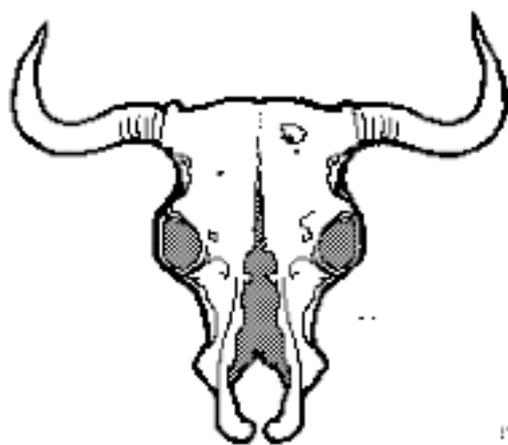


Bull Creek Bully



A Western Novel
by John J. "Jack" Gerken

He was the "Bully of Bull Creek"

"We pulled up stakes down Uvalde way and came all this way. We ain't planning to get bluffed out easy. We got a first warning this morning." Silas briefly outlined the morning shooting, the dead horse and the shouted warning.

"Oh Damn! Its'started already!" Mort exclaimed. "The last bunch that came in two years ago only lasted three weeks," Mort blurted out and then immediately hung his head and said, "Sorry, didn't mean that just the way it sounded. But damn that Jenks. He's the Bully of Bullcreek. Just runs roughshod over anybody he pleases and we ain't got no law closer than sixty miles."

In the tradition of Western Fiction as immortalized by the likes of Louis LaMour, author John J. Gerken, or "Jack" as he was known to his friends, penned this short novel in the late 1980's during his retirement years. Although better known as a newspaperman, statesman and politician, Jack always admired the great western authors, and this book stands as his tribute to their craft. Jack's efforts to get his book printed were fruitless during his lifetime. Now, nearly a decade later, Trails of Time Publishing is proud to finally bring his dream to reality.

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Bull Creek Bully

A Western Novel

By John J. "Jack" Gerken
(02/1922 - 02/1989)

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CAST^OF^CHARACTERS

MORT SWALLOWS Mild mannered storekeeper.

Spectacles, is a dreamer not a doer. Dies in his one vain attempt at courage.

MOLLY SWALLOWS, storekeepers wife, little is known of her except she comforts Mort.

PETER JENKS, big, florid, rancher, greying at temples, tends to act quickly, ask questions later.

NANCY JENKS, 18 year old daughter who is coming west after finishing school back east.

DOUBLE J is Jenks brand.

SLASH M AND FLAT 2 are other large brands in basin.

WILLIAM HARTHOFF blacksmith, called "Will".

GRACE HARTHOFF, blacksmith's wife

PRICE WATERHOUSE, owner of Double Eagle Saloon.

"DOC" PURDEE sawbones, alcoholic.

IVER SORENSON, gun and harness shop.

HILDA SORENSON, would like to run a cafe.

"SPARKY" PLYMAN, early 20's, Bill's Pard. Coming on as good with a gun. Will be saved as he courts Nancy.

BILL WOOD, hardcase. Doesn't have a rep but is fast with a gun and has killed "several" in fair fights.

SILAS BELL leader of the five wagon group of nesters.

BLOSSOM BELL, with child.

JED, nester with Silas.

CLEET SMALL, ranch foreman on Double J. Loyal to brand.

KID, youngster on Double J. Dakota is his hero.

"HOOKER", grizzled old hand on Double J.

DAKOTA, lead hired gunhand.

SLY, second hired gunhand.

GOTTLIEB FISCHER, leader of 17 wagon German immigrant train.

MICHAEL FAIRBURN, friend of Blossom Bell.

Chapter 1

“No consarned sodbuster is gonna fence in Bull Creek!”

The voice was a rumbling bellow. It shook the lid of the hoarhound candy jar on the rough board counter in Mort Swallows general store. The ham sized fist that Peter Jenks was pounding on the boards, made the jar bounce.

Jenks was a rancher. A big man. He was florid, weathered from years spent outdoors in the saddle. Well past his prime, he was greying at the temples. His stomach bulged over his belt but his build gave hints of the tough, hard man that he had been before he had grown older and softer. His entire bearing was one of domineering arrogance. He was used to having his orders carried out at a jump.

But no one jumped except Mort. No one was in the store except the mousy little store owner and the beefy rancher. Startled by the sudden outburst and the roar of Jenk’s voice the store keeper minced back a step until he bumped against the shelves behind the counter. Mort Swallows was too mild mannered to do anything other than nervously adjust his spectacles on his nose and rub a hand across his brow to wipe away imaginary sweat.

Mort was a dreamer and he hated men like Jenks. He had neither the nature nor the courage to stand up and be counted when the going got tough. He had drifted from store to store, moving as the west advanced. Always dreaming of tomorrow.

He had saved a little money from each place he had worked and when his wife’s aunt had left her a little inheritance, they had struck out on their own. They had bought this building in the tiny town of Bullhead and started a general store. It was an improvement from the standpoint that he now “owned” instead of “worked.”

But it was such a tiny hamlet and business was so limited it did little to improve his dream of wealth, power and dignity. If he only had a little more backbone and courage he might improve this area by standing up to men like Jenks. He should run some ads in eastern papers for homesteaders. He had heard this had been done in other areas and that it had brought people flocking in.

Swallows had known Jenks for all of the five years since he came to Bullhead to open his store. His ranch was tucked away in this huge basin ringed by mountains literally on all sides. The huge snow capped Big Horn mountains rose on the east and

curved a protective arm around the basin like a big question mark. The various named ranges of the Rockies were on the north and west and partially on the south. The town was named for the creek on whose banks it was built.

It was in a hidden basin area that had missed earlier settlement because it was off the beaten path. When the west-bound trails that crossed Nebraska got to Wyoming they split apart. One that went north to Oregon was called the Bozeman trail and it followed the flat land along the east side of the Big Horns while the main trail continued west to cross what was known as the Red Desert and then continued west splitting again for California and Oregon. Bridger had blazed a trail through this basin and the trail had looked good and was used a few times until the north end up into Montana territory proved too rough for both men and wagons.

It was a big basin, verdant and green, a huge area of flat land along the Big Horn River that would someday be irrigated. There were seemingly endless grasslands in the foothills rising to the mountains. The entire basin was well watered by the river and by many small creeks such as Fifteen Mile Creek, Grass, Gooseberry, No Water, Plum and Bull Creeks and dozen of others, some un-named.

Swallows knew that Jenks had been ranching in this big basin for 20 years. He came long before others had found the basin or had the courage or the guts to brave the fading Indian hold on the area. None of those passing through except a few furtive hardscrabble prospectors who were trying to eke out a living washing gold from the sands along the creeks or the river. They panned for gold only when they were not hiding from or dodging the scattered bands of Cree, Sioux, Crow or Nez Perce or mixed renegade bands of Indians that were still on the loose, trying to avoid capture and a return to their reservation.

Swallows cleared his throat and finished telling Peter Jenks that a covered wagon had pulled through town that morning on its way to "prove up" on a piece of ground along the Bull Creek bottom land up north of town and that one man had come into the store in typical sod-buster garb of flat hat, flat heels and overalls.

"Looked to me like the outfit warn't much, Pete," Mort placatingly added after Jenks had subsided somewhat from his original outburst. "But he did say there were more a'comin' behind him."

Jenks first explosion seemed to have vented his anger and the news of more coming only brought a growl, that rumbled deep in his barrel chest.

"It's been tried before, Mort," Jenks swung his gaze full upon the storekeeper. "You remember that bunch from Indiana? Well this bunch ain't gonna last any longer than they did!"

Flinging one last glare at the giver of the unwelcome news, Jenks stomped out of the store giving final vent to his anger by slamming the front door. He jammed the boxes of 44's he had purchased into saddle bags and, pulling himself up heavily on the huge roan, roweled it unmercifully. He rode up the only street of the town which was the old Bridger trail and rode north. After a couple of miles he then reined to the right on a trail that led to a fording place on the creek and splashed his way across. The trail led to the Double J ranch headquarters some seven miles to the northeast.

Jenks claimed the right to his huge ranch on the west slopes of the Big Horns by reason of his having been there first. His arrogance and bluster and a mighty salty crew—that included several more than middlin' handy with tied down six shooters—helped him maintain that right. There were only a few other ranchers or settlers who offered to dispute his claim.

Swallows sighed, popping a piece of hoarhound candy into his mouth before settling the jar lid firmly back into place. He remembered all too well two years back when the three Hoosier families had come through town stopping to pick up a few supplies while they had announced their intentions of settling on Bull Creek. They had lasted only three weeks.

Then what was left, one wagon of three, two men with bandages on arms or legs, bedraggled wives and kids peeking out of the wagon, rolled on back south through town like whipped dogs. They traveled on to find the fulfillment of their dreams elsewhere.

They had left three rough crosses on three mounds of dirt along the creek bank marking the graves of one good man and two boys. They had left a mound of ashes showing the location of the one log home they had started. They had left the remains of the burnt wagons which had still contained most of their worldly possessions.

Swallows remembered with a sigh. It was then, for three weeks, he had enough trade to keep him occupied. Maybe his dreams were coming true! Money had started rolling in. He had felt important and needed! Then it all tumbled into ruin when Jenks and his hired gunnies drove the Hoosiers out of the basin.

His trade now consisted mainly of the few people who lived in town, the six or seven smaller ranches within a twenty mile radius of town. There were a few prospectors who came in

three or four times a year for a mule pack of supplies before going back to their claims on the streams in the hills west of town. He desperately needed more business.

“Just can’t make it without some new folks coming in.” he muttered to himself. “Damn that Jenks!” he said half aloud and looked around sheepishly knowing he was alone in the store but cringing in the thought someone might have heard and would repeat it to Jenks. He actually feared the man.

The entire population of the town was only thirty five people. There were only five merchants in town. He couldn’t look for any help from them. The blacksmith did all the work for the Double J as well as the Slash M and the Flat 2 by tacit agreement that if he gave them his first attention, they wouldn’t put on a forge-handy hand on their ranch crew. It was enough to keep the blacksmith and his wife comfortable enough.

Price Waterhouse over at the Double Eagle saloon owned the only bar in over a days ride. He ran poker games on Saturdays when the cowboys came in. While he would like more trade than he had, he certainly couldn’t be counted on to turn against the ranchers in bringing in settlers.

“Doc” Purdee spent most of his time quietly nursing either a budding drunk or a relentless hangover managing to earn enough setting broken bones or sewing an occasional split scalp or even administering to an occasional sick animal to keep him in drinks.

Iver Sorensen ran the only other business, a combined harness and gun shop, besides Swallows store. Iver had several times visited with Mort, expressing his hope they could get some new folks into the area. In the meantime he garnered a meager living for himself and his wife Hilda by fixing guns and harness, doing day work on any ranch that might find itself a hand short for a day or a week and diligently applying himself at the task of growing a huge garden behind his shop.

“Hilda would like to serve a few meals now and then,” Iver had said. “But ve chust don’t have enough people except for Saturday night cowhands.”

“If ve could chust get Jenks to give up Bull Creek,” he once had said to Swallows. “He’s got tousands of acres over east and plenty good vater and grass- chust seems like he’s kinda greedy.” But he never spoke that message in the bar where it might get carried back to Jenks nor to Jenks himself, so it was little more than dreaming as far as Swallows was concerned.

The population was much too small to support, or need, any kind of law enforcement.

The rest of the population of the town consisted of two retired

ranchers and their wives, a couple of widows and a couple of old flea bitten propectors who spent most of their time in front of their cabin homes whittling, making occassional trips to the mountain streams when the weather was “nice enough for the rhumatiz.”

What could he do? He didn't have the courage nor the ability with a gun to offer any encouragement to the harnessman, even if he dared think of getting involved in some sort of a showdown.

Mort was dreaming again. What could he do? Even if he might have entertained the idea of some sort of a showdown, he wouldn't know where to start! He quickly discarded the idea that the nesters might have backbone enough to stand up to Jenks. “Oh sure, it was all well and good to talk about the land being open to homesteading. Jenks hadn't even taken the trouble to file on his own headquarters location over on Plum creek.” He abruptly stopped the pacing up and down behind the counter and grinning sheepishly to himself said half aloud “Talking to yourself ain't agoin to help. Might just as well sell down the stock as far as you can, close it up and get the hell out!”

Maybe he would give that some more thought tomorrow. Not now. Maybe tomorrow.

Glancing up he saw the shadows of his building stretched long across the street. He could faintly hear the rattle of dishes in the back of the store where a partitioned area held his living quarters and where even now Molly, his wife would be fixing his supper.

He pulled the shade on the only window, that in the front door, and dropped the wooden bar in place. He would go back to his favorite rocking chair and let Molly smooth away his worries with good food and sympathetic listening.

He didn't see the two men riding north, riding between the street and the creek bank. Men that rode without smiles and who appeared to give the tiny wide spot in the trail scant attention as they rode.

Chapter 2

“That wern’t much of a town” one of the two riders said as they loped on past the edge of Bull Head and swung back to the trail.

“Way Bell described it to me,” his companion answered.

“Looks to me we ain’t gonna need much to tree that town”

“Ain’t here to tree the town, Sparky,” was the answer as the pair swung back onto the north bound trail and started down into a swale. “Bell said the trouble would be coming from the ranchers to the north and east. They’re the ones dug in and claiming!”

Sparky Plyman, a youth of not more than 20, nodded grimly and looked to the east where the ground rose to the massive Big Horn Mountains. He rode loosely in the saddle but remained constantly on the alert with eyes sweeping both sides of the trail as well as occasionally scanning their back trail.

He liked riding with Bill Wood, a sort of easy going companionship that found the pair riding for miles with very few words needed between them, it was enough to be just riding together.

Sparky’s eyes were hard and a firm line marked his clenched jaw. A well worn 44 hung at his left side, butt forward, tied down for a quick cross body draw. He had all the marks of a well oiled, fast fighting machine that carried the quickness of youth coupled with a sharpness of mind. But a close look would have carried the impression that here rode a clean cut young man that was looking for excitement and fun but who was steady and firm and decent. Sparky would one day leave the adventure trail and settle down.

Sparky’s companion, Bill Wood, was somewhat older, not so much in years as in experience, carried himself in much the same manner, totally alert and instantly ready for whatever might come his way. While Bill had never put his gun up for hire, he had downed several men in face to face fights. He tried never to draw his gun in anger, but only in need. This need included taking the part of an underdog. Bill knew Sparky and realized one bad escapade could tip the boy down the wrong trail. He took extra care as they rode to both train him in survival tactics and how to sense and avoid potential bad situations that might put him “outside the law” and send them both on the owl hoot trail.

Both men carried a 44 Henry repeater in saddle holster slung

under their left knee with butt forward for an easy and quick draw.

They were ready for any action. Bulging saddle bags and blanket rolls and slickers were tied on behind the cante to complete a typical drifting cowboy's outfit.

"Might as well throw off right up ahead, Sparky." Bill Wood had raised himself upwards by putting his full weight in the stirrups as he stood in the wooden cups with his hands steadying himself on the saddle horn. He pointed to a clearing to the right of the trail where a small group of aspens circled a small meadow on what appeared to be a slightly raised bank of the creek.

"Suits me, Bill."

Without another word between them, the pair swung into the little clearing, rode up to the creek bank, and after swinging down they loosened cinches and let the horses drink. As soon as the horses had drunk from the clear, cold creek Bill took the reins and, in what was a well rehearsed routine of setting up evening camp, he stripped saddles and bridles, dropped the gear on a flat place near the trees. Gathering a handful of grass he rubbed down both animals then put hobbles on each horse, loose enough that it would let the horses graze for the night, even make it over to the water for a second longer drink when they were ready and yet keep them close for morning.

Sparky, in the meantime had found the best spot for a fire, gathered a few twigs and small branches, just enough to boil water for coffee and fry the bacon that would make their evening meal. Maybe tonight he would make some fried pan bread if they had enough flour and open a tin of peaches. He had been to the stream to wash his hands and face and fill the canteens with fresh water when Bill strode up to the stream and dipped the old smoke blackened coffee pot full and returned to set it by the fire. Sparky did the honors of actually doing the cooking for the pair. It was a routine they had worked out during their weeks of traveling together.

"Suppose we're going to run into much trouble?" Sparky queried as he set about slicing strips of bacon into the pan. "How'd you ever get hooked up with Bell any way?"

"Like I told you, Silas Bell and me got acquainted a number of years back down around the Nations. He was riding north with a herd and they had a bad stampede. When the crew laid over to rest up after bringing the cattle back together I rode by on my way down to Sante Fe, stopped to share chuck with the crew, met Bell, and we just kinda sat down and visited and hit it off pretty good."

“What’d ya do? Join the drive?”

“No, matter of fact, Silas quit and drifted off with me. They had lost enough beef in the stampede that the trail boss figured they could get along without him. So off we went.”

“We didn’t do much. After a couple months of just helling around Santa Fe we wound up down by Uvalde. Got a job on a medium sized outfit. After awhile I got tired of being in one place but Silas took a shine to the owners oldest gal and he was hooked. I took on out and went to Arizona for a spell.”

“So, how come this job,” Sparky pestered.

“Year ago Silas got married and right after his boss decided to put together a cattle drive up to the mining area in Montana,” Bill continued. “After the drive was finished Bell took the old Bridger trail on south, right through this basin, liked what saw, got the lay of the land and when he got back to Uvalde decided to come back. He talked a few other small operators from around Uvalde into the idea, pooled their resources, and made plans to take off come spring.

“You still ain’t told me how come you’re here or why you wanted me along.”

“Bell figured, from what he’d heard, that a rancher named Jenks and a couple of others up here were laying claim to most all the area and were being plain ornrey towards anyone coming in and that they had a pretty salty crew. Heard they had run off some other folks that come in trying to prove up.

“He got to figuring he would need some help other than the ones who were coming along. He was trying to line up somebody not only for extra manpower but to add a gun or two. He didn’ want someone expecting to settle in as a homesteader. When I happened through Uvalde about that time he put the heavy hand ‘o friendship on me and seein’t’how I liked him and didn’t have nothin’ exciting goin agreed to come.”

“That still don’t say how come I’m here,” Sparky persisted.

“Shucks, seein’s t’ how youre my new podner after Silas done got hitched, just didn’t want to go without ya,” Bill grinned. “Besides, you always told me you were gettin good with those guns and were lookin’ for some excitement. The way I see this one, it shapes up to have plenty of that before it all gets settled out!”

“Hot Dam, sure glad you asked me along,” Sparky chirped, slapping his sidearm, “Knew something good was coming seein’ t’ how it was taken ya so long to spill the beans.”

The pair went silent as they settled in to the food and hot coffee.

Bill and Sparky had first met one night in a out-of-the-way cantina over on the border of New Mexico and Mexico when Bill had held some knife wielding vaquarios at bay with his gun while they backed out of the swinging doors, leaped on their horses and pounded their way north into the mesquite covered desert. The Mexicans had'nt pursued them as they had been about as drunk as Sparky was and the saucy little Senorita that had been the cause of the trouble turned her attention back to the Mexican cowboys and they soon forgot their supposed injured pride.

“What do we do now?”

“Don't rightly have that figured yet, but Silas should be gettin' here soon if he ain't here already. Tomorrow, we'll wander on north a little way. Bell's spot should be somewhere close. Maybe then we'll just wander around a mite and look over the countryside just to see what we can see.”

The sun had set behind the mountains and darkness had fallen. The fire, small to start with, had died away. The horses were contentedly grazing on the lush grass and the pair shook out their blankets, with saddles for pillows made ready for a good nights rest.

Both men rolled one last cigarette and folding their arms behind their heads, gazed up into the star filled sky that stretched for an eternity above them. Each mind filled with thoughts of what the morrow might bring.

Bill thought about his friend Silas Bell who at this very moment would have bedded down with his new bride in their covered wagon, either a little way north on his chosen spot or still comin' up on the trail somewhere south and envied him.

“How come I'm always so ready to move on? Fiddle foot they call me.” Bill thought. “Well, it takes both kinds,” he mused. There were men who were willing to assume the responsibility of settling down to wife and home and family and dedicate themselves to building communities. And then his kind. They kept drifting, showing up whenever and wherever a ready gun was called for. He liked to take the side of the under dog. Time enough for him to become respectable later on. One day the right gal and the place. Some day. One day. But not just yet.”

So far he had managed to avoid spectacular gun fights. He had killed a few in fair fights but hadn't built a reputation. No legends followed him or went ahead so he hadn't been bothered with green hands or brash youngsters trying to build a reputation laying for him along the way, trying to prove they had a faster gun.

So far he had always found a good pard to side him in his

travels, had a good horse and saddle, was good enough with cattle to find a job when money ran low and had enough “wild country” savvy to get along living off the land when traveling.

Some day — One day — But not now. Maybe tomorrow. So, with guns near his hand just under the edge of his blanket, he slept.

Chapter 3

The rattle of distant gunfire brought the two sleeping men scrambling out of their bedrolls.

It was light but the sun itself was still behind the mountains.

"Its somewhere up north," Sparky commented as he stomped into his boots and hat.

"Lets get going, pard," Bill was already racing for the horses.

With the instant alertness born of years on the trail and exposure to danger, both men hurried to their horses who were standing nearby, heads and ears raised and pointing north. Quickly smoothing on saddle blankets, cinches were drawn tight; rifles were rammed home into boots and two riders started moving out of their bedground headed in the direction of the shots.

The first burst of gunfire had indicated several rifles were firing with the lighter reports of six shooters mixed in. The firing had now slowed to measured shots as the mix up, whatever it was, slowed from the initial stage down to a siege.

"Lets stick close to creek for the brush cover," Bill yelled at his companion as they both spurred north. It was hard to tell how far away the shots were. They could see no smoke or movement. Screened by the bushes along the creek bank neither rider could see far ahead.

"Lets hit that ridge to the left," Sparky waved. "If we go up that draw we should be able to slip to the ridge and peek over and see what's goin on"

Bill's only answer was to rein his horse to the left, riding up the tiny valley that broke away from the creek. After only a moment, the gunfire broke out with renewed vigor. As if by common consent, both riders slowed their horses and cautiously rode them up the ridge stopping just before they skylined.

Standing in their stirrups they could see a large meadow in the center of which was a canvas covered wagon, its horses tethered nearby and crouching under the wheels were two prone men facing the creek and firing an occasional shot in that direction.

From their vantage elevation Bill and Sparky could see four horses held behind the bushes on the creek bank. The shooters could not be seen in the brush and high grass, but puffs of smoke gave away the location of the attackers.

They were laying down a steady, measured fire on the wagons. From the looks of things, neither side had scored any

hits or hurts.

“That’s just got to be Silas down there at the wagon,” Bill said. “Lets work back down this draw and then pop over a little closer to that bunch in the brush and see if we can even this up a little!”

Sparky was already turning his horse and moving back to the east, rifle out and across his saddle. When they judged they were about even with the attackers, they turned once again for the crest of the ridge. Before they topped the ridge, they dropped to the ground and stooping low worked their way to the top until they could just see those in the bottom.

“Lets just dust a few shots around them so they know we are here and not get into killing until we know more of what’s goin on,” Bill said as he threw his Winchester to his shoulder and laid two quick shots under the very noses of the men firing toward the wagon.

The three men in the grass got the idea immediately. They knew at once reinforcements had arrived. In confusion they stopped firing and began looking around, wondering where the shots came from. They knew they had been boxed in.

Meanwhile Sparky had laid a pair of bullets under the bellies of the horses, causing them to shy and dance bringing the man holding them out in the open, fighting the reins. Sparky then lined a shot right at the horse holder’s feet bringing a string of oaths from the fourth attacker along with his call to his cohorts. “Hey, you guys, get over here and help me before I loose these damned horses!”

Bill and Sparky held their fire as the three shooters joined the horse holder, pulled themselves into saddles and whirled away north into deeper brush.

The clear morning air carried their shouts to Bill’s ears.

“Damn that Jenks. He didn’t say anything about more than one wagon! We damn near got in a hole back there.” The voices of the unknown riders faded as they raced northward out of sight and sound.

The two men at the wagon had risen to their feet and were standing near the back endgate shading their eyes with their hands and peering eastward toward where Bill and Sparky were still hidden behind the ridge.

One of them cupped his hand and shouted “Come on down for a cup, friend,” in the direction of the south ridge.

Mounting, Bill and Sparky booted their rifles but kept one hand hovering near a six gun as they walked their horses over the ridge.

After only a few steps past the ridge Bill gighed his horse to

a lope and shouted "Silas! It's me,—Bill" and started waving. One of the men at the wagon responded at once by throwing his hat in the air and letting go with a cry that would have done credit to a charging Apache.

The intervening distance was quickly covered and Bill flung off his horse in a cloud of dust, grasping his friends arm and slapping him on the back.

"Knew the minute I'd leave you alone you'd be in trouble!"

"Dang glad you came when you did! Those yahoos were getting downright pesky."

Introductions went around along with an invitation for coffee.

Sparky demurred, announcing he was going back to their campground to roll up and pick up their bedding and other gear "before those varmints happen to double back across the creek and take their spite out on our camp gear."

"Besides, unless you got an oversupply of cups, I might miss that coffee, which I sorely need cause we got roused out kinda sudden this morning before I got mine." While Sparky went for gear and Silas added wood to the fire and moved the coffee pot closer to the blaze.

The four riders who had done the attacking slowed in their pounding drive north. Out of hearing of the wagon they stopped and sat on milling horses.

"I tell you Cleet, we can't leave like this or old Jenks will have our head." the youngest of the quartet spoke while the horses stamped, blowing after their hard dash away from the attack.

"Well, why don't you just sashay back there and do something else," a grizzled oldster retorted. "I don't know 'bout you but it 'pears to me old Jenks got his dope all mixed up. Shucks that was just supposed to be one nester bunch. We got hit from two sides. That means at least two bunches or at least more'n he figured on."

"They wern't shooting like no sodbusters neither," the third chimed in.

The fourth man, obviously the leader of the four, snorted in disgust as he gave the other three sharp glances. "We should a yelled our little message first but no, you," stabbing his finger at the youngest "Hadda open up with your pea shooter."

"Oh yeah," the youngest retorted. "You started right in too. And besides, I noticed you lit out of there just as fast as the rest of us when them shots started coming from up on the ridge!"

"Mebbe so," was the retort. "But we gotta go back and deliver the Jenk's message, only this time no shooting until and less I say so, Savvy?"

With nods of approval the four turned their horses and slowly

made their way back along the creek bank, careful to keep a screening of bushes and trees between them and the meadow.

Cautiously one of them went the last few feet to the fringe of the trees on foot.

“Hey. The wagon.”

The men at the wagon dropped into the grass, pulling six shooters as they did and answered the hail.

“We’re listening.”

“This is a warning, next time ther’l be more of us. We hear you’re planning on squatting here on the creek. Tain’t allowed. Just pack up and move. Go back the way you come. Aint no way outta here to the north for a wagon so just head on back south.”

“Didn’t take ‘em long,” Silas said in a low voice to Bill. “What should we do?”

“Don’t answer ‘em and lets find out how serious they are,” was Bill’s reply.

The silence dragged on for several minutes and lay heavy in the valley when a single shot rang out from the brush. Once again the youngster’s itching trigger finger had got the best of him.

A crash behind the wagon showed the shot had hit one of the wagon team and it was down thrashing in the grass.

“Why those no goods, shootin a man’s horse!” Silas exclaimed. Grabbing his rifle he snarled “Lets give it to em.” But look as they might, no targets presented themselves from the low vantage point of the wagon.

“No sense in wasting ammunition,” Bill counseled. “Looks like a standoff for now. From the sounds of it, must of been a yonker that loosed that shot when he wasn’t supposed to, judging from the cussing out he’s gettin’.”

In a few moments there was again the sound of horses galloping to the north and east across the creek and then fading into the distance.

When Sparky rode up, his horse piled high with gear, the three were back at the fire fixing breakfast.

“What was the shooting about?” Sparky asked.

“Gettin’ our attention to deliver a message to move on,” Silas answered. “But them no goods got one of my horses, damn them! Part of my team. Hell, I couldn’t move even if I’d a mind to.”

“We goin after ‘em?” Sparky asked.

“Nope, not yet. Got some figurin to do first,” Bill replied.

Chapter 4

The four riders pulled gear from their horses, putting saddles on the top rail and turning the horses into the corral next to the barn. They continually cast furtive glances toward the rambling ranch house located on a gentle rise and overlooking a well built-up ranch headquarters area that had barns, corals, bunk house, cook shack and several other smaller buildings. When they finished putting away their horses they stood arguing and gesturing among themselves.

“You go on up and tell him,” the oldster was saying. “Dag nab it, yore gettin the chief honcho’s pay, ya might as well earn it.”

“Hooker, you just ain’t gonna squirm outta catchin it along with all of us,” Cleet said, his pointed toed boot nudging pebbles in the dirt. “This rightly should’a been a job for Dakota and Sly.” He was referring to Jenk’s two gunnies that were used to carry out his orders for things other than normal ranch work.

On a regular basis, Cleet Small and eight others carried on the normal ranch chores of spring roundup, branding, breaking horses and doing the hundreds of other normal ranch chores that called for hard work, long hours and little gun work. One extra man with a gimpy leg was the ranch cook.

Jenks kept the two fast gun artists, Dakota and Sly, on the payroll only for the purpose of backing Jenks hand when dirty work was afoot or for now and then chasing down some rustlers and shooting them down on the spot. They normally were at his side when he rode .

At times, depending on the situation, that number of gun hands increased. About five years back the north pastures suddenly became a favorite target for rustlers. They would run the stock north over the notch and down into the mining camps around Virginia City, where they were sold with few if any questions as to brands. Then there had been ten special hands, just hired to put a stop to the rustling and let drift shortly after.

Rustling activity had stopped quick enough after Jenks gunmen left six of the rustlers neatly laid in a row alongside the trail north of the notch.

Jenks impatience forced him to move quickly. “Time enough to ask the dumb questions later” he always said. It was his quick, decisive actions that had carved and held his empire and kept most of his neighbors in fear of him.

His regular ranch operation changed little. Cleet had been his ranch foreman since the beginning and the ranch was run with businesslike efficiency. The regular crew handled the day to day operations. Men were added for the annual cattle roundup and the drive that went down to Cheyenne each fall to market the normal herd build up and rid the herd of culls. The sell off provided the money to run the ranch.

The four men clustered on the veranda of the house while Cleet knocked on the door that led to the room Jenks used for his office. Hooker, the oldest, lolled diffidently against a porch pillar while the youngster doffed his hat and fidgeted nervously, trying to stay in the background. He felt certain he would come in for some extra attention because it was his shot that had downed the horse.

He knew he probably deserved a bawling out for that because of westerners attitudes about horses and Hooker's caustic "How the hell they gonna pull out with only one horse?" But wouldn't that have been what Dakota would have done?

Dakota was Kids hero. Dashing looking in his fancy clothes and a fancy rig on his horse with two pearl handled guns, tied down in well oiled holsters, Kid wished he could look like him. Dakota didn't have to do routine chores around the ranch. He came and went pretty much as he pleased, often riding away for days at a time. About the only thing that seemed to be a duty was to check with Jenks each day he was on the ranch for any new orders and being on hand to side the boss in times of trouble.

"Well?"

That was the only comment Jenks made when he came out of his office to stand glaring at the four on the veranda.

"They was there alright, right in that little bottom where them other nestors were a couple years ago," Cleet said, reaching for the makings to twist himself a cigarette. "We dusted 'em up with a few shots and delivered your message."

"Did you stick around to see if they started movin'?" Jenks asked quickly.

"Well, no we didn't," Rolly answered. "Seems there was more than one bunch. Someone pulled down on us from the south ridge and we sorta lit out of there pronto, if you know what I mean?"

"What?" Jenks exploded. "You mean more than one bunch?"

"Don't know," Cleet replied. "Only saw one wagon, "But there was at least two shooting from the ridge and at least two from the wagon."

"That don't sound like no normal nester bunch. Four men to a wagon? Ain't normal," Jenks growled. "Swallows said only one man came into his store. Something fishy goin on here."

Swinging his gaze to the youngster he blurted, "Kid, get on your horse and ride over to Ten Sleep and see if Dakota is there and tell him to get on back here pronto, hear? If'n he ain't there see if they know where he is and then go wherever they say and get him. Keep a lookout for Sly too. Mebbe he might know where Dakota is. I want Sly too. This might take 'em both or mebbe even more! Nobody makes Double J run!"

The youngster, snapped his hat on his head with a smart "Yessir" and took off at a run for the corral, pleased with the assignment as well as being happy to escape the expected dressing down about the horse shooting incident.

Jenks watched the youth momentarily, then turned back to Cleet. "Guess you did what you could, get some eats and then go on up north and help them others chousing them draws up on Whitestone ridge. I'll give them nestors until Dakota and Sly get here to get movin'."

"You sure they got the message?" he growled directly at Cleet.

"Yep, yelled it out myself. Loud and clear," Cleet answered and turned and started off the veranda. The others fell in behind him.

He hadn't told the entire story. "What the hell, that job really should have been done by Dakota and Sly," Cleet reasoned to himself as he led the men to the cook shack. "Jenks should have waited until they returned." He thought to himself. "After all, me and my crew are cowhands, not gunslicks." But they took orders and were loyal to the brand, even if it meant shooting at nesters.

Jenks continued to scowl looking off to the west as if his gaze could hurry the nesters on their way out of the basin. He turned after a moment and went back into his office where he pulled a bottle from his bottom desk drawer and downed a healthy slug.

Settling back in his chair he said, half aloud, "Damn will it never stop? You'd think after all these years they would leave me alone."

With his elbows on the desk and his head in his hands he thought about the grave of his wife and his son on the hillside behind the house. Those two plus five good hands who had worked for the brand with unswerving loyalty. "Thats a hellofa price to pay but damn it, thats the only language those rustlers and nesters understand. Guns and more guns."

He let his mind drift back some ten years to when he had lost

his wife. There had been an Indian raid. A renegade band had swooped down on the ranch in mid morning. Only the cook and the horse wrangler had been on the place at the time. After shooting the two hands out near the coral the Indians had turned their attention to the house.

Only the quick action of his wife in hiding their boy and girl under the potato sacks in the root cellar that opened off the back stoop had saved them. His wife, bravely standing up to the bunch had insisted she was alone in the house. It saved the children, but the braves, drunk on illegal moonshine whiskey, used their lances to vent their anger on her, running her through many times before they galloped off.

He had found her when he had returned from the mornings work and had found his children, frightened and unharmed. Mustering his entire crew he had ridden after the Indians, finally catching them up on the top of the northern Big Horns. The band had taken refuge in an ancient Holy Ground where rocks were formed in ceremonial circles on a high Mesa. They had ridden the Indians down and unmercifully shot every last one.

He had ridden back to face the problems of a motherless eight year old daughter and a ten year old son. He had sent the daughter back east to live with his dead wife's sister "for a decent upbringing and a good education" and set out to raise the son himself.

He had done well with the son, bringing him up as a "good cowhand" until one day, when riding with his crew, he had been caught and killed in a stampede on a regular fall drive to Cheyenne.

Jenks suddenly pulled himself upright, thinking now of his daughter. She would be eighteen by now and he had a letter last month saying she was graduating from that eastern school and wanted to come "home." He had almost forgotten her and that letter. He didn't know for sure when schools graduated but guessed it was spring. That too. That could be soon.

For a year or two after his wife's death and his daughter's departure he had kept the house open. Then he had slipped into a habit of eating with the crew at the cook shack and using only the room that was his office and the ground floor bedroom where he slept. By now the house was filled with odds and ends of tack, old clothes and accumulated junk. The rooms were festooned with cobwebs. Maybe he could get the blacksmith's wife to come and clean it up.

He would have to stock supplies. Could his girl cook and keep house? Would she stay or would the west be too tame and quiet after her many years back east? He had sent money

on a regular basis but hadn't written much and his lack of letters was treated in kind as he heard from her only on special days like Christmas and his birthday.

He reached again for the bottle in his desk drawer.

Too many problems. He would start to worry about them tomorrow. "Not today. Maybe tomorrow."

Chapter 5

With their backs against the wagon wheels, Silas and Bill sat on the ground. They balanced plates of bacon, beans and fried pan bread on their crossed legs with steaming cups of black coffee in their left hands. Sparky squatted in the grass with his plate in his hand and his cup on the ground. The fourth man, who had been introduced as Jed, stood at the back of the wagon with his plate and cup resting on the dropped tailgate. Little was being said as they concentrated on eating.

When they were finished and had dropped their plates and spoons into the water filled wreckpan they re-filled coffee cups. All four men gathered in the shade of the wagon, Bill and Silas again taking the favored spots with the wheels for a back rest.

“So you left Blossom behind in the other wagons,” Bill commented about Silas’s bride of less than one year.

“There’s four more wagons and a little herd about two-three days behind us,” Silas said. “A short while before we left Uvalde, Blossom’s Pa decided he’d stake us to about thirty head of heifers. Jed here had about twenty head of young stuff he wasn’t too keen on leaving behind and a couple of the others had a little young stuff so we decided to trail ‘em on up along with the wagons.”

“Long way from starting a ranch,” Silas grinned. “We only got about sixty head all told, but with the kind of grass around here, they should make out pretty good.”

“What about winters?” Bill asked. “Ya gotta plan on a little feed. It can get mighty mean during the wintertime.”

“The way this land lays in this basin its mighty well protected from the weather. If we claim some of our land over west we’ll pick up some even more sheltered land,” Silas said pointing to the slopes rising on the far side of the meadow. “When I was here before I rode over that way and found several pretty good sized meadows a little higher up that are pretty well sheltered by bluffs, cut banks and trees that should take care of some of the wintering problems.”

The entire area was a huge basin, shaped like a tear drop. It was ringed by mountains. The Big Horns were to the east and northeast while various named ranges of the Rockies took in the rest of the ringing mountains. It actually was a weather perfect formation for this far north, providing ample rainfall in summer. The entire basin was chinook country where, in winter, those sudden warm winds came down off the mountains turning any

heavy snows into groundwater. There were enough trees to provide cover in the winter and shade in the summer.

“Way this grass is wouldn’t take no time to put up a few stacks of hay,” Jed volunteered. “We got five men and two husky boys in our bunch so we should make out fine kinda exchanging work back and forth.”

Bill nodded, realizing that this little group had spent some thinking through their move and barring some trouble from those already established in the basin, had a good chance of succeeding. The land certainly looked good, well watered, flat for a good distance along the creek and then gently rolling as it broke away to other creeks. A few miles back of that the hills gave way to foothills that were tree covered but there were breaks in the trees through which meadows or parks of considerable extent could be seen.

But all that thinking didn’t amount to a damn if there was to be more action like this morning. The opposition to nesters, even if they ran a few head, was an unknown. Hay could be burnt. Hell, people could be shot! All the planning in the world couldn’t answer the question of what to do when guns started blazing.

“But what about those already here?” Bill was asking. “You mentioned that when I talked to you last. Remember, you worried about that cause you talked me into showing up here to help you. Then what about this morning? Them was real bullets wizzing around our ears.” “

Silas recounted what he had learned when he had ridden through the area last year on his way back to Uvalde from the Montana cattle drive. “From what I heard then from the storekeeper was that some folks had tried to settle in and got chased out by the biggest rancher in the area. Seems his name is Jenks and he really lives and runs his herd pretty much off to the east and north of here. I guess that was his crew that delivered that message this morning.”

“That storekeeper said he was pretty rough, bluffing out others over the years and kept a couple of gun slicks to back his hand.” Silas went on. “Didn’t get to meet any others save the blacksmith and he didn’t have much to say.”

“Theres a few smaller ranches up north of here. Spotted them when I rode through. Looked like good ranch country up there, higher up but lots of grass and trees, all the way up to the pass way up there.”

Even from here you could see the notch in the mountains that would have been the pass Silas was talking about. In this clear mountain air it was hard to tell just how far away it was but Bill judged it was probably at least forty miles.

"Where you figurin' on planting yourself?" Bill asked.

"Right about there," Silas replied, pointing about a hundred yards northwest to a slight rise in the ground. "There still seems to be some sign right there on the ground that I guess is what's left from those other folks who tried to settle here. My guess is they looked around some before they decided so it's probably good enough for me. But I aim to look a little more afore the wagons get here," he added.

"I'd like to look a little, too," Jed spoke up.

"Considering what those gunnies yelled about coming back, best be doing a little forting up for a spell," Bill said. "Any place in that little town you can buy a horse?"

"Don't know but it looked like that blacksmith had a little corral behind his shop. Worth a try. Can't move this wagon much with one horse."

"Take my horse and ride into town," Bill offered. "See what you can find out about what the lay 'o the land is now and if anything has changed since you were here last. Better buy a few more shells as well, we might be needing 'em. Both Sparky and me use 44's."

Patting Bill's horse on the neck to get acquainted, Silas flipped the reins and headed for Bullhead. Jed proceeded to clean up the remains of breakfast. Sparky took his rifle and saying he was going looking for some "fresh meat" rode to the west. Bill tipped his hat over his eyes, lay back in the tall grass and tried to nap.

He couldn't sleep. Those shouted words kept coming back to his mind—"We'll be back. and there'll be more of us!" When would they strike? Would they come with guns blazing? How many would there be? He had to come up with some kind of a plan. Silas and Jed were really both fine fellows but were pilgrims in this kind of an action.

Why not seek out this Jenks and face him? Get a feel of him and judge just how tough he was and what he had behind him. "That's what he would do! Go right to the top! Just as soon as Silas got back with his horse.

"Mebbe tomorrow," he mused.

Sparky rode westward looking for some game and looking over the countryside. He liked what he saw. A profusion of wild game of all sorts looked at him as he rode or ran for a short distance and then stopped and watched him ride by. He decided he could take his pick. He would ride a little further and maybe pick out a nice young, fat doe deer. That would make good eating.

The lay of the land was near perfect. The grass grew high

and thick. There plenty of building spots that would please a woman's eye. Trees scattered about and wild flowers peeking out among the grasses adding spots of color in a grand array.

Sparky gave some thought to those wagons coming in and thought about his own chances of taking a homestead. He wondered briefly if there would be any young ladies on the wagons. Wouldn't be much fun to set up a bachelor homestead. He was brought back to the present when his horse shied, almost unseating him. A covey of grouse had burst out of a low group of bushes almost at his feet.

"Depends on Bill," he thought to himself. "I guess if he wants to amble on after this bunch is settled, I'll do the same. Time enough for settlin' down. Not today anyway. Maybe tomorrow."

Chapter 6

Silas tied the rein to the short hitch rail in front of the blacksmith shop and went inside. The blacksmith paused in his work at the forge as Silas entered.

“Howdy, name is Silas Bell,” He said offering his hand. “Know anybody who might have any horses for sale?”

“William Harthoff,” the smith said, wiping his hand on his leather apron and grasped the proffered hand in a brief but hearty clasp. “Just call me Will!”

“Got a couple out back here,” he said nodding to the rear of the shop. “Ain’t much, actually they’re more work horses. Picked ‘em up off some folks who came through about a year ago,” he continued. “They lost their wagon and didn’t have much use for ‘em so I got them cheap but I been boarding them all this while and getting tired of feeding ‘em.” He didn’t volunteer the information that the reason he had the team was that the wagon they had pulled had been burned and the owner shot as they were bullied out of the area.

“Make you a real deal on the pair.” He pointed to two average looking horses standing hipshot in a fenced in area behind the blacksmith shop. There was a small leanto shelter next to which some hay had been piled. The horses obviously had not had much care, appearing shaggy and rough but were in good condition, not having worked for a year.

After brief haggling a deal was struck and money changed hands.

“Be needin’ the harness?” Will asked. “They aint much but if you can use the set say whatever it’s worth to you.”

Silas offered two dollars and it was accepted.

“You the wagon that went through yesterday?” the blacksmith asked. “Have trouble with that team you had?”

“Lost one to gunfire this morning,” Silas answered. “What do you know about or what can you tell me about somebody named Jenks? Seems like that was the name we heard when a bunch unloosed a scattering of shots at us and killed one of my team.”

William Harthoff suddenly became busy examining the dirt floor of his shop. “That would be our biggest and oldest rancher hereabouts.” he said brusksly. “If’n you got a message from him —best pay heed.” He turned and commenced pumping the bellows on the forge with vigor enough to send sparks billowing upward from the fire. It was obvious he was

done talking.

Silas waited a moment and then deciding he was not going to get any further information took the halters and harness from the wall put them on the horses and led them out through the gate and mounting Bill's horse led them on up the street to the general store.

The welcome he had received wasn't good. If the rest of the town was like that they were really in for trouble.

Tying up in front of the store Silas was literally met at the door by a genial and smiling Mort.

"Come on in. Store ain't too big but we will stock what you and your folks need and want if you let me know," Mort was hustling up behind the counter doing his best to exude friendship. "Get supplies once a week along with whatever mail might be coming in so we can fill your needs within a week or two at most."

"Right now, just a couple boxes of 44's and maybe a little information," Silas answered looking around at the meager stock.

"You bet," Mort hastened to get the shells, put them on the counter and leaning both hands against the counter waited the next question.

Silas briefly explained that he had stopped through a year ago and how after his brief visit to the basin, he and four neighbors had decided to come back to stay.

"What I'm asking now is this—has the situation changed any or is that fellow named Jenks still on the prod?"

Mort blanched, shuffled his feet, looked at Silas and cleared his throat. "Oh it would be just great to have some new folks in the area! But as far as Jenks is concerned, I'm afraid he hasn't changed much."

"Wished I could give you better news or help some myself," Mort was twisting his hands nervously. "But I ain't much at standing up to anybody, I guess."

"What about the rest of the area?" Silas asked. "Is everybody either takin his side or scairt of him?"

"Don't rightly know for sure if it were to come to a showdown," Mort said. "Slash M is the next biggest ranch as far as size is concerned and the Flat 2 is right next. Haven't actually heard or seen them doing much. 'Spect they are letting Jenks take the lead seeins'ta how he always pops off so quick." Mort lifted the lid of the hoarhound candy jar, motioning Silas to help himself.

"There is about four other smaller spreads," he continued. "While I've never talked to them direct about how they felt about folks comin' in, I 'spect they wouldn' mind some new

folks coming in. They never 'peared to be too grabby, if you know what I mean."

"What about folks here in town?" asked Silas.

"Well, of course I'm in favor of folks comin in, but I ain't much account," Mort sighed. "Will, the blacksmith is probably on Jenks side cause he does all their smithing and they don't keep a forge at the ranch. I understand the same is true for the Slash M and the Flat 2. Old Doc Purdee is drunk most of the time so you can count him out. Price at the Double Eagle saloon probably would welcome new business but I wouldn't count on him to say much. He'll get the business come one way or another."

"That leaves Iver at the harness and gun shop and I think we could count on him," Mort finished his review of the businessmen.

"Ain't nobody else in town 'cepting a couple old propectors, a couple widows and two old couples," Mort summed it up sadly. "We just ain't much of a town and if we don't grow some pretty soon looks like Iver and me might have to pack up!"

"Maybe we can change that!" Silas said. "We got four more wagons coming with nine grown folks and five kids and we're trailing about sixty head of stock. Silas didn't mention Bill and Sparky, prefering to keep them as a hole card in this game. Anyway, they hadn't indicated any interest in staying after the group had settled and trouble, if it came, blew over.

"We pulled up stakes down Uvalde way and came all this way. We ain't planning to get bluffed out easy. We got a first warning this morning." Silas briefly outlined the morning shooting, the dead horse and the shouted warning.

"Oh Damn! Its'started already!" Mort exclaimed. "The last bunch that came in two years ago only lasted three weeks," Mort blurted out and then immediately hung his head and said, "Sorry, didn't mean that just the way it sounded. But damn that Jenks. He's the Bully of Bullcreek. Just runs roughshod over anybody he pleases and we ain't got no law closer than sixty miles."

"I understand," Silas said. "We don't expect anyone to fight our battles for us. We just might have a trick or two up our sleeve. Thanks for the news. You can just pass the word along we 're here to stay." Shaking hands with the storekeeper, Silas departed.

Mort, his face wreathed in smiles, raced back to the partitioned area to pass along to his wife Molly what he considered the best news in years.

Figurin' he had used up enough time, Silas started the horses

walking back to his camp. For the first time in the year he had been planning and thinking of this venture he began to harbour a few doubts.

He wondered if Bill and Sparky would be enough to tip the scale in his favor. He had a good crew of folks coming, not gunfighters, it was true, but solid determined folks who would dig in and not let just a little trouble drive them off.

He gazed at the snow capped mountain peaks showing far in the distance. One stood out above the rest over to the east in the Big Horns. He decided he would use that one as his beacon and use it as a central landmark to always look to to determine his location. "Why not call it Snow Peak?" he thought. He, all over again, fell in love with the area.

He made his way slowly back to his little camp north of Bullhead.

Chapter 7

When Silas had finished recounting what he had learned in town, Bill rose from the ground near the wagon and took the reins of his horse and mounted.

"I'm going ridin'," He said. "Don't look for me for at least a day. I want to size up this Jenks layout and maybe visit with a couple of the other ranchers a bit. We better find out who we can count on or if there is anybody who might be on our side." He rode away north.

The Kid had stopped in every bar in Ten Sleep but no one could give him any information as to the whereabouts of either Dakota or Sly. There was one hint that they might have gone to the Hole in Wall but the Kid neither knew the location other than rumor and had no inclination to ride that far south on what might be a wild goose chase.

As he lounged in the shade of the last bar wondering what to do now he suddenly sat bolt upright and slapped his open hand against his knee. "Hell, why not ride back and handle it myself? They, after all, were nothing but sodbusters. He had to make his mark sometime soon in Jenks eyes!"

Whipping the reins loose from the tie rail he headed back to Bull Creek.

"Nancy is coming back from the east," Jenks was saying as hat in hand he stood awkwardly on the stoop of the Harthoff house talking to the blacksmith's wife. "I haven't used the house hardly at all since Nancy left, and I suspect it'll be a big job to get it all cleaned up and it's sure beyond me to do it."

Jenks was always uncomfortable around women and it galled him to be in a pleading situation. But Grace Harthoff, an understanding woman, assured him she would be glad to come out and "rid up the house" and get it ready for his daughter's arrival. If he would send a hand in a buggy or wagon and make arrangements to pick up the necessary supplies at Mort's store she would be ready tomorrow morning and would take care of the job, staying at the ranch until it was done.

Jenks, with a heartfelt sigh of relief, murmured his thanks and headed for the Double Eagle Saloon.

Mort Swallows was engaging in the weekly pleasure of looking through the mail that the freighter had dropped off

before he had pulled on to the saloon to unload some liquor from the back of the wagon. After unloading the liquor the freighter would come back to Mort's to unload some flour and other dry goods Mort had ordered. These had been first loaded in the front of the wagon when the freighter had picked up his load back in Casper.

Mort took note not only of who received mail but also observed who it came from before sorting it into an alphabetical set of pigeon holes behind the counter. There it waited until someone came into his store to check to see if they had mail.

He noted two letters for Peter Jenks bearing his daughters name on the return, mailed three weeks before from an address in Baltimore. There was a seed catalog for old Mrs. Grundy and a flyer for him announcing a new line of Bailey hats that he could stock, two newspapers for Waterhouse and a few other letters that didn't show who sent them addressed to some of the other folks in the area.

"Sure would be nice if Bullhead were declared an official post office," Mort thought. He would like the title of Postmaster.

Dakota stopped his horse on the flat space of the "notch" and let his gaze wander over the immense Big Horn basin spread below him. This was the north end of the old Bridger trail and it had fallen into disuse as easier routes were found. It was a breath taking view. He hooked one leg over his saddle horn and twisted a quirly, waiting until his side partner Sly caught up with him.

Letting their horses blow after the climb up the north side of the notch, Dakota eased his right holster and grinned at Sly slumping in the saddle. "You sure tied on a good one last night. Sure you wanta go all the way back to the Double J or should we cut off and stop at the north line camp?"

"Don't bother me none to go on," Sly retorted, rubbing his stubbled chin. "Won't be nothing goin' on back at the ranch anyway. Ya know, it's really gettin' damned boring back there and after the past few days in Virginia City I'm about ready to give old Jenks notice and head over the hill for good!"

"Better think that over," Dakota responded gently. "Hell, where else we goin'ta make that kinda money for doing what little we do? 'Sides, I heard Jenks say his daughter is coming back from out east. Might be kinda interesting with that little filly around the house!"

"Who wants to rob the cradle?" Sly retorted.

"Hold on, Sly," Dakota grinned. "She's coming up on about

eighteen now and don't go makin' no snap judgements 'till you get a look at the merchandise."

"Guess mebbe you're right. Lets get goin', I'm lookin' for some good bunk time tonight. Whoooo! That was some shindig last night at the Bon Ton and that little Chineese gal was somethin' else."

The pair moved off winding their way down into the basin and the Double J headquarters.

Fifteen men, shoulder to shoulder, standing around the canvas covered immigrant wagon, lifted on signal and literally raised the wagon with the busted wheel up onto the blocking log that had been set near the axle so the wheel could be pulled and trail repairs made. A like number of women were tending several small cook fires preparing a meal for everyone while the train paused to make the repairs. They had just passed the summit at Lost Cabin Pass and were on their way north into the Big Horn Basin.

Gottlieb Fischer was the elected leader of this group of seventeen wagons heading for the Big Horn basin. Solid German immigrants, only about half spoke English but every man was built stout and solid as were the women. They went about their tasks with stoic determination, glancing often off to the north where the huge basin spread as far as the eye could see.

"Gottlieb! Gottlieb" one of the men called from the rear wagon."Doz wagons and dot herd dots been comink behind is fast up catching!"

Fischer walked the length of the train to where he could see down the trail to the south. He shrugged his shoulders and spoke to the man who sounded the warning. "Sigfried, you chust must get used to looking in the mountains. Those wagons and that herd are still at least two hours behind. Mit any luck ve vill be going the hill down when they get here!" Patting the man on the shoulder he walked again to the wagon whose wheel had been repaired with a "trail fix" of wire and hope, approved the job and then cupping his hands to his mouth yelled "Onward we go now" as he climbed up to the seat of his own wagon which on this day was third in line in the trail travel rotation pattern.

While he waited for the lead wagon to move out he wondered about the four wagons and the small herd that had been trailing them about a half day behind. Now they were just past Lost Cabin Pass and had started down Bridger creek when the rim had come off a wheel. This trail was named after

that famous frontier scout who had first took a party over this route, named it the Bridger trail . Later it was abandoned when it proved too tough for men and wagons on the north end.

The little group that was behind them had turned north on the Bridger trail from the west bound trail out of Casper. So Gottlieb reasoned they were heading in the same direction, maybe even the same location. From what he and the train members had heard and from what he saw as he came over Lost Cabin pass the area would be big enough to hold ten times their number. “maybe even a thousand times as many as we got,” he said to his wife, sitting on the spring seat beside him. “Never saw such a big country!

Blossom Bell sat beside the slim wife of Michael Fairburn as Michael was doing the driving and the three of them nearly filled the wagon seat. Blossom was enjoying the ride today, for the Fairburn wagon had drawn the lead spot and the weather was mild and the view as they climbed the trail to the pass was unsurpassed. She was anxious for the journey to end so she would be back with Silas. She didn't know that such a few days could leave her so lonesome. She worried about Silas and Jed who had gone ahead. Silas had been more worried about their reception in the valley than he had let on to the other members of their group She knew he had not wanted to worry them overly.

“Way Silas described it, this pass is near the end.” Fairburn was saying. “Downhill all the way now.” he chuckled at his joke. “We've had the chance to rest to the horses while they fixed the wheel so we will go on until we find a place to bed down for the night! At any rate by tomorrow night we should be home!”

“Home,” what a magic ring that held for Blossom. She hadn't told Silas yet but for her the word had extra meaning. For her and the new life that was stirring in her.

The freighter had just finished unloading the last of Mort's supplies and leaned against the counter and mopped his brow. He grinned at Mort.

“Boy the news of twenty one wagons and a little herd coming up the trail behind me just about blew the top off old Jenks grey head back at the saloon when I told 'em the news down at the saloon.”

“Twenty one wagons?” gasped Mort. “I had heard only a few. How far behind? Who are they? Do they have families?” Mort was so excited he didn't give the teamster time to answer a single question before he was blurting out more.

"Whoa now." the freighter backed up in mock surprise. "Don't ask me all them questions. All I know I could see 'em coming along the trail road a few hours behind me as I come up to the Pass. Reckon they should be gettin in tomorrow sometime." Reaching for a piece of hourhound candy the freighter started for the door and then turning back "Reckon you will be wanting extra stuff next week. I'll stop by first thing in the morning and get your list. Figure on stopping for a few drinks down at the Double Eagle and then bed down alongside the creek for the night," he said as he left the store.

Stunned, Mort could only stand and hold on to the counter in a daze at the news. "Why that nester hadn't talked about more than four wagons!" He was turning to run to the back to tell Molly when the front door burst open with a bang and Jenks cussing filled the store.

"Got any mail for me?" he bellowed.

Mort quailed and wordlessly pulled out the two letters he had slipped into the H-I-J-K pigeon hole for Jenks.

Jenks grabbed the letters and without thanks stomped from the store slamming it hard enough that the entire front shook.

"Molly! Molly! My God, theres even more a comin'" Mort yelled as he ran to the back of the store. "Whoooo! Jenks looked fit burst." He was so excited he barked his shin on a kitchen chair as he and his wife shared the excitement.

"Twenty two wagons!" Mort gasped. "That'l more than double our population overnight. Lordy, we got to sit down and figure out a list of things to order. The freighter is going to stop in the morning to pick up my list!" Mort was so excited he had run back and forth across the living quarters twice, dropped his glasses once and finally had dashed back to the store part, forgetting to turn the knob on the door between living quarters and store and bumped his nose a solid lick before the door flew off the hinges.

Chapter 8

As Bill rode north along the trail he looked over the countryside and liked what he saw. The ground, what he could see of it, looked like good black loam. The grass was thick and high and the terrain was gently rolling. Beyond the gentle rolls the land began to tilt a little more sharply as it turned into foothills and beyond these rose the sharper and taller bluish purple outlines of the mountains.

It was serene country with a gentle breeze making waves in the grass and fluttering the leaves on the aspen and the cottonwoods. The songs of the meadowlark and the bob-o-link could be heard above the rippling of the creek and the creaking of his leather saddle. He let his horse pick its own gait. There were flowers in the grass and some of the bushes along the creek were in bloom. A smell of fresh and beautiful country reached his nose.

After a mile or so he noted a cross trail coming in from the right. A column of dust, on this trail off to the east, indicated a rider coming. He had been observing a similar tell-tale spiral of dust coming from the north on the trail he rode. Calculating that if the dust whorls were riders the two would just about meet at the crossing he decided he would pull off the trail and do some observing.

Putting his thoughts to action he swung his horse into a dense stand of Souvis berry bushes growing about a hundred feet from the trail. Dismounting, he looped his reins over one of the bushes and worked his way back through the stand until he was less than 50 feet from the crossing and hunkered down he waited.

Screened as he was and due to the slight elevation he had a good view. As long as he kept motionless he would probably go undetected. When the rider coming in from the east splashed across the creek he recognized the horse as being one that had belonged to those who had fired on the wagon earlier. He glanced to the north and saw that the dust there was being raised by two riders, both looking toward the lone rider coming across the creek. The lone rider, moving at a lope, reached the crossroad and started to turn south without even looking north.

One of the riders to the north, seeing the singleton turn southward onto the main trail pulled a six gun and fired one shot in the air and started waving the single rider back, who, when he

heard the shot pulled up, looked back as his hand dropped to his own gun. He evidently recognized the pair for his hand came up empty and waved above his head as he turned his horse and started back.

“Hey, Kid, where ya goin’ in such a rush?” one of the pair yelled out.

“Lookin’ for you, Dakota.”

The three riders met on the trail directly opposite Bill’s hidden location and as they sat their horses he could hear their conversation.

“The Old Man wants you, Dakota, pronto. I just been clear over to Ten Sleep trying to find you. Where the hell you been?”

“What’s his problem?” Dakota asked, ignoring Kid’s pointed query as to his whereabouts.

“Some nesters down on the bottom north o’ town and he wants em out! Sent me a lookin’ fer ya in a hurry.”

“Well you knew we wern’t in Bullhead so how come you was a headin’ south?” Dakota asked.

“I was headin’ down to roust em out myself,” Kid responded defiantly.

“Little big man!” Sly hawked a spit off to the side of his mount. He grinned at Dakota and continued “You and me might as well hang up our guns and let the big man here handle all the troubles.”

“Come on Sly, lay off the kid. Hell you got your start somewhere along the line just like that.” Dakota said. “Let’s head for the ranch and get the low down from Jenks, and anyway I’m running low on ammo and need to stock up!”

As the three started to turn to the east on the cross trail they spotted a cloud of dust coming up on the trail from the south. They stopped and waited while a hard ridden horse and rider broke into view.

“Ain’t that Jenks right now?” Sly asked.

“Yep, lets wait a minute.” Dakota replied.

In a swirl of dust, Jenks pulled his horse to a sliding halt sawing cruelly on the reins.

“Where the hell ya been?” he growled at Dakota. “I got a job that needs doin’!”

Jenks quickly explained the arrival of the nester wagon and the ranch hands dismal attempt to scare them out. He also told them of the later news he had just heard of more of the same bunch on their way and the 17 more wagons on the way up the Bridger trail. Without waiting for any comments, Jenks in his typical “act now” manner started issuing orders.

“Kid, first off, I just got two letters from my daughter, Nancy. She’s coming into Casper on the train. Sounds like it might even be tomorrow.” Jenks was waving the letters as he talked. “You get back to headquarters, hitch up the Spring wagon and head down there to pick her up “

Peeling off several bills from the roll he had pulled from his pocket he continued, “You wait till she comes in and bring her direct to the ranch. The money is for a room for her in case it’s late and you need to stay over and for any meals you may need to buy. Make sure you get all her baggage, even if’n it means staying over till the next train if it don’t arrive on the one she comes in on.” Jenks dismissed the Kid with a wave to the east and turned to his gunmen, Dakota and Sly.

“Sly, you get back to headquarters and get the buggy and git for town and pick up the blacksmiths wife and bring her to the ranch,” he was looking worried as he talked and waved his hands. “Gotta get that house cleaned up before Nancy gets here and Missus Hartthoff said she’d do the job if’n we’d pick her up and fetch her out.” Jenks told him to get whatever cleaning supplies she wanted at Swallows store before returning to headquarters.

“Better pick me up a jug of whiskey at Price’s while you’re in town,” He growled as he dismissed Sly. “I’m running low and the way things is breakin’ so fast I’m a gonna be needin’ some.”

Turning to Dakota his face grew grim as he began rattling off his instructions. “You, go roundup some of your pards or whatever gunnies you can lay hands on quick and get ‘em over to headquarters,” Jenks was puncuating his statements with jabs of his finger.

“Looks like we got a bunch of them nestors this time and we might just as well make short work of them and do it damn quick.” Jenks had stuffed the letters back into his pocket.

Again digging out his roll of bills, he peeled off some more and thrust them at Dakota.

“The usual pay, five dollars a day, ammuniton and keep and I’ll pay as many as twenty if you can get ‘em.” Jenks growled as he waved his dismissal of Dakota.

Without more conversation Jenks swung east toward the ranch headquarters and Dakota turned north, retracing his route to the mining camp he had so recently visited where he was certain he could obtain the required numbers of men, either drifters or gunslicks, who would fight for five dollars a day.

“So that’s what we’re up against,” Bill muttered to himself as he went back to his horse. Mounting his horse he worked his way out of the bushes and back to the cross road where he sat

in thought as he rubbed his chin and pondered what he had overheard and trying to decide what should be the next move for himself and Silas.

“No time for doing any visiting, we gotta get ready!” he muttered to himself. He started back south toward the meadow he had so recently left keeping off the trail so he didn’t raise any dust in case any of the riders might look back from a distance and realize they had been spied upon. As he rode he tried to plan a possible defense, but realized it was useless until he knew more about the 17 other wagons coming and what nature of men might be with them.

“Damn, this might turn into some real whingding!” he thought as he spurred to a lope. “Might get some real action out of this yet!”

When he got back to camp he related all his news to the other men who were gathered around the carcass of Sparky’s deer. They dressed it out and hung it from a tree branch, its body cavity propped open with sticks so it could cool. They had sliced off some choice rump steaks and made their way back to the fire chattering back and forth, trying to make reason out of what they had heard.

“Those wagons should get here tommorow.” Silas said. “Best we just wait and see what all we got.”

Bill rolled a cigarette. “Always tomorrow!” he thought.

Chapter 9

.IN +5 For the next four days hardcases of various sizes, shapes and descriptions wandered into the Double J ranch headquarters, singly or in pairs.

They were shown to the bunk house and told when meals were served by the cook and advised to “sit tight ‘till the Boss says otherwise” and then left to their own devices.

Some looked like the scum of creation, dirty, unkempt and ill smelling while others were dressed “to the nines” with fancy shirts and neck pieces, boots and hats that might cost an ordinary cowhand two months wages.

But they all had one thing in common — a gun, or two, that was tied down and well oiled, and, in many cases, well worn.

Despite the warning to “sit tight” a few drifted off to Bullhead and the Double Eagle Saloon in search of some drinks and some excitement while they waited spending the 10 dollars they had already collected.

Kid had spent all that was left of the first day and most of the night driving the spring wagon to Casper. He then cooled his heels at the train station waiting on incoming trains. Between trains he hung his heel on the brass rail at the bar in the Cowboys Rest saloon. He was waiting for Jenks daughter Nancy.

When the noon train pulled in on the fourth day a girl that Kid mentally described as a “vision of loveliness” descended from one of the cars and began to look up and down the short platform as if expecting someone to meet her. When no one immediately came forward, Kid doffed his hat and spoke.

“Miss Nancy? Miss Nancy Jenks?” he asked as he twisted his hat in his hands.

“Didn’t Father come?” she asked as she looked over the awkward young man.

Kid hastened to explain her father was very busy and asked him to meet her and bring her to the ranch.

“Well, let’s get going,” she said tartly. “My luggage should be on this train. Will you please see to it so we can get started home at once?”

Grasping the bag she had been carrying with her on the train she went forward along the train to the baggage car where other bags and trunks were being tugged off onto a freight truck. Kid ran to the far side of the depot and drove the spring wagon around the station until he was alongside the freight

platform and where, under Nancy's watchful eye, he loaded assorted bags, trunks, hat boxes and cardboard boxes tied with heavy twine into the wagon until it was piled high. He almost had to unload and re-arrange to get it all on board.

"Well, silly, help me up and let's get started," she said sharply to Kid as he stood waiting uncertain what to do after the luggage was loaded.

"Yes Ma'am" he responded holding out his hand to help her step on the hub of the wheel and up to the seat. After seeing her seated he whirled around to the other side, climbed aboard himself and shaking out the reins, started the team moving away from the station and down the street that led to the trail west and then north.

Nancy paid scant attention to Kid. She let her gaze roam over the countryside and drank in the magnificent vistas. At one point she reached back over the seat and retrieved a frilly umbrella from one of the bags loaded in the back.

Kid cast covert glances in her direction, wanting to talk but finding his mouth dry. Finally after several miles had passed he sat upright and blurted out "Shucks, Ma'am. Maybe yo're hongry. Plumb slipped my mind to ask!"

"Not really," Nancy replied looking Kid directly in the eye. "I'm more anxious to get home and see Father than anything so just keep on driving. How far is it back to the ranch? Been so long ago and I was so small I don't remember."

"Take us 'till tomorrow evening 'lessen we drive all night."

"There aren't any inns or hotels along the way?"

"Shucks no ma'am. If'n you get tired and wanna sleep, we can make a stop along the trail. I brung a couple bed rolls along just in case!"

"Well, I'm not going to sleep on the dirt," Nancy tossed her head derisively. "Just hurry along now, will you?"

Nancy was slim, her hair the color of cured gamma grass, her complexion as fair as a summer cloud just tinged with sunset colors. It was obvious that she had spent her time indoors or well protected with sun bonnet or parasol. Her clothes were light and frilly and colorful, a far cry from the more servicable and drab wear usual to western women. What little she had said and her manner of speaking left little doubt she viewed Kid as a servant or a working man there only to serve her.

Kid, for his part was thoroughly tongue tied. He had never been around women much except for a few dance hall floozies and Nancy definitely wasn't in their class. Anyway, those times he'd had the help of a shot or two of booze to help loosen his tongue. He found himself wishing he'd had a bottle along now.

During these days Grace Harthoff, her hair tied up in a bandanna, mopped, dusted, washed linen, aired rooms, scrubbed a completely neglected kitchen and washed windows until the Double J ranch house shone and sparkled. Every room except the one used by Jenks for his office.

Jenks had stayed in that room, drinking the whisky Sly had brought him and pondering his problems, building up an impatient rage. It slowly built over the passing days until he was ready to explode.

Mort Swallows store was was the scene of almost frenzied activity as the wagons pulled into Bullhead. Mort rushed about greeting the incoming settlers. He doled out merchandise from scanty stocked shelves until they were almost bare, he started making notes of names and items different folks desired. He promised to order whatever they wanted when the next freighter came in. Mort smiled and bobbed and weaved himself to the point of exhaustion each day.

Molly helped him, greeting the ladies and helped making lists. She found she enjoyed the activity although she had some difficulty understanding some of the broad tongued German ladies.

The meadow north of town was filled with wagons after they pulled on through Bullhead and parked. They stopped and unhitched in a hap-hazard fashion. Each wagon had parked near a friend or two with those little clusters scattered over the entire meadow area from the creek bank westward.

Freshly washed clothes drying on makeshift clothes lines or on low bushes and the smoke of many small fires lazed upwards as the womenfolk cooked and washed and tended to the many little chores that had been put off while they had been on the trail. All were glad for the chance to stretch legs and visit and gossip back and forth among themselves after the many days of being restricted to the so-called spring seats of the bouncing wagons.

After they had settled down a little bit, Bill Wood went from wagon to wagon, getting acquainted, trying to size up the men and to think how they would stand up under an attack. How he could use them if a battle developed and would they fight.

Bill tried to explain in a patient way what he felt all the settlers were up against. He talked of the gun play he knew was coming. He told and re-told of the conversation along the trail that he had overheard and did his best to convince all the settlers of the gravity of the situation.

His efforts resulted in an agreement that all the men would meet at Silas's wagon at noon of the fourth day to arrive at

some sort of plan of action. "We can expect action by then or soon after and it will be plenty hot!" were his final words to each wagon.

On the afternoon of the fourth day Dakota rode into ranch headquarters accompanied by four men. This brought the total he had recruited to fifteen.

When he reported to Jenks the rancher slammed his doubled fist against the desk and fairly screamed, "About time. Call everybody together at the bunkhouse and make sure they are ready. Pass out shells to anybody that needs 'em and get those that snuck off to town back here. We'll move tomorrow! Right after supper bring everybody here to the porch and we'll give the marchin' orders then!"

Silas opened the meeting of the settlers at his wagon. It was after noon and some time was spent talking about how to stake a claim and when and where to file.

"Guess you are all acquainted with Bill Wood and have heard from both him and me as to what we know and what we have heard. Question is what do we do. You all have had time to think, to talk to your friends and we better make up our minds right now how we're goin' to handle this."

Gottlieb Fischer rose from where he was slouched next to the wagon wheel. "Our group is much bigger than yours," he said to Silas. "But we have heard the same things you have from the folks in town and hafta lay some considerable weight to that." He shuffled his feet for a moment then continued, "But we don't see the problem so urgent as you seem to." He looked at Bill as he spoke. A buzz started as the assembled men began to make comments to their neighbors with gestures and shakes or nods of the head as befitted the comments being passed.

One man who stood at the fringe of the crowd and spoke loudly, "Mit a gun I shooten gud, but I don't think much on killin', but my Got in Himmel, comes to sombody out chasin us I'm ready to fight!"

His words seemed to reflect the thinking of a majority of those in the crowd as heads nodded and the conversation buzz broke out again.

While the German had been talking, Sparky rode into the camp from town and stopped near Bill where he leaned over and held a low conversation with him. Bill swung to the crowd and yelled, "My pard, Sparky, has some interesting news. Tell em, Sparky."

Sparky recounted how he had spent some time in the saloon and had struck up conversation with two gunmen who had

slipped away from the Double J for a few drinks. Sparky told of the numbers that had gathered and of Dakotas recruiting effort.

“The important news is that just a bit ago another hard case had rode in and pulled those two out telling them Dakota had returned, that he had seventeen men and that Jenks had called a meeting for this very night to set his plans in motion,” Sparky finished.

“All right,” Silas said. “I guess that is all the proof we need and proof trouble is coming fast. I move we elect Bill here as our Captain for defense and take orders from him!”

A chorus of “yahs” and “yeahs” greeted the suggestion.

Bill stood up. “All right. Gottlieb, you pick two men, Silas name one. They and you two and Sparky and me will be the council of war! The rest of you go back to your wagons and pack up what little you have unloaded and harness your teams and hitch up. This council will put together a plan. Come back to this wagon in one hour and we’ll lay out our plan. If you don’t like what we figure to do, you will be all loaded and hitched so you can head out.”

He paused and looked over the crowd watching for signs of quitters. All the men seemed to be standing solid.

“I know that sounds rough and quick but believe me, I’ve been through the likes of this and if we aren’t ready for tomorrow, there’ll be no tomorrow.”

The seven men stayed behind as the others went to wagons to load and hitch up. The war council sat on the ground as Bill explained the plan he had worked out in his mind. As he talked the seven asked questions or interjected ideas but for the most part agreed on Bill’s plan as he laid it out.

“Move the entire camp about a mile north so they would not be where Jenks expected them and to be beyond the trail coming in from the ranch.” That, he explained, might buy a few minutes time and take away any little surprise as far as timing that Jenks might gain.

“We should circle the wagons like we’re expecting an Indian attack. Send the women and children and the stock a mile or so further to the west to be behind the ridge so when shooting started they would be out of the line of direct fire. Pick the five best rifle shots and equip them with horses and station them in a hiding place such as a grove a short distance from the circled wagons.” He explained these five would enter the fray as flankers when the attack started. Maybe they could even catch Jenks crew off guard and split his force.

“Finally,” Bill looked over the group. “Make sure that the

ammo we have is evenly distributed among the men with guns." They had completely run Swallows shelves dry so they had to make do with whatever they had.

"Sparky and I will act as a roving scout force. We'll be over across the creek watching and we'll give you some sign when they are coming and then we'll move in behind em to pick off stragglers or mop up or whatever," Bill finished his plan and looked from man to man. There was no dissent.

"All right, let's get moving." Bill waved his hand and said to Sparky "Let's ride north and pick a good looking spot and be on hand to show 'em where to circle. Silas, you explain the plan when everybody comes back."

Jenks paced the floor of his office like a caged tiger. He was nervous. Something bothered him about tomorrow's operation. He couldn't put a finger on it. Every time he got his thoughts running in his usual "blow 'em out of existence" line visions of his daughter coming back danced into his head and blocked his roughshod thinking. What would she think of this kind of action? Did he give a damn what she thought? She was his blood and as he remembered, a gentle thing. Now she would have been tamed by those years in that fancy girl's school back east. He had to move those sodbusters out and right away. If he only had a few days with her first to feel her out. To show her why he had to do what he had to do.

He was just reaching for the bottle in his desk drawer when a timid knock came at the door. "Come in," he bellowed and then blushed when Grace Harthoff opened the door to announce she had done all she could and the best she could and could he please arrange for her to get back to town.

Mumbling an apology for his abrupt manner he went to the outside door and bellowed for Hooker to get the team and buggy ready.

"It's not my affair Mr. Jenks," Grace was saying, "but it looks to me like you're not thinking of your daughter's homecoming with all these gun slingers around and planning that terrible action tomorrow just when she is coming home. What in heavens name will she think of you? You should be ashamed of yourself!" She stamped pertly out of the office to catch up her things and went to the porch to wait on the buggy. She didn't tarry long enough for Jenks blustery, stammered reply to reach her ears or to collect her pay which Jenks had pulled from a drawer of the desk. He was left holding the money in his hand.

Chapter 10

It was getting dark as Hooker was driving the buggy back to Double J headquarters. He had dallied in town so he would miss the meeting at the porch. Hooker didn't want to go on the raid against the settlers but he didn't know how to avoid it. He was torn between his ingrained loyalty to the brand. "If you draw their pay, do their work" was more or less his code.

He had stopped briefly at Mort Swallows store and had caught Mort's excitement over the many wagons that had come in. He could see the logic of his thinking about the right of settlers to come in and the needs of the community. He had stopped at the saloon and had a drink and a pass at the free lunch area of the bar. He had been surprised to hear Price talking of the good points of the increase in population.

Hooker had stopped for a visit with Will Harthoff, telling him he had brought his wife back to town and was surprised to discover the blacksmith had taken the side of the nesters.

He thought about the things he had heard as he drove. "The older you get the more conservative you get," he muttered to himself. "Damn that Jenks, I never liked what he did to those Hoosiers. He don't use half all the land he's got now, don't know why he can't let them folks settle over on this side of Bull Creek, he don't ever use this anyway!"

"Harthoff, of course, that's got to be a German name," he mused. Mort had mentioned that most of those wagons were filled with Germans. "Birds of a feather...I guess," he chuckled.

As he drove he looked to the left and it took him a moment to realize that the area where the wagons had been was now empty. "Wonder if they took out?" he mused. A little further on he sat bolt upright in the buggy seat when he spotted the wagons better than a mile north of where they had been, drawn up in a tight circle.

The wagons were now situated in an area that gave them a clear open space all the way to the creek and the trail and had a rocky bluff behind them that would give them protection from the rear. He saw men moving among the wagons and saw the horses inside the circle but he didn't see any women or children about. He chuckled to himself as he made the turn for the trail to the ranch.

"Somebody who knows what he's doing picked out that spot! Old Jenks and his gunnies might have a surprise waiting in the maw'nin'." He chuckled. He had already made up his

mind. He wasn't going to volunteer the information when he got back!

"How many we got?" Jenks asked as he came out of his office and stood on the porch looking down on the assembled hardcases.

"Seventeen, counting me and Sly" Dakota answered.

"Alright, unless you stumblebums are wearing those guns for decoration, you should be able to take on all those sod busters in one sweep. We head out at first light to be at the creek at dawn and then we will give 'em hell. Stay with 'em till they hitch up and start moving out. You know what to do Dakota, they're right there in that meadow where them others were. Don't nobody fire until Dakota gives the signal. He and Sly will give exact instructions in the morning and give you your locations. When you are done and you got all them damn nesters moving, go on in to the Double Eagle. I'll be in about noon and make the payoff!"

"You sure its going to be that simple?" one of the men asked.

"Did it like that two years ago and it worked and it better work this time," Jenks growled. "Take over, Dakota."

"Make any difference if a target's got skirts?" one of the unkempt gunnies growled out.

"Hell no," bellowed Jenks. "You aint gettin' paid by the body but it don't matter. I want them nesters moved!"

Jenks whirled and stormed into his office.

Dakota made a mock half salute at Jenks retreating back and crisply ordered the men to the bunk house. "Make a last check on your horses and saddle gear then get your bunk time, We'll be riding out while its still dark in the morning and we ain't goin' to wait for anybody doing last minute gear changes, so get it ready tonight. No show at the action in the morning and no pay!."

Hooker pulled hard on the lines and stopped the buggy as a lone rider popped out of the brush a short distance east of the creek along the trail to headquarters. It was light enough he could see the gun casually pointed at his belly over the pommel of the saddle.

"Think mebbe you better turn em around and be our guests tonight at the cicrle of wagons," Bill casually told the oldtimer. "Just wouldn't feel right about you passing along our new location to Jenks at this late hour."

"Whatever you say," Hooker said meekly and turned the buggy back and made toward nester camp.

“Hadn’t figured on passing the news unless I had too,” Hooker said to the rider alongside the buggy. “Guess if’n I don’t get back tonight there ain’t no way they can get it out of me!”

They rode in silence back to the nester camp and after unhitching on the back side of the circle and picketing the buggy horse with the others, Hooker and Bill went to the single fire and with coffee in hand hunkered down while Hooker volunteered information about himself, the basin, Jenks, the build-up of hardcases back at headquarters and what he knew of the plans for tomorrow.

Hooker related how over the years he had been loyal to Jenks but as he grew older he began to doubt if Jenks was always right. “I’ve done a heap of living and riding and thinking in my time, young man,” Hooker said to Bill. “I think it’s time for me to declare.”

The incident with the Hoosier settlers had weighed heavy on his mind. The influx of the gun fighters, most of whom looked pretty unsavory, and now with Jenks daughter coming . . . He didn’t relate how the blacksmith’s wife had harangued him all the way back to town in the buggy nor maybe did he realize that it was her sharp denunciation of Jenks and Mort’s bubbling enthusiasm that had tipped him over.

Bill had taken a liking to the oldster and could sense what was going on in his mind, he believed that the truth as Hooker knew it had been told. He mulled over their plans for morning.

“Was I running this show, I think I’d hit Jenks tonight,” Hooker said glancing at Bill.

“What makes you say?” Bill asked.

“They got all the horses in the one corral and their feeling so smug they ain’t got no guards out. Looks to me if a couple fellers were to sneak in and turn ‘em loose before morning, might take ‘em down a notch or two,” Hooker said and grinned.

“Take the war into his own camp,” Bill chuckled and then he turned to the others who had gathered around to listen. “What you think?”

“Chust a minute,” Gottlieb spoke up. “This man is one of dem, one of the enemy. How do we know what he speaks is so?”

“Well, I’d go along,” Hooker said. “I know where that loose pole is on the back side of the corral. We could lift that out and quietly chouse them horses out and let ‘em drift. Sure they could round ‘em back up but it would put over any early start they plan to make over to full daylight and maybe give ‘em a second thought!”

"I like it!" Bill said. "Sparky and me'll go with you. We'll leave here about midnight!"

Silas motioned Bill aside and expressed reservations. "How can you be sure he isn't a plant? How do you know they won't be waiting for you? That whole bunch against just two ain't what I call very good odds!"

"No, I got a feeling about old Hooker. I think he is plumb fed up with Jenks. Anyway, there'll be two of us and only one of him and if anything looks suspicious we can handle him and he knows that. Besides, if we spot anything fishy we can back off and come back here and other than losing a little sleep we won't be any worse off than we are now." Bill patted Silas on the back "We're goin', come midnight we're goin'".

Kid's stomach was growling as they reached Lost Cabin Pass. He guessed it was well past midnight. He stopped the horses at the turnout and spoke to the girl beside him.

"Miss Nancy, I'm sorry if'n you were sleeping. We just got to let this team blow a little and I need some coffee and some grub even if'n you ain't hongry."

He jumped down, unhooked one trace on each side of the double tree, put a rock under the rear wheel of the spring wagon and started gathering some twigs and branches to kindle a fire. He was at a ring of rocks that had been set up, and added to, by the many travelers over the years who had used this area as a resting spot both coming and going over the pass.

"Well, Silly, aren't you going to help me down?"

Nancy was waiting on the spring wagon seat.

Kid was tempted to tell her that if she expected to live in this country, she should already have been down and started the coffee. But her manner had him sufficiently cowed and he stopped what he was doing and stretched a hand up to steady her descent over the wheel and hub and to the ground.

As she made the final step, her legs cramped from the long sitting, started to buckle. With a tiny "ooh" issuing from her lips she reached for Kid and threw her arms around his neck for support. She held on tightly, perhaps longer than needed.

Kid's heart raced as Nancy's soft hair brushed his face.

"Ma'am, we're goin' to stop for a spell and let you rest. I'll get out a blanket and then you just sit here a bit. I'll make some coffee and bacon and we'll have a bite right now!" Kid hustled with the arrangements, getting some things out of the wagon, fixing the coffee and the food and bustling around trying to make Nancy comfortable. After their brief close encounter all thoughts were gone from his mind that she should have been

helping and he wanted to do it all.

Nancy watched a sly smile creasing her face. It really didn't matter if it was on the trail or at a lawn party back east. Men were all the same!

She was tired. She really wanted to curl up in a nice soft bed and sleep forever. Those trains had gone on forever and even though she had a sleeping compartment for part of the way she was still desperately tired. Kiuid had mentioned bedrolls, what was involved? She was afraid to ask. He had responded quickly to her little play in coming down off the wagon and she had sensed a strong animal desire in him in that brief moment even if he seemed to be the very picture of confused and bashful ranch hand.

She was used to the boys who took her to the dances and parties back east. Boys who were aggressive but who were polite and gentle and could be counted on to be gentlemen. Suddenly she was nervous, she was afraid. She drew the blanket closer around her and was hoping Kid would stay on his own side of the little fire.

Suddenly she began to have second thoughts about the wisdom of coming west. It was all so vast, so strange.

She wondered what the morrow would bring.

Chapter 11

An hour before midnight Bill, Sparky and Hooker were in the saddle heading east on the trail to the Double J headquarters. At Hooker's suggestion they rode off the trail by a few hundred feet. "Some of them have been slipping off to the bar now and then and we don't want to be running into any coming home late. In my opinion most of 'em wouldn't know the difference but there ain't no sense in running extra chances."

Going a circuitous route they came up to the Double J headquarters on the back side and stopped at the edge of the trees behind the barn and corral. After whispered consultation they agreed to sit and wait for at least a half hour to see if they could see any signs of activity or spot any guards. They heard nor saw nothing.

Working their way slowly downward they came to the back side of the pole corral where Hooker grasped one of the upright poles and wiggled it back and forth to indicate the loose one he had mentioned earlier. Lifting the cross bars carefully, each man grasped one and lifted it from its bracket and quietly carried it to the side and laid it down. Then Hooker and Sparky, facing each other on opposite sides of the loose pole, wrapped their arms around it and straightened their legs, lifting the pole upwards. It moved up at least a foot. Taking new holds they kept working it up until it was free of the ground and they carried it aside to where they had laid the bars.

Now there was a clear opening of about fifteen feet in the enclosure. It was like a new gate.

The horses, hearing and seeing the activity, had gathered at the far side of the corral, but other than some nervous snorting and some foot stamping, they made no extra or unusual sounds.

"Just step back out of the way," whispered Bill. "Them broomtails will soon enough come to investigate that hole."

Very shortly, with heads bobbing and noses flaring, two of the horses did indeed let their curiosity lead them the hole and finding the bars down, gingerly stepped past the old confining border of the corral. After discovering nothing happened after they had crossed the old corral line, tossed their heads and started to slowly walk and then canter to the meadow beyond. As soon as one had made the break, the others followed until they were all streaming out and spreading across the meadow.

"Worked like a charm," whispered Hooker. "Let's walk behind

them a little ways as we head back for our horses.” The trio, on foot, drove the horse herd another 500 feet deeper into the meadow before they turned back to the trees and their own tethered mounts. They walked their horses quietly back and slowly drove the horse herd farther and farther from the headquarters area.

After they were out of hearing of the headquarters they raised their pace to a canter and finally, after almost two miles of herding, they let the freed horses peel off from the drive and scatter out as the three made their way back to the wagons.

“That won’t stop em,” Hooker said as the trio jogged. “But it will sure slow ‘em down some!”

“Yeah, we sure enough bought a little time,” grinned Sparky. And they off saddled and bedded down near Silas’s wagon after briefly giving him the details of their night activity.

It was nearing dawn when Kid finally worked up the courage to shake Nancy awake.

“Sorry, ma’am. I didn’t rightly know what to do. You said you wanted to drive all night but then you just went right to sleep here beside the fire when we stopped to blow the horses. I figured you must’a been all tuckered out so I just let you sleep.” Kid was obviously uncomfortable as he shuffled his feet and twisted his hat in his hand.

“Oh thank you, you dear boy,” then immediately felt foolish. She knew that Kid had to be several years older than she was and certainly many years wiser in the ways of this country. She suddenly threw the blanket off her shoulders and ran over to Kid, who had been standing across the fire.

Throwing her arms around his shoulders she hugged him saying, “Forgive me, Kid. I’ve been acting like a little spoiled brat. You know what’s best to do. I’ll do what you say from here on out!”

Kid, so flustered from this sudden outburst and display from Nancy could only hold her tightly in his arms for several moments.

“We best get moving down the trail,” he said brusquely and quickly stowed their gear, hitched the horses and started down the trail after helping her up to the seat. For the rest of the hours of darkness Nancy sat close to Kid on the seat and let her head droop on his shoulder as the horses trotted downhill on their way into the basin. The pace slowed as the last of the sliver of moon went behind the mountain and the utter dark of pre-dawn settled over the land.

As day broke Kid woke Nancy to watch the dazzling display

of dawn breaking over the Big Horns, they stopped again at a turn out and made coffee and bacon, this time Nancy climbing down unaided and pitched in with the fire and cooking chores. As they started again Kid began to find his voice as he pointed out the landmarks along the trail and told Nancy what he knew of her Father, his ranch and his operation. She hung on his every word, realizing she really didn't know her father or much about his operation. She had only the romantic and exaggerated impressions from her childhood. She was distressed when Kid talked of the settlers who had just arrived and the action that was pending to drive them from the land.

"You say that Father has more than enough land now, why would he chase those poor people out?"

Kid tried to tell Nancy the history of the Double J and her Father's long battle to build and hold the ranch. Even as he told what he knew about the ranch and the family he knew he wasn't telling it as Jenks himself would have and he stopped.

"I just can't tell it like it should be told or like Jenks would," Kid was saying. "Sides, I don't really know it all. Best you wait and let your Daddy do the telling." he finished lamely.

"Oh, you people out here are so wild and so rough, I don't know what to think!" Nancy smoothed her dress and hair and pulled away a little from Kid. "Seems like there ought to be a more civilized way." she said primly.

"Why don't you let the law handle it?" she asked.

"Ain't really no law in the basin," Kid answered. "Nearest is the Sheriff and he's over 60 miles away and don't or won't come this way often. Mostly folks settle their own troubles and mostly with a gun." he said as he patted the six gun on his hip.

Nancy was becoming restless. "When are we going to get home?" she asked shortly.

"At the rate we're agoin' should get in about noon, I reckon." Kid shook the lines and kept the team moving. He was restless too. He felt he had muffed his chances to make an impression on Nancy but hadn't made the grade due to his being enough tongue tied to not have told her the story of the ranch and the family in a better way. Why couldn't he have been as glib as Dakota? His heart swelled inside his breast when he thought of Nancy putting her arms around him or when she slept with her head on his shoulder and color crept above his collar at his thoughts.

"Maybe tomorrow, after she had a chance to visit with her Pa. Maybe tomorrow."

Chapter 12

Darkness had begun to lighten when the iron triangle at the cook shack burst forth in a riot of sound. Hands came pouring out of the bunk house, hat and boots on and most tugging on pants or shirts over long johns.

“The horses are gone! “The horses are all gone!” The Horse wrangler was jumping up and down in the yard, waving his arms and pointing to the corral.

“What the hell happened?” bellowed Dakota looking for an answer from the ranch foreman, Cleet Small, as he strapped on his gunbelt.

Above all the noise and confusion Jenks bellow could be heard from the porch.

“Cleet, Dakota, get over here!”

Jenks absorbed the situation in a moment.

“Get my roan and that stallion we got in the barn and get some hands out rounding up those horses and do it now!” Jenks shouted at Cleet who took off for the barn at a run.

“Find out what happened.” were his orders to Dakota. He stomped into his office from the porch. He was visibly shaken and his color was a sickly grey. He slammed open the desk drawer that held his bottle only to find he had drained it last night. He threw it violently against the wall where it cascaded downward in a thousand pieces. He slumped in his chair and held his head in his hands.

Things were all going wrong. Here they were just ready to roust out the nesters and the horses were all gone! Who turned them out? Was it a stupid mistake or did he have a turncoat among his crew? His daughter was coming. Things were happening too fast. His rage was building. He shook his head like a wounded grizzly. “My God, my head hurts, I must have drunk that whole bottle last night!”

Suddenly his body began to shake in uncontrolled shudders. He got to his feet and went into the kitchen where he took the bucket in the kitchen sink and dumped it over his head. He shook his head like an enraged bull sending water drops spraying across the kitchen. He grasped the edge of the sink to steady himself and stumbled across to the table where he sat heavily in a kitchen chair and put his head on the table. He was seeing two kitchen stoves, two kitchen tables, two of everything!

“My God, what is happening to me?” he thought. “This is

something more than a hangover.” Thoughts were swirling in his mind. He thought of his daughter arriving anytime now. He thought of the riff-raff crowding his bunkhouse and chow tables. He thought of the sharp words from the blacksmiths wife as he thought of the raid that should be starting right now against those damned nesters. He thought of the years of fighting to hold and build the Double J. His mind suddenly searched for the “Why?” Why was he doing all this? He suddenly felt old and tired . . . so tired. He wanted to sleep. Where the hell was his bottle? Where the hell was his daughter? Where the hell was he?

“Boss, them poles on the back of the corral was pulled out by hand, they wasn’t broke down,” Dakota was saying as he came into Jenks office after his inspection tour. Seeing the office empty and the open inside door that led into the hallway into the kitchen Dakota went that way and found Jenks slumped over the table. He went over to him and grasped his shoulder to shake him when Jenks slide off the chair and onto the kitchen floor in a heap. Dakota bent over Jenks. He couldn’t waken him. He broke for the yard at a run yelling for someone, anyone to get a horse on the way to Bullhead for Doc Purdee only to find that every horse left available was off trying to round up those that had been set astray during the night.

“Ring that triangle and keep it going until someone out there hears it and comes back. Couple of you men hoof it up onto the ridge and start waving a shirt or something. We need to get the Doc out here pronto. Old Jenks had a stroke or a heart attack or somethin’.

A few of the men from the regular crew huddled around the porch, not knowing what to do, waiting for some direction. Cleet Small, who might have given that direction was off chasing horses. The hired gunmen clustered in small groups caring more about what their situation might be than about what had happened to Jenks.

Shortly one of the hands came into the yard at a gallop and stopped in a cloud of dust.

“Get to town pronto and get the Doc out here,” Dakota yelled at him. “I don’t care how you get him back here but hurry, man. Old Jenks has had a heart attack or a stroke or something.”

The hand leaped back on his horse and lined out for Bullhead, forsaking the regular trail for the more direct route on a bee line for town.

Several of the men had gone into the house and as gently as they could had lifted Jenks from the floor and carried him into the

bedroom where one said, "Always heard said you should loosen clothes" and they proceeded to strip the comotose man. Jenks breathing was faint, shallow and ragged and he showed no awareness of anything going on around him. The men drifted out, there being little more they could do at the moment. Dakota detailed one man to stay near the bedroom door in case Jenks should stir or call while he went out on the porch to ponder the events and try to decide what came next.

At about that time Cleet came over the ridge driving eight head of horses ahead of him. He lined them into the broken corral. "Alright, you men. Lets get this fenced fixed and some saddles on these broomtails and get out and start helping round up the rest of the horses."

Dakota yelled him over to the porch and quickly filled him in on Jenks condition. Cleet went into the house on the run and when he came back out in just a moment he stopped in front of Dakota.

"Damn! What the hell do we do now?"

"I'd say as soon as you get them hosses in we take care of them nesters like Jenks wanted," Dakota offered.

"Nope, don't figure thats right," Cleet responded. "Don't figure we turn a wheel till we find out whats wrong with the old man."

"Cripes might be days, mebbe never, before he gives orders again!" Dakota was beginning to see visions of future control of the ranch swim through his head.

"Dakota, until Jenks is up to sayin' different, I'm running the Double J!" Cleet stood mere inches away from Dakota daring him to challenge his take over of power.

"What makes you think you got the right—" he blurted as his hand started for his gun.

"Just this—" Cleet answered as he brought his right fist direct to the chin of Dakota in a vicious and hard jab, rocking Dakota back against a porch pillar. Before Dakota could recover Cleet followed with a left to the solar plexus and as Dakota began to double over from the blow Cleet met the descending chin with a right upper cut carrying all the power he could muster. Dakota crumpled to the floor. He had been taken by surprise, had depended upon the threat of his gun when Cleets direct and quick action shook him into confusion then laid him out on the floor.

"I'll just take this gun for now," Cleet said pulling Dakota's six shooter. He turned to the men standing in the yard and brandished the gun. "Anybody want to buy in?"

No one moved. Several shrugged shoulders and drifted off

to the bunkhouse. Cleet let out his breath with a whoosh. Lucky for him Sly hadn't been nearby or that challenge might not have gone unanswered.

Calling to some of the regular ranch hands he ordered them to lug Dakota into the office and to "truss him up real tight" and "keep a watch so some of those gunnies he's hired don't sneak in and turn him loose."

Several of the hired guns gathered in a corner of the bunkhouse to take stock of their situation. They knew that the regular ranch hands had won a turn when Cleet had laid Dakota low and had him tied down and watched in the office. The gunnies had no loyalty to Jenks and they knew he was flat on his back, maybe dying.

"Got nothin' left here for me," one of them was saying. "I'm heading for town, get me a bottle and hit the trail back to Alder Gulch." With those words he was joined by two others and they drifted to the corral to await the return of their horses.

When Sly came down off the ridge where he had been observing the progress of those trying to round up the lost horses he was quickly filled in on what had been happening. He moved at once to gather what he could of the gun hands into the bunkhouse and began to harangue them.

"Don't anybody get any idea of leaving right now!" he was saying. "Soon as we can we storm the house and get Dakota out of that office. We might hafta take over from the regular ranch crew and hold this thing together until Jenks gets better or until Dakota takes over!"

"He related or somthin'?" one of the gunnies asked. "How come he'd be able to give orders?"

"Or pay us?" another asked.

"Cripes, this leaves this whole ranch wide open," Sly was responding. "Jenks didn't have no family exceptin' a girl and she's just a yonker. Just sit tight, Dakota will be taking over pronto!" Sly was peering out of a bunkhouse window at the guards posted on the veranda of the house.

"I ain't got no hankerin' to go up against them rifles up there," one of the gunnies said as he turned to the door. Sly, with lightning swift motion pulled his 44 and without even seeming to aim, shot the man through the back of the head even as he opened the bunkhouse door.

The remaining gunnies eyed Sly with mixed emotions. They had seen the lightning quick draw and the instant downing of the one who wanted to desert. They knew Sly would do what he had to to keep things together until Dakota took the lead. None of them wanted to join the one who lay almost unnoticed, half in

and out of the bunkhouse door, dead by Sly's swift bullet. The men in the bunkhouse divided into roughly three groups. One group gathered around or close to Sly, waiting from word him. Another group gathered at the far end of the bunkhouse, they seemed unsure of what to do, but obviously didn't want any part of what lay ahead on the Double J.

The rest weren't even a group. They were the loners who lounged on their bunks or sat in a chair or sprawled on the floor in a corner. They made no move to declare themselves on one side or another but were biding time waiting.

The settlers at the wagons were relaxing, realizing the sun was already high in the sky and no attack had come. They began to move about, a few of them drifted off to the west to check on the wives and children who waited beyond the ridge. Hooker, Bill, Silas, Gottlieb and Sparky stood beside the wagon closest to the creek talking in low tones, trying to think through what their present situation was and what they should do next.

Hooker, observing a dust mote coming along the trail from the south spoke suddenly, "That looks like Pinto, one of the regular ranch hands. I know him pretty well. I'm going to saunter out there and see what he's been up to and find out how come he's coming from town!"

Hooker walked the short distance to the trail and the oncoming horseman stopped. They had an animated conversation with Pinto several times motioning back toward town. He then spurred his horse on and in a cloud of dust took the trail turnoff to the Double J.

Hooker returned the wagon, walking as fast as his high heeled boots and advanced age allowed. "I'm heading for the ranch," he gasped, winded after his effort. "Clete, the foreman is goin' to need help!" He rapidly recounted the reason for Pinto's ride to Bullhead for the Doctor, the confusion at the headquarters and said "That Dakota will try to take over. I gotta get back there and help Cleet pronto! How about borrin' a horse?"

Bill, recognizing what was happening at the headquarters, quickly offered his along with an offer of his and Sparky's help.

"Why don't you two amble over to that ridge where we were last night," Hooker said. "Keep an eye on the veranda. Ifn' you see me there waving my hat, come on in. We may need help agin' that bunch although I spects they'll fold and run off when they realize the Boss is down. They ain't got no reason for any loyalty and mebbe Dakota can keep there under a gun but my guess is they'll slope if they get a chance." He left in a cloud of

dust, trying to catch Pinto.

The crew members out chasing the scattered horses were completing their job, bring them back to the corral. The regular ranch hands gathered on the veranda around Cleet and after short discussion, dispersed themselves around the corners of the house and inside the house, rifles in hand, waiting for some action from the gunnies in the bunkhouse. Hooker and Pinto joined Cleet just inside the front door of the ranch house.

“I’d say lets face Dakota and give him his walking papers right now!” Hooker said to Cleet. Cleet nodded agreement and the three walked down the veranda to the office door just as the shot rang out from the bunkhouse. They could see the body of the slain gun toter crumple in the doorway and remain laying there.

Chapter 13

Dakota was thrashing around on the floor of the office, fighting the ties on his hand and legs. When Cleet and Hooker entered, he stopped and eyed Cleet with pure hatred.

“What the hell you trying to do?” he roared.

“Just making sure you and those two bit gunnies of your don’t try to take over the Double J,” Cleet answered calmly. “You got a choice. Staying right where you are the way you are or ride out.”

“Why damn you, you miserable cow nurse. I’m the one who’d know what Jenks wants. Cut me loose and lets get on with it! Dakota tried fighting his bonds again and lapsed into a rage of bitter cursing when Cleet and Hooker merely lounged back and looked on with smiles.

Leaving Pinto in the office to guard the bound Dakota, Cleet and Hooker went into the kitchen and out the back door of the house. “Double J” Cleet called “To the back door!” The regular ranch hands began to gather around the back stoop.

“All right, men, we are in for a little action,” Cleet began talking to the men. “Dakota and Sly will be wanting to take over. We got Dakota out of action but we got to get rid of those bunkhouse coosies and they might not drift too easy. You men spread out to wherever you can find good cover and still cover the bunkhouse and the corral with rifle fire. I’ll go out front and yell down to Sly and try to reason him into leaving. Maybe with Dakota out of the picture he’ll listen to reason. Whatever, let any of ‘em that come out and head for the corral and then head for the ridge go but blast any that make any other kind of move. Anybody need a rifle?” The men moved to various positions around the ranchyard that gave them protection as well as a clear field of fire.

“Hooker, call in them two you say are up on the ridge. We might need all the help we can get!” Cleet made his way to the front door of the ranch house.

Hooker began waving his hat, facing the ridge behind the corral. Immediately two riders broke from the trees and began to lope to the ranch yard.

“Sly, we need to palaver!” Cleet yelled toward the bunkhouse. “Sly can you hear me?”

Sly gingerly stepped over the dead man in the bunkhouse doorway and turning back to gave orders for a couple of the men to drag the dead body “out back behind the bunkhouse”

Sly faced the house and shouted "Whad'ya you want? Wheres Dakota?"

"Meet me halfway so wewe don't hafta shout," Cleet responded.

"Keep me covered," Sly said over his shoulder in a low voice and then started walking across the yard toward the house and Cleet. He pauses momentarily as Bill and Sparky loped past him and dropped reins at the hitch rail in front of the house. He took in their tied down guns at first glance and wondered about them. He stopped when he reached the midway point in the yard. His hands hung loosely at his sides, hovering near his guns.

Bill and Sparky assumed a similar stance near the hitch rail at the house, listening intently while Hooker, in a low voice, filled them in on the situation.

"Dakota is all tied up at the moment," Cleet was talking levelly and steadily to Sly. "With Jenks out of commission I'm giving the orders and I'm saying we don't need you or Dakota or them gunhands anymore. You got fifteen minutes to pack your gear, saddle up and move out!"

"Why you. . ." Sly glanced at Bill and Sparky standing ready. His blood began to run cold. These two were no ordinary cow hands. He saw the glint of rifle barrels poking around the corners of the house. He hadn't lived this long by taking unnecessary chances. He was uncertain of Dakota's circumstances but he wasn't here now so Cleet probably had him gagged and bound and under guard somewhere considering how calm Cleet was.

Sly shrugged his shoulders "Turn Dakota loose and we'll figure this out!"

"Nothing doin'," Cleet responded. "He goes loose half an hour after the last of you and your kind clear the corral."

Sly's face boiled with anger. If only Dakota were here to tell him what to do. "Your show right now, cowboy, my day'll be comin'." He spun on his heel and sauntered back to the bunkhouse.

When Sly got back to the bunkhouse he found that the two who had carried the dead gunnie out of the doorway had not returned and that three others had slipped out as well. The pound of hooves left no doubt of their desertion. When he explained what had happened in the yard three more started edging toward the door. "Tain't our fight," one said. "I didn't hire on for no war," another said and they slipped out. Left with only six guns Sly was fuming.

"Whats your pleasure gents?" he asked those remaining.

"We can go out fighting or we can wait till dark and try to get Dakota out or we crawl like whipped dogs!" He was growling his face red. "Just call me Fido" said one of the fancy dressed gunmen that was left. "I don't like the looks of those two that came ridin' in!"

"I don't cotton much to rifles, even in the hands of cow pokes," said another. "Count me out!"

"Get out! All of you! Get out!" Sly was screaming as he stomped his way to his bunk and flung himself at full length and flung one arm over his brow.

Cleet and Hooker were counting the men drifting out of the bunkhouse. As the last group of five mounted and took the trail west Cleet sank to the steps and with shaking hand began to roll a cigarette. "Whew," he muttered. "That's worse than facin' an old mossyback bull on foot!"

A buggy was pulling into the yard and 'Doc' Purdee, alighted, grasped his bag from the seat and made his way to the porch. "Hear you got troubles?" He looked slightly hung over and his eyes squinted against the bright sunlight in the yard.

Hooker responded, leaving Cleet to draw himself together and took the Doctor into Jenks bedroom.

Bill and Sparky re-mounted. "Better head back to our own outfit just in case them yardbirds that left decide to do hoo-rawing on their way to town," Bill said as they rode off. The clattering hooves covered Cleets "Thanks" as he pulled himself together and went into the house.

The gunslingers made a bee-line for Bullhead and the Double Eagle saloon where they proceeded to take on drink after drink, trying to wash away their retreat and justify their leaving Sly and Dakota.

For a while Price Waterhouse reveled in all the trade. Then as it became obvious that some couldn't hold their liquor and that most of them were getting mean, he began to get nervous. He had grown used to the quiet bar here in Bullhead where there normally were only a few customers who got drunk and mean and those generally were just Saturday night cowhands who could be easily quited down or who would fall asleep with a head on the table as the liquor progressively took effect. He went quietly to the alcove at the back end of the bar and rummaged until he found his double short barrellled shotgun. Checking to make sure it was loaded, he hid it behind his apron and brought it with him to the bar and laid under the edge out of sight. One of the few times he was wishing there was some law in Bullhead!

As the situation got worse and talk got louder he stayed close to his gun. When two of the gunfighters got to the point they suddenly stepped away from the bar and dropped into the traditional crouch, ready to draw on each other and the others scrambled to get out of the line of fire, he brought the shotgun out. "Outside!" he bellowed. "Outside! No fighting inside!" Price kept the shotgun at his shoulder and slowly moved it back and forth covering the group. "You men have had enough. There's buckshot here inviting ya' to just move along. Go on out in the country and settle your problems there!"

With the drop on them and every last one knowing what a load of buckshot could do they trooped out of the bar mumbling threats at Price, at Jenks, at Bullhead and at anyone or anything else that came to mind.

One of them shouted, "Come on, lets head down to Casper, hear thats a real live place!" and they mounted and pounded out of town to the south.

But four remained at the bar. They had been quietly drinking among themselves and had taken no part in the boisterous activities that had gotten the rest evicted. Waterhouse put away the shotgun and wiping his hands on his apron went to the table. "No hard feelings gents, you understand. How about a round on the house?"

The four hardly looked up. They were the hardest of the group of hardcases that Dakota had hired. They nodded their acceptance and thanks to Waterhouse and went back to their drinking.

Chapter 14

All was quiet back at the nester camp when Bill and Sparky rode in. They told the nesters what had happened at the ranch, and after some discussion, it was agreed the immediate danger was past. Horses were hitched to wagons and they were pulled out of the circle and spread apart into their former scattered pattern. Some drove over the ridge to pick up women and children. Others left on foot or horseback to handle the livestock. Life in the nester camp went back to routine quickly.

Bill stretched out beneath Silas's wagon to catch up on his sleep. Silas and Blossom wandered over to the ridge and arm in arm began looking over the country side and were pointing here and there, obviously discussing the relative merits of various building sites. Sparky tightened the cinches on his saddle and headed for Bullhead.

The horses drawing Kids wagon south of the town were showing their tiredness and Kid had to keep slapping the lines to keep them moving above a draggy walk.

"Come on nags," He clucked to the team as he slapped the lines again. "Less than a mile to town then six more miles to hay and rest!" Nancy was telling Kid she couldn't even remember the town ahead.

"What do you suppose that is?" Kid asked out loud as he saw the cloud of dust spring up in the vicinity of Bullhead and head towards them on the trail. "That's a pretty good sized bunch of riders pounding it pretty fast," he told Nancy.

One of the seedy looking gunnies near the front of the bunch riding south spotted the loaded spring wagon. Stinging from their putdown at both the ranch and the bar and feeling the effects of the liquor, he shouted to his companions, "There's a nester right now! Lets dust 'em up as we go by!" His wild companions caught the spirit if his suggestion and pulling their six shooters began banging away at the wagon as they went by in a swirl of dust. A few threw a parting shot or two over their shoulders as they galloped on down the trail. They never stopped to survey any damage they might have done but galloped on. One horse was down and Kid lay slumped on the wagon seat. Those in the rear could hear a woman's scream and they grinned.

Nancy was screaming at the top of her lungs, her hands alternately covering her eyes, her ears, then her mouth. Kid

was slumped on the spring wagon seat, blood was running from a wounds in his chest and his head. Some blood had sprayed on Nancy. She suddenly looked down and saw the spots. Her screams stopped as she fainted dead away.

Sparky, who had heard the popping of the guns as he rode into Bullhead, stopped for a moment. He looked to the south where he could see the gunnies riding away at a gallup. He could faintly hear the screams and then the silence.

“Somone’s in trouble!” he yelled and put the spurs to his horse. He could see the wagon drawn up alongside the trail with at least one of the horses down. He could see the dust cloud fading in the distance as the riders galluped on south, out of sight.

When he got to the wagon he looked in dismay at the two people on the seat, both slumped over, both blood stained. One of the horses lay dead in the widening pool of its own blood and the other, fighting the smell and the noise, had panicked and was completely tangled in the harness, on its side and kicking.

Sparky dismounted and climbed a wheel. He grasped the young lady. As he moved her upright could see her breathing and saw the blood was only that which had spattered from the hits the man had taken. It was easy to see that the man, or rather a boy, was dead.

Catching up the girl in his arms he jumped to the ground and laid here in the grass along the trail, gently chafing her hands and wrists.

“Wake up, Miss. Wake up!” he was saying. “It’s all right now, Please wake up.”

A new outburst of struggling from the downed horse took him away from the girl long enough to unhook the harness and free the struggling animal enough so it could get to its feet. He tied it to a wheel.

Going back to Nancy he saw she was breathing regular and her color was returning. Sparky took off his hat and began to fan her face and neck. She stirred.

Suddenly her eyes opened wide, she sat upright, her mouth opened with her unfinished scream, but stopped when she realized Sparky was somone different. He was bent over her with deep concern in his eyes and hat in his hand.

“What happened? Where am I?”

“Easy now, Miss. I was hopin’ you could tell me what happened.” Sparky said as calmly as he could. “How are you feeling? Could you ride a little?”

Nancy managed a weak nod and Sparky gathered her in his

arms and swung her into his saddle, swinging up behind her and holding her gently, started his horse toward town.

"Everything is all right now Miss," Sparky spoke soothingly. "Just you relax . I'll take you on in to Bullhead and drop you off at the store where Mrs. Swallows can look after you a bit. I'll go back and get the wagon and your things on into town and get somebody to help me with that other fellow."

Sparky continued to hold Nancy, perhaps a bit more tightly than necessary, as they rode to Swallows store. He was glad his horse had accepted the double burden and the flapping skirts without more than slight nervous protest.

At Swallows hitchrail he stopped, lifted Nancy from the saddle and carried her into the store. Mort bustled up and upon receiving Sparky's brief explanation called to Molly as he rushed to the back of the store and held the door open to their living quarters. Sparky laid the girl on the bed indicated although she was now full awake and was protesting she was fine. She sat up at once smoothing her hair. Molly shooed the men out of the living quarters and settled herself on the edge of the bed with her arms around Nancy's shoulders.

"Reckon that must be Jenks daughter," Mort was saying. "Heard she was coming home from back east where she's been goin' to school."

"Need to get that wagon in." Sparky said. "Got anybody in town that handles buryin'? Got one out there that's sure enuf dead!"

At that moment both Iver Sorenson and Will Harthoff came into the store, explaining they were drawn in by the flurry of activity. After discussing what had happened, it was decided that Will would get a horse and he and Sparky would go back and retrieve the wagon and the body and bring it into town. They would dispose of the dead horse temporarily by pulling it off the trail and that Iver would get word to the Double J of the dead ranch hand and the stranded girl.

Iver rode into the Double J ranch headquarters yard and joined Hooker, Cleet and Doc Purdee on the porch. He told briefly what he knew of the gunnies attack on the wagon south of town, of the killing of Kid and of Nancy waiting at Mort's store.

"Reckon you'd better send an extra wagon in to pick up Kid if you want to plant him out here," Iver offered. "That spring wagon is full of that young lady's stuff and don't reckon she'd want to ride all the way out here with the dead one tied top!"

Cleet detailed Hooker to pick a couple of hands, get an extra horse ready and head for town. "I'm goin' to settle with Dakota and Sly, damn their hides! I kinda liked the Kid and it was just on

account of that bunch of no goods they brung in that he's gone!"

Inviting Doc to remain at the ranch so he could be on hand when Nancy arrived "just in case she needed any attention after that escapade" and adjusting his six gun headed for the bunkhouse.

With gun in hand he entered the bunkhouse door. Sly jumped to his feet from the bunk hands splayed at his sides.

"Drop them guns, right now!" Cleet commanded. When Sly, caught against a drawn gun, complied, Cleet in short chopped sentences told of the attack and the death of Kid. "Now get out!" Cleet ended up shouting, stepped clear of the door. "Get out right now and clear the country. If I ever see you again it'll be over my gunsights. Now! Git!"

After Sly rode away he went to the ranch office and repeated the procedure with Dakota.

Cleet's rage subsided as Dakota's horse disappeared over the ridge. Doc Purdee came out of the house and sat down beside Cleet. "Don't look good," he said. "Jenks could go any minute. Looks like a real bad stroke!"

Chapter 15

By the time Hooker and Pinto had arrived in Bullhead, Sparky and Will had returned to town with the spring wagon. They had re-arranged the load so they could place Kid's body across the back, covered with a piece of tarp. They rapidly told Hooker all they knew about the shooting up along the trail. While Will unhooked his horse from the Wagon and Pinto harnessed and hitched the Double J horse brought from the ranch, Hooker went into the store "to break the sad news of Nancy's Pa's sudden attack."

Nancy was up and around, drinking coffee with Molly Swallows when Hooker came into the living quarters. Mort and Sparky hovered in the background.

"Plumb sorry 'boot your troubles, Miss Nancy," Hooker was saying. "But I reckon I got other bad news. Your Pa had a bad attack this mornin', Doc says a stroke. When we left the ranch to come to town he was in bed and like he was out cold!"

Nancy rose to her feet, a shocked expression on her face. Stunned by the news she stood unmoving for several seconds. She gasped a great sob caught in her throat. Her eyes searched the faces of those in the room in distress, sought help. Then she sank back into the chair.

"I must go to him at once," she suddenly said. "Right away." Nancy looked to Sparky. "Can you take me on your horse, that would be faster than the wagon!"

Sparky was thrilled he had been chosen. His heart was going out to this girl with grief piling up on her shoulders. "Come on! My horse is right outside." They fled to the front of the store.

By the time they arrived at the Double J, Doc had come out on the porch to announce to Cleet that Jenks had died. It was left for Cleet to give the bad news to Nancy. She sank into a chair on the porch and commenced sobbing, her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands.

"I never really knew him and hardly remember him." she whispered as tears rolled down her cheeks. "What will I do?" Without even thinking she turned toward Sparky who moved a step toward her. He took her in his arms, patting her back and holding her head on his shoulder while she wept.

Cleet took over details. He set two riders off to notify the other ranchers the word the funeral would be held the next morning at the ranch in the graveyard up on the ridge behind the house. He sent others of the crew up to prepare the

graves for both Jenks, who would be laid beside his wife, and for the Kid, who would be laid beside the other hands who given their lives in the service of the Double J. Cleet sent another hand into town to bring Missus Harthoff and perhaps Mrs. Swallows to come to the ranch to be with Nancy.

The yard was filled with wagons, buggies and horses. Literally everyone within a day's ride had come for the funeral. Bullhead had closed up tight as a drum. While many hated and feared Jenks when he was alive, he was still the first and the biggest rancher in the area. Many came out of curiosity if not respect. One of the Germans from the wagon train was a lay preacher and he had volunteered to read a service, which Nancy had gratefully accepted.

Even Dakota and Sly and the four gunnies had come. They had been chased out of the Double Eagle when Price announced he was closing for the funeral, but they stayed away from the rest a good distance, in a fringe of trees that bordered the graveyard.

All of the ladies had brought food. After the service, the ladies gathered at the house where they "dished up" the food. The bowls and baskets were set along the edge of the porch. Everyone walked by and filled plates. Talk was subdued and all extended sympathy and hello's to Nancy. After eating most starting drifting away with exhortations of "If there is anything we can do . . ." and "Come over to see as soon as you can" Soon the ranch was still and quiet except for Molly and Grace who were in the kitchen tidying up. The hands had retired to the bunkhouse and it left Nancy, Cleet, Hooker and Sparky sitting on the porch.

"Don't know if'n old Jenks... Your Pa...had a will. But I guess no matter...far as I know you are his only livin' kin so I s'pect the ranch goes to you Nancy," Hooker had spoken to all four. "I know this is kinda sudden but a ranch don't run by itself and I reckon you'll hafta take over!"

A look of skocked dismay passed over Nancy's face. "Good heavens," she said "I don't know the first thing about running a ranch!"

"Well, I reckon Cleet, who is the foreman, will just keep on a doin' what he's been a doin'," Hooker was saying. "Seein't how him and me been around the longest, we can help you we can sorta look after things," Hooker said. He looked to Cleet and got a nod of confirmation. "We can keep the day to day stuff goin' and check with you when something special comes along, after you get you're feet on the ground you can start givin' what orders you want then."

Cleet and Sparky went to the kitchen to carry the dishes and utensils that had been brought up from the crews cook shack back to their proper place. Cleet then went to hitch the buggy to return Molly to town. It was agreed that Grace would stay at the ranch for a few days to be hand to comfort Nancy and be a companion until she would feel composed enough or had the desire to be alone.

When Sparky got back to the porch he found Hooker sitting on the porch swing with Nancy, relating the history of the Double J to her. He told her all of the past as he remembered it, told her of the current operations and of the ranch's place in the community.

"When you feel up to it, You'll have to make a decision on which way you want to go," Hooker said. "Your Pa was ready to chase those nesters out. If'n you want to follow your Daddy's path I reckon' the hands'l do their best." He looked over at Sparky who had been listening intently.

"Howsomever, there's lots of folks, I guess me included, that figure the Double J has all it needs if'n it stays on the east side of the creek and that would leave room enough for folks coming in to settle over on the west side!"

"Oh!" Nancy exclaimed. "I don't know what do! I'd like to do what Daddy wanted but I'm not used to all this fighting and I don't think I like it!" She sat primly on the swing twisting her hands in her lap.

For the next several hours Hooker and Sparky discussed with her the problems of running a ranch of this size, the problems of claiming and holding the land against all comers, the problems of rustlers, of weather, of disease, of keeping the Double J intact. They tried also to indicate what her options might be if she decided not to stay, how she might sell out and go back east. Finally she threw up her hands.

"Oh!, You've got my head in a whirl! I'm going in and lay down for a while." She retreated to the bedroom that had been made ready for her.

Sparky and Hooker were joined by Mrs. Harthoff and in low voices, discussed the problems facing the girl. They agreed it would be hard for them to suggest any course of action knowing so little about Nancy. They agreed that she appeared very steady, level headed and seemed to have a quick grasp of facts and felt that, with her quick exposure to the details of the operation, even coming right on the heels of all the violence and grief she had been subjected to, she had displayed remarkable calm and good judgement.

"I think she'd be somebody to ride the river with!" Hooker

said. "Wish I was forty years younger!"

Grace Harthoff chuckled.

Nancy tried to sleep. She was physically exhausted. Her mind was in a turmoil. She had met so many people—she'd never be able to put names to faces. The details of the ranch operation were beyond her limited business experience. She was torn between loyalty to the Jenks name and the family history as she had heard it from Hooker. Nancy liked Hooker and vaguely remembered him from her childhood. She felt certain he would not give her any bad advice. She hated violence and she knew holding the ranch like her Father had would entail more bloodshed. Her mind kept turning to that nice young man who had rescued her from the wagon and who had held her in his arms. She had to admit she had liked the feel of his strong arms around her as they had ridden to town and to the ranch.

Nancy tossed and turned and finally blessed sleep came and wiped away her thoughts.

Cleet dropped Mrs. Swallows off at the store and started to turn the buggy around to head back to the ranch. He sighed and shrugged his shoulders. There was a ranch to run, whatever else!

A hard, firm voice reached his ears and he pulled up on the reins.

"Lets decide right now, its you or me going to run the ranch!"

The challenge was obvious. It was Dakota. Standing, his feet spread, in the middle of the street in front of the Double Eagle saloon, his hands loose at his sides. .

Cleet laid down the lines and without haste climbed down to the street. He knew a moment of fear, he wasn't in Dakota's class. But memory of the Kid and all the other troubles of the last few days had to laid at the feet of Dakota and his kind and his rage boiled back up and displaced his fear.

If it meant going down, he was going down fighting. He wondered where Sly was at the moment and guessed he was in the saloon. There was no one to look to for help. There was no tomorrow.

"This is for the Kid" he said and pulled his six gun.

Even as it came out of his holster he knew he was beaten for Dakota's gun was leveling and flame showed at the muzzle. He pulled the trigger anyway. He'd go down true to the brand, maybe he could take Dakota along!

Dakota, feeling overconfident of his ability against a common cow nurse, had pulled too fast and hadn't waited for his gun to finish its leveling, and his first bullet plowed the dust of the

street at Cleet's foot. Cleet's shot, slower, was truer. It struck Dakota in the chest, turning him slightly. Dakota's second shot went off to the left.

Cleet's second shot took Dakota in the neck and finished him. He lay in the street, blood staining the dust.

Mort, had been in the doorway, after greeting his wife. He had stayed to watch the challenge in the street. His dreams had evaporated when Dakota's second wild bullet struck him full in the face.

Cleet was holstering his gun and turning back to the buggy when he heard Molly Swallows screams. He hadn't known what had happened but sensed the tragedy when he saw Mort's body in the doorway. He hurried to the store in time to catch the fainting Molly. He carried her back to the living quarters.

Chapter 16

The second funeral within as many days had a sobering effect on the basin. Almost the same people who had attended Jenks funeral were present for the burial of Mort Swallows. The biggest difference was that more true sorrow was evident at the passing of Mort.

There was the undercurrent of muttering as well. There was the oft expressed sentiment that it was high time to consider some law enforcement for Bullhead. Although many lay the blame back at the doorstep of Peter Jenks, they realized that door was now closed. Closed unless Nancy Jenks chose to follow in her father's footsteps.

They laid Mort to rest on a shady, low, wooded knoll just to the west of town. Dakota was planted without much notice lower on the slope and nearer the creek. "Maybe the start of a Boothill for Bullhead" several quipped.

Sly and the other hardcases had left town quickly and quietly, and things in the basin began to return to normal.

But things were not to be normal again. Perhaps never.

A lone rider stopped at the Double Eagle for a drink and announced that a big herd was on its way from Oregon. It would stop at the far west side of the basin. The lone rider was an advance scout and was checking to make sure things hadn't changed since the owners of the herd had made the decision a year ago to make the drive. He seemed relieved to hear of Jenks passing. He passed the word his outfit was known as the Pitchfork brand.

The group with Silas Bell had all staked their homesteads close to the west bank of Bull Creek, starting just a mile north of town. They had started homes by bringing in logs from the forested areas. The seventeen Germans had moved just slightly north of Bell's group, with a few going just to the west along a smaller, un-named feeder creek.

The freighter who made the regular run hauling in supplies upped his deliveries to twice a week, bring and taking mail each trip.

A mule pulled wagon, loaded with a printing press and cases of type arrived. The owner of the press set up a tent and unloaded his equipment and immediately set to work putting out the first edition of the BULLHEAD^BEACON and proclaimed the area would see the paper on a weekly basis and it stood ready to Fearlessly Tell The Truth As We See It

Headlines stated it was an official paper in which could be published the required legal notices of homesteads. It also stated it would accept cash or foodstuffs for the price of a years subscription!

Molly sent word out to the settler area asking Bill Wood to come in and assist her with the moving of heavy things around the store as they came in on the freight wagons. She had ordered the freighter to bring a load of lumber and laid plans to build an addition along the south of the store. Bill had grown restless at the nesters site and welcomed the change in routine. He discovered he enjoyed working the store and quickly picked up the routine. He took his meals in the back and was thoroughly enjoying Molly's company. Bill had taken a tent from the store shelves and had set up a sleeping camp along side the creek.

Nancy had fallen into the routine of riding over the ranch area in the mornings with either Cleet or Hooker and she began to look forward to spending the afternoons with Sparky, either riding or just sitting on the porch talking. Mrs. Harthoff returned to her home in Bullhead declaring, "That gal has adjusted just fine and she's safe with that bunch, they're fine men." Secretely she was pleased at the attention Nancy was paying to Sparky for she had grown to like the straightforward young man and was willing to overlook the fact that he was reported to be handy with his guns.

It was coming on July and the merchants got together to plan a celebration for the Fourth. They would invite all the cowboys to come in and stage a rodeo, they would games for the children and a big picnic supper. If they could find someone to play they would have a dance in the evening. The fact they didn't have a hall bothered them not a whit. The newspaper editor agreed to print some handbills and riders carried them out as they went and tacked them to trees or wherever they might be seen. At least one wound up in every bunkhouse in the area and was read and re-read. Everyone was planning to come!

Hilda Sorenson had begun serving meals at her house Iver was making plans to build a regular building facing the street. Will Harthoff had erected a pole barn with stalls and a hayloft and declared it a livery. One of the German settlers who was handy as a carpenter and had a set of tools, abandoned his plans to homestead and came to Bullhead where he found work from dawn to dark building.

Such was the bustle and excitement of a rapidly growing town. The sounds of sawing and hammering were heard all

over town.

Bill was sitting on the bench in front of the store after supper and smoking a cigar when Molly joined him. They visited as they sat in the shade.

"I think you should order some hardware items, Molly," Bill was saying. "Have had several calls the last few days for nails, bolts, tools and even window glass!"

"Bill I realize this may sound kind of forward, especially coming so soon after after Motr. . . " Molly hesitated, then continued. "But what are your plans for the future? I think Bullhead has a good chance now and I can't run this store alone."

"Molly, you know I've been a loner and a drifter. I haven't given it that much thought." Bill was gazing at the far away snow capped peaks of the Big Horns as they caught the last golden rays of the setting sun. "I guess I've thought a time or two of settling down. But about the time the thought gets serious the itch takes over and I'm off again!"

"I understand," Molly said gently. "We moved a lot but it was for different reasons. This time I want to stay put. It looks like this town will grow enough and this store is on the ground floor so it should make money. I dream of enough money coming in to build a little house separate from the store actually having a home of my own."

Bill enjoyed her vision with her for a moment then suddenly his thoughts turned back to the carefree trails he had ridden, Carefree trails with a good pard at his side, the great outdoors for a roof and no wall at all!

Suddenly he squirmed on his seat. He sensed where this conversation was leading. "Watch yourself, Bill, old boy," his thoughts were saying. "Molly ain't no dance hall girl. She ain't gonna disappear at midnight." Even as he thought the negative thoughts, he was aware he enjoyed being close to Molly. She was a calm sensible girl, Never demanding. There was a nice, clean woman smell to her.

Bill cleared his throat readying to speak when footsteps sounded coming down the street.

It was Harthoff, Sorenson, and the newspaper editor. "Good evenin' Molly — Bill. We, that is, the businessmen are havin' a meeting down to the saloon. Would like you both to come. Molly, we'd understand if'n you don't want to, but Bill could come and fill you in later."

"You go, Bill," Molly said.

The group sat at a round table near the back of the saloon. Waterhouse stood at the end of the bar near the table."Want

anything?" He asked Bill and served a beer in response to Bill's request.

Harthoff led off. "We been a talking about trying to organize something like a town board," he said. "We've added a newspaper to the five businesses places already here and I guess you would have to call my adding a livery as another and even Hilda starting to serve meals as another. We hear from the freighter there is some more folks talking to him about moving 'em up here to start a lumber yard and a dress shop."

Sorenson started talking. "We got to draw up a few rules about where people can build and layout some streets and things like that afore we just get all topsy turvy and mixed up so we would never look like like a town!"

Waterhouse picked up the talk. "Until we get somerething worked out we decided that all the businessmen together would serve as a board. Later we will organize an election and pick a Mayor and maybe only three board members."

"But for now," the Editor was saying, "What with the celebration only three days away we think we need a town Marshall and we want to offer that job to you, Bill."

"Whoa, now!" Bill exclaimed. He was almost speechless—this coming on top of the just completed talk with Molly. Bill had a sinking feeling. His days of freedom were going down the drain. "Whoa, now—Lets give a little thought to this . . ."

A babble talk broke out around the table urging Bill to considered the job. He lamely waved his hand.

"Tomorrow! I'll think it over. I promise you that much and I'll give you an answer tomorrow."

Bill headed for his camp on the creek.

PROBLEM WITH

Chapter 17 this is BULL17:F AND BULL18:F
ACTUALLY DIFFERENT VERSION - ALLEGED FINAL

Chapter 17

Sparky drifted into Bill's creek-side camp as darkness was falling. After picketing his horse he joined Bill in hunkering over the small fire, both men were silent, lost in thought.

"Bill, I got a hankerin to stay here in this area." Sparky's comment was the first spoken word in several minutes.

Bill smiled in the darkness. He had nightly been hearing Sparky relate his rides, visits and conversation with Nancy. He knew that Sparky was building up to a proposal and from what he had heard, Nancy was likely to accept. She had no parents to turn to for advice or from whom to ask permission. Apparently both Hooker and Mrs. Harthoff, to whom she had been looking for adult advice and counsel, had indicated their approval of Sparky. It was probably just a matter of finding the right moment or situation.

Suddenly Bill felt very alone. It was not long ago he had lost Silas as a pard and now he could see Sparky heading down that path. He, himself, had been thinking a lot lately about the benefits of settling down.

Molly was uppermost on his mind. Her talk of the store, its possibilities, the profitable future, her need for help in the store . . . "Cripes, it was as if she was almost proposin' to me!" He didn't feel quite right thinking this way about her what with hhusband dead only two weeks. But out here you didn't have time to stand on formality. It was root hog or die!

Now they wanted to make him Town Marshall! He was looking forward to the coming celebration and recognized the need for some sort of control so the event didn't get out of hand. Thoughts were racing through his mind at break-neck speed. What should he do? He wished he had someone to confide in. He rolled into his blankets.

Tomorrow! He had to make a decision tomorrow!

Waking to the smell of coffee boiling over the camp fire, Bill rolled out of his blankets and went to the creek and washed. He rubbed his chin, felt the need for a shave but hated cold water shaving. He would drink a cup with Sparky and then go to the store and ask Molly if he could shave in the back. There would be warm water and a good mirror. Yes! Then as he was shaving he could talk to her about the offer for the job of Marshall. He felt comfortable talking to her.

He finished his coffee and went to the store.

Standing stripped to the waist, spreading lather on his face,

he glanced over his shoulder at Molly sitting quietly at the kitchen table sipping coffee. Neither were embarrassed at his half-dressed condition.

"Molly. Last night the businessmen offered me the job of Marshall," Bill said.

"That must mean they are getting a town board organized," she answered thoughtfully. "I have heard that was being talked about." She gave no hint by voice or expression how she felt about the offer.

"Darn, it sure puts me in a spot," Bill continued. He stopped shaving and turned to face Molly. "I'm not really the settlin' kind and I'm past due for movin' on," He was blurting out the words but now that the rush had started, he couldn't stop.

"Molly, I ain't much on words but lately I been feeling kinda comfortable here in Bullhead. Workin' here in the store has been kinda nice and interestin'. And if you'll excuse me for being so forward so soon, I'm feeling mighty comfortable 'round you.

"I reckon' it probably ain't fitting to be talking like that to you so soon after you lost Mort, but, I was kinda figurin' after a decent spell to ask you if I could come courtin'," Bill's words were bubbling out.

Molly sat quietly, holding her cup, neither smiling nor frowning, but the lights in her eyes gave her away. "Oh Bill, I'm so pleased you like it here. It has been so nice to have you around. You are so strong and so sure. You seem to know just what to do all the time. I've been used to a lot of indecision and I like having you around making decisions and feeling you have the strength to carry them out." She rose from the table and went to Bill and put a hand on his arm. "You can come calling anytime you want, Bill," She smiled up at his half-shaved face. "Out here on the frontier there really is no proper time of waiting when the two people involved are right and ready!"

"Well," Bill said turning to finish his shaving. "I'm declarin' my interest in comin' calling. But right now I gotta go tell that board no on that Marshall job. Can't work a store and be lawing at the same time!"

"Maybe you can help until after the celebration," Molly said. "When that crowd is in town is the time we will need somebody and for just a few days wouldn't hurt."

He shrugged into his shirt and said as he was leaving, "Just 'till after the celebration!"

It was early and none of the business places had opened yet so he sat on a bench in front of the Double Eagle. He was joined by one of the old prospectors, who sat beside him and

pulled out his knife and a whittlin' stick.

"Reckon you be the one that took out that Dakota," the Propector squinted up at Bill. "Reckon you heard some of that bunch is plannin' to come back to town for the celebration and they will be a layin for ya."

"So that what's behind them offerin' me that Marshall's job last night," Bill muttered.

"Reckon so," cackled the old timer. "Don't figur' a badge'd help much 'cepting maybe make it legal!"

At that moment both Waterhouse and Livesay came by. They had been to Hilda's for breakfast. Bill stood up.

"I'll take the job." He said without preamble. "But only 'till after the celebration.

"I been helping Molly over at the store and she's gotten to depend upon me and needs the help what with all the folks comin'in and the new addition to the store bein' built. Guess that would cover the time when a big crowd might be on hand and things will quiet down after that 'till we grow some more!"

"Anybody got a badge?" the editor Livesay wanted to know.

Bill went back to the store, opened the front door and got the store ready for the days business. Molly came out of the living quarters and said she would be washing and that Bill should call her if he got busy.

Bill told her about his taking the Marshall's job through the celebration. "Was going to ask you about takin' you to the dance but I guess that will be about the busiest time for a Marshall to be round and about so how about next Sunday I find a buggy and we go for a ride?"

Molly smiled. "And I'll pack a picnic lunch amd we'll make a day of it!" She sounded excited.

Slash M was furnishing a beef for the celebration and their cook and crew had come in to dig a pit and start the beef cooking . They came by the store to purchase a pitchfork to be used to handle the chunks of meat after they had been wrapped in cheesecloth. They also bought a rake to level the coals after they had burned down to usable embers. The coals were raked level, the meat packages placed on top of the coals, more branches piled on that and then the pit filled over with damp green sod. Then it was a matter of waiting for the meat to cook.

Areas had to be roped off for the rodeo. Swallows store was donating the rope. The cowboys came to pick it up and went back to the area by the creek to do the temporary fencing necessary.

It would mostly be steer roping and riding and bull dogging and some horse racing. Somebody was bound to bring a wild cow and if they did a milking contest would result.

It was a busy day with folks coming in and getting last minute items for tomorrows celebration and folks coming in just to visit. Some folks who lived considerable distance away came in early, some coming as much as an entire day's travel.

Chapter 18

Early in the morning the town was already filling with horses and riders and buggies and wagons as more and more folks came in adding to those who had arrived the day before.

Molly had found a flag in the store and Bill had nailed it to a long tree branch which he fastened to the front of the store. A grassy area under some cottonwood trees had been selected as the picnic site and Slash M crew passed the word the beef would be done as soon as the rodeo was over. This area would also double as the dance floor. A fiddler had been found and a guitar and banjo player offered to help at least part of the time.

Families brought blankets and picnic baskets to the site and claimed their spots. It was turning into a great celebration.

Bill spent most of his time in front of the Double Eagle where he greeted all the cow hands coming in with a firm, rehearsed little speech.

“Boys, I ain’t got no badge but I been elected Town Marshall of this here young town. We are glad you came to celebrate with us but we gotta ask you to leave your guns at the bar. You can’t ride the rodeo with ‘em anyway and Slash M says the beef’ll be done enough so you won’t have to shoot it. So have a good time but behave yourselves!”

Everyone wearing a gun complied willingly as they were grateful the town had sprung for the celebration and were willing to show their respect. One look at Bill and his tied down gun showed he had the ability to use his gun and no one wanted to challenge him or the authority he claimed he had, badge or no badge!

After the shouting had died down and the last race was run, the rodeo was declared finished. Everyone drifted over to the grassed area in the cottonwoods. Some planks had been laid across some log ends and all sorts of culinary delights began appearing from wagon and buggies and the ladies were in their seventh heaven supervising the laying out and displaying of the food.

The Slash M cook had been busy with a huge knife and had a heaping platter of the pit-roasted beef waiting. More was on the way as the cowboys finished uncovering the rest of the roasting pit and exposing the cooked chunks of beef, releasing the delicious aroma.

The German, who was a lay preacher, offered a brief prayer

and the meal was served.

Bill had stayed along the street as everyone had gone to the picnic area. He didn't want anyone sneaking back during the activities to make a hasty theft of merchandise, horses or gear, all of which had been left unattended.

Bill was sitting on the bench in front of the saloon when Sly and two others walked into the street. They come from the west alongside the saloon building.

They must have left their horses in the trees back of town, but suddenly they were there. They just walked into the street past the saloon.

Sly and two others! They stopped, eyed Bill and then spread apart.

"OK Nester this one is gonna be for Dakota!" Sly snarled as he crouched.

"Poor thing to spoil a celebration," Bill said to him calmly. He was about forty feet from Sly as he calmly walked out into the street to match Sly's location. He remembered later thinking that he liked that distance.

"Why don't you boys just hand over your guns and we'll put 'em in the bar here with all the others and you can pick 'em up when you're ready to leave town!"

Bill had watched the other two slide off to each side until they were at the edges of the street and off to the very side of his vision. No way he could cover all three. Time started to stretch and slow. He began to grin. Funny, but at a time like this he was thinking of waiting on folks in the store, dishing up scoops of flour and sugar and raisins and weighing out paper bags of beans. His grin faded—this wasn't funny. It suddenly meant a great deal to him. He looked intently at Sly knowing that was where his first shot had to go.

Sly was un-nerved by Bill's sudden grin. It was now or never. He was steeling himself for his draw when a gravelly voice from alongside the saloon rasped out "You Jaspers off to the side, you might better think twice before you decide to buy in. I 'reckon you know what buckshot from this old double barrel can do at this range!"

The old prospector had seen the riders go by his shack and had loaded his shotgun and followed. He was glad now he had waited at his cabin until "the lines for the chow got smaller!"

Bill felt a welling of relief. Again confident, he focused his attention on Sly.

Sly cast a quick glance to the side to confirm the shotgun. Rage boiled in him and overflowed. Any good judgment he may have had, had flown. With a mighty curse he pulled his iron.

Bill, watching him closely, saw the sudden tightening of Sly's eyes and drew. He vaguely remembered thinking as his gun was coming level, "I beat him!" when a blow that felt like a sledge hit him in the left shoulder, knocking him back and down. He was hit! It seemed to take forever for his body to hit the ground. Dust flew. He couldn't see for the dust.

Bill vaguely remembered hearing the dull boom of the shotgun. He was trying to puzzle out what had happened. He had thought he had beat Sly! What was he doing down here in the dust? His shoulder began to throb, he could feel the blood soaking his shirt. It was getting dark!

Later that night he struggled back from remembering the dust to being awake. He realized he was in Molly's bed, a big bandage on his shoulder and Molly, Sparky and Nancy sitting at the table talking quietly.

"How long I been here?" Bill asked.

Molly jumped to her feet and rushed to the bed, "Just lie still, everything is all right. It's only about ten or so. You been out for a couple hours." She was holding him down by his good shoulder while she pressed her hand to his brow.

Sparky had come over and was filling him in. It seems the old prospector had held one of the gunnies at bay but the one on the far side of the street had taken a chance. It was his bullet that had hit Bill and luckily, had gone on through without hitting bone. Bill's 45 had gone true and Sly was dead. The gunny on the far side of the street had got off one shot, the one that had hit Bill, before the prospector had loaded him full of buckshot. They both had been drug off and were ready for planting in Bullhead's new boothill. The third had left town quickly amid hooting and catcalls.

Bill had been brought to Molly's where Doc had treated and bandaged the wound. The shooting had almost broken up the picnic when everyone had rushed to the street to see what had happened. But when the fiddle player had started scraping away, they had all drifted back to the grassy area where a dance was in full swing with grass and gravel for the floor.

The prospector, hero of the hour, feeling his importance, had agreed to assume the duties of marshall. At one of the breaks in the dancing, when some announcements were being made, Sparky had informed the crowd of his engagement to Nancy, who, properly blushing, had announced that Double J would henceforth be known the "JP" connected. She never understood the sudden chuckles that rippled through the crowd. Nancy also proclaimed the ranch would no longer lay any claim to any lands west of Bull Creek.

After the news was all told Sparky and Nancy went off to do more dancing. Molly sat on the edge of the bed beside Bill, holding his hand. He reached and pulled her down and kissed her. She returned the kiss with fervor.

“Stay beside me,” he whispered.

“Just you stay beneath the blankets, I’ll stay above” and she cuddled close to him.

“Tomorrow!” Bill thought. “I’ll get rid of those blankets tomorrow!” He dropped off to sleep.

Humph! Always wanting what is not!

THE END!!!!!!!!!!!!!!