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WILD HORSE RANGE

LOUIS TRIMBLE



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The stranger stayed in a half bent position, the gun tantalizingly a foot from his reaching fingertips. "Turn around," Rodeen commanded. "Strike a match and give us a look at your face."

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As he spoke, he brought a match from his pocket. A flick of his thumbnail sent the match flaring up. At the same instant, he twisted to one side and snapped the lighted match at Rodeen's face . . .

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LOUIS TRIMBLE has lived and worked in many parts of the West, from New Mexico clear up to Northern Idaho, and he brings to his novels a love of the country derived from experience as well as from extensive learning. For professionally he is a member of the faculty of a large university with his specialties in creative writing and linguistics. He and his wife Jacqueline, herself a writer, make their home on the outskirts of Seattle.

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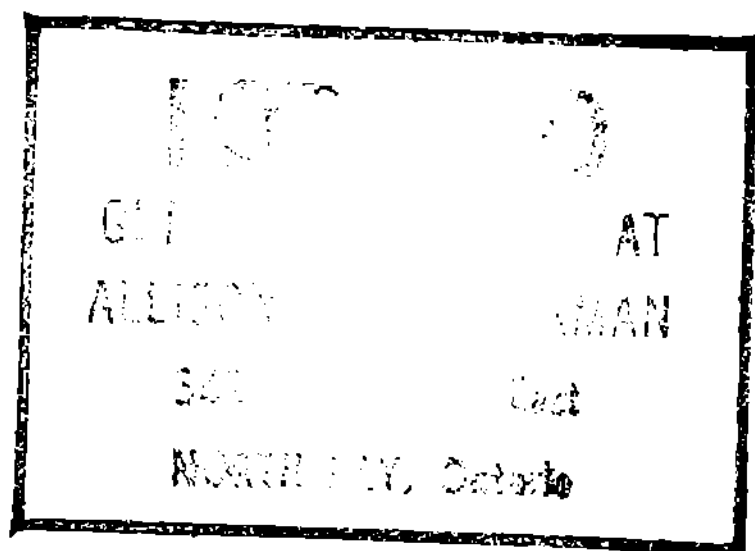
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WILD HORSE RANGE

by
LOUIS TRIMBLE



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THE HIGH HANDER

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I

CLINT RODEEN hurried the twenty head of wild horses down and out of the badlands just as dusk thickened to dark. He came onto the sage flat that sprawled from the southern end of the badlands to the high pass and ran the horses into a narrow-mouthed box canyon.

He had stumbled on the canyon when he arrived in this country the week before, and he thought then that it would be perfect for his purpose. Now he took the lead ropes off the horses and turned them to graze. They were prime stock rather than the usual scrub stuff a man found running free, and Rodeen grunted with pleasure at the sight of them galloping for grass and water with manes and tails flying. There was no question that Major Brittan, the purchasing agent for the cavalry, would want them, nor any question that they would bring top prices.

"If," Rodeen murmured to his sorrel, "the raiders give me a chance to deliver this bunch to the Major?"

He rode out of the canyon, closing it behind him with the brush fence he had fixed beforehand. He thought back over the past week—of his secretive movements as he rounded up the horses from the grassy, well watered draws where the badlands blended into the mountains. He thought of Colonel Canning's stern warning not to let himself be seen by any of the Lost River people. And he thought of his two meetings with Beth Canning, when she had slipped deep into the broken country to bring him provisions.

WILD HORSE RANGE

It had been a week of hard, driving work. But now it was almost ended and if his luck held, at this time tomorrow Rodeen would be well over the high pass and on his way to deliver the horses to Major Brittan, at Fort Missoula.

If his luck held, Rodeen thought. If the raiders didn't suddenly appear and scatter the wild stock back into the broken lands—as they had done these past months each time the Colonel had tried to drive a few head out of the Lost River country.

Riding a short distance from the mouth of the canyon, Rodeen turned in the saddle and looked back. There was nothing to see but a jumble of rocks. His brush fence was as completely hidden as if it didn't exist. He carefully surveyed the whole south face of the badlands, from the high part where he sat to the low saddle by the eastern mountains. Over that saddle was the Lost River valley and the lights, noise and friendliness of Lost River town. But here there was only the gathering darkness and silence.

As he often had this past week, Rodeen felt a touch of loneliness. He shrugged it off and turned the sorrel toward the lone trail that led from the flats into the badlands. Until he had the wild horses sold and brought the profits safely back to the Colonel, he would have to remain alone. The raiders seemed to know all too easily every move the Colonel made. Rodeen wanted to give them no chance to spoil tonight's plan by letting himself be seen.

Eyes probing every shadow on the trail ahead, Rodeen pushed the sorrel over country that a week ago had seemed to lead nowhere but into a maze of wind-scoured slopes and scrub timber. But seven solid days in the saddle, of probing the square miles that lay between the sage flats and the valley had given him a feel for the country and now he was able to hold a steady pace as he worked his way to the small bench where he was to meet Colonel Canning.

The bench rose at the northern edge of the badlands, and from it Rodeen could see the valley squeezed like a soft-shelled egg between the high peaks of the Beaverheads to the east and west. The thin run of Squaw Creek twisted out

WILD HORSE RANGE

of the eastern mountains and flowed in a line of pale silver past the lights of Lost River and on northward through the dozen ranches scattered on the valley floor.

It was September and already frosty in the western Montana mountains. The aspens were quivering gold and beginning to drop their first dry, brittle leaves over the trails. Rodeen could hear branches rustle under a light but cutting wind, and he huddled down into his mackinaw. To his left a mountain maple, already brilliant red from fall frost, moved a viny branch with a soft hiss as the wind gusted briefly. The sorrel danced at the sudden noise and Rodeen quieted it with a soft word.

"Rest easy," he murmured. "He'll be along soon." He glanced eastward through the now heavy darkness, seeking the jagged line of mountains swallowed by the night sky. He frowned. If the Colonel didn't come soon, the nearly full moon would start up, and then it would be too late for him to risk riding here for their meeting.

The darkness moved steadily on, swallowing the valley and finally the mountains to the west. Pinpricks of light sprang up, marking the town and the ranches lying due north of where Rodeen waited. His anxiety grew and he considered riding over the water-hungry valley grass to see if anything had happened. But Colonel Canning's orders for him to keep out of sight had been firm, and two hitches in the cavalry under the Colonel's command had taught Rodeen that he never gave an order without sound reason. And so now Rodeen called on the patience that years of Indian fighting had developed in him and held the sorrel at a tight rein.

Minutes slid by with painful slowness, each one bringing the rising moon nearer to the rim of the eastern mountains; each one deepening the sense of wrongness nagging at Rodeen's mind. Then he caught the sound of a horse walking softly behind him, to the south. He swivelled in the saddle, slipping his carbine from the boot, he peered into the darkness.

He could see nothing but the black bulk of a stand of

WILD HORSE RANGE

scrub pine. Then the edge of the stand seemed to move and a man on horseback appeared. Rodeen lowered the carbine as he recognized the straight, slender form of Colonel Canning.

"Rodeen here, sir," he called softly.

"Where the devil are you, sergeant?" a brusque voice answered. "All I can see is nothing."

Rodeen chuckled, from relief and at the Colonel's insistence on calling him sergeant. It had been over three years since either of them had been in the cavalry, but old habits persisted.

"Straight ahead," Rodeen said. He returned the carbine to the saddle boot and waited while the Colonel came forward and reined alongside him.

"Is anything wrong, sir?" Rodeen demanded. "I expected you to come up from the valley."

"I sent Weems out earlier to scout for me, and he reported someone, or something, over by the cliffs below." The Colonel's voice held a note of weary scorn. "Weems never is sure of anything, but I couldn't take a chance, so I rode toward town and came over the saddle and here—by the back door, as it were."

"Who is Weems?" Rodeen wondered.

"A shirt-tail relative by marriage," the Colonel explained. "I inherited him when my wife died. He knows business and I've let him manage my business affairs. If he didn't have a passion for cards, he wouldn't be any trouble to have around." He added, "Beth always liked him," as if that explained everything.

"Maybe hiding for a week has made me suspicious, sir," Rodeen said, "but why didn't Beth scout for you instead of this Weems?"

"Beth is in town," the Colonel said. He gave a soft chuckle. "And not with Alvin Fletcher, in case you're worried, sergeant. She's helping Scotty McDennis straighten up his accounts. He's the world's worst business man."

Rodeen was puzzled. It wasn't like Colonel Canning to chatter, especially not when there was business as pressing

WILD HORSE RANGE

as that tonight. But he seemed in no hurry to get to the subject of the meeting; instead he rattled away like an old woman at a sewing circle.

When Rodeen said nothing, the Colonel grunted. "Sorry, sergeant. I keep forgetting you don't know all these people. Fletcher is the lawyer who drew up our partnership contract. He owns a half interest along with Cully Banks in the Flying F, lying just to the north of my spread. Scotty McDennis is an old friend from the east. He made a killing in Idaho and came here when I did. He built a fancy saloon, hired people to run it, and settled down to reading his books."

"Yes, sir," Rodeen said. "Now about the horses . . ."

The Colonel was riding a long-legged black. It reared up suddenly, as if it had been spooked, and sent Rodeen's sorrel dancing from a hip blow. Rodeen gave a twist of the reins to keep the sorrel steady, and for a moment he and the Colonel were thigh to thigh as their horses pressed close together.

The Colonel's voice came to Rodeen in a sharp, swift whisper "I think I was followed. Let me do the talking."

He swung the black away. "Fool horses," he said. "Let's give them a rest, sergeant. I could stand to stretch my legs anyway."

The Colonel stepped from the saddle and walked about, letting the black drift. Rodeen followed suit. Now he understood the reason for the Colonel's strange actions; if one of the raiders had managed to follow him, this kind of talk would have the man as puzzled as Rodeen had been. But, he thought, it also meant that his own presence was no longer a secret, and he wondered what effect this would have on their plan.

The Colonel took a cigar from a case in his pocket and stepped toward Rodeen. "Match?"

Rodeen found a match in his mackinaw and struck it on his thumbnail. As the light flared up, he saw the grim lines around the Colonel's strong chiselled features. Sucking flame into the tip of his cigar, the Colonel blew out the match with a puff of smoke. "Play up to me," he commanded in a

WILD HORSE RANGE

whisper. "Mention the decoy stock you rounded up but not the others. Say anything else you like."

He stepped back and raised his voice. "What puzzles me about these raiders, sergeant, is—Who are they? It's plain enough that someone is trying to keep me from selling the horses so I won't have money enough to carry the Leaning C through another winter. But why force me to sell? Who would want a drought-ridden piece of the valley and these badlands? And I own little else after I sold off most of my beef last fall and this spring. It makes no sense."

"At the same time, the raiders don't want the horses or they wouldn't just stampede them back into the canyons," Rodeen said. He took out his tobacco sack and shaped a cigaret. "The only answer is that someone is trying to make you sell out."

"But why?" the Colonel demanded. "If I only had some idea why?"

Rodeen lit his cigaret, cupping the match carefully in his palms. "It shouldn't matter after tomorrow, sir," he said. "I rounded up six prime head and they're waiting for daylight. By sunrise you should have them well on the way up the pass."

A soft chuckle escaped from the Colonel as he seemed to understand what Rodeen wanted him to say next. "I think we have the answer this time," he said in a voice heavy with satisfaction. "By the time the raiders learn about you, it'll be too late. But don't shoot unless they give trouble, sergeant. Just let them start for me and then come in from the rear and show them your gun. They'll be in jail before they know what happened."

Rodeen smiled grimly in the darkness. This was an old trick he and the Colonel had used before when they had set a trap for a renegade Indian they suspected of being a spy for the Paiutes. And if the trick worked as well now as it had then, the raiders would be running in circles, trying to watch the Colonel and avoid Rodeen at the same time. And while all this was going on, Rodeen and the twenty

WILD HORSE RANGE

head of horses would be well up the pass and on the way to safety.

The colonel repeated, "Don't use your gun unless you get trouble, sergeant. There hasn't been any violence so far; I prefer not to be the cause of any."

He puffed on his cigar. "I've given a lot of thought to who might be paying the raiders. At first I decided it was someone local—possibly a friend of mine. But lately I've come to the conclusion that it has to be a gang from outside."

His voice ended on a high note as if he wanted Rodeen to pick the thread of the conversation. Rodeen obliged. "Why not a local man?" he demanded.

"There are only four people in the valley with money enough to buy me out if I had to sell," the Colonel explained. "Scotty McDennis, who knows nothing about ranching and wants to know nothing. Our sheriff, Dutch Holzman, who isn't very brilliant or imaginative, but who's as honest as any man alive. Alvin Fletcher, who sold Cully Banks half the Flying F so he could spend his time with the law and in courting Beth. And Cully Banks, who's an ambitious man but too wise a rancher to buy up as poor a spread as mine. That leaves only outsiders." He added, "There's Weems, of course, but he's nothing."

Rodeen thought, So the Colonel had learned enough to suspect one of the four men he'd mentioned just now. Otherwise, he wouldn't have made such a point of bringing in their names. And what now, Rodeen wondered.

The Colonel said, "My cigar has gone out. Strike another match, sergeant." He stepped close to Rodeen. "I've found out why someone wants my ranch," he whispered. "I think I know who, but I'm not sure yet. I don't want any one to suspect until I'm positive. So be careful. If there is suspicion, there may be violence, sergeant."

Rodeen struck a match. The Colonel blew it out and moved away, raising his voice. "We're agreed on the plan then?"

"Agreed, sir."

The Colonel climbed aboard the black. "Wish me luck.

WILD HORSE RANGE

Ah, I almost forgot, Beth sends her best and hopes to see you tomorrow." Chuckling as if at a private joke, he rode off, going down a steep trail that led to the valley, the trail Rodeen had expected him to come up by.

Rodeen stood motionless, listening to the fading sounds of the Colonel's horse and thinking about the Colonel's words. What had the Colonel learned since their meeting a week ago that had roused his suspicions this way? Whatever it was, Rodeen thought, he hadn't been sure enough to tell even his daughter Beth. And that was typical of Colonel Canning—he would never make an accusation against any man unless he had absolute proof of guilt. From what he had said last week, Rodeen knew that he hadn't yet mentioned the raiders to the sheriff in Lost River.

"Why stir up trouble?" he had asked. "Until I get something solid to take to Dutch Holzman, I'm not going to make my friends think I'm suspicious of them."

But now he had apparently discovered some solid evidence, and Rodeen wondered what would be happening here while he was driving the horses to Major Brittan. The thought occurred to him that the Colonel could well be in more danger than he realized. Once the raiders discovered how they had been tricked . . .

Rodeen's thoughts were shattered as the scrape of a foot-fall directly behind him came clearly through the darkness. He started to turn but stopped abruptly as the coldness of a gun muzzle touched the back of his neck.

A low-pitched, strangely taut voice said, "Just lift your hands away from your gun. Move nice and easy, friend. Nice and easy."

Rodeen started to turn for a look at the man behind him but the pressure of the gun muzzle held him motionless. He said, "If you're looking for money, you're wasting time. I'm not riding these back trails because I'm rich."

A note of amusement crept into the taut voice. "You're telling me that you're just a drifter, friend? Now explain what kind of a drifter rides a blooded horse that carries a fancy

WILD HORSE RANGE

rig? And explain what kind of drifter has meetings with Colonel Canning."

Pressure from the gun muzzle eased slightly as the man bent forward to lift Rodeen's gun from its holster. Rodeen's raised arms came down in a slashing motion. He pivoted to his right and clamped his left hand over the man's gun wrist. He had a glimpse of a surprised face, no more than a blur in the darkness. Then he tightened his fingers hard over flesh and bone and twisted out and away.

The man cursed in pain. His handgun fell free, skittering over hardpacked ground to stop a half dozen feet off. For a moment the battle was motionless, the weight of the man's solid bulk matching the strength of Rodeen's grip. With a grunt, the other sent a looping left fist flailing for Rodeen's temple. He ducked back and his grip loosened enough for the man to pull free.

He made a half dive for his gun. Rodeen drew with a swift, fluid motion. "Hold it right there—*friend*," he said with soft mockery.

The man stayed in a half bent position, the gun tantalizingly a foot from his reaching fingertips. "Turn around," Rodeen commanded. "Strike a match and give us a look at your face."

"You play fast and rough," the man said. He sounded more resigned than complaining. He straightened and turned slowly, his right hand lifted to a shirt pocket as if he might be fumbling for a match.

The resigned note disappeared from his voice, leaving it tautly menacing. "I can play the same way, friend. So don't let me catch you in this country again. Next time I won't give you any warning."

As he spoke, he brought a match from his pocket. A flick of his thumbnail sent the match flaring up. At the same instant, he twisted to one side and snapped the lighted match at Rodeen's face. Rodeen swore and threw an arm up to protect his eyes. He fell back a step to avoid the other's potential rush. Rough ground caught his heel, sending him staggering. Recovering his balance, he raised his gun.

WILD HORSE RANGE

He held his fire as he saw the man turn away instead of toward him. He had a glimpse of the other's tall, heavy bulk move swiftly to the gun on the ground, scoop it up, and race for the dark protection of a nearby canyon.

Rodeen hurried to the sorrel, but by the time he was in the saddle, he could hear hoofbeats hammering away in the night, the sounds fading fast as the man raced toward the valley.

The Colonel had been right; someone had followed him here. Rodeen's first impulse was to find a way to warn the Colonel. Then he decided that the listener could only have overheard their deliberately misleading conversation. Rodeen chuckled softly. The man—obviously one of the raiders—had played right into the Colonel's hands, stepped into his carefully set trap.

Still chuckling, Rodeen reined the sorrel around and headed back for the sage flats to ready himself for the drive over the pass.

II

RODEEN COULD hear the wild stock stirring behind the brush fence a short distance to his left and back. He was hunkered over a small fire built at the base of the jumble of rocks marking the entrance to the canyon. He had bedded down for a few hours sleep but now with morning not too far off, he was alert and ready for the drive.

The sorrel cropped bits of grass and weed not far away. Rodeen emptied the last of his breakfast coffee from the pot and reached for his tobacco sack. Another thirty minutes and he would break camp. The moon was well across the sky now and soon daylight would begin to follow it. When the first light touched the rim of the eastern mountains, the Colonel was supposed to begin his maneuver to decoy the raiders, holding them in the valley and making sure that Rodeen would remain free to get the horses over the pass.

WILD HORSE RANGE

Rodeen sucked smoke in deep and sipped his coffee. He was concerned for the Colonel and wished that he would take more people into his confidence. But since the first strike by the raiders, the Colonel had not asked the help of anyone but Beth and Weems. Even his three man crew, ramrodded by Mike Grogarty, weren't aware of what was going on. Alvin Fletcher, the Colonel's lawyer, knew of course, Rodeen remembered. He had drawn up the partnership contract Rodeen and the Colonel had signed on Rodeen's arrival here a week ago.

Emptying his coffee cup, Rodeen leaned back for a final few minutes of rest. His mind stirred restlessly, exploring the events that had led up to his being here now.

Last fall the Colonel had written Rodeen that he had found a herd of wild horses pastured in the badlands he owned. He had rounded up a bunch and driven them to Major Brittan, who gave him a standing order for all he could bring in. Knowing that Rodeen hated running the small, profitless Wyoming cattle ranch he had quit the cavalry to take over when his father became sick, the Colonel suggested Rodeen sell out and manage this new horse business, coming in as an equal partner.

"You'll get a half interest in the badlands and half the profits from the horse sales," the Colonel had written. "We should make enough to let me keep the Leaning C and restock it with good beef when this drought breaks. Meanwhile, we can turn some good horse stock in with the wild stuff to keep the bloodlines strong. The canyons where they live are small and in rugged country, but there are many of them and all have fine grass and constant water from small springs."

Rodden had agreed to the proposition but until this Summer hadn't been able to sell his ranch. The Colonel's later letters, warning of the raiders who had appeared to keep him from making a second drive hadn't changed Rodeen's mind. If anything the thought of a little action after the quiet years away from the cavalry appealed to Rodeen. And the thought of seeing Beth Canning again was a pleasant one.

WILD HORSE RANGE

He let his mind dwell on Beth now, the striking girl who had grown into a handsome, competent woman. When she had been on the post with her father, she had had alternate spells of showing interest in Rodeen and of being icily cold to him. He smiled a little now. He couldn't blame Beth for the spells of coldness. In more ways than one, Rodeen had been a wild soldier, and twice during his six years he had been broken from sergeant and forced to work his way up again.

But he had changed these past few years, he thought. The responsibility of running a ranch, of caring for and then burying his father, had taught him self discipline. And now he had a real opportunity to make a future for himself doing what he liked best—working with fine horseflesh.

He wondered at the role Beth might play in this new future, and he grimaced, remembering the Colonel's remarks about Alvin Fletcher, the town lawyer who was so busy courting her. But remembering Beth's obvious pleasure at seeing him during their brief meetings this past week, Rodeen felt hope that the Colonel's business partner might have as much chance with her as his lawyer.

An uneasy snort from the sorrel brought Rodeen's attention back to the present. Rising, he looked toward the eastern mountains. No daylight showed there yet; the mountains were still black, an unformed mass against the star-spattered night. Strange mountains, Rodeen thought with a touch of irritation. Timbered and well watered and yet the valley they enclosed lay dry after hot summer suns, after two years of light winter snowfall. If only those mountain waters could be got to the valley to irrigate the hayfields, a rancher might then be able to keep his stock fed while he waited for the weather to return to normal.

But as the Colonel had explained, the mountains created few rivers. The rain and snow that fell on them was sucked into the ground, to reappear here and there as small springs; and these in turn disappeared back into the soil before they could form even into small creeks. It was well-named country, Rodeen thought—Lost River. As the Colonel told it,

WILD HORSE RANGE

the Indians claimed there had once been a river on the west side. But then the gods had grown angry and taken the river, hiding it so that it was lost forever to the Indians.

The sorrel snorted again and moved restlessly at the end of his picket rope. Rodeen went to him. "What's the trouble, fellow?" He looked around, but in the darkness nothing moved; there were no sounds except the soft crackle of the dying fire and the horse's breathing.

"Another few minutes," Rodeen said. "Then we'll get moving. As soon . . ." He broke off as he heard distinct sounds now. He turned northeastward, to the low ridge that separated the flat from the valley. The sounds grew distinct now, the thud of hoofs hammering against the moonlit darkness.

Six head of wild stuff appeared, flying out of shadow onto the moonlit flats. Manes tossing, they bolted at a panic-driven gallop toward the foot of the pass.

Two riders pounded after them. One whipped his horse in a wide circle, turning the horses. His gun streaked the air bright orange. The horses swung, coming now at a frenzied run toward the badlands and directly at Rodeen's small camp.

The sorrel snorted excitedly and pulled his picket rope taut. Rodeen murmured a quieting word but kept his eyes on the flats. A carbine began to rattle sharply now, the sound rising above the beat of unshod hoofs. A third rider appeared, half standing in his stirrups. The two lead riders swung their mounts, following the six wild horses. The rifleman changed direction, and a horse neighed shrilly as one of his bullets scoured its hide.

Rodeen recognized the rifleman as Colonel Canning and he hurried to his saddle and drew his carbine from the boot. Moving back out of the firelight, he knelt by the sorrel and levered a shell into the chamber of the carbine. He sighted but lowered his gun as the galloping horses got between him and the oncoming raiders.

The sorrel neighed shrilly. Rodeen became aware that the wild stock was too close now to turn. They would sweep past the camp, and in the excitement the sorrel could be

WILD HORSE RANGE

engulfed by them. He drove two futile shots in front of the oncoming animals but they were too frantic to pay any attention to this new threat.

Quickly now, Rodeen rose and reached for the picket rope to free it from the sorrel. It was in his mind to mount bareback and ride to the protection of the rocks while there was still time. But now one of the raiders had opened fire. A bullet searched toward Rodeen as he fumbled at the snap on the rope. It struck the ground at the sorrel's feet, sending him rearing, fighting Rodeen's grip on his halter.

A sharp cry twisted Rodeen about. He saw the Colonel rise out of the saddle. Both raiders were facing toward the camp but for a numbed moment Rodeen was sure the Colonel had been shot. Then the sorrel gave a final wild tug. Rodeen lost his grip on the halter. The horse pivoted. A flailing hoof lashed out. He felt it strike his shoulder. And then he was on the ground, fighting for wind, for consciousness.

He heard the wild horses rush by and then the sound of a man running from the rocks behind him filled his ears. He sought to roll over, to regain his feet, but there was no time. The hard jolt of a rifle butt driving against his skull paralyzed him.

He reached wildly for consciousness, thinking of the carbine still clenched in his fingers. The sounds of the running horses faded and the voices of two men came in their place.

"It worked just like you figured," a man said.

"We'll see," a deep, strangely taut voice replied. Rodeen could see nothing but black mist, but he could hear with a sharp clarity. He sought now to place the odd voice. In the haze that filled his mind, he felt sure he had heard it somewhere before.

A rider came up now and dropped heavily to the ground. "You got him clean," he said. "The Colonel won't be no witness against us—not anymore."

The first man said, "What do we do with this joker?"

The man with the taut voice replied, "I'll take care of him."

WILD HORSE RANGE

Rodeen could feel hands touching him now. Fingers probed his pockets. The man searching him grunted as he located Rodeen's papers—the Colonel's letters and the partnership contract. A match flared. The man grunted in satisfaction. "This is what we want," he said.

Rodeen could hear the papers rustling as the man thrust them into his own pocket. "Let's get out of here," he said. "If the job was done right, a posse ought to be along any minute."

His voice quickened. "Get moving. Scatter the stock but be sure and leave sign to show it was penned up there. And build up the fire. We wouldn't want the posse to miss our friend here."

Rodeen thought, They had shot the Colonel and were going to leave him to take the blame for it. And they had taken his papers and letters—all the proof he had that he had been working with the Colonel, not stealing his horses. Anger brought strength to Rodeen and he lifted his head toward the now bright glow of the campfire.

A boot toe slashed through the air and struck his temple. "Go back to sleep, friend," the taut voice said viciously. "I've got plans for you."

Then Rodeen heard no more, felt no more. The dark mist over his eyes filled his brain, drowning out the last of his awareness.

He awoke to quiet darkness. He couldn't have been out long; the moon's position had changed little. And now, listening carefully, he could hear the faint clang of shod hoofs on rock as the raiders worked their way into the badlands behind his camp.

The thought of the Colonel forced Rodeen to his feet. He stood a moment, swaying. Nothing seemed broken. His body and his head throbbed with incredible pain but he could move. He took a tentative step, and then another. He turned eastward and staggered in the direction he remembered seeing the Colonel fall.

Rodeen found him with his rifle under his body, the stock broken and stained with blood that dripped through

WILD HORSE RANGE

coat and shirt. Kneeling, Rodeen searched for some sign of life. Eyes opened. A faint breath fanned Rodeen's ear.

"Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. It's all right now." Rodeen lifted his head at the sound of a number of riders coming from the east. "There's a posse on its way," he said.

"A sniper," the Colonel whispered bitterly. "After all these years, I get it from a sniper." His voice thickened. "Water."

"In a minute, sir," Rodeen answered. He mustered all of his strength and lifted the tall, slender body in his arms. Staggering under the weight, he moved back to the fire. Carefully he laid the Colonel down. His hands were wet with blood and he knelt again, searching for the source of the wound.

"Water," the Colonel said again. "That's an order, sergeant."

"No water, sir. You've been hit in the belly."

"I know where I've been hit!" the Colonel made a move as if to sit up.

"Lie still," Rodeen commanded. "The posse's on its way."

"I ordered no posse," the Colonel said. His voice dropped as strength ebbed slowly from it. "Water," he pleaded.

"Not for a belly wound, sir," Rodeen answered firmly.

"That's an order," the Colonel said for the second time.

"With all due respect, sir, shut up and lie still."

"Ah, that's a cavalryman for you!" the Colonel whispered.

He was silent. Rodeen bent closer, looking down at the handsome features, now tisted with pain. The posse was not far away now, obviously drawn by the flaring firelight.

The Colonel groaned sharply.

"They'll be here any minute," Rodeen said.

"I haven't got a minute," the Colonel answered. Words jerked out of him; but they were only a jumble of meaningless sound. Then Rodeen began to catch words that made some sense:

"Beth . . . Scotty . . . nobody else. Understand, sergeant? Nobody else . . . the paper—the map . . . Scotty'll understand. Get the map . . . Beth . . . Scotty."

WILD HORSE RANGE

His voice drained away and ceased. Rodeen waited, his hands clenched tightly. The Colonel's lips had stopped moving. His gusty breathing died with a faint rattle from his throat. His eyelids shut as if he had grown too tired and had dropped off to sleep.

Rodeen was still crouched over the body when the posse rode up and surrounded him. He lifted his head and stared into a circle of guns.

III

A BLOCKY man of middle age, wearing a star on his vest, left his horse and came up to where Rodeen waited. He peered down at the motionless form.

"It's Colonel Canning, right enough," he said to the others.

Rodeen said, "He's dead. The men who killed him went into the badlands not too long ago." He made a move to rise.

"Stay where you are!" a nasal-voiced man commanded. Tall and thin, he leaned forward in the saddle, pointing a handgun at Rodeen.

The man with the star said, "Who are you, mister? What are you doing here?"

Rodeen saw no further need for secrecy, nor was there any urgency. The Colonel was beyond needing a doctor; he had use now for only the minister. Quietly, Rodeen gave his name and his reasons for being camped on this flat. Without giving more than the briefest background, he described the chase, the shooting, the sniper in the rocks, and finally the death of the Colonel.

As he spoke, he watched the circle of faces. They reflected the hard tautness of suspicion, and when Rodeen was through there was no change in any of their expressions.

The man with the star said, "I'm sheriff Holzman. Get on your horse and come with me." He glanced away from Rodeen. "Some of your boys look around. See what you can find."

"My horse bolted with the wild stock," Rodeen said. He looked down at the body of the Colonel and then up at

WILD HORSE RANGE

the sheriff. "What do you mean, come with you?" he demanded. "Aren't you going to follow the killers?"

The man with the nasal voice came forward now, holding Rodeen's rifle in one hand. "I figure we got all the killer we need," he said. "Here's his gun, Dutch, and it's been shot recently."

The sheriff took the carbine. "See what else you can find, Corbin."

Rodeen said, "I already told you I fired trying to turn the horses."

A slender man with sharp features moved into Rodeen's view. "You say a sniper in the rocks behind you was shooting at the Colonel. But you only fired at horses. Why didn't you shoot back?"

"I explained that," Rodeen said wearily. "Before I realized it was a sniper, my horse knocked me down. Then the sniper came out of the rocks and hit me with a rifle butt. I wasn't even sure that the Colonel had been hit until I heard the raiders talking."

He stared at the three men watching him. The other members of the posse were moving about the camp, searching, leaving only the sheriff, this sharp-featured man, and a small, dumpy individual with a round face beneath wispy white hair. He remained on his horse, clinging to the horn with both hands as he leaned forward to look down at Rodeen.

"Why should I have killed the Colonel?" Rodeen cried. "He was my friend, my business partner."

The sheriff turned to the man standing beside him. "What about that, Fletcher. You kept up on the Colonel's business. Did he have a partner in a wild horse speculation?" He glanced at the small man clinging to his horse. "You'd know about that too, Weems."

Fletcher studied Rodeen from dark, steady eyes. "I drew up a partnership contract over a week ago between the Colonel and a man named Rodeen. But whether this is the real Rodeen or not, I can't say."

"Nor can I," Weems called down from his horse. "I know the Colonel was expecting trouble tonight. That's why I went

WILD HORSE RANGE

to town to tell you, sheriff, when he got up and rode away before daylight."

Weems and Fletcher, Rodeen thought. Two of the men the Colonel had mentioned as being his friends. Two of the men he had pretended no suspicion of, but at the same time letting Rodeen know that he was not too sure of either.

Rodeen tried to think this matter through, to find the right words that would lift the cold hand of suspicion from him, free him so that he could take up the hunt for the raiders. But the dark haze was coming back to his mind as the strain he had gone through worked into his pain-racked body. He became aware that daylight had come to the eastern sky, and he thought that it would be too late now to pick up the raiders' trail. They would be long gone, back into whatever holes they had crawled out of.

Rodeen said thickly, "I can prove who I am. That should be enough to satisfy you, sheriff."

"A fine man has been killed," the sheriff answered. "I won't be satisfied until I see the one who did it hanging from the gallows." He motioned at Rodeen with his gun. "Now you hand over that .44 on your hip and come along. Whatever else you got to say can be said at the jailhouse."

Rodeen glanced around slowly, shaking his head to clear the mist from his eyes. Except for Weems, everyone was afoot. Riderless horses stood not far away, waiting patiently. And of the three men close by, only the sheriff appeared to be armed.

"Anything to oblige," Rodeen said with deliberate sarcasm. He dropped his hand to his gun butt and took a step toward the sheriff. He saw the alarm rise in the man's eyes an instant too late. Before Holzman could get into position, Rodeen had knocked his gun arm aside and drawn his own forty-four. He took a sideways step now.

"If you haven't sense enough to go after the Colonel's murderers, I have," he said. He shook his head again as darkness spread a film over his eyes. "Now drop that gun, sheriff, and bring me up a horse."

Red-faced, the sheriff reluctantly let his gun slide from his

WILD HORSE RANGE

fingers. He moved toward the nearest horse, slowly, as if he could help this situation by delaying. Catching the horse's bridle, he led it forward.

Rodeen caught the reins in his free hand and lifted his foot to the stirrup. He heard the scrape of a bootsole behind him and then felt the force of a man's body strike him in the back. A pair of slender, strong arms caught him and spun him to the ground. Fletcher came down on top of him, pressing with his full weight.

"Don't be a fool, man!" Fletcher whispered. "Keep acting this way and I'll never get you out of a murder charge."

Rodeen felt his gun being plucked from his hand. Fletcher stood up and away from him. The sheriff's heavy hand came down and caught his shirtfront and jerked. Rodeen staggered to his feet. He could hear men running toward them.

"What happened?" Corbin cried in his nasal voice.

"Rodeen tried to make a break for it," the sheriff said briefly.

"By God, that proves he's guilty!" Corbin shouted in his nasal voice. "I didn't find no evidence that says otherwise."

"He told the truth about them horses being in the canyon," another man argued.

"What does that prove?" Corbin demanded. "I figure he stole them horses from the Colonel and hid 'em in the canyon. The Colonel came along and caught him. So this joker killed the Colonel. That all there is to it."

"That'll do," the sheriff said sharply. "You're my deputy, Corbin, but that doesn't make you judge and jury too. The law will decide what Rodeen did and what he didn't do."

"The circuit judge won't be here for another six weeks," Corbin complained. "I say hang Rodeen here and now."

"You keep up that lynch talk and I'll be getting me a new deputy," the sheriff retorted. "Now get ready to ride. We can come back when the sun's up and look for more evidence." He glanced around. "Did anyone find Rodeen's horse?"

"If he had a horse, most likely he stole it," Corbin said.

Rodeen's voice sounded far off to his own ears as he said,

WILD HORSE RANGE

"It's a sorrel gelding with my brand on it. A backward Leaning R, and duly registered in Wyoming."

The sheriff said wearily, "Weems, you and Feeney are the smallest. Double up and we'll put Rodeen on the extra horse."

Rodeen felt himself falling asleep during the slow ride to town. He tried to remain awake, to clear his head for the ordeal that he knew was coming up. But finally his eyelids dropped closed and he slept.

When he awakened, he could smell the pungent odor of a jail cell around him. The cot under his sore back was board hard and the blanket over his body had a moldy stink about it. His eyes travelled from his boots on the floor by his bunk, through the bars of the cell door, and to the sheriff coming toward him with a steaming cup of coffee. Behind Holzman walked Fletcher, a light smile set on his sharply handsome features.

"Let's pour this down him," Holzman was saying. "Being out cold that way, he like to froze in that cell. I don't want it said that a prisoner of mine didn't get good care."

"Keep him healthy," Fletcher replied. "I don't get many chances to defend in a murder case."

The sheriff unlocked the door and both men stepped into the cell. Fletcher said, "If that fool Corbin had his way, I wouldn't have anybody to defend, would I?"

"No need to rub it in," Holzman growled. "You always said that Corbin wasn't any good as a deputy. But who else can I get for the wages we pay?" He made a snorting sound. "Anyway, Corbin has no say around here. There won't be any lynching out of this jail, no matter who's deputy."

Rodeen lifted his head and sat up slowly. Most of his pain was gone but his shoulder and back muscles were incredibly stiff. He managed to get both hands around the mug of coffee extended to him and to carry it to his lips. The metal edge of the mug scalded his mouth, but he scarcely noticed. He had never felt so cold inside. He gulped the steaming coffee as if it were spring water.

"He looks alive," the sheriff remarked. "I figure he'll be

WILD HORSE RANGE

around long enough to get himself tried, sentenced, and hung."

"Don't be too sure," Fletcher said. A smile with a good deal of charm flitted across his face. "I don't believe you even have evidence enough to keep him here, let alone try him."

Holzman snorted. Fletcher looked amused and shrugged. His manner gave Rodeen the feeling that to Fletcher he wasn't really a man in trouble; he was no more than an interesting law case.

Fletcher said, "Remember, the doctor found a hoofprint on his shoulder."

"That only proves he got kicked by a horse," the sheriff retorted. He shook his head. "Later, I'll go out and see what evidence I can find. If there's proof of what Rodeen claims, I don't aim to hold him."

"There'll be proof," Rodeen said. "My letters from the Colonel and our partnership contract were stolen from me or you'd have all the evidence in my favor you need."

"If there were letters and a contract," Holzman replied.

"I told you I drew up that contract myself," Fletcher snapped.

"If so, the Colonel should have put a copy in his house," Holzman said. "I'll go by there and read it." He looked at Rodeen. "But I can't see how a contract does you any good. It don't prove you didn't kill the Colonel so you could get all the profits from the horses."

He squatted down with his back to the far wall. "All right, Rodeen, let's hear your story again. And notice, I'm letting you have your lawyer right here all the time."

The sheriff hoped to catch him in a lie, trip him on a detail, Rodeen knew. As hazy as his memory was of some of last night's events, he felt sure he could repeat the same story. But he felt less certain that he could say anything to make that story believed.

He repeated what had happened, speaking carefully and slowly, leaving out nothing that he hadn't left out before. He was tempted to add to his telling of the Colonel's death. But he hadn't told the man's dying words then; he didn't mention them now.

WILD HORSE RANGE

When Rodeen was finished, Holzman said, "Why didn't I hear about these raiders? Why didn't the Colonel come to me for help?"

"I can explain that," Fletcher said quickly. "The Colonel was never a man to accuse anyone without proof, nor to stir up trouble unless it was absolutely necessary. Besides, he thought that the fewer people who knew of his plans for the wild horses, the better it would be."

"But he told you," the sheriff said.

Fletcher shook his head. "I knew about the first drive he made. We all did. But I knew nothing of the trouble until he came to me to draw up the partnership contract."

"Who did know?" the sheriff insisted.

Fletcher shrugged. Rodeen said, "Beth knew and so did Weems, I understand."

"Not Mike Grogarty or the other Leaning C boys?"

"The Colonel didn't want to involve them," Rodeen explained.

Holzman grunted. "Tell it again, Rodeen. You haven't said anything yet that makes me think you're innocent."

"Then I'll say something!" a clear, feminine voice announced from outside the cell. "You're a fool, sheriff, if you think Clint Rodeen could have killed my father."

All three men turned. Beth Canning strode toward the cell door. She was a softer, strongly feminine version of the Colonel. Her features were clear cut and forceful without being sharp. Her hair was the same dark wheat-blond the Colonel's had been before his had begun to turn white. She had the same lithe grace of movement.

She studied the men in the cell from eyes so blue that they seemed to hold a smoky blackness. She was dressed in riding boots and a dark gray riding skirt and jacket. A broad-brimmed hat with the brim rolled up on one side was fitted to her mass of dark blond hair. Her features were calm, but redness around her eyes made it painfully clear that she had been crying recently.

"You're acting as his lawyer, Alvin?" she said to Fletcher.

WILD HORSE RANGE

"I assume so," Fletcher replied. "Although Rodeen hasn't agreed."

"I appreciate your help," Rodeen said. He rose and walked stiffly to the door. "I'm sorry about your father, Beth. I should have done a better job of protecting him."

She reached through the bars and touched his hand with her gloved fingertips. Then she looked scathingly at the sheriff. "You say Clint has told you nothing that proves his innocence. What has he said or done to show that he's guilty?"

A stubbornness settled around Holzman's mouth. "I'm the law here, Beth. I'll handle things the way I see fit. Now if you got something to tell us about Rodeen, go ahead."

"Clint has been here a week," Beth said. "He had the horses rounded up and ready to go last evening. If he'd wanted to steal them and kill father then, he had chance enough. They met above the valley last night to finish planning Clint's drive."

"What makes you say Rodeen might have wanted to steal the horses?" the sheriff demanded. "What put the idea in your head?"

"Corbin is talking that way all over town," Beth replied angrily. "It isn't my idea. It isn't the kind of thing Clint Rodeen would ever think of, either."

Rodeen was watching Fletcher, wondering what the lawyer thought of Beth's vehement defense of him. After all, Rodeen remembered, Fletcher was courting Beth.

But if he felt any concern, Fletcher let none of it show on his expression nor in his voice. He said now, "Rodeen told us that the plan was for your father to act as a decoy and lure the raiders away so that they wouldn't come near the sage flats or the pass. Is that right?"

"Those were the last plans I heard," Beth agreed.

"Who else could have known about them?" Fletcher persisted.

"No one," Beth answered promptly.

"What about Weems?" Rodeen asked.

She shook her head. "Uncle Elijah knew something was

WILD HORSE RANGE

going to happen, but he didn't know exactly what. And Mike Grogarty and the boys were in the hills cutting winter firewood." She added as if feeling a need to explain herself, "I was in town helping Scotty McDennis with his book-keeping. He's all muddled again."

Rodeen started to speak and stopped. He could see no point now in telling the sheriff any more than was necessary. Whatever he said would not be believed. Besides, he thought, the less he revealed of what he knew, the better it might be in terms of his own safety. He was thinking that somehow the raiders had again displayed an uncanny knowledge of the Colonel's plans. Despite the attempt last night to mislead the raiders, they had somehow known enough to drive the horses onto the flat where Rodeen was camped.

An idea struck him as he recalled now some of the words the taut-voiced man had said. Those words had made no sense before but now, his head clear, Rodeen began to find a meaning to them. The Colonel had been deliberately led to the flats so that the sniper in the rocks—the taut-voiced man—could shoot him. So that the blame would fall on Rodeen.

The Colonel, he remembered, had discovered most of the truth about the raids last night. He had been killed to keep him silent. And his death was to be blamed on Rodeen so that anything he might say wouldn't be believed.

The sheriff said, "I'm going out to the flat soon. If there's any proof there favoring Rodeen, I'll find it."

Before any of them could answer, a sudden burst of noise came through the window in the rear of the cell. Fletcher turned and hurried to the window, the sheriff at his heels.

Outside a deep, taut voice cried loudly, "I say this fooling around is a waste of time. You all heard what Corbin said. That murderer'll sit in jail eating and getting fat on the taxpayer's money for six weeks before the circuit judge comes and orders him hanged. I say do the job—and do it now!"

WILD HORSE RANGE

IV

"THAT'S CULLY BANKS out there!" Holzman cried in angry surprise.

"I know who it is," Fletcher snapped. "Let me out of here so I can go reason with the fool!"

The sheriff hurried to the cell door and unlocked it. With Fletcher following, he moved swiftly out of the office, stopping only to take a shotgun from his wall arsenal.

Rodeen went to the window. A quick glance showed him a tall, wide-shouldered man on a big black horse. Behind him were three other riders, nondescript men in working cowhand outfits, their expressions strained. The four riders were in the rutted alley that ran directly back of the jailhouse. Past the alley was a weed grown vacant lot and across it a good dozen men were scattered in bunches of two and three. They were obviously townsmen, but each was armed with some kind of gun, ranging from a rusty squirrel rifle to new weapons fresh from the general store shelves. They stared, faces expectant and fearful, at the jail.

Rodeen saw the man on the big bay horse look squarely at him through the window. "There's Rodeen now!" he roared.

A gun banged as some excited townsman fired from the safety of distance and anonymity. Wood by the cell window chipped off and flew away in humming splinters.

Rodeen dropped down, out of sight, knowing that he was only inflaming the men. He walked slowly to where Beth stood outside the bars. He was thinking of Cully Banks. His was the same voice Rodeen had heard last night on the bench and the same one he had heard later as he lay helpless at his camp.

"That man Banks," Rodeen said quickly to her. "He's the one who knocked me down last night." He told her of his two encounters with Cully Banks. He spoke softly, undercutting the heavy murmur of sound coming from outside.

She stared at him, wide-eyed, "You're sure, Clint?"

WILD HORSE RANGE

"I'm sure," Rodeen said. "I couldn't mistake that voice."

"But why would Cully . . ." She broke off and added. "He's never been very friendly—as a neighbor I mean. But . . . I don't understand."

"I don't either," Rodeen said with quiet savagery. "But when I get out of here I'm going to find the answer."

A shout of surprise sent Rodeen hurrying to the window again. Sheriff Holzman with Fletcher, empty-handed, flanking him, stood in the alley, a half dozen feet from Cully Banks on his big horse. Holzman motioned with his shotgun.

"I said ride out of here, Cully. Get your men back to the ranch where they belong. And remember this. There'll be no lynching in my territory!"

"We'll see what happens in your territory," Cully Banks shouted arrogantly. "If you can't do the job you were paid for, we'll hire a man who can."

Holzman turned and handed the shotgun to Fletcher. Then without a word, he strode to Cully Banks, reached up, and hauled the bigger, younger man from the saddle. Banks made no effort to defend himself. He stood on the ground, his face flushed in ugly red, while Holzman gathered in a fistful of shirtfront and shook him.

"I've had them tougher than you many a time," Holzman said. His voice was quiet now, almost too low for Rodeen to catch the words. "Now take your choice. Ride out of here or get in the jailhouse. And the next time you want to tell me how to run my job, have more than your mouth to back it up."

He gave Cully Banks a contemptuous push and walked past him, toward the knots of men standing in the weedy lot. "The same goes for every one of you. You all got work to do—go do it!"

A few of the men began to walk quickly away. A half dozen or so stood their ground for a moment and then turned and hurried off. Holzman strode back to where Cully Banks still stood, his fists clenched, his face working.

The two men stared at one another for a long moment. Then Banks stepped into the saddle. He lifted a

WILD HORSE RANGE

hand in signal to his three riders and slashed his spurs into his horse's flanks, sending it leaping away down the alley. He stopped abruptly and stared back at Fletcher.

"I'm not forgetting which side you took in this," he cried.

"You used to work for me, Cully," Fletcher said in an icy voice. "You could be doing it again." He turned away.

Banks kicked his horse to a wild gallop and disappeared. Rodeen stepped back from the window. To his surprise Beth Canning was standing beside him.

"Your sheriff is a brave man," Rodeen remarked.

"But a very stubborn one," she said. "Don't blame him too much, though, Clint. He and Dad were close friends. Once he gets over the shock of his death, he'll be more sensible about all this."

"While Cully Banks runs around free," Rodeen said disgustedly.

"Can you prove he's involved?"

Rodeen grimaced. "Not yet I can't. But there must be a way—some sign he left . . ." He broke off as the sound of the sheriff and Fletcher returning came clearly into the cell.

Beth said, "Did you tell the sheriff or Alvin about Cully—about his voice, I mean. It's very distinctive. They'd recognize who you meant in a minute."

"I didn't think of it," Rodeen confessed, "until a little while ago. Then I decided to keep quiet until I have more proof." He smiled faintly. "Like your father, I want more proof before I accuse anyone."

The front door opened and Holzman appeared with Fletcher at his heels. Rodeen said hastily, "I have to talk to you and Scotty McDennis—alone—as soon as possible. Your father gave me a message for you just before he died."

Before Beth could answer, Holzman strode to the cell. He looked at the open cell door with an expression of self disgust.

"I was well guarded, sheriff," Rodeen said with a touch of amusement.

"Or smart enough to know that you're safer in here than outside," Holzman retorted. "Come on out of there, Beth."

WILD HORSE RANGE

By rights, only Rodeen's lawyer's allowed to be alone with him."

"Yes, sheriff," she murmured demurely. She walked out of the cell.

Holzman clanged the door shut and turned the key. He said to Fletcher, "If you see Corbin, tell him to get in here fast. I have an idea he got everybody stirred, and I'll have none of that here."

"You can save everyone a lot of trouble by letting me go," Rodeen said dryly. "Either do that or charge me with something. You can't hold me forever without a good reason."

"I can hold you for your own safety," Holzman said stubbornly.

"You'd better be able to prove that's the reason you're holding me," Rodeen said. "I won't take kindly to sitting here six weeks waiting for the judge to show up so he can throw the case out of court."

Holzman glared at him. "You're threatening me with a charge of false arrest?"

"I'm considering it," Rodeen said with deceptive mildness.

Fletcher laughed suddenly, delightedly. "Rodeen has a point, sheriff. Especially if he's a respected citizen where he comes from. In that case, the judge and jury won't care for your treating him like an Alder Gulch renegade."

Holzman shook the cell door as if testing the strength of the lock and then swung away. "Rodeen gets out of here when I think it's safe for him to go," he said. He looked back. "And you better get used to that bunk and jailhouse food. From the way the town's stirred up, you may be in here quite a spell."

Rodeen lay on his cot smoking and watching the sunlight patterns change on the floor of the jail office. He was given dinner, a sad meal of fat beef and soggy potatoes, and then left to his own devices. He dozed and woke once to see the deputy, Corbin, staring at him with an almost hungry expression. Rodeen yawned and rolled over, showing Corbin his back.

Later when he awoke, the light was fading and evening

WILD HORSE RANGE

had begun to creep into the cell. A church clock chimed slowly and softly in the near distance. Rodeen stood up and walked around the few feet at his disposal, stamping the stiffness from his body. No one was in the office, but as darkness fell Holzman came in with Corbin tagging along behind.

"I don't care how many tracks we found," Corbin was arguing, "they don't prove Rodeen's story."

"They make it a little stronger than it was," Holzman was saying.

"There've been lots of riders around that country all summer looking for strays," Corbin answered.

"Two men rode into that box canyon and drove the wild herd out last night," the sheriff said heavily. "You can read sign good enough to see that. I don't say it makes Rodeen innocent, but I do say it gives him and Fletcher a lot of reason to talk. Besides, you heard Fletcher threaten to go get a writ of habeus corpus—and he'll do it too, if he has to ride all the way to Helena. And how's that going to look to the judge and jury? It's like accusing me of holding a man against the law. Whether you like it or not, Corbin, Rodeen gets turned out of here."

Rodeen reached for his boots. A lamp was lighted and the sheriff came toward the cell. "You try leaving this town, Rodeen, and you'll be back in here faster'n you can rope a sick calf." He snorted. "If I can ever find the evidence I'm looking for, you'll be back in anyway."

He unlocked the door. Rodeen stepped out. "I'll thank you for my belongings, sheriff."

"Get his stuff," Holzman ordered Corbin. He said to Rodeen, "They found your horse. It and your warbag are down at the livery barn. Just don't get any ideas of heading out over the pass."

Corbin dumped Rodeen's effects—his papers, pocketknife, and money belt on the office desk. Rodeen stowed the things away. "My gun," he said to Corbin.

"You'll know where it is when you want it," Corbin answered.

WILD HORSE RANGE

"If some of the people you stirred up with your loose mouth try to lynch me, I'll need that gun," Rodeen said.

Corbin stared at him, fists clenched. Holzman said flatly "Get his gun." He looked at Rodeen. "Where you planning to go?"

"The Colonel told me I could get a good meal at Scotty McDennis' place," Rodeen answered. "From there I expect to go out to the Leaning C."

"If you live long enough to get out of town," Holzman remarked with a sour look at Corbin.

The deputy returned with Rodeen's belt and gun. Rodeen started for the door. Holzman called, "You so much as bend one of my laws and you'll be back in here—pronto. Remember that, Rodeen."

With a pleasant nod, Rodeen buckled on his belt, pushed his .44 into the holster, and went outside. He stood on the board sidewalk and looked along the dark street, noticing the warmth where yellow lamplight splashed into the dust, smelling the cool, fresh breeze that rolled down the mountain side, bringing with it the scent of the forests touched by fall.

It looked like a pleasant enough place, Rodeen thought. A place where he could settle down once this was all ended. If it ended, he added to himself. The same feeling of unease that had gripped him on the bench last night returned, but more sharply now. The wind seemed to take on a sharper edge and the darkness beyond the puddles of light added a new dimension of blackness.

Despite the sheriff's warning, Rodeen knew that the wise thing would be to get his sorrel and run. With any luck, he could be over the pass and into Idaho Territory before the pursuit started. And once out of Montana, he could fade out of sight, as thousands of men had done before him here in the west.

Rodeen shrugged the idea away as quickly as it had come to him. There was more at stake here than just himself. There was the death of Colonel Canning to consider; and there was Beth's problem. His running would not change the

WILD HORSE RANGE

situation for her. Until he found the paper, the map the Colonel had spoken about, until he learned what it meant, and until he saw the raiders behind bars, Rodeen knew that he could not leave here.

Once those things were done, then he could consider the future.

The opening of the jailhouse door turned him from the street. Corbin came out, threw Rodeen a poisonous look, hurried to his horse, mounted and rode swiftly away.

Rodeen stared thoughtfully after Corbin, wondering at the man's obvious hatred of him. Then he turned and started down the sidewalk, looking for the livery barn.

V

RODEEN FOUND the livery at the foot of the town's main street, where the dusty road dribbled off into an even dustier trail that wound toward the saddle leading to the sage flats.

The door to the small office stood open. Inside a white-bearded man with the scars of an Indian tomahawk running just above his ears slept noisily. A lamp turned low sat on a desk near where the old man's booted feet were propped.

Rodeen stepped into the small office. "Sorry to wake you, Pop," he said, "but you've got something of mine."

The old man had his feet on the floor and was out of his chair almost before Rodeen finished speaking. He reached behind him and caught an ancient gun off a chair. He blinked at Rodeen with bright blue eyes.

"I'm a customer," Rodeen said.

The gun muzzle lowered. "Don't go scaring a man that way, sonny. I was dreaming of Injuns. And they don't make a man's sleep too easy—except for some of the squaws I remember," he added.

"I fought a few myself," Rodeen said. "Indians, that is."

The old man chuckled. "You come for that sorrel and your

WILD HORSE RANGE

warbag, I reckon." He laughed aloud at Rodeen's surprised look. "I knowed who you was right off," he said proudly. "I seen you when they rode you into town this morning. Cavalryman, wasn't you? I can always tell."

"That's right," Rodeen admitted. "I was with Colonel Canning."

The beard wagged as the old man nodded. "Your horse is fine. Leave him here if you're staying in town. The warbag, I got in the corner over there."

His eyes sharpened at Rodeen's momentary hesitation in making a decision. "You wasn't figuring on riding out of the Lost River country, was you?"

"No farther than the Leaning C," Rodeen said.

The old man bobbed his head. "I didn't think you looked like the kind'd run out because of some loud-mouthed fools."

"What makes you think I didn't kill the Colonel?" Rodeen asked.

"A man's face and the way he walks and what's back of his eyes can tell a lot," the old man said. He grinned, showing three teeth and a good deal of bare gum. "Besides, Scotty McDennis told me to take good care of your horse. If Scotty figures you're all right, there ain't no argument. He's looking for you," he added.

"I'll go along then," Rodeen said. He found his warbag in the corner and shouldered it.

"You keep an eye peeled," the old man said. "There's some around this town are worse'n the Sioux." He touched the scar tissue above his ears. "Besides, they ain't as smart. A Sioux at least had some kind of reason for what he done."

"You talk a lot," Rodeen said. He grinned easily to take the edge off his words.

"Come back when you got more time," the old man answered. "I might say something worth listening to." He sat back down and lifted his feet to the battered desk top. His eyelids drooped down over his bright blue eyes.

Rodeen went back to the street, crossed and started up the far side. On his way down here, he had noticed a hotel on the corner one block up and beside it, on the

WILD HORSE RANGE

crossstreet running toward the creek and the valley, Scotty McDennis' saloon.

He turned into the hotel, thinking to get a room before going to the saloon. The small lobby was empty except for a tired, middle-aged man leaning on the desk. He glanced up with little interest as Rodeen reached him.

"Two dollars a night," he said. With one hand, he swung the register to face Rodeen. With the other, he reached for a key on the board behind him. "Second floor front is vacant."

Rodeen lifted the pen from the shotglass and dipped the nib in ink kept in a piece of buffalo horn. He wrote, "Clinton Rodeen," paused, and added, "Wyoming."

Replacing the pen, he reached inside his shirt to get at his money belt. The clerk turned the register and glanced down at it casually, at the same time holding out the key to Rodeen.

His hand pulled the key back suddenly. "Looks like I was wrong," he said hastily. "I forgot there's a man coming in late. So there won't be no vacant rooms for quite a while."

Rodeen buttoned his shirt slowly. "When a man makes himself judge and jury all in one, he must think himself pretty close to God."

The man's tired face took on a stubborn set. "I've got a hotel to run. It's a respectable place with respectable people. I don't intend to see it busted up."

"What is that supposed to tell me?" Rodeen asked.

"My advice to you, mister, is to travel and keep traveling," the clerk retorted. "Cully Banks and his Flying F hands aren't the only ones who want to see a rope around your neck." He was beginning to sweat already, as if he could see a lynch mob tearing apart his building.

Rodeen put a finger on the register. "In that case, you'd better have my name scratched out," he advised. He turned and walked to the door. Pausing, he looked back. "Mind if I leave my warbag here for a time?"

"I mind," the man said.

Rodeen regarded him thoughtfully. "Did you ever fight Indians?"

WILD HORSE RANGE

"No."

"I didn't think so," Rodeen said. With a nod, he walked back to the street.

Despite his calm exterior, he was churning inside. He hesitated to go to the saloon, not wanting to cause trouble for this Scotty McDennis the Colonel had thought so highly of.

But he had a message for the man and the urgency of that sent him through the batwing doors into the large main room of the saloon. He paused and looked slowly around. It was a fancy place for a town like Lost River. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, pulling the smoke from pipes and cigars and cigarettes companionably up to candle flames. The far side of the room was filled with green baize covered tables, most of them occupied by groups of men playing faro or poker. Two of the dealers, Rodeen noted with interest, were women, both with that fine, mature beauty many women acquire as they reach toward forty. The bar running the width of the building was of highly polished wood. It was half filled with a mixture of townsmen and cowhands, as was the lunch counter off to the side. An empty dance floor was directly in front of Rodeen and at its far side tables for eating or drinking and sitting were lined along the back wall.

He carried his warbag to an empty table and dropped it onto a chair. As he walked, he could feel a silence slowly settle over the big room. By the time he was back at the bar, signalling for a glass of whiskey, the room might have been empty for all the noise there was. A man a few feet down the bar from where Rodeen stood picked up his glass of beer and moved some distance away. Aside from that there was no movement of any kind.

Rodeen said, "Whiskey, please," softly to the bartender.

The man brought him a glass and bottle and poured. His hand was steady as he filled the glass to the rim. His eyes lifted and met Rodeen's and there was a warning mirrored in them.

Rodeen paid for his whiskey and added a dollar, in-

WILD HORSE RANGE

dicating he wanted a meal from the lunch counter. He downed the drink quickly and stood a moment, waiting for its warmth to work through him. Then he moved along to the lunch counter which, miraculously, had become empty of customers. Filling a plate with a tasty looking meal of beef, beans, and cabbage, he added two slabs of buttered bread, a piece of dried apple pie and a thick mug of strong coffee. Balancing the plate and mug, he started for the rear and his table.

The silence appeared to have thickened, so that it was more now than just the absence of sound. Rodeen glanced toward his table and saw the reason for the heavy tension lying like a fog on the air. Standing just inside the back door was Cully Banks. He came a step forward and his three men moved in behind him.

Rodeen went on, not looking at the men again. Banks moved toward him and then stepped to one side as if to pass behind Rodeen. He turned at the last instant so that his elbow hooked Rodeen's arm, sending coffee from the mug slopping over Rodeen's hand.

Rodeen glanced to the side. His eyes met the cold, dark gaze of Cully Banks.

"I'd be more careful, *friend*," Rodeen said softly. He started on.

A foot snaked out quickly, tangling between his and sending him pitching forward. His plate of food and mug of coffee slid out of his hands and spattered over the floor. Rodeen caught his balance and turned, moving with a cat-like quickness that caught Cully Banks without his guard raised.

Rodeen took a dancing step forward and hit Banks twice over the heart. His fists bounced off, sending shock up his arm as if he had tried to smash in the side of a log barn.

Banks shook his head. "You need a lesson, friend, before you start kicking air. Any man should know better than to come into a fine saloon like this and stink it up around eating time."

Rodeen's voice was soft, undercutting the current of

WILD HORSE RANGE

sound that had begun to swell through the room. "That's my dinner on the floor. You're going to eat it and then you're going to buy me another one."

A ring of men had formed, pressing in on the two men. The Flying F crew stood in the front of the crowd, hands on their guns. "Stay back," Cully Banks said. "This is my pleasure. Mine all alone."

"Do you do all your fighting with your mouth?" Rodeen asked pleasantly. His voice dropped too low for anyone but Banks to hear him. "Or when you're safe up in the rocks?"

Cully Banks flushed and the hard edges of his mouth clamped down in an ugly line. He came at Rodeen with a rush of heavy steps. Rodeen boxed with him, landing two hard fists over Cully's heart and taking a grazing right to the temple that sent him staggering off balance.

Rodeen thought, "If I stay out of his reach, I'm all right." But, he knew, one solid blow from Cully Banks' massive fist and that would end the fight—and Rodeen. Banks was a good head taller and wider than Rodeen, with muscles that bulged against the arms of his fancy shirt and stretched the thighs of his jeans.

Rodeen let Cully Banks bring the fight to him. Twice the big fists found their mark, but each time Rodeen was moving backwards, and so letting the air take most of the force of the blows. Rodeen moved cautiously, for when Cully swung with the force of his shoulders behind his blows, his fists slashed the air like a boulder screaming down a cliff face.

Rodeen danced in and out, picking away at the bigger man's body because it was easier to reach. After a time he realized that this was like trying to chop down a tree with a hand knife. Cully's body was rockhard and seemingly impervious to Rodeen's tough fists.

"Stand still and fight!" Banks roared as Rodeen danced out of his reach again.

Rodeen's footwork carried him to the edge of the crowd, directly in front of the tallest member of the Flying F crew. A pair of hands found Rodeen's back and pushed, sending him stumbling forward. He saw Cully Banks' fist coming and

WILD HORSE RANGE

he tried to dodge it. The swing carried Cully forward and against Rodeen. With a grunt of satisfaction he wrapped his great arms around Rodeen's chest and squeezed.

Rodeen felt the air gush out of him as if he had been no more than a pair of worn bellows. He jabbed backward with his elbows to break the hold. Cully grunted and squeezed harder.

Rodeen raked a bootheel down Cully's shin. Cully howled and loosened the tension of his arms just enough for Rodeen to twist free.

Rodeen backpedalled and gulped in great gouts of smoky air, fighting for strength and to clear the buzzing that filled his head.

Banks rushed again, his tongue flicking over his lips in hungry fashion, his dark eyes cold and bleak. He had had his prize and lost it, his expression said. This time he would catch it and keep it until it was dead.

Rodeen's first blow at Cully was slow, lacking swiftness and strength. But he aimed for the man's nose this time and he drew blood. Cully Banks blinked as his eyes watered. Rodeen had a sudden desire to laugh. The big man had an Achilles heel!

The realization that he had found a weakness in so formidable an opponent sent new life surging through Rodeen. He began his dancing, weaving attack again, surging in to peck away at Cully's nose, at his eyes, at his hard mouth. Cully took great swinging blows, now with closed fists, now with open, clawing fingers. But each time that Rodeen hit him, he moved a little more slowly.

The crowd had fallen silent except for an occasional murmur of surprise as more and more of Cully's swings went wild of their mark and as more and more of Rodeen's chopping blows found their mark, ripping skin to raw flesh, bringing blood spurting.

And then Cully Banks could no longer see. Blood streamed from his eyes, and he pawed the air. His voice rose up in a crazy roar like that of a wounded mountain lion.

"Doesn't he know when to quit?" Rodeen wondered.

WILD HORSE RANGE

He stopped fighting, stepping back and letting his hands hang at his sides. Cully Banks stood and swung his huge head, sniffing the air, blindly striving for some sign of his opponent.

"I'm over here," Rodeen called quietly.

Cully turned toward Rodeen's voice. Someone laughed, sending him forward in a wild, angry rush. Rodeen stepped aside and drove a hard fist against Cully's jaw. The force of the rush sent the bigger man straight on into the crowd. Hands propped him and turned him and aimed him in Rodeen's direction. He took one step, reaching up as if seeking something to hold to, and then he fell, measuring his length on the floor. His bloody features went down in the middle of the mess of beans and meat and potatoes that had been Rodeen's supper.

"By Lord," someone cried, "that other one said he'd make Cully eat it. And danged if he ain't!"

"Shut up," a rough voice commanded.

A half choked cry of warning turned Rodeen toward the rough voice. The tallest of the Flying F crew had moved forward from the crowd. A white lumpish scar on his flat features stood out against the anger on his face. He held his gun at belt level, the muzzle aimed at Rodeen.

"Pick Cully up and wash him off," the man said. "He wouldn't want to miss seeing you hang."

Rodeen stared into the gun muzzle, painfully aware of his own .44 hanging uselessly at his hip. He glanced around the circle of watching men. Some dropped their eyes away hastily, finding something else that needed looking at. A few stared back belligerently. The rest showed sympathy and shrugged as if to say, "I'd do something if I could, but there's nothing I can do."

And there was nothing he could do, either, Rodeen knew—except to wait for the crash of the bullet or the feel of a rope.

WILD HORSE RANGE

VI

"THAT'S FAR enough, Finch," a voice from above and behind Rodeen called out.

Rodeen looked toward the top of the stairs that rose sharply from the far end of the bar. A balcony stretched across the open end of the room at this point. Standing at the balcony railing was a small, wiry man with a bald crown inside a ring of red hair. A shotgun was gripped in his hands.

The man on the balcony said, "Take your bully boys and get out of here, Finch. And haul that chunk of raw meat with you. Rodeen won in a fair fight, and that's the way it ends."

Finch held his position a moment longer, his expression showing a hunger to defy the order and to use his gun on Rodeen. Then, reluctantly, he holstered his .44 and stepped toward the still motionless Cully Banks. The other two Flying F hands followed him slowly.

Rodeen said, "Banks owes me a dollar for my dinner."

Someone in the watching circle burst out with a gusty, nervous laugh. Finch stared at Rodeen with vicious anger.

"A dollar," Rodeen repeated softly. "You can take it out of his pocket or I'm collecting it from your hide."

Finch pulled a dollar from his own pocket and threw it toward Rodeen. "I'll pay it and more to see you hang," he said thickly. "And I won't have to wait long!"

Cully Banks stirred. Rodeen nodded toward him. "Leave your boss home when you try lynching me," he told Finch. "He only gets in the way."

Cully Banks lifted his head and pushed himself slowly to his feet. One of his men handed him a bandanna to wipe the mixture of food and blood from his face. Finch took his arm and steered him toward the batwing doors. The crowd parted to let the Flying F crew pass. No one spoke until the doors had swung shut behind them.

"Cully Banks'll never forget that," someone remarked.

WILD HORSE RANGE

Rodeen ignored the murmur of sound rising around him. "Someone bring me a mop and I'll clean up this mess," he said.

"Leave it for the swamper," the man on the balcony instructed. "And come up here where you can eat in peace."

The crowd broke apart now that the show was obviously over. Rodeen walked slowly to his warbag and hoisted it to his shoulder. Then he turned for the stairs.

A lean, lantern-jawed man flanked by two fresh-faced young cowhands stepped into his path. Rodeen stopped.

The lantern-jawed man said, "My name is Grogarty. This here chubby type is Slim Ellis. The other is Tom Carter. Remember us, Rodeen. We're Leaning C hands."

The small, wispy haired man Rodeen remembered as Elijah Weems came forward on short legs and shook his head at Grogarty. "Let's have no trouble, Mike."

"No trouble," Grogarty agreed. "I just want Rodeen to know he ain't welcome at the Leaning C."

"As long as Beth invites Rodeen, we haven't much to say about it," Weems stated in a fussy voice.

Grogarty thrust out his lantern jaw. "I'll have plenty to say if I ever catch you on Leaning C graze, Rodeen." He shook Weems' insistent hand from his arm. "All right, I won't make no trouble—not here." Turning, he led his two men away.

Weems blinked at Rodeen with myopic eyes. "Beth is usually a sensible girl, but from what the Colonel told me, she was in love with you a few years ago." He paused and cleared his throat. "That could tend to—ah, color her view."

"What are you getting at?" Rodeen demanded.

"I'm trying to explain how Mike Grogarty thinks," Weems said. "He's fond of Beth but in this case he doesn't trust her judgment. So understand that I'm not taking any sides as yet, Rodeen. I am merely trying to warn you to stay away from the ranch—for your own sake."

"Or at least I should stay away from Mike Grogarty. Isn't that what you mean?" Rodeen asked dryly.

"There's been enough bloodshed," Weems said worriedly.

WILD HORSE RANGE

"And there will be more if Grogarty hears any evidence that contradicts Beth's belief in you. He worshipped the Colonel, and he is a man with a temper."

What exactly was this man Weems trying to do, Rodeen wondered. Keep him away from Beth? Or was he sincere in his warning? Remembering the Colonel's words on the bench last night, Rodeen stared thoughtfully at Weems. Apparently the Colonel hadn't trusted him too far. On the other hand, that didn't mean the Colonel had suspected Weems—any more than it meant he had suspected Alvin Fletcher. It was the Colonel's nature to be cautious and to avoid involving people in his own problems until it became absolutely necessary.

He would follow the same pattern as far as Weems and Fletcher were concerned, Rodeen decided. He said, "Thanks for the warning," in a pleasant enough tone.

Nodding, he stepped around Weems and slowly climbed the stairs to where the wiry man waited, his shotgun resting on the balcony railing.

A firm handshake greeted Rodeen. "I'm Scotty McDennis," the wiry man said. "The name is Timothy and I'm Irish, so it's Scotty they call me."

He led Rodeen down a hallway to the end. He nodded toward a door straight ahead. "This leads to outside stairs and down to the alley," he said. "Across the alley is a fine stable with a hayloft above. The hayloft doors open to a field that goes straight to the creek and so on to Leaning C grass. Such things are handy to know if a man ever needs a way to leave here in a hurry."

Despite his weariness, Rodeen had to grin. "I'll remember that."

"You may have to," Scotty McDennis answered. He turned to his left and opened a door in the wall there. "Come into my parlor where we can talk."

Rodeen walked into a large room made comfortable at the near end with a sofa and chairs grouped around a fireplace. At the far end, by a large window, a desk piled high with papers showed where Scotty McDennis kept his business

WILD HORSE RANGE

records. Between the office and parlor, the walls were lined with bookcases filled to overflowing.

"I lead a quiet life," Scotty said. "And there are few men here I have much to talk about with. The Colonel was one of those few—he and Alvin Fletcher." He paused long enough to open a door and show Rodeen where he could wash up.

"The Colonel told me a good deal about you," Scotty went on. "Enough so that I share Beth's and Fletcher's belief that you had nothing to do with the Colonel's death."

"I had a great deal to do with it," Rodeen said with soft anger. "My coming forced the raiders into acting."

"Ah, then it's revenge you have in mind?"

"Not revenge," Rodeen said flatly. "Justice. I know who killed the Colonel, but if I executed him myself, I'd be no better than Corbin with his hunger to hang me."

He turned to the washbasin. Scotty McDennis walked softly away, and Rodeen could hear him calling downstairs for a drink and a meal to be sent up.

Neither man talked until Rodeen had warmed himself with whiskey and eaten the dinner that was brought. Then Rodeen said, "Tell me about the man I fought tonight."

"Cully Banks? He's a bully boy in some ways. And an ambitious man." Scotty frowned. "I don't understand his fighting you as he did. I thought he had more brains."

"He wants me dead," Rodeen said bluntly. "We met twice last night—once on a bench above the Leaning C, after I'd been talking to the Colonel, and at my campsite—after Banks shot the Colonel from the rocks."

"You're saying he's the killer!"

"I recognized his voice," Rodeen said. Quickly, he told the story, beginning with the first letter he received from Colonel Canning, and ending with his rejection from the hotel not over an hour before."

Scotty McDennis snorted. "Alistair at the hotel is an old woman," he said. "But Andy Pobble at the livery stable, there's a good friend if you need one."

"The only help I need now is to find the paper the

WILD HORSE RANGE

Colonel spoke of," Rodeen said. "That should give us proof enough against Banks."

"You didn't mention this to the sheriff?" Scotty asked.

"I told no one but you," Rodeen said. "The Colonel made it plain I was to tell you and Beth—no one else."

"Not even Fletcher," Scotty McDennis mused. "That was a cautious man, Colonel Canning." He frowned. "But where could such a paper or map be? It wasn't left here. It obviously wasn't left with Fletcher as most of the Colonel's papers were—or he'd know all about it."

He took a pair of cigars from his pocket and handed one to Rodeen. "The paper you mention must have to do with what the Colonel told me yesterday. He said he'd been far back in the badlands, where they joined the west mountains. He made no blunt statements, but I had the idea he'd learned something about the raiders."

"So he said last night," Rodeen agreed. "And in his talk, he mentioned you, the sheriff, Fletcher, and Banks as not possibly being guilty." He added, "And Weems, too."

"But saying it in such a way that you think he suspected one of us?" Scotty murmured. He chuckled. "Or was he just trying to throw off the thinking of the man he suspected was listening to your talk?"

"I don't know," Rodeen confessed. "And I don't know enough about the people here to judge."

"About myself, I'll say nothing," Scotty replied. "The sheriff is not a hard man to understand. He was a rancher who lost his herd to a Nebraska blizzard and came out here. He was offered the job of being the law and took it to keep from going back to raising cattle. He believes in the power and dignity of the law, and he will fight to keep both. But he is not a man of imagination nor daring. It will take a lot of proof before he shakes his sureness of your guilt."

"And Fletcher?"

"A cold man with an eye to the future," Scotty said promptly. "Sometimes I think he resents having buried himself in a small place such as this. His only compensation is Beth Canning, and she gives him little encouragement." He

WILD HORSE RANGE

smiled an Irish smile at Rodeen. "She has given him less since you came or so the Colonel told me," he added.

Rodeen said hastily, "What of Weems?"

"Elijah? He's as bad a card player as Fletcher is a good lawyer. And that means you have fine legal counsel, lad. Because Weems is a man who can lose with a handful of aces. He is unfortunate, small and weak, with no skills but the ability to add columns of figures and to write a readable hand. He can't ride a horse. Whiskey makes him ill. And he has no card sense. And what is there left for him in a country like the Lost River valley? He is the kind who should have inherited money enough to live without working."

He rapped ash from his cigar. "But what does all this matter if all you need is the Colonel's paper to prove your innocence?"

"If the paper can be found," Rodeen said. "Someone knew the Colonel's every move these past months. Each time he rounded up a herd of horses the raiders were waiting. But they never tried to hurt him before. Why did they last night?"

"Because they knew about you and the threat you were," Scotty said.

"That and more," Rodeen insisted. "I think they'd found out the Colonel was close to proving them guilty. Somehow they learned about his paper and map."

"Ah, you're saying that if they knew about it, besides killing him they'll have tried to find it and destroy it."

Rodeen nodded and rose. "I was thinking of asking you to ride to the Leaning C and tell Beth. I didn't want to intrude on her grief so soon. But now I think I'd better go myself."

"You're thinking that she might need more protection than Elijah Weems and Mike Grogarty can give her?"

Before Rodeen could agree, a gun butt hammered violently against the hall door. "Open up in there, Scotty!"

"The sheriff," Scotty McDennis said in a puzzled voice. He rose and threw the door open. "And what law have I been violating tonight, sheriff?"

Dutch Holzman strode into the room, his .44 in his hand.

WILD HORSE RANGE

He planted himself before Rodeen. "I told you if you so much as bent one of my laws, you'd be back in jail. You're under arrest. And this time you stay that way!"

VII

"YOU'RE ARRESTING me on what charge?" Rodeen demanded.

"I just heard about the fight you started with Cully Banks." Holzman retorted. "I tolerate no fighting in my town."

Scotty McDennis closed the door quietly. "Rodeen started no fight," he said. "I saw the whole affair. Banks pushed Rodeen into defending himself. And since when does your law say a man can't defend his person?"

"That isn't the way Weems told it to me," Holzman replied stubbornly.

"Ah, Elijah," Scotty said. "A squeamish man. He was trying to prevent trouble between Rodeen and Mike Grogarty, fearing that Rodeen would ride out to the Leaning C. And so he sought to have Rodeen put back in jail."

"Why don't you talk simple English," Holzman growled at Scotty, but it was obvious that he respected the wiry man's word. He looked at Rodeen with less belligerence now.

"I speak plainly enough," Scotty retorted. "And if I don't, you'll find fifty witnesses downstairs who will tell you the same story. It was Cully Banks who pushed Rodeen into fighting. Now why don't you go arrest Cully if you're so eager to put some poor soul in a cell?"

"Save your energy, sheriff," Rodeen said. "I won't press charges against Banks."

Holzman was plainly dubious now. He said stiffly, "Just stay in town and keep out of trouble." He marched out, slamming the door behind him. He shouted back. "There'll be no fighting with Grogarty!"

"So Weems wants me back in jail," Rodeen said.

WILD HORSE RANGE

Scotty shook his head. "Don't make too much of that. Weems is afraid of trouble, as I told the sheriff. Besides, he is said to be a friend of Cully Banks. The stories have it that they play big poker games in the room Banks keeps at the hotel here." He chuckled. "Maybe Weems didn't want to miss out on a game."

Rodeen frowned. He was about to speak when a faint noise from above stopped him. Raising a cautioning hand toward Scotty, he cocked his head. The sound came again, as of something scraping against the roof.

Scotty heard it now. "Someone is up there," he said in a faint whisper. He indicated a trapdoor to the roof directly above their heads.

Rodeen whispered back, "Keep talking and bring a chair." He said loudly, "Whatever Weems' reasons, I wish he'd keep his nose out of my business."

Scotty McDennis brought a hard-bottomed chair and set it beneath the trapdoor. Rodeen climbed on the chair and raised his hands, pressing his palms lightly against the wooden panel. Scotty said loudly, "Forget it, lad. Don't go giving yourself more trouble." He held out his hands, cupped together, and Rodeen put one foot in the support provided.

"Stay here, I say," Scotty ordered. "Leave Weems in peace." He nodded. Rodeen thrust up with both hands, at the same time driving with his legs. Scotty strained his arms, helping to send Rodeen and the trapdoor catapulting upward.

Cold night air struck Rodeen as the trapdoor was thrown back. He smelled the dust of the roof but could see nothing in the darkness. Catching the edge of the roof where the trapdoor fit down into it, he levered himself up and over. He could hear someone running now and as he scrambled to his feet, a man's form was momentarily outlined against the night.

"Hold it!" Rodeen cried. He drew his gun.

The man disappeared. Rodeen ran forward. He could hear the thud of feet landing hard. He looked over the edge of the roof in time to see a dark figure scramble up from the top

WILD HORSE RANGE

of the one story building next door to the saloon and disappear into shadow.

Rodeen hurried back to the trapdoor and climbed into the room. "He went that way," he said, pointing north. Pulling open the door, he ran to the hall, through the outside door there, and down the steps to the alley.

Scotty Mc Dennis, holding his shotgun, followed closely. Rodeen turned up the alley and ran to the far side of the building where the man had jumped. He stopped, staring at the emptiness of a vacant lot. There was no sound from there, nor any sign of movement.

"He got away," Scotty McDennis said in a worried voice. "He could have turned back and gone the other way down the alley while you were climbing into the room."

Rodeen walked in that direction. "And gone into the hotel," he said thoughtfully, stopping by its rear door.

"And short of searching every room to look for a man with roof dirt on his clothes, we can do nothing," Scotty said. He led the way back upstairs and into his parlor.

"And I wonder how much he heard," Rodeen said. He climbed onto the chair. "I'll put your roof back together and then ride."

"The sheriff told you to stay in town," Scotty reminded him.

"So he did," Rodeen agreed. "But if I stay, he'll find an excuse to put me back in jail sooner or later. I'll make it easy for him and give him a good reason."

He set the trapdoor back and climbed to the floor. "By daylight, I want to be at the campsite. The sheriff said he found nothing to prove my story. I want to do some looking on my own."

He dusted his hands. "Then I'll ride to the Leaning C and talk to Beth—and to Weems."

"Keep an eye out for Mike Grogarty," Scotty warned. "He has a temper . . . and a hard fist."

Deputy Sheriff Corbin leaned panting against the wall in the dark room. Once he caught his breath, he struck a match

WILD HORSE RANGE

and found his way to the lamp on the dresser. Lighting it, he looked toward the bed where Cully Banks lay asleep.

Corbin walked to the bed and shook Banks' shoulder. "Wake up, Cully. There's been trouble and more's coming."

Banks sat up, groaning at the strain on his stiff muscles. He peered out of battered eyes. "What the devil's wrong now?" he demanded in his taut voice.

"Rodeen and Scotty nearly caught me on the roof," Corbin said. "My foot slipped when I was up there listening like you told me to." His voice fawned a little, as if he wanted to curry favor with Cully Banks. "But I heard plenty before I had to run."

Banks threw back the bedcovers and stood up. He reached for his trousers. "Go ahead," he said.

"Rodeen claims he recognized your voice last night," Corbin said. "He told Scotty you killed the Colonel."

Banks snorted. "What can Rodeen prove? Nothing—if you took care of any sign the boys and I might have left out by the box canyon."

"I took care of what I could," Corbin said defensively. "But the sheriff saw where two riders had pushed the stock out of the canyon."

"He can't prove anything with that," Banks said. "Besides, it isn't Holzman I worry about. It's Rodeen. And he hasn't convinced anybody of anything yet."

"Rodeen claims he's got real proof," Corbin said. "He talked about a paper and a map the Colonel told him of before he died. He wasn't supposed to mention them to anyone but Scotty or the girl—not even Fletcher or Weems."

Cully Banks buried his face in the wash basin. He came up blowing and groped for the towel. Corbin put it in his hand. Banks patted his face gingerly.

"What's it mean?" Corbin demanded. "What kind of paper and map could hurt us?"

"It doesn't mean a thing," Cully Banks said quickly. "Now stop acting like an old woman and tell me everything you heard."

He listened while Corbin repeated the conversations as

WILD HORSE RANGE

he remembered them. When he finished, Banks made an abrupt gesture of dismissal. "All right," he said. "Keep on doing what you've been doing. Watch Scotty McDennis and that old fool who runs the livery stable. And let me know everything the sheriff says about Rodeen."

Corbin started away and stopped. "Rodeen ain't staying in town. He's figuring on riding out to the Leaning C and hunt for that paper."

"I'll handle Rodeen," Banks said. "There isn't anything he can do, I told you that. You know the whole plan we worked out—forcing the Colonel to sell the Leaning C by keeping him from making money off the horses. The girl's no better off for money than her father was. And Rodeen can't change that as long as we keep him from selling off some horses."

He grinned through battered lips. "Besides, Rodeen won't be around long enough to sell the horses. By spring, we'll be able to buy the Leaning C at our own price. And you'll get your share the way you were promised."

He bent down and put on his boots. "Don't worry, Corbin, you'll get everything that's coming to you."

"I don't like the way things are going," Corbin said worriedly. "It was all right until the Colonel got killed."

"It was him or us," Cully Banks replied. "Now get out!"

After Corbin left, he sat for some time, smoking and staring at the bare floorboards. Then with a grunt of displeasure, he rose, blew out the lamp, and left the room.

His bay was stabled behind the hotel. Saddling, he rode east, following dark and quiet alleys until he reached the small barn where Fletcher kept his saddle horse. Tying the bay, Banks hurried through darkness to Fletcher's rear door.

Five minutes of cautious knocking brought Fletcher out. Banks slipped into the kitchen and locked the door behind him. Fletcher lit a lamp and turned to Banks.

"Coming here at this time of night was a crazy thing to do," he said.

"It's a better risk than our neck might be by morning," Banks retorted. "Weems was right and the Colonel did find the big spring. Corbin overheard Rodeen tell Scotty Mc-

WILD HORSE RANGE

Dennis that the Colonel left a paper and a map hidden somewhere. Rodeen figures they'll prove who the raiders are and what they were after."

Fletcher busied himself building a fire in the cookstove. He set coffee on to cook. "I don't like this," he said. "We kept the news about the spring quiet from everyone. Then the Colonel found it. Now Corbin knows too."

"He doesn't know any more than he did before," Banks said. He sketched out briefly what Corbin had overheard.

Fletcher made a surprised sound in his throat. "So the Colonel didn't trust Weems or me too much after all."

"So Rodeen is guessing," Cully Banks said. "At least he didn't trust you enough to tell you about finding the spring. But he didn't tell Scotty either. Or the sheriff."

"Or even Rodeen," Fletcher pointed out. He chuckled. "Sometimes the Colonel's caution is more of a help than a hindrance. Except for this paper and map, nobody but you, Weems, and I really know about the spring. All we have to do is get the paper and map before Rodeen or Beth do, sit tight, and wait for Rodeen to be convicted of murder."

"You may be a good lawyer but you don't know much about men," Cully Banks observed. "Rodeen isn't the kind you sit tight and wait for. He's quick and he's smart. He knows I shot the Colonel and as long as he's alive, he won't stop trying to prove it."

"You pushed that lynching business about as far as you can," Fletcher said. "And now that Rodeen beat you up where everybody could be a witness, if he is lynched, you'll be blamed."

"I should think you'd be as eager as anyone to get rid of Rodeen, seeing how much the Canning girl thinks of him," Cully Banks said.

"If we can force her to sell the Leaning C cheaply enough, why should I bother to marry her?" Fletcher said disdainfully.

He set coffee mugs on the table and filled them. "On the other hand," he murmured thoughtfully, "you may be right about Rodeen being dangerous." He nodded. "Let me think

WILD HORSE RANGE

a while. I'll find a way for someone besides us to get rid of him."

"While you're thinking," Banks said, "you better figure out how to get word to Weems to find the paper and map before Rodeen tells the girl and she finds it."

Fletcher blew softly on his coffee. "Send Corbin to the Leaning C," he said. "If anyone sees him, he can say he's on official business. Have him tell Weems to ride and meet you in the badlands. Then you can warn Weems. At the same time, Corbin can let Grogarty know Rodeen is on his way out to the Leaning C."

Banks winced as hot coffee touched his battered mouth. "What's the point of bringing Grogarty into this?"

"Ah, you didn't hear," Fletcher said with amusement. "You were too busy sleeping off your beating. Weems stopped by earlier in the night and told me Grogarty threatened Rodeen if he ever caught him on Leaning C land."

Banks laughed gustily. "So Grogarty runs Rodeen away before he gets a chance to tell the girl anything about the paper! That'll give Weems more time to hunt for it and get rid of it."

"You're learning," Fletcher said. "There are ways of doing things that are better than fighting."

"I fought Rodeen to make it look more like you and I are on the outs about whether he's guilty or not," Banks said angrily. "So don't go throwing that up to me."

"Was it part of the plan to have him beat you to a pulp?"

"He surprised me," Banks said. "Next time, he won't have it so easy."

"There won't be a next time," Fletcher snapped. "You keep away from Rodeen. When he's found hanging from a tree, we want to be able to prove that none of us had anything to do with it."

Banks licked bruised lips. "And when will he be found hanging from a tree—when you get some clever idea thought out?"

Fletcher ignored the sarcasm. "Tonight or tomorrow," he answered quietly. He stepped into the front room and

WILD HORSE RANGE

returned. "It's two a.m. You'd better get Corbin moving so you can meet Weems by daylight."

As Banks gulped his coffee and rose, Fletcher said, "Remember, keep away from Rodeen."

Banks laughed. "The next time I see Rodeen, I'll be at his funeral."

He went out quickly and hurried off through the darkness.

VIII

ON SCOTTY McDENNIS' advice, Rodeen waited until shortly before dawn to ride from town. Scotty used the time to bring Rodeen's sorrel from Andy Pobble's livery. Rodeen waited impatiently in the stable behind the saloon.

"It was a good thing you waited," Scotty said, as he brought the sorrel up. "The sheriff went off duty but I saw Corbin saddling up at the livery. I had to wait so he wouldn't see me."

Rodeen frowned. "What's he doing, riding out at this hour?"

Scotty shrugged. "Official business somewhere, most likely. Just be careful and don't cross paths with him. The only place he'd rather see you be than in jail is dangling from the end of a rope."

Mounting the sorrel, Rodeen said, "Thanks for everything."

"You know where to come if you're in trouble," Scotty answered. He slapped the warbag strapped behind Rodeen's saddle. "I wish you'd let me put more grub in there, lad."

"The lighter I travel now, the better," Rodeen said. "I'll get food at the Leaning C." With a nod, he reined the sorrel out the wide rear doors of the stable and rode across the fields that stretched to the creek.

Scotty had mapped out a route for him and now he went slowly, seeking the trail that would carry him into the badlands without forcing him onto the main valley roads. He was halfway to the safety of the broken country when he heard the hard hammering of a running horse.

WILD HORSE RANGE

Pulling into a cluster of cottonwoods, Rodeen turned in the saddle and stared eastward through the star-dusted night. He made out a rider coming rapidly, following the main valley road from Lost River. The sorrel stirred at the nearness of the oncoming horse and Rodeen leaned forward, holding its nose gently with his hand.

"Easy, fellow," he whispered. He held his position while the rider came closer. At this point, Rodeen's trail and the main road were within yards of another, and when the rider went by, forcing his horse at a dead run, Rodeen had no difficulty in recognizing Deputy Corbin.

As Corbin raced on in the darkness, Rodeen straightened, frowning. "He's heading for the Leaning C or the Flying F," he said to the sorrel.

He was tempted to follow, but rejected the idea. This might be a wild goose chase, following Corbin. And he had enough to occupy him without wasting time on the off chance that Corbin's business might be connected with him.

Rodeen pushed on, hurrying now as the first faint line of dawn stroked the eastern mountains. He slowed again as he reached the badlands. This was familiar territory and he felt protected here, hidden by the deep draws, by the high, wind-eroded bluffs.

He worked his way from canyon to canyon, rising constantly to a high ridge that formed the backbone of the broken country. From here on, he went downslope, coming out on the sage flat some distance east of where he had made camp two nights before.

The early sun was rising now as Rodeen turned westward. He expected to find no worthwhile sign in the box canyon and so he pushed past, sending the sorrel into the jumble of rocks by the canyon's mouth, attempting to follow the route taken by the raiders when they ran from the posse.

The ground was rocky and hard here and search as he might, Rodeen could pick up no hoofprints, no sign that anyone had ridden this way. He pressed on, judging his position by the memory of the sounds the riders had made. Breaking out of the jumble of rocks, he found himself on a

WILD HORSE RANGE

shallow flat covered with a scattering of stunted pines. Three canyons radiated from the far end of the flat, all of them going in a general northwesterly direction.

Rodeen swore disgustedly. The sun was already high enough to send warmth biting through his mackinaw into his back. If he didn't find something soon, he would have to give up the search and ride for the Leaning C.

And as he had ridden here, he had come to realize the importance of finding evidence of the raiders. Short of leaving this country, he knew that he couldn't avoid the sheriff for long. Too many hands were turned against him, too many of the people were eager to see him behind bars or worse. This might well be his sole opportunity to produce proof of his story.

There was the paper and the map, of course. But these, Rodeen felt sure, would not be easy to find. The caution that had kept the Colonel from revealing what he had learned the day before his death was bound to have influenced his choice of hiding place for the map and paper. Until he had them in his hands, Rodeen had decided to seek more tangible evidence of the truth of his claim.

Painstakingly now, he checked each of the three canyons for sign that the raiders had come this way. The first canyon was no more than a quarter of a mile in extent before it ended in a blank wall. Riding back to the flat, Rodeen went on to the second. At first this seemed to offer more promise. A well defined trail twisted along the canyon bottom, working its way deep into the badlands. Rodeen had ridden nearly a mile when he heard the sound of water. One of the innumerable springs that laced the badlands lay ahead, and that could only mean soft ground. Ground, he thought eagerly, that would take and hold the hoofprints of a fast-ridden horse.

He rounded a bend and stopped at the edge of a water-hole. It appeared to fill the trail, blocking him from going farther. The canyon here widened out so that its steep sides were a good fifty yards apart at the top and half that at the bottom. The entire twenty-five yard area lying in front of

WILD HORSE RANGE

Rodeen shimmered under a layer of water too muddy for him to gauge its depth.

He was about to rein around and go back to the flat when he saw the narrow shelf on his left. It was no more than three feet wide at best as it ran along the widened out canyon wall, skirting the water a few feet above the muddy surface. On impulse, Rodeen sent the sorrel up the sharp climb to the shelf and started along it.

They moved slowly, the sorrel picking its way over loose rubble. Twice when the trail narrowed, Rodeen had to leave the saddle and lead the horse. Then the shelf ended abruptly. The canyon bottom sloped up in this direction so that the sorrel had only a two foot jump to make to land on soft, damp ground.

Rodeen was about to send the sorrel off the end of the shelf when his eye caught irregularities in the surface below. He leaned forward in the saddle, squinting against sunlight that angled down into his eyes.

Hoofprints! Three distinct sets of them, pressed deep in the soft dirt. Rodeen's eyes followed the prints as they crossed the canyon bottom and disappeared onto hard ground on the far side.

A full day of warm sun had dried the prints out so that the edges of a few of them were badly crumbled. But for the most part, they were sharp and clear, allowing Rodeen's trained eye to read them as if their makers had written out their signatures.

"Look," he said softly to the sorrel, "somebody'd better get his horse shod before it throws a left hind shoe. See where one nail is missing and the one forward of it is working loose?"

Carefully he made note of the characteristic marks of the hoofprints. The second set showed that a rock had worked into the tender frog of the right front hoof, while the difference in depth of the prints made by the third, and obviously the largest horse indicated that it favored its left side, especially the back leg.

WILD HORSE RANGE

"Bruised itself along the trail most likely," Rodeen remarked.

He glanced back, seeking a place to turn the sorrel. He wanted to avoid adding its prints to those in the soft dirt if it was at all possible. Resignedly, he realized that he had no choice but to back the horse a good hundred yards before there was width enough to turn it.

Skillfully, Rodeen started the sorrel moving. This was not the kind of work it liked and twice it balked, forcing him to talk it gently into going on. By the time he had worked the horse around and ridden back to the narrow flat, the sun was higher than he liked to see it. He hurried now, returning to the main trail that ran from south to north through the badlands, he started for the Leaning C.

He had gone a quarter of the distance when the sorrel lifted its head and snorted. Hurried as he was, Rodeen respected the horse's keen senses, and he reined to a sharp halt.

"What is it, fellow?"

A horse and rider materialized from a side canyon to block the trail ahead of him. Rodeen stared at the set, angry expression on Mike Grogarty's lantern-jawed face. The muzzle of a carbine resting on the saddle bow waggled slowly.

"All right, boys," Grogarty sang out. "I've got him."

Two other men joined Grogarty, one coming from the other side of the trail, the other from some distance down. Rodeen recognized them as Slim Ellis and Carter, the two Leaning C hands.

"That windbag of a Corbin was right for once," Slim Ellis drawled. "He said Rodeen broke parole and headed for the badlands, and here he is."

The carbine muzzle waggled again. "Ride forward easy," Grogarty commanded. "Keep your hands high."

"What is this, a lynch party?" Rodeen demanded.

"No lynch party," Grogarty responded. "Don't get the wrong idea about us, Rodeen. If we were sure you were guilty, we'd be the first to string you up. But Miss Beth still claims you didn't kill the Colonel. Until we learn for

WILD HORSE RANGE

sure that you had a good reason, we're doing this the way the law wants."

"And how is that?" Rodeen asked quietly. He stayed where he was, holding a tight rein on the sorrel.

"You're going back to jail. That's where Corbin told us to take you."

"Mind if we make a couple of stops along the way?" Rodeen asked in a pleasant voice. He saw no lessening of the grim expressions facing him. Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "I have a message to deliver at the Leaning C."

"We'll take it after we leave you with the sheriff," Grogarty said.

"This is personal, for Beth."

"She'll be in town later today. She can visit you in the jailhouse."

Rodeen said, "I found some evidence back a ways that proves my story about the three raiders. The least you can do is look at it and tell the sheriff."

"We ain't got time to waste," Carter said. "There's ranch work to be done."

"Any spare time we got, we'd like to use in a different way," Slim Ellis drawled. "Mike said if we caught you on Leaning C graze, we'd whale you good. You're just lucky we ain't got that much time to spare right now."

Rodeen saw the hopelessness of argument. He settled in the saddle and took a moment to glance around, reasoning that if Grogarty had no intention of lynching him, neither had he any desire to use his gun. But he couldn't press this reasoning too far, Rodeen knew. Grogarty's expression said that he was watching for a trick.

Rodeen said carefully, "What was Corbin doing out at the ranch?"

"He came to warn us about you," Grogarty said.

"Before daylight?" Rodeen mocked softly. "You took your time finding me."

"Don't try to confuse things," Grogarty said roughly. "We saw Corbin when he got to the ranch, just after sun-up."

WILD HORSE RANGE

"And I saw him halfway across the valley before daylight," Rodeen said.

"Corbin's got other business than you," Grogarty said indifferently. He lifted the gun. "Now stop wasting everybody's time, Rodeen. Ride forward like I said."

Rodeen searched his memory, trying to recall which of the side canyons that the men had been hidden in didn't end in a blank wall. The first to the west, he thought, the one on his left not six feet from where Grogarty blocked the trail.

Rodeen calculated his chances of sending the sorrel galloping forward and into the canyon. If he moved fast enough, he might throw Grogarty enough off balance so that his shot would miss. Rodeen didn't doubt now that Grogarty would fire. He could see the edginess plainly on the harshly set features.

If the sorrel stumbled or failed to respond fast enough, Rodeen knew the consequences. A bullet from that carbine at this range would tear him apart. He looked beyond Grogarty at Slim Ellis and Carter. Neither man had a gun showing but Rodeen was sure they could draw as fast as the next men when the occasion demanded it.

He said to Grogarty, "You don't leave me much choice."

With a sudden lunge, Rodeen raked his spurs into the sorrel's flanks and flattened himself over the saddle. The startled horse leaped forward, straight into the muzzle of Grogarty's waiting gun.

IX

SURPRISE SEEMED to freeze Grogarty. Looking beyond him, Rodeen saw both Carter and Slim Ellis drawing their guns. He was almost on top of Grogarty now and he held his direction until the last second, using the Leaning C foreman as a shield, forcing Slim Ellis and Carter to hold their fire and wait for a clear shot.

WILD HORSE RANGE

Grogarty came to life suddenly, lifting the muzzle of his carbine. But now Rodeen had the sorrel head to head with Grogarty's dun and he reached out, knocking the barrel of the gun into the air. Grogarty's shot went screaming upward. Rodeen clamped his fingers on the stock and gave a savage jerk, tearing the carbine from Grogarty's hand.

"Get him!" Grogarty shouted. His voice was wild with rage as he turned in the saddle and clawed for his forty-four.

Rodeen threw the carbine at Slim Ellis and Carter and then reined the sorrel to his left in a tight turn that carried him to the mouth of the narrow side canyon. Behind him, someone fired, sending rock and dirt spitting into his face. A razor sharp shard of rock struck the sorrel on the flank. It bucked in surprise and then broke into a dead run.

The canyon had a narrow, twisting trail along its floor, and at each turn Rodeen thought the sorrel would run head on into the rock walls squeezing in on either side. But somehow it managed to keep its balance as it plunged wildly forward. He let it have its head, making no effort to maintain control.

At first he could hear the pursuit from the rear, but then it faded as the canyon burrowed deeper and deeper into the badlands. As the sorrel slowed to get its breath, Rodeen tightened the reins. "Easy from here on, fellow," he said softly. "If I haven't forgotten, there's a way to turn off just up ahead."

They broke into a wide area with a steep trail pitching upward on the right. Rodeen sent the sorrel onto the trail and soon they broke onto a ridge. He grunted in satisfaction. This was the place he had been looking for. The ground here was too hard to take a print and a maze of canyons led off in three directions. Choosing a canyon trail that led westward, Rodeen walked the sorrel now, confident that for the time being he had lost Mike Grogarty and his crew.

Corbin, Rodeen thought as he rode. How had Corbin found out he was leaving? If the deputy had seen him ride away, why hadn't he arrested Rodeen then?

Only two others knew of Rodeen's going—Scotty Mc-

WILD HORSE RANGE

Dennis and Andy Pobble. The idea that either of them would have warned the law was unbelievable, and Rodeen thrust it hastily aside.

One other thought occurred to him so suddenly that he drew back on the reins in surprise. Corbin could have been the man on the roof! But Rodeen found it hard to imagine Sheriff Holzman using underhand tactics, even in a case such as this. The sheriff didn't strike Rodeen as a man of that type. Stubborn, unimaginative, yes; but underhanded, no.

Rodeen shook his head. He had other things to concern himself with now and he set the problem aside for the future. He looked around to orient himself. Nothing seemed familiar, and he realized that he must have taken a different turning somewhere back a ways. And as a result, he was well into the western part of the Leaning C, where the badlands burrowed into the foothills of the mountains.

He considered retracing his steps, feeling now an urgency to reach the ranch and talk to Beth. The morning was well along, so that each moment of delay loomed larger and larger. He was about to turn back when he saw a swath of blue sky where there had been only blank canyon wall before.

Hurrying the sorrel, Rodeen broke into a wide, sprawling canyon. He stared out over the grassy floor, lush from the small springs that seeped onto the ground in this area. This was a place he had not found before, but he recognized it as similar to those where he had found the best stock of wild horses. He saw a half dozen now, up at the far end of the canyon, all grazing calmly. Even at this distance, he could tell that they were prime stock, perfect for Major Brittan's needs.

"We'll remember this place," Rodeen said to the sorrel.

He looked out over the canyon in an effort to decide which would be the best way to go to get back onto the main trail to the Leaning C. He was about to send the sorrel onto the grass when a sudden disturbance among the horses at the far end of the canyon stopped him.

They had stopped grazing and were posed now, ears

WILD HORSE RANGE

lifted and heads cocked. Abruptly they turned and bolted toward Rodeen, moving in that wild way that could only mean something had startled them into panic.

Rodeen pulled the sorrel cautiously back into the mouth of the side canyon he had recently left. He leaned forward in the saddle, watching the wild horses reach a rock wall less than fifty feet to his right. They disappeared as if they had been gulped into the stone.

Rodeen returned his gaze to the far end of the canyon. He expected to see a bear or a cougar and he started in surprise when a horseman appeared and came directly down-slope. At this distance Rodeen could not see where the man might have come from and he thought idly that he would have to explore this canyon more carefully when he had the chance.

Then the rider came close enough for Rodeen to see that it was Elijah Weems. He rode with all the grace of a sack of potatoes, hanging to the horn with one hand and the reins with the other, fighting the saddle and the horse, obviously in misery.

Now what would Weems be doing this far from the ranch, Rodeen wondered. Here was a man whose dislike of riding was a local joke; yet he had not just mounted a horse, he had ridden it over the difficult badlands' trails.

Weems was going due east as he neared Rodeen. Suddenly he reined his horse northward, crossed a swampy strip of grass, and disappeared into a canyon.

Rodeen remained where he was, puzzling this over. Finally he decided that Weems had enough head start so that there was no danger of their meeting and he sent the sorrel trotting into the big canyon. As he reached the trail the horses had disappeared into, he saw that it was a deep cleft in the rock, wide enough for a single animal to pass through. He would have to explore that too, he decided. But first he would find where Weems had come from when he had appeared in the canyon—where the man had been that was interesting enough to make him ride a horse to reach.

Rodeen held the sorrel back until he climbed a ridge

WILD HORSE RANGE

where he could look ahead and on beyond to the valley. He could make out Weems, following a canyon bottom far below. He was almost to the valley floor and Rodeen felt safe in taking the main trail and riding faster in an effort to make up the time he had lost this morning.

The tired, patient looking horse Weems had been riding was tied by the rear door of the ranch house when Rodeen arrived. He put the sorrel alongside it and stepped to the ground, stamping about to take the kinds from his legs.

The rear door opened and Beth came onto the veranda. She looked in surprise at Rodeen. "Clint, what are you doing here? I thought sure Mike and the boys would have found you and—and taken you back to jail."

"They found me," Rodeen agreed. "But they move a little slow. I left them somewhere in the badlands."

She held the door, indicating he should come inside. He went into the kitchen. Taking off his hat, he mopped his forehead and let the cool air of the room play over his sun-heated body.

"Corbin came early and told the boys . . ." Beth began.

"I know," Rodeen said.

He felt her hand on his arm and looked down into her upturned face. Concern misted her dark blue eyes and put touches of color to her cheeks.

"I tried to keep Mike here," she said. "But he has a terrible temper. He told me I could break the law, but he wasn't going to. And he rode off. But I did make him promise not to hurt you."

Rodeen said gently, "You can stop worrying about me, Beth. I found some evidence this morning that not even the sheriff can overlook once he sees it. With that and the paper . . ."

He broke off as Elijah Weems appeared in the doorway. "Rodeen!" he said. "I thought Holzman told you to stay in town."

"So he did," Rodeen answered. "After your effort to get me back in jail failed, he gave me instructions to stay put. But I had business out this way." His steady gaze met the

WILD HORSE RANGE

pale eyes of Weems. "And seeing that it's a mighty fine morning for a ride . . ."

Weems flushed and looked away. Beth said in a puzzled tone, "What do you mean, Uncle Elijah's effort to get you back in jail?"

Weems coughed. "I was merely trying to protect Rodeen, my dear. He fought with Cully Banks, as I told you. Then Mike Grogarty threatened him. Naturally, I want no more trouble, and it seemed to me that he is far safer in jail."

"Why should an innocent man sit in jail?" she cried. Her hand was still on Rodeen's arms and she tightened her fingers.

"That is a matter of opinion, a matter for the courts to decide," Weems said.

Beth turned her back to him. "You were saying something about . . ."

Rodeen made a gesture, silencing her. "I'd rather talk to you privately," he said, not taking his eyes from Weems.

The small man said, "Yes, of course," in a stiff voice, turned, and walked away.

Rodeen moved to where he could see through the doorway into the dining room. Weems was going on, into the parlor. Rodeen said rapidly, "I told this to Scotty last night. Just before the Colonel died, he gave me a message."

Beth stared up at him silently, her warm lips parted. Rodeen said softly, "I'm sorry to intrude on your grief this way, but it could be important—to both of us."

She nodded. Rodeen repeated the Colonel's last words. Beth listened quietly, a puzzled frown creasing her forehead. "I haven't the faintest idea what Dad meant!" she said when Rodeen had finished.

"Scotty said your father thought he'd found out something about the raiders," Rodeen said. "He made a trip deep into the badlands . . ." He broke off, remembering where he had been a short while ago and where he had seen Weems. That had been farther back into the badlands than he, Rodeen, had been before.

He added, "Did he say anything like that to you?"

WILD HORSE RANGE

"Not a thing," she said. "But you knew Dad. He kept so much to himself, especially suspicions, until he was absolutely sure of his facts."

"Do you have any idea where he'd keep a paper and a map that he wanted no one to see?" Rodeen demanded.

"His private papers were—are in Alvin Fletcher's safe," she said.

"These aren't," Rodeen said. "Only you and Scotty are supposed to know about them. If they were in Fletcher's safe, he'd know too."

She nodded. "That's so strange—his not trusting Alvin when he trusted him in everything before."

"It might not have been distrust," Rodeen said, "merely caution."

"Of course." She thought a moment. "I'm sure Uncle Elijah might know where Dad kept very private papers but—I can't ask him, can I?"

"Not unless you have to," Rodeen said. "Look for yourself first. If you find anything, take it straight to Scotty. Don't show it to Weems or Fletcher or even the sheriff yet. Take it to Scotty," he repeated.

"I'll start right away," she promised.

Rodeen turned to the door. "Where are you going?" Beth asked quickly. "You can't just hide forever, Clint."

"I don't intend to hide," Rodeen said. "I'm going to the sheriff and tell him about the evidence I found."

"He'll put you back in jail" she cried.

"He won't keep me there long once he sees what I have to show him," Rodeen said.

She touched his arm again and looked up into his harsh features. "Don't take any more risks, Clint. Let Alvin handle the case from now on."

"Let him take the risks, you mean?" Rodeen said lightly.

She flushed. "I don't really worry about him," she said in a strange voice. "I do about you."

Rodeen laughed deep in his throat and dipped his head, seeking her lips with his. She came to him willingly, eagerly. They clung to one another.

WILD HORSE RANGE

"It's been so long," she breathed finally. "I tried to forget you when you left the cavalry."

"You were pretty young then," Rodeen said. "And a Colonel's daughter. I was a sergeant."

"That doesn't matter now," she said softly. "If it ever did."

He kissed her again, lightly, quickly. "We'll talk about it when this is all over," he said.

Putting on his hat, he stepped onto the veranda. He started for the sorrel and stopped as Mike Grogarty, flanked by Slim Ellis and Carter, came across the yard toward him.

"Here I spend all morning in the badlands looking for you," Grogarty said in a deceptively amiable voice. "And all the time you're here. I should have known."

His tone lost its amiability. "This time you won't find it so easy to get away, Rodeen!"

"I'm on my way to see the sheriff now," Rodeen said. "You can ride along if it makes you feel any better."

Grogarty rubbed his palms on his jeans. "We'll ride, but you won't. You're going to be carried, Rodeen. I said we'd whip you if we ever found you on Leaning C graze."

From the doorway, Beth cried, "Mikel!"

Grogarty said thickly, "You keep out of this, Miss Beth. If you want to give me my time when it's over, go ahead. But first I'm going to whip Rodeen right down into the dirt."

He strode forward, followed closely by Slim Ellis and Carter.

X

"THIS WON'T take long," Grogarty rumbled. He strode toward Rodeen, his heavy fists doubled.

Beth Canning said angrily, "Mike, stop being a fool!"

She started forward. Rodeen put out an arm, holding her back. "Go inside, Beth," he said quietly. "This is something Grogarty has to get out of his system."

He stepped from the veranda into the bright sunlight. "How many of you are in this fight?" he asked.

WILD HORSE RANGE

Grogarty kept his eyes on Rodeen's face. "Just me."

Rodeen unbuckled his gun and belt and tossed them to the veranda behind him. Grogarty paused and followed suit. Slim Ellis picked up his gun and belt and backed away. Carter hesitated, as if unsure of what to do, and then joined Slim Ellis.

As Grogarty came forward again, Rodeen shifted his position. Grogarty stopped, squinting and frowning. "What are you waiting for?" Rodeen asked softly. "Am I supposed to hit you first?"

Grogarty's anger was cold and still. He said through his teeth, "Putting my face in the sun is an old trick, Rodeen. I'll wait until you move again."

Rodeen laughed. Despite his weariness from lack of sleep and from the long ride of the morning, he felt a sharp sense of aliveness, of the same exhilaration he had experienced when Cully Banks attacked him. But in one way this fight was different. Rodeen held no grudge against Mike Grogarty. He was going to fight now the way he had fought in the cavalry—for the pleasure of it.

Grogarty obviously wasn't sharing Rodeen's sense of pleasure. As Rodeen moved a quarter circle to his left, Grogarty rushed him. The foreman's eyes spat cold hatred; his lips were flattened over his teeth; his big fists opened and closed spasmodically. He was deceptively fast. Before Rodeen could set himself to sidestep, Grogarty was on him. A lashing left crashed against Rodeen's cheek, splitting the skin and sending him sprawling to the dirt.

"Go get him, Mikel!" Slim Ellis howled.

Rodeen climbed to his feet. Grogarty rushed again. This time he feinted with his left. Rodeen ignored the feint, waiting for Grogarty to bring in his right. It came. Rodeen brushed it aside and bored underneath Grogarty's guard. He struck three times, hard blows that probed for softness around Grogarty's belly. There was no softness, but Grogarty grunted in surprise. Rodeen stepped back, weaving so that two half-aimed blows barely grazed his chin.

Once more Rodeen moved in. He let Grogarty hit him

WILD HORSE RANGE

twice on the shoulder. Then he chopped a left under Grogarty's ear, a right to the heart, and backpedalled. Pain surged up in Grogarty's face. He gave ground this time.

Rodeen went after him. He took two stinging left jabs to the face and a vicious right to the middle, but some of the steam had gone from Grogarty's punches. Rodeen moved in close and drummed on Grogarty's body. Grogarty's fist came up and dropped.

It was over very quickly then. Rodeen sent a slashing left to Grogarty's jaw, followed it with two quick right jabs, and finished with another left. Grogarty stumbled backwards. He made a final, futile effort to lift his arms. Sweat beaded on his forehead and ran down the runnels of his cheeks to drip off his lantern jaw. His mouth hung open as he fought for air.

Rodeen followed him, poking lightly at his face and body, maneuvering him backwards. When the backs of Grogarty's thighs struck the horse trough, Rodeen brushed aside a feeble swing and tapped the foreman's chest. Grogarty folded over backward and into the horse trough.

He came up sputtering and choking. Rodeen stepped forward to help him to dry ground. Grogarty swung his arm, knocking Rodeen's hand aside.

Rodeen said, "When you're up to it, we'll ride to town and see the sheriff."

"There won't be no need for that," a voice said from the veranda.

Rodeen turned. Sheriff Holzman was on horseback, looking toward him. Holzman said, "When I couldn't find you in town, I figured out where you'd be. What's the matter with you, Rodeen. Didn't you get fighting enough in the cavalry?"

"Clint didn't start the fight!" Beth cried.

"That's right," Grogarty mumbled. "It was my idea." He stood up, stepped out of the horse trough, and sloshed dejectedly to the bunkhouse.

"I don't care who started the fight," Holzman snapped. "Rodeen belongs in town where I told him to stay." He made a motion toward the sorrel. "You climb aboard now

WILD HORSE RANGE

and come with me. This time, you're going back to jail—and staying there until the day they take you out and hang you!”

Rodeen climbed aboard the sorrel and tossed Beth Canning a brief smile. She stared after him, her hand pressed against her lips, and then she turned and ran into the house.

Rodeen waited until he and Holzman were over a knoll from the ranch buildings before he spoke. “Don’t be too sure about hanging me, sheriff, until you see the evidence I found this morning.”

“I’ve seen all the evidence I need,” Holzman said heavily. “Only one thing has been bothering me—why you’d kill the Colonel. Now I know. And the proof is in writing. Neither Fletcher nor any other fancy lawyer can save your skin, no matter how many tricks he thinks up.”

Later, Fletcher came to the jail to see Rodeen. The Sheriff had gone out, leaving Rodeen alone with Corbin. When Fletcher arrived, Corbin left, saying he would go get something to eat.

“They don’t trust me very far,” Rodeen said dryly to Fletcher. “One or the other of them keeps an eye on the cell as if I might try to eat my way out of it.”

Fletcher smiled without showing much humor. Pulling a chair into position outside the cell door, he said, “The sheriff is building a pretty strong case, Rodeen.”

“Building it on what?” Rodeen demanded. “I don’t even know what this ‘evidence’ he has could be. He won’t tell me anything.”

“Corbin found your copy of the contract you had with the Colonel,” Fletcher explained. “It was lying near your campsite, where you must have dropped it the other night.”

Rodeen stared at him. “The contract should be evidence in my favor,” he said. “It proves my story!”

“Not to Holzman, it doesn’t,” Fletcher answered. “Remember the clause in it that states if anything happens to one of you, the other party gets the entire horse business—badlands and all.”

WILD HORSE RANGE

He grimaced. "Holzman is angry with me for not having told him about the clause. I pointed out that it was my duty to protect my client, not to condemn him."

"Saying that was as good as admitting that clause was evidence against me," Rodeen said.

Fletcher shook his head. "Look at it from the town's point of view, Rodeen. You're a stranger. Nobody but Beth knows anything about you." He smiled his thin smile. "And I'm afraid that her opinion doesn't carry much weight since it has become common gossip that she's in love with you."

"We can leave Beth out of this," Rodeen said shortly. He rose and paced the small cell. He turned to Fletcher. "The sheriff is claiming that the clause in the contract leaving everything to me is evidence for my killing the Colonel."

"It provides you with a sound motive," Fletcher rose. "And so far there haven't been any other motives established." His eyes were fixed on Rodeen.

"Then it's up to me to find a motive for someone else," Rodeen said. He checked himself from mentioning his suspicion of Cully Banks.

Fletcher pushed out his lower lip thoughtfully. "I was thinking the very same thing." He shrugged. "For the time being, let's do nothing. The sheriff might get over his first excitement at finding the contract and start thinking a little. Meanwhile, I'll do what I can . . ."

His voice trailed off. He seemed to be waiting for Rodeen to say something, to suggest a course of action for him to take. Rodeen said only, "If Corbin found the contract, he must have found the letters the Colonel wrote me. They should prove that a lot of what I said was the truth."

"Corbin found nothing but the contract," Fletcher said.

"I don't see why it should stir up excitement now," Rodeen said. "The sheriff could have read the Colonel's copy any time he wanted, by asking for it. He knew there was a contract. I told him so yesterday."

"No one can find the Colonel's copy," Fletcher said. "Beth and Weems have searched the house for it." He looked at

WILD HORSE RANGE

Rodeen again, his expression expectant, as if Rodeen had something to say to his last remark.

Rodeen said nothing and a moment later Fletcher left, assuring Rodeen he would do what he could. When next the door opened, Rodeen went to the front of the cell. He expected to see Corbin and he had a few questions he wanted to ask.

But instead of the deputy, Scotty McDennis came into the office. He crossed quickly to Rodeen. "I came as soon as Fletcher left," he said. "I'll say this in a hurry as that fool Corbin is on his way from the cafe."

He glanced back at the closed door. "There'll be a time tonight when the office here is empty. When that happens, expect a visitor at the alley window."

"You're talking about helping me break jail?"

"I am that," Scotty said. "Can you do yourself any good inside like this?"

"I hadn't intended to stay," Rodeen admitted. "But Holzman's jail looks as hard to break out of as a cavalry stockade."

"So it is." Scotty broke off as the door opened, and Corbin came in. "I'll see that you get your meal and you can pay me when you're free," Scotty said in a loud voice.

Corbin laughed raucously. "The only way you'll get money from Rodeen if you wait for him to be turned loose is chase him to hell," he said.

Scotty McDennis turned with deliberate, insulting slowness. He made a face as if he wanted to spit and walked silently from the office.

Rodeen said to Corbin, "Where did you find the contract?"

Corbin was staring angrily after Scotty McDennis, his face flushed. He turned on Rodeen. "That's law business."

"When I was knocked down the other night, the contract was stolen from me," Rodeen said. "Now you find it. That's quite a coincidence, Corbin. Where were you while the Colonel was being killed?"

Rodeen had no purpose in mind but to anger Corbin into telling him where he had found the contract. But to his

WILD HORSE RANGE

surprise, Corbin spun on his heel and strode from the office.

He returned less than thirty minutes later and sat silently at the desk until Holzman came to relieve him. "Go get some sleep," the sheriff said briefly. "You've got night duty coming up."

The hours passed. At dinner time, a meal was sent to Rodeen from Scotty McDennis' saloon. Rodeen was amused at the careful way the sheriff examined the food tray, as if he expected to find a saw blade hidden under a plate. There was nothing to be found and he opened the cell door, let Rodeen take the tray, and slammed the door again. He returned the cell keys to the desk drawer where they were kept and busied himself with paper work.

Corbin returned at dark and Holzman left. He said only, "You've got your orders. And remember that Rodeen has friends in this town."

Rodeen said, "Sheriff, since you put me in here, you've been acting as if you expected me to escape. What put the idea into your head?"

"I saw the way that fool girl looked at you out at the Leaning C today," Holzman answered. "And I'm not forgetting Scotty heard me order you to stay in town—but he helped you ride out this morning."

He jammed his hat on his head and tramped out. Rodeen settled back on his bunk, shaping a cigaret and trying to piece together nagging bits of thought that kept jolting through his mind—remarks the Colonel had made at their last meeting; things Rodeen had noticed these past days; even words dropped by the sheriff and Fletcher. But nothing seemed to fit together. Yet, he was sure, somewhere in his memory lay the complete answer to his problem.

He still had one possible defense against the sheriff's charges. He could tell Holzman what he knew about Cully Banks. But Rodeen doubted if that would do any good, not now at least. He laughed briefly. Cully Banks was a respected member of the community and, as far as the sheriff was concerned, he had been beaten up by a vicious stranger.

Rodeen's laughter died as the full extent of the sheriff's

WILD HORSE RANGE

blind prejudice struck him. Any man with a half open mind would have credited Rodeen's story enough to have done more than make a superficial check. Holzman might claim he had investigated, but Rodeen couldn't see how this was possible, considering the sheriff's attitude.

Occasionally Corbin glanced in Rodeen's direction. But for the most part, he leaned back in the sheriff's chair, his feet on the desk, and his eyes vacantly on the ceiling.

Time crawled past and Rodeen heard the sounds of Lost River's night life begin to fade. He began to wonder if something had happened to Scotty McDennis' plan to help him.

With the sheriff's obvious suspicion of Scotty, the saloon owner might well find himself checkmated in an attempt to leave his place of business to help Rodeen.

Rising from his bunk where he had forced himself to get some sleep off and on through the evening, Rodeen looked thoughtfully toward Corbin. If he could get the deputy over here—close enough to grab . . .

Rodeen rejected the idea. He wanted no violence at a time like this. It was one thing to get out of Holzman's jail. It was another to hurt someone in the process. Even so, his eyes fixed themselves on the desk drawer, not inches from Corbin's belly. The cell door keys were in that drawer.

The hopelessness of thinking this way made Rodeen go back to his bunk. He was lying there, fighting impatience, when the sound of a horse hammering in a wild run up the main street brought Corbin's feet down to the floor. A gun went off and someone let out an exuberant shout. The gun fired again and the sound of a bullet digging into the jail-house's front wall was plain.

Swearing, Corbin drew his gun and hurried to the door. He threw it open and then ran outside, shouting, "You there!" in a loud voice.

Immediately someone said from the cell window, "Rodeen!"

Rodeen rose and went to the window. In the alley darkness, he could make out the wrinkled features of Andy Pobble,

WILD HORSE RANGE

the livery stable owner. A long, stiff wire was thrust between the bars.

"Scotty figured this'd be long enough to reach to the desk drawer and get them keys," Pobble said quickly. "You hurry up while I go make sure Corbin don't get back too soon." He turned and stopped. "Holzman had your sorrel locked in the stable back here, but it seems to have got out and wandered around behind where it could chew a mite of grass. The girl will have food waiting at your old camp."

Before Rodeen could thank Pobble, the old man scuttled out of sight. Drawing the wire fully into the cell, Rodeen turned and hurried to the front. The wire already had one end formed into a hook. Rodeen ran the hooked end through the bars of the door and let it slide along the floor until it was almost beneath the desk drawer. Then, slowly, he lifted his end of the wire. For a moment he thought the wire was too long and too flexible, but finally the pressure from his end forced the hook up. It quivered by the desk drawer handle and then with a soft tick dropped into position.

Rodeen blew out his breath. He pulled sharply. The drawer came open, sliding out of its guides and crashing to the floor. The contents scattered, Rodeen saw the ring of keys, now not over six feet away. Freeing the hook from the drawer, he caught the keys and drew them forward. In a moment he was out of the cell.

He moved swiftly, taking time only to unlock the gun rack and get his carbine and handgun. He hurried out by the alley door and trotted through darkness to where his sorrel waited behind the sheriff's small stable.

Rodeen slid into the saddle. "All right, boy, let's move!"

He headed straight into the badlands, recalling Andy Pobble's words that Beth would have food waiting at his old camp. That could only mean the spot he had made headquarters while rounding up the horses.

It was located in a small meadow, well hidden under an overhang, and it was not until he was almost into the meadow that he saw the fire flickering against the darkness. Puzzled, he reined up.

WILD HORSE RANGE

It was a big fire, sending flames shooting high up against the roof of the overhang and casting a wide circle of light well out into the meadow. Rodeen frowned. Beth knew better than to make a fire the size of this one, he thought.

He started forward. The ground at this end of the canyon was marsh from springs seeping down to water the meadow, and the sorrel's hoofs made only the softest of sucking sounds. Above them, Rodeen could hear the crackle of the fire and the occasional explosion of a pitchy dry branch. Then he heard another sound—the jangle of harness, and again he pulled the sorrel up short.

A voice said from ahead and out of sight on Rodeen's left, "Why don't he come?"

"Maybe the size of the fire scared him off," another voice suggested. "I think we better cut it down some."

Rodeen recognized the deep tones of Mike Grogarty as he said, "You saw Beth set that fire. I figure it's a signal between her and Rodeen, so don't go messing with it. And he'll be along. She wouldn't have left all that grub for him if she hadn't been sure Weems was telling the truth about Rodeen escaping tonight."

"I don't understand Weems," Slim Ellis complained in his soft drawl. "First he wants Rodeen in jail, then he helps get him out."

"I figure Beth talked Weems into thinking the way she does," Grogarty answered. "From what I overheard between her and him, Weems got Scotty McDennis and old Andy Pobble to do the real work getting Rodeen free."

His voice roughened. "But I can't figure how he'd think Rodeen innocent. You heard him tell me about the new evidence the sheriff found. And that's proof enough for me that Rodeen killed the Colonel. He wanted this land and the wild horses quick and fast. He couldn't wait and take his profit slow and steady. He had to have it all at once."

The bitterness in Grogarty's voice sent a chill through Rodeen. On the basis of that clause in the contract providing a murder motive, both Mike Grogarty and sheriff Holzman had condemned Rodeen without any appeal. But at least,

WILD HORSE RANGE

Rodeen thought, the sheriff was willing to let the law make the final judgment. Grogarty was not.

He said now, "This time we don't take Rodeen back to jail. Not when he's got friends to help him get out. We'll string him ourselves—to that tree setting right over there!"

XI

THE WET ground under the sorrel's hoofs made it stir restlessly. With a quick motion, Rodeen started the horse backwards onto dry ground. He turned it up the canyon and then paused to listen in case Grogarty and his men might have heard the jangle of the sorrel's gear. But there was no sound at all now.

"All right," Rodeen whispered, "let's go—slow and easy for a while yet."

Once out of the canyon, he eased up on the tight rein and set the sorrel to a quick jogging pace. He was puzzled by what he had heard. Weems had apparently been behind the plan to help Rodeen escape jail. At the same time he had told Grogarty about the sheriff's new evidence, thus inflaming the foreman to the point where he was willing to take the law into his own hands.

Rodeen turned the sorrel toward the Leaning C. He would talk to Weems and find out exactly where the man stood, he decided. If Weems had actually come over to his side, as Grogarty suggested, maybe Rodeen could get him to talk to the sheriff about the evidence Rodeen had found earlier.

With that hope and the thought of seeing Beth again cheering him, Rodeen hurried into the valley and to the Leaning C. He left the sorrel in a patch of shadow near the house and walked swiftly toward the patch of light coming through the kitchen window. He stopped there and glanced quickly inside. Beth sat at the kitchen table, wearily pecking at a plate of food. She wore riding clothes and her hair had a wind-blown look.

WILD HORSE RANGE

Rodeen went to the rear door, rapped softly, and walked in. Beth stood up with a cry. "Thank heaven you got my signal!" she said. She came forward into Rodeen's arms. "I didn't know what to do. Uncle Elijah said we shouldn't tell the sheriff or he'd have you back in jail and then he went off to see if he could help and he hasn't come back and . . ."

"Whoa!" Rodeen said softly. He held her a moment longer and then gently led her back to the table. "You're all tuckered out," he murmured. "Finish your supper and tell me about it slow and easy."

"There's coffee on the stove," Beth said. She began to eat again.

Rodeen brought coffee for both of them and sat down. He shaped a cigaret and smoked it slowly while Beth talked.

"Uncle Elijah told me earlier that he'd made a plan to get you out of jail," she explained. "He suggested I take some food to you at the place where you camped last week. Of course, I did."

"What made Weems change his mind about me?" Rodeen asked.

She flushed. "I suppose because I—I think so much of you. He's always trusted my judgment and once he got over the shock of Dad's horrible death, he began to remember things that happened before you came. And finally he agreed that someone already in the valley had to be behind the killing." She made an effort to smile. "To make up for the way he'd acted, he helped you get out of jail. He thinks that if you're free, you can do more to help yourself."

Rodeen blew out a thin cloud of smoke. "Then why did he tell Mike Grogarty about the evidence the sheriff had found? Having the whole Leaning C crew ready to lynch me doesn't give me much freedom to move around."

Beth looked puzzled. "I don't understand, Clint. Uncle Elijah has gone off to find Mike and the boys. He was going to take them into the badlands to help you."

"Maybe you'd better tell the whole story," Rodeen said. "Was that big fire you set a signal of some kind for me?"

"To warn you," she said. "When I left here with the food,

WILD HORSE RANGE

I had the feeling I was being followed. I know the trails pretty well and I stopped once and looked back where I wouldn't be seen. I was being followed. I was sure it was Cully Banks and his men and I didn't know what to do."

"Why Cully Banks?"

"After what you told me—that he killed Dad—I was sure he'd try to kill you too. Before you could prove anything against him. And I saw one of his men watching our place here most of the day." She made a gesture toward the hills. "I used Dad's surveying transit like a telescope when I thought it was a horseman. And I was right."

"So you set the fire to warn me—knowing I'd think something was wrong when I saw such a big blaze?"

She nodded. "I left the food and hurried away as if I didn't suspect anything. I didn't have a gun and I couldn't think of anything else to do but find Mike and the boys. They weren't here when I got back, but Uncle Elijah was. He said he knew where they were and he rode away. But he didn't come back and I didn't know what to think."

"He didn't find them because they were at the camp waiting to lynch me," Rodeen said. He told her briefly what had happened.

"But that doesn't make sense," Beth protested when he finished. "If Uncle Elijah knew about that stupid evidence, why didn't he tell me?" She looked around as if half expecting to see Weems waiting to explain himself. "And where could he be?"

She gasped. "Clint, if he went to town to find Mike and the boys, and if he got into a poker game . . ." She broke off and said, "Cards are like a disease to him. He could have . . ."

"That wouldn't explain why he talks one way to you and another to Grogarty," Rodeen said. He stood up. "I'll be going. Grogarty and his crew might get tired of waiting for me and come back."

"Where are you going? Where can you go?"

"I'm going to do what I was let out of jail to do," Rodeen answered. "Find some more evidence in my favor. I'll camp

WILD HORSE RANGE

in the hills tonight. I know a place where Grogarty or Banks or the sheriff couldn't find me."

He started for the door. "You haven't found the paper or the map or you'd have said so."

She rose and came to him. "I'm sorry, Clint. I looked everywhere. I did find a special place in Dad's desk—he had a drawer with a false bottom in it. His copy of the contract was there but that was all."

"It's probably been destroyed by now," Rodeen said. He kissed her briefly. "Don't tell anybody I was here—not even Weems."

"But . . ."

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said. "Get some rest now."

He left quickly, hurrying out to his horse. He rode to the dark shadow along the hills bounding the valley on the west and sent the sorrel swiftly northward until he was directly above the Flying F ranch buildings. He moved downhill to a patch of pines set not far from the main corral and tethered the sorrel in shadow there. He started walking toward the corral and stopped as he heard a horse coming into the yard.

He squatted down and watched the rider approach. He was small, sitting his saddle awkwardly, and Rodeen had no need of the moonlight to recognize Elijah Weems.

Weems slid clumsily to the ground and tied his horse by the back veranda. A light moved from the front to the rear of the house as Weems knocked loudly on the door. It came open, showing Cully Banks holding up a lamp. He stepped back, letting Weems inside, and shut the door.

What was Weems doing here, Rodeen wondered. Another big poker game or had he another reason. Rodeen was tempted to try to find an open front window where he could hear what went on between Banks and Weems, but the rear door opened again and three men, Finch in the lead, came out and strode to the bunkhouse. Two of the men went inside but Finch stayed in the doorway, smoking a cigaret and staring out at the night.

Carefully now, Rodeen made a wide circle, going be-

WILD HORSE RANGE

hind the barn to the corral. Here he was cut off from Finch's line of vision by the bulk of the barn. Squatting down, he struck a match and examined the chopped up ground. He was hunting for particular hoofprints. He found what he sought—three fairly fresh sets laid over many old ones. One print showed a missing nail as had the first set by the waterhole back in the badlands. The other prints he had found there were matched here perfectly.

With a grunt of deep satisfaction, Rodeen blew out his match and straightened up. This was evidence the sheriff would have to think about—if he could be made to look at it. Now the problem was to get Holzman to the waterhole and then here.

His mind concerned with a way to get the sheriff to listen to him, Rodeen started out of the corral. He saw a horse coming from the barn toward the watering trough and automatically he changed his direction to avoid crossing its path.

His movement was sudden and the horse gave a startled neigh as the scent of a strange man struck its nostrils. Rodeen swore and hurried toward the fence. From the direction of the bunkhouse, Finch's voice called out, "Peters, that crazy watchdog of a bronc you own smelled something again. Maybe it's another cougar."

The horse neighed again as Rodeen clambered up the corral fence. A man said, "More than likely a bear this time of year."

Rodeen could hear someone running. He dropped to the ground on the far side of the fence and started through a tangle of weeds into the darkness behind the barn. The corral gate creaked. The man who had answered Finch called out, "There ain't nothing here."

A match flared up as Rodeen rounded the corner of the barn. The man shouted, "There's fresh bootprints all over!" He swore as if the match had burned down and scorched his fingers. "They go to the fence that runs up toward the back of the barn."

"Maybe we got us a horse thief!" Finch shouted back.

WILD HORSE RANGE

Now Rodeen could hear men running. The fence creaked as the one in the corral climbed out. The patch of pines was just ahead and Rodeen sprinted toward it across a narrow strip of moonlight.

"There he goes!"

"Horse thief, hell!" Finch shouted. "That's Rodeen."

A gun blossomed flame. Lead whined past Rodeen and thudded into a pine tree just ahead. He threw himself forward, seeking the safety of darkness. Two other guns opened fire, scouring the night around him. He felt a finger of fire lay itself along his thigh and he went down as his leg was jerked from under him.

Rolling, he came to his feet and staggered on. The pine trees swallowed him. Lead crashed through the branches. The sorrel whinnied in fear. Then Rodeen was beside it. He jerked the reins free and tried to pull himself into the saddle. His leg gave way a second time, spilling him into the dirt.

He scrambled up and with a savage thrust lifted himself aboard the sorrel. Men were coming closer now. In a moment they would have the patch of pines ringed, leaving him no way to escape. He turned the horse and sent it flying back the way he had come—to the hills.

"There he goes!" a voice cried.

"Saddle and go after him," Finch shouted.

Rodeen could feel the surge of the sorrel's muscles as it responded to his urging. By the time the Flying F crew was saddled and riding, he would be long gone, he thought with a grim smile.

Gone where, he wondered. He could feel blood running down his leg, dripping into his boot. Sweat washed over him, cold and clammy, and he fought rising pain. He tried to guide the horse but he could only cling to the saddle as shock washed over him. He slumped forward, letting the sorrel have its head.

WILD HORSE RANGE

XII

AS THE SHOCK and pain eased off, Rodeen became aware of his surroundings. The sorrel was jogging steadily toward the one place it knew best—Rodeen's old campsite.

At first, Rodeen thought of it as a refuge. Then he realized that Grogarty and his crew might be there yet. With an effort, he turned the horse onto an eastward trail.

"Hit for town, fellow," he whispered thickly, It was in his mind to find Scotty McDennis or Andy Pobble. He couldn't remember exactly why he wanted to see them except that it had something to do with Elijah Weems and Cully Banks.

The ride seemed interminable. The sorrel worked its way through the badlands and into the sleeping town by the back streets. Fording the river was the hardest. The shock of icy water revived Rodeen for a moment but it also nearly cost him his grip on the saddle. He clung numbly to leather, seeking the alley that would take him behind the livery barn.

He smelled the place before he could see it. Finally it loomed in front of him, large and bulky against the late night darkness. He stopped the sorrel with a word and slid to the ground. He took one tentative step and felt his leg beginning to give way. The stars showing above the stable roof began to spin crazily. Rodeen fought to hold to his consciousness.

He felt the hardness of the ground, smelled the acrid dirt, and his last thought was to wonder who might find him here first—Andy Pobble or one of the town's less helpful citizens.

The feel of strong hands under his head wakened Rodeen. The sharp odor of raw whiskey stung his nostrils and tingled against his lips. His mouth opened and the liquor poured down his throat. Rodeen choked and opened his eyes.

He saw the sharp eyes of Scotty McDennis peering down at him. Dim light from a lamp turned low revealed the small room Andy Pobble used in the livery stable. The old man

WILD HORSE RANGE

himself was hovering near the door, peering anxiously into the street.

"Ah, the good Irish fairy," Rodeen said as relief washed over him.

"And you never needed a good fairy more," Scotty said. "There you lay, worth a thousand dollars to any drunken fool staggering down that alley."

Rodeen rubbed a hand over his face. He pushed aside the whiskey glass Scotty held toward him. "That's Andy's best," Scotty said with a faint chuckle.

"What's this about a thousand dollars?" Rodeen demanded.

"Ah, you haven't heard. It's the reward posted on your head. Cully Banks made the offer—to any man who brings you in dead or alive."

"He'd better hope I come in dead," Rodeen said. "I found the evidence I was looking for."

Andy Pobble turned from the door and blew out the lamp. "Cully Banks and his crew just rode into town," he said. "I saw them as they passed the hotel window."

"They couldn't have tracked me here," Rodeen said.

"Ah, then Banks is the one that shot you?" Scotty asked.

"Finch did or one of his men," Rodeen said. He made an effort to stand. Scotty's hands held him firmly down.

"Where do you think you're going, lad?"

"I can't stay here," Rodeen said. "Banks must have guessed where I'd come." The effort of moving had brought the pain again and the haze began to fill his mind.

"The evidence," he muttered. "And Weems. Something about Weems . . ."

"Quiet now!" Scotty hissed. "Andy, if we hurry, we can get him to my place. It'll be safer there. And I can treat that leg of his."

Andy Pobble went to the door and came back shortly. "Now is the time," he said. "Banks and his men went up toward the sheriff's place."

Despite Rodeen's muttered protests, the two men helped him cross the street and work up the alley behind the saloon.

WILD HORSE RANGE

The outside stairs presented a formidable barrier, but finally Rodeen lay on Scotty's couch."

Andy Pobble said, "I'll bring his horse to the stable here."

Scotty had a knife out and was slicing away the leg of Rodeen's jeans and longjohns. "And rob his saddlebags for fresh clothing," he instructed.

Pobble left quietly. Scotty brought a pan of hot water and a glass of smooth, rich whiskey. "Here, be drinking this while I see to that leg," he ordered.

He washed the wound, talking all the while. "After you fell, that horse of yours snorted around until Andy Pobble came to see what the trouble might be. He dragged you inside and hurried over here."

He straightened up as he finished washing Rodeen's leg. "The luck of the Irish you have," he said. "It's no more than a furrow through the skin and meat. I could plant potatoes in it if I was of a mind, of course," he added. "But even so, the bullet has gone out and left your bone intact. Give it a few days . . ."

"I haven't got a few days," Rodeen said quietly. "Not with Banks and his crew in town and Mike Grogarty in the badlands." He drank down the whiskey Scotty had given him. "The best thing is to let me ride out of here. If I can get by Grogarty, I know a place where he can't find me . . ."

"And what will that get you?" Scotty demanded. "A while ago, you were saying something about evidence against Banks. Will running and hiding make the sheriff consider that evidence?"

"It was in my mind to let you tell the sheriff," Rodeen said.

Scotty laughed without humor. "Dutch Holzman is not about to listen to me, you can be sure. After you left the jail, Corbin and Holzman came storming into my saloon, accusing me of helping you escape. With the innocence of a babe, I swore I didn't know where you were. And it was the truth, for you told me nothing."

He poured raw alcohol into Rodeen's wound. "No, the sheriff is in no mood to hear any story I might be telling."

WILD HORSE RANGE

Andy Pobble came into the room, carrying clothing of Rodeen's. He was panting and his seamed face was red from exertion. "The sheriff is up and forming a posse," he gasped out. "I sneaked up and listened and they're coming here first."

Rodeen held his hands out for the clothes Pobble carried. "There isn't much time then," he said.

"There's time enough to tell us what you found," Scotty McDennis said. He went away and returned with a bed-sheet. He began tearing it into strips. "You had thoughts about Weems too. I want to hear all that's on your mind."

While his leg was being bandaged, Rodeen sketched out what he had done since he had been freed from jail. He mentioned his suspicion that Corbin might have been the man on the roof, gave a detailed account of finding the hoof-prints by the waterhole and of matching them in the Flying F corral. He finished by saying, "I don't understand what Weems is up to. First he's the cause of my going back to jail. Then I hear he had the idea of your helping me escape. After that, he told Grogarty about the clause in the contract. And finally I see him with Cully Banks."

"Weems is a strange one," Scotty conceded. "There isn't much man there, and what he does is often done to make himself a little bigger—in his own eyes if not in the eyes of others." He frowned and shook his head. "The escape was not his idea. It was mine. But I needed him to tell Beth to meet you with provisions and so I brought him into the scheme."

He paused and thought. "After he hinted that it would be best for you to escape," he added. "Ah, so in a way it was his idea. Now that is strange. Before he was against you . . ."

He finished tying the bulky bandage. "Now on with your clothes. I'll tell the sheriff as much as it is good for him to hear."

Rodeen dressed slowly and awkwardly. "Can you get a message to Beth without going through Weems?"

"I can," Andy Pobble said. "Mike Grogarty owes me ten dollars for oats. I'll go this morning and collect it."

WILD HORSE RANGE

"Right now, go to the window," Scotty said. "I hear noises outside or the leprechauns are playing tricks with my ears."

Andy Pobble went into Scotty's bedroom. In a moment he was back. "The alley has half the town stuffed inside it," he reported. "Dutch Holzman is playing general and Cully Banks is acting like his Lieutenant. My guess is they have the saloon surrounded."

"At least they know who your friends are," Scotty said dryly. "Are you fit to go up on the roof?"

"I was thinking that," Rodeen said. "If I can make the jump from there to the stable . . ." He stood up, wincing as he put weight on his bandaged leg. But Scotty had done his work well and in a moment Rodeen found that he could move about.

"Your sorrel is waiting and I put a few things you might use in your saddlebags," Andy Pobble said. "Now the message for the girl?"

Rodeen said quickly, "Get out to the Leaning C early tomorrow. Tell Beth that I think I know what the Colonel's paper and map were about. Be sure that Weems is listening too. Make it sound as if I overheard some talk."

Scotty was dragging a chair under the trapdoor to the roof. Outside heavy footsteps pounded up the stairs. He said in a puzzled tone, "Before, you didn't want Weems to hear the message."

"I want him to hear it," Rodeen explained. He climbed onto the chair. "I didn't want him to deliver it—because I don't think it would get to Beth."

"Ah, what's on your mind, lad?"

Rodeen said, "Remember that everything the Colonel did with the wild horses was known in advance by the raiders. They either had a better scouting system than the cavalry or they had someone close to the Colonel to tell them his actions."

"And you suspect that someone was Weems?"

"It's a guess," Rodeen said. "But I have nothing else to go on."

He pushed his gun into his holster and reached up, lifting

WILD HORSE RANGE

the trapdoor. A heavy fist hammered on the outside door. "Open up in there!" sheriff Holzman bawled.

"And after I give the message to Weems and the girl?" Pobble demanded.

Rodeen smiled thinly down into the eager, wrinkled face. "Then take Beth aside and tell her to follow Weems if he rides out. And I'm betting my life that he will."

Scotty said, "If you don't hurry, lad, you won't have any life to bet!"

Holzman hammered on the door again. "Open it up, Scotty, or I break it down!"

"Let a man get his trousers on," Scotty shouted back. He made a saddle of his hands. "Up with you," he whispered to Rodeen.

Thrusting with his good leg, Rodeen pulled on the edge of the opening with his fingers. He felt the strain on the muscles of his weak leg; then his arms and the force of Scotty's thrust sent him belly over onto the roof.

He rolled, sucking in the cold, late night air. Quickly he set the trapdoor back in place and got to his feet. He could hear Scotty below, moving the telltale chair back into place and giving low voiced orders to Andy Pobble.

Rodeen crawled to the edge of the roof and looked down into the alley. He could make out a dozen riders framed in the light from Scotty's windows. As he watched, they split into two groups and rode to opposite corners of the saloon building. More light spattered out as the upstairs door opened and sheriff Holzman clumped inside.

Rodeen pulled back from the roof as below one of the riders lifted his head. Near the trapdoor again, Rodeen could hear the sheriff shouting at Scotty McDennis.

"Stop your Irish lying. Those bloody rags tell the story well enough." His footsteps were heavy as he went to the outside door. "Keep the place surrounded, Banks!" he bawled. "And send a half dozen men in here. I want every inch of the building searched. Rodeen is here somewhere all right."

He paused and raised his voice. "Remember, every man

WILD HORSE RANGE

of you is deputized. If Rodeen puts up a fight—shoot to kill!”

“You’re condemning an innocent man to death, sheriff!” Fletcher replied from the darkness below. “Rodeen has hurt no one. You’ve bullied him like a dog does a rat.”

“He’s a wild animal and he’ll be treated like one,” Holzman retorted.

Cully Banks said in his taut voice. “If you don’t like this, Fletcher, go back and hide your head in a law book.”

Someone laughed. There was the jangle of harness as men rode into position around the building. Footsteps clattered on the stairs as others came up to search the building.

Rodeen hurried back to the edge of the roof and looked down. Men were moving there, too intent now to look up. This was his one chance, Rodeen realized. He backed away and stood up. Taking a deep breath, he began a slow, steady trotting forward, pacing himself so that the jump would be made from his good leg. He reached the edge, drove downward with all his force, and launched himself into the darkness.

It was like jumping into a deep cave. He could see nothing but deep blackness, feel only the rush of icy air. Then the hard solidity of the stable roof rushed up and smashed him, driving him down, sending him sprawling in a welter of noise. He lay gasping for breath, aware again of the blinding pain rushing up from his wound.

Someone shouted as the noise of Rodeen’s landing echoed on the night. He roused himself and crawled to the far edge of the stable. A hay meadow stretched out toward the river as Scotty had once mentioned. The block and tackle rig that swung hay into the loft stretched out in darkness.

Rodeen could hear men calling back and forth now. He leaned forward and grasped the outstretched arm of the block and tackle. He pulled himself out into darkness. His swinging feet scraped the hayloft doors. A wild kick sent them crashing inward. Rodeen forced his body to go back and forth like a pendulum. He took a deep breath as he

WILD HORSE RANGE

swung inward, and opened his grip. His body flung itself into blackness and dropped onto a pile of fresh hay.

Sounds were muffled now and Rodeen could hear little above the restless stomping of horses in the stalls below. He stood up carefully and felt his way to a ladder leading down from the loft. He half stepped, half slid to the stable floor. The sorrel nickered softly to his left.

Rodeen found the horse and then sought the big double doors that should open from the rear of the stable onto the hay meadow so that rigs could be driven in and out. He lifted the bar and pushed the doors open. Night air and dim starlight rushed in. Beyond, on the meadow, the moon cast a thin sheet of silver.

From the alley, someone shouted, "In the stable. Look in the stable."

Rodeen flung himself into the saddle and kicked the sorrel's flanks. "Run, fellow!" he commanded.

The horse surged forward into the stubble on the hay meadow. Ahead the river gleamed in the moonlight. Behind Rodeen the first line of dawn etched the mountain rim to the east. Beyond the river lay the rolling pastureland of the valley, and on past that darkness marked the western mountains.

The river came up swiftly and Rodeen sent the horse into it without pausing, knowing now that he was outlined by the cold glare of the moon. Water splashed up in an icy spray. The sorrel went in to his belly and Rodeen was almost washed from the saddle, as current struck them broadside.

"Keep going!" Rodeen gasped. He raked the sorrel's flank with his heel.

A cry came from behind as the upward splash of water attracted attention. Rodeen and the sorrel fought up the far bank, out of the river and onto the pasture of the valley.

"There he goes!" came Cully Banks' tight voice. "Ride for the bridge. Keep him in the valley."

Rodeen knew what was in Banks' mind. Once he managed to get into the badlands, he had a good chance of eluding the posse. If they could force him to stay in the open,

WILD HORSE RANGE

on the valley floor, they could run him until the sorrel dropped.

He wasted no time in reining the sorrel and sending it flying across the rolling ground toward the badlands. He looked to his left and saw a good two dozen riders streaming across the bridge and heading in his direction. Many, he knew, were on fresher horses than his.

Straightening in the saddle, Rodeen measured the distance between himself and the near edge of the badlands and weighed it against the distance the posse was from him.

He would reach the broken country first. He had that much of a headstart. But even if none of the riders could catch up with him, a well-aimed carbine bullet could.

As if his thought was a signal, two guns opened up from the lead riders in the posse. The range was still too great and the shots fell short. But, Rodeen knew, the angle of those riders would soon enough cut that range down.

If he rode a straight trail, he would be a perfect target for even a fair marksman. If he zig-zagged the sorrel to make himself hard to hit, he would soon lose the advantage of distance.

He chose a straight trail until a bullet scoured the cantle of his saddle. Then he had no choice. He sent the sorrel into a zig-zag run. Turning in the saddle, Rodeen watched helplessly now as the posse ate away at his meager margin of safety.

At this rate, he judged, the posse would reach him while he still had a furlong to go.

XIII

RODEEN PUT the sorrel on a straight trail again. He gained precious yards on his pursuers, until one of them found the range with his carbine. Then Rodeen was forced to zig-zag a second time. By alternating the patterns of running, he reached the first cut in the escarpment with a full thirty

WILD HORSE RANGE

yard lead. The lathered sorrel slowed its wild pace as Rodeen started him up a narrow canyon trail.

"Keep moving, fellow," Rodeen urged reluctantly.

As he rode, he mapped out in his mind the terrain at this end of the badlands. Recalling a cup with a twisting maze of side canyons, he worked back and forth until he found it. The sounds of pursuit were dim for the moment and Rodeen slowed the horse while he decided which side canyon to take.

They all opened into a series of main trails farther west, he knew, but the one on the right looked most promising, having no soft dirt that would hold a revealing footprint. Quickly now, he urged the sorrel in that direction.

After an hour's riding, they broke into a small grassy meadow deep in the shadow of the western hills. Rodeen drew rein and dropped from the saddle to give the weary, sweating sorrel a rest.

Safe for the time being, Rodeen thought. But for how long? A man needed food and shelter to live. And he didn't doubt that some in the posse might know this country as well as he did. Where was there a place to hide? A place where the sorrel could rest?

Rodeen knew of only one such spot. And he wanted to stay away from there until Andy Pobble would have time to deliver his message and Weems would have slipped away for his trek into the badlands.

If Weems came here! Rodeen grimaced. He was betting long and deep on a guess. But it was a logical guess; and as far as he could see, it was the only answer to what had been happening.

The sorrel lifted its head and flicked its ears. Rodeen turned his attention back to the moment. He heard the noise that had disturbed the horse—the faint clang of a shod hoof on rock. Someone had found his trail. He mounted again and sent his tired animal wearily across the meadow. They would have to go to the wide, sprawling canyon where he had seen Weems yesterday.

It was a slow ride, and twice Rodeen lost himself and

WILD HORSE RANGE

ended in box draws. But with the coming of daylight and then the warming sun, Rodeen finally broke into the wide, sprawling canyon. Today a dozen head of prime looking wild stock grazed in the upper end of the meadow. There was no sign that anyone had ridden this way since yesterday, and Rodeen left the saddle. He led the sorrel to a small spring and, deciding it had cooled down enough, let it drink. Then he walked about, forcing himself to stretch the muscles of his bandaged leg.

He located the small side canyon where he had seen Weems disappear and then he set about exploring the deep cleft in the rock where the horses had vanished when Weems had startled them. Caution prompted Rodeen to take the sorrel into the cleft with him and it was the animal's nicker that warned him of someone coming into the canyon.

Carefully Rodeen stepped to the lip of the cleft and peered out. At first he could see nothing. Then Weems came riding into view. He was trying to hurry his horse and his body jiggled like a loosely packed sack of oats. He passed within a dozen yards of where Rodeen watched and the torture he was undergoing was plainly etched on his round, pale face.

Rodeen remained where he was as Weems made his way toward the upper end of the canyon. The wild stock there caught his scent, bunched together, and ran to one side. Weems rode through the area where they had been grazing. Rodeen blinked in surprise. One moment Weems was visible; the next he had disappeared.

Even so, Rodeen stayed in the cleft. Minutes passed slowly and he wondered if anything had happened to Beth, or if Weems had been clever enough to realize she was following and so had managed to lose her.

But even as he was considering making a search, Rodeen saw a small bay come into the meadow. Soon the horse was close enough for him to recognize its rider. He stepped into the open, calling her name softly.

She rode toward him, her look questioning. Rodeen caught the bay by the bridle and led it into the cleft to stand along-

WILD HORSE RANGE

side the sorrel. Beth slid to the ground and took a moment to press herself against Rodeen.

"When I heard you'd been shot . . ." she began.

"I'm fine now," Rodeen interrupted. "Andy Pobble got the message to you, didn't he?"

"Yes, of course," She gave Rodeen a puzzled glance. "What's the matter, Clint?"

"Weems has disappeared," Rodeen said.

She frowned now. "I don't understand all this about Uncle Elijah. I did what Andy said I should do, but . . ."

"Quiet!" Rodeen whispered. "There he is again." He pointed toward the upper end of the canyon where Weems came downslope, riding more slowly now.

"I just looked that way a few minutes ago," Beth protested. "And he wasn't there then."

"When he leaves, we'll find out exactly what's up there," Rodeen said.

"There isn't anything," Beth answered. "I've been here before. The canyon is choked with brush that's grown up against a cliff. You can see all the way up from where I came across the marsh."

"We'll wait," Rodeen said softly. "I'll explain about Weems later."

He hunkered down and thrust his bad leg out in front of him. After a moment's indecision, Beth sat on the ground beside him. Neither spoke but watched Weems as he rode slowly toward them and then turned north. After a few moments, Rodeen got up and peered around the edge of the cleft.

"He's crossing the marsh now. We'll give him a little longer."

"He can't hear you," she said half angrily. "Will you tell me what this is all about, please?"

Rodeen spoke softly, explaining to her his reasoning concerning Weems. He said finally, "Not only have his actions been strange but, except for you, only Weems could have known what your father's plans were."

The anger flushing Beth's cheeks had begun to fade as Rodeen talked. When he finished, she said in a low, miser-

WILD HORSE RANGE

able voice, "I've thought of that more than once, but I wouldn't let myself believe it. Uncle Elijah has always been so—so quiet and in the background."

Rodeen got to his feet. "Maybe he grew tired of being in the background," he said dryly. "All right, let's go see what's up ahead."

The wild horses had drifted back to their grazing but they swirled away again as Rodeen and Beth approached. As they neared the narrow end of the canyon, the hills rose sheer on both sides, bare and rocky halfway up, and timbered from there to the distant rims. When they were almost to the high rock wall that blocked the canyon neck, they had to swing left to avoid the edges of a small, deep pond.

"That's the most water I've seen in one place in the badlands," Rodeen remarked.

"If you look closely, you can see the bubbles from the spring that feeds it," Beth answered. She smiled shyly. "Once I stopped to pick some flowers at the lower end. I could hear the water going down into the ground."

"Maybe this is the Lost River," Rodeen said.

"I wish there were such a thing," Beth remarked. "Or that some of the springs in the badlands were all one. We'd have water enough for the valley then!"

She rode on and pointed to the tangle of brush growing up against the cliff blocking them from going farther. "See. Uncle Elijah couldn't have gone past here. There's just no place to go."

Instead of answering, Rodeen stepped down from the sorrel and began to examine the ground closely. He walked forward until his face was almost in the edge of the brush. He moved to his left, still bent over. Then with a grunt, he straightened up. Returning to the sorrel, he caught up the reins.

"Climb down and lead your horse," he advised Beth. He started walking directly toward the brush. Beth hesitated and then did as she had been ordered.

Rodeen pushed aside a bushy branch to reveal a small opening in the thick growth. He led the sorrel forward,

WILD HORSE RANGE

stopping now and then to examine the ground for sign. A narrow tunnel opened through the brush, leading him now right, now left. It began to grow dark as he burrowed his way deeper and deeper into the tangle. Then light appeared ahead, faint and first. It grew brighter rapidly until Rodeen was in full daylight again.

He stepped through the last of the brush screen and stopped. He was standing on a wide ledge of rock. He stared in amazement at the scene spread before him. Beth moved alongside him.

The rock ledge where they stood was a half dozen feet above an almost round bowl set deep in the hills. The near end of the bowl was covered with thick, lush grass. A creek, as deep as the pond in the canyon behind them, moved slowly along the edge of the grass, and disappeared into a great fissure in the rock wall that hemmed in the sides of the brush through which they had just come.

But what held their gaze was the lower two-thirds of the meadow. Here was a sheet of water sparkling blue in the sunlight. The rock wall forming a barrier at the far end sparkled brightly as springs gushed from it to create this lake.

"That's what the Colonel found!" Rodeen said. "If this could be channelled, there'd be water enough to irrigate two Lost River Valleys."

Beth could only stare in amazement. Rodeen said, "And this is what the raiders were after. This is why they wanted to drive your father from the land. They hoped to get it from him cheap—and then they'd own this too."

"It's worth a fortune to anyone who would develop it," Beth said.

Both she and Rodeen started forward, leading the horses as far as the meadow and going on to stand by the edge of the lake. It was bigger than they had thought at first, part of it curving out of sight between rocky bluffs that twisted off to the left. A shelf followed that left shoreline and Rodeen began to walk along it.

"Clint, watch out, that's wet and slippery," Beth called.

WILD HORSE RANGE

Rodeen said, "Someone else went this way not long ago. There's fresh mud here and there." He continued walking and then stopped abruptly as the shelf ended, dropping off into the dark, deep blue of the water.

Why would anyone walk out here, he wondered. He looked around carefully, searching the face of the rock wall on his left. It was then that he saw the niche nature had cut deep into the rock. In the niche, protected from the weather, was a clumsily carved statue perhaps two feet high.

Rodeen heard Beth move up beside him. "This was a place of worship for some Indians a long time ago," Rodeen said, pointing at the statue.

Beth shivered. "It's cold and gloomy here. Let's go back."

He said thoughtfully, "But why would Weems risk coming out on this slippery ledge just to look at a statue?"

Rodeen reached out his hand and felt in the niche. His fingers slid behind the statue. He grunted and withdrew his hand. He was holding a thick leather wallet with the insignia of the U. S. Cavalry embossed on the front.

Opening the wallet, Rodeen drew out two sheets of paper. He turned and handed them to Beth. "Here's why you couldn't find the paper or the map. Weems knew where they were, took them, and hid them here."

"But why Uncle Elijah?" she demanded. "Why would he . . ."

"My guess is that Cully Banks found the water some time ago—most likely when he was hunting for strays," Rodeen said. "He figured a way to get the land away from the Colonel. But he needed the help of someone close to your father, someone who could keep a check on his movements. And who better than Weems, his big game poker partner?"

Beth whispered, "I've heard that Uncle Elijah is deeply in debt to Cully Banks." Almost as if she was afraid of what she might see, her eyes traveled down to the papers she held. One was covered with fine writing; the other was a detailed sketch of the badlands and the south end of the valley.

WILD HORSE RANGE

"Look," she said, holding out the map. "Dad figured a way to channel water into the valley for irrigation."

Rodeen's eyes were on the paper. "What's on that?"

Beth's eyes scanned it quickly. "Only notes to accompany the map." She looked up at Rodeen, her eyes dark with sympathy. "It doesn't say a thing about the raiders, Clint. There isn't a word here to help prove your innocence!"

XIV

CULLY BANKS pulled his horse up as he saw Corbin coming down canyon toward him. "I been hunting for you," Corbin said as he drew his mount abreast of Banks. "I followed that old fool Andy Pobble, the way you told me."

"Get to it," Banks ordered impatiently. "What happened?"

"He didn't ride to Rodeen, like we figured," Corbin said. "He went out to the Leaning C with the first light. I hung back and when Pobble and Weems and the girl had all left, I rode in and found out from Grogarty what was going on."

He shifted position in the saddle. "The way Grogarty told it, Pobble come with a message for the girl—from Rodeen." He frowned. "And he talked to her with Weems and Grogarty right there. You think they're in with Rodeen now?"

Banks scowled. "What was the message?"

"Pobble said Rodeen knew where the map and the paper were and that's where he was going." He added suspiciously, "that's the second time I've heard talk about a map and paper . . ."

"I'll tell you later," Banks interrupted. "What happened after Pobble gave the message to the girl?"

"Then, the way Grogarty tells it, Weems says something about helping the posse, climbs on a horse, and disappears. Pobble says something real quiet to the girl and pretty soon she rides off too. Grogarty and his crew were hanging around the ranch because they figured Rodeen might come there. I told them to stay, figuring the whole thing might be a trick

WILD HORSE RANGE

to get everybody away from the Leaning C so Rodeen could come and hide, and then I went after the girl."

He looked anxiously to Cully Banks for approval. Banks nodded. Corbin said, "The girl was following Weems but not so he could see her. He goes into a big meadow way back in the hills. After a while, she follows. Then Weems comes out, riding slow and looking like he'd got rid of a big worry. I thought about following him a ways but figured I'd better see what happened to the girl. I went into the meadow careful like and there was Rodeen with her way at the upper end of the place. I had Rodeen in my sights and I was getting ready to spend that thousand dollar reward when they disappeared."

He looked blankly at Banks. "I went up and had a look and there was no place they could have gone. No place at all."

Cully Banks swore savagely. Corbin said hurriedly, "I didn't know what to do then, so I come hunting for you."

"How long ago was this?"

"Twenty-twenty-five minutes since I left the meadow. I rode hard."

"Then Weems hasn't had a chance to get back to the Leaning C?" Banks demanded.

"Not the way he was riding," Corbin answered.

Banks nodded. "All right, go find the sheriff. Don't tell him any of this. Just keep him away from the country around that meadow. Say you heard Rodeen was at the east end of the badlands."

"Keep the sheriff *away* from Rodeen?"

"That's right," Banks said. "I'll explain later, and you'll get an extra cut when our plans go through. Now start riding."

As soon as Corbin disappeared, Banks headed his horse in the direction of the Leaning C. The big black followed short-cut trails easily, and soon Banks was on the escarpment above the valley. He dropped into a small side canyon. He grunted in relief as he saw Fletcher sitting a compact roan.

"I got your message from Finch," Fletcher said. "But I don't see why I should waste my time waiting here for

WILD HORSE RANGE

Weems. He hasn't shown up around the ranch. For all I know, the fool may still be sleeping."

"We're the ones who've been sleeping," Cully Banks said. "Last night Weems came over to my place. He was there when Rodeen showed up and got chased away."

"That was a crazy risk for Weems to take," Fletcher said angrily.

Cully Banks grinned sourly. "Weems is gambling for real high stakes this time. He's willing to take risks. He told me last night that he found the paper some time ago—right after the Colonel was killed, in fact."

Fletcher swore in surprise. "Why didn't he tell me!"

"Because," Banks said, "Weems claims the paper and the map prove that both you and me were behind the raiders, and he wants more than ten per cent of the money we'll make out of the water for his share. If we don't give him a half interest, he'll turn the paper and map over to the sheriff."

"And stick his own neck in a noose!"

"He says there's nothing on the paper to show he's been in with us," Banks added. "I figured he had us until I heard from Corbin this morning." Quickly, he outlined what Corbin had told him.

Fletcher's smile was cold. "Then Weems has been hiding the paper and the map up by the big lake!"

"That's right. And if what Corbin says is right, Rodeen and the girl have found their way into the lake. They may even have the paper and map by now."

Fletcher thought rapidly. "They could still be there, or close by. If they haven't found the paper, maybe I can talk them into trusting me. I'll try to hold them in the meadow or by the lake while you ride for Finch and the boys and get up there."

"What about Weems?" Cully Banks demanded.

"We can take care of him later," Fletcher said. He swung his roan past Banks and rode quickly off.

Cully Banks started away and stopped. Weems hadn't returned yet or Fletcher would have seen him. But he had

WILD HORSE RANGE

to come soon if he had left the meadow when Corbin claimed. And when he did come . . .

Banks grunted in satisfaction when, five minutes later, Weems came into sight. He moved slowly down the main canyon trail toward the valley. As he came abreast of the small draw, Banks drew his gun and called softly, "Weems, in here."

Weems twisted in the saddle. He saw Banks and the gun and for a moment he seemed ready to run. Then he straightened in the saddle and rode toward Banks.

"Don't try anything foolish," he said. "If something happens to me, the sheriff gets a letter telling him where to find the paper and the map." He smiled thinly. "I'm not fool enough to trust you and Fletcher."

"No," Banks said heavily, "but you were fool enough to trust what Andy Pobble said. He tricked you into riding to the lake—and the girl followed. Corbin saw her and Rodeen go in there."

Weems went white. Banks said jeeringly, "What are you so scared about. You said the paper didn't mention your name."

"It doesn't mention any names," Weems blurted miserably. "But it shows how the water can be brought into the valley. If it's found, we lose our chance of getting rich. You've got to do something to stop Rodeen and Beth."

"Fletcher has gone after them now. He'll hold them until Finch and the boys arrive." Banks grinned at Weems. "Then we'll have nothing to worry about."

His tone of voice made Weems stare at him. "You aren't going to let them hurt Beth?" he demanded in a high, thin voice. "I didn't bargain for you to kill the Colonel, but I had no choice."

"No choice at all," Banks agreed. "Not with all the poker losses you owe me." He shook his head. "But you got greedy and eager and let the girl find out about the lake. So I don't have any choice either."

Weems said desperately, "Leave her alone. I'll talk to her, make her keep quiet." He looked into Banks' cold, im-

WILD HORSE RANGE

placable expression. "I have some say in this," he cried shrilly. "I'm the one who told you about the spring in the first place. I'm the one who brought you all the Colonel's plans ahead of time. I took more risks than anybody. I've got a right to be heard!"

"You've got a right—to this," Cully Banks said softly. Lifting his gun, he shot Weems out of the saddle. The small, pudgy body hit the ground soggily and lay still. Before the echo of the shot had faded from the canyon, Banks had ridden out of sight.

Weems pushed himself slowly to his feet. Pain racked his body like a wild fire and twice he fell before he could haul himself into the saddle of his docile horse.

He rode with one hand holding the reins, the other pressed to his belly. Blood oozed from between his fingers and smeared the saddle leather. At each step the horse took, he gasped in agony and nearly fell to the ground.

His mind held but one thought. He must find the sheriff and warn him that Cully Banks was going to have Beth killed. The thought turned into a dream—Beth would make him manager of her water company after she learned how he had suffered to save her life. Certainly she would be grateful. Because life was a very precious thing.

He rode blindly, unaware that the horse was taking him into the valley, straight to its home corral. The dream continued to grow in his mind. Now Elijah Weems was no longer a nobody. Now he walked tall through the streets of Lost River. Water poured into the valley, turning it lush and green; and gold poured into the hands of Weems.

He could hear the water rushing into the valley. The sound filled his ears, drowning out all else. It became a torrent and then a flood. It rose, covering his face, choking him, threatening to drown him.

He gasped and opened his eyes in time to see Mike Grogarty ready to pour another bucketful of icy well water over his face. Grogarty set the bucket aside. "Who did this?" he demanded harshly. "Rodeen?"

WILD HORSE RANGE

XV

RODEEN WAS leading the way out of the brush barrier and into the canyon when he saw a rider some distance off. He signalled a quick warning to Beth, stopping her.

"Someone is coming."

She stepped carefully alongside him and shielded her eyes against the glare of the sun. "It's Alvin," she said. Her voice was filled with relief.

Not answering, Rodeen led the horses back into the bowl. Beth joined him, standing quietly until Fletcher burst onto the ledge, leading his horse. An expression of relief lighted his face as he saw Rodeen and Beth.

"I was hoping you'd have found this place!" he said. He came forward, smiling his charming smile. "I slipped away from the posse to tell you to sit tight, wherever you might be. The area around this canyon is crawling with men."

"How long have you known about the lake?" Rodeen asked.

"For some time," Fletcher answered. He glanced at Beth. "Since your father discovered it and told me of his plan to develop it—once he had the money."

"And you didn't tell anyone?" Beth demanded. "Not even when you knew it would help Clint, you didn't say a word?"

"Help Rodeen?" Fletcher laughed shortly. "Hardly. You know Dutch Holzman. He'd only take this as more evidence. This is Rodeen's land now, remember. It gives him another reason for having killed the Colonel. Or so the sheriff would claim."

"I don't think so now," Rodeen said quietly. "Weems knows about the lake." He turned the horses onto the grass and then lounged against the rock wall at the back of the ledge. He shaped a cigarette slowly. "My guess is that he was in with the raiders—supplying them with the information that let them keep one jump ahead of the Colonel every time he tried to drive a band of wild stock out of here."

"Weems!" Fletcher cried. Then he shrugged. "Even if that's true, how can it help you?"

WILD HORSE RANGE

"Once Weems realizes that someone found the paper and map he hid here and realizes that Scotty McDennis has the proof of my innocence, I think he'll break down and talk."

"Scotty has the proof?" Fletcher echoed. "You mean he has the paper and the map?"

"Beth has those," Rodeen said. "Scotty has information about three sets of hoofprints made by horses carrying three killers. He can show the sheriff those prints and then show him the same kind—in the Flying F corral."

He lit his cigaret slowly and dropped the match to the stone ledge. "That will pretty well prove Cully Banks' part in all this. And Weems' story will tie you in."

Beth gasped. Fletcher sounded amazed. "Me?"

"Banks may be a smart rancher," Rodeen said. "But he's a bully boy. He isn't the kind who can think through a scheme like the one that got the Colonel killed and put his murder onto me. It took a different kind of brain for that—a brain like yours."

Beth said, "Clint, do you know what you're saying?"

"Fletcher forgot one thing," Rodeen answered. "The Colonel make it plain to both Scotty and me that he'd told nobody about what he found. He wanted to keep that a secret until he could be sure who to trust—and who to suspect. So he told no one—not even you, Beth. And certainly not Fletcher here."

With a sudden movement, Fletcher stepped behind Beth and drew his gun. He caught her with his left arm and pulled her sharply against him.

"You're too clever for your own good," Fletcher said. "Or for hers." His voice held a regretful note. "You should have stayed out of this, Beth, and you wouldn't have been hurt. As it is, you know about the lake . . ."

Rodeen took a step forward. The hand holding his cigaret dropped toward his side, stopping a few inches above gun butt. He spread his fingers, letting the cigaret drop to the ledge. He said softly, "Do you think you can kill me before I draw and shoot, Fletcher?"

"If you want to murder Beth, go ahead," Fletcher taunted.

WILD HORSE RANGE

"What difference does it make to her—if she's going to be shot anyway?" Rodeen said softly. He took another slow step forward. "But it makes a difference to you, Fletcher. Because if I have to shoot her to get at you, I'll do a thorough job on you."

Fletcher's gun muzzle wavered. "I don't believe you," he said thickly. "You wouldn't kill Beth."

Facing Rodeen, Beth looked squarely into his face. She said after a moment's hesitation, "Why shouldn't he? If I'm going to die anyway, I'd rather know that he killed you too!"

A smile touched the corners of Rodeen's lips. "Well, Fletcher?"

"What do you want me to do?" Fletcher cried in a desperate voice.

"Turn Beth loose. Let her go out of here. Then you can have my gun."

"Her going won't save you, Rodeen," Fletcher said.

"I made my bargain," Rodeen answered.

Fletcher cocked his head—as if he was listening or thinking. He laughed suddenly. "All right." He released Beth and stepped to one side, and now his gun was steady on Rodeen.

Beth hesitated. Rodeen said harshly. "Hurry up before some of Fletcher's friends get here."

She turned and started for the horses. Fletcher said, "Get away from them. I can see the carbine in Rodeen's saddle boot. You can go, but you go on foot."

Rodeen nodded at her. She went slowly toward the brush barrier and then more quickly. Rodeen called softly, "Don't try walking out of the canyon. Climb up in the rocks and hide. If I read Fletcher's face right, Cully Banks and his men are due any minute."

Fletcher laughed again. Beth disappeared into the brush. It crackled briefly and then silence dropped down. Rodeen unbuckled his gun and belt and let them fall to the ledge. He stepped back, giving Fletcher room to pick them up. Then he leaned against the rock wall beside the brush and rolled himself another cigaret.

"What made you do it?" Rodeen asked curiously. "As

WILD HORSE RANGE

the Colonel's lawyer advising him on running a water company, you could have got rich."

"Rich!" Fletcher said scornfully. "You knew the Colonel better than that. He talked before about finding water—and that if he did, he'd let everyone have a hand in developing it and then they could each have a share for nothing!"

"That was my idea—and Beth's," Rodeen said. "We talked it over before you got here and agreed to follow the directions on the Colonel's map and paper."

Fletcher's head was cocked again. "I'm afraid you won't get the chance," he said mockingly.

Brush crackled loudly and Cully Banks burst into sight. He stared from Fletcher to Rodeen. Fletcher said, "Beth got away. Rodeen told her to go hide in the rocks in the canyon. Send the boys to find her."

Banks pushed his black horse toward the meadow and strode back out of sight. He returned in a few minutes. "Finch will find her," he said. "The canyon's too steep for her to climb out of. And if she tries to run across the bottom, the boys will see her quick enough."

He turned his attention to Rodeen. "Let's go down on the grass where we've got better footing. Fighting on this rock, a man's too apt to lose his footing."

Fletcher said, "Don't be a fool, Cully. We haven't got time for this. What if Weems gets an attack of conscience and goes to the sheriff?"

"Weems won't go anywhere," Cully Banks said. "And when they find him, everybody'll think Rodeen shot him." He grinned at Fletcher.

"So far most of the ideas have been yours," Banks went on. "Now it's my turn. If we go and shoot Rodeen out of hand, the sheriff might get suspicious. But if he's found dragged to death because he fell off his horse and got a foot caught in the stirrup, everybody'll figure he got what he deserved."

He unbuckled his gunbelt. "I owe Rodeen a beating, and I'm making sure right now that he's going to look good and battered before we hang him from his stirrup."

Conscious of Fletcher's gun on him, Rodeen walked down

WILD HORSE RANGE

into the grass of the bowl. He moved until he was almost on the edge of the deep creek that flowed out of sight under the rock separating this bowl from the canyon.

A gun went off sharply in the near distance. Banks grinned. "Sounds like the boys flushed a little game," he said.

Rodeen flipped his cigaret into the creek and watched the slow current carry it lazily for a time. Then, suddenly, the bit of brown paper was sucked out of sight as the water neared the rock wall. An idea stirred in Rodeen's mind.

"Lots of water flowing out of this lake," Cully Banks said mockingly. He was a few steps behind Rodeen. "All right turn around."

Rodeen heard the soft swish of Banks' boots as he charged forward over the thick grass. Half turned, Rodeen stopped, ducked, leaped to one side. Banks' charge carried him a step beyond Rodeen. Catching himself, Banks turned.

Rodeen straightened up and struck with a savage left fist. He caught Cully Banks in the throat. Banks gasped and swung blindly. Rodeen hit him twice under the eyes. Barswung again, his knuckles ripping across Rodeen's temple and sending Rodeen to his knee.

Banks shook his head and came forward. He lashed out with his boot, twisting his leg as he drove the heel for Rodeen's face. Rodeen leaned to the side and let the boot sweep over his shoulder. He grabbed Banks' ankle and heaved. Banks came to his feet. Cully Banks went over on his back. The grass cushioned his fall and he rolled and came quickly to his feet.

Rodeen stepped up tight against him and began to hammer at the already bloody face. He twisted as he struck, ripping the skin from Banks' cheeks with his bruising knuckles, cutting Banks around the eyes, forcing him to stumble backward.

The savage desire to kill this man drove Rodeen relentlessly forward. Banks was helpless, pawing the air and finding nothing. "Make him hold still!" he screamed at Fletcher. "Give me a chance to get my hands on him!"

Rodeen struck without mercy, working on Cully Banks' eyes until Banks was blinded by his own blood. Rodeen

WILD HORSE RANGE

struck him viciously under the ear. Banks went down and lay where he fell. Rodeen stepped forward to lift him to his feet.

"That's enough," Fletcher said.

"No," Rodeen answered. "There's never enough for this kind of animal." But he saw that Cully Banks was unconscious and, leaving the man, he walked to the creek and thrust his hands into the water. The current slowly swirled the blood from his knuckles.

Fletcher said, "Cully had his chance. Now we'll do this my way."

Rodeen turned and stared into the gun muzzle not ten feet away. He lifted his eyes to Fletcher's face and saw his death warrant written there.

From the direction of the canyon, two more shots rang out sharply. A man's voice rose in what could have been a shout of triumph.

"I think that about takes care of everything," Fletcher said with a cold smile. He drew back the hammer and readied his gun.

XVI

RODEEN KICKED wildly down with both legs, launching himself toward the water. Fletcher fired and the bullet ripped off Rodeen's right bootheel. He barely felt the jolt as the icy creek closed over him.

Rodeen surfaced, gasping against the cold. Fletcher fired again. His bullet spat water into Rodeen's eyes. Sucking in a deep breath, Rodeen went down, seeking the darkness near the bottom. He felt the strong pull of the current here and he let it carry him while he worked free of his jacket and boots.

The need for air drove him up again. As he cleared water from his eyes, he could see the rough face of the cliff rushing at him. For a brief moment he felt panic, and he wondered

WILD HORSE RANGE

if the idea he had had when his cigaret had gone out of sight was worth trying. The creek roared here as it went down under the rock wall. Rodeen was gambling that it was this water that formed the pond in the canyon—and gambling that there was room in the funnel of rock to let his body through.

Fletcher sent a shot screaming at Rodeen. It hit rock and rained sharp shards down around his head. Rodeen went under, letting the current have him. For one wild instant, he wondered if drowning or being shot was the better death. Then there was no time for thinking. He could only fight for survival.

He was twisted around and battered against smooth, cold rock. Seconds seemed hours, each one longer than the last. And then the need for air burned in his chest. He flailed a hand upward. There was only water above him. Then he felt a thin stir of air. With a final effort, he got his nose and mouth into the narrow space between the water and the rock above it. He sucked air greedily.

Faint light touched his eyes. The force of the current began to lessen now that he was close to the surface. He let his legs dangle wearily and felt the current suck greedily at them. He drew them up, wincing at the pain that had started again in his wound.

The light grew brighter and then the water spewed Rodeen out from under the rock and into the bright sunlight. He saw the towering hills of the big canyon and realized he was in the little pond near the brush barrier. For a moment, he could only float on his back and absorb the warmth of the sun and the freshness of the air. He felt as if every muscle had been torn loose in his body by the tumbling of the water. He wanted to do nothing but lie here until the current should push him to the shore.

The sharp crack of a carbine roused him. He became aware of the present, of Cully Banks and Fletcher in the bowl, and of Finch and his men hunting Beth here in the canyon.

A quick glance showed Rodeen three riders working along

WILD HORSE RANGE

the far canyon wall. The rocks there were broken and jagged with small trees jutting out well up the slope. From his position, Rodeen caught a glimpse of color and he knew that Beth was working her way up the steep slope toward the trees. Relief jarred through him and he struck out for the shore of the little pond.

Pulling himself onto land, Rodeen lay hidden in the deep grass, regaining the strength he had lost in the icy water. Lifting his head, he studied the situation. His eyes picked out large clumps of grass and an occasional rock. He rose and started moving from one to the other, following the patterns he had learned fighting Indians. As he drew nearer the far side of the canyon, he recognized Finch by the white, lumpish scar on his flat face. Briefly, Rodeen was tempted to maneuver himself into a position where he could ambush the man, but he thrust the idea aside.

It was three against one here. More important, Beth was high enough up the slope to be a poor target, and she was obviously well able to defend herself. Even as Rodeen watched, a good-sized boulder thundered down the canyon side, forcing two of the riders to give ground.

Rodeen half rose and darted behind a large rock. A glance behind showed him that the Flying F men were all looking upward. He stood and made a quick run that carried him to the brush barrier. Diving into its protection, he paused to regain his breath and then began a slow, careful passage through the heavy growth.

On the grass, his bootless feet had presented no problem. Here roots and stubby branches seemed to seek them out until he was wincing at every step. He grunted in relief as he saw the smooth stone ledge just ahead. Cautiously, he parted the screen of bushes and peered into the bowl.

Cully Banks was on his knees, beside the creek, splashing water on his bruised face. Fletcher stood beside him, Rodeen's gun and belt dangling from one hand.

Rodeen's eyes searched the ledge where Cully Banks had been standing when he took off his gunbelt. It was still there,

WILD HORSE RANGE

a dozen feet from Rodeen, the butt of the holster glinting dully in the light from the slanting sun.

From behind Rodeen, brush crackled and Finch's came clearly. "We'll ask the boss what to do. I say wasting bullets. She ain't going nowhere. When she's cold enough, she'll come down."

Rodeen swore. With Finch coming through the brush, Fletcher and Banks waiting in the bowl, he was worse than before. His only chance now was to arm himself.

He stepped onto the ledge and took long strides toward Cully Banks' gunbelt. Fletcher cried out in amazement. Rodeen made a running dive, scooping up the gunbelt and rolling to one side.

Fletcher fired, sending rock splitting at Rodeen. Cully Banks surged to his feet, roaring, "Give me a gun!"

Rodeen jerked Banks' gun from its holster and snapped a hasty shot that sent Fletcher stumbling backward. Fletcher threw Rodeen's gun to Cully Banks and drew his own.

Rodeen used the instant of time to run forward and throw himself down near where Finch and his men would come through the brush screen. His idea was to draw fire that would rip into the bushes and so force Finch to stay back.

Rodeen lay belly down and threw a second shot that forced Fletcher even farther back. Cully Banks was running toward the ledge, working close for a sure shot. He stopped and fired, driving his bullet into the brush.

Rodeen returned the shot, laying it coldly and carefully on target. Cully Banks was screaming, "Rodeen!" in a voice choked with hatred, when Rodeen's bullet caught him in the throat. He took two full steps forward before he flung out his arms and buried his face in the lush, moist grass.

From behind Rodeen and to his left, Finch shouted, "Rodeen's loose in there!" Brush crackled as he plunged forward.

Rodeen quickly changed his tactics. He bobbed up, making himself a target for Fletcher. He dropped down again swiftly so that the bullet buried itself in the bushes above him. "Stay back, Finch!" he shouted.

Carbines opened up as Finch and his men answered what

WILD HORSE RANGE

the first thought was Rodeen's bullet. Lead dug into the grass with a faint splash. Fletcher. He opened his mouth to shout and then checked, breaking into a zig-zagging run in an effort to avoid Beth's deadly barrage pouring out at him.

Rodeen smiled grimly at the success of his maneuver. He stood up, readying himself for the final move.

Finch burst onto the ledge, closely followed by his two grasshoppers. All three drew up short, staring out into the bowl. One man raised his carbine. Finch knocked it aside. "That's Fletcher out there!"

Rodeen stood now, his gun levelled from the hip. "I'm over here," he said softly. "And I can drop all three of you before you get turned around. So let your guns down easy."

Finch twisted about, trying to bring his carbine to bear on Rodeen. Rodeen fired, catching Finch in the chest, slamming him backward. He rolled off the ledge to the grass and lay still.

Rodeen said, "You two, drop those guns!" Reluctantly, they let their carbines fall and then unbuckled their gunbelts. On Rodeen's order, they moved back. He threw the weapons into the grass and then stopped, listening.

From the canyon, he heard the deep voice of Mike Grogarty, and an answering shout, faint and thin, from Beth. Grogarty, the last man Rodeen wanted to see now. Maybe if he kept the Leaning C foreman in the canyon until Beth talked to him, it would save another fight. In an effort to delay Grogarty, Rodeen said to Finch's men, "Go out with your hands up and you've got a chance of living."

Without a word, both plunged quickly into the brush. As the crackle of their passage faded, Rodeen dropped from the ledge and walked to where Cully Banks lay. He was dead, his battered eyes staring upwards at the blue of the sky.

Rodeen tossed Banks' gun down and took his own from the grass beside the body. He walked on, in the direction Fletcher had taken. He reached the shore of the lake and turned to his left.

He could see Fletcher now, at the far end of the slippery

WILD HORSE RANGE

ledge. One hand held his gun, the other clung to the rock where the idol sat, where Rodeen had found the man's paper.

"Come on back, Fletcher," Rodeen said. "The sheriff's coming along soon. Give yourself up and maybe he'll let you be your own lawyer."

The mockery in Rodeen's voice sent color surging into Fletcher's cheeks. He held the gun chest high. "As soon as I let loose of my grip, I'll have to watch my footing," he said. "Is that when you plan to shoot me?"

"There'll be no shooting if you come peaceable," Rodeen said. He lowered his arm, letting his own gun hang at his side.

Fletcher followed suit. He let loose of the niche and took a tentative step forward on the slippery rock. He took another step and a third. His fourth step carried him to where the rock was no longer damp and as he planted his feet firmly, he lifted his gun and fired.

Rodeen felt the impact of the bullet against his left shoulder. He spun backward, stumbled, and righted himself. Fletcher raised his gun for a final shot. They were less than a dozen feet apart now, with Rodeen a perfect target outlined against the late sun.

Rodeen could feel his strength slipping away. He cursed himself for having been taken in by Fletcher's pretended fear. He went to his knees as pain struck him. Fletcher's gun hammered violently, sending a bullet whipping past Rodeen's ear.

Then he had his own gun up. He fired twice, with the same cold deliberation he had used against Cully Banks. Both shots struck Fletcher squarely in the face.

Fletcher made no sound at all as his body went backwards. He sprawled on the slippery rock he had just crossed safely, hung on it for an instant, and then slid over the edge into the water. A spray of silver drops and the soft lapping of wavelets against the rock marked his going.

Rodeen rose and staggered back the way he had come. He stopped as he saw a blur of men come from the brush

WILD HORSE RANGE

He stride toward him. "Grogarty!" he thought wearily, and held his gun in a warning gesture.

He heard Beth's voice call his name and he took a running start forward, lowering the gun. His feet somehow reeled on the track. He fell and lay still, his face buried in the rich sweetness of the thick green grass.

XVII

A FAMILIAR voice said, "I brought some good whiskey, so I put that rotgut away, Pobble."

Rodeen opened his eyes. He looked into the faces of Andy Pobble and Scotty McDennis, and for a moment he thought he was living a recent piece of his life over again. A hand lifted his head. Another held a glass to his lips. He gulped rich whiskey and lay quietly, letting it spread warmth through him.

He felt the softness of a bed and the bulk of bandages on his shoulder and leg. He said, "This is the Leaning C?"

"That's where you are and that's where you stay until you heal," Scotty McDennis said. "The sheriff wants some words with you when you're well enough to tell a good Irish lie to him. Until then, you're paroled to Beth and Mike Grogarty."

Rodeen's mind went back. "How did Grogarty find the lake?"

"Because Weems told him everything before he died. Cully Banks shot the poor old man but he got home and confessed his part. So Grogarty and the boys set out to find you two. I hear they were a little late."

"They missed all the fun," Andy Pobble said. "They tell me that bowl looked like an Indian battlefield." He stared at Rodeen in open admiration.

"After they caught those two spalpeens you left alive, Grogarty rode for the sheriff," Scotty went on. "He found Holzman and that miserable excuse for a deputy and me at the waterhole where I was giving a lecture on hoofprints. Our sheriff was getting interested when Grogarty appeared

WILD HORSE RANGE

and told his story. In the excitement, Corbin tried to stomp out the hoofprints. That reminded me of some things you had said, lad, and I mentioned them to the sheriff. Corbin's unwashed face and his actions gave him away and before he could so much as reach for his gun, Grogarty hit him. Ah, and a fine blow it was, right where Corbin keeps his whiskey. After he got over the beating Grogarty gave him, he talked enough to make it clear you had nothing to do with the Colonel's death.

"Then he pulled his gun and tried to get away. That's when Dutch Holzman lost his temper and shot him."

Beth Canning said from the doorway, "Visiting hours are up, gentlemen."

She herded them firmly from the room and shut the door. Setting a tray on the nightstand, she looked down at Rodeen.

"You're all right?" he asked.

"Shouldn't I be?" she retorted. "I did exactly what you told me when I went back into the canyon. It was easy to keep away from those horrible men."

She put a hand on his forehead. "Everything is all right, Clint—and everybody. You've been cleared, you know."

"So Scotty said. Then why am I paroled to you and Grogarty? Why doesn't Holzman let loose of me?"

"The sheriff wants to be sure you stay long enough to clear up a final legal complication," she said in an overly serious tone.

Rodeen looked suspiciously at her. "What kind of complication?"

"He wants to give the bride away," she answered. "And he wants to be sure the groom stays in the valley long enough to give him his chance."

She was laughing down at Rodeen. He lifted his good arm and drew her toward him.

"You can tell the sheriff he has nothing to worry about," Rodeen said.

Beth's answering words became only a faint murmur as his lips pressed gently against hers.

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