"I took the train to Bigelow's Cut and walked in from there."

"Yet you're going out by way of Hilldale?"

"I'm not going out. I'm on vacation and I want to spend it all in the mountains. I know there's good fishing around Hilldale, and I thought I might find conditions a bit more peaceful here than I did on the Gistache." He repeated the story of his narrow escapes, while Buck listened closely.

"Did you see anybody at all on the Gistache?"

"Nobody. There were a few old campfires and a few horse tracks. That's all."

"Have you any reason to believe that any human agency was responsible for this series of near accidents at your camp?" Buck asked in a quiet voice.

"None whatever."

"Did you get a good look at this man who shot at you?"

Lashton grinned ruefully. "He was traveling fast when I first saw him, and right after the shot *I* was traveling fast. No, I can't offer any helpful description."

"Why did you hide from Tom?"

Alex Lashton shrugged. "I thought I'd already taken enough chances, and I assumed it was the same man."

"Well, that isn't unreasonable. Sorry your fishing was messed up, but if you want to bunk with us we can direct you to some good streams around here. Once in a while you can tie into a trout almost as big as those Gistache rainbows."

"Thanks," Alex Lashton said, "but I've already decided to go down to Hilldale, get a room, and hire a guide to show me around."

"Stay and have something to eat with us, anyway."

"No, thanks. It isn't far to Hilldale, and if you're through with me, I'll be on my way."

His pack on his shoulders, Alex Lashton walked back down the trail toward the road. As soon as he was well out of sight, Tom swung curiously to Buck.

"What could you make out of him?"

Buck shrugged. "Not much to make. He's just a dude who had a run of bad luck, or got mixed up with some of our local talent, or both."

"But why would the rustler take a shot at him? Lashton was ahead of, not behind him."

"Some of these nitwits around here would shoot their own brothers just to see 'em kick. You know that."

"I can't figure it that way. There's something else up. Was it to throw Smoky off his trail?"

"You've been reading too many detective stories," Buck scoffed. "That dude's full of pipe dreams, too, with his stories of rocks and snakes chasing him. Nobody ever goes into the mountains without having a narrow escape from a grizzly or something. Otherwise, what would they have to talk about when they get home?"

"That rustler wasn't any pipe dream."

"I didn't say he was, but just because somebody pinched your horse do you have to build it up into a three-ring mystery? Meanwhile there's something else to stuff your gizzard with. Come on in."

They entered the cabin. Buck went to the littered bench which served them as a desk, picked up a letter, and thrust it at Tom. Tom glanced at the signature of Ned Williams, Chief Warden for the district in which he and Buck worked, then read:

Dear Buck:

I hope that you and that young partner of yours are able to take on a little job. Somebody with influence has been trying to make the Gistache River area into a National Park. I can't help falling right in line with the idea. There's only one Gistache, and those pines are almost the last stand of virgin white pine we have left.

I'm waiting for a complete report and will shoot it out to you as soon as I get it. The man, or men, who are working for the park idea have run into some headaches, naturally. It seems, according to reports, that it's too wild and dangerous a country ever to attract numbers of people, even if there was a road to it. The last report has to do with a couple of fishermen who went in and never came out. How about you two sauntering up there and finding out about them?

I'll keep you posted, and will come see you as soon as I can get away from this blasted desk.

Regards,  
Ned

Tom looked squarely at Buck. "Lashton's story still means nothing, eh?"

"That's right. Those two fishermen left Bigelow's Cut on the train yesterday. I checked."

"And nothing happened to them?"

"Sure!" Buck snorted. "They were attacked by bears, buffalo, wildcats, and man-eating fish! Ever know a tenderfoot that wasn't?"

Tom stared out of the window. Buck, who could plant his feet as stubbornly as any mule, had arbitrarily decided that the whole affair was too unimportant to bother with. He had to be aroused. When Tom turned toward him again his face was soberly anxious.

"I'm going to poke around a bit anyway, Buck. I can't help an idea that things as they are just don't add up. Of course I can understand your reasons for not wanting to mix in it. These birds will steal horses and apparently they'll also shoot—"

"Why, you uppity little jaybird!" Buck was on his feet and roaring before Tom had a chance to finish. "If you think I'm afraid of any bat-head that walks these mountains I'll—"

"I didn't say you were afraid!" Tom shouted.

"Yes, you did!" Now that Buck had worked himself up to the boiling point, he would simmer for a long while. "Tell me what you know—or think you know—about this rustler!"

"He didn't know about Pete or Smoky," Tom said, keeping his grin to himself, "so he hasn't been in these parts recently. But he's lived here, or spent a while here, because he knows his way around. He's not a tenderfoot; his fires and his concealed trail prove that. He's not old, or at least keeps himself in good shape, because he can travel like a wolf-scared deer."

"That couldn't be more than about half the men in the hills," Buck pointed out. "How do you propose to go about getting a line on him?"

"We might see if Bill Tolliver can help us out."

"A good idea!" Buck exclaimed. "Let's go."

"Slow down to a gallop, Buck. It's a long way over to Bill's and he won't be home now anyway. We'd best hit that trail in the morning."

"And waste the rest of the day?" Buck complained. "You want to sit here and just talk about it?"

"No. Let's go back and see what we can make out of that joker's trail."

"Okay." The redhead was spoiling for action.

They saddled their horses, Tom using an old saddle and bridle he had discarded, and started back toward the trail where Tom had met Alex Lashton. Coming to the trail, Smoky padded forward and nosed about. Slowly working the scent out, he started down the path.

Buck put his horse to a trot and Tom hurried to catch up with him. Never famous for his patience, Buck always wanted everything to happen at once. Ramming through, instead of slowly working things out, he was apt to spoil the trail entirely. Buck turned around.

"Let's go ahead so Smoky will run faster."

"Take it easy."

"Easy! We'll never get anywhere this way."

Buck brushed in ahead of Smoky. The red-haired Warden had decided for himself that the fugitive would not leave the trail, and now he wasn't even looking at it. His head was up, his rifle ready, as though he expected to see the rustler at any minute.

"Buck, wait!" Tom called.

Buck turned to look questioningly at him. Tom indicated the trail.

"He turned off here."

Buck swore. "Blast his hide! We'll pick him up!"

"Wait! Watch Smoky."

Smoky had swerved to enter some tall grass growing beside the trail. The big hound's tail wagged. He put his nose to the ground and started back in the direction from which they had come. Tom knelt to examine the grass. Again a grudging admiration, not for the fugitive, but for his woodcraft, arose within him. He had doubled back, and done it so cleverly that anything except a bloodhound would have been thrown from the trail. Tom straightened.

"Let Smoky do the trailing, Buck."

The tawny hound over-ran, stopped, re-located the scent, and cut over into unbroken forest. Tom's heart sank.

There could no longer be much doubt that the rustler knew exactly where he was going. He was heading straight for Sunken Branch Meadows, extensive grass lands that cut through the mountain forests. Reaching the meadows, Tom reined Pete to a halt. Grass lands, spotted here and there with a little grove of aspen or thorn apple trees, stretched before them. A herd of twenty horses stood warily in a clump of aspens and looked at the approaching men. The herd belonged to various mountaineers who, having too many horses, simply turned the surplus out to fend for themselves until they were again needed.

Tom knew without being told that there had been twenty-one horses. The rustler had caught one, a horse he could ride, and the trail probably would end here because only with the greatest difficulty could Smoky track a mounted man. They came to the trampled spot where the rustler had caught his horse. Tom looked disconsolately at the baffled hound and then turned to Buck.

"We're stymied."

"Yeah," the redhead admitted. "Anyway for now. We've got about as much chance of tracking him across here as a porcupine has of flying. Wish I knew where he was heading."

Tom said nothing. For a moment he studied the meadows, trying to select the fugitive's most logical escape route, and found a dozen possible ones. For the moment, at least, the rustler had eluded them. Furthermore, they hadn't the faintest clue as to his identity. From here on, the hunting would be hard. Buck spoke again.

"Got clean away, slick as a whistle. No use in hanging around here."

Side by side, followed by Smoky, they cut through the forest back to the clearing and corraled their horses. Smoky threw himself down on the porch. Fishing rod in hand, Tom walked down to the creek to catch trout for their supper. Buck, who detested anything that even smacked of household tasks, including catching the fish they ate, set to work with a scythe. He cut a clean swath of grass, raked it up, and threw it over the corral fence to the horses.

When Tom came in with trout, Buck was seated at the desk. There was a sheet of paper spread before him, a pencil in his hand, and a look of intense concentration on his face. Buck would rather ride forty miles than write a letter. While Tom busied himself at the stove, Buck tore up his sheet of paper and took another. He wrote and tore that one up, then showed his final effort to Tom.

Dear Ned:

If you know anything about a man named Mark Orsway, or another named Alex Lashton, shoot it on to us. Don't let this letter sit on your desk. Personally I think everybody's cock-eyed about the Gistache being dangerous. Those two fishermen left yesterday. But let us know more. Right now we're busy chasing a private horse rustler. Anyhow, let us know.

Regards,  
Buck

"Think he'll get the idea?" Buck asked anxiously.

"He should," Tom grinned. "You didn't exactly beat around the bush."

Buck folded the letter, put it in an envelope, and addressed it. "After we've found out what Bill knows," he announced, "I'm going in to Hilldale, and mail this and nose around. If anything's really going to happen here, you can bet your last cartridge that somebody in Hilldale will be mixed in it."

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The next morning, shortly after dawn, they were mounted and starting across the mountains that led to old Bill Tolliver's isolated cabin. Pete pranced restlessly under the spare saddle, and tried to take the unfamiliar bit in his teeth. Gently Tom restrained him.

After an hour they reached the top of the mountain and stopped to let the horses rest. Then they went on, the sure-footed horses picking a careful way along the sloping trail that led down the other side of the mountain. Far below they saw Bill Tolliver's clearing and buildings, and as they drew nearer they heard his hound pack baying. They reached the clearing and the pack swept forward.

Smoky, born to old Twig, the leader of this pack, paced serenely forward. Old Bill's were fierce hounds, accustomed to hunting the most ferocious game in the mountains, and used to fighting anything that moved. Most of them knew Smoky well enough to leave him alone, but Bill had bought a couple of new dogs since Smoky's last visit. Old Twig had speedily shown the newcomers their place in the pack, and taught them that pack members must not fight among themselves. But strange dogs were fair game.

The two raged forward, and closed on the tawny hound from opposite sides. Smoky walked lazily, disdaining to get out of their path, but when the two dogs were almost upon him he whirled and sliced with huge jaws. There was a startled yelp, and one of the would-be attackers withdrew with a slashed paw. Smoky turned to deal with the other, who decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and gave up the battle before he was hurt. Smoky wagged forward to sniff noses with a lithe young female, the same one that had drawn him away from Tom's camp the night Pete was stolen.

The cabin door opened and old Bill Tolliver came out. He was not a tall man, but he gave an instant impression of great size. Blocky as an ancient boulder, he had a mane of silver hair, and a flowing beard that spilled like a cataract across his immense chest.

When he came forward his stride was the free-swinging one of a boy.

"Tawm!" he said delightedly. "Buck! Light an' make yourselves to home!"

They dismounted, and tied their horses to Bill's porch. While the horses were lowering their heads to snatch at the grass they could reach, Mrs. Tolliver, a pleasant, even-tempered woman as ageless as Bill, came to the door.

"Land sakes!" she exclaimed. "I thought you two boys had just forgotten where the Tollivers lived! Now ain't it just grand that I picked some prime ducklings yesterday? Talk with Bill and work yourselves up an appetite!"

"We can't stay," Tom protested. "We—"

"Oh, sniff! You can too stay! Both you boys look a bit peaked from eatin' your own food! Do you good to get some real vittles into you!"

"Best not argue with mother," Bill Tolliver put in, eyes twinkling. "Where's you new saddle, Tawm?"

"Hanging in a tree, near the picket meadow on Windy Mountain. Left all my gear there, too."

"I'll be up that way in a day or two," old Bill rumbled. "Be right glad to pack 'em down for you. How come you left 'em in such a place?"

While Tom told the story, Bill Tolliver listened with grave attention.

"We figured you might know somebody who left the mountains," Tom concluded. "Somebody who doesn't much care what he does, now that he's back."

The old man rested his head in his hand, and for a while lost himself in thought. When he raised his head, he was frowning.

"I can't rightly name you anybody off-hand. I can't do it at all. Suppose you leave me ponder on it a bit, and prod around here and there? Could be I'll find something, or think of somebody."

"That'll be fine," Tom said.

Buck nodded agreement. Both understood. Old Bill had no intention of accusing anybody until he had proof. When he came up with a suggestion, if at all, they could then be reasonably certain of putting their finger on the thief who had stolen Pete and shot at Alex Lashton. It was as much as they had expected to get.

They passed a pleasant hour talking with Bill and looking at the skin of a huge bear Bill and his hounds had killed up in the mountains. Then, with real appetites, they did complete justice to the delicious meal Mrs. Tolliver had prepared. There was roast duckling, its skin cooked to a golden crisp and the meat so tender it almost melted in their mouths, mealy baked potatoes, salad from vegetables grown in Bill's own garden, flaky apple pie, and endless cups of fragrant coffee such as no man will ever learn to make. Then, bidding good-bye to the Tollivers, they hit the trail to Hilldale.

Buck rode defiantly when they came to the little mountain town. Not long before, Buck and Tom had broken up an organized gang of poachers, and Hilldale was the home of most of them. Of the gang, Bob Magloon, Lead Dather, Cole Sellers, and Fred Larsen had gone to jail. Magloon and Larsen were out now, having served their sentences, and all four had friends in Hilldale. It went without saying that some people in Hilldale would not be friendly to game wardens and both Buck and Tom knew it.

Hilldale was changing, they saw, even though the change was not apparent to the casual eye. The usual loafers walked the street, or sat in front of the stores. However, a new element was filtering into Hilldale. They were outlanders, sportsmen, the advance guard of the many city dwellers who, they knew, would one day come to enjoy vacations in the mountains. And that was good.

As they dismounted in front of the post office, Tom saw Alex Lashton going up the steps of the Hilldale House, the town's only hotel. While he waited for Buck to mail his letter to Ned Williams, Tom's eyes roved to the village's upper end.

Fred Larsen's pasture and livery stable were there. A herd of horses had climbed the hill behind Larsen's stable and were silhouetted against the sky. Among them was the black horse Mark Orsway had ridden.

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## CHAPTER IV

### NIGHT VISITOR

Tom looked away, not sure he was right, then looked back again. There was no mistake. The trim black, standing a bit apart from the rest of the horses, was the mount Mark Orsway had ridden down Two Bear Trail yesterday morning. There could not be two horses exactly like that.

Buck stood uncertainly near Tom, looking questioningly from him to their own horses. Not knowing why Tom remained on the post-office steps, the redhead's voice was tinged with impatience.

"Expect your rustler to come up and bop you on the head? Let's go back to camp and then into the hills. That's where we'll find him."

"Not now," Tom said softly.

"You find another clue, Sherlock?"

"Take a look at Larsen's horses and notice the black standing alone."

"Looks like quite a horse."

"It's Orsway's horse."

"So there's something in the Constitution says Orsway can't leave his horse at a livery stable if he feels like it?" Buck demanded. "Hey! You might have hit on something at that."

"Let's see if we can find Orsway."

"Let's not," Buck dissented. "Fred Larsen's the one we should see."

"Larsen?"

"Sure. If there's anything dirty under way, he's sure to be mixed up in it somehow. Come on."

"Think we should barge right in?"

"Why not? Maybe your little pal of the mountains has buddied up with Larsen, and if he has we should know about it. Anyhow, let's see if we can find out anything at all."

Buck swung into the saddle. Tom followed. Smoky fell into his accustomed place beside Pete, and Tom kept an eye on him. He felt strong doubts about the wisdom of this hasty action.

A game warden had a hard, thankless job which, by its very nature, made him few friends and many enemies. The enemies were always on the alert, and they'd like nothing better than to see Tom and Buck make complete fools of themselves. On the other hand, just what was the significance of recent events? Buck's opinion notwithstanding, hill men didn't steal horses, especially other hill men's horses, just because they were bored and wanted something to do. Nor did they shoot harmless wayfarers for no reason at all. Though it was true that most tenderfeet, going into the mountains, imagined they had at least one thrilling escape, Alex Lashton was level-headed. It was highly unlikely that he had imagined all the misfortunes which, he said, had befallen him on the Gistache.

Tom tried to think clearly as they rode along. Mark Orsway, Lashton had said, represented powerful lumber interests, and the white pine on the Gistache was a prize well worth anyone's time. Might Orsway be out to get it? Would he, for instance, make an attempt to terrorize fishermen who went into the Gistache and thus give the place a bad name? Tom set his jaw grimly. He had a powerful hunch that, when he found out why Pete had been stolen, he would at least be on the track of bigger things.

Buck made his horse prance as they came near the livery stable, and danced him to the corral. He sat loosely in the saddle, and Tom thought of a cougar in a tree, waiting to leap on a passing deer. Fred Larsen came out of the stable.



He was a big, disheveled man, and jail had done nothing to improve his customary slovenly appearance. His face was crossed by so many small veins that it was permanently red, as were his eyes. The frown he usually wore became a glare when he recognized his visitors.

"Get out!" he snarled.

"Why, Freddy boy!" Buck coaxed. "We'll think you don't like us! What a way to greet old friends!"

"Get out or I'll throw you out!" Larsen snarled again.

"*Mister* Larsen!" A note of happy anticipation crept into Buck's exaggerated coaxing. "I'm sure you wouldn't throw me out of here. Would you now?"

"What do you want?"

"Just being friendly," Buck said affably. "How was jail?"

"I got no time for the likes of you!"

"Then you'll have to take time, old pal," Buck said cheerfully. He became self-righteous. "We sent you to jail, but a good officer's duty does not end when the man he prosecuted is freed again. The officer must also see that the man is properly rehabilitated. Do you consider yourself rehabilitated, Fred?"

Larsen set his jaws and took two backward steps. He looked into Buck's eyes, then turned away.

"Sure you haven't gone back to your old ways, and the bad, bad boys who led you astray?" Buck pursued smoothly. "You haven't been shooting deer and elk out of season and selling them? You haven't been back on the Gistache trying to scare the wits out of harmless fishermen? You haven't taken pot shots at anybody? Or have you been doing all these naughty things?"

Buck's shot went wide of the mark. Larsen neither flinched nor offered any other indication that he knew what Buck was talking about. Buck became brisk and business-like.

"We really came to buy a horse, Fred."

"Got none to sell you!"

"Oh, I don't believe that. You sell horses to everybody. It would be unfair discrimination if you didn't sell us one. Now that black up there on the hill. Is he your horse, Fred?"

"No!"

"Shucks. I like black horses. Who owns that one?"

"How should I know? The boys come and go, and I ain't here all the time. When I ain't here they leave their horses, and they pay me when they get 'em again."

"Suppose you aren't here when they get 'em again?"

"Look, Brunt, the way I run my business is none of yours."

"Why, I never said it was, Fred. It's just that Tom and I like black horses. If we can't buy that one, we can at least look at him. Tom, while I stay here and talk to good old Fred, suppose you climb the hill and take a close look at that horse?"

"Stay out of there!" Larsen warned.

"Now you're being unreasonable," Buck complained. "Where's the harm in letting Tom look at that horse? Fred, have you been stealing horses again? Go right ahead, Tom. He doesn't really mean it. He's a kind man at heart."

"Stay out of that pasture!" Fred Larsen's eyes were deadly. "Or I'll—"

"Shut up!" Buck roared suddenly. "Unless you want me personally to poke a mouthful of teeth down your throat! Go up

and look at the horse, Tom."

Tom dismounted, looped Pete's reins over a corral post, and climbed the hill. Some of the horses trotted nervously away, but the trim black stood his ground and stretched out a friendly muzzle.

Tom verified what he already knew. The black was the horse Mark Orsway had been riding. He had been ridden hard recently, too, but spirit still showed in his eyes. Tom's heart warmed to him. Horses like the black were not nearly plentiful enough, and any rider could take pride in owning such a mount. His identification sure, Tom descended the hill and remounted Pete.

"Is it the one you thought it was?" Buck asked him.

"There's no doubt about it."

Buck turned to Fred Larsen. "Tell us who rode that horse in here and when."

"It's none of your business."

In one motion Buck sprang from his saddle, alighted in front of Fred Larsen, and seized the other's collar in his left hand.

"Talk!" Buck roared. "Talk, and talk straight or I'll twist your ape's head right off your buzzard's neck!"

Visibly shaken, Fred Larsen wrenched himself free and stepped back. "Belongs to a man named Orsway," he said sullenly. "Rode him in here this mornin'."

"Where did Orsway go?"

"I don't know. Said his horse was spent, and anyway he didn't want to take a real good horse where he was goin'. He rented a saddle and pack horse off me and lit out again. It ain't none of my business where he went."

"Did he leave his own saddle here?" Tom demanded.

"Yes. He wanted an old saddle; said his cost him five hundred dollars and he couldn't risk losin' it. He left enough money to cover."

"I believe that," Tom murmured. "Nobody takes anything out of here unless they pay. Where's Orsway's saddle?"

"In the stable."

"I want to see it."

With a snap of his fingers, Tom called Smoky to his side and followed Fred Larsen into the livery stable. He patted Orsway's expensive, hand-tooled saddle, and Smoky came forward to drink deeply of the scents that clung to it. Tom left the stable and remounted Pete. Buck spoke to Fred Larsen.

"Okay, we got what we came for and we're leaving now. But stick this in your gizzard and chew it hard; if you ever step out of line again, the most fun I could think of would be arresting you and sending you back to jail. Don't forget it."

They wheeled their horses and, without looking back, rode into Hilldale. When they had put distance between themselves and Fred Larsen's, Buck turned to Tom.

"How much did you make of that?"

"If Larsen was telling the truth," Tom said, "it's the first time in his life he ever did. How do we know Orsway rode out of Hilldale?"

"I can't see what difference it makes if he did or didn't," Buck said. "What are you driving at?"

"He's a lumberman."

"And that," Buck jeered, "means he's a suspicious character? Well, lead on and I'll follow, pal. What are we going to do next?"

"See Pop Halvorsen."

"Why didn't I think of that?"

"Must be you aren't brilliant."

They reined their horses in in front of Hilldale's General Store. Pop Halvorsen, the store's owner and manager, had been staunchly behind them from the first, and Pop's loyalties were not the wavering kind. He came to meet them.

"Holy Elmer! Now whatever got you two boys out'n the woods?"

"We needed a taste of city life," Tom grinned. "How have things been, Pop?"

"All right, an' maybe even a little better'n that since these city fellers have been buyin' their fishin' outfits off me. What's the good word?"

"Any mountain veal—" Tom used the local term for illegally killed game, "—coming out of the hills, Pop?"

"There's always some, Tom. You know that. But I haven't had wind of anything big."

"Happen to notice that new black horse in Larsen's pasture?"

"Can't say as I did."

"Step across the street and take a look at him, will you?"

Tom and Buck waited while Pop crossed the street. The old man came back, shaking his head.

"I know the one you mean; stands out like a sore nose. Larsen don't get many horses like that."

"Neither does anyone else. Did you see him come in?"

"Nope. I take it you're more interested in the rider than the horse?"

"Right."

"Sorry. Sure would like to help you fellows. But I can't do it this time."

"Thanks, anyway, Pop." Buck laid a bill on the counter. "When you get around to it, stock our cabin, will you? You know what we need."

"I'll take care of it."

They left the store, and Buck turned puzzled eyes on Tom.

"What's eating you, anyway?"

"Just a yen to talk to Orsway."

"He's gone."

"So Larsen says. But Smoky got a whiff of the saddle and he knows the man we want to find. Stick around and we might just bump into him."

"You lay a lot on that hound's nose."

"It's a good nose, and you know it."

"Well, it'll do no harm to try."

Tom glanced down the street and saw Alex Lashton again. The man was walking toward Fred Larsen's, accompanied by a moronic-looking hill youth who had been known for so long as Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby that most people had forgotten his real name. Tom grinned. Evidently Lashton was not particular about his fishing guide. Two-For-A-Nickel had been known to have difficulty finding his own house. How he would ever locate good fishing for his client, Tom

didn't know. Doubtless they were now going to rent horses from Fred Larsen, and they would go into the hills tomorrow.

Slowly, never taking his eyes from Smoky, Tom walked Pete down Hilldale's dusty main street. Buck, who knew the big hound was good, but who doubted that any dog was good enough to smell a saddle, then find a man who was probably on another horse, miles away, followed along indifferently.

They walked the length of the main street without finding anything, and Tom turned toward the scattered houses on the side streets. Once Smoky showed some interest, and Tom's heart quickened, but the big hound was only looking at a yellow cat scooting across a yard. At last ready to admit defeat, Tom turned dejectedly to Buck.

"Orsway's not in town, I guess."

"So now that you and your hifaluting hound have found out something we already knew, let's get back to camp."

"We might as well."

They turned their horses and trotted slowly up the dirt road that led out of Hilldale and into the mountains. Twilight shadows gathered. Tom rode silently and glumly. Maybe he was, as Buck seemed to think, batting his head against a stone wall. Or perhaps he was imagining things, just as Lashton and the two fishermen had imagined them. There was still much that did not add up, and Tom voiced his thoughts to Buck.

"What do you really think of it now?"

"I think we're a pair of fools. Sooner or later we're going to run across your rustler, and when we do we'll nab him. That's all."

"No, it's not," Tom said stubbornly. "Look at it this way. Somebody, evidently somebody with influence, wants to make a National Park of the Gistache. Somebody else doesn't want 'em to. So fishermen who go in there get the living daylight scared out of 'em by a series of incidents which nobody can explain. The Gistache, reports say, is a wild and dangerous country. Is it just coincidence that the Gistache has a stand of white pine that would make anybody rich, and that one of the biggest lumbermen in the country has disappeared in the hills, nobody seems to know where?"

"So Mark Orsway, who's got more hundred-dollar bills than a pine tree's got needles, steals your horse in passing?" Buck gibed.

"No. That's just one of the things that don't add up."

"Look, if Orsway Lumber really wanted the Gistache pine, do you think they'd send their retired owner to grab it single-handed? They'd have timber cruisers, road engineers—"

"Then what does Orsway want here?"

"Same as the rest of the dudes, some good fishing."

"Maybe."

"Cut it out, Tom. If we're going to watch somebody around here we'd do better to keep our eyes on Fred Larsen."

"Think he's up to something?"

"If he isn't, then it's the first time in his life that he hasn't been. I think Freddy boy has plans, and stealing Pete was part of them. But sooner or later he'll trip himself up. He's too dumb to do anything else."

Night shadows fell. Bats emerged from their daytime rests and swooped up and down the road. The vesper thrush sang his good-night song. Ahead of them, in the road, the fresh tracks of a lone horseman faded with the gathering darkness. A buck deer, his antlers velvet-coated, leaped from the brush on one side of the road to cover on the other side.

As they neared the clearing, the tired horses broke into a canter. The two let them go, knowing that the horses were anxious for the rubdown that would be theirs and for rest and food. They came closer to the cabin.

Smoky gave a sudden little spurt that carried him ahead of the horses. The big hound's head was high, his nostrils

working. He stopped, testing the breezes that swirled about him. Smoky's hackles rose, a growl bubbled in his throat. He looked questioningly back at Tom, then continued to test the winds.

Tom reined Pete to a halt, and for a moment sat quietly in the saddle while he studied Smoky. Buck stopped beside him. A second later, as though the same thought had occurred to both of them at the same time, they slid from their saddles and led their horses into the sheltering forest. Buck's hand dangled near the butt of his gun; they could have been seen. When nothing appeared, Buck reached up to quiet his nervous horse. Tom spoke softly.

"We've got a caller."

"Yup, and he's likely to be unsociable."

As Buck tied their horses to the low-hanging branch of a convenient tree, Tom grasped Smoky's collar. The big hound remained tense, quivering. He pulled strongly ahead, and Tom had to exert all his strength to hold him. Swinging around through the forest, they came in behind the cabin.

The darkness had deepened, making the cabin a soft symmetry with no sharp or harsh angles. Outlined against the softly glowing sky, a night hawk swooped overhead. A flickering yellow light from a kerosene lamp glowed behind the bunk-room window, then faded. Apparently whoever was carrying the lamp had gone into another room.

"Can you make Smoky stay with us?" Buck whispered.

"I'll try."

Side by side, Tom stooping to keep his hand on Smoky's collar, they ran through the high grass behind the cabin. Again, for a split second, the light glowed behind the bunk-room window. Tom swerved to the left, heading toward the trail. Whatever intruder was in the cabin might try to run that way.

In the uncertain light, Tom tripped and instinctively put out his hands to steady himself. When he did, he let go of Smoky's collar and the tawny hound disappeared into the darkness. Tom sprawled full length, a jarring fall that set his teeth to quivering and made red lights flash in front of his eyes. Almost at once he pulled himself erect and ran on.

Now he abandoned caution in favor of speed. Smoky was gone, and the big hound would not stop until he had reached and thoroughly investigated the trespasser. So doing, he was likely to get hurt. Dimly in the darkness, a little ahead, Tom saw Buck racing at top speed toward the cabin. The redhead's revolver was in his hand.

Suddenly feet pounded across the porch. Tom heard the thud of flying hooves and faintly saw the rider, who must have mounted a hitherto unseen horse, tearing down the trail toward the road. A ghost figure in the night, he was getting all the speed of which his horse was capable.

Buck's big revolver barked, and a tongue of flame licked suddenly into the night. Buck shot again, and again. There was no sound of a bullet striking anything solid, and then the rider was gone. He had gained the trees at the lower end of the clearing and was hidden by them. Buck's explosive voice seemed louder than the revolver shots.

"Missed him!"

Tom panted up. "It was my fault. I fell in a woodchuck hole and Smoky got away. He warned that highbinder that we were coming."

"A half hour earlier and I'd have stopped him!" Buck gritted. "I'd better practice up on my night shooting!"

Smoky, who had chased the intruder a little way, came back up the trail and threw himself at Tom's feet, panting. Tom reached down to stroke the big hound's dangling ears. Smoky brushed his cold nose against Tom's arm.

Buck put his revolver back in its holster and, without speaking, started toward the cabin. Tom fell in beside him, Smoky bringing up the rear.

The cabin's door hung wide open, and the flickering lamp still lighted the kitchen. But the open door and the lighted lamp were the only evidence that a trespasser had been in the cabin. As nearly as they could tell, everything was exactly as they had left it. Nothing appeared to be disturbed. Tom picked up the lamp and went into the bunk room. Both bunks

were still smoothly made, and their clothes hung as they had left them. The intruder had come and gone, touching not a thing. Tom turned to Buck.

"What did he want, do you suppose?"

"Darned if I know. Maybe he thought we had a money cache. Guess we came back before he could find what he was looking for."

"I can't figure it."

"Neither can I. Well, he's gone but he might be back. Let Smoky sleep inside tonight."

"I aim to."

While Buck brought water, Tom prepared a hasty meal. They ate, then went to bed with Smoky stretched on the kitchen floor. For a while Tom lay wakeful, trying to fit this one more piece into the disordered jig-saw puzzle. But he had ridden too far, and was too tired, to resist sleep for very long. There was no immediate cause for worry anyhow. Smoky would let them know if anyone came even near the cabin. Tom fell into a deep sleep.

He was awakened by Smoky's warning growl. As soon as he awoke, he saw that dawn had come. Gray light, still not brightened by the rising sun, hung like a soft cloth over the windows. Tom's hand groped for his revolver. Buck stirred in the upper bunk, then swung his bare feet over and landed on the floor. Tom looked into the kitchen.

Smoky was on his feet, hackles raised and nose questing as he sought for some scent. Buck dressed quickly, a happy light in his eyes.

"This time a proper reception committee is ready," he said. "Maybe we'll find out something now!"

Three minutes later both heard the unmistakable sound of trotting horses. The horses stopped, and Tom looked out the window at Al Loeb, the Sheriff from Hilldale, and Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby. They swung off their horses and knocked on the door. Disappointedly, Buck sheathed his gun and let them in.

"Well, well, well!" he greeted the new arrivals. "Isn't this an early time of morning to come visiting?"

"Never mind that," Al Loeb said importantly. "I come to get you two."

"And why are you coming to get us?"

"For robbery," the Sheriff announced. "For robbery of the United States Post Office in Hilldale."

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# CHAPTER V

## CABIN FIGHT

Tom stood still, and for some reason he could not explain, he had a great desire to laugh. Then he felt a rising anger, and looked at Buck Brunt. Taken completely by surprise for once in his life, the red-haired warden could only stare at Al Loeb.

The Sheriff stood by himself, alone, as though he were the only man in the cabin. Tom thought of a tree, a lonely, storm-lashed, wind-beaten tree that doggedly resists the worst the elements can fling at it. Al Loeb, who was Sheriff of the Hilldale District only because nobody else wanted the thankless, underpaid job, was like that. He was a stolid, plodding man who had no idea how to go about reasoning out an intricate problem. But he was an honest man, determined to do his duty as he saw it. Al would uphold the law to the letter. Once he had decided to his own satisfaction that a man had done something deserving arrest, nothing could stop him.

However, Al was not an intelligent man, and he was obviously here because somebody had sent him. Somebody had told him that Tom and Buck had, of all things, robbed the post office. Who was behind it? Who had made the Sheriff do his bidding while letting Al think that he was only doing his duty?

Buck recovered himself. "I've heard of some fool things you've done, Al, but this one sure takes the hand-painted rain drop."

"I got evidence," Al Loeb said stubbornly. "I hope you two ain't goin' to put up a fuss. You'll get a fair trial, but I'd best tell you that anythin' you say can be used against you."

Buck's anger was rising. "I won't promise anything, and I sure don't aim to go anywhere on the strength of some fairy tale!"

Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby drew his revolver and cocked it. Buck glanced contemptuously at him.

"Put it away," he said, "before I take it away from you. All right, Al. If you're taking us in, tell us more. Who sent you up here?"

Tom backed up quietly, so that he stood near a chair. He was satisfied, and had been from the first, that Buck had no intention of letting Al Loeb take them to jail or anywhere else. Al was a tool in the hands of somebody who was using him to get Tom and Buck out of the way. Now Buck was probing to find who that was.

"I got an eye witness," the Sheriff said.

"Produce him."

"He's right here."

"Him!"

Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby nodded sullenly. His face was vapid and empty, but his eyes held a shifty animal cunning and alertness. When he spoke, his mouth was a slit across his face and his eyes were partly closed.

"Yes, me. I was right thar in the dark of the alley when you an' your partner come sneakin' up it. I saw you push open the back door of the post office an' come out with a mail sack. I didn't want to show myself on account I didn't want to get shot."

"You saw all this?"

"Yup."

"Congratulations," Buck said pleasantly. "I didn't think you ever kept your eyes on anything except your neighbors' unlocked hen roosts. When did it happen?"

"Last night."

Buck was grinning now, a dangerous grin.

"Catesby," he said smoothly, "I've run across some liars in my life. But of all the horse-faced, melon-headed imbeciles who ever tried to lie, you take the plaster medal. I'll bet if I kicked you in the seat of the pants, which is what I'm going to do in just a minute, your wooden brain would rattle. Why did you cook up something like this?"

"Let him alone," Al Loeb warned. "You don't mind if we look around, do you?"

"Help yourself."

Al Loeb nodded to Catesby. Two-For-A-Nickel went to the desk, lifted some of the scattered papers, and triumphantly brought up two packages of first-class mail, each of which was tied with a string. He broke the strings and spread the letters on the desk.

Tom stared, dumfounded, at Buck. Two-For-A-Nickel happily waved a handful of letters in the Sheriff's face.

"Here's the evidence!" he crowed. "I knowed I'd find it here!"

"How did you know?" Buck barked.

Tom remembered last night's intruder, obviously Two-For-A-Nickel. He had wanted to put something in the cabin, not take anything out.

"I followed you home an' looked in the window when you put it away. That's how I knowed."

"You satisfied now?" Al Loeb asked. "You give me your word you won't start anythin', an' I won't put the handcuffs on you."

"We're satisfied." Buck's voice was deadly. "But not nearly as satisfied as we're going to be."

He swooped suddenly, put both hands under the table, and with all his hundred and eighty pounds flipped it over on Al Loeb. Tom leaped around the table to close with Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby. His hand shot out to close on the other's gun arm. He heard the pound and thud that was Buck rolling around with the Sheriff, but for the present all his attention was centered on his own antagonist.

Two-For-A-Nickel, though slender, was lithe and slippery as an eel. His spare frame hid whipcord muscles, hardened in more than one rough and tumble fight. Desperately Tom held onto his opponent's arm. From the corner of his eye he saw the gun coming up, Two-For-A-Nickel's supple fingers bending it into position.

Tom lunged, throwing his weight against the other's stomach, acutely conscious of the leveling gun. It did not waver, and the muscles on Two-For-A-Nickel's right arm stood out like stretched cords as he bent the muzzle toward Tom's head.

Then a pair of great jaws enveloped half of Two-For-A-Nickel's forearm. The jaws closed, Catesby cried out, and the gun clattered to the floor. Pushing himself backward, Tom kicked it away and rose to his feet. Smoky crouched over the terror-stricken Two-For-A-Nickel, ready to seek the throat next. Tom picked up the fallen gun and pointed it.

"All right," he said. "All right, Smoky."

The tawny hound left his fallen enemy and padded to Tom's side. Tom kept Two-For-A-Nickel covered.

"Get to your feet," he ordered, "and keep your hands up. My finger's twitching on this trigger."

Al Loeb was staggering against the wall. Following him up, Buck measured him for a right cross, then a left one. The Sheriff took two forward steps and sank wearily down. Buck turned his battered, bleeding face toward Tom.

"The man can punch!" he said admiringly. "If I hadn't landed a couple of wild ones, he might have had me down there instead of the other way round."

Buck stooped to get Al Loeb's gun, then went outside to search the horses. He came in with a rifle that he had taken from a saddle scabbard, ejected the cartridges it contained, put them in his pocket, and leaned the rifle against the wall. He stripped the cartridge belt, unloaded the revolver, and put that beside the rifle. For a moment he stared at Two-For-A-



Nickel.

"I've seen nicer things than you under rocks," he said, as though stating a simple fact. "Sit down."

Two-For-A-Nickel shuffled to a chair and sat down, his shifty eyes on Buck. His glance darted to Smoky, who was paying him no apparent attention. But Two-For-A-Nickel shivered and sat very still. He had already found out what a grip Smoky had in his powerful jaws, and he wanted no more of it.

Whistling cheerfully, Buck busied himself about the cabin. He unlocked the gun cabinet, laid out his and Tom's rifles, and slipped them into saddle scabbards. He put a box of ammunition near each, and slipped the remainder of their cartridges into a canvas rucksack. Next came a bare minimum of cooking utensils, and a supply of food.

Tom helped pack, keeping one eye on Catesby and the unconscious Sheriff. Now it was clear that there was something afoot in the mountains, and whoever lay behind it wanted no interference from wardens. Tom grinned wryly. Buck was at last convinced, and wardens *were* about to interfere.

However, from now until such time as they got to the bottom of the affair, he and Buck could not live in the cabin. They had not only resisted an officer, but they had resisted him violently, and Al Loeb was not one to let that pass. He might be a tool for some person more clever than himself, but he would never permit a supposed outlaw to go free if he could help it. Though he was not a skillful man-hunter, he was a tireless one. He would never give up.

They finished, making two equal packs of the gear they wanted to take with them. Buck saddled their horses, then came back in and looked speculatively at the still-motionless Sheriff.

"Poor Al," he sympathized. "Can't help wishing he was on our side. Well, it's time he stopped hearing the birdies sing."

Buck picked up a tin pail, filled it at the little stream outside, and dumped it over the fallen Sheriff. Al Loeb stirred, then groaned. He sat up, blinking stupidly. His head cleared.

"There're your guns," Buck said. "Naturally I didn't leave you anything to shoot in them. But you can ride any time you take the notion."

Al Loeb, supporting himself on the door jamb, got slowly to his feet. He swayed, then found steady legs.

"I'm askin' you once more to come with me. You'll be better off if you do."

"Shucks, I thought that was all settled," Buck complained.

"I'm comin' back," Al Loeb warned. "An' the next time I see you I'll take you with a gun. Come on, Catesby."

"Two-For-A-Nickel is going with us," Buck announced. "We want to teach him some of the finer points of lying."

Al Loeb bristled. Fists clenched, he took a forward step. Buck closed in from one side, Tom from the other. Smoky looked up. The Sheriff hesitated.

"All right," he said shortly. "You've got high cards this time. But hurt that man and you'll pay for it."

"We won't hurt him," Buck said. "We just want to keep him from hurting himself."

Al Loeb got on his horse and, without looking back, rode down the trail toward the road. Watching him, Tom was again reminded of a beaten and battered tree which, despite fierce storms, does not alter its shape. Al Loeb had weathered another storm. The Sheriff might be wrong, and probably he would change if he were proven wrong. But he was a man of his convictions, and once he decided on his duty he would pursue it to the end. He and Buck, Tom decided, were in for more than one kind of trouble, thanks to the redhead's temper.

Buck spoke coldly to Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby. "Get on your horse and ride ahead of us. Do exactly what I tell you, and don't do anything else."

Tom swung into the saddle and waited until Buck mounted. Smoky stood expectantly near. Buck mounted his horse and sat with the reins loosely in his hand.

"Up the trail," he directed their prisoner. Slowly they trotted up the trail, toward Bill Tolliver's house, and when they came to the steepest part of the slope, the horses slowed of their own accord. Reaching the top, Buck told their prisoner to stop. Two-For-A-Nickel reined his horse to a halt, and Buck turned to Tom.

"Ride ahead of him. Take him up Pig Snout Ridge."

Tom rode Pete in ahead of their captive, and swerved from the trail into a tangled mass of briars. It was almost impenetrable, except for narrow trails deer and elk had beaten through it. Expertly Tom piloted Pete along the trails. He emerged from the brush into a forest of pine trees.

Red squirrels chattered their alarm and were silent. A blue jay's shriek heralded their approach, and once a lumbering bear took hasty flight. Tom rode on, winding an erratic course among the pines. This was the Pig Snout, crowned by a small stand of virgin forest. It was possible to reach only by the route they had chosen, and even then an inexperienced man would have to hack his way through brush. The Pig Snout stood on a triangle of sheer stone cliffs which few people had scaled. Because it was difficult to reach, and there was nothing there to reward whoever ventured onto it, even mountaineers seldom visited the place. Buck spoke to Two-For-A-Nickel in a harsh voice.

"Get off your horse."

The captive dismounted, and turned around. Animal cunning still showed on his face, but now it was tinged with fear. He looked questioningly at his captors, and flinched when Buck threw a lasso that settled over his shoulders and pinioned his arms. Turning his back, as though Two-For-A-Nickel were scarcely worth notice, Buck dragged him to one of the smaller trees. He took a half hitch with the rope, then wound it around the tree. When Buck finished, Two-For-A-Nickel was bound so securely to the tree that he could scarcely wiggle.

Buck stepped back, dusting his hands as he did so. "There!" he said. "You can't say we aren't giving you a fighting chance. All you have to do is stay right here until your pal, the Sheriff, finds you. Come on, Tom."

They mounted and, leading Two-For-A-Nickel's horse, started away. They were halted by Catesby's hoarse voice.

"Wait!"

"Something you need?" Buck asked politely.

"You, you goin' to leave me here?"

"That's the idea," Buck said. "It's nice and quiet. You'll have lots of time for thinking up some better lies than the one you told Al Loeb."

Two-For-A-Nickel was sweating. "Honest, I was told that by somebody who did see you rob the post office."

"Then he followed us to our cabin?" Buck suggested. "After which he went back to Hilldale and told you exactly what he did with the letters? Your lying hasn't improved. So long."

"Come back!"

For a second time they stopped. Buck looked at him coldly.

"Maybe," he suggested, "you can't lie at all? Maybe you can tell the truth? How much were you paid for telling Al Loeb we robbed the post office?"

"Nothin'."

"Catesby, the next time I start away from here I aim to keep on going."

"It's true," the sweating prisoner insisted. "My brother made me do it."

"Your brother? What brother?"

"My brother Lee. He's been in Oregon, an' got home just a little while ago. He went over to the Gistache an'—"

"Wait a minute," Tom broke in. "You say you have a brother who's been away, and just got home? And now he's on the

Gistache?"

"That's right."

"I see," said Tom. He knew now who had stolen Pete.

Two-For-A-Nickel hesitated, and looked from one of his captors to the other. He swallowed hard.

"Go on," Buck said sharply. "Tell us some more about brother Lee. What's he doing on the Gistache? Killing game out of season, and selling it in the highest-paying market?"

"No," Two-For-A-Nickel gulped. "It ain't that, but I dunno jest what it is. 'I need some time,' he said, and those were his very words. 'If I can have some time on the Gistache, both of us will do all right. Only I can't have those two wardens snoopin' around. You keep them out.'"

"And how," Buck asked, "were you supposed to keep us out?"

"I was s'posed to go in the post office every night. If you go through the alley, the lock on the back door is loose an' you can get in if you shake it. I was s'posed to get your mail an'—"

"Wonderful," Buck commented, caustically. "I always did want a secretary who'd work for nothing. Only maybe I should know about it. What else were you supposed to do?"

"Steam all your mail open an' read it an'—"

"And what?"

"If you got any orders about the Gistache, I shouldn't let you see 'em. All other mail I could paste back together an' let you have it."

Buck and Tom looked at each other, both remembering the letter from Ned Williams. Tom spoke first.

"How long have you been playing this little game of post office?"

"Couple of nights," Two-For-A-Nickel answered sullenly. "Only there wasn't no mail."

"That's too bad," said Buck with mock sympathy. "Then how come you cooked up this little scheme with Al Loeb?"

"I was afraid of bein' caught at the post office, an' thought if I could get you out of the way fer a spell—"

"So," Buck said, "being brilliant, you stole mail out of the post office, planted it in our cabin, and told the Sheriff we'd robbed the post office?"

"Yup." Two-For-A-Nickel seemed a little proud. "That was my idea."

"I thought it must have been," Buck grunted. "Nobody else could be that dumb." He untied their prisoner. "Get on your horse."

"What you goin' to do?"

"Don't worry," Buck said smoothly. "We're just going to ride over and see Bill Tolliver, and you'd better have a brother named Lee!"

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# CHAPTER VI

## A NEW CLUE

Reaching Bill Tolliver's they were met, as usual, by the hound pack. The dogs divided, pacing on either side as they rode toward the house. Working in his garden with a mule-powered cultivator, Bill Tolliver came forward to meet them. The old man's blue eyes sparkled as he solemnly regarded their prisoner.

"You boys been trappin'?" he demanded.

"Yeah," Buck said. "Skunk trapping. Think we should skin him now?"

"Don't look like his pelt will be worth more'n two for a nickel," Bill chuckled.

"Maybe you're right. But Tom and I thought we'd check up on his tracks, anyhow. Bill, has this thing got a brother named Lee?"

"That he has," Bill rumbled. "Anyhow he had. Lee Catesby made tracks out of here five-six years ago, right after John Dolan was found dead on Hogback Mountain."

"Well, he's back now."

"On-ordinary," Bill grunted. "I figgered he'd of got himself hung long ago."

"Nope, he's set himself up in business on the Gistache." Tom, speaking, was looking directly at their captive. "That right?"

"Yes," Two-For-A-Nickel growled sullenly.

"If Lee Catesby's got any business, it'll bear looking into," Bill Tolliver rumbled. "What's he doin' back there, you?"

"I dunno. He never told me."

"Don't blame him. I wouldn't trust you neither. Runnin' a poachin' crew, maybe? Or holdin' up fishermen? It's sure somethin' that's got to be done in the dark of the moon. You Catesbys are all alike."

"Two-For-A-Nickel," Buck said suddenly, "you've got a horse and you're on it. If you, and the horse, can't disappear in one minute flat, I personally am going to kick you all the way from here to Hilldale."

Two-For-A-Nickel wheeled his horse, spurred him into a trot, and then into a gallop. In less than a minute he had disappeared behind the sheltering trees. Tom looked in astonishment at Buck.

"What'd you let him go for, Buck?"

"I don't like his smell."

"We could have taken him back to town, and had him tell the straight story to Al Loeb. We owe him that much."

"If he believed Two-For-A-Nickel's post-office yarn," Buck said hotly, "we don't owe him a thing. Besides, if anybody is poaching back on the Gistache, we want him in jail where he should be. Suppose Two-For-A-Nickel confesses, then runs and tells brother Lee his scheme didn't work? Lee would head back to Oregon and we'd never see him again. But if Two-For-A-Nickel says the wardens were dumb enough to let him go with a warrant hanging over their heads, Brother Lee will like that. He'll think we won't dare do anything while Al Loeb's keeping us busy, and he'll be on the Gistache, just like a sitting duck, when we want him."

"Al Loeb after you?" Bill Tolliver was frowning.

"Yeah."

"What for?"

"Robbing the post office."

"Did you?"

"Not lately," Buck said, "though we might be tempted if we run out of stamps. Looks like we've got a little job, Tommy boy."

Tom shook his head. "I don't like it."

"Don't like what?"

"Buck, if there's just a little poaching crew operating on the Gistache, it doesn't amount to much or we'd have had wind of it before this. There's something else going on."

"Such as?"

"Such as thirty thousand acres of the best white pine in the country, and this guy Orsway. Retired or not, he does represent the Orsway Lumber Company."

"So what?" Buck said. "Orsway buys its lumber on the level. I know some of the fellows in that outfit."

"It still doesn't add up. All these shenanigans to steer us off the trail of some two-bit poachers? Suppose this half-wit, Catesby, is a decoy to draw us off, or something like that?"

Buck grinned. "Still say you read too many detective stories, Tom. What do you think we should do?"

"Find Orsway. His horse is in Hilldale, and all we have is Fred Larsen's word that Orsway rode out again. Of course Smoky couldn't find him in town, but I'd like to have another look around. If I can talk to Orsway again, I'm sure I can learn something. Besides, Two-For-A-Nickel might go back to Hilldale. If so, we can find what he does."

"Not a bad idea," Buck admitted. "Also, if we're going to sleep in the hills for a piece, we could use some more of Pop Halvorsen's grub. Yeah. We'll go."

Bill Tolliver had been studying Buck's face, his eyes twinkling. "You run into a door or somethin', Buck?"

"Yeah, a door named Al Loeb. He and Two-For-A-Nickel caught us cold in our cabin, and Al had to be convinced a mite before he'd let us go."

"Looks that way," Bill rumbled. "If you're goin' in to Hilldale you'd best let Mother tend that face of yours. And could be you'll get tired of sleepin' in the hills. In that case, you know where the Tollivers live. By the way, Tawm, I fetched your gear in. Maybe it'll come in handy now. Before you go to Hilldale, how about a bite to eat?"

"Come to think of it, we did leave kind of sudden-like and without any breakfast. We could use some."

Mother Tolliver, who had had half a lifetime of experience fixing bruised and battered men, ministered to Buck's face. When she was finished, though his left eye remained puffy and partly closed, Buck was unlikely to attract attention if he stayed away from well-lighted places. Then they sat down to the hot meal Mother Tolliver prepared.

Finishing, Tom changed Pete's saddle and bridle. Pete nickered appreciatively. This saddle fitted him and he liked the bridle better. Knowing that Smoky might have to be confined sometimes, and mindful of the big hound's tendency to chew ropes, Tom borrowed a chain from Bill Tolliver and put that in his pack.

Finally they mounted. Instead of starting directly for Hilldale, they set out in the direction Two-For-A-Nickel had taken. This was for his benefit, in case he might have lurked in the hills to see what they would do. Tom swooped from the saddle to pick up Two-For-A-Nickel's hat, which he had dropped in his hasty flight and had not bothered to pick up. Tom tucked the hat into his saddle bag.

Safely hidden by the forest, where they could no longer be seen from a long way off, they swung around to the Hilldale trail. Evening shadows were gathering when they reached a thick grove of aspens about a mile from town. They dismounted, stripping the bridles from their horses but leaving the saddles loosely on and picketing their mounts so they could graze. Tom built a small fire and cooked a meal.

He scrubbed the dishes in a sandy stream, repacked them, and snapped the chain on Smoky's collar. As soon as it was completely dark they remounted and started into Hilldale. Tom wondered if they were doing the right thing. Al Loeb would be leaving no stone unturned to capture them. Doubtless he had already alerted the townspeople, and a great many of them had no love for game wardens. Riding into Hilldale in this fashion, Tom knew that he and Buck would need all the wits at their command.

They swerved from the main road to a side trail, and Tom faded into the shadows, keeping Smoky on the far side of his horse, when they met a horseman coming from the opposite direction. In the night horse and rider were only a dim shape. Buck did not even move from the center of the trail.

"Howdy, stranger," the horseman greeted.

"Howdy," Buck replied affably.

They passed in the night, and Tom breathed again. He realized that all of Hilldale must know they were wanted, but nobody really expected to meet them. They would not be crazy enough to ride into town.

They entered Hilldale by a back way, and in the deep gloom came to a big building that served Pop Halvorsen as both warehouse and barn. Pop's team of big draft horses stamped comfortably in the darkness, and whinnied a greeting. Tom and Buck felt their way to empty stalls, the location of which they knew from previous visits. They tied their horses and, keeping Smoky on a short leash, walked to the rear entrance of Pop's store.

Tom knocked softly, waited a moment, and knocked again. The door opened a crack and Pop Halvorsen's spare figure showed in the light. Almost immediately the door closed again. Tom and Buck waited, knowing that Pop had seen them but that there was no immediate danger or he would have warned them. After five minutes the door reopened and they slipped in. Pop Halvorsen turned on them.

"You two crazy?" he demanded fiercely.

"Sure," Tom said. "Crazy as loons."

"You must be! Ever'body in town knows about you, an' half the men here have rode with Al Loeb to fetch you in. Fred Larsen an' Bob Magloon are with the posse, an' there's nothin' they'd like better than to shoot you on sight."

"We know it," Buck said calmly. "How come you didn't let us in right away?"

"There was three customers in here I had to get rid of."

Tom glanced toward the front of the store. The lights were dimmed. The shade with CLOSED written across it was pulled down over the door. Tom turned to Pop Halvorsen.

"Our horses are in your barn. We're going back into the hills a while, Pop, probably to the Gistache, and we need some grub. Can you make us a couple of packs?"

"Sure."

"Another thing, did Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby come in to town today?"

"'Bout two hours past."

"Did he talk to anybody?"

"I don't know. I didn't pay him much heed."

Tom looked meaningfully at Buck. If Two-For-A-Nickel was merely connected with a minor poaching gang on the Gistache, he should have ridden there to warn his companions. The fact that, instead, he had ridden into Hilldale, was itself circumstantial evidence that someone in Hilldale had connections with the Gistache. Tom smiled with satisfaction, and Buck grimaced at him.

"You needn't look so all-fired smart. I know what you're thinking. So maybe Brother Lee is in Hilldale. Reckon we can find him?"

"I don't know. But I think we can find Two-For-A-Nickel."

Pushing Smoky, who would have followed him, back into the store, Tom slipped out the back door, got Two-For-A-Nickel's hat from his saddle bag, and returned with it. Smoky wagged up to him, licked his hand with a sloppy tongue, and reared with his front paws on Tom's chest. Tom pushed him down. Smoky sat on the floor, looking insulted, until Tom offered him the hat. The tawny hound drank long and deeply of its scents, wagged his tail some more, and scratched his right ear with his right rear paw.

"You aim to put 'The Nose' on the job?" Buck asked.

"That's it."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

"Don't go out!" Pop warned. "You're sure to get caught if you do!"

"Oh, shucks, Pop, if we land in jail the least we'll get is free board," Buck said. "It can't be any worse than Tom's cooking."

With Tom keeping a tight leash on Smoky, they slipped out the back door into the darkness. Tom hesitated momentarily. It seemed to him that Smoky was ten feet tall, with glowing signs all over that proclaimed his identity. Then he put such thoughts aside. Hilldale was a community of outdoorsmen, and eighty percent of the men in it owned hunting hounds. No night passed but that one or more men walked through Hilldale with a hound on a leash.

Openly, making no attempt at concealment, they strode up the street. When they came to one of the oil lamps that illuminated Hilldale's main thoroughfare, they turned aside to stay in the shadows. Within the limits of his chain, Smoky padded here and there to sniff at scents that interested him. They had walked for perhaps ten minutes when he stopped abruptly, staring at the other side of the street.

When Tom let him go he walked softly, not straining at the leash. Nevertheless there was a sureness about him that told Tom he was not on a false or an old track. Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby had passed this way recently. They followed the hound across the street, and fell in behind him when he started down it.

Though several people must have walked this way since Two-For-A-Nickel had passed, Smoky never faltered or hesitated. An expert tracker, he knew the man he wanted. Past the barber shop he led them, and the gunsmith's shop. Smoky strained toward the steps of Hilldale's only hotel, the Hilldale House.

Tom pulled him back into the shadows, hesitant and a little afraid. Obviously Two-For-A-Nickel had gone into the Hilldale House, but that was lighted and, if Tom and Buck entered, they were sure to be recognized. Tom was aware of Buck standing beside him, and of the redhead's growing nervous tension.

"What are we waiting for?" Buck demanded. "Come on!"

Tom felt Buck's hand on his shoulder, and he was half dragged up the steps into the Hilldale House. Then he forgot his misgivings. The time to decide whether or not to go into this thing was past, for they were already in it. Now their only choice was seeing it through. Tom was aware of the startled expressions of a couple of loungers in the lobby, and of the night clerk's amazed glance.

Paying no attention to anything save the scent he was on, Smoky went straight to and up the stairs that led to the second floor. The tawny hound went down the hall, and reared against a closed door. Behind him, Tom was aware of the night clerk, Charley Handley, who had followed them up the stairs.

"You haven't any right to do this!" the clerk protested.

"Is that so?" Buck growled.

He tried the door, found it locked, backed across the hall, and flung himself against it. It buckled, but did not yield. Buck got another running start, and hit harder. The door burst open to reveal an empty room with a wide-open window at the far end. Both men rushed to it and looked out upon a wooden fire escape. There was no one in sight. Then they heard a step at the door they had smashed and a man's voice.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Please! A little quiet!"

It was the dude, Alex Lashton. Behind him, peering over his shoulder, the night clerk stood irresolutely. The dude's face softened and he smiled.

"Oh. It's you. Do you always enter rooms this way?"

"Not always," Buck grunted. "Once in a while we stop to turn the knob. Know anything about who was in this room?"

"I'm afraid I didn't notice. Are you still after that horse thief?"

"You can't do this," the night clerk protested. "This is a respectable hotel."

Buck swung on him. "Who rented this room?"

"I don't have to tell you. You know very well—"

"Charley," Buck said smoothly, "my agents tell me that somebody who looks a lot like you has been eating wild turkey lately. I wouldn't want to say outright, but ... who rented this room?"

"His name's Orsway," the night clerk said sullenly. "Mark Orsway. But he hasn't been here for a while."

"Thanks," Buck said. "Come on, Tom; out the window."

It was high time. Feet were pounding on the stairs. Stooping, Tom gathered Smoky in his arms and lifted him out to the fire escape. He followed, and Buck came last. They clattered down the wooden steps and melted into dark shadows near the building. The head and shoulders of a man were outlined in the open window through which they had come. For a short space he searched the darkness. Lashton appeared beside him, and they exchanged comments. Then the man who had first appeared turned around.

"They've gone out the back way! Get around to the back!"

"Good for the dude!" Buck whispered. "Come on!"

Keeping Smoky on the short chain, and staying close to buildings with their friendly shadows, they raced down the dimly lighted street and turned a corner. For a moment they plastered themselves against the side of one of the ramshackle log cabins which were typical of Hilldale's back streets. In the rear, a chained dog began to bark throatily. The cabin's door opened and a man came out on the porch.

Neither Tom nor Buck moved a muscle as they waited. Faint shadows in the darkness, now and again sharply outlined against one of the hotel's lighted windows, men moved in the rear of the Hilldale House.

"What's up?" the man on the porch shouted.

"Those two game wardens that beat up Al Loeb," someone shouted back. "They're here in back of the hotel!"

"I'll get my gun an' help!"

The man dashed back into his cabin and Tom began to edge toward the rear. The dog went wild, throwing himself against his chain and falling back. He snarled continuously, showing white teeth in the darkness. The back door of the cabin opened and the man appeared again, gun in hand.

"You, Jeff! Shut up!" He ran off toward the Hilldale House.

The dog subsided to a few quivering growls, and Tom and Buck slunk past. Crawling to the end of his chain, the dog moaned excitedly as the two trespassers, against whom he was supposed to guard the cabin, disappeared behind an outbuilding. Disgusted, the dog flung himself full length, rested his chin on his paws, and watched the gathering man-hunt.

Shielded by the darkness of the night, Tom and Buck stopped. Behind them, near the hotel, a rifle cracked sharply. They heard the near-hysterical voices of aroused men.

"Listen to that!" There was no less vehemence in Buck's voice because he had to whisper. "Wouldn't that jar you?"



"Sure," Tom whispered. "But it will jar us even more if they find us."

"It's a mob," Buck said in disgust, "and a mob's never got any sense. They'll be jumping at their own shadows all night, and lucky if they don't shoot each other."

"Well, Catesby got away, and we can't find him now. What are we going to do?"

"I don't rightly know. Something's sure up on the Gistache, but I can't get the pitch."

"Orsway and a lumber grab?"

"Looks that way," Buck said. "Let's ride over to the Gistache and see with our own little eyes."

Buck swerved, and led back toward the main street. Suddenly a group of six men ran out of a side alley and started in their direction. Light from a street lamp glinted on the rifles and shotguns they carried, and softly outlined the men. Tom felt a lump rise in his throat, swallowed it, and let his hand stray toward his revolver. He snatched it away. It was no part of their plan to do any shooting.

With unnerving abruptness Buck ran directly into the center of the street. He waved his arms at the approaching men.

"Other way!" he bellowed. "Make it quick! They've got those two wardens cornered in Fred Larsen's house!"

The group wheeled as one. Shouting among themselves, they raced down the street to Fred Larsen's. Buck remained where he was, an unholy grin on his face.

Then both of them sprinted across the street, back to Pop Halvorsen's barn. They found their horses and the packs Pop had prepared, and rode out of Hilldale.

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# CHAPTER VII

## THE GISTACHE

Tom awakened to the touch of the morning sun, warm on his face. For a moment he lay quiet, still sleep-fogged and wondering where he was and what he was supposed to be doing here. Then he came completely awake and raised himself on one elbow. Chained to a nearby tree, Smoky padded over to receive his morning caress. Tom petted the big hound affectionately, then crawled out of his sleeping bag and sat up to see Buck Brunt still fast asleep.

"Buck!" Tom called.

The red-haired warden merely grunted and curled a little more snugly into his sleeping bag. Tom called again, and when his partner did not get up he rose, pulled his boots on, and filled the canvas water pail at a spring. Pulling the flap of Buck's sleeping bag back, he dribbled cold water on his partner's face. The redhead sputtered and sat up.

"What are you doing?" Tom asked sarcastically. "Hibernating? You've been pounding your ear for almost eight hours in that sack! Where's your pioneering spirit? You're nothing but a sissy after all!"

"Aw, shut up!" Buck growled. "If you feel so full of vinegar, why don't you work it off? You could have called me when breakfast was ready!"

Tom grinned. Last night both he and Buck had been reeling with fatigue, and able to do little except crawl into their sleeping bags. This morning the bright sun brought its own special tingle, and the promise of action ahead was an exciting one.

"Haul your ornery carcass out of there," Tom directed, "or you get the whole pailful. Don't forget that we've still got a lot of riding to do, and probably work at the end of the ride."

Buck grumbled as he crawled out of his sleeping bag. "If I had it to do over again I'd never be a game warden with a partner as crazy as you. You know what I'd do? I'd get me a nice, soft, restful office job where I could go to work at nine in the morning, take an hour, or maybe two or three hours, for lunch, and quit at five. Then I'd go home and to bed until nine the next morning. That's what I'd do."

"Yeah, yeah," Tom agreed. "And now that you've had your morning grouch, what do you think about the situation on the Gistache?"

"Oh, that." Buck frowned thoughtfully. "It's sort of tough to know just what to think. Last night, when that sputtering idiot went into Orsway's room, you almost had me convinced that Orsway and his company were planning to bring off a lumber steal. But by daylight it doesn't make sense. That sort of thing belongs to the past and nobody knows it better than the big lumber companies."

"That Gistache white pine would still be worth anybody's time."

"Sure it would. If it were done right, I suppose there could even be a lot of selective cutting in there. But I think you're making mountains out of molehills. All we're going to find on the Gistache is brother Lee and a few other toughs like him. They'll be killing deer, elk, and moose, and packing 'em out to some buyer. All we'll have to do is round them up, kick their pants into the nearest jail, then go ahead and have the Gistache made a National Park."

"Simple, huh?"

"The Gistache *should* be a park," Buck said positively. "In the first place, there isn't another river like it on the entire continent. In the second, I doubt if there's another stand of pine like that anywhere. For my money, we should keep it just the way it is, so our children and grandchildren can see for themselves what the North American forests were like. But what have poachers got to do with it?"

Tom withheld further comment. Buck, nothing if not impetuous, was apt to make snap decisions and then act on them. He had decided, to his own satisfaction, that there was nothing on the Gistache except a minor poaching ring, and after it was rounded up the whole problem would be solved. But, if Buck's surmise were correct, what about all these

mysterious goings-on?

Just what was Mark Orsway doing in the hills, and where was he? Why had somebody, certainly not Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby, decided that Tom's and Buck's mail must be censored, and that anything relating to the Gistache must be removed? Why had Two-For-A-Nickel gone to Mark Orsway's room at the Hilldale House? Why had Lee Catesby, fleeing from Tom, shot at Alex Lashton?

These, and other questions, needed answers. Until they had those answers, they could do nothing intelligently.

"I'll bring the horses in," Buck said. "You make a meal."

"When's it going to be your turn to cook?"

"When I can't get out of it," Buck said. "Then we'll have cold biscuits and water. Get going, chef."

Tom built a small fire and prepared breakfast from the supplies they had packed. He used them sparingly, being especially careful with salt, sugar, and coffee. Neither he nor Buck expected to spend much time on the Gistache, but it was impossible to say exactly how many days they would need. At any rate, they must not waste basic supplies. With fish abundant, and wild berries and fruits in season, they were not likely to go without something to eat no matter how long they had to stay. But unseasoned fish can be a monotonous diet.

Buck came back with the horses, and saddled and bridled them while Tom finished the meal. Buck stared down at the skimpy breakfast.

"My! You made all this for only two men?"

"You can always get your own."

"Oh, I'm not that hungry," Buck declared. "It's a fine breakfast, Mr. Rainse, but I hope it's only a sample of what the dinner will be. Yes, indeed, it's still a fine breakfast! I've been out with a lot of cooks, and you're the only one who can cook to my taste. That's what I told Ned Williams the last time I saw him. Old Tom, I said, sure knows how to cook. Why I wouldn't touch a skillet when I'm out with you any more than—"

"You wouldn't touch a skillet if your life depended on it," Tom broke in. "And you needn't bother with any more boot-licking. Somebody has to cook if we're going to eat at all, and I might as well fix enough for two."

"In that case," Buck grinned, "hustle up so we can move."

They ate, did the necessary cleaning up, and mounted. The horses were fresh and spirited after a night's rest, but after a few miles, Tom and Buck pulled them to a trot. They were now within a couple of hours of the Gistache and on a main trail. Tom kept watchful eyes on Smoky, but the tawny hound offered no indication that other men had been or were about.

Finally, after another hour, Buck reined his horse in. Always aware of every possibility, the redhead was getting nervous. This trail was the obvious one. It led into one of the very few parts of the Gistache upon which boats could safely be floated, and anyone going to the river was likely to travel this way. It naturally followed that anyone looking for unwelcome visitors would watch the trail. Buck turned to Tom.

"I don't like it. With characters like brother Lee running wild around here, this is a wonderful place to get bushwhacked. Let's leave the trail and cut through the woods."

"Good idea."

They had scarcely left the trail when Smoky, trotting ahead, stopped short. His head was up, his nostrils questing. He poised, scarcely moving, then turned to look at the two men accompanying him. Buck glanced inquiringly at Tom.

"It's not man scent," Tom decided. "Anyhow, not fresh man scent. But let's investigate."

They dismounted and led their horses forward. Seeing himself accompanied, Smoky cut at right angles from the direction they had been traveling and went deeper into the forest. Five minutes later the scent of decaying flesh was evident to both men.

In a little open glade among the trees they came upon the heads, offal, and feet of three cow elk. Obviously they had been grazing in the glade, and shot down before they had had a chance to run. Very carefully the two wardens examined the evidence. Tom turned to his partner.

"Poachers, without a doubt. I'd say this was done more than a week ago, maybe about ten days."

"Looks that way to me, too. Well, Old Sleuth, does this make everything clear?"

Tom said reluctantly, "There *are* poachers in here, all right."

"Remarkable deduction," Buck sniffed. "If you were a poacher, where would you be camping?"

"On the river, naturally."

"Which proves you'd make a smart poacher. Let's get on to the river."

A mile farther on, they came to the great pine trees of the Gistache. Forest giants, venerable living things which must have been fair-sized trees when the first white man saw them, now they towered 200 feet above the heads of the men. It was a healthy forest, remarkably so. There were very few fallen trees, or trees with their tops broken, and no sign of disease.

As he rode among trees that dwarfed him, Tom felt a deep peace and contentment. No sensible person would deny the need for lumber, but surely there were enough trees for the lumberman's axe without taking these, too. He agreed with Buck; the white pines of the Gistache might far better remain as they were, a lasting monument to America's past. Whoever wanted to make a National Park of the Gistache was certainly a man of vision.

Leading the way, Buck let his horse follow an ancient game trail. It was wide and deep, a veritable animal highway that wound among these vast trees. A herd of white-tailed deer, surprised in the trail ahead, took graceful flight, their tails bobbing like lanterns in the dark forest as they disappeared. A few stray sunbeams stole through the branches of the great pines to dapple the forest floor, and an occasional bird flitted among the branches high above them.

Presently Buck put his horse to a rock-studded trail that led downhill, and from the rim of a cliff Tom got his first view of the Gistache.

Five hundred feet below, almost straight down, the river snarled along in the bed which it had been slowly carving for itself for countless centuries. A few gnarled evergreens, wind-lashed and storm-beaten, a strange contrast to the giant pines, clung precariously to the rock walls that rose from the river. Directly across from them, a small tributary stream flung itself from the top of the cliff and spilled its five hundred feet of spray into the river below. Upstream, more spray from a large falls of the Gistache itself, floated in the air.

This was the Gistache River, sixty miles of wild and wonderful water that had its birth high on a craggy mountain. Alternately pursuing its course between sheer cliffs and gently rising slopes, it was a river of a sportsman's dreams. As they had done for the past millennium, moose, deer, bear, and elk quenched their thirst in its waters, which were in turn filled with a variety of game fish. To wilderness-lovers, it was a river of beauty and sheer delight, almost the only one of its kind.

"Sort of rugged, isn't it?" Tom remarked.

"I noticed that myself." Buck had also been engrossed in watching the river.

"What's next?"

"Make camp. It's too late in the day to do anything else. Tomorrow we'll go out and find who we might have for company."

"Let's camp at the river's edge."

"If we can get there," Buck grinned.

Buck put his horse to a narrow trail that sloped down the cliff. The horse, experienced on such trails, felt his way cautiously. Pete followed, not as carefully, because he had a mate going ahead of him and there was no need for him to

be so wary. Smoky trailed behind.

Suddenly Buck's horse snorted and backed so violently that his rear quarters smashed into Pete's neck and shoulders. Instantly Tom slackened the reins, giving Pete his head. The little horse danced on the narrow trail, came within inches of stepping over, then found his balance. Shaken, but not panicky, Pete came to a trembling halt. He tossed his head nervously, and Tom dismounted.

"What's the idea?"

Buck started to speak. "I don't—"

Before he could finish, a large boulder lying on the upper side of the trail moved slightly, then toppled over, smashing across the trail and bounding down to the river's edge. Loosed by the boulder, a miniature avalanche slid down behind it, leaving a cloud of dust. Tom stood still, unable at once to comprehend the narrow escape they had had. Any horse in front of that boulder, and Buck's would have been if it had not had the trail sense to stop when it did, would have been carried along.

Buck's horse, reacting nervously, scraped the path with his right front hoof. Buck turned to Tom, beads of perspiration on his forehead.

"Well, pleasant little interruption!"

Tom remembered Alex Lashton's account of accidents and near-accidents on the Gistache. "Think it happened all by itself?"

"I didn't see anybody around here pushing it."

"It could have been set to jar loose when somebody traveled this trail."

"It could have been," Buck agreed grimly. "Let's have a look-see."

Letting their horses stand in the trail, they examined the boulder's bed and the path it had plowed for itself in crossing the trail. It told them nothing. If the boulder had been set with any sort of trigger, its own weight had smashed all the evidence. Buck scratched his head.

"Maybe you've got something, but I don't believe it. It's too fantastic."

"There's one way to find out."

"Yeah, let's go down and see."

Cautiously, leading their horses, aware of every pebble in the trail and watching every boulder, they walked down a rock-strewn slide and sniffed gratefully at the cool air that met them at the bottom. Exclusively snow- and spring-fed, the Gistache cooled both banks with its icy waters. While Buck unsaddled and unbridled the horses, and loosed them in the tall grass beside the river, Tom cut a willow pole and tied a hook and line to it.

He baited, cast, retrieved, and cast again. Swift water swept the line along. Suddenly the line halted, as though it had lodged against a snag, then started to move upstream. When Tom struck, his clumsy willow pole bent almost double. Grimly he held on with both hands, and fought a five-pound rainbow in to the bank. Tom swooped to pick the flapping fish up in his hands. He grinned with delight.

The Gistache was filled from source to mouth with big, fighting game fish. A sports fisherman, one who fished the river with light tackle, could enjoy the time of his life on it. Tom cleaned the fish, fed the head and tail to Smoky, filleted his catch, and went along the river's edge to pick up driftwood for his fire.

He found a half-submerged log, lifted it, and threw it back into the river. The water-soaked log sank into the angry water, and rolled sluggishly downstream. Tom found a few small pieces of firewood, then looked up the trail down which they had come. Obviously there was little driftwood along the river, and no accessible trees among these rocks. If he was going to cook his fish he had to get fuel. But the rock slide was high and he was tired. While Smoky padded contentedly beside him, Tom continued to search the river bank.

He came upon something and stopped short. In a little backwash, against the river's bank, lay the broken, ragged front half of a canoe. In spite of the fact that it was now battered and smashed by pounding water, and marked by rocks and boulders over which it had scraped, once it had been a good canoe. Definitely it was not a discarded craft which might have been thrown or loosed in the river just to get rid of it.

"Buck!" Tom yelled.

"Coming!"

The redhead joined him, and side by side they stared at this mute, broken evidence of tragedy on the Gistache. Then, as though both had one thought, they raised their heads to look at the spume hovering over the falls. Without a doubt the canoe had come over the drop. If anyone had been in it, it was inconceivable to suppose that he was still alive. Buck swung slowly to Tom.

"I reckon I'm convinced."

"It might have been an accident," Tom said.

"But it wasn't. You know that."

The Gistache, among a certain select group who did not mind a hard pack back in, was famous for its rainbow trout. But those who came to fish were all experts who either knew the river or hired a guide who did. There were places where it was safe to float a raft or canoe. Gistache fishermen were aware of such places and confined themselves to them. No Gistache fisherman was fool enough to venture into any of the river's more treacherous water. The wrecked canoe was no accident.

"Somebody might identify this," Buck said. "Give a hand."

They pulled the broken half of the canoe up on the bank and laid it under the shelter of an overhanging cliff. Side by side they gathered enough driftwood for a fire, then returned to camp. Watching the fish cook, Buck voiced Tom's thoughts.

"It must have happened on The Flats."

"I figure the same thing. The canoe would have beached way above the falls if it had wrecked higher up the stream."

"Yeah. Well, you can catch any kind of fish if you use the right bait."

"What are you talking about?"

"Bait," Buck repeated. "Whoever doesn't want company doesn't want it badly. He'll stop at nothing, including murder. He's got something, a gunman or a trap, planted on The Flats. If we go up there we'll be good bait."

"We'll at least make him come out of his hole," Tom agreed. "But I don't like it much."

"Neither do I," Buck said. "Wish I knew what his idea is."

"Fear," Tom guessed. "If enough fishermen come in here, and don't come out again, or if enough wild stories drift out of the Gistache, it'll keep people out. Nobody would back a death trap for a National Park."

"Could be," Buck conceded. "Well, let's go to bed."

Tom spent a restless night, and awoke with an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was possible, even easy, to wreck a canoe on the Gistache. And there was no law that confined fishing to experienced people who knew the river. Yet, there were too many accidents on the Gistache to be shrugged off as mere coincidence.

They ate a hasty breakfast and caught up their rifles. Tom slung a coil of rope over his shoulder, thinking it might be useful if they had to make a raft. The horses, which would be as safe here as anywhere, raised their heads to look when they started up the river.

Paying no attention whatever to the scents of deer, elk, rabbits, and other creatures that would have driven another dog wild, Smoky paced sedately beside Tom. He was a man-hunter, and men were all he wished to hunt. Knowing that, Tom

watched the tawny hound carefully.

They scrambled over rock slides, bracing themselves with rifle stocks as they did so, and threaded along narrow trails that overhung fierce water. Coming to the falls they stopped for a moment to watch.

Tons of rushing water, the Gistache's entire volume, here pounded through a narrow canyon from the deep pool at the foot of the falls. Nothing, not even a tree trunk, could take the falls' terrific hammering and emerge unscathed. No living creature, swept over such a place, had the remotest chance of living.

At the falls they scaled the cliff, lifting Smoky up some of the steeper places, and rested for a moment on top. There was no sign whatever of other men, nor of anything at all save the river and the giant trees.

Buck led the way up the rim of the canyon, and they came to a small meadow which was carpeted with wildflowers. Just ahead was The Flats, a two-mile stretch of water which was one of the very few places wherein the Gistache was navigable. In this part the wild river had room to grow. Instead of being crowded between narrow rock walls, it flowed between forested slopes and had made itself a wide bed. Above and below were similar places upon which a boat could be floated, but The Flats was the longest and best.

Beyond the meadow, at the edge of the forest, Smoky darted away from Tom's side and paused. The tawny hound stood a moment, one forepaw lifted and nostrils working as he tested the wind. He looked inquiringly back. Hastily Tom went to his side and snapped the chain on his collar.

"Hunt him up, Smoky," he ordered.

Smoky tugged gently at the chain, picking his way among the giant pine trees. Tom and Buck followed carefully, warily, trying to see everything. Smoky swung left, toward the river.

Suddenly a rifle cracked sharply, and a bullet thudded into a tree three feet to Buck's left.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### ORSWAY AGAIN

Tom dropped his rifle and dived forward, making a flying tackle on Smoky as he did so, and dragged the tawny hound behind another tree. Close on their heels, his rifle still in his hands, Buck threw himself down beside them. Buck Brunt's face was redder than his hair, and his eyes sparked hotly. He knelt, peering around the tree, so mad he couldn't talk.

Grasping Smoky's collar, keeping the hound close beside him, Tom crawled backward to retrieve his rifle. He looked at the sights to see if they had been damaged or knocked out of line, and at the bore to see if any foreign matter had entered. Finding the rifle in good shape, he returned his attention to Smoky.

Buck's voice was a brittle growl. "Cover me! Cover me, Tom! I'm going out and show that bushwhacker how to shoot!"

"No! Look at Smoky!"

The big hound was standing erect, testing the wind currents. His heavy jowls moved, and he snuffled audibly as he followed with his nose the man who had shot at them. His head turned steadily.

"Come on!"

The impetuous Buck scooted to another tree. Rifle gripped in both hands, ready for instant action, he peered around the trunk. Tom kept at his heels.

"Easy! He might not miss the next time!"

"He can't shoot anyhow!" Buck growled. "That first bullet missed by a yard! Come on!"

Tom let go of Smoky's collar and let him have some chain. The tawny hound strained to the end of it, and pulled hard. When Tom let more chain pay out, Smoky instantly took up the slack. The dog, on a hot scent, wanted to run, but Tom held him to a walk. Side by side, guiding themselves by Smoky's nose, Tom and Buck stalked among the great pines.

They moved forward slowly, at a deer-hunter's gait, and missed nothing. High in one of the pines a squirrel jerked his tail and disappeared. Mechanically they noted the action, dismissing it as inconsequential. They both started involuntarily when a marmot dashed across their line of vision.

Smoky swerved toward a big pine and dropped his nose to the ground. This, Tom knew, was the place where the would-be ambusher had hidden when he shot. The carpet of withered pine needles that covered the ground still retained faint tracks. However, the evidence left behind was very plain to Smoky's superlative nose.

The tawny hound snuffled a second or two and, with his nose still to the ground, tightened the chain in Tom's hand. He raised his head to run with his nose up; he had body scent again.

In the actions of the dog, Tom read the actions of the man Smoky trailed. He turned to Buck.

"I think he's trying to run away."

"Let's move faster, then," Buck gritted.

"We'd better see him before he sees us."

"We will," Buck promised. "You handle that dog and I'll handle the bushwhacker."

Tom fed Smoky more chain, and fell into an easy trot behind him. Instantly adjusting his pace to Tom's, Smoky began to trot. He veered more sharply, and between the trunks of the huge trees Tom caught glimpses of the river. That worried him. Nobody would be fool enough to take just one shot at two men unless he had a ready getaway. The hidden bushwhacker must have some means of escape, a boat on the river or a nearby horse, and if he succeeded in reaching either before they caught him, he could make good his escape.

Smoky strained very hard, pulling so strongly that he choked himself. His breath came in audible grunts. Tom trotted



faster, but as soon as he did the anxious Smoky instantly took up the slack. They came nearer the river.

"I see him!" Buck said suddenly. "He's got a boat or raft on the river. Come on!"

Smoky raced willingly with them as they ran toward the river, and because the hound offered no protest, Tom knew that the man Buck had seen was the one Smoky had been tracking. Then, flittingly through the tree trunks, he had glimpses of the fugitive.

He stood on a raft, obviously a crude one, and was poling as hard as he could into the Gistache. The river bore the raft out of sight behind some trees and Buck swore loudly.

"Damn! But he's never going to get across the river! If he won't come back when I tell him ..."

Buck left his unfinished threat hanging in the air. They ran nearer, until they could again see the raft. Then both men stopped in their tracks.

They saw the raftsman, about twenty feet from shore, set his pole deeply and give a mighty shove. They saw the pole bend and break in two. The man staggered wildly to retain his balance. He teetered, then fell backward onto the raft. A moment later the current had swept him out of sight again.

Abandoning caution, Buck tore wildly toward the river, Tom at his heels. They broke out on the river bank just in time to see the raft go into the air.

The rear end raised, as though the front had struck something solid in the river. Swiftly, pushed by the weight of water, the back end of the raft went farther up. The man flung himself clear just before the raft completed its turn, going clear over. As it splashed down on the river's surface and floated away, the man's head broke water.

Scarcely aware of what he was doing, Tom took the rope from his shoulder and cast it.

"Catch hold!" he bellowed.

The uncoiling rope hissed out over the Gistache's surface. The swimming man turned, fighting the river while he watched the rope. When its end fell into the water a few feet away, he made a desperate lunge that carried him forward. The man swooped again. His head ducked beneath the water and for one breathless moment Tom thought he was gone. Then the rope tightened.

Hand over hand, careful not to move too fast or to jar the swimmer loose, Tom drew in the rope. He and Buck waded into the shallows and knelt, one on either side of the exhausted man. They stooped to pick him up, carried him onto the shore, and laid him down. For the first time Tom had a good look at his face.

"Mark Orsway!" he cried.

"You sure?" Buck questioned.

"Positive!"

Mark Orsway stirred, made an effort to get up, and fell back. His lips were blue with cold, his teeth chattered. As Tom started a fire, Orsway moved again, and sat up. He looked bewilderedly at the two wardens and Smoky, but almost instantly regained control of himself. Tom had a feeling that, no matter what the situation, Mark Orsway would never lose his composure nor his self-control for long.

Tom lighted his fire and nursed a flame through the heap of dry wood he had gathered. Buck stood coldly aside, saying nothing, and it was Mark Orsway who finally broke the silence as he spread his numb hands to the fire.

"Thanks seem to be in order," he said stiffly.

"Also," Buck said, "explanations."

Tom thought fast. Mark Orsway was no sniveling Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby, who could be terrified with a threat. Buck's usual bullheaded approach wouldn't work here.

"Remember me?" Tom asked.

"Certainly. Did you catch your rustler?"

"Let's stop being so polite," Buck broke in. "How long have you been here?"

"Since the day after I picked up this young man's horse."

"Why did you leave your own horse with Fred Larsen, and hire his?"

Mark Orsway shrugged. "I happen to be rather fond of the one I was riding, and didn't want to risk its neck on these trails. Subsequent events proved that I was right. Both of Larsen's horses, the mount and the pack horse, have been stolen."

"Who stole them?"

"Maybe you can tell me?"

Tom felt a growing annoyance. This questioning wasn't getting anywhere. If Mark Orsway was here on an illegal mission, nothing he had said so far proved it.

"What brought you to the Gistache?" Tom asked.

"A rather silly impulse. That is, a rather silly impulse brought me alone. Had I known the sort of people I would find here, I would have waited for reinforcements."

"What kind of reinforcements?"

"Legal ones, like yourself," Mark Orsway said pleasantly. "Didn't you tell me the other day that you were Tom Rainse, and isn't he one of the local game wardens? Your friend, I presume, is Warden Brunt."

"So," said Buck hotly, "knowing we were game wardens, you shot at us?"

Orsway flushed. "*You* were the only one I could see clearly, and I hastily assumed you were the same gentleman who had stolen my horses. But I did not shoot *at* you, only near you. I merely wanted to delay you long enough to let me cross the river."

Tom remembered that the shot had landed three feet away. Anybody who knew how to handle a gun, even if he was not expert, could have put a bullet much closer than that. Mark Orsway, at least in this matter, was telling the truth. Tom had seen him shoot before.

"Permit me to ask a question that may be helpful," Orsway went on. "Have you heard anything about an attempt to make the Gistache a National Park?"

Tom and Buck looked searchingly at each other, remembering Two-For-A-Nickel's confession about tampering with their mail. Buck's eyes hardened.

"What do *you* know about it, Mister?"

"A great deal. The idea is largely mine."

"Yours!"

"That is correct, Mr. Brunt. Since handing Orsway Lumber over to my sons, I have devoted full time, and some money, to the creation of a National Park here on the Gistache."

"You don't say!" Buck grunted skeptically. "Why?"

"It's a matter of debt, I suppose."

"Debt?"

"That's right. Orsway Lumber, at least morally, is in debt to the nation. The company was founded by my grandfather, and

in those days the concept of proper lumbering was to cut every stick that could be marketed. Orsway did its share of this. I've wanted to pay at least part of that debt by guaranteeing the Gistache, and this pine, to the nation as a National Park."

"Call me a poacher!" Buck snorted. "Tell us some more!"

Mark Orsway said carefully, "I am aware, gentlemen, of the fact that my story may sound fantastic. I assure you that it would have sounded even more so to my grandfather. It is easy to imagine him turning over in his grave at the thought of an Orsway saving timber rather than cutting it.

"Please do not put the wrong interpretation upon this. We must have lumber and we can get it only if we cut trees. Lumbering is, and must remain, a commercial operation. However, progressive lumber companies, Orsway among them, have awakened to the fact that they must replace what they take. But in some instances replacement is not enough. These pines on the Gistache should be preserved for future generations.

"If they were removed, not only would irreplaceable timber be gone, but the unique Gistache would go the way of many rivers. The pines, as you know, are responsible for holding it at an almost constant level. Take them away and the river would flood dangerously in spring, then drop to almost nothing in summer. The whole area would be ruined, just as many another has been. And I am sure that we can afford to preserve this bit of wilderness, to keep it as it was when America was an Indian's land. That, gentlemen, is my story."

"What could you do out here alone?" Tom asked.

"Keep my eyes open. A certain amount of drama and mystery has cloaked the Gistache ever since it has become known that it might be a park. That's only natural. For another thing, there is enough pine here to make anyone wealthy, and of course there are various interests who have selfish eyes on it. The people are not going to have the Gistache if these interests can get it for themselves. However, my backers in Congress have assured me that they are ready to act favorably if I could scotch rumors that have been flying about the Gistache. In short, action cannot be taken if this place is only a death trap for fishermen and others who enter. I wanted to see for myself if there is a connection between the rumors and those who are opposed to the National Park."

"Who is opposed to it?"

"If I knew I would tell you," Orsway said. "I know only that someone is making a desperate bid for these pines."

"You've had time to get help," Buck pointed out.

"But not the opportunity," Orsway said. "My horses are gone, and every trail into or out of the Gistache is undoubtedly watched."

"You have no ideas at all?" Buck sounded sarcastic.

"Certainly I have ideas. I have explained them. Someone is after this stand of pine and intends to get it. In fact, it looks as though they are getting it, by creating trouble and blocking the Park project."

"You don't think," Buck said, "that a gang of poachers is pulling all this scary-scary stuff?"

"If they are, they're taking their operations seriously."

"Why did you try to skip across the river?" Tom asked.

Orsway shrugged. "I was obviously being watched on this side, and thought I'd try the other. I've been hiding in here for two days, building a raft. When I saw you coming, mistaking your identity, I decided that this was the moment to make myself scarce."

"What wrecked your raft?"

"I don't know, but it's not the first unpleasant surprise I've had here. I suspect it's some kind of booby trap, because there aren't any rocks or shoals in this stretch of the river."

"Suppose," Buck said smoothly, "that you make yourself comfortable right here, Mr. Orsway. Don't try to run, and don't try any signals. I know it's impolite, but my partner and I have things to talk over."

Mark Orsway smiled. "You don't trust me?"

"Frankly, I don't trust anybody at this point."

"Go ahead and talk, then."

With Smoky padding beside them, Tom and Buck withdrew far enough from Mark Orsway so that he could not hear them, but not so far that they were unable to see him. Buck's face wore a puzzled look.

"What do you think of him?"

"I don't know what to think."

"Neither do I," Buck admitted. "But I still say all we have to do is catch brother Lee and his pals."

"You sure, Buck?"

"What else can there be?"

Tom shook his head. "Buck, I just can't imagine a Catesby with brains enough to cook this up all by himself. Not that the Catesbys wouldn't try anything, but this shows somebody else's hand. Suppose Orsway is telling the truth?"

"There's one way to find out."

"What's that?"

"Nobody's going to wreck himself voluntarily on the Gistache," Buck pointed out. "Not if he knows the river, and Orsway does. He says there's a booby trap out there. If there is, we should get it out anyhow before somebody else falls into it and goes over the falls. Also, it'll prove part of Orsway's story. He sure didn't put it there and then nearly drown himself just to convince us.

"We'll make a raft and tie it together with your rope. Then I'll go down the river and find what's in it. You stay on the bank to watch Orsway—and me."

"Fine," Tom said, "except for one thing. You always want all the fun. *I'll* ride the raft."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!"

Buck stooped, broke a twig from a tree, and twisted it into two pieces of unequal length. Turning his back, he concealed both in his palm and held his clenched hand out to Tom.

"Here, pal. Short man rides the raft."

Tom drew the short piece.

"You saw me!" Buck accused.

"Shut up and let's make a raft!"

They walked back toward Orsway, who came to meet them.

"Did you reach any conclusions?"

"Yeah," Buck said shortly. "We concluded that we're going to find whatever wrecked you, if anything, and take it out of the river."

They prodded among piles of driftwood on the river's bank, discarding water-logged pieces and keeping those that were light and buoyant enough for a good raft. Expertly they lashed the wood chunks together with the rope, and Tom went into the woods to cut a long, slender sapling for use as a pushing pole. Feet braced on the raft, Tom tried the pole for balance.

"Good enough. Let's go."

Buck looked anxious. "Swing in when you get to the leaning pine."

"Don't worry. I'm not aiming to be picked up below the falls."

Tom shoved the raft out, fighting back a cold chill that swept over him. He was not in the brush now, but on the open river, and certainly there were enemies around. All that kept him from being utterly defenseless were Buck and Smoky. Tom steadied himself, and sought the river's bottom with his pushing pole. As long as Buck and Smoky were there, he would not be bushwhacked. He gave himself over to a study of the river.

It was swift water, but for the Gistache this was a placid stretch. Looking down, he saw a dark swirl in the water, then a big rainbow trout broke water within three feet of the raft. Tom began to enjoy his trip. Most of the time he and Buck were too busy to bother with either hunting or fishing for sport alone. But, if they ever did get time, they must come back to the Gistache and try some of these mighty trout on proper tackle.

Tom glanced shoreward. Buck, with ready rifle, was walking along the bank, behind Orsway. Then Tom had a sudden conviction that Orsway had told them a lie. There was no trap.

The leaning pine glided past on the right, and he turned the raft toward the bank. Buck was standing near the water's edge, watching anxiously.

"Come on!" he called. "Come on in!"

"I'm com—"

Before he could finish, the raft hit some unseen obstacle in the river, tilted dangerously, and Tom was pitched from it into the icy Gistache.

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# CHAPTER IX

## THE POACHERS

The stinging shock of the Gistache's ice-cold water penetrated his entire body and brain, and seemed for a moment to make everything numb. Above him, as through a distorted pane of glass, he saw daylight over the river's surface. Tom kicked his feet, vaguely aware of a shadow above him, but he did not know that it was the overturning raft. Then there was a sudden, terrific shock and blackness closed in.

The next thing he felt was his own tongue. It was between his teeth, felt as large as a football in his mouth, and seemed to be swelling steadily. Experimentally he moved his jaws, and tried to turn over on his side. When he did he was aware of a heavy weight on top of him, and irritably tried to shake it off. He couldn't, and the effort only made him dizzy.

Tom opened his eyes, to look at a clump of grass, and concentrated on a red ant crawling up one of the grass spears. For a moment he lay absorbed in that spectacle, as though it were very fascinating. He had an inward feeling that, when he stopped being interested in the ant, he would be in trouble. However, he also knew that he must move sometime. Tom groaned, turned on his side, and blinked in the dazzling glare of the bright sun.

He could see only hazy blue sky toward which equally hazy grass and trees seemed to advance and recede in a shimmering, unsteady wave, like an improperly focused moving picture. Tom shut his eyes and kept them tightly closed for what he thought was a long time. When he opened them again, except for a terrific headache, his illness had passed.

Less than two feet away he saw Smoky. The big hound was sitting on his haunches, head bent and long ears dangling. Concern was written on the dog's wrinkled face, and his great mouth was slightly parted. A pink tongue hung between Smoky's polished white teeth, and his mournful eyes were centered on Tom. When Tom turned his head, he saw Buck and Mark Orsway standing beside him.

The redhead's hands were on his hips, his face tilted down as he studied Tom's face. Buck knelt, took hold of Tom's wrist, and felt his pulse. Buck's sleeve was dripping wet, proof that he had also been in the river.

"How do you feel?" he asked gently.

"Ow-oo!"

Tom tried to sit up, fell back, and lay quietly for a moment. The next time he tried, Buck was kneeling beside him, a strong arm about his shoulders. Tom sat unsteadily, knowing that he was going to be sick again. He rested his head on his hands, feeling sweat creep out between clenched fingers, but when the spasm passed he felt better and, at last, could think clearly. He turned weakly to Buck.

"What happened?"

"Plenty." Buck's face still showed anger as well as concern. "That joker, whoever he is, has got a cable stretched across the river here, just under the surface. Your raft caught on it, went over, and when it came down it clunked you on the head. The only reason you didn't go down the river with the raft is because your gun belt caught on the cable and held you."

"How did I get out?"

There was respect in Buck's words. "Mr. Orsway hauled himself out along the cable and brought you back."

"And Mr. Brunt pulled us both in," Orsway said.

Buck was embarrassed. "Now all three of us can qualify for the life-saving class of the Girl Guides, or something. Hope too many of your ribs aren't cracked, Tom. We gave you artificial respiration, but you kept trying to throw us off. Now that you're alive again, I want to tell you that there are some characters around here who need education. How about all three of us educating 'em?"

Tom grinned. Directed to educate rather than arrest the poachers around Hilldale, Buck had inaugurated a very effective curriculum and driven it home with his fists. Tom looked at Buck, then at Mark Orsway. Buck had now accepted Orsway

at his own declared value.

"Good idea," said Tom weakly.

He rose to his knees, waited until he could hold steady in such a position, and got to his feet. Buck's helping arm went around his shoulder, and after a few seconds Tom had his land legs back. He shook his head and looked at the Gistache.

There was nothing visible except the river, comparatively gentle above the leaning pine and below it gathering momentum for the wild race that would take it on its thundering course down the valley. The river's surface betrayed in no way the fact that, concealed just beneath it, was a death trap. No boat, canoe, or raft could cross that stretched cable without capsizing. Whoever might be in the craft that tried it, barring miracles, would never survive to tell of his holiday on the Gistache.

Tom looked at the snarling white water that began well below the leaning pine, and heard the roar of the falls. He shivered. The Gistache was now a fierce, untamed river that would not be safe until it became a park, with rangers to tell the inexperienced about dangerous places, and to help them should they get into trouble. Possibly the most dangerous parts of the river would be fenced.

Buck said, "Before 'school' starts there's a little job to do."

"What's that?"

"Cut the cable. Some other fisherman with a yen to try his tackle on Gistache rainbows might come any time. We don't want him to end up below the falls."

They walked along the river and looked into its churning currents. There was no visible evidence whatever of the deadly thing they hid. The three turned to come back, and it was then that Buck found the end of the cable.

It was tied to a submerged post which must have been painfully hand-driven into the river bank, but whoever put it there was a craftsman. The top of the post, two inches below the river's surface, had been cleverly hidden beneath a swirling black ripple. The cable, fashioned of many twisted strands of steel, was bent downstream in a curving arc by the force of the current. It might have been another shadow beneath the water, a swaying, drifting thing that revealed nothing of its deadly purpose.

Looped around the post, the cable was secured by a metal clamp held by a rusting bolt. Buck lay down on the river's bank, reached into the water, and tried to turn the bolt with his fingers. It refused to yield, and Buck stood erect.

"Wish I had a monkey wrench."

"There has to be some way to break it," replied Tom. "How about—"

But Buck was already prowling along the river, kicking at various stones on the bank. He picked up one that suited him, balanced it in his hand, and searched until he found another. He knocked the two together, and when he did only a few chips broke from them. They were hard rocks, the sort for which he had been searching. He carried them back to the cable.

"A couple of chisels," Buck said. "If you can pound with the top one, Tom, I'll hold the bottom one."

"Sure."

"Let me pound," Orsway broke in. "He's had a nasty bump."

"I can do it," said Tom stubbornly.

Buck lay full length on the river bank, sliding his stone beneath the cable so that one half was on each side and the cable was supported in the center. Tom brought his rock down over Buck's and grimaced as cold water splashed in his face. He turned his head aside and continued to pound at the cable. Shiny steel showed where he knocked rust away. With a measured rhythm he kept at his pounding. He felt small steel wires giving way to his attack, but they broke slowly. At length he stood erect.

"Holy Christmas!" he gasped. "At this rate we won't have it cut until snow flies!"

Buck stood up beside him, rubbing raw, water-chapped hands. The red-haired warden blew on them.

"Maybe you've got better ideas?"

"Easier, anyway. How about driving a crotched stick into the river bank, then getting a long pole to stick under the cable and lift it free of the water. Five or six shots should cut it."

"Guns make noise," Buck objected.

"Is that bad? We're looking for these fat-heads anyway. If we can make them look for us, it will save time."

"Maybe you're right," Buck admitted.

He went into the forest and returned with two poles, a three-foot stick with a crotch on the end and a twelve-foot pole with one short branch left to form a hook. With the flat side of a big rock he drove the crotch into the river bank, balanced his long pole over it, and probed for the sunken cable. He brought the cable up, and turned his probing pole so that the cable was twisted in the hooked end. Buck rested his pole over the crotch and steadied it. When the raised cable had stopped trembling, he turned to Tom.

"The bullet comes out that little hole in the end of your rifle. Now let's see what else you know about shooting."

Tom stepped back, raised his rifle, centered the beaded front sight in the notched rear, and took steady aim. Moved by the river's current, the raised cable was still swaying slightly. Tom waited until he saw the cable over both sights, then squeezed the trigger.

The rifle's whiplash crack sent echoes bouncing back from the river's surface and from the rising hills. The cable danced. Particles of rust and bits of steel flew from it. Tom levered another cartridge into the chamber and waited until the cable stopped dancing. He aimed and shot again. The bullet plunked into the water, sending up a tiny geyser as it did so.

"Hold it still, you lunk-head," he admonished Buck.

"Why don't you learn to shoot?"

Tom shot again, and again, and on his next shot the cable sagged as though it had a suddenly broken back. For a few seconds it remained together, held by the last few stubborn strands. Then they, too, parted. Like a long snake the cable writhed downstream, the severed end of the longer part twisting toward the far bank.

Buck stepped back, a grin of satisfaction on his face. He ran a hand through his red hair and looked at the river. The trap, the deadly cable, had been rendered harmless.

"Well," he said, "you two ready to go hunting?"

"Yeah," Tom said.

"Right!" Orsway exclaimed.

"You lost your gun in the river," Buck pointed out. "Aim to fight 'em bare-handed?"

"You can use my revolver," Tom offered. "I've got the rifle and would rather have it anyway." He reached down to unbuckle his gun belt. "Blast the luck!"

"What's the matter now?" Buck asked.

"I must have lost my sheath knife in the river."

"You can use my jackknife," Buck grunted. "But what do you want to do? Scalp 'em after we find 'em?"

"I don't feel dressed without a knife."

"We wouldn't want you to run around naked. Might run into a lady deer."



Tom passed his gun belt to Orsway, who buckled it around his waist, and Tom slipped Buck's jackknife into his pocket. Buck turned to Orsway.

"You say these characters are all over the place?"

"They seem to pop up everywhere."

"Then tell Smoky to get his sniffer working, Tom."

In single file they threaded their way among the Gistache's giant pines, and jumped or waded the glass-clear little streams that flowed among them. After half an hour, Smoky tensed and alerted himself. Tom stopped, and Buck and Orsway halted beside him. Tom looked at the big tawny hound.

Smoky was straining against the leash, but not as eagerly as he did when he was on a man's scent. At the same time he was more interested than he ever was when there was merely an animal around. Buck looked at Tom.

"Well?"

"Don't know what it is. Keep your rifle handy."

Slowly, flanked by Buck and Orsway, Tom followed Smoky forward. The big dog walked softly, stopped, and started again. His tail wagged slowly. His tongue dipped from the side of his mouth. Then, ahead, Tom saw a horse.

It was pure white, a true albino with pink eyes and nostrils, and it wore neither saddle nor bridle. They were draped over the low-hanging branch of a nearby tree. The horse was tied by a long rope to another tree. Its ears flicked inquisitively forward as the men approached, and it stamped a restless foot.

A dozen feet away were the cold ashes of a dead fire. Evidently whoever owned the horse had stayed here for some time, because he had taken the trouble to build a rough fireplace. Scattered around were a few pots and pans, typical camp dishes, and a bed roll. Smoky sniffed about, but gave no indication that any of the man scent remaining here was fresh. The camp's occupant, Tom decided, had left early in the morning. Buck eyed the horse.

"One and one are at last making two," he announced. "That's Fred Larsen's saddle horse."

"Right," Tom agreed. "Nobody except Fred rides him, either."

Buck said, "I know now where we're going."

"And where is that?" Orsway inquired.

"Right where Fred Larsen's gang is, and after we get there we're going to clear up this whole mystery. You're wrong, Orsway."

"I'm wrong?"

"This is the same old stuff," Buck said wearily. "Just a bunch of bums who are too lazy to work for a living, so they're in here killing game to sell, and Larsen's got a string of pack horses to haul it out. Unfortunately, there's always somebody with no scruples who will buy illegally killed game."

Buck went up to the white horse, who arched its neck and sniffed him over with a friendly muzzle. Buck slipped the rope from around its neck and slapped it on the flank. For a moment the horse remained still, waiting for the saddle. When Buck moved away, the white horse trotted a few steps in the opposite direction and turned to look back. Then it tossed its head, kicked up its heels, and disappeared in the forest. Buck grinned.

"Fred will be walking from now on. Let's go."

Tom spoke up. "Larsen's sure to come back to this camp. Shouldn't we wait for him?"

"He'll be back," Buck agreed, "but when? Fred won't be a hard man to pick up anyway, and they must have more horses around. I'd like to find them. It will be a neat stroke of business if we can leave 'em all afoot. They won't be nearly as hard to round up then. Let's go."

Buck's proposal made sense. Certainly there were men on the Gistache who were up to no good, and jail was the proper place for them. If they were left without horses, they would be much easier to find, for even Smoky had difficulty following a man on a horse.

Slowly, missing nothing, they advanced through the great white pines of the Gistache. Smoky, on a short chain, walked contentedly beside Tom. Orsway followed quietly, but Buck was tense and impatient. Another hour and a half elapsed before Smoky showed any sign of interest.

He tightened the chain, sniffing suspiciously into the wind. Smoky glanced back at Tom.

"Go on. Hunt him up," Tom said softly.

Smoky swung back toward the river, on a forty-five degree slant from the course they had been following. He fumbled, sat down, and waited to catch the wind in his nose. When he started off again, he walked straight as a string. Smoky broke into a little trot and Tom hurried after him.

"Wait!" Buck said.

They stopped, and when they did the faint odor of wood smoke was evident. A camp lay not too far ahead. Smoky pulled impatiently and Tom drew him back. The tawny hound sulked.

"Take it easy!" Buck whispered.

They slowed to a snail's pace, redoubling their alertness. As they drew near the camp, the smell of wood smoke became stronger. Through an opening in the trees, Tom caught sight of a pole corral in which a dozen horses stood quietly. There was a rough cabin near the corral, and as they watched, a man came out of the door to look at the horses. Tom recognized Harris MacTeague, one of the more shiftless hill men.

"Stay here," Buck whispered. "Come when I call."

Without waiting for a reply, noiseless as a shadow, Buck slipped away. He disappeared among the great pines. Tom chafed mentally, and it seemed that an interminable time passed. Then he heard Buck's voice.

"Well, well, well! If it's not my old pal, Harris MacTeague! Hoist 'em, Harris!"

Tom and Orsway started toward the camp.

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# CHAPTER X

## SMOKE SIGNAL

Buck held his rifle carelessly, waist high. But it was cocked and the muzzle centered squarely on Harris MacTeague's gaunt stomach. The hill man's face, above a month's growth of beard, was half frightened and half sullen as he backed against the corral.

Buck stood a little distance away, his feet braced and his head jauntily erect. Beyond was the cabin and beyond that, Tom saw, was an open space about a hundred yards long. Buck had chosen his position well; he could see anybody who might come out of the forest, although himself shielded by the cabin. Contemptuous of the man who stood before him, Buck deliberately turned his head when Tom and Orsway approached.

"One down and six to go!" he said happily. "This man look familiar, Orsway?"

Mark Orsway frowned. "I can't say he does, but then I haven't had a good look at any of the local characters before. Who is he?"

"Goes by the name of MacTeague," Buck said cheerfully. "Harris MacTeague. Where you been hiding it, Harris?"

"Hidin' what?" the mountaineer growled.

"Now, now, Harris," Buck said pleasantly. "Leave us not play guessing games. Where have you been hiding the game that you and your pals have been shooting in here and packing out to whoever would pay you the most money for it?"

"You got nothin' on me," Harris MacTeague asserted.

"Maybe not," Buck agreed. "But I soon will have. How about taking a look at the cabin, Tom?"

"Sure thing."

Smoky padded beside him as Tom walked to the cabin and entered. The place was little more than a crude hut, hastily put together and roughly furnished. There was a kerosene drum with the side knocked out that served as a stove, pole bunks with rumpled blankets on them, a shelf of food, and a Winchester repeating rifle in one corner. Judging by the bunks, at least six men had occupied the cabin.

Tom stepped out of the low door, ducking his head as he did so, and went around to the back. Six fresh elk hides, obviously removed within the past two or three days, hung over the limb of a tree that grew behind the cabin, and a fresh haunch of elk, wrapped in a seventh hide, hung near them. They were up against a poaching gang, all right.

Depending upon the judge or justice before whom they took Harris MacTeague, he might draw anything from a ten-dollar fine to thirty days in jail, upon presentation of the evidence in the tree. Or he might be freed with a stern warning, local justice being notoriously lenient with poachers. But Harris MacTeague was on a level with Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby, and Buck was an expert at bluffing such lackwits. If he could bluff Harris into thinking that they had him in very serious trouble, he might talk and tell them everything they wanted to know. Tom returned to Buck and his captive.

"We've got him!" he said positively. "There's half a dozen fresh elk hides and a hind quarter of elk hanging behind the cabin, and for every single thing there we can stick him with at least five years in the cooler. That makes thirty-five years for you, Harris. Isn't that dandy?"

"You can't prove I done it," the hill man growled.

Tom winced. Officials were reluctant to punish even those poachers who were caught red-handed, and seldom would they even hand out fines unless the arresting warden could produce positive evidence of guilt. They had no such evidence against Harris MacTeague and he knew it. But Buck instantly took up the challenge.

"What else is in the shanty, Tom?"

"Blankets, a little grub, a few dishes, and a rifle."

"Is that your rifle, Harris?" Buck demanded.

"Yes," the other said sullenly.

"Ha! We're getting somewhere!" Buck rubbed gleeful hands together. "Get me the rifle, Tom."

Tom went into the cabin and returned with the Winchester. He handed it over to Buck, who threw the lever of the weapon back far enough to assure himself that it was loaded. Buck cocked the rifle, pointed it at the ground, and shot it. That done, he ejected the rest of the cartridges and handed the rifle to Harris MacTeague.

"Here. Your shootin' iron."

Astonished, Harris MacTeague accepted the weapon. Orsway looked puzzled, but Tom and Buck seemed to understand perfectly what was going to happen next. They glanced knowingly at each other.

"Where do you think I should shoot him?" Buck asked seriously. "In the cabin, or out here in the open?"

"It doesn't matter," Tom shrugged. "He'll never tell anybody anyway."

Buck started to bring his rifle to his shoulder.

"You—you can't do that!"

"We sure can," Tom contradicted. "We're sort of tired of rounding up you slimy yaps and then seeing you get off with a five-dollar fine. So we use our own methods. You're only one, and we're three, so we have three witnesses to swear that you came out shooting. They can't do anything to us for shooting you in self defense."

"Yeah," Buck agreed. "There's nothing personal about it, Harris. We just don't like poachers."

"Wait!" Harris MacTeague's voice shook, and Buck lowered his rifle.

"Something you want to say? Any last message? About those elk hides, maybe?"

"I didn't get all of 'em!"

"Who helped you, Harris? That is, who besides Fred Larsen? We know he's got a hand in it."

"Two-For-A-Nickel an' Lee Catesby, Avery Polder, an' Tate Catum."

"That adds up," Tom said. "There were at least six."

Buck asked, "Where'd you sell the game, Harris?"

"We took it over to Bigelow's Cut, at night, on Fred Larsen's horses. A man picked it up there."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know."

"Harris," Buck reminded him, "I haven't shot a skunk in a long while and I'm aching to keep my hand in."

"I swear I don't know!"

"Who does know?"

"Lee. He's the only one."

"You were too dumb to find out, huh?"

"Buck," Harris MacTeague pleaded, "I didn't do nothin' what many another man hasn't done!"

"Keep talking," Buck said. "It's interesting."

"I've told you all I know!"

"Who," Tom asked, "gave orders to kill any strangers who came in here?"

"We didn't kill nobody!" MacTeague was righteously indignant. "Lee, he said we should scare 'em when we found 'em! That's all—just scare 'em. Then, Lee said, nobody would come in here no more an' we could work just like we wanted to!"

Obviously the frightened MacTeague was telling as much of the truth as he knew. But somebody had thought up that devilish cable, and had needed help in rigging it. Certainly Lee Catesby was no master mind. Who was behind it? Tom turned to Orsway.

"What do you think of it?"

"Just what I thought before."

"A timber grab?"

"Judge for yourself. Did this clod ever think up anything except how to get his next plug of tobacco? There are brains behind it."

"Who's the real boss, Harris?" Tom asked.

"I've told you every last thing I know! Lee Catesby, he runs the whole thing!"

"That satisfy you, Orsway?" Buck asked.

"As far as this man is concerned, it does. Obviously he doesn't know any more than he's told, and he's too frightened to hold anything back. However, there's more to it than we see here."

"I'll back you on that," Tom asserted.

Buck scoffed. "Still say you read too many detective stories! There's nothing here except a bunch of small-time poachers just like this one, and all we have to do is wait right here in the cabin until they come back. Where are they, Harris?"

"Huntin'."

"On foot?"

"Yup. The hosses is all here."

"They'll come back," Buck decided, "and they'll bump right into us when they come. Speaking of horses, Tom, how about going back and moving our horses up to The Flats; the grass is better there. And fetch our gear, while you're at it."

"What are you and Orsway going to do?"

"Sit here in the cabin and be a reception committee."

"You go move the horses."

"Nothing doing!" Buck declared. "You rode the raft and this is my turn! It won't be much of a job, anyhow. They'll walk right in on us. Saddle one of these horses in the corral and get going. You should be back before the excitement, anyway."

"Well ... All right."

Tom roped a horse, a lantern-jawed gray, and saddled and bridled him. Smoky paced alongside as he trotted his mount into the giant pine forest. There he spurred the strong mountain pony to a canter. He cut away from the steep bluffs to the path they had taken down the cliff, and the gray took it without hesitation. Pete, picketed, neighed a friendly greeting and Buck's horse stamped his feet. Tom loaded their gear, and mounted Pete. Leading the other two horses, he rode back up the trail and picketed Pete and Buck's horse on The Flats, near enough the river so they could drink whenever they wished. He would have liked to take their own horses back with him, but knew the poachers would not come back to the cabin if they saw strange horses around it.

Satisfied that the horses were comfortable, Tom rode back to the cabin. He led the gray back to the corral, unsaddled and unbridled him, and loosed him in the corral. He started toward the cabin.

Smoky stopped suddenly, and stood with his massive head erect. Puzzled, Tom looked at him. Smoky acted as though he had a scent, but it was a faint and far-off odor which even he could not pick up clearly. Tom stood back.

Smoky walked across the clearing, but uncertainly, with many pauses. He kept his head high, as though unsure of himself, and then bent his muzzle to the ground. He trotted back to Tom's side and sat down, whining uneasily. But he walked along readily enough when Tom entered the cabin.

"Anything happen?" he asked Buck.

"Not yet." The redhead was sitting on one of the pole bunks, keeping a careless eye on Harris MacTeague. Mark Orsway leaned against the wall. Buck added, "They'll be back any time."

"Wish I could be sure of that," Tom said.

"Aren't you?"

"I think the show's been given away, Buck. Smoky picked up a scent when we came in, but not a clear scent. The way I read it, they've been here and gone."

Buck frowned. "How did they get wise?"

"Maybe you can tell us?" Tom looked at Harris MacTeague.

"I don't know nothin'."

"What would he know?" Buck snorted.

"Not much," Tom admitted. "But he wasn't left behind for no reason at all. And somebody's been warned off, I'm sure of it."

Buck's face flushed with anger. "Start talking," he invited.

"I don't know nothin'."

"I'm sure of that. But did you have any signals arranged?"

"I ain't been out of the cabin. They must have saw you."

"But they didn't, and you know it."

"I don't know nothin', I tell you."

"Yes, you do!" Buck roared. He leaped erect, cocked his rifle, and leveled it at their prisoner. "This time I'm going to blow what few brains you have clear into the Gistache! How did you warn them?"

One look at the redhead's face was enough for Harris MacTeague. "The chimley should of smoked," he whimpered. "They can see it from Fountain Knob."

Buck lowered his rifle. "Of all the stupid fools," he said bitterly, "and I mean fool wardens! Tripped up by a trick older than these hills! Harris, you did right well by your pals. A sight better, I might say, than they would do by you. Stand up."

"You goin' to shoot me?"

"No, I'm not going to shoot you. As Mr. Orsway says, brains are responsible for what's going on around here, and it's not your fault because you haven't any. At that, you seem to have more of them than a couple of game wardens I know. I just want to make sure you'll be here when we need you. Put your hands behind your back."

The hill man obeyed. Expertly Buck wound a rope over his wrists, then brought it up over his arms. When he was finished, there was no possibility of Harris MacTeague freeing himself.

"Pick your own bunk and get in it, Harris," Buck ordered.

MacTeague lay down on one of the lower bunks, and Buck lashed his feet. Then he threw a blanket over their prisoner.

"Sweet dreams."

Buck turned his back, walked out of the cabin. Tom and Orsway followed, and the redhead angrily kicked the door shut.

"The 'chimley' didn't smoke," he said. "And we were hooked by it! Well, maybe we can pick up what we lost."

Buck opened the corral gate and chased the horses out. They emerged uncertainly, nervously, and for a moment milled near the gate. Then, discovering their freedom, the herd moved off toward the forest.

"That'll keep our friends on foot for a while," Buck said. "Now let's see if that hound can find them!"

From the minute they left the cabin, Smoky's interest was at a high pitch that became increasingly tense as they advanced. Tom called him in and slipped a rope under his collar. The tawny hound strained against it, eager to be on the hunt. He led them straight toward Fountain Knob.

They came to the foot of the Knob, about a half mile from the cabin, and stopped to look up. One of the few places on the Gistache that was covered with scrubby brush instead of the big pines, Fountain Knob thrust its rocky head farther into the sky than did any of the forested hills around it. They started climbing.

They ascended slowly, warily, always watching Smoky to see what might lie ahead. The brush, straggling huckleberry bushes that reached scarcely to their belts, afforded only meager shelter. And, looking at Smoky, Tom decided that nobody who had been on Fountain Knob was still there. Although on a hot trail, the tawny hound gave no indication that any stranger was very near. When they reached the top, Smoky half-dragged Tom to a single small pine that grew there.

The big hound bent his head to the needle-littered ground, snuffling prodigiously. His tail wagged, and he strained toward the brush on the far side of the Knob. Tom restrained him and looked back. He could easily see the cabin, and the pole corral. The freed horses still lingered at the forest's edge. Buck surveyed the scene for a moment, then started forward impatiently.

"Let's go after 'em."

The pine needles were scuffed and kicked, and the brush was broken where men had climbed down the side of Fountain Knob. There was no way of determining how many men there had been, but certainly more than two. Perhaps all the rest of the poaching gang had been there. Now, warned, they were fleeing.

The trail through the brush was plainly marked by bent and broken huckleberry bushes, and Smoky's actions indicated that it was a very fresh trail. They came again into the great pines and the trail was no longer visible to human eyes.

But it could not be hidden from Smoky's nose, and was so powerfully evident to the hound that he had to bend his head to the ground only at intervals. Impatient, Buck came up beside Tom.

"Let's go faster."

Tom broke into a run, and instantly Smoky took up the slack in the rope. The poachers were heading directly away from the cabin. The chances were good that they would not return, for they would expect to be ambushed there.

Smoky burst out on a thin trail that wound among the pines, and started down it. Tom ran behind him in an effortless woodsman's lope. Buck stayed close, but Orsway lagged a hundred yards or so in the rear. Tom shot a fleeting glance behind to see what was detaining him, and ran on. Orsway was stopping now and again to catch his breath.

Smoky stopped abruptly, and faltered. Uncertain, anxious, he paced a little way down the trail, then turned and came back to snuffle into the forest. Puzzled, the tawny hound sat down. Again he tried earnestly to solve whatever problem confronted him. Buck brushed past.

"Let me have a look."

The redhead got down on his hands and knees and carefully examined the trail. He picked up and looked critically at a

pebble that was kicked out of its bed, and at a crushed weed. Rising to his feet, he walked a hundred yards down the trail, eyes down, then knelt beside a soft place.

With painful care he studied it, then arose and brushed the dirt from his knees. Buck returned to give an equally careful inspection to the place where Smoky had strained into the forest. Orsway panted up and stood silently.

"They've split," Buck announced. "Three, and maybe four, have gone down the trail. One, perhaps two, into the woods."

"Then we split, too," Tom suggested.

"That'll be best," Buck agreed. "It won't be very hard to follow the ones who've gone down the trail. Unless I miss my guess they're heading into the Upper Breaks and they'll stay in one of the cabins there tonight. Don't know where the woods runner will end up, but he'll be harder to follow. Smoky can do it. Do you want to trail him, Tom?"

"Sure."

"If you can catch him, bring him back to the cabin. And stay out of trouble," Buck advised. "Orsway, you come with me."

Buck and Orsway trotted down the trail. Smoky tugged worriedly after them, but came back when Tom pulled gently on the rope. At last sure of himself, and knowing which trail he was expected to follow, Smoky took it eagerly.

He padded along among the great pines, cutting farther and farther away from the trail and the river. Tom tried to fathom the reason for it, and could not. They were getting into wilderness country which was seldom entered, even by hunters. No fisherman ever came here, and there was no good reason why the fleeing men—he now knew there were two—should seek to escape by this route. Still, Smoky was sure that the trail lay here and Smoky was always right.

Tired, Tom slowed to a walk. The men ahead of him must be real woodsmen; at any rate, they were able to stay ahead. This trail was suspiciously like the one he had followed the day after Pete was stolen. Perhaps one of the men was the same.

Two hours after they'd left Buck and Orsway, Smoky stopped suddenly. The tawny hound poised, one front paw curled and every muscle tense. His head was up; he shuffled audibly. Tom reached down to give his ears a reassuring pat, and tightened the rope. The men he had chased for so long were very near, and anything could happen within the next few minutes.

Carefully, his rifle ready, Tom advanced. Trembling with excitement, Smoky tried to pull ahead. Tom restrained him. Then, about a hundred yards ahead, he saw a small clearing with a new cabin built in the center of it. Two-For-A-Nickel Catesby stood near the cabin door talking with another man who could be none other than Lee Catesby. The resemblance between them was strong.

Tom slithered to a big tree and edged cautiously around it. He wanted to be nearer, if possible, when he called upon the pair to surrender. Otherwise one or both might escape, and Tom had no desire to shoot either. He slunk around another tree, and was suddenly aware of motion beside him.

Then something struck his head with terrific force and darkness closed in.

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# CHAPTER XI

## THE PRISONER

Smoky, the trailer, sat on his haunches and tried to understand the situation that confronted him now. His master lay motionless on the ground, but Smoky did not connect the fact that he was there with any of the three men who stood near. Concentrating on the men he was trailing, he had not seen Tom struck by a man who had hidden himself behind a tree.

Smoky had known that the man was there, just as he had known that the two men that he had been trailing were close ahead. One of the two was the man he had trailed into the Hilldale House, and the other he had trailed when Pete was stolen. The third man Smoky had also known before, but he had been at the cabin for some time, and so was of little interest to the dog. Smoky could not know that Tom, intent on the two men he could see, had not even considered the possibility that there might be a third that he could not see. For only two men had laid the trail.

The big hound worried because Tom lay motionless, and when Tom stirred he pricked up interested ears. Unable to solve this situation, Smoky only knew that it did not seem right. The men began talking, first the stranger who had not been followed into the camp.

"You *were* being followed, all right. Where'd the other two go?"

"Must have lit out after Avery an' the boys," Two-For-A-Nickel said.

"Where are they heading?"

"Into one of the cabins on the Upper Breaks. We didn't want to bring 'em here."

The third man said, disgustedly, "Can't you fellows use your heads for something besides growing hair? That warden, Brunt, knows the country and is experienced. I'll bet he's on his way to the Upper Breaks right now."

"We got one warden," Lee Catesby said, "and the dog. 'Twon't be hard to get the other one."

"And get our ears shot off in the process?" the third man suggested. "No, we'll do it sensibly. We have the redhead's partner, and naturally that puts us in a good position to bargain."

"I never thought of that!" Lee Catesby exclaimed admiringly.

"You wouldn't." There was contempt in the other's voice. "Watch him. And don't bring him into the cabin, understand?"

Smoky watched the third man disappear into the cabin. He bore no resentment toward this man or either of the others because, most times, he was a gentle dog with overwhelming curiosity about all men. Only when aroused did his fighting Plott-hound heart overcome his bloodhound gentleness.

He continued to sit on his haunches, eyes intent on Tom, until his master stirred again. Tom rolled over, opened his eyes, and groaned. Smoky wagged a happy tail and snuggled close as Tom sat up and looked at the two men. He did not see them clearly because, as Smoky could not know, he was still dazed from the blow on his head. When he spoke, his voice was thick.

"Where's the other one?"

"Other what?" Lee Catesby asked roughly.

"I—I—" Tom was not yet fully conscious. "I thought I heard someone talking. Someone I know."

"You know too much!" Two-For-A-Nickel sneered.

Smoky twitched nervously. There was an undertone, a threat, in the other's voice that the big dog did not like. An unborn growl trembled in his throat and there was a prickling sensation along his neck as the hairs there rose. He watched Tom shake his head violently, and focus his eyes on Two-For-A-Nickel.

"Hello, Catesby," Tom said.

"Hello, Catesby," the other mimicked. "Hello, Catesby! What's the matter, warden? Is the big, bad warden scared? Hello, Catesby! This ain't the same, is it? You an' your side kick was goin' to leave me tied to a tree, but you never figgered my turn would come!"

Smoky's growl bubbled deep in his chest, and he bared ivory fangs as he turned. The bristles on his neck rose as he put himself between Tom and the lanky hill man. Two-For-A-Nickel grabbed his rifle.

"Easy, Smoky," Tom said.

Hearing his name, and the command, Smoky relaxed. But he kept a wary eye on the man. With a dog's inborn ability to judge the moods of people, Smoky knew that Two-For-A-Nickel's words and intent were both dangerous. Therefore he would bear watching, even though Tom's commands were to be respected.

"Put your gun down," Lee Catesby said shortly.

"Who you think you're talkin' to?"

"Put it down and quit actin' like a half-wit before I bust you in the jaw!"

Smoky watched the smaller man cringe before the larger one, understood the tone of voice, and looked at the larger person with some respect. Obviously he was the master here. Then Smoky heard that tone of voice change as Lee Catesby addressed Tom.

"I ain't soft-headed, and I'd just as soon shoot that hound, or you, if either one of you gets out of control. Don't make no mistakes about that."

"You're making the mistake, Lee Catesby," Tom said. "Stealing my horse was one. Another was becoming a two-bit poacher."

Without understanding the words, Smoky knew that Tom and this man were not quarreling.

"You look reasonably intelligent, Lee," Tom went on. "Who got you into this small-time operation?"

"Don't get smart, warden."

"I'm already smart, Lee. So is Buck. You and your half-witted gang made peanut money poaching. Did you hope your big money would come in when the white pine was cut? If so, who's backing that?"

Lee Catesby flushed, and got to his feet angrily.

"You've been havin' too many nightmares. They don't pay off. Look, I'm goin' to tie you. If that dog interferes, I'll shoot him. Try any tricks and I'll shoot you."

With the change in voice, Smoky plunged forward, baring his fangs and raising his hackles as Lee Catesby approached Tom. The tawny hound heard Tom's quieting voice, and felt his soothing hand. Again he relaxed, crouching as close to Tom as he could get and ready for whatever came. Smoky got to his feet again when Lee Catesby ordered Tom to put his hands behind his back, but again he was quieted by Tom's voice. Catesby lashed Tom's arms and legs.

"That'll be all for a while, warden. Except that I'm goin' to tie that dog of yours and he better let me."

Smoky drew back when Lee Catesby approached him. Again he looked to Tom and again was quieted by Tom's reassurance that everything would be all right. Smoky let the man slip a rope beneath his collar and tie him to a tree. He slunk close to the tree, letting the rope slacken, and kept anxious eyes on Tom. He heard Lee Catesby's voice, again calm and assured.

"Might as well take things easy, warden. We won't do nothin' until night."

"And what are we going to do then?"

"Then we're goin' to find your pal. That is, we're goin' to let you and your dog find him. Ain't that a smart idea?"

Taking his brother with him, Lee Catesby turned abruptly and walked away. Smoky watched them enter the cabin. When

he tested the scents flowing out of the open door, he knew that the third man was still there. Carrying rifles, both Catesbys came out of the cabin, shut the door, and sprawled out in the sun.

Smoky lay down, pillowing his huge head on his outstretched front paws. His mournful eyes remained wide open as he watched Tom steadily.

This he did not like at all. He was tied and unable to move except within the limits of his rope. His master did not move at all. It was a difficult situation, and too hard to understand. After a while the tawny hound rose to pace restlessly back and forth.

Periodically he stopped his pacing to look at the cabin, and sniff every little scent that was borne to him. There was the odor of smoked meat, the smell of tobacco, and even the scent of two chipmunks that had taken up their abode beneath the cabin. Smoky discarded all those, and remained interested only in the man who, he knew, was still in the cabin, and the two who were lying outside in plain sight.

Finally Smoky saw the Catesbys go back into the cabin, and then smoke sifting lazily out of the chimney. There was the smell of cooking. Lee Catesby brought a plate of beans and elk steak to Tom, and threw a chunk of meat to Smoky. The hound remained still, not eating, while Lee untied Tom so he could eat. When he spoke, the man's voice was still calm.

"An hour or so after dark we'll start. Until then, you're better off tied."

Tying Tom up, Lee Catesby went back into the cabin. Smoky sniffed at his meat, then lay down, ripped it to bits with his powerful jaws, and swallowed it. Again he got up to pace restlessly at the end of his rope. He turned to stare at a yellow light that suddenly gleamed in the cabin's window.

Night, as usual, brought all the creatures of the night. Near the cabin a whip-poor-will sang its evening song, and from far off another answered it. A field mouse rustled and squeaked in the grass near the tree to which Smoky was chained, and a great horned owl came on silent wings to hunt the mouse. Smoky gave disinterested attention to a mother fox who was leading her cubs through the forest.

He wanted, and liked, none of this and was becoming more and more uneasy. His place was with Tom, not with strangers, and he had never liked being tied even when Tom tied him. Smoky picked the rope up in his teeth and dropped it again. He pawed restlessly at the ground. Then he picked up the rope a second time and began to grind it between his teeth.

This trick he knew, and had practiced often before. He also knew the difference between ropes and chains, and was aware of the fact that he could not bite a chain in two. But he could cut any rope if he continued to chew at it. Presently the rope parted, leaving about ten inches trailing from his collar. Instantly Smoky forgot his nervousness and his uneasy feeling. He was free, and could now go to Tom. He drifted happily over to his master and snuffled at him.

The cabin's door opened, and yellow lamplight streamed out around the man who stood in the doorway. Smoky felt Tom stiffen.

"Get back in here and shut that door!" The voice was imperative.

The cabin door shut and Tom relaxed. Smoky reached down to lick his master's face with a sloppy, wet tongue. Tom pulled away.

"Cut it out!" he whispered.

Smoky wagged his tail and whined low in his throat. He walked a little distance away and looked back, unable to understand why Tom did not follow him. Then he returned to his master and stretched full length, his head on his paws. He raised his head when Tom spoke softly to him.

"Smoky, get Buck! Go to Buck!"

Smoky wriggled uneasily, not understanding. He knew that he was being given a command, but he was unable to interpret it. Smoky reached out with a big paw to scratch experimentally at Tom's trousered leg. Tom spoke again.

"Get Buck! Go to Buck!"

Smoky rose and stretched, letting his tongue dangle between his teeth while he looked at Tom quizzically. This was a command he had never heard before and, never having heard it, could not figure out what it meant. Smoky watched with sympathetic interest while his master distorted his body.

Tom arched his back, so that his head and heels were on the ground and the middle of his body was in the air. He writhed and twisted, assuming every conceivable pose which his ropes would let him. Panting, he lay back down. Then he began twisting himself again. After five minutes, when an object dropped out of his pocket, Smoky stepped inquisitively forward to snuffle at it.

It was Buck Brunt's knife; the redhead's scent clung unmistakably to it. Smoky sniffed it thoroughly, as he did everything he came across that had any trace of man scent clinging to it. This odor of Buck's was very familiar and already catalogued away in the numberless brain cells where Smoky kept every human scent he had ever found. The tawny hound raised his head.

"Hunt him up!" Tom said sharply.

Smoky whined uneasily. This time he understood perfectly because this was the way he had always been set on a man's trail. First he was permitted to smell some object to which the scent of the desired man clung, then ordered to hunt him. Smoky hesitated because he did not want to leave Tom.

"Hunt him up!" Tom repeated.

The tawny hound quivered. Since the day he had met Tom, back at Bill Tolliver's, he had lived only to please him. He loved his master with all the affection an intelligent dog could lavish, and not to do as Tom wished was unthinkable. Since his master wanted him to find Buck, he would do his best to find him.

He had hunted many people in many places and always, when he was out with Tom and they passed some place where he had followed a trail, Smoky remembered it. He knew perfectly well where he had last seen Buck. With a low whine, Smoky moved away from Tom into the darkness.

A hundred feet away he paused to sit down and look back. Now he was torn between two very strong desires: the wish to stay with his master and the imperative command to hunt a man. Smoky shifted his paws uneasily. Then the instincts and impulses which had been bred into generations of bloodhounds helped him decide. He had been born to hunt men, and hunt men on command.

A dark shape in the dark shadows, he flew back along the trail over which he had followed Two-For-A-Nickel and Lee Catesby. Now he was eager and tense, vibrant with the mission he had set out to perform. Nothing could make him turn aside now.

He reached the narrow little woodland trail and stopped for a moment to orient himself. The scents were still plain. Buck and Mark Orsway had gone down this trail behind three other men. Smoky closed his mind and his nose to all save one scent, that of the man he had been ordered to hunt. At a fast lope he raced along that scent.

Though he paid no attention to anything else, little escaped him. He knew when he passed a rabbit that flattened itself in its brush pile, hoping to escape detection. He was aware of feeding mice, roosting grouse, wandering deer, bear and elk. Smoky had run three-quarters of an hour on the trail when he slowed his pace.

Ahead of him was a cow moose with a calf, and her scent proved that she was angry. Scenting the dog, which to her was little different from a wolf, she feared for her calf's safety and proposed to defend it. Bristled, long, upper lip curled back from yellow tushes, she rushed the dog.

Smoky retreated, dodging into the brush and eluding the cow as she raced by. Agile as any wild thing, she whirled. One of her raking hooves caught Smoky's shoulder and left a gaping wound in it.

Smoky's anger flared. Though he was half bloodhound, he was also half Plott hound and as such feared nothing. Fangs bared, he roared out of the brush straight at the angry cow. She retreated, snorting, and Smoky leaped in to strike at her flank. Butting her calf ahead of her, the cow ran into the forest.

Smoky let her go. The trail was the thing. Now that he had started it, he must come to the end. Handicapped because the

cow's blow had lamed him, he still ran as fast as he could. A short time later, Smoky increased his pace. There was a cabin ahead, and all the men who had left their scents in the trail were there.

Smoky whimpered with joy. He had found the man he had set out to find. Balancing himself as best he could on his hurt leg, Smoky scratched on the closed door.

A moment later a light flared. Buck Brunt appeared at the door. Behind him, Smoky saw Mark Orsway getting out of a bunk. Three other men lay on separate bunks, tied hand and foot.

"Smoky!" said Buck incredulously.

The tawny hound wriggled happily into the cabin.

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## CHAPTER XII

### ON THE FLATS

Tom lay perfectly still, trying not even to wriggle or to do anything else that might call Smoky back to him. Knowing the dog as he did, he realized the internal conflict that must be going on within him. Smoky had been ordered to find Buck Brunt, but he would want to stay with Tom, and it was not until Smoky had been gone for a full half hour that Tom breathed easily. Smoky would not be back now. Anyhow, he would not be back without Buck.

Tom relaxed, making himself as comfortable as he could. He did not know when Buck would return because he could not possibly know how far he had gone, or whether or not Buck and Orsway had fallen into a trap too.

Meanwhile he had done everything he could. Tom sat up alertly at a noise down the trail, but it was only a wandering deer. Catching scent of the camp, and the men, the deer snorted and leaped back into the forest.

The moon rose, painting the clearing yellow and softly illuminating the cabin. Tom stared toward the building. Whatever the three men in the cabin—and he was sure there were three—intended to do, they were not in any hurry about doing it. Tom tried to figure out just what their plans were.

Lee Catesby had already told him that they planned to find Buck, or rather, to make Tom and Smoky find him. Then, probably, they would do their best to take Buck and Orsway prisoner. Doubtless they wanted to strike by night because that would be much safer than a daylight attack. The Catesbys certainly knew of Buck's prowess with a gun. Tom wriggled in his bonds, but they had been expertly tied and there was no loosening them. He could not get away.

Nearly an hour after Smoky left, the cabin door opened and one of the men came out. A dark shadow among the trees, it was not until he spoke that Tom identified Lee Catesby.

"Looks like the time's here, warden." Catesby said.

"I haven't much to say about it, have I?"

"You got nothin' to say," Lee Catesby corrected. "Do as you're told and you won't get hurt. We're goin' to leave your hands tied, but you'll be able to walk. I'll get the dog."

Lee Catesby took a few steps toward the tree to which Smoky had been tied and stopped in the darkness. For a tense moment he stood still, and when he turned to Tom there was something cold and ugly in his voice.

"Where's the hound?"

"You tied him. You should know."

"You *do* know. Call him."

"Sure," Tom said. "Anything to please."

He whistled shrilly, waited a moment, and whistled again. For a moment he was afraid that Smoky *would* come. If by any chance he had lingered near the camp, and was within hearing distance, he would respond to the summons. Then Tom breathed easier. Smoky was definitely gone, and the only place he would go was on Buck Brunt's trail. Tom could not keep a note of triumph out of his voice.

"He seems to have run away."

Lee Catesby stood still a moment and, even though Tom could see his face only indistinctly, his fury was very evident. Catesby hesitated, as though uncertain, and Tom knew that he was not a free agent. There was someone else here, someone who gave the Catesbys their orders. Abruptly the hill man whirled on his heel and re-entered the cabin. When he emerged there were two more men with him and, though Tom got only fleeting glimpses of either, one was certainly Two-For-A-Nickel.

"How did the hound get away?"

The voice was soft, and purposely low. Tom writhed in his bonds and then lay quiet while he concentrated every faculty on that voice. He had heard it before. But where?

"He just chewed his rope in half and took off," Lee Catesby said.

The other voice murmured indistinctly.

"We can allus shoot the warden and get out afore we get caught," Two-For-A-Nickel suggested.

Another indistinct reply. Again Tom strained to identify the voice, and could not.

"But we can't go back—" Lee Catesby began.

"Take him back to the other camp," the third man said harshly and distinctly. "You're responsible."

Lee and Two-For-A-Nickel stood silently near while the stranger went back into the cabin. Two-For-A-Nickel knelt to cut the bonds that lashed Tom's legs, and Tom felt the sting of the knife as it sliced through his trousers into the leg.

"Get up," Lee said.

"Before I kick you up!" Two-For-A-Nickel added.

"Lay off!" Lee growled. "You heard what he said."

"We got to take orders from him?" Two-For-A-Nickel whined.

Lee ignored him, and said to Tom, "Get up and start walkin'. Try to get away and I'll bat you down with a rifle."

Tom rose, his legs aching painfully as he stretched them. He took a forward step, stumbled, and recovered his balance. Blood flowed back into his cramped legs and he walked more easily. Behind him, saying nothing, the Catesby brothers followed.

Apparently the third man was staying here, or perhaps he would come along later. Who was he? Surely he was no local hill man, and just as surely he was here for something more important than just running a small-time poaching gang on the Gistache. Tom's thoughts were interrupted by the blunt muzzle of Two-For-A-Nickel's rifle in his spine. Prodded by it, he emerged on the narrow trail and swung back toward the camp where they had left Harris MacTeague.

Experimentally he tried the ropes that bound his hands, but could not loosen them. It would be useless to run, or to try to escape, if he could not get his hands free. Lee and Two-For-A-Nickel had every advantage. They could overtake him easily and he would be unable to fight back.

The trip took them most of the night. Soft mists that foretold the approaching dawn swirled about the clearing when they reached it. While Two-For-A-Nickel threatened him with a cocked rifle, Lee made Tom sit down with his back against the pole corral and bound his legs. He ran a rope from the bonds to a corral post, then both Catesbys went into the cabin.

Tom lay helplessly, unable to see an opportunity to do anything. Whoever was running this gang, and giving orders, knew his business. The plan to make Smoky trail Buck and Orsway had misfired, but Tom was positive that the stranger had some new scheme. He was both bold and desperate, and evidently had no intention of abandoning his plans.

"Harris!" Tom heard Lee Catesby exclaim.

"Leave me loose!" Harris MacTeague gritted. "I got somethin' to settle with them game wardens!"

Lee Catesby's sarcastic laugh sounded from the cabin. "You'll have to wait, Harris. We've got one of them, but—"

The door slammed, a light flared in the cabin, and presently the acrid smell of wood smoke filled the quiet air. Half an hour later another man, undoubtedly the stranger who had stayed behind, rode into the clearing. He looked at the empty corral, as if considering something, then tied his horse to a corral post and went into the cabin. He did not approach Tom, and made no effort to speak to him.

Tom eased up beside the corral, making himself as comfortable as possible and relieving the strain on his bonds as much as he could. He slept in fitful snatches, and awoke from an uneasy nap to find that dawn had come. He could see the front

of the cabin, but not the back. No smoke was rising from the chimney.

Then, with a start, Tom noticed the horse that the stranger had ridden in the night before. It was Buck's, which he had left with Pete on The Flats! Where was Pete? If the stranger had found the horses, why hadn't he brought Pete in, too? He couldn't have ridden Pete, but he could have led him. Sick with worry, Tom tried to consider every possibility.

Presently both Catesbys and Harris MacTeague came out of the door, and shut it behind them.

Was the fourth man, the stranger, still in the cabin? Tom cursed himself for not staying awake and watching. The Catesbys and Harris MacTeague, each with a rifle, arranged themselves in plain sight in front of the cabin.

A cold fear swept over Tom. Now the stranger's strategy, or at least part of it, became apparent. He, Tom, was the decoy, the painted duck to lead Buck into a trap. They figured that Smoky had returned to Buck, and would lead him straight to Tom, or that Buck would return to the cabin anyway. In either case, they would use Tom as a hostage. Tom twisted around until he could face the direction from which he had come last night. If Smoky returned with Buck, they would be on this trail.

The three in front of the cabin did not even shift their positions. Tom knew with a growing certainty that they were waiting for Buck. His eyes seemed to burn in his head as he kept them turned on the trail. But the sun was high, and an interminable time had elapsed, before he saw any motion.

Then it was just a faint flicker, something that appeared and disappeared among the Gistache's giant pines. Maybe it was a deer or elk. Maybe ... Tom could no longer bear the suspense.

"Buck! Buck!" he shouted.

There was a moment's silence, then Buck answered. "That you, Tom?"

"Yes! Yes! Don't come any closer! It's a trap!"

Tom was aware of motion beside him, and turned his head to see Lee Catesby standing there. Lee was grinning sardonically.

"Can you hear me, Brunt?"

There was second's silence. "Yes," Buck said.

"You're near enough," Lee advised. "There's three rifles on your partner, and if you try anything he gets it first. Did you catch the boys?"

"We caught them," Buck said.

"Bring them in," Lee ordered. "Bring them down this trail and see that you're walkin' with them. Get it?"

There was another silence, then Buck said, "I got it, but I'll have to go back for them."

"How much time you need?"

"Two hours."

"No more than that!"

Tom writhed in his bonds. Whoever had directed this was indeed a clever man. Tom was a hostage, insurance to see that Buck not only freed the rest of the poaching gang but gave himself up. Then, for a time at least, the stranger would have a free hand. Evidently time was all he needed.

After a glance at Tom's bonds, Lee Catesby walked back to resume his place beside Two-For-A-Nickel and Harris MacTeague in front of the cabin. Tom twisted in desperation. Again he turned to face the trail down which, within two hours, Buck would come with the freed poachers.

Minutes that seemed like hours dragged slowly by. Tom kept his eyes on the trail. The two hours seemed to have passed, but when Tom looked at the shadows cast by the sun he knew that it had been only a few minutes. More minutes went



slowly by, then Tom was startled out of his fierce concentration on the trail by Buck Brunt's harsh voice.

"All right, you guys! Grab the air!"

Tom jerked his head around to see Buck standing in the cabin doorway. Behind him was Mark Orsway. Buck's rifle was at his shoulder, aimed, and when Lee Catesby snatched his own rifle up, Buck's roared. The rifle spun out of Lee's hand.

Tom grinned happily. He should have known. Buck didn't know how to quit and he was a master of strategy. He must have summed the situation up instantly and thrown his enemies off guard by promising to return in two hours. Then he had led Orsway around to the back of the cabin, climbed through the window, and this was the result.

While Orsway covered the three, Buck strolled forward and grinned down at Tom.

"That's a pretty good dog you got," he admitted, as he cut Tom loose. "First he came and got us. Then he brought us back to you. Of course, if you—"

"Where *is* Smoky?" Tom asked, stretching cramped arms and legs.

"Back in the woods. We figured he wouldn't be too good at climbing through windows, and we didn't want him to give the show away, so we tied him up. Orsway and I—"

The window! Tom suddenly remembered the stranger, whose actions now became clear. Too clever to believe that Buck would actually bring in the captured poachers, he must have gone out the back window and headed for The Flats, where he had purposely left Pete!

But Buck's horse, which the stranger had probably left as a blind, to make the poachers think he was still in the cabin, was hitched to the corral!

"Tie up these three and follow me to The Flats!" Tom cried. "There's still another one, the real leader!"

He loosed the picket rope on Buck's horse and made a flying mount. He leaned low over the little horse's back, and dug his heels into his mount's ribs. Buck's horse streaked into the forest, toward the river.

If his guess about the stranger had been right, he might still be in time. It *had* to be right. Leaving a fresh horse on The Flats was a logical plan. But there was one thing wrong about it, Tom thought hopefully. Pete couldn't be ridden by a stranger!

In proof of his theory, he heard an enraged horse scream. As he broke out on The Flats, the horse screamed again, and Tom saw Pete.

In the saddle, trying to urge his mount into the river, sat the dude, Alex Lashton!

Pete went straight up, and came stiff-leggedly down. The rider desperately retained his seat. Pete crow-hopped, sun-fished, and still Alex Lashton rode him. Then Pete rose again, flung himself to the right, twisted to the left, brought his rear quarters into the air while he danced on his front feet, twisted again, went from the left to the right, reversed himself, and Alex Lashton flew from the saddle to land heavily on the ground. As soon as he was free of his rider, Pete started placidly to crop grass.

Alex Lashton lay where he had fallen. Tom dismounted and started toward him.

"So it's you, Lashton," Tom said grimly. "Well, you bet on the wrong horse this time."

Alex Lashton groaned and rolled over. "It was ... last gamble," he said painfully.

"You let the rest do most of the gambling, didn't you?"

"Naturally. Why take unnecessary risks?"

Tom paused a moment. This man had no more humanity than the rocks on which Pete had thrown him. He would probably tell all he knew about the poaching, if he thought it would help his own case.

"You might make things a little easier for yourself by cooperating now," Tom said coldly. "What do you know about Lee

Catesby?"

"Catesby is a fool." There was contempt in the other's voice. "If I had not distracted you that first day we met, you would have gone on and caught him. I needed him here."

"What kind of hold have you got over Catesby?"

"Little matter in Oregon; there was a murder there." Lashton sat up, clutching his side. "Would it help me if I gave you the details?"

"We'll get in touch with the Oregon authorities." Tom felt revolted at the man's eagerness to incriminate others. "What are the rest doing here?"

"They're all working directly for Catesby. Market-hunting."

"Yes, as a blind for your plan for grabbing the Gistache pine! You did tell me, the day we met, that you are in the lumber business. Remember?"

"An unfortunate slip."

"No difference," Tom grunted. "I was dumb enough to forget it. Did you tell Two-For-A-Nickel to steal our mail, too?"

"No; his brother did."

"On your orders!" Tom snorted. "I suppose he stretched the cable across the river by himself, too. Look here, Lashton. You'd better tell the truth, because Catesby will."

Alex Lashton looked at the river, then at Tom. Again he clutched his side. "Yes, Lee Catesby and I did that."

"Knowing that people might be killed by it?"

"Mr. Rainse, people who are wealthy can afford to be scrupulous. I could not."

"You knew Mark Orsway?"

"Yes, and I knew what he was trying to do. If we could have kept him and you out of here, the Park project would have failed, and this pine could have been bought for next to nothing."

Struggling to his feet, Alex Lashton bent over, grasping at his stomach, and nearly fell. Tom stepped forward to catch him. As he did so, Lashton straightened. His clenched right fist, with all his weight behind it, collided suddenly with Tom's jaw.

Tom staggered backward, trying to see clearly through the dancing lights that flashed in his head. He braced his feet, dimly sensing Lashton's charge toward him. Tom threw out both arms, wrapping them about the other's body, and they went down together, rolling over.

Tom was brought back to full consciousness by the shock of the Gistache's icy water. Thrashing to the surface, he struck out desperately for shore, aware that the current was sweeping him out and down.

He heard the roar of the falls that spilled from The Flats, and struggled harder. His hand brushed a projecting rock, slipped off its wet surface, grasped another. Gasping, he drew himself half out of the water, and turned to look for Alex Lashton. He saw him floating down the swift current, making feeble efforts to reach shore. It was hopeless. With a shudder, Tom crawled up on the bank. Nothing could go over those falls and live.

A few minutes later Tom sat up shakily, to see Buck Brunt and Orsway break out of the pines on a dead run. Ahead of them was a big, tawny dog.

Smoky galloped across The Flats, to fling himself on Tom, whimpering excitedly. Then he looked up, his nose twitching.

"It's all right, Smoky," Tom said weakly, putting an arm around him. "Our job's done. This is the end of the trail."

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**BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

*Big Red*  
*Snow Dog*  
*Wild Trek*  
*Irish Red*  
*Fire-Hunter*  
*Forest Patrol*  
*Kalak of the Ice*  
*Buckskin Brigade*  
*A Nose for Trouble*  
*Chip, the Dam Builder*

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Transcriber's note:

Hyphen variation left as printed (post office and post-office, bunk house and bunk-house, Plott hound and Plott-hound)

[The end of *Trailing Trouble* by Jim Kjelgaard]