

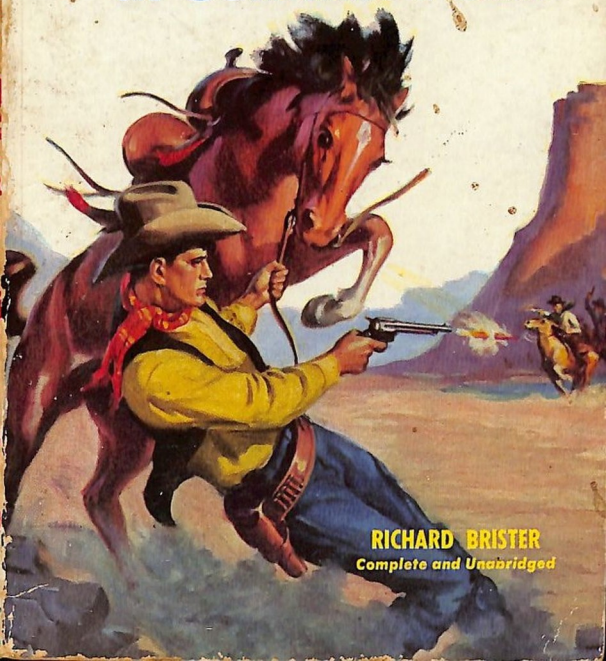
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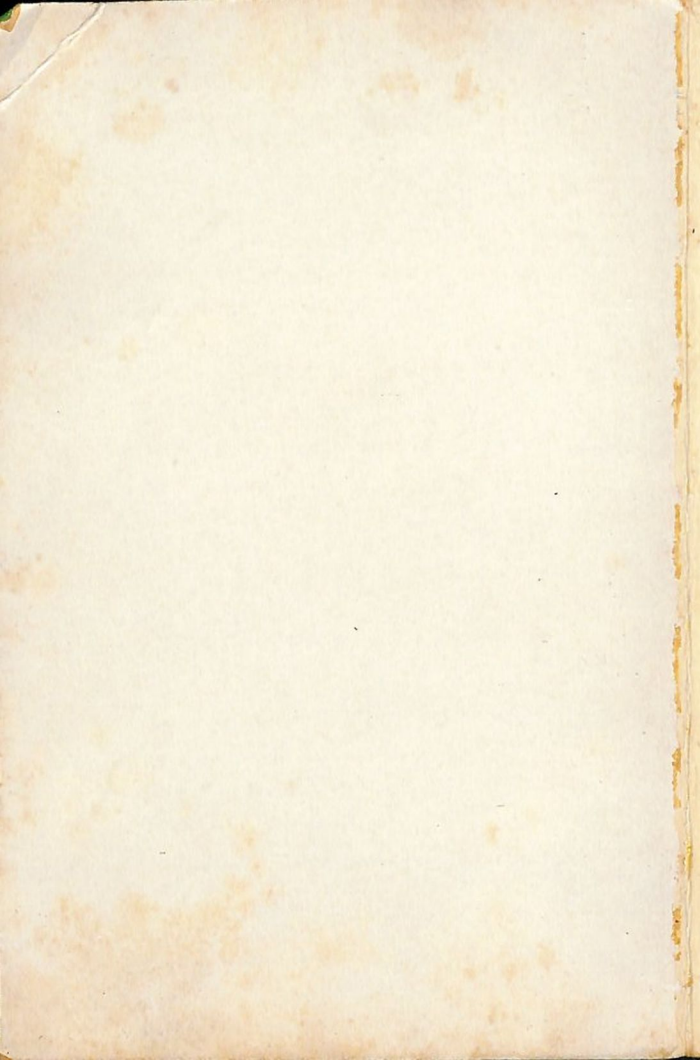
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A dead man's homestead reaps a hellfire harvest!

THE SHOOT-OUT **at Sentinel Peak**



RICHARD BRISTER
Complete and Unabridged



THE WATER HOLE THAT STARTED A RANGE FIRE

The storm broke in Sentinel the day Cleve McNary's neighbor, Will Ruscher, spilled out his life's blood on the town street. Will's H-on-a-Rail ranch was just a two-bit holding between two giant neighbors but it had one thing of real value in that arid valley—a darned good waterhole.

Cleve could have used that water himself but he wasn't the kind of coyote that would buy something with lead that he couldn't get for silver. On the other hand, he couldn't stand with holstered pistols while another man got away with murder.

It's a smashing new Western by a first-rate writer!

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

CAST OF CHARACTERS

CLEVE MC NARY

He squatted on a dead man's land to help bring in his vengeance harvest.

BEN DE MARRIS

He knew he could ride over any man in the valley, but not all of the other men admitted it.

WILL RUSCHER

He cashed in his chips with a last ace still up his sleeve.

RUTH FORBES

She had the guts to make a pact with a dying man.

HANK FETTERMAN

He learned that there's no middle road in a range war.

BUD GRACEY

He didn't know it but he was a shoot-on-sight target.

**THE
SHOOT-OUT
AT
SENTINEL PEAK**

by Richard Brister

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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CHAPTER ONE

CLEVE McNARY crossed the tracks south of town and jogged up Cedar Street toward the corner. He reined in deliberately at sight of the flatbed wagon standing outside McClain's mercantile. It was Will Ruscher's rig. Eyeing it, Cleve thought, *So the damn fool's come in. He's accepted the challenge.*

He drifted on up the street, a tall, slack-bodied man, about thirty, whose weathered face now wore a deeply troubled expression.

Dismounting in front of the Three Star, he flipped his buckskin's reins over the tie-rack and walked in. The saloon, considering that this was Saturday noon, was doing thin business. A couple of desultory card games were in progress; a few men lounged at the bar, resting idle elbows on it.

Cleve called out greetings to a puncher from the Triangle ranch. He waved to the man who'd come to Block Five as foreman after Cleve had left that job to start his own outfit.

The acknowledgments he got from the pair seemed reluctant, if not downright chilly. Cleve commented on it to Billy Bates, when the stout saloon owner set Cleve's usual glass of beer down before him.

Billy Bates didn't say anything for a moment, and then he suggested, "You ain't liable to have a very sociable time of it until that thing between Ruscher and Ben De Marris comes to a head, Cleve."

"Why?"

Bates looked fishily at him. "Are you really askin'?"
"Why?"

"If it's any news to you," Bates said, "you've made quite a rep as a man who likes to throw in for the underdog. I understand you been real neighborly with the homesteader. Maybe the boys figure you mean to cut in on the fracas."

"Why should I?" Cleve asked carefully.

The fat man stared at him. "Damned if I know. I'd say there ain't much of a case to be made for the stand Ruscher's taken. Now I can see Ben's side of it without hardly lookin'."

Cleve looked up and said tiredly, "All right, Billy, let's hear Ben's side of it."

Billy shrugged. "Ben's sore and I can't say I blame him. Don't forget Ruscher sneaked down there and filed on Wheel land at a time when Ben's old man was in bad shape, and didn't figure to squawk much about it. The old man was dyin', and Ruscher knew it. A dyin' man ain't goin' to kick up much fuss over some fella sneaking onto the edge of his grass and—"

"Second time you've used that word, Billy. I don't like the sound of it. He didn't sneak down there. He filed for that homestead, the way anybody files for a homestead. Nothing sneaky in the way he went about it."

"He filed on Wheel land," Bates pointed out dryly.

"So did some others before Will thought of it. Ben's old man never said boo to any of them. As for it bein' Wheel land, how did it get to be Wheel land? Because that old pirate came in here twenty years ago, ran a few cows on it, claimed it was his, and dared anybody to say it wasn't."

"Cleve," Billy Bates said, "the old pirate—as you call him—is dead. Ben swings the big whip on Wheel now.

He's kicked all them others out except Ruscher. If you ask me Ruscher's a fool for tryin' to buck the steam-roller. He ain't got a chance in hell against Ben De Marris. If you really come up here to help him, you better advise him to pull in his horns."

Cleve scowled down at his beer glass. Billy Bates, he thought sourly, wasn't even trying to see Will Ruscher's side of this quarrel. Will had filed on that homestead with Ben's father's tacit permission. He'd worked hard building up his little spread. Now, after almost three years, when he was within a hairsbreadth of proving his land up, Ben proposed blandly to force him out.

Billy Bates' attitude, of course, stemmed from his respect for the Wheel iron, the power Ben wielded now that his father was dead.

Cleve said wearily, "Will doesn't want advice, Billy. Or my help. He's funny that way."

"Meanin'," Bates said, "he wants to stand on his own feet?"

Cleve nodded.

"Sometimes," Bates murmured, "a man'll stand on his own feet until he gets shot off 'em." He waddled away as a customer called him down the bar.

Cleve took a sip of beer. Nobody spoke to him, nobody came near him. He knew now why he was being avoided. Apparently everybody here in town and throughout the valley was beginning to fear Ben De Marris. It occurred to Cleve that something ought to be done about that. Ben was throwing too long a shadow lately.

A man outside the saloon poked his eyes over Bates' swing doors, said, "Ben just come in, he's headin' this way!" and retreated, that quickly. Cleve put his glass down and walked to the window in time to see Ben drift across Main Street at the corner.

Ben glanced once, coolly and briefly, at Will Ruscher's parked team and wagon, then came on up the planks, a thick-set, olive-complexioned man with enormous shoulders and a small hard mouth. He had, Cleve thoughtfully noted, brought one of his crew into town with him, a surly, slouch-shouldered puncher named Meanea.

Ben left Meanea out in the street, obviously to keep Will Ruscher under surveillance, and tramped into the saloon. His glance picked Cleve out and he said with his bulldog directness: "What're you doin' in town?"

Cleve made a chiding noise through his teeth. "That the way you greet a man, Ben?"

"If you're here on Ruscher's account, I'll tell you now I won't stand for any meddlin' in my affairs, Cleve."

"All right, Ben. You've told me." He glanced up, grinning. "How far do you figure you're ready to go, Ben?"

"I told that fool I'd stop him from haulin' another load of supplies down where he's squattin' on my land. I'll stop him."

"Homesteading, Ben. Homesteading, not squatting."

Ben's intolerant mouth twitched. "Where's the difference? You call yourself a ranchin' man, and yet you can't see this. My old man was runnin' beef down there before that damn fool ever heard tell of—"

"Don't cuss in my face, Ben. When you're cussin' mad, you spit. Thing like that riles me."

Something like smoke lay trapped within Ben's narrow black eyes.

"Cleve," he said, "I'll not waste my temper on you now. I'm savin' it up for Ruscher. But don't push me past my limit."

The saloon doors swished behind Ben, and Meanea—Ben's man—poked his head in. "He ain't bluffin' down, Ben."

Ben turned deliberately toward him. "Say what you mean."

"He's up there and he's waitin'. His rig's loaded down, ready to roll. He's settin' on McClain's stoop. Waitin'. Looks like your move, Ben."

Ben nodded. He gave Cleve one heavy glance, then he turned and walked out of the saloon.

Meanea hesitated a moment, just inside the batwings. He started out.

"Hold it, Meanea," Cleve said. The man turned and looked at him.

"What for?"

"Over here," Cleve said. He put a little edge in back of his words. Meanea felt it. His face took on a sullen defiance. But when he tried to make it stick against the pressure of Cleve's steady eyes, he found that he couldn't. He came sidling over, dragging reluctant feet through the sawdust.

"What's the idea?"

"You're not going anywhere till it's over, outside there."

The slouch-shouldered man bristled. "You say."

Cleve's gun whipped up, and he stepped toward the Wheel puncher. A sick pallor tinged Meanea's dark face. He swallowed.

"Turn around," Cleve said.

Meanea did, his hands automatically lifting. Cleve reached out, snaked Meanea's gun from its holster, and stuck it down inside his waistband. He stood considering a moment. He knew what he had to do then, and he backed to the doors, his eyes raking the room.

"I'm going to see Will gets a fair shake. If Meanea comes out of here with a gun, I'll know some kind-hearted soul staked him to the spare iron. Nobody better be that kind-hearted."

He gave them all a second or two to get the idea, then he backed out under Bates' awning and dropped down to the street.

He was not a bit soon, he saw. Ben De Marris had drifted up the far side of the street and stood now in the shadow of the bank building. Will Ruscher, beside his loaded wagon, watched Ben with a stubborn animosity in his gray eyes. Neither man was aware of Cleve's presence downstreet. Cleve moved up toward them, watching Will's work-worn face begin slowly to show the strain he was undergoing.

"I'm goin'," Will said. His eyes flashed defiance at Ben.

"I say you ain't."

Will turned deliberately toward the front of his wagon. Ben's head jerked with a sort of angry puzzlement.

"One more step, Ruscher," he said. There was a flat finality in it. Cleve saw Will Ruscher struggle to lift himself from stubborn resolve to the fury he needed to get past this point. Will turned slowly to face Ben.

"All right," he choked out. His thin elbow slid back. He made his painfully inept grab for his gun.

Ben's gun was up, roaring, before Will's cleared leather. His bullet struck Will heavily in the chest. Will staggered back against a rear wheel of the wagon. He grabbed a spoke, tried to support himself by it.

The startled team reared up in the harness. The wheel turned, dragging Will off his balance. He dropped to the street. He hung there on hands and knees, choking for breath. He was still holding his gun, but was unable to lift it or even to raise his head. There was no danger in him.

Cleve saw Ben deliberately recock now. He whipped his own gun out, triggering into the ground. He saw

Ben's startled eyes jerk around, saw the mottled rage in Ben's face.

"What are you, Ben?" he asked disgustedly. "A butcher?"

Will was prone in the dust now, coughing blood. Ben, seeing it, gave all his attention to Cleve.

"Cleve," he said, "you're goin' to regret this."

Cleve only looked at him, unimpressed. He walked slowly toward Ben. He said, "You can give this back to your boy," and lifted Meanea's gun from his waistband. He handed it to Ben, butt foremost. Ben accepted it, slid it down under his belt, and turned away from Cleve slowly. He walked the few yards to the corner and stepped out of Cleve's eyeshot around the bank building.

Cleve knew bitterly then that Ben had just blandly saddled him with the problem of what to do about Will Ruscher.

CHAPTER TWO

CLEVE got Will Ruscher into the wagon and drove around to Doc Forbes' little frame house at the corner of North and Sage. Doc's daughter finally opened in response to his knock. She was a tall, pretty girl. Although extremely young looking, she had a curious gravity about her that made you wonder what her age might be, really.

Obviously he'd aroused her from a nap, for she rubbed at an eye with the tip of a dainty finger as she

explained that her dad wasn't home.

"He's on a case over by Kettle. Diphtheria. I really don't know when to expect him. Both of us were up all last night with Mrs. Shafter, and now he— But what is it? Maybe I can do something."

Cleve was standing in front of her, blocking off her view of the wagon. She stood on tiptoes, glancing past his high shoulder. He heard the swift intake of her breath.

"Good grief! It's Will Ruscher!"

She brushed by Cleve and ran down the porch steps. Cleve followed in time to hear Will greet the girl in a painful whisper.

"S'pose you can get me inside, Ruth? Ain't feelin' too chipper."

Ruth Forbes glanced at the sticky red blotch on Will's shirt. Cleve saw her bite down on her lower lip. Yet when she turned toward him, an instant later, she had regained her composure. Something coolly professional was in her manner as she asked: "Can you carry him, do you think? In your arms, like a baby."

Cleve wedged one arm under Will's bony shoulders. After that it was easy enough to lift him out of the wagon. He followed the girl up the porch steps, over the threshold, and along a narrow hallway. Ruth led the way into a small room which contained a worn leather sofa, a battered rolltop desk, two easy chairs, and a long cluttered table.

A strong odor of sickness hung over this room. Cleve guessed it did double duty, serving as living room and doctor's office.

He laid Will down on the sofa and watched the girl cut Will's shirt away, exposing the wound. She worked with a quick competence, and Cleve's eyes followed her as she hurried back to the kitchen to moisten a bit of

gauze. He felt Will Ruscher's gaze and turned to grin reassuringly at the injured homesteader.

Will said unexpectedly, "Why'd you do it, Cleve?"
"What?"

"Chase up into town and horn in on my little tea party with Ben?"

Cleve said awkwardly, "We've been pretty good neighbors, Will. Don't worry about it."

"Can't help worryin'," Will said, and behind the pain in his eyes Cleve saw a deep bitterness. "Feel like I owe you somethin'."

The girl came back then, and Cleve was relieved when she touched his arm, saying, "I don't think he'd better waste any strength talking."

Cleve grinned down at Will and let the girl lead him from the room. On the porch he turned slowly toward her.

"How's it look for him?"

"Bad." Her voice broke a little. "The breast bone's been shattered. I don't like that bleeding from the mouth."

"Lung?"

"Yes."

A sick premonition wafted through Cleve and he stared out at the street, where Will's wagon waited. After a moment he said, "Notice you two know each other. It surprised me."

"We met shortly after Dad and I came to Sentinel," she explained. "You see, Will's an asthmatic. He always drops in here to see Dad whenever he gets into town."

Cleve stared wonderingly at her. "I never knew. Will and I have been neighbors goin' on three years, and I never guessed he had anything like that to deal with."

"He isn't the sort to advertise his troubles."

He saw the pride in her eyes. It was obvious she

shared his admiration for the homesteader.

"How old are you, Ruth?"

"Twenty-one," she said, frowning. "Why?"

"You look like a kid. You don't talk or act like one."

"I lost my mother when I was eleven. I grew up pretty quickly after that, in order to look after Dad. Maybe growing up in the midst of sickness and death marks a person." She was staring down at Will's wagon. Anger touched her pretty mouth, and she said, "How did it happen?"

"Ben," he said, and hesitated. "You sure you want details?"

"No. Not really. Time enough for that later." She looked up curiously. "You tried to help Will, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid I didn't help much." He grew bitter now as he thought of it. "All I did was make Ben's play look more or less legal."

"But you did try," she said softly.

He grew uncomfortable under her thoughtful glance, and he put his hands in his pockets. "I'll take Will's load of supplies back to McClain's and drop the rig off down at Nickersen's stables. If there's anything else I can do before I ride out town, Ruth—"

She shook her head at him, saying, "No. But thanks so much for offering. Dad will be getting back. We'll manage."

She gave him her hand, her slender fingers giving his a warm, firm pressure. He tipped his hat gravely and went down the steps then, and climbed up onto the seat of Will's wagon.

McClain gloomily helped him return Will's purchases to the mercantile's dusty shelves. "How is he?" the bent

old Scotsman inquired in his nasal, rasping inflections. "Bad," Cleve said grimly, and he stepped out of the store and drove Will's empty rig up Cedar Street, and turned in under Nickersen's archway.

Nickersen, a paunchy middle-aged man with sleepy eyes in a boozy red face, came out from his slovenly office and watched Cleve water the team at the trough.

"What I'd like to know," Nickersen said, making a small mouth, "is who's gunna pay me for feedin' and boardin' them horses."

Cleve looked over at the stableman but didn't say anything.

The paunchy man shifted his weight in his manure-caked half boots, and said, "How's Ruscher doin'?"

"You askin' that as his friend, Eli?"

"No," Nickersen said. "I don't propose to get stuck with his horses."

Cleve could admire honesty in any man, and now he looked at Eli Nickersen and said, "All right, Eli. He's over at Doc's, and Doc's girl's doin' what she can for him. And there's a damned good chance he won't make it."

"Then I don't want no part of them horses," Nickersen countered promptly. "He never had nothing much. Ben'll be takin' the ranch. And whatever few dollars he might've saved up will go for funeral expenses. I been stuck this way before. I'm through bein' played for a sucker."

Cleve said quietly, "I want these horses stabled down and fed, Eli. You can put it on my bill."

"Well, that's different," Nickersen said, and he showed Cleve his grudging smile now. "That's different."

Cleve turned away wearily and walked out to the street. He knew he would have to eat something before he tackled the long ride back home. Going across the

street to the Three Star, he took up the reins of his buckskin, which still stood patiently waiting at the tie-rack. He led the animal back into Nickersen's. "Grain this fella, Eli," he said. "Back in an hour."

He walked down Cedar Street then, toward the corner, moving swiftly, for he was suddenly eager to have his meal and put distance between himself and this town.

He took a chance on Camp's Cafe, on East Main, and encountered poor service. There was a dance scheduled for tonight up at the Masonic and the prospect of the oncoming fun was gradually beginning to fill the streets. Every eating place on Cedar and Main was doing a land-office business. An hour later he came from the restaurant with a toothpick and a sour after-taste of fried potatoes and eggs in his mouth. He was trudging back up Main toward the corner when he saw Horace Coates step down off the hotel's wide veranda and lift one scrawny arm officiously toward him.

Coates clerked in the hotel. He was a bit of an old busybody, and Cleve hesitated before he reluctantly crossed the street to see what the old man wanted of him.

"Your old boss is in town," Coates said importantly. "Him and Miss Evie. He wants to see you."

Cleve's glance rose toward the suite of rooms Hank Fetterman always occupied when he came into town for a weekend. "All right, Horace," he nodded. He went through the lobby and up the worn steps, knocking at a paneled door near the end of the hallway.

"Come in," Hank Fetterman's friendly, familiar voice said.

Cleve did, and Hank Fetterman rose to greet him. Hank was a slender man, remarkably handsome. His face was crisscrossed with crowsfeet that hadn't been

there the last time Cleve had seen him.

Hank's getting old, Cleve thought. It hurt to see this, and he glanced at Hank's daughter, Eve, who perched on the four-poster bed and smiled at him. The past few months had in no way detracted from Eve's dark beauty. Cleve gave her a crooked grin in return for her smile.

Hank started off bluntly, "Cleve, I hear you've been messing into a game you didn't hold chips in. Damn it all, you— How is Ruscher?" he asked, as if it hardly mattered. "Any chance for him?"

"Dim," Cleve said. "Ben put that slug where he intended to put it."

Fetterman took a cigar from his pocket and bit off the end of it. "Ruscher asked for it," he said. "I side Ben in this."

"Kind of figured you would," Cleve said. Hank Fetterman's Block Five outfit and Ben De Marris' Wheel were the two biggest spreads in the valley. That shaped Hank's viewpoint. It was bound to, Cleve realized. "What did you want to see me about, Hank?"

The older man's ready smile flashed. "Cleve, I've always been strong for you. You did an ace-high job for me when you rodded my outfit. I'll admit I was a trifle put out when you left to start your own outfit, but that's water over the dam now. I still consider you the closest thing I ever had to a son."

"There's the sugar," Cleve grinned. "Let's have the salt. What are you leading up to?"

"There'll always be a place for you on Block Five," Fetterman said, and Cleve stared at him.

"I don't get your drift, Hank. I've got my own outfit."

Fetterman dragged the cigar from his mouth. He glanced toward his daughter, who still perched on the bed. "Have you given any thought to the probable re-

sult of your little ruckus with Ben, Cleve?"

"Oh," Cleve said, "that."

Fetterman's eyes narrowed with impatience. "Come on, come on, Cleve." He snapped a finger. "Wake up. Don't you see what you've done? You've finally stepped on Ben's toes. Do you realize how much power Ben controls now that his father's gone?"

"If you mean: am I afraid of him like everyone else around here seems to be lately—the answer is no," Cleve said curtly. "Ben's pretty sore, but he'll simmer down."

Fetterman lifted quizzical eyebrows. "Will he?"

"Look," Cleve said, "all I did was shoot into the dirt."

"You're oversimplifying it," Fetterman grunted. "Cleve, do you remember the drought we had two summers ago? When you nearly lost your whole herd? And would have, by golly, if Ruscher hadn't shared his water with you?"

Cleve nodded. "I was thinking of that, Hank, when I chased up here this morning. Why? What about it?"

"What happens the next time we have a drought?" the older man asked slyly. Cleve got the point. With Will Ruscher out of the picture, there would be no H-on-a-Rail water available to Cleve in another bad dry spell.

"Cleve," Hank said, "one thing I've learned the hard way is that you can't make a ranch go, year in and out, without the friendship and cooperation of your neighbors. Now you've lost what little help Ruscher could give you. Alvin Burnett, down on Kettle, lives under Wheel's shadow. He'll avoid you like the plague after what's happened. That leaves you on your own. Ben can play the waiting game with you, cat and mouse. He'll do just that, if I know him. Mark my words, eventually he'll see to it you go under."

"You paint a dark picture," Cleve scowled. "Why do you bother to do it?"

"I've told you. I want you back. As my foreman. I'm prepared to take that Flying Nine beef off your hands. I might even be able to find room for those two men working for you. Miskimmons and— What's his name, that gimpy-legged fellow?"

"Spreckels. Pete Spreckels. Hank, I—I'm afraid not. You know how it is. I've had a taste of sweet independence. And—thanks, though."

Fetterman frowned. "Think it over," he said. "I'll keep the offer open awhile."

Cleve thanked him again, but still shook his head. He went out then, and at the head of the stairs that led down to the lobby he heard Eve call his name. He turned and the girl came down the hall to him.

"Cleve"—she caught hold of his arm with a hint of possessiveness he vaguely resented—"are you sure?"

"After today," he said, "I'm not sure about anything, Evie."

"Cleve, Dad's right. There's no show for you on Flying Nine, now you've antagonized Ben. Why be so stubborn? That's really Wheel grass Will's been homesteading. Ben's right, and—"

"You too?" Cleve asked, frowning.

She made a mouth at him. "Bud Gracey pulled out of there quick enough after Ben's father died."

Cleve frowned. Bud Gracey was an ex-Block Five puncher who'd filed on the edge of Wheel grass. He'd done so at the same time Will Ruscher had filed next door to Cleve on the south side of the valley.

"Bud pulled out," Cleve said darkly, "with Ben's gun rammed into his stomach."

"He's better off now than Will Ruscher," Eve retorted.

Cleve was silent, wondering if Bud Gracey would look at it that way.

"Cleve," Eve said, "think about it. At least think about it."

Cleve looked uneasily at her, remembering Eve as he first knew her, a freckled gamin who used to follow him about the Block Five barns and corrals with something like hero worship in her enormous black eyes.

"Please, Cleve?"

He nodded, and was turning away when she said, "There's a dance tonight, Cleve. Couldn't that darn old ranch of yours struggle along without you another few hours?"

Cleve scowled, wondering if she understood the tactlessness of what she was asking. When a man's friend is slowly, painfully dying he doesn't feel like kicking up his heels to the scratch of a fiddle.

"No," Cleve said, "it couldn't."

He swung away from her and clumped down the worn uncarpeted steps.

Eve stood there watching him until he crossed the lobby and turned out of her line of vision. A murky anger darkened her eyes. She moved along the corridor, that dull frustration still running through her.

"Luck?" her dad said, as she stepped back into the room.

"No," Eve said. She didn't feel like talking about it. "I told Helen Mott I'd drop out to see her this afternoon, Dad. I'll meet you in the dining room in time for dinner."

She was telling her dad all about her visit to Helen, at a table in the hotel dining room, later, when Fred De Marris, Ben's brother, came up from somewhere behind her.

"Evenin', Fred," her dad nodded. "Pull up a chair and powwow with us a minute."

"Well," Fred said, smiling at Eve in that vague way of his, "if I'm not intruding."

He had the nicest voice, Eve thought. "Of course you're not," she said warmly. As Fred pulled up a chair and sat down she covertly watched him.

Fred was an educated man. Not like Ben. Fred was an artist. After he'd got out of college back East he'd gone to Europe and haunted art galleries, studying the old masters. Then for a couple of years he lived in New York, painting, according to Eve's information, like a man possessed.

She still couldn't imagine why he'd come home to Wheel ranch, to the valley. He still painted, she knew. Once during a solitary ride on her bay pony she'd encountered Fred atop a high rampart of the Wataugas, at work on a landscape. It was a beautiful picture, as she remembered.

Fred looked up now, their two eyes met, and Eve, embarrassed, said quickly, "Will you be at the dance tonight, Fred?"

"Will you?" he asked guardedly.

Eve nodded. "You may have the first schottische, if you want it."

"Taken," Fred smiled, and then added, "I was afraid Cleve might have stayed on for—"

"Oh, bother Cleve!"

"In that case," Fred said, his smile widening, "I'll insist on more than just the first schottische."

Eve looked narrowly at him. She hadn't thought she wore her feelings toward Cleve on her sleeve, but apparently she hadn't fooled Fred. Maybe this would explain the uncertainty he often displayed in her presence. Now he'd grown bolder, she found him more at-

tractive. As was her habit when any man caught her interest, she tried to imagine herself married to him.

A girl could do worse. Fred was gallant, well-groomed, sophisticated. Of course he hadn't much drive, but brother Ben had enough of that for both of them. And Fred, as co-owner of Wheel, would always live comfortably, without effort. The girl who married him faced a pleasant prospect.

"Why shouldn't you insist on more than one dance?" Eve asked. "You're the best dancer in the valley. You know that."

Fred lifted a hand to protest, but Eve's father said, "Never back away from a compliment, Fred. Eve means that."

Eve looked at her dad sharply. She always could tell when he was up to something. She sensed a motive behind this idle remark of her father's. Suddenly she knew what it was. Her dad was afraid of Wheel's power, afraid of Ben De Marris' unbridled, rough-riding ambition. He was shrewd enough to know that one sure way to forestall any trouble between the valley's two biggest outfits was to bind them together. Through marriage.

And I'll be accommodating, Eve thought, *if Cleve doesn't wake up soon.*

CHAPTER THREE

BEN DE MARRIS stepped out of Ghezzi's barber shop and ran his idle glance along Main Street. It was darkening now. Up at the corner the plank walks resounded

to a heavy foot traffic. Riders, alone and in groups, rattled into town for the dance, shouting out boisterous greetings.

It had no effect on Ben's mood, which was soured by the memory of his fight with Will Ruscher and by a nagging curiosity as to Ruscher's condition.

An hour ago he had posted two men at the rear window of the Three Star, with instructions to keep their eyes peeled on Doc Forbes' house. He had a hunch that if and when Ruscher kicked off there would be signs. And—

Ben dragged a half-smoked cigar from his mouth as a man and woman came along Railroad Alley, from the direction of Elk Street, and stepped out onto the boardwalk not fifteen feet from him. Ben knew this couple. The girl was Louise Dannehauser, who lived across the street in a boarding house run by her immigrant parents. The man was Bud Gracey, with whom Ben had once had difficulties.

He saw the glance Gracey gave him. The sandy-haired puncher would have led the girl across the street without acknowledging Ben's presence had not Ben said idly, "Evenin', Bud."

Bud Gracey's head came around and he said, barely civil: "Hello, Ben."

He started away.

"Wait a minute," Ben said. It was not a suggestion. It was an order which his voice made sharply emphatic. Bud Gracey pivoted, peering at Ben in the half light of dusk.

"Whatta you want?"

"A civil answer when I pass you a howdy." Ben watched Gracey's face, aware of the sullen pride in the man. The girl touched Gracey's arm. Ben heard her grit out a warning. Gracey's pride pulled him away from

her. Ben said, "I don't like a man bein' short with me, Bud. I don't put up with it."

Gracey stood there, sullen, unresponsive. Ben stared at him for a moment, then said, raillery in his voice now: "Haven't seen you in town much, since you been ridin' for Kettle."

"Burnett works a crew hard," Gracey said.

Ben put the cigar between his teeth, smiling around it. "If I was sweet on a pretty thing like Louise—"

"Leave her out of this, Ben."

"Mind your manners with me, kid," Ben said.

"My manners stack up pretty fair in present company," Gracey suggested.

Ben tossed his cigar into the gutter. He reached out, grabbed Gracey by the front of his shirt, and twisted to anchor his hold. With his free hand he made a fanning motion, slapping the man on either cheek, first with his palm, then with the back of his fingers. He heard Gracey's smothered curse.

The puncher struck out blindly at him. Ben yanked him off balance, avoiding Gracey's wild blow. He pushed his man back, tripping him. Gracey sat down and you could hear his bones rattle.

His hand went toward the gun at his hip, and Ben said quickly, "You know better'n that, kid."

His own hand touched the butt of his holstered gun. He could, if pressed to it, shoot this man like a sitting duck through the leather. He saw how the knowledge of that restrained Gracey. The puncher stood up now, pointedly ignoring the gun at his hip, and came at Ben, his teeth grinding. He carried his fisted hands high.

"Bud!"

Gracey paid the girl no attention. He hurled a punch at Ben's composed, smiling face. Ben lifted an arm, deflecting the blow. He hit Gracey on the jaw, and the

shorter man sat down again.

He was game enough, Ben saw. He tried to get up and continue this, but Ben's one punch had him groggy. It took all Gracey's strength to get to his feet. He staggered toward Ben, and Ben measured him for the punch that would end the exchange.

He felt remote pleasure when the girl caught hold of Bud's arms, dragging him back.

"Bud, please. Please!"

"I ain't afraid of him," Gracey said. He put a trembling hand to his chin, exploring the welt left by Ben's knuckles.

Nevertheless it was over, Ben knew. That was as well, for the fight had attracted attention. All along the street people had stopped to watch this. Their sympathy, Ben wearily guessed, would lie with Bud Gracey. Now, for the benefit of those watching, he turned toward Gracey with the air of a man who, although having no stomach for it, has doled out punishment to another.

"Kid, when I kicked you off my grass I could've run you out of the valley. I think you know that."

Gracey only glared at him.

"Reason I didn't," Ben said, "was because I didn't want to punish Louise on your account, Bud. I'm a fair man. But I run Wheel for a profit. And damned if I'll let any man fatten his beef on my grass. . . . Louise, I apologize for my language. I feel strong about this."

Gracey said, "You're so fair you can't see but one side of the picture. Your old man never lifted an eyebrow when I—"

"Kid," Ben said, "it's no use to brood about what's over and done with. I'm nursing no grudge. If you're smart, you won't either."

"Won't I?"

Ben swore silently. "I can still run you out, kid, any time I take the notion." He turned to the girl. "Louise, I'm sorry about this."

He touched his hat before turning away. He heard the girl bid him good night, pleasantly enough in the circumstances, and thought how sensible that was. Gracey was lucky to have her, Ben reflected. If it hadn't been for the girl he'd have told Gracey to ride out now, or take consequences.

Entering the Three Star saloon, a few minutes later, Ben saw Pres Riddle, Oscar Thompson, and Alvin Burnett. Idly acknowledging Billy Bates' greeting, he sauntered toward the rear of the room, where Vic Bassler and Lorenzo French waited for him, a bottle of whiskey in front of them.

Ben leaned over the mahogany, picked a glass off Bates' back-bar shelf, and helped himself to a drink from the bottle.

"So how about it?"

Lorenzo French said, "Preacher went in Doc's house fifteen minutes ago. I guess Ruscher's bein' introduced to St. Peter." He grinned. "When my times comes, I can do without the sky pilot."

Ben glanced at French, frowning. He'd hired this man on as his foreman a few weeks ago. French was a top hand, but there was a reckless, vicious streak in him, and Ben had never made any pretense of liking the fellow.

"When your time comes, French, you won't need a sky pilot. Not where you're going."

Vic Bassler slapped the side of his leg, guffawing. He lifted his glass. "Here's to the preacher you ain't going to need, French."

Ben scowled. Vic Bassler's hand was steady, but his color was too high, and Ben knew he was feeling his

drinks. It didn't take much of the stuff to put an edge on Vic, Ben thought.

He said to Vic curtly, "Keep an eye peeled out that window. When that preacher leaves Doc's, I want to know it."

Bassler started to pour himself a drink to keep him company at the window.

Ben said, "Haven't you had enough for awhile, Vic?"

Bassler looked up. "I ain't had but two or three. Close-herdin' me, ain't you?"

"Go ahead," Ben said easily. He watched Bassler pour three fingers of whiskey and carry it back to the window. He could feel Lorenzo French's glance on him, and then French was saying, "He wasn't lyin' to you, Ben. All he's had is three drinks."

"He better quit the stuff then," Ben said shortly.

"Vic's been sick a lot," French said, "He had pneumonia last winter. When he was a kid the diphtheria pretty near killed him."

"Have a drink," Ben said boredly, indicating the bottle. "And quit trying to sell me on Vic, French. I know all about him."

"Go easy on him," French said. "Vic don't like bein' crowded."

Ben looked ironically at him. "Touching how loyal you boys are to each other. Never gussed you had a heart, French."

"I ain't a stone. I'm strong for Vic," French said, and Ben glanced up narrowly at him. French, he knew, was unconscionably vain. Vic followed him around like a dog, thought him a wonderful fellow. So French had conceived a strong affection for Vic. The situation amused Ben, for these two were hardcases, known killers.

"Save some of that loyalty for Wheel, French, if you can spare it."

French looked up, those reckless highlights in his eyes, but before he could frame a retort Vic Bassler deserted his post at the window and returned to the bar.

"Preacher just left," he reported.

Ben nodded. "I guess," he said quietly, "we can scratch off one homesteader, boys."

"Now what?" French murmured.

Ben was silent a moment. "I'd better have a talk with the Forbes girl."

"What about?"

Ben shrugged. "Ruscher. Ruth was his closest friend, and there's all that junk of his to be got rid of."

"Soon for that, ain't it?" French asked. "You ain't liable to get much of a welcome. Wouldn't surprise me if the girl tried to shoot you."

"I want this settled," Ben said. "You boys wait here. And go easy on that." His glance indicated the bottle.

He went out the saloon's rear door and picked his way across a weed-grown lot littered with tin cans and jagged remnants of bottles. Nearing the Forbes house he saw Ruth on the porch, staring out into the night. She turned woodenly at his approach, and then, recognizing him, said in an icy tone, "Go away, Ben."

Ben stood his ground.

"Ruth," he said without rancor, "all I can say is I'm sorry it had to turn out this way."

"Are you?"

"I wish he'd never filed on my land. I wish—"

"Go away, Ben. Just go away."

"Ruth, I'm a reasonable man. I want you to know I'm willin' to pay funeral expenses. If there's any way I can make things easier for you—"

"The last thing Will would want," Ruth said, "would be for you to pay his funeral expenses."

"Ruth—"

"Oh, go back to the Three Star or wherever you came from. Go back to your drinking."

This cut Ben's vanity. He'd had only one drink with the boys. Yet she smelled it on him.

"All right," he said, "then let's get down to cases. He was on my land. He wouldn't listen when I warned him off, so I had to kill him. I don't want what I've got no legal right to. He had his tools and his stock and a lot of other odds and ends of stuff down there. What I want to know is if he had any people."

"No. He was all alone. That made him perfect game for you, didn't it, Ben?"

Ben shrugged it off. "I don't quarrel with girls. If he had no people, I'll have to trouble you in cleaning things up, Ruth." He paused. "That was my grass he was on. I want the use of it now, and I'm in a hurry."

"Suppose I'm not," Ruth said.

"Don't truckle with me, Ruth," Ben said. "I won't have it. I'll wait till Monday night. If nothing's been done by then about that stuff of Ruscher's, I'll have my boys round it all up and we'll stage us an auction. We'll turn the proceeds over to the bank. It'll be credited to the Estate of Will Ruscher."

Ruth was staring incredulously at him. He heard her take in a long breath. "Of all the high-handed, presumptuous—"

"Call it names if you want to," Ben said complacently. "I can do it."

Ruth was silent and he could almost read her thoughts. There was no lawdog in this off-the-track town, nor within fifty miles of it. Sentinel policed itself through a committee of vigilantes. Such policing had

been no policing at all in the case of Ben's quarrel with Ruscher. This was cattle country. The vigilantes' major concern was to rid the valley of horse thieves and rustlers. And Ben was a leading member of the committee.

"Yes," Ruth said bitterly, "I suppose you can, Ben."

"I want to know what you're going to do," Ben said.

"Nothing," Ruth said. "Absolutely nothing, Ben, to make this easier for you."

She turned her back on him and went into the house.

Ben stood at the foot of the steps, scowling as he considered this setback. Presently he shook his big shoulders and retraced his steps to the Three Star, where he rejoined Lorenzo French and Vic Bassler.

"Job for you, boys," he said. "Ride down there where Ruscher thought he was going to prove up a homestead. I want an eye kept on that place."

"Wait a minute," French protested, "There's a dance tonight, Ben, in case you're forgetting."

"Better take some grub and a deck of cards down there with you," Ben said. "You may be stuck there a couple of days. I'll keep in touch with you."

"Damn it," French said, "the dance. Can't this wait until that's over?"

"Finish those drinks," Ben said, "and cut wind, boys."

CHAPTER FOUR

CLEVE McNARY reined in atop a rocky spur and let the buckskin blow before tackling the tricky descent to the

floor of the valley. His glance dropped toward his Flying Nine buildings.

They looked pitifully small from this distance, but a small spread takes working as much as a big one. Cleve wiped sweat off his forehead, recalling this day spent hazing cattle up to the little grass parks and salt meadows which dotted these foothills.

It was a chore he did not dare neglect, for if he let his animals work the lower graze now, through these summer months, he would have no winter range to offer them when the weather turned bitter.

He put the buckskin to the descent. After the first plunging drop, a dim trail twisted to follow a shallow gully. At the foot of the grade Cleve let the buckskin set its own homeward pace.

Pete Spreckels was waiting when he rode in, and helped him off-saddle the buckskin. An apple-cheeked man in his thirties, Pete had, despite a game leg, one of the sunniest dispositions Cleve had ever encountered. Pete's silence now, as he bent to unbuckle the cinch, struck Cleve as unusual.

"Anything wrong, Pete?"

"You won't like hearin' this," Pete nodded. "I hazed some of our stuff off Kettle this mornin'. Bumped into Bud Gracey. He says Will didn't make it."

Cleve shook his head grimly. He'd expected this news, but still felt the jolt of it, the crushing sense of loss.

"When's the funeral?" he asked in a dull, bleak voice. "I'm goin' to it."

"Guess you ain't. It already was. Yesterday, in the town cemetery."

Cleve stared across the broken, sage-dotted floor of the valley, toward Wheel ranch.

"I guess Ben's satisfied now," he said grimly. He glanced up. "Are those two hooligans of his still parking

over at Will's place, Pete?"

Pete nodded. "I been seein' their smoke." His mouth soured. "Hell, do you think Ben'd move 'em till he's clinched his hold on the place? Cleve," he said, "how're we gonna hold out here? Ben's got us spraddled."

"I think I know Ben pretty well, Pete. He's sore right now, but he'll simmer down."

"You ask me," Pete said, "you're givin' him plenty."

"Maybe," Cleve said. He was staring distractedly at a small dust puff out on the prairie. It was moving in steadily toward these buildings. After a long moment during which he studied that dust and the half-dozen riders beneath it through squinted eyes, he said softly, "Speak of the devil."

It was Ben De Marris and five of his Wheel men riding in at a long lope from the direction of H-on-a-Rail.

Behind Cleve now Bump Miskimmons came into the door of the cookshack, where he'd been getting supper, and watched, too, as the Wheel delegation rode in. Old Bump had a sort of sixth sense. He seemed to put out feelers, for he always knew, somehow, when anybody was riding in.

At two hundred yards Ben and his men reined down, waiting to be waved in, as tradition of the country required. Cleve jerked a hand at them. They came in at a jiggling trot, reining up alongside the well. Cleve stood looking at them in a stiff, unfriendly silence.

Ben said, finally, "You askin' us to light down? Or ain't you?"

"I'll hear what's on your mind first," Cleve said.

"Will Ruscher," Ben said, "is dead. I understand Ruth Forbes was closer to him than anybody around here. I asked her to see about movin' his grabbag lot of trifles and odds and ends off my grass. It's clear she doesn't intend to cooperate with me. I'm auctionin' off Ruscher's

stuff day after tomorrow. That'll be Thursday."

Cleve stared at him. "You've got a gall, Ben," he said thickly. It was probably illegal, he thought, what Ben was proposing. "Does Hank Fetterman know about this?"

"Hell"—Ben's smug smile was infuriating—"he's goin' to be there." He watched Cleve's face, a dry mockery in his eyes. "My crew's passin' word through the valley. Harry Jacks will handle the auctioneering. If there's anything Ruscher had that you'd care to bid on, I guess your money's as good as anyone else's. I'm doin' this legal. Everything strictly accordin' to Hoyle, see?"

Cleve looked up and said coldly, "You killed him accordin' to Hoyle too, didn't you, Ben?"

Ben's mouth went hard. He hooked the horn of his saddle with a couple of fingers, and stepped down deliberately from the big dun. There was a long, long moment of silence, broken only by Bump Miskimmons' light cough from the cookshack door, and then Ben said, "You got anything special you'd like to say, Cleve? If so, let's hear it."

Pete Spreckels threw a quick glance of warning at Cleve, as if to say, "Let it ride, they've got us outnumbered." Ben's men still sat their horses, watching this with half-amused but sharply attentive eyes.

Cleve knew he was probably being foolish, but all his memories of Will Ruscher came crowding up in him, and he said, "That was cold murder up in Sentinel the other day, Ben, and you know it."

Ben's eyes narrowed a fraction. He said, with surprising mildness, "Go on, Cleve. Tell me about it."

"He didn't have a chance."

"He went for his gun first," Ben pointed out.

"He didn't have a chance. If there was any justice you'd swing for that killing," Cleve said.

Ben's big hands had balled into fists, and the temper was beginning to pile up inside him, Cleve saw. The Wheel men glanced at each other, and Cleve saw their hands edge toward their holstered guns.

Over at the cookshack Bump Miskimmons was brandishing a Winchester rifle which he always kept ready to hand, just inside the door there. The old man said, almost conversationally, "Who wants to be first, boys? And where would you like it? Between the eyes, maybe?"

Ben De Marris visibly relaxed. He was never a man to crowd his luck, and he had a shrewd respect for the killing power of any man's bullet, no matter how old and decrepit the gun wielder might be.

"Cleve," he said heavily, "you're right much of a fool. You must know you can't exist here unless I choose to let you, now that I've got back H-on-a-Rail's grass and water."

It was true, Cleve thought bitterly. With Ben back on the H-on-a-Rail, Wheel beef would graze this lower range in increasing numbers. Cleve would be squeezed in a pincers between Wheel and Kettle. He could look to neither outfit for help in the event of a drought like the one two summers ago.

He was silent, thinking about it, and Ben said, "I hear Hank Fetterman's willing to give you your old job back as his foreman." His mouth clamped. "Take him up on it."

Cleve's eyes lifted. "If I don't?"

"Take it," Ben said.

Their eyes met and Cleve knew that this big man was telling him, in effect, that there was no future for him here on Flying Nine. Get out or be driven out. It was that simple. A cold fury came up in him. For three years he had sweated and struggled building up this

little spread. He knew suddenly that he could not even think of throwing in chips. Not without a fight.

"Go to hell, Ben," he suggested.

Ben bristled, then his thin smile came. "I'll give you odds," he said, "that you'll be there before me." He turned deliberately toward his horse, then looked back over a shoulder. "Will you be at the auction?"

"I lent Will a sledge and a couple of wedges two weeks ago," Cleve said. "I'll be over there to collect them on Thursday. I won't be bidding on any of Will's things."

"Suit yourself," Ben said. He hauled himself up, nodding around at his men. There was dry mockery in his eyes as he wheeled the big dun and led his party out of Flying Nine's dusty small yard.

CHAPTER FIVE

CLEVE HAD no crystal ball in which to foresee the startling twist of events that took place at the auction. He rode over to H-on-a-Rail on Thursday, therefore, with reluctance. He had never seen that place so crowded. Wagons were parked in orderly lines down by the sheds, the two corrals were filled with visitors' horses. Youngsters romped noisily down by the barn, where fat Harry Jacks, the auctioneer, stood swapping anecdotes with Oscar Thompson and Alvin Burnett.

Punchers from the various valley ranches perched atop the corral fence, good-naturedly pointing out flaws in each other's horses.

Cleve gravitated toward the barn, where a group of

men were picking over Will Ruscher's sorry little collection of tools.

"Poor devil," Cleve heard one man say. "He sure didn't have much."

"He died tryin' to keep it," another put in, and Cleve moved away, depressed by what he had heard.

But this was often the way you mourned a man, picking over his possessions when they went up for auction after he died. Cleve walked around to the front of the house, where two men stood watching sweet water, pumped by Will's windmill, splash into a galvanized iron trough.

One of the two said, as Cleve came within earshot, "Ben can increase his herd by five hundred head on the strength of this water."

"Wish some nester'd move in on me for awhile," said the other, "and fix me up with a nice little line camp like Ben's goin' to have here."

Cleve turned away. Ben, he saw, was lounging in the shade of the barn with Lorenzo French and Vic Bassler. Cleve still hadn't seen Hank Fetterman here, and he wondered briefly, hopefully, if Hank had decided against lending his presence to the auction. But then he saw Block Five's handsome black buggy top a rise and come jouncing along the rutted lane toward the buildings. Ben De Marris, as if he had waited only for this, inclined his head toward Harry Jacks. The auctioneer mounted a high flatbed wagon and called for attention.

"Folks, I know some of you come a good ways to get here. I guess we're all anxious to see this stuff knocked down in a hurry. We're late getting started, but I don't see no reason we can't wind this up in a couple of hours." Jacks turned, glancing toward Ben De Marris. "Anything you'd like to say, Ben, before—"

"I'd like to see Ruscher's estate realize a fair price on

this stuff, that's all," Ben said. "Get on with it, Harry."

Jacks nodded down at a group of men who stood at the wagon's tailgate. "Hand up the first item, gents. That's it, let 'em see it. An iron skillet in perfect condition. Just broke in, and who'll start it off at a dollar? Dollar, dollar, do I hear a dollar?"

He didn't. He had to drop down to a quarter before he got a bid. Cleve wished suddenly that he'd come earlier to pick up his sledge and wedges, and not seen this. He was turning away when someone murmured, "Ain't that Doc Forbes' girl comin' in?"

It was Ruth, all right, Cleve saw. She was driving Will's team and wagon. Some acquisitive soul pointed that fact out to the auctioneer, and asked loudly, "That goes too, don't it, Harry?"

It caused a buzz of talk in the crowd. Harry Jacks passed the buck to Ben De Marris.

"What about that, Ben?"

Ruth had pulled the team up at the edge of the crowd, and she was watching Ben's face as he debated the problem.

"Sell it," Ben grunted. "It belonged to him, same as the rest of this stuff did."

"For your information, Ben," Ruth said quietly, "I happen to own this team and wagon." She saw Ben's smile, indulging her in this nonsense because, Ben's manner said, she was a pretty, young woman. "Also," she said, "I happen to own all these things you're proposing to sell off at auction. I'm afraid you owe all these folks an apology, Ben."

Ben stared thoughtfully at her. "How do you make that out, Ruth?"

For an answer Ruth climbed down from the wagon and walked through the crowd toward Harry Jacks. She handed up a crisp, official-looking document to the

fat man, saying evenly, "Would you mind taking a look at this, Mr. Jacks?"

"What is it, Harry?" Ben asked, unable to control his impatience.

Jacks unfolded the paper. His eyes briefly scanned it. "Well," he said, "it's a marriage certificate, Ben. Her and Will Ruscher seem to have joined together in matrimony on the twenty-first—" The auctioneer broke it off, glancing down wonderingly at Ruth. "That was last Saturday," he said. "You mean you married him after—I mean to say—when he was dyin'?"

Ben, Cleve noticed, was staring shrewdly at Ruth. "So that's what the preacher was doin' at your place," the big man said slowly.

"When a homesteader dies, Ben," Ruth pointed out dryly, "all rights in his homestead pass to his widow."

"Wait a minute," Ben sputtered. "If you think I'm goin' to let you—"

"Will needed three weeks more to prove up on this place," Ruth said. "I'm going to finish out those three weeks for him, Ben."

"You're what?" Ben half-shouted. Somewhere in the crowd near Cleve a man let out a short laugh, then wiped all trace of humor from his face as Ben turned hot eyes toward him.

"She's in the right, Ben," an older woman said tartly. "If she's really the widow."

The crowd took it up, and it was easy to see, Cleve thought, where their sympathy lay. He heard a man whisper to his companion, "By God, that girl's made a blithering fool out of Ben."

Ben stood there, a big man full of stubborn anger, but too shrewd to buck this strong current.

"Ruth," Ben said, shrugging heavily, "if you've come down here to stay, I guess I'm beaten. I've never used

force on a woman, and I'm not starting." He turned and planked a stiff smile on his face as he faced the crowd. "I'm sorry I brought you folks down here for nothing."

He tramped away toward the corral, and the crowd dispersed quickly. Cleve was still standing there, staring admiringly at Ruth Forbes, when he heard a rustle of skirts. He turned to see Eve Fetterman beside him, looking up at him strangely.

"Evie," Cleve asked, "did you see that?"

"What?" He was a little surprised at her tartness.

"Ruth and Ben, just now. She really took the wind out of Ben's sails." He shook his head, grinning. "Never seen the match of it. Thought Ben'd bust a blood vessel."

"Cleve," Eve asked, "are you coming back to Block Five?"

He glanced down curiously at her. "I've about decided against it."

Eve's eyes were impatient. "What's just happened won't help you, if that's what you're thinking. Ben's been thrown off his stride, but that's all it amounts to. Sooner or later he'll squeeze you out. What's the sense in—"

"Evie," Cleve said, "let it drop."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not quitting."

Eve shook her pretty head wearily at him. "If you could give me one sensible reason—"

"Ruth," Cleve cut in quietly, "will need help here, if she intends to finish out Will's time on that homestead patent. As her closest neighbor, I guess I'm elected to give her that help."

Eve looked at him for a long, long time. He had never seen such a strange expression in her eyes. "You're

a fool," she said very quietly, and turned her pretty back on him.

Cleve watched her go, an indulgent smile on his weathered face. Presently he drifted across the trampled yard toward Ruth Forbes, wondering what would be the best way to make her the offer of his assistance.

CHAPTER SIX

ALVIN BURNETT's Kettle ranch lay in a cedar grove at the base of the Wataugas. The main house, a sprawling, L-shaped affair, was an architectural monstrosity which Burnett had thrown together as his needs dictated. Originally it had been a two-room masonry structure. It had lost all integrity, and whatever charm it drew from its setting, when Burnett added a wing of frame and clapboard, and then finally tacked on an additional room using rough-cut cedar logs in the construction.

A barracks-like bunkhouse lay close by the boss house. This in turn lay near the barn with its lean-to wagon shed. A tangle of corrals abutted on a stony foothills bluff, and that mass of granite lent a cheerlessness to these buildings.

Burnett was himself a thin-mouthed, cheerless man. His crew respected him but couldn't relax in his presence. After evening chow they either bunked in against the next day's work or slipped off unobtrusively to Watauga Spring, a little settlement three miles up the mountainside in a clearing.

Here they could drink Rotgut Sam Allenbine's whis-

key, play penny ante, and, if they had a mind to, make uncouth remarks about Sam's Piute woman. And if they tarried overlong at the Springs and woke up the ranch with their drunken homecoming, Burnett never said anything but only worked them harder the next day.

Bud Gracey had not ridden up to the Springs with the others this evening. Not that he disapproved of Rotgut Sam and his Piute woman, or even of drinking on week nights. The truth was, Bud wasn't very well liked here at Kettle. A few short months ago he'd had his own spread. It was hard, going back to working for wages after a taste of independence. Bud had to admit he'd done nothing to win this crew's affection.

Now he lay in the dark bunkhouse and turned his thoughts to Louise Dannehauer. Thinking of Louise always lifted Bud's spirits. They'd been planning to marry until Ben De Marris kicked Bud off his land and threw a fly in the ointment. Thinking of Ben, Bud scowled, and a sour hatred of the Wheel owner ran through him.

A clatter of hooves outside in the yard pulled him out of his bunk in sock feet. He padded to a window in time to see the very man he'd been thinking about rein up in front of the house.

Alvin Burnett stepped out on the gallery and peered at his visitor in the uncertain moonlight. Bud Gracey heard his boss' murmured greeting to Ben De Marris, and then Ben's voice, blunt, demanding, "You alone here tonight, Alvin?"

"My crew lined out for the Springs an hour ago," Burnett said. "Why?"

"All of them?"

"I'm pretty sure," Burnett said.

"Make sure," Ben said.

Burnett stared at him. Shrugging, he entered the

house. He reappeared after a moment carrying a lantern. Swinging it in rhythm with his slow, deliberate stride, he came toward the bunkhouse.

Bud Gracey, acting on an impulse he didn't entirely understand, grabbed his boots from under his bunk and let himself out the back of the building just as Burnett and Ben stepped in through the front door.

Crouching outside, he heard Ben murmur idly, "Got a job for you, Alvin. There's a piece of property I'm anxious to get my hands on."

"If you mean H-on-a-Rail, Ben, I—"

"Suppose I talk and you listen. The Forbes girl will finish provin' up over there as of tomorrow. No doubt she'll trundle right up to town to collect her patent from the Land Office. There's where you come in."

"Where?"

"The girl's only reason for marryin' Ruscher and layin' claim to the place," Ben said, "was to spite me. But it'll be a white elephant to her, once she's proved on it. Likely she'll be willing to sell."

"Then she'll sell to McNary," Burnett said. "He needs the water. She's in his debt for the help he's given her these three weeks."

"She won't sell to Cleve," Ben said.

"Why won't she?"

"Because she knows I'd put a bullet in him before I'd let him move in there. I still consider H-on-a-Rail to be my property, Alvin. I can be a hard man when I'm in the right. Bud Gracey could tell you something about that."

Burnett's voice was silent a moment. Then he said, "What do you want of me, Ben?"

"I want you to buy that place from the girl, once she's got title to it. It's logical that you'd want it. It's close to you here, and there's the water. I brought some cash

you can dangle in front of the girl. Cash helps in a dicker. Naturally I want to get off as easy as you can manage. But if you have to you can go as high as three thousand."

"You never give up on a thing, do you, Ben?"

"That's my land. I mean to have it."

"Sorry," Burnett said. "I can't help you."

"I figure you can."

"I like Ruth Forbes, Ben. When my sister pretty near died up in town two years ago, it was Ruth's nursin', much as anything, that saved her. I ain't a scrupulous man, but there's things I draw the line at."

"As I say," Ben put in idly, "you're the logical buyer. That elects you for this. I think you'll do it."

"You threatening me, Ben?"

"Not me," Ben said. "I'm only askin' a little neighborly favor. And suggestin' that if you're wise you'll accommodate me."

"It ain't fair," Burnett protested, "puttin' it up to me that way."

"As I say," Ben countered, "I can be a hard man when I want to be, Alvin."

There was a long silence, broken by Alvin Burnett's voice saying sullenly, "All right, all right."

Bud Gracey heard Ben cackle softly as the two men turned out of the bunkhouse.

Later, after Ben had ridden out, Bud lay on his bunk grinding his teeth, wishing he knew of some way to throw a crimp in Ben's plan. He gave it up finally and he slept. When the crew clomped in around midnight their racket turned him over on the straw ticking, and along toward morning he had a dream.

He dreamed he was in another fight with Ben. Only this time he drove Ben steadily back, he pounded Ben's

face and body at will, until, finally, Ben lay bleeding and helpless.

"Wake up, Gracey," a voice said.

Somebody was shaking Bud's arm. He forced his eyes open. Gray light spilled in through a window. A dawn chill came with it. Alvin Burnett's leathery face peered down at him.

"Doggone it," Bud said, "I was enjoyin' that dream, boss."

"Catch up my roan," Burnett said with his early morning abruptness. "I'm ridin' to Sentinel soon as I eat breakfast."

Bud sat up on the edge of the bunk and groped for his levis. And then an idea came to him. It was risky, he knew, but he hesitated only an instant.

"Boss," he said, "do you mind givin' my girl a letter when you get to town?"

"Damn it," Burnett snapped, but he relented. "All right, if it's written."

"Well, the fact is, it ain't. But I write fast. Won't take me a minute."

"You'd better write fast, and see it's a short one. I want that horse around front in ten minutes."

Burnett tramped out. As Bud pulled hurriedly into his boots, the man on the bunk across from him opened one bleary eye at him.

"Mornin', Whitey," Bud murmured.

"What's good about it?" groaned Whitey, and Bud, ignoring him, went to the cluttered table in the center of the room and rummaged about for something to write with. He found some paper and a small stub of pencil, but no envelope. "Blame it," he muttered, "there was six here yesterday. You got an envelope I could use, Whitey?"

"No," Whitey said, adding grumpily, "let a man sleep."

"I only got ten minutes," Bud said anxiously. "You heard the boss."

"Look," Whitey said, "use your head. Write it and fold it and seal it with candle drippings. The way your granddaddy did before envelopes was invented."

"Hey," Bud said, and he brightened. Then his face fell. "Trouble is, I've used up half my ten minutes already. I—I hate havin' to ask you, but—"

"All right," Whitey sighed. He put on his clothes and went out to catch up the boss' horse. Bud sat at the table and scratched out his letter.

Dear Louise:

I asked the boss and he says he will deliver this to you. Now listen careful. The boss is going to try to buy H-on-a-Rail off Ruth Forbes. I want you to know he is buying for Ben, not for himself like it will seem on the surface. So if you can get a quick word in with Ruth, put her wise.

But don't take no chances because if Ben heard, well you know him and I guess it would sure finish me in the valley.

So long now honey, and I love you three X's.
Bud.

Bud folded the letter and struck a match to the short length of candle standing in an old sardine can on the table. He was still trying to seal the letter with the candle's drippings when Alvin Burnett came back into the bunkhouse.

"Blame it, Gracey, I'm late already, and here you sit foolin' around. What in Sam Hill are you doin'?"

"Tryin' to seal my letter, boss. Only candle grease don't seem to do the job," Bud said lamely.

"Gracey," Burnett said, at the end of his patience, "if you want me to deliver that, hand it over and quick about it. Don't flatter yourself that I'd be interested enough to peek at your romantic droolings."

"Well, I know you wouldn't," Bud said. The crew was awake, grinning at this scene. Bud sweated toward a decision. If the boss did sneak a look at the letter's contents— Bud shivered.

He took the long gamble.

"Give this to Louise first thing after you get into town, will you, boss?" he asked humbly.

"Naturally," Burnett grunted, "it bein' so all-fired important."

He thrust the folded paper into his pocket, hobbled out to his horse, and rode out, sitting stiffly and grumpily in the saddle.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALVIN BURNETT's mood didn't improve on the way up to town. Ben De Marris' money was strapped around Alvin's waist in a canvas money belt. It chafed him as he rode, reminding him of his errand. And he was ashamed of his errand.

He tried to console himself with the thought that he hadn't dared to refuse Ben. A smart man knew when to bend under pressure. Look at Will Ruscher. If he'd had enough sense to give ground he might be alive and kicking today. Instead the blame fool was six foot under. And—

Burnett broke off this line of thought. Deep down inside of him was a tremendous respect for Will Ruscher. The man had backed up his honest convictions. In a manner of thinking, Will Ruscher had died a hero.

Which is more'n most of us do, Alvin Burnett conceded with reluctance.

Topping a little rise, he heard the *chee-chee-chee* of swamp sparrows in a swale. Overhead a black buzzard, soaring on widespread wings, cut its wide circles, then suddenly dropped like a stone.

The wind was out of the west now, carrying with it a rotten stench from Stinking Water basin, which lay above Hogpen and formed an eastern boundary to the Washakie desert. Alvin Burnett's nose crinkled and he pushed his horse quickly forward.

When he came to the river he let his pony slake its thirst sparingly, then pushed up the far bank into the willow grove where Orin Senderling kept his lonely store.

The old man hobbled out to greet him. Old Orin was always aggressively sociable, more than willing to pass the time of day with anyone who chanced by here. But Alvin Burnett was not a sociable man.

"Ruth Forbes come by here this morning, Orin?" he asked shortly.

"Yep," the old man said in his throaty voice. "Druv by about a half-hour ago. Young Cleve McNary was ridin' along up to town with her. Said somethin' about a package he's been expectin' from one of the mail-order houses."

Alvin frowned. Cleve's presence in town was a complication he'd just as soon not have had to contend with. But it mightn't matter.

Orin Senderling cackled like an old rooster. "Today's the day Ruth picks up the patent on Will Ruscher's

homestead. Laugh's on Ben, ain't it?"

"Ben generally has the last laugh," Burnett observed sourly.

Rattling across the railroad tracks into town, a half-hour later, he was hot, dusty, tired, and depressed by the thought of his errand. As he neared the depot he heard a man call out his name. He turned his head to see Lorenzo French, Ben De Marris' new foreman, nod at him from atop the loading platform.

"Ben's in the hotel bar," French said. "He wants a word with you."

Burnett dropped a hand into his pocket, touching the letter Bud Gracey had asked him to deliver to Louise Dannehauer.

"All right," he said. He started across the compound toward the rear of Dannehauers' two-story building.

French's voice drifted after him. "Ben's waitin' on you. He ain't a patient man."

"All right, all right," Burnett said testily. He walked his horse a few more yards toward the Dannehauers', then wheeled around peevishly toward the hotel and stepped down. Thoroughly disgruntled, he entered the hotel bar through its back door.

Ben was slouched at a corner table. Alvin Burnett went over to him, and Ben waved him into a chair.

"Where you been?" Ben asked in a gravelly whisper.

"I don't punish a horse, Ben. Not at my age. What's the matter?"

"She's in the Land Office right now. She'll be out in a couple of minutes." Ben looked up. "You got that money I—"

"I'm wearing it," Alvin Burnett said. Through the cloth of his shirt he tapped the canvas belt strapped around his waist. His eyes narrowed speculatively and

he murmured, "I hear Cleve came in with her."

Ben shrugged. "Just on some personal errand. He ain't with her now. It don't mean anything to us." The big man stood up. "All right," he said, pleasantly enough, "you better get going. I'll wait for you here."

Alvin went out and led his horse around the corner of the hotel onto Cedar Street. He walked down past McClain's, where Will Ruscher had made his ill-fated stand against Ben, and halted in front of the Three Star.

He was standing in the shade of Billy Bates' awning, swabbing the back of his leathery neck with the corner of his bandanna, when Ruth Forbes emerged from the Land Commissioner's Office.

She turned into the mouth of the narrow alley that lay between that building and Win Birdsell's law office.

"Hi, Ruth."

The girl stopped, turning to face him. A tall, softly rounded girl with honest blue eyes, and a mouth whose gentle, half-smiling expression was somehow appealing. Nicest girl in town, Alvin Burnett thought. Remembering how Ruth had sat up three days and nights with his sister Effie, he swallowed dryly. But then his hand strayed toward the canvas belt that held Ben De Maris' money.

"What is it, Mr. Burnett?" Ruth said pleasantly.

"Got title to H-on-a-Rail now, have you?"

"That's right," Ruth said, and frowned at him. "Why?"

"What're you fixin' to do with the place, Ruth?"

"Well, I—" She bit at her lip. Her glance narrowed at him. "Why?" she repeated.

"Dunno as it'll be much good to you, will it?" Burnett grinned uncomfortably. "I might be interested in takin' the place off your hands. I could use the extra water. That is, if you'd be interested in sellin'."

"Isn't that a little out of the way for you?" Ruth said,

frowning. "I didn't know you were interested in extending your range over that way."

"I'll run Kettle beef wherever they can find grass and water," Burnett said. "If you're minded to sell, we just might strike a quick bargain. Happens I'm prepared to offer you cash on the barrel."

"Cash?" Ruth's eyes narrowed faintly. She was silent a moment, and then she said, "If you'll forgive my saying it, Mr. Burnett, I understood you were a bit strapped for cash this summer. There's been talk about the bank holding your note, against your next stock check."

"Talk," Alvin Burnett said. He shrugged his thin shoulders, but the girl was watching him closely, and his eyes wavered downward. "Keepin' this businesslike, Ruth," he said, "all I want is a yes or no answer. Are you willin' to sell?"

"Why, no." Ruth's blue eyes lifted to study Alvin's reaction. "No, I guess not. Thanks for the offer though, Mr. Burnett."

She turned away. For a few seconds Alvin Burnett stood there, noting the trimness of the girl's figure, the easy grace with which she carried herself. She had left a faint fragrance behind her. It was enough to make a man regret his years and wonder if there wasn't something in life he was missing. "Old fool," he muttered under his breath. He wheeled around, retracing his way to the hotel.

Ben was waiting in the bar at that same corner table. He made no move, other than a quick lift of his eyes, as Alvin Burnett entered.

"Well?" Ben spoke in a voice that discouraged eavesdropping.

Alvin Burnett unstrapped the canvas belt from around his waist and laid it on the table. "Your money's all there, Ben. Maybe you'd better count it."

Ben looked murkily at him. "You bungled it," he said, and there was a gritty quality in his voice that angered Alvin. Ben grabbed him by the wrist, dragging him down into a chair. "You didn't even try," he said.

Alvin Burnett was not a man who often indulged himself in outbursts of temper. Only fools, as he saw it, risked death on the strength of a chance word, a possibly misinterpreted meaning or gesture. But there was one thing that could always infuriate him. He hated any encroachment upon the privacy of his person. The valley had never recognized this quirk in him.

"Take your hand off me, Ben," he said, and Ben stared curiously at him.

Something in Alvin Burnett's face must have warned the big man, for he said, "What's eatin' on you all of a sudden?"

He did not let go of Alvin's wrist, and that was a mistake. For with his bony elbow Alvin Burnett pushed his coat back, and he hooked the thumb of his free right hand in his cartridge belt. His hand was only inches away from his gun.

Ben, seeing it, frowned heavily at him. A cheap smile came on Ben's face after another moment, however. He let go of Alvin's wrist and teetered back in his chair, surveying Burnett from under hooded eyelids.

"So she wouldn't sell," he murmured, as if he had forgotten that other issue between them. "What's she goin' to do with the place then?"

"No idea. Lost interest," Alvin said curtly.

Ben's eyes rose a fraction. His jaw clamped. Then, as if to smooth down Alvin's pin feathers, he nodded toward the bar.

"Come on," he said. "I'll buy you one for your trouble, Alvin."

Alvin Burnett's rheumy old eyes met Ben's without flinching.

"You can return that money belt when it's convenient," he said. He turned his back and walked out, leaving the younger man to reflect on the fact that Alvin Burnett had refused to drink with him.

From the post office, where he was informed that the package he'd been expecting from the mail-order house hadn't come in, Cleve McNary drifted into the Sentinel Cafe. On his way out of town after a leisurely lunch he dropped into the Three Star for a drink.

Ben De Marris and his tall, ruggedly handsome foreman, Lorenzo French, were the only customers in the place. Cleve was regretting the impulse that had brought him into the saloon when Ben spoke.

"I want to talk to you, Cleve."

Cleve turned, resting his elbows over the lip of the bar. "Go ahead."

"I don't appreciate the help you been giving Ruth this past three weeks," Ben said. He was studying Cleve's face with the closest attention. "Why'd you go out of your way to help her?"

Cleve grinned. "I like to think I'm a good neighbor."

The grin, he saw, had been a mistake. Ben was in one of his irascible moods when nothing pleased him.

"Be a neighbor then," Ben snapped. "You're runnin' beef down there on that cap-and-ball outfit you call a ranch. We're on the same side of the fence, both workin' cattle, and yet you go out of your way to encourage the girl."

Cleve looked curiously at him. "What's put your nose so far out of joint today, Ben?" he asked shrewdly.

Ben stood up and rested his fingertips on the table.

His face was mottled with anger as he said, "I'm warnin' you, Cleve. Learn to hobble that tongue. You're treadin' on thin ice around here."

Cleve pushed away from the bar. "Any time you want a racket with me, Ben, it's right here, waitin' for you."

Ben started around the table, then hesitated. "I quit fighting for the hell of it years ago," he said gruffly. "Which for you is damn lucky."

Cleve smiled faintly, mockingly at the big man. "Hate to see a man grow old that way," he murmured.

The bait did not take with Ben. He was too shrewd, too practical a man, as he said, to engage in a saloon brawl without more provocation than this. Lorenzo French, watching the exchange out of restless eyes, said without warning, "This damn fool's just askin' for it."

"Shut up," Ben said.

French was studying Cleve. He said, in an idle aside to his boss, "I haven't quit, Ben."

"Quit what?" Ben grunted at him.

"Fighting," French said, "for the hell of it."

This was his offer to Cleve. He stood up, his eyes smoky with challenge. He came across the sawdusted floor toward Cleve. Ben watched him and said nothing. French suddenly leaped at Cleve. His hand came out, his bunched knuckles seeking Cleve's face.

Cleve's head swiveled only as far as was necessary and his own right hand slammed hookingly into the other man's stomach. It jackknifed French. As his head came down, Cleve's knee lifted, smashing him in the face. There was the sickening sound of bone crunching against bone. French fell over sideways into the sawdust, and lay there in a gray misery, moaning. The whole thing had taken less than ten seconds.

Cleve looked at Ben, and said, "I thought he was tough."

"He is," Ben said. His eyes on Cleve's were baleful. "He made the mistake of thinking you weren't. He won't make that mistake again. Next time you tangle with him, he'll kill you."

"I doubt it," Cleve said. He was looking down at the man on the floor. French's pain-glazed eyes came up, hitting at him with a concentrated animosity. Cleve knew, then, that the man's pride would never let him forget this incident. He walked toward the door keeping a wary eye out behind him.

Tensions were building up, he knew, as he rode out of town, and he shook his head grimly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALVIN BURNETT's offer to buy H-on-a-Rail was still on Ruth's mind when she walked into the little corner house she shared with her father. She found her dad at his desk. He was thumbing through his unpaid accounts, trying to decide which people were honestly unable to pay, and which ought to be dunned for what they owed him.

It was a chore he disliked intensely, Ruth knew. Noting the weary distaste with which he went about it, she said, "Dad, I could do that for you this time."

"It's all right," he said. "I'm almost finished." He glanced up at her. "Did they give you the title to Will's place?"

"They had to," Ruth said. "Will's application was perfectly legal." She frowned. "Alvin Burnett just offered

to buy Will's place from me, Dad. Does that seem sort of funny to you?"

"Why should it?"

"Ben wants the place," Ruth said pointedly. Her father lifted a hand to his ear, glancing up quizzically at her.

"You think Burnett was acting as straw man for Ben?"

"I'm almost certain of it," Ruth said. A shadow darkened her face, and she sighed. "There's something I haven't told you about, Dad."

Her father looked up, a work-worn man in a rumpled black suit, and she hated the thought of burdening him with her problems. But in one way the H-on-a-Rail was his problem too. It had taken her away from him for three weeks, forcing him to keep his own house and do his own cooking. Of course he hadn't complained, but she knew he could hardly have enjoyed such a lonely existence. Her marriage to Will had worried him too, for she had never fully explained what lay behind that strange deathbed ceremony.

Wondering how to say what she knew she must say, she noticed the sheaf of unpaid bills on the desk.

"Will was one patient who never gave us any of that kind of trouble, wasn't he, Dad?" she murmured, indicating the bills. "He was funny about that. He couldn't stand the thought of being in debt to anybody."

"I know, honey."

"I never knew how strongly he felt about it until—until he realized he was dying. Do you know what he hated most about the idea of dying?"

"Most people, if they're reasonably young and not jaded with living, dislike the idea on general principles, Ruth."

"Will couldn't get it out of his head that he owed Cleve something for standing behind him in that fight

with Ben. It was all Will could think of. He kept brooding about it, wondering how he could repay Cleve. It was like an—an obsession." She was silent, remembering Will as he lay dying. "He was delirious toward the end. That didn't help any."

"What are you trying to tell me, Ruth?"

"My real reason for marrying Will."

"I'm a little confused. I thought—"

Ruth shook her head. "It wasn't just to spite Ben. Will wanted Cleve to have H-on-a-Rail, Dad. I'm supposed to turn it over to him, now that I've got title to it."

"Hmm." Her father swiveled back in his chair, staring down at his fingertips. He looked up presently, his eyes grave. "That's clever," he said. "I never guessed that."

"Nobody else did either," Ruth said.

"For a man who died suddenly, and intestate, Will tied up his tag ends pretty neatly." Her father sat up in the chair and a wry smile bent his mouth. "So Cleve's to be the beneficiary. This gets interesting. Wonder how Ben will take this."

"That's just it," Ruth said, and she bit her lip. "Ben hates Cleve already. When he learns about this— Dad, I just don't know what to do. I've been thinking about it night and day for three weeks, and I'm nowhere near an answer."

"Seems to me, honey, that if you promised Will you'd turn the place over to Cleve— Of course, I can see why you'd hesitate, too."

Ruth nodded. "Dad, I get sick all over when I think what could happen if I keep that promise. I really think Ben would kill Cleve. Is that what Will wanted?"

"Ruth," her father asked gently, "why didn't you tell me about this?"

"You have enough troubles."

"You're like your mother. Always playing the mother

hen to me." He gave her a long look full of affection. Behind the fondness in his eyes lay a shrewd speculation. "I suppose you and Cleve saw a good deal of each other during your stay down on H-on-a-Rail. You like that young man, don't you, Ruth?"

Ruth felt warmth in her cheeks. Her eyes started to drop, then she tightened her mouth and looked her dad in the eye.

"Yes. I do. He's a wonderful man, Dad."

Her father looked at her with quick understanding, and with an ineffable sadness.

"What are you going to do?" he asked gently.

"The right thing, I hope," Ruth said, very soberly. "I'll just have to fight this out, Dad, with my conscience."

On his return trip to Kettle, Alvin Burnett stopped in at Orin Senderling's store to replenish his dwindling supply of tobacco. He found the old storekeeper gossiping idly with Johnny Meanea, a Wheel puncher.

As Alvin Burnett nodded a greeting to Johnny Meanea, he reached into his coat pocket for his wallet. His exploring fingertips touched the letter Bud Gracey had asked him to deliver to Louise Dannehauer. He swore.

"What's the trouble?" asked old Orin. He grinned toothily as Burnett laid the difficulty before him. "That's easy fixed, Alvin. Johnny here's on his way up to town. Don't reckon you'd mind haulin' Gracey's mash note to his girl, would you?"

"I don't mind," the Wheel rider said, shrugging.

Burnett frowned, and he hesitated.

"Save you ridin' back with it, Alvin," Orin Senderling pointed out.

"So it will." Alvin Burnett was relieved at that pros-

pect. With no further misgivings he handed Bud Gracey's letter over to Meanea.

He climbed down in front of his own house in late afternoon. He was an aging man with a growlingly empty stomach and with a sour awareness of having spent his day to no purpose. A dozen-odd horses milled in the corral, indication that the crew, gambling on his continued absence, had knocked off work early. Bud Gracey hurried over from the bunkhouse and caught up the reins of Burnett's horse.

"Did Louise get my letter, boss?" he asked anxiously.

For some reason the question touched off Burnett's already frazzled temper.

"Yes," he snapped out. He turned his back on Bud Gracey and tramped into the house.

At a little past eleven o'clock the next morning Ben De Marris rode into Kettle, accompanied by Lorenzo French and Vic Bassler. Alvin Burnett stepped out onto his gallery to greet the Wheel trio.

"Gracey around?" Ben asked idly.

"No," Burnett said, and he frowned.

"Where is he?" Ben asked just as idly.

"Why?"

Ben's huge shoulders lifted and fell. "My business with him won't take long. Where's he workin' this mornin'?"

"He's ridin' fence," Burnett admitted, and again he asked, "Why?"

"Ridin' fence—where?" Ben insisted.

"Damn it, he's ridin' my north fence," Burnett got out gruffly. "What's this all about, Ben?"

"Personal matter. Nothin' you need to worry about," Ben said.

He wheeled the big dun, nodding toward French and

Bassler. They rattled out of the Kettle yard. Watching them, Alvin Burnett frowned, and gave a slow shake of his head, wishing suddenly that he hadn't told them where Bud Gracey was working.

CHAPTER NINE

BUD GRACEY'S pony was too spirited an animal to enjoy riding fence. It kept breaking into a jiggling trot. Bud finally lost patience and sawed back on the bit, mouth-whipping the pony. That settled that. The animal quit breaking gait.

"Hated havin' to do that," Bud said contritely, "but this here's a walkin' job, fella."

It was a monotonous, menial job which Bud—in common with most cowboys—hated. You rode along with pliers, cutters and a supply of bobwire. Where the fence needed repairing you stepped down and repaired it. It required neither brains nor skill. All a man needed was patience and the ability to turn in an honest day's work without supervision.

It was lonely work, but that didn't bother Bud much. He could always shut his eyes and imagine he was in town, perched on the Dannehauers' living-room sofa, with Louise snuggling beside him.

Sometimes he saw Louise so clearly in his mind's eye he almost felt he could reach out and touch her. He was dreaming along like that when a trio of horsemen

topped a rise, southward, and came on steadily toward him.

A cold finger ran down Bud's back as he recognized Ben De Marris' giant dun gelding. The other two, he saw, were Lorenzo French and Vic Bassler. He had an impulse to run, but a stiff-backed pride wouldn't let him give Ben that satisfaction.

He built himself a brown-paper cigarette, waited for the three to come up. He had lit the smoke and was taking in his first long, lung-scorching drag when the three reined up before him.

"Howdy." Bud's nod included Bassler and French in the greeting.

Ben looked expressionlessly at him, then inclined his head toward French and Bassler. They kneed their mounts forward, placing themselves on Bud's flanks.

Bud swallowed. "What—"

"Get his gun," Ben said.

"Listen—" Bud got out thickly.

"If you're smart," French said in his high, half-amused voice, "you'll do the listenin' now, kid."

Bud's head turned. He had his look at the gun in French's hand, which was pointed straight at him. He saw the grin on French's face. His body turned rigid. His breathing was suddenly shallow.

"Get it, Vic," French said. Vic Bassler's horse shouldered against the hip of Bud's pony. Bud heard Bassler wheeze as he reached out, then Bud felt his gun teased from its holster.

"Now," Ben said, "you can get down, kid."

"Why?" Bud said.

"You don't know?"

"No, damn it, I don't know."

"You're a liar," Ben said matter-of-factly. "You should be more careful when you write to your girl, kid."

Bud had the feeling of doors closing in on him. His panicky glance swung left and right, then back to Ben. "I—I don't know what you're—"

"No way you can weasel out of this," Ben said. He took a piece of paper out of his pocket. A piece of paper folded three times, and spattered with candle drippings.

Bud stared at it. "Where'd you get that?"

Ben smiled like a smug fat cat. "Get down off the horse, kid," he suggested.

"Why?"

"We're wastin' time," Ben said wearily. He glanced toward Vic Bassler. Bud sensed what was coming. His head snapped around. The gun in Bassler's hand struck him in the left temple, just at the hairline. He jerked away so violently that he lost his seat in the saddle. He hit the ground on his knee, then at the shoulder. He rolled over once, and watched Lorenzo French and Vic Bassler climb down off their horses.

Bud stood up, knotting his fists.

"All right," he said. "All right, you sons of bitches."

Somehow, having said that, he felt better, although he knew what he was in for.

Lorenzo French stepped toward him almost idly. The man threw a punch. Bud ducked low, making French miss. French adjusted his footing. His fisted right hand smashed Bud on the cheekbone. It drove Bud off to one side. He righted himself, and he charged French. Head down. Both fists flailing wildly.

French hit him on the forehead, splitting Bud's skin. Bud grappled with him. French's knee came up into his groin. Bud groaned and let go of the man. French pushed him back, released him, and then, still with that devil's half smile on his face, hit him on the point of the chin.

Bud went down. He was hurt, he knew, but oddly he

felt no pain—only a wild, cornered fury. He crawled along the ground, grabbing at French's legs. French kicked him in the face. Bud let out a whimper. He caught and hung onto French's foot, trying to twist the man down.

A hand wedged itself under his chin, prying him back. He saw Vic Bassler's gargoyle face, upside down, above him. The man hit him a clubbing punch on the nose, knocking him away from French. A dismal sense of futility came over Bud then. He stared up almost impassively at French and Bassler.

French, he saw, was still smiling. He would always hate French for that smile, he knew dully.

He looked over at Ben. Ben wore a bland, self-righteous expression.

"You bought this, Gracey," he said.

"You'll get yours one of these days," Bud said.

Ben's mouth turned hard. He nodded at his riders. "Work him over."

French's foot stabbed out at Bud's ribs. "Get up."

Bud lay there. French grabbed him by the front of his doeskin vest, yanked him to a kneeling position. Still with that smile on his face, French slapped Bud on the cheek, then smashed his fist into Bud's nose.

Bud tried to butt him in the groin. This show of defiance drove French half crazy. He yanked Bud erect, hurled another punch at Bud's battered face. It knocked one of Bud's teeth loose. He fell soddenly, hitting the ground so heavily the wind was knocked out of him. He was only half-conscious now.

He heard Ben's voice, cold as ice, saying, "See how it is, kid, when you go out of your way to make trouble for Ben De Marrisi?" Ben's voice paused, then rasped, "You hear what I'm sayin'?"

"I hear you." Bud's eyes were closed.

"Then get this. Get it right. You're through in the valley. If I ever see you again, you'll get the dose I gave Will Ruscher. Open your eyes and look at me when I'm talkin'."

"I hear you," Ben mumbled.

And mercifully, that was all. He lay there listening to the creak of their saddle leather as Ben and his two riders mounted. They rode away. When Bud could no longer hear them, he pushed himself to a sitting position. A knifelike pain in his ribs made him wince. It was hard to breathe, and he gathered dully that one of his ribs was broken.

His horse stood about thirty yards away, brown eyes focused troubledly on him.

Bud tried to whistle to the horse. His ripped mouth wouldn't pucker into shape for a whistle. He called out weakly, and the horse walked over uncertainly to him.

Holding onto a stirrup, Bud hauled himself to his feet. He stood for a full minute waiting for the sensation of nausea and dizziness to pass. When he finally realized it was not going to pass, he hooked a foot in the stirrup, grabbed the horn with both hands, and tried to haul himself up to the saddle.

The pony took a step forward, and that helped Bud swing his dragging right leg across the animal's croup. He reined around to the left, bringing the saddle back, and slid into position.

The dizziness hit him again, then it let up a little, and he touched the pony with the side of one bootheel. Gingerly now, he started the long ride back to Kettle headquarters.

He had gone about a quarter mile when he remembered the letter. Burnett, he recalled, had acted kind of funny when Bud asked him if Louise got that letter.

Why, hell, Bud thought bitterly, it was the old man sold me out.

He hated to think it. But what else could have happened? How else could Ben and his men have got hold of the letter? They'd ridden up here from the direction of Kettle. That tied in, Bud thought. Considering it, he felt his battered lips curl, and he knew he could not trust himself to face Alvin Burnett.

He reined the pony off its homeward course and rode in the direction of Cleve McNary's Flying Nine buildings. The pony did not approve of the change in destinations, and showed its displeasure by moving more slowly. It was as well, Bud thought. His throat was parched; the brassy noon sun was baking him out. His whole body ached and throbbed miserably, and he wondered how long he could stay in the saddle.

When he dragged into Flying Nine he was so done in he had to be lifted down. And not until a half-hour later, when he was stretched out on a bunk with a cup of beef broth inside him, was he able to talk coherently about what had happened.

Cleve McNary and his two Flying Nine crewmen, Bump Miskimmons and Pete Spreckels, heard him out in tight-mouthed silence.

"Now what, Bud?" Cleve asked soberly as Bud finished.

"I'll ride out, I guess," Bud said, remotely ashamed as he made the admission. "What would you do in my place?"

"I don't know," Cleve said without censure. "I'm not the one who took the beating."

"Ben will kill me if I don't clear out," Bud said. "He promised me that."

"And I'll promise you," Cleve said, scowling, "that he won't lay a hand on you as long as you're here. Well,

try not to think about it. Rest is what you need." He looked down at Bud, added gravely, "You're staying here until you're able to ride. That much is certain."

Bud murmured his thanks, then he sighed and said with some hesitation, "I hate havin' to ask this, Cleve, but— Well, I been goin' with Louise the better part of four years now, and I'd sure like to see her. Aw, let's forget it. I got no right to ask it."

"Do you think she'd come down here?" Cleve asked. "I mean, aren't her parents pretty strict with her?"

"She'd come," Bud said eagerly. "She'd see to it they let her. I know Louise. She's got that Dutch in her."

Pete Spreckels was grinning.

"I'll go fetch her," the lame puncher offered.

Bud's eyes clouded with a faint jealousy, and Cleve, seeing it, said, "Maybe an older man's indicated, Pete." He turned toward Bump Miskimmons. "Bump, how long since you been to town?"

Cleve's taciturn old man-of-all-work fingered his ram's-horn mustaches. He said, "That ain't no job for me, Cleve. I ain't no good around women. Never know what to say to 'em."

"I know," Cleve said. He smiled. "That's why you're elected. Ride in and put up at the hotel tonight, Bump. Bring the girl back in the morning. . . . Can she ride, Bud?"

"Not good."

"Hire one of Nickersen's buggies," Cleve told the old man.

"Cleve," Bud said, "I ain't goin' to forget this."

"Get some sleep," Cleve said.

CHAPTER TEN

THE NEXT morning Cleve busied himself with a round of small tasks that kept him close to his Flying Nine buildings. He patched a section of the barn roof that let in both water and daylight. He put a new handle on the well windlass and reversed the frayed rope. He shapened his axe and went to work on a pile of deadfall pinons that had been snaked down off the foothills earlier in the summer.

The pile of cut wood beside him mounted swiftly. He had a cat's grace of movement, a cat's sureness. His blade always entered the wood where he meant it to enter. When a limb was nearly cut through he gave his final stroke no more force than was needed to shear it.

Years ago he had learned to spend his energy closely. Once, in order to ship a thousand head of Hank Fetterman's beef before the price tumbled, he had spent twenty-three consecutive hours on horseback. Men who had tried and failed to keep up with him that day were still talking about that performance, trying to make a sort of cowboys' Paul Bunyan of him.

Cleve took no particular pride in his ability to work on and on while other men faltered. It was all a matter of economy, of conserving one's strength, so that when the big tests came you had a store of energy to fall back on.

At noon, Pete Spreckels rode in from H-on-a-Rail. Pete had fallen heir to the job of keeping an eye on the place until Ruth decided what she was going to do with it. Cleve and Pete and Bud Gracey lunched on cold beef and potatoes and leftover coffee from breakfast.

They all heard the buggy approaching.

Bud Gracey, who had been nibbling at his food from a half prone position, tried to sit up in the bunk. He winced and fell back.

"Have a look, somebody," he pleaded, "before I bust a blood vessel."

Peter Spreckels grinned across the table at Cleve. "Love," he said, "sure is wonderful, ain't it?" There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye. Although his chair was nearest the door, he didn't move.

Cleve got up and went to the door. The buggy had almost reached the yard, and he saw with surprise that Bump Miskimmons had brought two passengers down from town with him. One was pretty, plump Louise Dannehauer. The other was Ruth Forbes. She lifted her hand in a friendly wave to Cleve in the cabin's doorway.

Cleve hurried across the yard. He was waiting by the well when the buggy creaked to a halt. He handed Louise down, giving her fingers a friendly pressure.

"Bud's inside," he said, indicating the cabin. Louise nodded gratefully and hurried away.

Ruth accepted Cleve's offered hand and stepped down beside him. Cleve, without intending to, was staring at her in the way a man stares at a stunningly pretty young girl, and after a moment of that Ruth smiled.

"Seeing a ghost, Cleve?"

He realized he still had hold of her hand. He let go with reluctance.

"Last thing I'd think of calling you, Ruth," he said. His slow grin brought a rush of color to Ruth's cheeks.

"I do haunt you," she said. "I've saddled you with the extra responsibility of the H-on-a-Rail. I know your work here must have suffered, these last three weeks. And now here I am back at you like a bad penny."

"More like a new penny." Cleve glanced admiringly

at her. Ruth blushed, but she was pleased, Cleve decided.

"Louise asked me if I'd come with her," Ruth said. "Her folks felt she ought to be chaperoned down here. And I thought if Bud's badly hurt I might be able to do something. How is he, Cleve?"

"Cut. Bruised. A rib or two broken. Happy now, I'd imagine."

Ruth nodded, and smiled gently. "They're so in love," she said. Her eyes softened, then took on a pinched anger. "What ails Ben De Marris, Cleve? Why can't he let people be happy?"

"He'd probably tell you Bud's to blame for all this," Cleve said, "if you asked him."

"But how in the world—"

"I don't know how Ben got hold of Bud's letter to Louise, Ruth. But I can imagine the look on Ben's face when he read it. I suppose he felt justified in what he did about it."

She looked up curiously at him. "Don't you hate Ben, Cleve?"

Cleve frowned. Hate, he had always felt, was the most wasteful emotion. It corroded a man's insides. It always left scars.

"Not yet," he said. He saw Ruth's quick frown. "Do you, Ruth?"

Her mouth tightened. "Yes."

"Because of what he did to Will?" Cleve asked slowly.

Her little nod of agreement was vindictive. It explained a lot of things to him. This gentle girl who had already given so much of her time and energy to relieving the pain and suffering of her fellow humans was not a hating sort. If she hated Ben De Marris, she must have loved Will Ruscher. It was a simple equation. You could measure the depth of her love for Will Ruscher

by the intensity of her hatred for the man who had killed him.

He glanced down at her, suddenly, painfully aware of that faint fragrance that floated about her. She was, he thought, an altogether beautiful girl. She could give Eve Fetterman cards, he decided, for Eve's beauty lay close to the surface and Ruth's went much deeper.

There had been evenings, during Ruth's three weeks at H-on-a-Rail, when Cleve had sat pleasantly with her in front of a crackling fire. They had learned how to be perfectly comfortable in each other's presence. When Ruth went back into town, Cleve had been irritable, snappish. So much so that Pete Spreckels commented on it. "Trouble with you is you've fell for that girl, boss, if you'd only admit it."

He admitted it now, but he saw no chance for himself here. If Will Ruscher were living the two of them might make a sporting rivalry of it. But he couldn't, Cleve knew hopelessly, fight a dead man. Not in this case. Ruth had married Will Ruscher and she would be loyal to him. She was that kind.

Ruth had been studying him surreptitiously all this while, and now she looked up gravely at him.

"A penny," she murmured.

He caught himself staring at her half-parted lips, wondering what it would be like to take this girl in his arms, crush his mouth against hers. Her eyes on his now were entirely friendly. There was a warmth in this girl that drew him on like a magnet, but he felt himself withdraw instinctively from her. A dead man stood between them.

"Bad bargain," he said in a neutral voice. "My thoughts are not worth a penny."

He saw puzzlement and something like hurt in the blue eyes. And then, as if taking her cue from him, she

said evenly, impersonally, "Ben was in town over night, Cleve. He stayed at the hotel. Fred was with him."

Cleve frowned. "Didn't think Ben and his brother got along well enough to share a hotel room."

Ruth said soberly, "I think Ben stayed over mainly to find out what Bump was doing in town."

Cleve took a moment to consider the implications of that.

"You think he knows Bump's brought Louise down here? That we've got Bud here?"

"Ben's not exactly a fool," Ruth said. She looked up troubledly. "What will he do?"

Cleve shook his head and said slowly, bitterly: "I wish I knew."

At breakfast with his brother Fred in the hotel's dining room, Ben De Marris teetered his chair back and stretched his huge legs under the table. His chair groaned alarmingly as he put pressure against its flimsy backrest. He scowled, watching Fred fork a morsel of egg into his mouth. It occurred to Ben that his brother ate like a woman. He drummed on the table with the tips of spatulate fingers.

"Hurry it up, will you?" he grumbled.

Fred swallowed the food in his mouth and asked mildly, "Where's the fire?"

"Watchin' you eat gives me a pain you know where. All I can say is I'm glad Pop never shipped me back East to college, if eatin' like a damn dude is what they teach a man back there."

"You don't have to watch, you know, Ben."

"Eat, eat," Ben said. He had only a sort of indulgent contempt for his handsome artistic brother.

"Wound up this time, aren't you?" Fred asked. "Why do you let it excite you so much, Ben?"

"What?"

"I'm not an idiot, even if I did go to college. You've been snapping and growling ever since you saw that girl of Bud Gracey's leave town this morning with Bump Miskimmons. Gracey's holed in with Cleve and you know it." Fred glanced up curiously at Ben. "What're you going to do about it?"

Ben's mouth was grim. "I never make a move till I've thought about it. Come on, shake dust. I got things to do at the ranch, if you haven't. I work for a livin', I don't dab paint on canvas."

Fred's mouth took on a petulant expression. "That's hitting pretty low, isn't it?"

Ben rose from the table. Smiling unruffledly, he said, "You comin', Rembrandt?"

"God damn it," Fred said, "don't call me 'Rembrandt.'" He lurched to his feet trembling with anger. There was something so ineffectual about the picture he made there that Ben couldn't help grinning at him.

"Never try to cuss a man in that educated accent of yours, kid. It don't scare, like cussing ought to. Comin' from you it just sounds sort of foolish. . . . Come on, let's get the horses."

"Go ahead," Fred said.

"What's the matter? Can't you take a joke?" Ben asked.

"I'll see you later. I—I've got an errand."

Ben grinned knowingly. "I'd say that's handy." His eyes narrowed. "What errand?"

"I'm riding out to Block Five, if you must know. I've got Hank Fetterman half sold on letting me do a portrait of Eve. There'll be a nice fee in the commission, if I can land it."

"Who're you kiddin'?" Ben snorted. "I think I know how come you're spendin' so much time down there lately. You're sweet on that girl."

Fred only looked at him, then pushed his chair into place under the table and turned toward the door.

"Wait a minute," Ben said.

Fred turned and said wearily, "Now what?"

"Maybe," Ben said musingly, "I'll ride down there to Block Five with you."

It was obvious from Fred's expression that Fred didn't want him along. Fred's eyes were suspicious. He challenged, "What for?"

"I been wanting to have a little powwow with Hank Fetterman," Ben said.

"What about?"

Ben's mouth thinned. "Stick to your paint brushes, kid. I'll take care of the business."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

EVE REINED in atop a high rampart and sat for a moment enjoying the view. Below her, in the canyon's mouth, she could see Block Five's sprawling house, and beyond it the barns. Horses moved about in the larger of the two corrals. The distant industrious clang of a hammer striking an anvil gave her a sense of security and well being.

One day, she thought proudly, she would be sole mistress of Block Five. Her glance lifted toward the fat Herefords grazing out on the valley flat, and she saw a pennant of dust moving toward her from the direction of town.

Somebody was coming in, she realized, and immedi-

ately her curiosity was active. It could be Fred. He'd been dropping in a lot lately. Too often on the spur of the moment, Eve thought with a wry mouth. A couple of times during the past two weeks he had caught her with her hair every which way, and with her wearing a dreadful old shirt and faded blue levis.

But Fred was amusing. That pretext of trying to sell her dad on letting him do her portrait, for instance. Of course he really did want the job. He also, Eve knew shrewdly, wanted an excuse to keep dropping in on the ranch.

I wonder, she thought, why Dad keeps putting him off?

He was probably playing Fred's game, letting the dickering over the portrait drag on in the hope that if Eve saw enough of Fred she might lose interest in Cleve McNary.

Reminded of Cleve, she straightened up in the saddle, and she studied that approaching dust cloud, wondering if Cleve might be paying Block Five a visit. But it was too much to hope for. Until Ruth Forbes made up her mind what she was going to do with H-on-a-Rail, Cleve would be too busy, tending both his own and that outfit, to pay old friends a sociable visit.

Her mouth went small and hard as she thought of Ruth. There was something cheap, underhanded, she thought, in the way Ruth had acquired title to Will Ruscher's homestead.

I hope Ben gets it back from her somehow, she mused.

Gradually now the miniature shapes of two horsemen emerged from the dustball she had been watching. Within another minute she was able to recognize Fred's white-stockinged California sorrel, and then she recognized Ben's big dun gelding.

Now what? Eve thought, and already she was turning her pony for the ride down the tricky trail that snaked along the wall of the canyon. Curious as she was to know Ben's reason for coming to Block Five, she knew better than to hurry. She let the bay pick its own cautious footing until she reached the foot of the grade. The pony wanted to pause then and shake cramp from its muscles, but Eve gave the animal a sharp kick with her boot-heels.

She rounded the east wing of the house just as her dad was waving the two De Marris brothers into chairs on the veranda.

Her dad turned and watched her trot across the yard. Both Fred and Ben stood up as Eve neared the veranda. Fred doffed his hat, but Ben only touched his. He seemed displeased by her presence, Eve noticed, and she wondered why that should be.

"How's Wheel these days, Ben?" she asked.

"All right," he frowned.

"Is there anything new about the Ruscher place?"

"No," Ben said. He glanced at her father. "Hank, I been wanting to have a little talk with you about that situation."

"Go ahead," Eve's father said dryly. He saw the pointed glance Ben threw at Eve, and added, "I have no secrets from Eve, Ben."

Ben hesitated, but then resigning himself to Eve's presence he said, "I'm runnin' out of patience with Cleve McNary."

Eve watched her father, who only nodded and murmured, "Go on, Ben. Speak your piece. What about Cleve?"

"He's got Bud Gracey over there on Flying Nine with him," Ben snapped. "That's what about him." He seemed to realize this required explaining, and in a

cold, angry voice he filled in the details of the situation between him and Bud Gracey. "Gracey's through in the valley," he finished. "Next time I see him I'm goin' to kill him. He knows it."

Eve's father said slowly, "That's pretty strong talk, Ben."

Ben jerked up an arm and said impatiently, "I want to know where you stand on McNary."

"I'm thinking about it," Eve's father said.

"Thinking what?"

"I'm wondering what I'd have done about Bud Gracey, in Cleve's place. There's such a thing as etiquette of the range, Ben."

"Etiquette," Ben snorted. His mouth hardened. "Hank, you're gettin' to be an old woman."

Eve's father stiffened. "I don't put up with that kind of talk, Ben."

Ben glanced up shrewdly. "Wait a minute," he said placatingly. "Let's not jump the chain at each other, Hank. I didn't come here looking for trouble. But I tell you McNary—"

"Cleve McNary," Eve's father said evenly, "was the best foreman I ever had. As far as I'm concerned he can stand on his record. I don't propose to listen to anyone knock him."

Ben frowned. "You don't give a man much satisfaction."

"There's never been any mush in my mouth, Ben."

His tone was brittle as ice. It was too much for a man as vain as Ben De Marris to swallow.

"You're not the only big frog in the pond, Hank," he said. "One of these days you may wish you'd sung a different tune."

"Ben," Fred De Marris cut in uncomfortably, "haven't you said about enough now?"

Ben glanced disdainfully at his younger brother, then ignored him.

Eve's father asked softly, "Were you threatening me, Ben?"

"Not me," Ben said dryly. "We run the two biggest outfits in the valley. Like it or not, we're on the same side of the fence, Hank." He seemed to be debating what tack he ought to take now. He grinned, rather woodenly, Eve thought, and offered his hand to her dad. "No hard feelin's?"

Hank Fetterman's relief didn't show on the surface, but Eve, who knew him so well, could tell he was secretly pleased by Ben's gesture.

"You haven't stepped on my toes yet," he said. He shook Ben's hand, somewhat aloofly.

Ben stepped down off the veranda and tramped across the yard to his horse. He raised one hand in a sort of mocking salute as he swung the dun and rode out. For a man of his size, Eve thought, he was amazingly relaxed in the saddle. He could move quickly too; he was no muscle-bound behemoth, and she found herself considering him in relation to Cleve. He hated Cleve now—he'd made that apparent—but if they ever came to blows she hated to think of the outcome. For Ben, she would imagine, must outweigh Cleve by a good thirty pounds.

Fred, embarrassed to the roots, was trying to apologize for Ben's boorish behavior.

"Hank, I don't know what gets into Ben sometimes. He—"

"It's all right," Eve's father said. "You're not his keeper."

The subject, Eve saw, was a painful one for both of them. "Dad," she said, "when are you going to break down and tell Fred he can start on my portrait? Seems

to me you've had us on tenterhooks long enough."

Her father glanced distractedly at her, and then he surprised her. "Now," he said quietly. He turned toward Fred. "You can fetch your stuff down here and start right away, if you want to." He rubbed at his chin. "Let's see, we still haven't settled on a price, have we?"

"Well," Fred said, "this is one job I'd be willing to take on for nothing if—"

Eve's father made a clucking sound in his throat. "Fred, the first rule in business is never to underestimate the value of the product you're selling. You didn't learn to paint overnight. I understand you're a fine artist. What would you say to two hundred dollars?"

"It's too much. I—"

"Not to my mind it isn't, for a portrait of Evie."

Fred hesitated. "Well—"

Eve's father clapped him heartily on the back. "No wells about it, Fred. It's all settled."

Fred, Eve saw, was dumbfounded by this sudden turnabout mood of her father's. It puzzled her, too, but just for a moment. *Dad's worried*, she thought, watching him shrewdly. *Ben threw a forty-five caliber scare into him just now. He's trying to mend his fences with Ben by letting Fred do my portrait.*

Her father excused himself, murmuring some inanity about three being a crowd, and went into the house. It was too pointed, too obvious, Eve thought. *Why don't you just throw me at him, Dad?* she thought angrily. A stubborn negativism flared in her.

Fred stepped back and gave her a slow, professional appraisal. He had not sensed her mood. "Evie," he said, "it's going to be a beautiful portrait."

Eve only stood there, thinking her thoughts. Fred was still staring at her with frank admiration. He sobered suddenly and drew breath, and blurted out with—

out warning, "Marry me, Evie."

Eve looked up startledly at him. "For heaven's sake—"

"Say you will," Fred said, "and I'll go right in and talk to your father. He's obviously in a receptive frame of mind."

"Can't you guess why?" Eve asked.

Fred looked at her closely, then nodded glumly. "I can guess. I'd rather not, though. Marry me, Evie."

Eve had a sensation of being pushed, crowded. She shook her head. "Let's talk about the portrait, Fred," she suggested. "What do you think I ought to wear for it?"

Fred looked at her for a moment and gave a slow shake of his head. "Evie, you're not being fair. Just because Ben happens to be a damn bully is no reason to penalize me, is it?"

"And my hair," Eve said. "Should I wear it up in a bun, do you think, Fred, or let it fall down over my shoulders?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

DISSATISFACTION with himself and with the world in general was Ben De Marris' unwanted riding companion as he loped away from the Block Five buildings. That gesture of offering his hand to Hank Fetterman, after their quarrel, had lost him some "face." He hated to conciliate any man, but there were times, as Ben saw

it, for soft words and at least some pretensions to amicability.

Hank Fetterman's loyalty to Cleve McNary had both surprised and dismayed Ben.

"I've got to pull him away from Cleve somehow," he thought darkly. He turned in his saddle and stared across a sea of tufted grama grass toward the footslopes of the Wataugas. Somewhere over there, tucked away in a little notch at the base of the mountain, were Cleve's Flying Nine buildings. And Bud Gracey.

Ben rode on in silence a moment, then swore. It occurred to him that he'd put up with just about enough of Cleve McNary's meddling. Obeying a sudden impulse, he pulled his dun off the road and headed across country toward Flying Nine.

An hour's riding brought him almost abreast of the *H-on-a-Rail*. As he passed that scatter of buildings he eyed the old windmill Will Ruscher had erected after having found water. Ben's mouth took on a pinched, greedy expression when he thought of that water.

My water, he thought, with a cool disregard for the fact that Ruth Forbes now owned title to it. *And by God, my cows are going to have the use of it!*

He put the buildings behind him, and swung in against the footslopes. He rode parallel with the range for fifteen minutes, coming up presently against a low spur just beyond which, he knew, lay Cleve McNary's Flying Nine headquarters.

Ben reined in, took his gun from the holster, aimed carelessly at the sky, and pulled trigger. Sound of the shot went rocketing away, bouncing back at Ben off walls of naked granite above him.

He climbed down off the dun, reholstering the pistol. He let the dun seek its own shade among the sparse *piñons* dotting the base of the spur. He put his own

back against the bole of a dwarfed tree, eased himself down to a sitting position, and pulled a cigar from his pocket.

He was sitting there blowing smoke rings, fifteen minutes later, when Bump Miskimmons rode around the point of the spur, saw him, and came down the line toward him.

"You fire that shot, De Marris?"

"That's right," Ben nodded. His glance lifted disdainfully toward the aging man on the swaybacked old crowbait.

"What do you want? You're on Flying Nine land, in case you don't know it."

"I know it, old man." Ben nodded idly in the direction of Flying Nine's buildings on the other side of the spur. "Cleve over there?"

"Why?"

"Because," Ben said, "I want to see him." He knocked ash off his cigar and looked up at Miskimmons.

The old man stared back at him for a moment, then rode back the way he had come. Ben watched him go. He blew some more smoke rings. There was only an inch or two of his cigar left when Cleve swung around the tip of the spur aboard the same horse Miskimmons had ridden.

Cleve was not wearing his gun. Ben frowned, and was still trying to figure that out as Cleve slid down and faced him.

"I'll say this," Cleve said after a moment during which they only looked at each other. "It's a new way to come callin'."

"Not a social visit," Ben grunted. He had not changed position. He was still sitting there idly with his back against the trunk of the tree. "You've got Gracey over there, haven't you?" he grunted.

Cleve hesitated, only an instant, then nodded.

"Next time I lay eyes on Bud Gracey," Ben said, "I'm goin' to gutshoot him. I served that up plain enough to him."

"Maybe it's a good thing you didn't ride in, Ben," Cleve said. "You might not have ridden out."

"Big talk," Ben said, "for a man that forgot to pack his gun out here."

"I didn't forget," Cleve said.

"No?" Ben's mouth curled a little.

"You're on my land, Ben. You're my guest, strictly speaking." A whisper of a smile bent Cleve's mouth. "So's Bud Gracey."

"And just how long," Ben asked, "do you propose to make a guest out of Gracey?"

Cleve frowned and said quietly, "Don't take that tone with me, Ben."

Ben put his hands against the ground and pushed himself deliberately to his feet.

"Why?" he asked. "What makes you different?"

"There's a way to find out," Cleve said, looking steadily at him. "Take off your gun, Ben."

This was a clear invitation, Ben knew. As his hands went to unbuckle the gunbelt it came to him that he and Cleve were going about this all wrong. This was too cut-and-dried. A man needed an edge of temper to spur him to his best fighting. Ben felt peculiarly empty, his anger had glazed into a sort of dull resignation—the feeling that this had been building up for a long, long time. It was a job to be done, no more than that, and he wondered at this dullness in him, this failure to rise to occasion.

He dropped the belt and leaped at Cleve, trying to get in the first punch. He saw a flicker of surprise in Cleve's face, and knew that Cleve had not thought him

capable of moving this quickly.

But his hand only brushed along the side of Cleve's neck, scraping the top of Cleve's shoulder. Cleve hit him heavily in the body, danced back lightly as Ben tried to counter, and pinked him with a rapier-like left to the cheek.

There was no hurt in it, except to Ben's pride. He made a bull's rush at Cleve, accepting another two blows in order to gain a hold on Cleve's arm. Ben stepped back, pivoting violently, and swung Cleve off balance. He had all the weight advantage. He let go of Cleve's arm without warning. Momentum carried Cleve against a rock upthrust. He tripped and fell heavily, striking his hip on the stone.

Ben leaped on him like a huge cat then, using his weight as a bludgeon with which to hammer Cleve down again against that bed of stone. He was astride Cleve, driving short, neck-snapping punches into Cleve's face.

Cleve arched his back violently, jerked his head aside as Ben aimed a blow at him. Ben's knuckles were scraped raw as his hand hit the stone. He tried to bang Cleve's head down, but Cleve circled Ben with his arms, lifting himself in that way.

Ben let himself fall prone, twisting his head. He heard the back of Cleve's head strike the stone with a sickening thud, felt the telltale relaxation of Cleve's arms around him. He was about to repeat the maneuver when Cleve caught hold of the bandanna around Ben's neck and hauled back desperately on it.

The knot at Ben's Adam's apple bit into his flesh. He retched. The instinct of a choking man made him lean back to ease the pressure against his windpipe. He tried to slide his fingers between his throat and the straining cloth of the bandanna.

Cleve's answer to that was to haul back even harder. Ben reached desperately for a breath which wouldn't come. The world revolved dizzily. Cleve's face beneath him started to blur. He felt himself dragged over backward. He was only dimly aware of Cleve's body following him as he fell over, and then, mercifully, all sensation left him.

The first thing he was aware of, as consciousness returned, was a dry ache in his throat. He tried to swallow, gagged at the effort, and lay still another few moments, his eyes closed. He sat up, presently, and felt a stabbing pain in his hand. He opened bleary eyes and stared down stupidly at his bleeding knuckles.

He put that hand to his mouth, licking grit out of the exposed flesh with his tongue, cauterizing his wounds with saliva like any animal after battle. He heard movement somewhere behind him, but gave it only a distracted sort of attention.

"You would have bashed out my brains on that rock if I'd let you, Ben," Cleve's voice said wonderingly. "You would have killed me."

Ben sucked at his knuckles and spat, considering it dully. He turned his head now and saw Cleve slouched back against the same tree that had served him, Ben, as a back-rest. Ben's gun was in Cleve's hand. Ben watched him break it down, snake the cartridges from it. He hefted them briefly, then dropped them into his pocket.

He looked up thoughtfully at Ben.

"There's a limit to what even you can get away with in this country, Ben. I hope you realize it."

Ben grunted. "I assume you intend to let me have the gun, or you wouldn't unload it. I'll take the belt too, while you're at it."

Cleve stood up. He had Ben's cartridge belt in one

hand, Ben's gun in the other. He eyed Ben speculatively, then shrugged and dropped Ben's gun into the holster. He handed both gun and belt to Ben.

Ben strapped the belt around his thick middle, adjusting the hang of it to suit him. He moved unsteadily to his horse and lifted himself into the saddle. He started away, but then turned the dun back and stared at Cleve a long, puzzled moment.

"You wouldn't have had to give me the belt back."

"I know."

"There's cartridges in it," Ben pointed out. "How'd you decide to take the chance on my temper?"

Cleve said quietly, "You wouldn't shoot an unarmed man down, Ben. You prefer to keep your killings more or less legal."

Ben frowned. "I take it you're referrin' to Will Ruscher."

Cleve nodded. "As far as I'm concerned you murdered him, Ben. He didn't have a chance against you, and you knew it. But you're a man who's got to justify murder before you'll commit it."

Ben's temper climbed up into his eyes. He said, "And you think I haven't had justification enough to kill you?"

"Yes," Cleve said.

"Don't count on it, friend. Don't count on it," Ben said.

He swung the dun gelding away then.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AFTER FRED rode out, Eve found a sunny spot on the veranda, and sat for some time with her eyes closed, listening to the dry rattling of the cottonwoods' leaves in the breeze. It was one of those bone-dry days when the sun felt good. Eve smiled and stretched herself like a cat, luxuriating in the memory of Fred's proposal.

He's nice, she thought. And it was fun, she decided, being proposed to. Especially by a mannerly fellow like Fred, who was flatteringly eager but never too insistent or boorish. *I hope he asks me again*, she mused, and then she frowned, wondering why she should hope for that when she knew, deep down inside, she wasn't going to say yes.

I'm hard, she decided. *I just like playing cat and mouse with him.*

It was an uncomfortable thought—she liked to think well of herself—and she began immediately to cast around for proofs that she wasn't really hard or unfeeling.

"After all," she thought, "if I were like that would I still feel the way I do about Cleve after all this time?"

She frowned. Certainly Cleve hadn't done anything since he left Block Five to deserve her affection. Her mouth took on a little girl's pout as she remembered how she had swallowed her pride and pleaded with him to come back to Block Five. He'd been pretty short

with her. No other man could treat her like that and get away with it.

Eve shook her head puzzledly, wondering why she always made excuses for anything Cleve did instead of getting impatient with him.

It was really Cleve, come to think of it, who had brought on that ugly scene between Ben and her father. She suddenly straightened up in her chair, remembering the icy animosity she'd seen in Ben's eyes as he spoke Cleve's name.

Dad only piled fuel on the flame by championing Cleve, she thought, and something clutched at her insides. Her pony was standing in the shade of the cottonwood, not having been turned into the corral yet. Eve rose abruptly and hurried across the yard.

Her father called out from the house, as she rose to the saddle, "Anything wrong, Eve?"

"No, I'm just going to finish my ride," Eve told him. But when she emerged from the mouth of Block Five's canyon, she swung off sharply to the right, heading straight toward Flying Nine.

She didn't punish her pony on the way to Cleve's place. She wanted to look reasonably decent when she arrived. She hugged the shade of the *piñons* along the base of the foothills, staying out of the sun as much as she could so she wouldn't perspire. Dropping down off the slope at the end of her ride, she came upon Cleve's little spread from the rear. It was Pete Spreckels, not Cleve, who came out the back door of the cabin to greet her.

"Howdy, ma'am?" he said. He was one of those simpletons who forever grinned at you, but he was not grinning at the moment, Eve noticed. He was staring uncertainly at her, and scratching his head behind one fan-shaped ear. "What way'd you come?"

"Where's Cleve, Pete?" Eve asked, not troubling herself to answer his question.

Pete seemed embarrassed. "Well," he said, "I reckon you'll find him around front."

His hand started out from his side, as if he wanted to say something else. Then he pulled it back and remained uncomfortably silent. Eve looked at him sharply, but then shrugged it off. Most punchers were awed by her regal presence, and she was growing used to it.

She climbed down and handed Pete the reins of her pony, her manner suggesting that he should feel honored at having been permitted to tend the animal for her.

The prospect of being with Cleve brought a flush to her cheeks as she hurried around the cabin. She moistened her lips, having heard somewhere that it improved one's expression. But her lips, moist or not, took on a petulant look as she turned the corner of the cabin and saw Cleve standing beside the well with Ruth Forbes.

He had his shirt off. He was naked from the waist up. Ruth was cleansing an ugly gash in his shoulder, using a bit of gauze which she moistened from time to time in the well bucket.

Both of them were facing away from the cabin. Eve watched them a bitter, silent moment, and then Ruth, somehow sensing Eve's presence, turned and said pleasantly, "Why hello, Eve. What cloud did you fall from?"

"I thought you'd gone back to town," Eve blurted. The instant she said it she felt like cutting her tongue out. It was a stupid, utterly tactless remark. What must Cleve think of her? she wondered. She was afraid to look at him.

Ruth filled what might have been an awkward silence by saying with unruffled poise, "I did. I came down here with Louise, Eve. This morning. She's inside with

Bud Gracey, by the way, if you'd like to say hello to her."

"I'm not sure they'd appreciate company," Cleve said, and his grin flickered from Ruth's face to Eve's.

Eve said, "Cleve, could I talk to you a minute?"

He looked at her, frowning. "Go ahead."

Eve glanced toward Ruth, and Ruth said understandingly, "I haven't had a really good look at this place yet, Cleve," and strolled off idly toward the corral.

Cleve's glance followed her, not too idly, Eve thought, and a hot wave of jealousy almost overwhelmed her.

"What happened to you, Cleve?" she murmured, making talk to cover her feelings.

Cleve seemed to sense her lack of real interest in the injury to his shoulder, for he said only, "I bumped into something." He looked up. "What's on your mind, Eve?"

There was something aloof, almost cool, in the way he looked at her. *I've got to get him away from here, away from that hussy*, Eve thought. And suddenly it didn't matter a damn how she did it.

"You've got to get Bud Gracey out of here, Cleve," she said slowly.

"Why?"

"Ben's mad enough about that to eat tacks. He'll kill you if—"

"I'm pretty hard to kill," Cleve countered dryly.

Eve's eyes pinched with impatience. "Be sensible, Cleve. Try to get it through your head that he's out to kill you."

"Pretty tall order you're handing me," Cleve said. "Inasmuch as he had his chance to do exactly that less than an hour ago, and chose to pass it up." He saw Eve's sharp frown, and filled her in on the details of his encounter with Ben.

Eve was silent a moment after Cleve finished, and then she said, "Maybe I'd better tell you something now, Cleve. Do you want to know the real reason Ben passed up that chance at you?"

Cleve stared thoughtfully at her. "Don't play riddles with me, Eve. If you know something, let's hear it."

"All right," Eve said. She took a deep breath, then looked straight into Cleve's eyes. "The real reason is Dad. He's told Ben he'll back you up if it comes to a showdown." This, Eve knew, was laying it on a bit. Her father hadn't put himself that far out on the limb. Guilt almost halted her runaway tongue, but then she rattled on glibly. "If Bud Gracey stays here it's almost sure to bring on a range war between Ben and Dad, Cleve. Don't you see what you're doing? You're jockeying Dad and his crew into the position of having to fight your battle."

Cleve was staring bitterly, troubledly at her. "That doesn't sound like your dad, Eve. He's not a rash sort. Are you sure—"

And again Eve's glance met his fairly and squarely. "Do you think I'd lie about something like that, Cleve?" she challenged. "I was there when they quarreled. Honestly, I've never seen Dad so excited. I thought he'd shoot Ben." It was really surprising, she thought, how easily the lies strung themselves out, once you'd told the first one. "Cleve," she said, "you've got to do something about that situation."

He was staring bitterly at the ground. He believed her now, she saw. Again the guilt started up in her, but she thrust it down, telling herself she'd lied to him only to help him.

"What do you suggest that I do about it, Evie?" he murmured.

"Come back to Block Five," Eve said promptly. "To

your old job as Dad's foreman."

He looked up at her, frowning faintly. "That offer still open?"

"Of course." Actually, neither she nor her dad had spoken about it for weeks. But this was no time for splitting hairs, Eve thought. She had the initiative now and wanted to keep it. She wanted to get him away from here, away from Ruth Forbes' influence.

Cleve was staring down at his work-hardened hands, considering the offer glumly. Eve watched him, on pins and needles as she waited for his decision. There'd been something cool, almost stand-offish, she thought, in his manner toward her ever since she'd ridden into his ranch. She frowned, remembering the easy camaraderie she'd enjoyed with Cleve in the old days when he'd been her dad's foreman.

She almost blushed now, recalling some of her adolescent attempts to make Cleve aware of her as a woman. Once, in the hayloft, she'd pretended to lose her footing, and stumbled against him. When she looked up, fluttering her lashes at him, inviting his kiss, Cleve only put his hands against her shoulders and pushed her gently away.

For three days after that, she remembered, she'd tried to convince herself she hated Cleve. If it had been anyone else that anger might have lasted. But somehow, no matter how often Cleve repulsed her, she always wound up where she'd started: wanting him, determined to have him. He was the only person in the world who could make her eat humble pie and like it.

One reason for that, she knew, was that he'd always managed to leave her pride intact. He had the knack of refusing her favors and at the same time intimating that he was flattered by her interest in him.

She remembered Cleve's answer, one long ago day,

when she'd asked him if he thought she was too bold: "Hard to draw the line between that and honesty, Evie. We all have our impulses. You do something about yours." He'd grinned indulgently. "Most people wear themselves out tryin' to hide what they're thinking and feeling. Who's to say they're right and you're wrong?"

Now, watching him anxiously, Eve said, "Is it such a gray prospect, Cleve? After all, you might enjoy rodding a big outfit again."

"I might," he admitted. But there was no life in his voice.

Glancing up, Eve thought it wasn't too hard to guess how his thoughts were running. He'd schemed and sweated and driven himself savagely to make a start here on his own little outfit. She bit down on her lip, that guilt rising in her again as she thought how she'd misrepresented the situation between Ben and her dad.

But then, remembering the preoccupied way he'd looked at Ruth just a few minutes ago, she said, "Cleve, please. If not for your own sake, for Dad's."

He looked up harriedly. "It's hard to quit, Evie. I hate the idea of letting Ben force me to it. Still, the last thing I'd want is to put your dad in the middle. I—I'll think about it. Suppose I ride over and have a talk with your dad tomorrow. Is he going to be home?"

Eve nodded, then turned her head, trying to hide her disappointment. She'd hoped to win a definite answer from him. Ruth, she saw, was standing down beside the corral. *Waiting for me to leave*, Eve thought angrily, *so she can make a big thing of dressing Cleve's shoulder. I hate her*, she thought, *I hate her*.

Her voice was perfectly calm, however, as she said, "All right then, Cleve, we'll look for you. Sometime tomorrow."

Cleve walked along with her around the cabin, and

he held the headstall of her little bay while she lifted herself to the saddle.

Eve rode over to the corral on her way out and exchanged a few meaningless pleasantries with Ruth. She was careful to smile as she spoke to Ruth, for she knew Cleve was watching.

When she had ridden out several hundred yards she glanced back over her shoulder. Ruth was daubing away at Cleve's shoulder again. *The angel of mercy*, Eve thought, and she gave her startled pony a savage raking with both spurs.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"THERE," Ruth said, stepping back for a critical appraisal of the bandage she'd applied to Cleve's shoulder. Cleve murmured his thanks and reached for his shirt atop the well windlass. Ruth saw how awkwardly he went about getting into the shirt, knew that the injured arm had begun to stiffen up, and stepped around behind him to ease the shirt over the bandage.

It occurred to her that this was the sort of intimate help a wife might offer her husband. When the backs of her fingers, which were looped around the collar of the shirt, touched Cleve's neck, a little sensation of warmth, of tenderness, ran tinglingly through her.

She could only hope that this feeling within her had not communicated itself to him. Not that she was

ashamed. As a doctor's daughter she had long ago purged herself of all guilt feelings with regard to her physical self and her natural instincts.

But men could be amusingly inconsistent in the demands they placed upon women. They looked for dewy-eyed innocence in a girl, but did not, Ruth suspected, really find it attractive. They dallied with Jezebels, but sought out virgins when it came time to marry.

Cleve, if he followed the pattern, would think less of her if he knew how her thoughts were running. Or would he? Ruth wondered. Somehow she suspected that here was one man who, having lived all his life away from the towns, in close communion with nature, would share her down-to-earth viewpoint.

Cleve turned now and looked at her in an odd, pre-occupied way as he absently buttoned his shirt. Ruth felt a sudden heat in her cheeks and was surprised at the reaction. Her natural poise didn't often desert her in that way, and she thought, *I wonder if I'm falling in love with him.*

It didn't do, she thought, to think things like that in a man's presence. Love put out feelers, charged the air between people drawn toward each other. And the worst thing a girl could do, if she really was falling in love with a man, was to let him suspect it.

Cleve was still looking at her in that curiously affecting way. Ruth looked up at him now and said quietly, "What will Ben's next move be, do you suppose, Cleve?"

He frowned faintly. "Hard to predict that man, Ruth. Why?"

Ruth stared out across the sage- and mesquite-dotted floor of the valley. She still hadn't told him that Will Ruscher had wanted him to have the H-on-a-Rail. It was wrong of her, she felt. She hadn't any right to withhold that information. She'd have to tell him, sooner or

later. Somehow she kept putting it off, dreading the consequences.

"I—I just wondered," she murmured.

He looked keenly at her. "Something's troubling you, Ruth. What is it?"

Ruth turned and looked straight into his eyes. "How mad is Ben now, Cleve?" She hesitated a moment, then elaborated on the question. "Will he be shooting mad, do you think, the next time you step on his toes?"

"Yes," Cleve said. And again his eyes lifted curiously. "Ruth," he said, "I keep getting the feeling there's something you'd like to tell me. Is there?"

Ruth bit down on her tongue. If she was ever to tell him, now was the time. She half opened her mouth, ready to blurt everything out. Then she thought of Ben, and his gun, and his hardcase crew. She considered the possibility of Cleve's being brought to her with a bullet hole in him, as Will Ruscher had been brought.

I can't tell him, she thought. That instant, she knew her own secret. She knew she loved him. She shook her head at him, and he said, after a moment, "Guess you'd better tell Louise her time's about up, Ruth. We'll have to roll, if I'm to get you two back to town at a reasonable hour."

His tone was pleasant, but his eyes were puzzled. And hurt. As if he'd sensed she was not being above-board with him. Sighing bitterly, Ruth walked across the yard. She paused outside the door of the cabin.

"Louise . . . any time now," she called gently.

To Louise Dannehauer and Bud Gracey the sound of Ruth's voice was like the sound of a death knell. When Louise first entered the cabin she had perched on the edge of Bud's bunk to talk to him, and then offered

only token resistance when Bud's arm went around her and pulled her down beside him.

She tried to disengage herself from Bud's circling arm now, but Bud said, "Aw, lie still awhile, honey. What're you scared off?"

"We shouldn't be lying here like this," Louise said. "It's—it's not decent."

"Ruth'd never barge in on us without knockin'," Bud grinned. "She's a peach and you know it."

"Well . . ." Louise said. Bud pulled her head down and kissed her. They were in a world of their own for a moment. But then they heard the team outside being backed around between the shafts of the buggy. Louise pulled her mouth away from Bud's, and looked into his eyes, and that did it. She felt the tears starting. She let out a little whimper and buried her head in his chest. She tried hard not to let go. Bud hated to see her cry, but she couldn't help it.

"Ah," Bud said. "Listen, it ain't the end of the world. We'll be back together again 'fore you know it."

Louise looked up and said on a choky inflection: "How? If you're leaving the country—"

"Honey, I ain't goin' to China. A hundred miles or so ought to do it. I'll get myself a good job and send for you."

"What kind of a job?" Louise asked him.

"Well," Bud said, "ridin'." Louise's lips started to flutter, and he said half-apologetically, half-proudly. "It's what I know, ain't it? I'll sign on with some big outfit, honey. One that pays decent wages. You'll see. One day soon you'll get a letter from me sayin' come runnin', so we can be married."

"Bud," Louise asked tearfully, "do you mean that? Do you—do you believe it?"

"I'm sayin' it, ain't I?"

He looked almost angrily at her, and Louise thought bitterly, *Why do I do that?* Now, of all times, the last thing she wanted was to quarrel with him. *I'm too hard-headed*, she thought. *I'm too realistic. But somebody's got to call a spade a spade around here, and I guess I'm elected.*

"Darling," she said, "you can do anything you set your mind to. I know that. It's just that—" She bit it off, frightened by the look in his eyes.

"What?" he asked slowly.

"Bud, I'm scared. I'm so terribly scared. I have this awful feeling I'll never see you again after today."

His battered lips stiffened and he said, "Don't talk foolish."

"You don't understand what goes on inside of a girl," Louise said. She looked in his eyes and said on an impulse, "Bud, take me with you. Let's not wait to get married. We've done our fair share of waiting already. I can get a job too. Waiting on table or—"

"When I get married," Bud said, "my wife ain't goin' to wait on no tables."

"Well, something else then," Louise said. "It wouldn't have to be for long. It's just that—oh, Bud, let's be realistic. You can't earn enough punching cows to send for me. Take me with you. I wouldn't mind working. I'd love it."

"No," Bud said flatly.

"But—"

"Honey," Bud said, "it's no good. I seen that setup too often. Little wife cooped up in a room in town, seein' her husband one or two nights a week, if she's lucky. And him out on the range worryin' himself sick about her. There's no use even talkin' about it. Your father and mother'd never forgive me. Or you either."

Louise was silent, thinking about it. When she looked up again she had regained her composure. She smiled,

bravely as she could, and said, "I guess I'm like every woman that ever was born. We all get a little flighty at times like this. It's just that I love you so much. But then I guess you already knew that."

Bud rapped her lightly under the chin with his knuckles. "Baby, we'll work this out. Just give me some time."

Louise heard the buggy rattle up from the barn toward the front of the cabin. She knew there wasn't much time left. She leaned down and kissed him, saying, "I'll wait. I'll wait forever, if I have to."

"We'll work this out," Bud repeated, more grimly this time.

Louise stood up and walked to the door.

"Bye, darling." She tried to say it smoothly, and almost succeeded. She opened the door and saw Ruth and Cleve waiting outside in the buggy.

Bud, without leaving his bunk, called out: "So long, Ruth. And thanks."

"Good luck," Ruth called back. Louise went out quickly then, and stepped up into the buggy with Cleve's help.

She refused to let herself look back as they rattled out Flying Nine's rutted lane. Instead she stared fixedly into the distance, in the direction of Wheel ranch.

Damn you, she thought. Damn you, Ben De Marris.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RATTLING into Sentinel with his two pretty charges, Cleve McNary was conscious of a vague inner discomfort. The feeling came over him that trouble was brewing, with him for its object. He was not a man who took much stock in hunches, but on the basis of this one he made up his mind to drop off the girls, return the buggy as quickly as possible to Nickersen's stable, and get out of town without any lost time or motion.

It was darkening fast when he left Ruth. He wheeled the rented buggy back toward the center of town. A sliver of moon hanging over Sentinel Peak made a picture postcard effect as he swung out onto Cedar Street. But a cool wind off the high ridges of the mountain whistled cheerlessly through the town. It rattled a loose shake on the roof of Win Birdsell's law office, and spun up a cargo of dust off the street.

The dust got into the horses' noses. Cleve had to squint his eyes against it. He was as eager as this hired team was to escape that annoyance. He turned in sharply under Nickersen's wooden arch.

He pulled up in the manure-littered runway and stepped down, rubbing at one smarting eye with the back of a curled finger.

He was like that, distracted, off guard, when the voice whipped out at him from a deep pool of shadow under the eaves of the stable.

"You're accommodatin', McNary."

The voice drawled, but there was a brittle, dangerously unreliable quality to it. Squinting into that

shadow, Cleve could see nothing. He stood still, playing for time, and asked quietly, "Who is it?"

The man concealed against the wall of the building stepped out to let the moonlight, what there was of it, touch his face. It was Lorenzo French, Cleve saw. He appeared to be smiling.

"I been waitin' for my chance at you, friend," he said.

His voice was still off its key. That, Cleve supposed, was why he had not recognized it. Remembering what he had done to this man in the Three Star, remembering the concentrated animosity in French's eyes that day, he drew in one long, thin breath, and his right hand made an inching movement toward his holstered gun.

A voice behind him said almost pleasantly, "Where would you like it, McNary? Between the shoulder blades, or in the small of the back?"

"All right, Bassler," Cleve said, and he wondered bitterly where Vic Bassler had come from. "I hear you," he said, and his hand came away from his gun.

"McNary," Lorenzo French said, "nobody uses his hands on me like you and lives to talk about it. I'm goin' to blow you to Kingdom Come." He stepped out into the moonlight. There was that killer's wariness in him. He put his feet down gently, carefully, and his hand never strayed far from his gun. He halted and stood watching Cleve for a moment. "Go ahead," he invited. "Have a try at me."

Cleve frowned. "That's your offer, French? With your boy friend holdin' a gun on me from behind? I thought you were supposed to be tough."

"Vic won't get in our act," French said. "He won't have to. I've never needed any help yet in this kind of a setup." He shifted on his long legs and said again, "Have a try."

A dismal rage lifted in Cleve then. Rage against him-

self, for having fallen into this trap. Rage against these two men, who proposed to butcher him but intended to make it look good, if he knew how their minds worked.

"Have a try," he said, his lip curling. "Sure. And the instant I lay a hand to my gun Bassler will plug me. So it'll look as if I had a chance. I've got news for you, French. I'm not going to help you make it look good. You're throwin' a drownin' man a two-foot piece of rope. I'm not grabbin' for it."

"Best offer you'll get," French said. "Better take it, McNary."

Cleve shook his head. "You boys want to commit a murder you're goin' to have to do it without any help from the victim. Go ahead. Cut me down. You'll swing soon enough for it."

French's big body winced visibly at the mention of hanging. As if that was all that was needed to push him over the line, he said quietly, "Vic, let the fool have it."

Cleve sucked breath, setting himself for the smash of Bassler's bullet. He closed his eyes, telling himself he'd be damned if he'd cringe or beg, when a new voice said:

"If I was you, Bassler, I'd think twice about it."

In the brittle silence that followed, Eli Nickersen stepped uncertainly out of the little shack he called an office. He staggered a little. He was half drunk, Cleve saw with disgust. But then he decided he was glad the paunchy stable owner was under the weather, for it gave the man a brash courage he never displayed when cold sober.

"I ain't much," he said thickly, "but I reckon I'd qualify for a witness to murder."

The fat man wasn't armed. French glanced angrily at him, and muttered, "Where in hell was you ten minutes ago when we tried to raise you, Eli?"

"Sleepin'," Nickersen said. He belched. Cleve saw how it had been. These two had assumed, when Nickersen didn't answer their shouts, that the stable was deserted. The fat man could not have awakened at a more appropriate time, Cleve decided.

Cleve said, very gravely, "Eli, I've brought back the buggy. Where's that horse Bump Miskimmons rode in here?"

"I'll get it," Nickersen said, and lurched into the stable.

Cleve grinned blandly at Lorenzo French. "I wouldn't be holding a grudge against Nickersen if I were in your place, French. If you'll think it through you'll realize he saved you and Bassler from stretching rope."

French only looked cloudily, hatefully at him, then walked stiffly out to the street. Bassler went with him. Cleve watched them turn out of sight, and there was a cold soberness in him. It had been too close for comfort. They would try again, he knew. And the next time he could not expect to be lucky.

It would be a case of kill or be killed.

A few minutes later, as he mounted and trotted his horse out onto Cedar Street, he was still trying to accustom himself to the thought that his quarrel with Ben had reached the killing point now. His concern was less for himself than for Bump Miskimmons and Pete Spreckels. He had no right, as he saw it, dragging those two into a situation that called for shooting.

As he reached the four corners he felt a decision forming within him. He swung suddenly into an alley, which he threaded quickly, and presently he stepped down in front of Ruth's house.

She came to the door immediately, in response to his knock. She led him back to her kitchen, where she'd

been getting a sort of catch-all cold supper together. She asked him to join her and Cleve settled agreeably for a sandwich and coffee. Her dad was out on a case, she said.

They were sitting across from each other at the oil-cloth-covered table when Cleve said, "I don't know just how to say this, Ruth. I—uh—I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to look after the H-on-a-Rail for you much longer."

"Oh?" She glanced up from her coffee. "Go on, Cleve. Don't be embarrassed. You've a perfect right to withdraw from that situation any time that you want to. I'm already in your debt for the help you've given me down there." Her eyes focused more thoughtfully on him. "Something's happened," she said quietly, and she waited.

He gave her a dispassionate account of the close shave he'd just had at the stable. Ruth didn't say anything as she listened. She only looked at him with something sick, frightened in her blue eyes.

"What—what are you going to do?"

Cleve stirred his coffee and laid the spoon in the saucer. "Eve told me today that her father's still willing to take me back as his foreman, Ruth." He shook his head slowly and a deep sigh came from him. "Maybe it's time I quit being stubborn and took him up on that offer. If it were only my own life being jeopardized, Ben couldn't budge me off Flying Nine with a crowbar. But it's Bump and Pete I've got to think of. And Hank Fetterman too."

Seeing her puzzled frown, he told her what Eve had warned him about the likelihood of his stubbornness sparking off a range war between Wheel and Block Five.

"I don't want that on my conscience, Ruth," he said

bitterly. He gave a resigned little lift of wide shoulders. "If I throw in cards now and go back to work for Hank, Ben will be satisfied and pull his horns in. Ben's hard, but as he says he's past the age of fighting for the fun of it."

Ruth sat very still with her slender fingers curled around the coffee cup, drawing warmth from it. Cleve had never seen her so grave.

"You don't want to go back to Block Five very much, do you?" she asked softly.

Cleve gave a grim shake of his head. "But I'll do it," he sighed. He grinned limply at her. "Not much choice for me, is there?"

Ruth didn't say anything. She seemed lost in her own thoughts. Cleve, trying to rationalize his decision, said, "I don't suppose there was really much show for me down there on Flying Nine. It was different when I could count on the use of Will's water, come a dry spell."

"Maybe," Ruth said, "you still can, Cleve."

"How's that?" he said, glancing curiously at her.

Ruth's pretty mouth firmed. She stood up suddenly and walked out of the kitchen. She returned presently with a brown manila envelope which she handed to him. She told him, then. Everything. How she and Will had struck on the idea of a last-minute marriage as a means of defeating Ben. How Will had exacted her promise to see to it that H-on-a-Rail, once she'd proved up and gained title to it, was turned over to Cleve.

"I ought to be very ashamed of myself, Cleve. And I am. I—I had no right withholding this from you."

He peeked into the envelope at the enclosure. It was, he saw, the patent to Will Ruscher's homestead. His brain was still fogged a little from the suddenness of this development, and he said, "It's crazy. I can't be-

lieve it. He didn't owe me anything, Ruth."

"He thought he did," she said dully.

Cleve stared down with unseeing eyes at the checker-board design of the tablecloth. It was all fitting into place in his mind now: the marriage, Ruth's dramatic appearance at the auction, her willingness to accept his help during those three weeks at H-on-a-Rail during which she'd legalized her claim to the places. Yes, he thought. Yes, it's exactly the sort of thing Will would think of.

He looked up, wanting suddenly to ask Ruth if that was the only reason she had married Will Ruscher. His mouth went dry and he remained silent, an odd sense of guilt, of disloyalty to the dead man, running through him.

"Why *didn't* you tell me about this before, Ruth?" he asked, after a moment.

"I know Ben," she said. She tried to smile, but it turned into an expression of deep worry. "I can picture him when he learns about this."

It brought up an image of Ben in Cleve's mind, and his mouth, too, went sober.

"So now," Ruth said, looking up at him, "you have the decision to make all over again, Cleve. Are you going to accept this—this bequest from Will? Or will you go back to Block Five?"

He took a slow sip of his coffee, his eyes pinched with thought. He couldn't get that picture of Ben's face out of his mind. There was an irony Ben would not appreciate in this situation, Cleve thought, smiling faintly. Will Ruscher was dead. Ben had killed him. But the dead man was striking back from the grave now. The last laugh, apparently, was to be on Ben, after all. He could imagine how the town, the whole range would enjoy this.

"If you decide to accept it," Ruth said, "we'll have to take that title over to Win Birdsell, and have him transfer it legally to you." She sighed. "Once that's done, there'll be no way of keeping it secret."

Cleve nodded. "It's too rich to stay a secret."

Ruth looked anxiously at him. "What are you going to do?"

Cleve stood up. There was really nothing to debate about, as he saw it.

"He wanted it, Ruth," he said quietly. "Let's go see Win Birdsell."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

EVE WOKE UP and lay for a moment listening to the crew tumble noisily out of the bunkhouse. She heard them tramp into the long dining room for their pre-dawn breakfast. She was getting a little fed up with this business of being awakened by the crew. She wrapped the pillow around her head, and tried to go back to sleep.

The trouble was, she liked to sleep with a wide open window, and was too lazy now to climb out of bed and close it. She heard the corral gate creak as someone went to catch up a horse from the work bunch. The sounds of that ritual, the placating murmur of the puncher's voice as he stalked the horse he intended to saddle, the horse's snuffling objections, gripped her unwilling attention.

The cookshack door slammed shut with a sound like

a firecracker. Eve winced and then winced again as the voice of Smiley Davis, the foreman, cut through the chill, dew-drenched air like a knife blade.

"Chet, let the new kid work along with you today. Ride over and see what you can do about that Three Stone water tank."

There was something particularly aggravating to Eve in the way Smiley Davis barked out his orders. Eve padded to the window and slammed it down. Dimly, through the pane, she could hear the foreman's dry laughter.

Far from being contrite about waking her up, he seemed to enjoy the thought of it. Crawling back into bed, Eve remembered that Cleve was coming over today. Smiley Davis, she reflected, would be laughing out of the other side of his face if Cleve elected to take back his old job as foreman.

The thought made her smile. She fell asleep, still thinking about it. When she woke again it was bright daylight. And then she remembered that Fred De Maris was in the house, an overnight guest. She tumbled out of bed, dressed hurriedly, and went down to find Fred sipping coffee on the sunny side of the veranda.

"Goodness, how long have you been up, Fred? Where's Dad?"

Fred told her her father had ridden over to Hogpen on some trivial errand and would be back before long. Eve started to apologize for having slept so late, but Fred broke in, saying, "Offhand, I'd say the extra hours were well invested. You look ravishing, Evie."

Eve wrinkled her nose at him. "Not before breakfast. You'll spoil me," she told him.

"I'd like to spoil you for the rest of your life," Fred said gravely. "Marry me, Evie."

Eve laughed good-naturedly. "I can't possibly enter-

tain a proposal before I've had my morning coffee."

"I'll try again," Fred said, still gravely, "when we're at those sketches then, Evie."

He sauntered into the living room while Evie got her own skimpy breakfast of toast and coffee. When she came back outside she saw that Fred had set up his easel and had carried the Queen Anne wing chair with the cabriole legs out onto the veranda. She was a little self-conscious as Fred posed her in it.

Her pose wasn't tiring, really, but after sitting still steadily for fifteen minutes she began to feel itchy. When Cleve came trotting in, presently, she gave Fred a quick, half-apologetic little smile, and stood up and went across the yard to meet Cleve.

He had stepped down, ground-reining his buckskin. Eve, as she walked toward him, hoped he had noticed the smile she'd directed at Fred. But Cleve said with impersonal directness, "Just dropped in to say the answer's no, Eve—and to thank your father again for making the offer. Is he home?"

Eve faltered through an explanation of her dad's absence. "Honestly, sometimes I don't understand you at all, Cleve. Yesterday you were practically certain."

Cleve grinned understandingly at her. "Guess I owe you an explanation, at that." He told her what had happened, leaving out none of the details. "Kind of crazy, isn't it, Eve?" he grinned, as he finished. "It's true, though. I've got title to H-on-a-Rail, and that's all the proof I need that it really has happened." His eyes were reflective. "With that extra water to fall back on the next time a drought strikes I won't have to worry. For the first time since I opened up shop down there on Flying Nine I can take a really confident view of the future."

Eve folded her lower lip beneath her teeth and stared

at the ground. As an indulgent father's only offspring she was accustomed to having things pretty much her own way. A petulant anger, like that of a little girl offered a plaything then refused it, surfaced in her.

"Doesn't it seem rather odd to you, Cleve," she asked shortly, "that Ruth waited until last night to tell you about this?"

"Odd?" he murmured.

"Oh, don't be such a fool," Eve lashed out impatiently. "She only told you after she'd learned you were planning to take back your old job here. I can see through that, Cleve, if you can't."

The way Cleve looked at her scared her a little.

"If you have something to say, Eve," he said softly, too softly, "just say it."

"That girl's in love with you. I knew it yesterday, the minute I saw you two together." Cleve looked wonderingly at her, and Eve knew suddenly that she had blundered terribly in telling him this. "Oh, what's the use talking about it?" she snapped. "It ought to be obvious, even to you, that she doesn't intend to let you come back here. If you ask me she's just making you an outright gift of the H-on-a-Rail in order to keep you away from me."

As long as she lived, Eve felt, she would never forget the murky contempt that came into Cleve's eyes as he looked down at her. He was too much a gentleman to say what he was thinking about her, but Eve got the idea. She was losing him, she realized. And because she knew no other way to fight back at what she saw in his eyes, she said, "Cleve, it's the truth. Even if you're too blind to see it. That girl is just jealous. She wants to keep you on Flying Nine where she can find excuses to see you. She—"

"I think you've said about enough, Eve," Cleve said. He stood another brief moment looking down on her,

the contempt for her deepening in his eyes. Then he turned abruptly to his buckskin, mounted and rode deliberately out of the yard.

Eve watched him until he swung around a curve in Block Five's long lane and passed out of sight. Fred, she knew, had watched all this from atop the veranda. He was undoubtedly impatient to go on with his sketches for the portrait, but somehow she wasn't ready for that yet. Not even for Fred.

She drifted listlessly across the yard to the corral. She perched herself atop the high fence, and was sitting there, staring down moodily at the chopped, manure-littered turf within the enclosure, when Fred came over from the veranda.

He climbed up and perched on the top rail beside her. For a long, long time he was silent, out of respect for her own moody silence.

"If you'd rather be alone for awhile," he started uncertainly, "I don't mind—"

"It's all right," Eve said, glancing up. She smiled a bit wanly and put a hand on his sleeve. "You're sweet."

Fred accepted it without comment. He seemed to be trying to gauge her mood, in order to be sure of not saying the wrong thing. Eve was flattered by such careful treatment.

"Really, I'm all right, Fred," she reassured him. "You don't have to handle me with kid gloves."

"Mood over?"

"Yes."

"Marry me, Evie," Fred said.

"Honestly," Eve said, "if you can't think of the craziest times and places to propose marriage."

"That's no answer," Fred protested.

There was something plaintive and appealing in his voice, and Eve glanced at him. Funny, she thought. Now that she'd lost her last chance with Cleve, she

could look at Fred from an entirely different perspective. He really was awfully handsome. No man had ever offered her more and asked less in return. Fred's attitude toward her was one of almost doglike devotion. Remembering how Cleve had looked at her, as if she were some sort of leper, she felt the sharp contrast between Cleve's and Fred's attitude toward her.

Her face grew very serious for a moment. Fred, seeing it, must have realized she was beginning to weaken, for he said, "Don't think too hard, Evie. Just say yes, and I promise you you'll never regret it."

Eve debated another ten seconds, and then she turned to him.

"Well then, yes," she said, wondering a little at the suddenness with which the decision had jelled within her.

Fred stared at her as though it was more than he'd dared hope for. His arm went around her. He wanted to kiss her right there atop the corral fence, but Eve turned her head away, laughing softly.

"Wait until we get down. We'll break our necks," she chided.

Fred climbed down and stood smiling up at her, his arms spread-eagled.

"Jump," he suggested.

Eve hooked her heels over the third rail from the bottom, and hesitated there, asking herself if she'd made this sudden decision to spite Cleve. *Am I really fond enough of this man to spend the rest of my life with him?* she wondered anxiously.

"Jump," Fred said again.

He wasn't looking at her the way Cleve had looked at her, Eve thought. A residue of anger against Cleve helped her to make her mind up. She jumped.

Ben De Marris stepped out through the big, rein-

forced oaken door of the Cattleman's Bank and stood on the plank walk for a moment. Carefully he counted a fat sheaf of greenbacks. Satisfied that the amount was correct, he tucked the bills into his wallet.

He jammed the wallet down deep into his pocket and reflected smugly that not many men in this part of the country would dare to carry that much cold cash around with them. The money he'd just withdrawn was a month's payroll for his Wheel riders. Better than eight hundred dollars. Worth a thief's time and effort, certainly. But Ben wasn't worried. He was only idly amused at the thought of anybody trying to separate him from his money.

He tarried briefly by the bank's iron-barred window. He knew his men were waiting eagerly for his return from town with the payroll. But he decided to wet down his throat with a beer before tackling the dusty ride back to headquarters.

He caught up the reins of his dun and led the horse along Cedar Street to the Three Star. Racking the horse outside, he shouldered in heavily through the swing doors.

Except for Billy Bates, who was polishing glasses behind his bar, and a couple of Triangle punchers playing blackjack at a wall table, the saloon was deserted.

Ben thought he detected constraint in the way the Triangle men acknowledged his "Howdy." But he put that down to imagination and bellied up to the bar.

"Been in town long?" Billy Bates asked guardedly, as he drew the beer Ben curtly ordered.

Ben didn't answer until he'd taken a pull on the drink and wiped a fleck of foam off his upper lip with the back of one outsized hand.

"I just popped in to pick up payroll money. And I intend to pop out as quickly. Why?"

Bates wiped soft hands on his apron. "Just wondered," he murmured. But his eyes avoided Ben's. He seemed uncomfortable, Ben thought. He studied the fat man.

"Somethin' goin' on up here in town I should know about, Billy?" he asked shrewdly.

Bates' eyes came up reluctantly. "I—I was kind of hopin' somebody else might've spilled the beans to you," he said wearily.

Ben set his glass on the bar and laid both hands, palms down, on the wood.

"Nobody did. Which means you're elected. Start spillin'."

"Well," Bates said, "it's all over town. Ruth Forbes has deeded the H-on-a-Rail over to Cleve McNary. Last night. Win Birdsell made the transfer of title, and—Damn it, keep your hands off a man, Ben. I'm just tellin' what's happened, I ain't responsible for it."

Ben had gripped a fold of the fat man's shirt, twisting to anchor his hold. He hauled the saloon owner into an awkward position over the back of the bar.

"If you're lyin'—" Ben said.

"I ain't lyin'," Bates grumbled. "Why should I? Damn it, let go. You're rippin' a button off my long-handleds."

Ben's grip on the man's shirt tightened. "Tell me about it," he said.

Bates did. He was too frightened by what he saw in Ben's eyes to make any further objection to Ben's manhandling of him. When he had told Ben as much as he knew, Ben shoved him back, like a man making a discard at poker, and stood for a long, long moment considering this news.

The temper piled up in him, higher and higher. Seeking an outlet for it, he sent his half-emptied beer glass skittering along the bar. It leaped over the lip at the

end and sloshed beer all over a wall before it hit the sawdusted floor and burst into fragments.

Bates gave him a brief, frightened look, then glanced away from him. Ben turned on his heels and tramped out through the batwings.

Seconds later he was astride the dun gelding, spurring the startled animal angrily along Cedar Street, on his way back to his Wheel quarters.

I'll kill Cleve, he thought. By God, I'll kill him!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AFTER HAVING displayed his contempt for Eve's charges against Ruth by turning his back on the girl and riding out of Block Five, Cleve McNary rattled along for some miles in a gray funk.

It always hurts when friends let a person down. For years, because he liked and respected her father, he had made allowances for Eve, made an effort to like her. Yes, and he even succeeded to some extent. After all, he was a man, and she an exceptionally pretty young woman.

Whatever warmth he felt toward Eve had been canceled out now. In its place was a chilly dislike softened by pity and a vague disappointment that she was capable of such behavior.

Remembering how she'd kept insisting that Ruth was in love with him, he rode along for some distance like a man in a trance. Women were more sensitive than men in such matters, and for awhile he let himself toy with the happy thought that in that one respect Eve had been making sense.

It set him up. By the time he trotted into Flying Nine's cramped little yard, he was in that bemused frame of mind associated with lovers everywhere down through the ages.

Pete Spreckels, who helped him off-saddle his horse, kept glancing curiously at him.

"You look like the cat that ate the canary," Pete said. "How come?"

Cleve hadn't realized it showed on him so plainly.

"Bud inside?" he asked, and Pete stared at him.

"Where else?" Pete shifted on his game leg and still stared at him. "Are you all right? You look kind of sun-struck or something."

Cleve smiled inwardly, for his own consumption.

"Haven't told Bud anything yet, have you, Pete?" Early this morning he and Pete Spreckels and Bump Miskimmons had held a council of war, and had decided that the thing to do now that Cleve held title to H-on-a-Rail was to move over there, lock, stock and barrel. Their hold on Flying Nine was secure. But Ben, if Cleve knew him, would never relinquish his claim to the H-on-a-Rail. The thing to do was to fort in over there, for Ben, when he heard the news, was capable of burning H-on-a-Rail to the ground. He'd just as soon destroy Will Ruscher's dug well than let Cleve have use of it.

"Bud's innocent as a lamb yet," Pete said. The cherub-faced man frowned. "What's you fixin' to do about that situation?"

"Tell him what the score is," Cleve said quietly, "and suggest that he ride."

Pete Spreckels made one of his classic understatement. "Ben's liable to be a little put out when he learns we've moved over to H-on-a-Rail, Cleve. Somethin' tells me we'll be able to use all the help we can get in the next twenty-four hours." His eyes darkened. "Don't Bud Gracey owe you somethin'?"

"No," Cleve said. He'd been too blunt, he saw, and he added, "I'd do as much for a hurt dog that wandered in here as I've done for him, Pete. And there's that girl of his up in town to consider."

"Yeah," Pete said glumly, "you're right. I'm bound to admit it."

Cleve grinned commiseratingly at the lame puncher and turned into the cabin.

Bud Gracey was sitting up in his bunk writing a letter. He put it quickly aside as Cleve entered. A letter to Louise, Cleve thought, and knew suddenly that he had to get this man's agreement to ride out, and quickly. Bud would undoubtedly offer to stay and help hold Ben and his pack of Wheel wolves off. *But if I let him, Cleve thought, and anything happens to him, I'll never be able to look Louise Dannehauer in the eye again.*

"How're you feeling, Bud?" he asked carefully.

"Some better than the day I dragged in here," Bud grinned crookedly. "Why?"

Cleve took a moment to choose the words, then said, "The day you rode in I said you'd be welcome until you were ready to ride. And that you'd be safe here. I can't back up that part about being safe any more, Bud." Quietly and dispassionately then, he explained why he couldn't. "You see how it is," he finished, and his sobered eyes touched those of the injured man on the bunk. "If you're able to ride now, I think you'd better."

Bud's hands were clasped around his stomach. He stared down fixedly at them.

"What the hell kind of a man do you take me for, Cleve?" he asked thickly after a moment.

"Bud," Cleve started, "I—"

"You took me in when I was damn near dead and risked everything you've got keepin' Ben off me. So now, when you're in some trouble, you expect me to turn tail and ride?"

"Now wait a minute—"

"You wait a minute," Bud snapped. "I got as much reason to hate Ben as you have, in case you're forgetting. More, the way I look at it."

"Bud, listen—"

"I ain't goin' to listen to nothing. If you think you can keep me from goin' up there to H-on-a-Rail and helpin' you hold off Ben and his vultures, you just ain't thinkin'. I may be banged up pretty bad, but I can hold a gun. And there ain't a damn thing wrong with this finger." He curled the finger in question, his trigger finger, and Cleve looked solemnly at him.

"Guess maybe I owe you an apology, Bud," he said at last, softly.

"You don't owe me nothing," Bud said, looking steadily at him. "But we both owe Ben De Marris something."

That afternoon Flying Nine's rickety wagon made several trips to H-on-a-Rail. By five o'clock they'd set up a makeshift sort of housekeeping in Will Ruscher's homestead cabin. By six they'd had supper and Bump Miskimmons was hammering nails in the wall and hanging up his cooking utensils.

Sitting around afterward they were all pretty sober—all wondering, Cleve supposed, how long Ben De Mar-

ris would wait before challenging their right to be here.

When Hank Fetterman trotted in, just before dark, Cleve was grateful for the diversion. He hurried out of the cabin to greet his erstwhile employer. Cleve noticed that Hank Fetterman's face was dead sober as he stepped down off his horse. They shook hands solemnly and had their talk while sitting on the edge of the big iron trough under the windmill.

It took Hank Fetterman some time to get around to the business that had brought him.

"Cleve," he said complainingly, "I wish you'd listened to me up in town the day Will Ruscher got it. I was kind of hopin' something'd develop between you and Eve." He took a thin cigar from his pocket, bit the end off it, and stared down ruminatively at it. "Puttin' that in plain English, I'd have been glad to have you for my son-in-law."

"Hank, I'm flattered. Real flattered." Cleve was embarrassed.

Hank scratched a match along the inside of one boot, where it had been worn slick from contact with stirrup leather, and applied flame to the stogie. When he had it working to suit him, he flipped his match to the ground and said, "That girl's all I've got, Cleve. All I've cared about, since her mother died, is to see Eve happy. I want to make sure of that, before I run my string out."

Cleve frowned, wondering how Hank hoped to do it. The only thing certain in this world was change. A man might leave enough money in a trust fund to be reasonably sure his children would never want for the necessities, but happiness was a different matter. It wasn't for sale, and it seemed to Cleve that Hank ought to realize that.

"You're not that close to the rim, Hank," he chided.

"Who ever knows?" Hank shrugged idly. "It's only a

step from here to eternity, Cleve. Any of us can take that step, any minute." His grin, Cleve saw, was a trifle sheepish. "Hell of a way to talk, ain't it? It's just that since this thing with Ben started I've had the feelin' that—" He shook his head. "Cleve, I'll get down to cases. Reason I'm here is to tell you I'm dealin' myself out of this hassle between you and Ben."

Cleve looked at him, then nodded. "That's all right, Hank." And he added, "One thing Sentinel Valley can do without is a range war between its two biggest outfits."

"There won't be any trouble between the Wheel and my Block Five," Hank said. "That's pretty sure now." He saw the puzzled look Cleve darted at him. "Eve's goin' to marry Fred De Marris."

Cleve scraped a furrow in the ground with the edge of his boot. He was remembering his quarrel with Eve earlier in the day. He lost all resentment he had felt toward the girl now. This news wasn't surprising, Eve's nature considered.

"Hank, all I can say is the best of everything to them. Pass that along for me, will you?"

The older man nodded. That note of complaint was in his voice as he murmured, "I ain't as happy about it as I figured I'd be." His old eyes came up. A father's eyes, deeply troubled, frankly curious. "How come you and her never hit it off, anyway?"

"No rhyme or reason to such things," Cleve said uncomfortably. "You know that, Hank." He changed the subject. "I appreciate your ridin' over in person to let me know how this thing with Ben stands."

"I should've come sooner," Hank grunted.

"You came," Cleve said. He shook hands with Hank, then held Hank's horse while the older man lifted himself to the saddle. It came to him, as Hank trotted out,

that he and Hank Fetterman had come to the end of something just now. The thought of it was an ache inside of him.

"So long, Hank," he whispered, "so long."

And he had the damndest feeling that what he said was in some way prophetic.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE INDIANS have a saying: *The strong man is not ashamed of his weakness.* Ben De Marris had long ago recognized his failing, an explosive, unpredictable temper; a tendency to go off half-cocked when angry. Because he understood it, he had learned to control it. Not until late afternoon of the day he learned Cleve McNary now held title to H-on-a-Rail did Ben rattle out of Wheel's yard followed by a group of heavily armed, grim-faced riders.

Toward sundown Ben and his party reached a rock cairn marking the southern boundary of the Wheel graze, and here Johnny Meanea waited patiently for him. Ben had staked him out down here to keep an eye on Cleve's movements. He nodded sparingly at the puncher.

"Well?"

"Like you figured," Meanea said, shrugging. "They've

moved over to the H-on-a-Rail." He hesitated, as if reluctant to add this: "Gracey moved with 'em."

French and Bassler had pulled their horses up close to Ben's and were watching him, Ben knew, to see how he would react to that last item of information Meanea had offered. His impassive face told them nothing. For a moment, while he rubbed at his chin and considered, the only sound by the cairn was the tinkle of bit chains and the creak of leather as the crew inched up and grouped around him.

"All right." Ben's voice was flat, authoritative. "We'll drop a loop around them. We've got twelve men. Five of you can come in on them from the back, out of the foothills. Rest of us'll Injun up on 'em from out here. It ought to be dark enough for that. Don't look like there'll be much of a moon out. Meanea, I'm puttin' you in charge of the foothills contingent. Pick out some men for yourself."

Meanea grinned faintly and started, "French, Bassler, Doheny—"

"Not French and not Bassler. Try again."

Meanea shrugged and named his men. "How in hell am I suppose to lead four men up into them hills without McNary knowin' about it?"

"Ride a wide circle and come in from above."

Meanea frowned. "Like you say, it's going to be a dark night. Rammin' around them hills in the dark ain't no picnic. Goin' to be hard to keep from makin' a racket."

"Picket your horses and shank it in the last mile or two," Ben said. "Crawl in on your hands and knees if you have to. I'll say this: If any man makes a racket and tips my hand before I'm ready to tip it, there'll be some damn sore jaws in this outfit." He looked around the circle of sobered faces, his black eyes flashing their

warning. "Anything else botherin' you, Johnny?"

Meanea hesitated. "How'll we know when you're ready for us to—"

"You'll know," Ben grunted. "Ease in as close as you can and take cover and wait."

"For what?" Meanea insisted. "And for how long?"

"Why, God damn it, for tea to be served!" Ben exploded. "I'm no Army general, to plan out every detail of this thing for you." Some of the other men started to laugh, but the laughter died when Ben glanced around at them. "I'm hopin' to get in a free shot or two before they realize we've throwed the net on them, Johnny. The first punch is the best punch. When you hear us start shootin', from out on the hummocks, that's when you start shootin'. Now get going."

Meanea nodded to the four men he had chosen and turned away, cutting a wide circle across the tufted flats of the valley floor: a circle that would bring him to the foothills somewhere between here and Kettle headquarters. It would take Meanea and his men a couple of hours, Ben reasoned, to get in position. He slid down off the dun, and piled one rock of the cairn atop another to form a crude seat and sat down.

Lorenzo French had been sitting sideways in his saddle, the back of one knee hooked over the horn. He took a final drag on his cigarette, flung it away, then stepped down and came over to sit on the ground beside Ben.

He didn't say anything. He only sat there with his feet curled back under him, Indian fashion. He had scraped up a handful of small pebbles. He kept flipping them off a grimy thumbnail, and after awhile it began to get on Ben's nerves.

"If you got somethin' to get off your chest, French, now's the time for it."

"I was just thinkin' over your orders. Kind of a cut-and-dried way of goin' at this, ain't it? Twelve of us. Sneakin' up on 'em like a bunch of damn Injuns. Pottin' at them from in back of cover."

Ben snickered. "What's the matter? Turning soft, French?"

"All right. I ain't a lily. I ain't a fool either. I'm thinkin' of what'll happen to me and Vic if some of these other outfits in the valley ever get wind of this. It's some different for you and the others. This range has me and Vic marked down as a couple of hardcases. Killers. We're made-to-order bait for a lynch mob. You aren't."

"Ain't you forgetting something?" Ben murmured.

"What?"

"I'm a big gun in the vigilantes around here." He grinned. "There won't be no lynch party for you and Vic, French."

"I still say it's a helluva way to operate, Ben. There's a dozen of us and only four of them. That's three-to-one odds, and—"

"And when the fur starts to fly," Ben said acidly, "we'll be out in the open. They'll be shootin' at us from inside a building. I figure that evens the odds some." His mouth hardened. "If we can knock one or two of 'em off before they know what's hit 'em, so much the better. This ain't a game with me any more, French. There's a lot of scores to be settled tonight between me and Cleve McNary. I want that water of mine that he's claimin'. And I've got some things to say to Bud Gracey. Say with a gun, that is."

"In a way, I suppose," French said, brightening, "Gracey's being still with them will excuse whatever happens. He had his warning to line out, and this whole range knows it."

Ben's crooked smile flickered. "Who needs excuses?" he grunted.

The prospect of a fight was harder on a man than the fighting. Ben could tell, after an hour, that his men had had a stomachful of this waiting. It was a little too early, he knew, for Meanea to have gotten into striking position. Ben ordered the men who had remained with him—all except French and Bassler—out of this impromptu camp.

"Fan out when you get down near the buildings, and move in on them from the north and east. The boys and I'll slide in from the west. Don't get trigger happy. But don't hesitate to shoot if the target looks juicy." He frowned. "I'd like to knock a couple of them down for keeps with the first volley. It may be that's too much to hope for."

They rode out, sober men on a sobering errand. Ben climbed aboard his big dun. French and Bassler, taking their cue from him, mounted too. Ben led them up and out of the little hollow which had become as familiar to him, during the hour of waiting, as his own yard up at Wheel headquarters. He laid his course roughly westward, letting the dun pick its own footing for it was too dark for him to see much now.

Southward the broken scarps and stairstep ridges of the Wataugas made a barely discernible silhouette against a blue-black sky. They topped a rise and dropped down into a swale that was dank and odor-some, clogged with weeds and jagged rock upthrusts.

Vic Bassler's stallion tripped on one of the upthrusts. Ben heard the man's muffled oath. He pulled his dun in and peered through the murk at the blocky gunman.

From somewhere within this semi-swamp came a

series of staccato hoots punctuated by a long, drawn-out *hoo-aw*.

Afterward there was a moment of silence. Vic Bassler's voice had an odd, sing-song quality to it as he asked, "What was that?"

Ben frowned. This, he thought, was the man he'd hired on for his toughness. A gunman— Spooking at sounds in the night, like a jittery schoolmarm. Ben snorted.

"Ever heard the sound a barred owl makes, Vic?"

"No."

"You have now," Ben said, and added impatiently, "What's your trouble tonight, Vic?"

"I'm all right."

"Come to think of it," Ben said, "you been actin' kind of queer ever since we left the ranch. What's kept you so quiet this past couple hours?"

"Let up on him, Ben," French said.

"I'm askin' him," Ben said, and he waited for Bassler to explain that moodiness he'd been displaying. Sitting there less than a yard away from the man who had, apparently, no intention of saying anything more on the subject, Ben's nostrils suddenly crinkled. He leaned a little closer to Bassler, sniffing the air about the man. He reached out on a sudden shrewd impulse and laid his fingers around Vic Bassler's hairy wrist.

It was wet to his touch. Ben grunted and let out a short laugh.

"I always figured the booze would make a yellow-bellied monkey out of you, Vic. But I never expected to see it happen so sudden."

French said warningly, "Ben—"

"He's sweatin' like a pig," Ben said. "He's yellow as hell. He's been sneak-drinkin' out at the ranch ever since I put him and you on the payroll. Don't tell me he

hasn't. I've smelled the stuff on him often enough."

"All right," French said wearily, "what's the use lyin'?"

"How hard," Ben asked angrily, "has he been goin' at it?" When French didn't answer, Ben snapped out at Bassler, "You'd better ride, Vic."

"Where?"

"Who gives a hoot where? Up to town. Back to the ranch. In this shape you ain't worth the room you take up, that's for certain."

"I ain't asked out of this party," Vic Bassler grumbled. "I ain't a dog to be sent tail-draggin' home, Ben."

The reaction surprised Ben. He tried to make out the expression on Vic Bassler's face, but it was too dark to see anything but the vague outlines of Vic's blocky torso.

"Have you got a bottle with you, Vic?" Ben asked shrewdly after a moment.

"Sure. What's more, I had a good stiff slug before we left the ranch. All I need now," he went on hopefully, "is a bracer to pull me together."

"All right," Ben said thoughtfully.

"All right what?"

"Go ahead," Ben told him.

Vic Bassler reached inside his coat, pulled out a pint bottle, uncorked it, and held it aloft for an instant in that stylized gesture common to drinking men the world over. The mildness of Ben's voice had completely disarmed him. But as Bassler lifted the bottle to his mouth, Ben's arm came up and out in a side-swiping motion, slapping the bottle out of Bassler's hand.

It hit the ground with a little *plop*, somewhere close by. For a moment three men with three entirely different viewpoints listened to whiskey gurgles out of the bottle.

Lorenzo French drew breath, then exhaled without

saying a word as Ben said, "Stay out of this, French. Vic, when I give an order, I don't listen to back talk. For your information, I can always do without the help of a man that carries his guts around in a bottle. Now I'll tell you again and you'll listen. Pull that horse around and shag it out of here before I take a gun to you."

There was a moment during which Bassler sat there, sullen, unmoving; a moment during which Lorenzo French settled back heavily against his saddle's high cantle and weighed his loyalty to Ben against his loyalty to Vic Bassler.

The thick silence ran on until Ben, gambling on French's temper said, "Move, Vic, when I'm talking to you."

Vic Bassler moved.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SOME MEN bully their way to success. Others, lacking the bullying instinct, achieve the same end by outmaneuvering the competition. In the cattle business there were the lions, the self-appointed kings of the range, like Ben De Marris; and there were the foxes.

Hank Fetterman was one of the foxes. A quick, cool head and an innate sense of tact had brought him a long way up the hill in a country where success, too often, depended upon a balled fist and a tied-down gun scabbard.

The use of physical force in a scramble for more and

more power was a fool's attempt to shortcut the road to success, as Hank saw it. In this rough, semi-civilized country the man who took that shortcut was always in danger of stopping somebody's bullet.

And nothing, he told himself musingly now, as he trotted out of H-on-a-Rail after his brief, uncomfortable conference with Cleve McNary, *cancels out all a man's earthly gains as quick as one well-placed bullet.*

It was his fox-cunning which had brought him down here tonight with the message that Eve was planning to marry Fred De Marris. Cleve, therefore, could count on nothing better than a strict neutrality from Hank in the quarrel with Ben.

I'm well out of that mess, he reasoned.

Still he didn't feel entirely right in his mind about it. Even the fox has some promptings of conscience. He couldn't rid himself of the uneasy conviction that in shaking hands with Cleve a moment ago he had, in effect, shaken hands with a dead man.

The night had darkened while he was talking to Cleve. There was no trail for him to follow now on his way westward toward his Block Five headquarters. A man had to make his way as best he could across a tricky terrain that was flat and broken at alternate stages. It made for slow going, as the night's niggardly sliver of a moon was hazed over.

Over by Oscar Thompson's horse ranch the badlands thrust up a series of jagged speartips of naked stone against the dark sky. Somewhere in the distance he heard a barred owl's insistent hooting. Hank Fetterman found that sound peculiarly depressing. There was something ominous in the air tonight, he decided. His thinking reverted to Cleve, and he shook his head now as his horse picked its way gingerly through the night.

He wasn't proud of himself, of the role he had chosen

to play in the showdown. But he told himself grimly again, *I'm well out of it.*

He heard the unmistakable click of a horse's shod hoof against stone and pulled his own horse to a halt in a little grass patch near a fingerlike upthrust of rock. Three horsemen topped a rise, southward of him. He had them in sharp silhouette against a low-hanging cloud for an instant, but then they dropped down into the swale in which he sat his horse like a statue, and he lost them.

They halted presently, not more than a hundred yards from him. By cupping a hand to each ear, Hank Fetterman was able to hear snatches of their conversation. Somewhere over there in the inky darkness Ben De Marris was giving his hired gunman, Vic Bassler, a thorough tongue-lashing. Hank Fetterman gathered that much, and then his blood froze.

One of the trio at the other side of the swale had turned away from his companions and was riding directly toward Hank's position.

Hank's first impulse was to run. It wouldn't do, as he saw it, for Ben to discover his presence here, so close to H-on-a-Rail. Ben was certain to draw the inference that he had been to see Cleve. Tonight of all nights the big man was undoubtedly in one of his towering rages. *He'll never believe me,* Hank thought raggedly, *if I try to tell him I rode all the way down here to tell Cleve not to count on any help from me.*

Hank swore under his breath. This could be trouble. The urge to keep his boots clean, to stand clear of this trouble, was what had brought him here tonight. But it was no good to run. If he did and was overtaken, it would make his presence seem all the more suspicious to Ben.

That horseman was threading his way up through the

swale toward him. Only about fifty yards away now, Hank judged from the sound of the man's progress. But the fellow seemed to be turning off a bit toward Hank's left as he came. There was always the chance that if Hank sat his horse quietly in the darkness, the man would ride blithely past him.

A chance worth the taking.

It didn't occur to him, as it certainly would have occurred to a bolder, more forthright man, to simply shout out a "Hello, who is it?" He didn't think of advertising his presence and letting Ben De Marris make of it what he chose to.

Whoever it was kept on coming. The fellow, Hank saw, was going to pass within a few scant yards of him. He laid a hand against his horse's neck, warning the animal to stand fast now, and then sucked a long breath in and held it.

The other rider, no more than a shadowy blob in the darkness, came abreast of him, started past him. Hank's horse stamped a forefoot and snuffled out a greeting to the other man's horse.

What happened then happened too fast to be prevented. The other man's gun was out, thumb-cocked and triggered; the other man's bullet was already smashing Hank in the chest while Hank cursed the luck and debated what he should say to the fellow. The fellow shot again as Hank clutched the horn and sagged forward.

That second tongue of orange flame lancing through the night at him was the last thing Hank Fetterman remembered.

A man characterizes himself by the way he reacts to the unexpected. Ben De Marris' reaction to the sound of two pistol shots in the night, coming only a minute

or so after he had sent Vic Bassler packing, was typical of him.

Lorenzo French, having observed the second gun flash, said, "That's Vic, Ben." He wanted to rush right up there and find out the reason for that shooting. But Ben said, "Wait," and sat there for thirty seconds, all his senses alerted.

"Vic?" he called.

"Up here," Vic Bassler's voice came back to him.

Satisfied, Ben giggered his horse forward. He and French located Vic without too much trouble. There was just enough light for Ben to make out the motionless figure of a man on the ground.

"Who is it?"

Vic Bassler, sitting his horse like a man in a trance, said, "Damn 'f I know." Ben ground his teeth with impatience. It occurred to him that a man's nervous system had to be pretty well shot when he could butcher a man and not even investigate the identity of the victim.

Ben climbed down, struck a match, nursed up its flame, and had his look at the face of the dead man. He pursed his lips, whistling in softly. He stood up and put his hands on his hips, facing Bassler.

"How'd it happen?"

Vic Bassler had seen and recognized Hank Fetterman's face by the light of Ben's match. He fumbled through an account of what had happened. "I never knowed it was him, Ben. When his horse nickered, I just let him have it. I was strung pretty tight. I figured he would of sung out if he was on our side, and I wasn't in no frame of mind to take chances. I—I couldn't see nothing of him. Just the outline of him."

"I see," Ben said. He was too calm. It worried Vic Bassler.

"It wouldn't of happened," he said dismally, "if that

horse of his hadn't nickered. I'd of rode past him. That's a mare he rides, ain't it? And here's me on a stallion. I—I was strung pretty tight, Ben."

Hank Fetterman's horse, Ben saw, was waiting patiently ten yards away. The loyalty of a dumb animal was a foolish thing, Ben thought. In this case he was glad to see it, however. He said, "Grab hold of that mare, French. Make sure she don't get away. Until I decide what's to be done about this, I don't want her trottin' into Block Five's yard with blood on her saddle."

French giggered his horse over alongside the mare and murmured gentle reassurances to her as he reached for her reins.

Watching him, Ben was moodily silent. Vic Bassler shifted in saddle, coughed lightly, uncomfortably, and said, "What's goin' to come of this, Ben, do you figure?"

"I'll say this," Ben said. "He was real popular hereabouts, Vic. His crew liked him."

Vic Bassler took a moment to digest the meaning of that. "Maybe I better shake dust on this country."

"So everyone'll know it was you shot him, is that it?" Ben grunted. "Try again. You're workin' for me, Vic. This range'll hold me equally responsible with you, if the truth ever gets out about this."

Lorenzo French asked mildly, "Can you prevent it from getting out, Ben?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Ben considered a moment, then asked a shrewd question. "What was he doin' down here, French? I'll give ten to one odds he was payin' McNary a visit." Ben's voice grew reflective. "Maybe there's a way we can make it look like he was still with Cleve when he got it. Like he throwed in with Cleve and got killed in the general fightin'. It would look better'n this does. And

this country would buy it. He was always strong for McNary. He never made no secret about it."

"How're you going to make it look like that?" French asked.

"Plant the body," Ben said, "where it'll tell that kind of a story."

"That's all right," French admitted, "provided nobody's tellin' a different story. There's four men forted in down there at H-on-a-Rail, Ben. Until they're dead, you idea's not worth much."

"I know."

"Another thing," French said. "We haven't much time now. Fetterman's sure to be missed, inside a couple hours, and—" He hesitated. "How do you figure to wind this up inside that time limit?"

"There's a way," Ben said. He was silent a moment, thinking about it. It wasn't pretty. Still thinking about it, he surprised Vic Bassler by saying, "I've had a change of heart on you, Vic. You're comin' with us."

"What for?"

"Job for you," was all Ben told him for the moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY

PETE SPRECKELS, Cleve decided, was a good man to have around when the cards were falling against you. Two minutes after Cleve walked into what had been Will Ruscher's homestead cabin and announced that Hank Fetterman had definitely cut himself out of the

quarrel with Ben, Pete Spreckels was joking about it.

"Well, I guess when a man's straddled the fence all his life, his legs get kinda itchy for the feel of that top rail between 'em." Pete grinned. "I don't wish him no hard luck, but I ain't gonna cry for him if he picks up some splinters."

"Any splinters picked up from now on," Bump Mis-kimmons said dourly, "we'll pick 'em up. Lead splinters, that is."

Pete only chuckled with his unfailing good humor, but Bud Gracey, Cleve noted, was sobered by Bump's remark. Pete noticed it too. He had the instincts of a circus clown. If he saw you frowning he felt he had to do something about it. He tried to cheer Bud with a couple of jokes that were old stuff to Bump and Cleve.

Bud brightened a little under the treatment—it was hard to stay moody with Pete working on you—and then he came back at Pete with a joke of his own. After that they kept trading off stories. Pete was in the middle of one when the pair of shots sounded.

He broke off at once, cocking his head toward one of the cabin's small windows. His eyes sought Cleve's.

Cleve stood still for a moment, then he went over and blew out the flame in the kerosene lamp. It made the room dark as pitch.

Bump said, into the silence, "What d'you make of it, Cleve?"

"I don't know."

"Damn it," Bump said. "Hank Fetterman rode out in that direction. Maybe one of us oughtta trundle out there and see what them shots was. I'm willin' to go."

"Could be a trap," Cleve said. "Ben's about due to show down here. Ben's tricky."

"What do we do?" Bump said.

"Wait." He went across the room and posted himself

at one of the windows. He could hear the others, less familiar with the cabin's interior than he was, fumbling around in the dark as they, too, gravitated toward the single room's windows.

The waiting was hard. It piled up strain in a man. They found themselves talking, for no good reason, in whispers. This night, Cleve thought, was too dark. A man's eyes tired quickly when he spent too much time probing the darkness for something that never appeared.

He found himself closing his eyes for brief rests. Several times he turned and stared at the utter darkness of the room behind him. It made the night outside seem less dark for a few seconds after he turned to look out the window.

He thought he detected movement out on the flat beyond the windmill. He concentrated on that spot for a full minute, saw movement again, and slowly lifted his carbine. That was a man out there, crawling along in the lizard position. He aimed less by sight than by instinct, and squeezed it out.

He heard his man scream out, "I'm hit." Somebody off to the left, out of Cleve's eyeshot, shouted, "They're in there. Let 'em have it!" A half dozen guns flashed out on the flat then, from as many positions. Cleve lined up on a gun flash, triggered, realized bitterly that he had missed, and then yanked his head aside violently as lead nicked his ear.

Across the room Bump Miskimmons levered another cartridge into the breech of his long-barreled Winchester, aimed deliberately, and fired.

"Cleve," he said complainingly, "they're throwin' lead from every point of the compass. Must be a small army out there. They've throwed a net around us."

The steady, wicked firing from outside continued. Another bullet whined through Cleve's window, and he

said, "Keep down. They may not be able to see much, but they've memorized the position of all these windows. Hold it awhile. Let 'em use up some ammunition."

It surprised him that when he and his men quit answering the attackers' fire, the men outside didn't let up but kept on pouring lead into the cabin.

Bud Gracey said wonderingly, "What kind of a turkey shoot is this?"

"Peculiar," Pete Spreckels said cheerfully. "Very peculiar. Cleve, what in Sam Hill is Ben up to? Why powder this buildin', as long as we ain't makin' targets of ourselves in the windows?"

"There's chink holes between the logs of this cabin," old Bump put in morosely. "Maybe they figure if they throw enough lead one or two shots will be lucky."

"That's covering fire," Cleve said, and frowned in the darkness. "Question is: Who's being covered? Where is he? And what's he hope to accomplish? Maybe we'd better all risk a look, boys. But be careful about it."

Five seconds later Bump Miskimmons swore. "You guessed it. Some jasper just come high-tailin' across the yard from in back of the barn. I missed my chance at him. And now I can't even see him. He's huggin' up against the back wall of the cabin."

Cleve inched along the wall toward the door, lifted the wooden latch from its housing, and eased the door open a fraction.

"Pete," he said, "take my window. Throw some lead back at 'em, boys. At least till I get out the door. I don't know what our friend around back thinks he's doin', but it strikes me he's too close for comfort."

He went out then, moving on his hands and knees. The boys put on a nice display of fireworks for him. He dropped down prone, hugging the ground with one

shoulder pressed against the foundation log of the cabin.

He lay there a few seconds, then pulled himself along awkwardly from the point of one elbow to the point of the other. Slugs hammered the logs of the cabin above him. Once a bit of chinking was knocked loose; it dropped down onto his neck and slid down inside his clothing. He was about to reach back to brush some of it away when a low bullet from one of Ben's men scraped out a fiery furrow along the small of his back.

He rounded the corner of the cabin, found himself in a deep screening shadow, and scrambled down to the rear corner on hands and knees.

He poked a cautious eye around the edge of the building. A man was kneeling against the rear of the cabin. He had tucked a big pile of hay, which he had apparently carried over here from the barn, against the tinder-dry logs. He was just in the act of applying a match to the hay.

This was Vic Bassler. He was intent on his work, caught unawares as Cleve grated out at him: "A little Indian blood in you, Vic?"

Bassler's whole body seemed to jerk, and his eyes darted up. Already the fire had gained enough headway to let him see the gun Cleve held leveled on him.

"Ben's idea," he mumbled, indicating the fire.

"Ben," Cleve said, "is in too big a hurry. Tramp out that fire."

Bassler started to scatter the hay away from the building. A gun barked over alongside the barn, and a slug imbedded itself in a log not three inches away from Cleve's head. Cleve flattened automatically.

Vic Bassler saw that, and took a chance. He was pulling his gun up into train when Cleve shot him. Bassler staggered forward a step, trying to get his gun up. Cleve

shot him again, and he went down like a felled tree, landing heavily on his face.

A good half of that hay was still wedged against the dry logs of the building. Eager, hungry tongues of flame were licking their way up the wall. Cleve ran along the building in a low crouch and kicked the burning hay out into the yard. He made too good a target of himself for that marksman lurking alongside the barn.

A bullet caught him high in the chest, knocking him down. Even as he fell, he was answering that other man's fire, aiming at the gunflash. He must have cut meat with his bullet, for the fellow came staggering out of the shadow in which he'd been lurking and dropped awkwardly to one hand and one knee.

It was Lorenzo French. He was hit hard, Cleve saw, but still dangerous as a snake. "Around here. Here's one of 'em down in the yard," he shouted, and he tried to get his gun up.

Cleve's gun was trained on him. He started to squeeze his shot out, then let his finger ease back off the trigger as a rifle bullet from inside the cabin caught French in the chest and sent him sprawling.

Bud Gracey's voice said, with a sort of cold, distasteful triumph, "Remember me, French?"

Cleve lurched to his feet, fighting off dizziness, and started around toward the front of the cabin. Then he halted, thinking that if Ben was capable of ordering Vic Bassler to fire the cabin, he was capable of ordering another of his Wheel riders to have a try at it.

Cleve changed direction, running across the yard to the barn. He had just stepped in through the big half door when he heard a pound of hoofs at the edge of the yard.

"Around here!" a voice shouted, and Ben De Marris, playing the general on horseback while his men fought

unmounted, rattled angrily out of the darkness.

From where he stood just inside the barn door Cleve had the big man dead in his sights for one moment. There was still a little light from that burning hay. He started to pull trigger on Ben, then shook his head wearily, knowing it wasn't in him to finish Ben off with a sneak shot.

Someone in the cabin took another view, and let go a bullet at Ben. Ben's big dun gelding dropped onto its knees, almost pitching Ben over the horn. As the horse pitched over onto its side, Ben stepped clear, and he didn't hesitate then. He ran straight toward the barn.

Cleve retreated along the manure-littered runway that flanked the ends of the stalls, and then halted as Ben stepped in through the door. He heard Ben swing the lower half of the door shut, as a sort of screen from behind which to do his shooting. He could hear Ben's heavy breathing, and he was aware of the noisiness of his own breaths, made so by the bullet Lorenzo French had put in him.

The time had come, he thought, to settle with Ben De Marris. Except for the wound, which was bleeding steadily, dulling his senses and sapping his strength, he was pleased at the way this had worked out.

He said into the coal-tar blackness, "Ben?"

It was foolish of him to warn the man before striking. But knowing the foolishness of it, he still had to do it. He heard Ben suck in one startled breath, then slowly exhale it. He heard the packed earth pinch under Ben's weight as the big man stepped away cunningly from the door, where he was in danger of being silhouetted.

Ben was not going to speak, Cleve saw. It set the pattern for what was to come. Two men armed with pistols stalking each other in the dark—the ultimate guessing game in which the prize was survival. It was a game in

which a man's gun was less important than a panther-like ability to move and make no sound, to locate the other man without betraying one's own position. It was a game in which self-control, a long patience, could determine the outcome.

Cleve knew suddenly, angrily, that in warning Ben he had given the big man all the advantage. A man who has taken a .45 slug through the body has a hard enough time to breathe, much less keep his breaths silent. He knew he was making a racket each time he drew air in.

He thought: *I'm cooked this way. He's got me. If he makes a move I'll never hear him above the racket of my own breathing.*

It occurred to him that his only possible tactic now was to keep moving, give Ben no sitting-duck target to shoot at. And he had to be ready to counter on the instant with a shot of his own if and when Ben threw a bullet at him.

He stepped carefully toward one of the stalls, thinking that its partitioning wall was made of good sturdy wood that might stop a bullet. His foot came down on matted straw. The racket it made as it crunched sounded like so many firecrackers exploding in the enveloping stillness.

He heard another sound. Only faintly. The sound a whip makes as it slices through the air. The sound, he decided quickly, of something thrown.

Whatever it was Ben had thrown hit the packed-earth floor of the barn less than five yards from Cleve's position. This was Ben's bid, Cleve knew. This was supposed to surprise a shot out of him, give Ben a target to shoot at.

On a shrewd impulse, Cleve stepped still farther into the stall, dropped a quick shot in the direction of the object Ben had thrown, then palm-cocked and twisted

toward the position from which that object was thrown.

Ben reacted as Cleve expected he might. The big man shot at Cleve's gunflash. His slug buried itself in the thick partition. Cleve had that all-too-short instant in which to line down on the big man. He squeezed out his shot quickly, praying a little as he touched the trigger, for he knew this was the big chance; if he muffed this he was a dead man.

He heard Ben grunt like a prodded pig. Ben ground out a gutter word at him. Cleve heard the big man take a step toward him. Another.

"Cleve," Ben said, on a strangling inflection. Cleve shot at the voice. A true instinct must have helped him direct that bullet, for he heard the big man's body hit the dirt like a felled steer.

For a moment there was only the awesome, choking sound of Ben's breathing, and then there was nothing.

Cleve moved uncertainly toward the door. In the dark he almost tripped over the object Ben had used to bait the shot out of him. He knelt to touch it. It was Ben's shellbelt and empty holster. So then, Cleve thought, the big man had chucked away all his spare ammunition. A man had to be pretty sure of himself to make such a bold gamble. It was the only way Ben De Marris had known how to gamble. Thinking of it now, Cleve shook his head in the dark.

He made his groping way to the door, suddenly aware that the shooting outside had fallen off to a trickle. Somewhere in the night, pretty far off, a man yelled, "They got French and Bassler. Ben's horse is down in the yard. Where is he?"

And another voice, sullen, edged with panic: "The hell with it. I had enough of this clambake."

After that there was only the diminishing rattle of hoofbeats. It was over, Cleve realized. Reaction set in

on him as he started across the yard toward the cabin. He hadn't made more than a half dozen steps before he keeled over.

There was a miserable ache in his left shoulder and his whole left arm seemed like so much dead weight attached to his body. Sunrays streaming in through the badly shot-out east window made his eyes smart as they opened. He didn't close them again, though.

Ruth was sitting beside the bunk he lay on, smiling relievedly at him.

"It's about time," she said. "I was beginning to wonder if I ought to rush back up to town and fetch Dad."

"Where is everybody, Ruth?" he asked.

"Bud's up in town with Louise. He's the one who rode up to tell me you needed my—you needed a nurse, Cleve." She glanced down diffidently at him. "Cleve, would it be possible to give Budy steady work and let him put up some kind of a little house here, so those two could get married? They're so crazy about each other. It doesn't seem fair that they can't be together."

"Sure," Cleve grinned. "A lot of things are goin' to be possible around here, now Ben's out of the picture. Strikes me there's nothin' to prevent Bud from movin' back onto the hundred-and-sixty acres he was homesteadin'. Fred'll take a more reasonable attitude toward it than Ben did. Especially as he's about to become a bridegroom."

He told Ruth about Eve Fetterman's engagement to Fred De Marris. "Kind of a royal match, isn't it? Fred owns Wheel now. One day, between them, he and Eve will own half the valley." He saw the troubled expression in Ruth's eyes, and said, "What's the matter?"

"Not one day, Cleve. The day that they marry. Hank

Fetterman's dead." She told him about it, as much as she knew of it. "The boys found him out on the trail this morning. They're taking him over to Block Five now, in your wagon. Pete Spreckels studied the sign around the body. He says it looks as if Hank got into some kind of argument with Ben and his two hired gunmen, and one of them shot him."

Cleve closed his eyes, remembering two shots in the night after Hank rode out. Once Hank Fetterman had been like a father to him. It was hard to believe he would never hear Hank's voice again. He swallowed thickly.

"He'd ridden over here to tell me not to count on his help, Ruth. Hank played fair with me, accordin' to his stripes. Funny, isn't it? If he hadn't come over here to tell me he was staying out of the fight, he'd be alive now. Pete Spreckels called him a fence straddler. I guess straddlin' the fence doesn't always pay a man, after all."

He closed his eyes, thinking of Eve again. His mouth twisted. "Eve will take Hank's death pretty much in her stride. She won't wait too long to marry Fred." He moved his head on the pillow. "All in all, she's done well for herself. She ought to be happy."

"I wonder," Ruth said. "Somehow I can't help feeling that no matter how much Eve has out of life, she'll always want something more. And be miserable for it. She'll never be happy. She's to be pitied."

Ruth's voice was sympathetic, and Cleve stared wonderingly at her. She was really sorry for Eve, he saw. It came to him again why he saw so much more beauty in Ruth's face than in Eve's. Ruth's beauty stemmed from a sweet disposition, from devotion to others.

Biggest, warmest heart in the world, Cleve thought, and wondered if she had been in love with Will Ruscher.

He didn't ask the question directly. He said, "I used to think all I'd ever want was water and grass enough to keep my herd fat and sassy. Looks as if I've got both those things now. I'm raisin' my sights some." He looked up into Ruth's eyes. "Place like this gets lonely, Ruth, without a woman around."

Ruth looked at him. Her heart was suddenly in her eyes, and he saw how she fought to control her emotions. He saw her lower lip start to quiver. "Town can get lonely too," she whispered gently.

Cleve's good arm went up and behind her shoulder. He pulled her toward him. He didn't have to pull very hard, he discovered.