

## Chapter X

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Cabin building turned out to be even more confining than tree chopping. Jim went to the Rutledges every morning with the others, but his heart was not in it.

"Cussed lot of trouble to go to, just to have a place to git in out'n the rain!" he remarked to Jonnie one morning as they headed for the raft.

"Rain?" Jonnie gave a laugh. "That ain't quite the point, is it?"

"What is?"

Jonnie shot him an exasperated glance. "Jim, you tryin' to get my goat, or what?" He cast loose the towline with a yank, but when he turned back to Jim he was cheerful again. "You wait'll we get our own cabin built, and start livin' in it. You'll find out the point."

Jim grunted and gave a shove with the pole that sent them into midstream, where the half-finished house became visible through the trees ahead. Point or no point, the solidity of those log walls was beginning to make him acutely uneasy.

Why would folks want to box themselves in that way? The stretched hides of a tepee kept out the weather but not the small sounds you listened for; if danger came you could duck under a loosened flap in any direction and be out, or even slit a wall straight up with your knife and walk through it.

And the sky showed through the smoke hole in the top, and the sun slanted in, and you could dismantle the whole lodge in a few minutes, roll it up and be ready to roam whenever you felt restless.

He was restless enough these days. All work and no fighting, no playing, no chasing or being chased—he felt like a squaw. He would sit back on his heels sometimes on the top log of a wall and look out across the river to their own glades, where Buckskin and Bad Medicine grazed idle. And a cold little ripple of astonishment and uneasiness would run over him. What was he doing, anyway, letting his horse grow fat and tame, and his traps rusty, and his senses dull, while he spent his days building bourgeyway cabins? It would outrage Scalp Necklace and the other Crows who had trained him, if they knew. And Tom Rivers—he could imagine Tom's slow, incredulous grin and the dry sort of remark he'd make— "By golly, hoss, so you've turned carpenter! Now that takes some believin'!"

One noon as he leaped down with the others to see what Mrs. Rutledge and the girls had concocted for lunch, he spotted Dan'l sitting by the wagon whittling pegs, and an idea struck him.

He walked past the fire and the sputtering skillets and the bustling womenfolk, loosening the thongs of his shirt as he went. He leaned over Dan'l and quietly spoke one word, "Follow." He waited only long enough to see comprehension dawn on the boy's face, then made for the willows. Dan'l was behind him now, his breath quick and audible as they pushed through the underbrush. Jim stripped to his breechclout and then sprinted for the water. A flat, skimming dive took him with a shock of cold into midstream; he heard a splash and a gasp behind him and smiled, knowing Dan'l had followed. Turning like a beaver, he headed into the current.

He had swum no more than a hundred yards upstream

before he knew his powerful, reaching stroke had carried him far beyond the boy. There he was, bobbing about more than halfway back to the anchored raft, his wet head gleaming in the sun. Beyond, at the landing, the womenfolk were milling about all talking at once. Jim got only snatches of it: ". . . catch their deaths! I declare to goodness . . ." ". . . ashore this minute, Dan'l Keath!" "Oh mercy, oh oh oh, that water's *freezin'* cold—" that was Bess, the timid Rutledge twin. And Maggie, the irrepressible, giggled, "Looks like fun, though!" Ned and his father stood silent, and grinning. Jonathan was nowhere to be seen.

Jim grinned too, and drifted lazily back. When he reached Dan'l he hooked a strong wrist under the boy's armpit and said, "How about it? Want to go ashore?"

Dan'l dangled happily, puffing and spitting. "Not till you're—tired—by cracky!"

"All right, then. You're gonna dodge bullets awhile."

Jim loosed him and sank beneath the surface, then with a quick lash of his body angled headfirst toward the river bottom. When he came up he was twenty feet away and had a handful of pebbles. He began throwing them at Dan'l with wicked precision, ignoring the fresh storm that broke out from the bank downstream, and noting with satisfaction that the boy was dodging almost all of them, tired as he was. He had the makings of a good wily swimmer.

Suddenly something struck him behind the ear with stinging force. He dived instinctively, came up in a different spot, and to his astonishment saw Jonathan swimming toward him from farther upstream, his bare shoulders white against the clear brown water. As soon as he spotted Jim's head, he hurled another pebble. He was grinning and his aim was deadly accurate. Jim's heart gave a leap of excitement as he dodged a third missile and submerged to snatch a handful of fresh ammunition. This was something like!

For five or ten minutes the action was fast and wild enough to suit even Jim. He needed all his skill to dodge Jonathan's "bullets" and yet have time to pepper both brothers as well. Dan'l was yelling with delight and sometimes with pain, Jonathan was laughing and all three were diving, weaving, darting, and thrashing until the water creamed white around them.

At last Jim swam to Dan'l's side, hoisted the puffing little boy to his back as Jonathan appeared beside them.

"Good game," Jonnie said. "Take you on again sometime. By golly, you're good at dodgin' them things."

"You ain't such a slouch yerself."

"How 'bout me?" panted Dan'l in his ear as they started for the shore. "Feel like I—been in a—hailstorm. But did I do—all right?"

"You done fine." Jim tumbled him onto the mossy bank and moved into the willows, shaking water from his braids.

Jonathan was there ahead of him, already thrusting damp legs into his jeans. "Ain't had so much fun in years," Jonnie remarked. "You and me'll have to . . ." The words trailed off.

Jim frowned, looked down at himself to see what Jonnie could be staring at. The scars? They were nothing new by this time. "What's up?" he muttered.

"Jim," said Jonnie thoughtfully, "that bear nigh ruint you, didn't he?"

"He give me a good stiff slap."

"Crimeny!" Jonnie wet his lips. "Someway it never dawned on me— Sure a good thing them Injuns found you."

"Yeah." Jim turned away self-consciously. Lot of fuss about a few scars. Were they all that bad? He'd seen lots worse, like the ones under the buckskin mask of Hides His Face.

Jim found his clothes among the underbrush and had begun

to put them on when Dan'l emerged from the bushes, his fair skin glowing all over from the icy water. Still aware of the scars, Jim reached hastily for his shirt. But Dan'l's grin held the usual dazzled reverence.

"Boy, them are the very *gaudiest* scars I ever seen in my life. Say, that kid Bobbie, at home, he oughta be here! Allus braggin' about his little old tangle with a wildcat! I wisht he could see *this* onct! What's that'n on your neck, Jim?"

"Just a arrer nick." Jim was laughing with relief. "You got a couple bullet holes yerself."

He smiled down at the boy, and Dan'l grinned happily, touching the red splotches that marked where Jim's pebbles had hit. "I'll dodge 'em all next time, you see if I don't. We're gonna do it again, ain't we? With Jonnie, too," he added thoughtfully. "It's fun, all three of us."

"Yeah, all three of us. Get into them jeans now, afore they eat up all the grub out yonder."

He yanked his shirt over his head and reached for his belt, wondering why Jonnie was taking so long about getting dressed. Might be better, he thought with amusement, if they all went out together to take their going over from Sally.

Jonathan was sitting motionless on a mossy rock, one moccasin on and the other dangling from his hand, staring at the river and seeing nothing but the cruel pale sweep of claw marks on a lithe brown body. And a new understanding of the young Absarokee, Talks Alone, was growing in his mind.

No wonder Jim won't hear nothin' against them Crows, he was thinking. If they'd been good to me when I was all tore up like that I'd've thought they was the best folks on earth. By golly, I can see how he feels.

Jonnie made a point, after that, of joining in Jim's and Dan'l's games whenever he got a chance. He shot Jim's bow, tried catching fish with his hands, learned to mend a moccasin

—all in a vain attempt to catch more glimpses of those years in Absaroka that were like a wall between them.

"If we could get Jim's point of view, it'd be half the battle," he told Sally when she asked him indignantly if he planned to turn Injun too.

"Get *his* point of view? He's got to get *ours*! You're just encouragin' him to run wild—and Dan'l too. Neither one of 'em is worth shucks any more at helpin' Mr. Rutledge. That boy's always at Jim's heels. Ain't you noticed?"

"I've noticed," said Jonnie gruffly. She had touched a sore spot. Always before, Dan'l had tagged at *his* heels, copying his walk, quoting his opinions, thinking everything he did was wonderful. He was too proud to admit how much he missed it, too honest to blame the boy. "Easy to see why, sis," he mumbled. "To a young 'un, I ain't a patch on Jim. Besides, all I do nowadays is make Dan'l work. And I can't change that."

"Of course not. We got to change Jim!" Sally's eyes filled suddenly. "We got to fight him, Jonnie, we got to civilize him! Or he'll wind up stealin' Dan'l clean away from us, just like Uncle stole Jim!"

"Sis! Don't talk crazy! Jim'll tame down, he's bound to. Wait'll we get our own cabin built, and he's livin' our way—"

"What makes you think he'll live our way? Maybe he'll never tame."

Jonnie chewed his lip. "If I could get to know how he feels about things—if he'd only talk to me—"

But it was too early for that—or perhaps too late. Jonnie's plan had got out of hand. Jim welcomed him into any and all of his skylarking with Dan'l, but refused to confine it to off hours. When Jonathan wouldn't quit work to go prowling the hills with him, he took the boy anyway. And when Jonnie put his foot down on that, Jim went alone.

Blast it, sis is right, Jonathan thought exasperatedly. The

amount of work he does these days you could put in your eye—and it's likely my fault for encouragin' him!

He pitched in twice as hard himself, trying to make up for it; he came back across the river every evening so tired he'd fall asleep before the meat was cooked. But when at last the Rutledge cabin was finished and work started on their own, the situation only got worse. In the morning Jim might buckle down and do a few hours solid work. By noon he was likely as not gone.

Tales began to drift back from the settlers round about. Jim and the old Chinook devil who ran the ferry were getting thick as thieves, ran the reports. Jim had got in an argument with a Willamette Falls trader and put a knife through his hat. Moki had chased an old sow clean around Sam Mullins' claim while Jim held his sides with laughing.

"Good crimeny, Mr. Rutledge, what'll I do about him?" Jonnie fumed one day as they hailed Jim for some job and found he had vanished again. "He'll get us all in trouble first thing you know. I can keep Dan'l's nose to the grindstone even if he sulks about it. But Jim's another matter. You can't boss him and you can't argue with him—no more'n you could with a loaded gun."

"Let 'im go, bide your time, Jonnie," Mr. Rutledge told him. "Jim's restless and mixed up, he don't know what he wants, right now. Just bide your time—you can't make a lone wolf into a house dog overnight."

So Jonnie took what help he got from Jim, and bided his time with as good grace as he could muster, while heavier and heavier on his shoulders settled full responsibility for the cabin. It was up to him, and him alone, he saw that now. Jim just didn't care.

All right, he thought fiercely. I'll do it alone, then. I promised Mother and I'll do it if it takes me a year.

He himself loved every log and shingle of it, despite the

hundred small miscalculations and unforeseen difficulties that beset him every day. He could hardly wait for the hour he could walk in the door and look around him at four sturdy walls, and know he was home. Jim would care then, he couldn't help it! That was the hour, Jonnie felt it in his bones, that Jim would come home too.

And at last the time came; early one afternoon toward the end of December, the house was complete. They stood in a row, all four of them, and looked at it in silence. It was a rectangular log building, mud chinked and crude, small against its background of towering firs. But to Jonnie it was beautiful beyond compare.

His eyes went over it possessively, anxiously, lingering on the buffalo robe hung over the entrance, the rough stones of the doorstep, the logs whose every chink and ax mark he knew intimately. Have to build a real door soon, he thought. Couple windows, too, first chance I get, and put Sally down a puncheon floor. Gotta build shelves and a table and something to set on, and that chimney ain't much more'n a hole in the roof.

No matter. Out of that hole a thread of smoke curled up triumphantly. The clearing had a home in it.

Sally's tanned face was radiant under its halo of blonde tendrils. "I can't hardly believe it!" she whispered. "But yonder it is. Jonnie, I know it don't have a stick of furniture in it, but let's sleep there tonight. We could cut fir branches—and with mother's feather bed . . ."

"You bet we will!" Jonnie was remembering her sleeping on boxes, on prairie grass, in spray-drenched blankets. "You just bet we will! It's early yet, I'll bring in what we got and you can fix it to suit yourself. Dan'l—"

"I'll get the branches," offered Dan'l eagerly. "Remember, me and Jim's gonna sleep in the loft!"

He dashed off toward the fir grove, Sally hurried into the



cabin, and Jonathan started for the wagon. But Jim still stood silent and tense, a curious expression in his tawny eyes—almost like fear.

"Jim, what's the matter?"

"Nothin'." Jim turned, the expression vanishing under his usual impassive mask. "What d'we do now, unload the wagon?"

"Yeah. There ain't much. We had to throw stuff out all along the trail, the oxen was gettin' so starved and played out. But we'll cart in what there is."

He led the way to the wagon. This was the time he'd been waiting for, and he was banking on it heavily.

Hoping with all his heart, he began to unload the wagon. One by one, the crates and barrels and bits of furniture that had jolted the long miles across the wilderness were carried into their new home. There was little enough, but Jonnie knew and felt affection for each piece—a stool or two, Sally's little rosewood lap desk, the feather bed, and a small chest of drawers, the big Bible, some kitchen things—and the clock.

"Oh, blast it, sis," Jonnie said as he lifted it carefully from its packings. "I think it's broke inside. Hear that rattle? We'll likely never get it to run."

"Never mind." Almost tenderly she picked away the last bits of straw adhering to it. "We'll put it on that shelf over the hearth just like Mother done at home. It don't matter whether it runs or not. It's so beautiful."

Jonathan nodded agreement. It was beautiful. It was the only really beautiful thing his mother had ever owned, and she had loved it dearly. It was tall as a man's knee, made of bronze. The stem of the fat brass pendulum was concealed by a wooden panel painted with shepherdesses and cupids in a woodland glade.

"There," Jonnie said, setting it carefully on the shelf. "Now where's that little leather box? Jim, did you—"

He stopped again. Jim's face had gone quite pale under its deep tan.

"Jonnie," Jim breathed. "I'd forgot about that clock."

They stared at him in dismay. How could he have forgotten the clock, in nine years or even ninety? The whole Keath household had centered about it. Pa's nightly winding of it had always been a solemn ritual, and so was Mother's careful daily dusting. The narrow space underneath it had been used from time immemorial as a sort of strongbox; the door key lived there, Pa's medal from the war of 1812, a letter Grandfather Keath had once received from General Washington, Mother's egg money. The Bible always rested on the shelf beside the clock, Pa's dreaded hickory switch leaned against it, and every Keath child had heard from infancy the tale of its long journey from France in Mother's great-grandmother's trunk.

If Jim had forgotten that clock he had forgotten everything that used to be, everything he himself once was. Jonnie thought of the scars, and realized how it could have happened. But he realized also, that the whole process was being reversed now. Memories were flooding back.

He seized the moment. With one step he was across the room and opening the leather box Sally had placed on the dresser. In it were the family treasures—the medal, the letter, and the rest—and two other things his mother had clung to until the day she died, for they were all she had of Jim. One was a yellowed baby cap, which Jonnie laid on the dresser without comment, but making sure Jim saw it. The other was the picture.

It was a faded but curiously lifelike drawing of two small boys in stiff collars and bunched suits, one sitting, the other standing behind him.

Jonnie held the picture out to Jim. "Know who that is?"

Jim wet his lips and nodded. He turned abruptly and

moved to the doorway. Then he swung back. "Some folks say we still look alike," he burst out.

"Been a long time since you looked like Jonnie," Sally said evenly.

"Oh, I dunno," Jonathan said. "I think we still resemble. That is, we would if—" he stopped short, but the damage was done.

"Yes, *if!*" Sally was moving forward like a cat about to pounce. Her eyes were on Jim, but her mind, Jonnie knew, was on that treasured baby cap and a grave by the Sweetwater. Too late, he opened his mouth to stop her. She was already talking. "*If* you'd cut them braids off. *If* you'd throw away that heathen necklace and get rid of that feather!"

"Cut off my *braids*? Get rid of my *coup feather*?"

"Why not? What use is it 'cept to make folks think you're Injun when you ain't?"

"Sis, wait!" snapped Jonathan.

But now Jim's mouth was as rebellious as it had been in the old picture. "You don't get rid of Pa's medal, do you?"

"My stars, what's that got to do with it?"

Jonnie cut in sharply. "It's the same thing to Jim, sis. Can't you see? It's the same thing!"

"The same as Pa's medal?" cried Sally. Suspiciously, she added, "What'd he do to win it?"

Jim opened his mouth to answer, then all at once clamped it shut. "I counted coup," he said at last defiantly. "A heap of times, not just onct. I could wear a dozen feathers if I was a mind to."

"I just bet you could! And I bet I'd rather not know how you got 'em or what they mean!"

"They mean I ain't no coward, that's all."

"Neither's Jonnie!" Sally flung at him. "But he don't deck hisself out like a savage to prove it! James Keath, you listen to me! You ain't in Absaroka now, you're in a civilized valley

with civilized folks, livin' in a house again the way you was meant to. You ain't a Injun, you're a Keath, like us! All these things, the clock and all, they're yours, as much as ours. Why won't you cut off them braids and quit lookin' like a heathen? If you ask me—"

"That'll do, Sally!" thundered Jonnie.

But Jim only said softly, "I ain't askin' you." Then he turned and vanished outside.

Jonathan dropped the picture back into the box and glared at Sally. "Now see what you done! You can't crowd Jim, sis! Ain't you found that out?"

"I don't care, I meant it, I— Oh, Jonnie, go fetch him back!"

Jonathan had already plunged out into the misty afternoon. Dan'l, headed for the cabin with a load of branches, was staring perplexed in the direction of the river.

"Where's Jim off to? I thought—"

"Nowhere. Go on in the cabin."

Jonnie ran for the willows. Fifty yards upstream he caught up with Jim and forced himself to speak casually.

"For the lord's sake, Jim, Sally spoke outa turn and she knows it. Come on back. We'll knock off work and just enjoy ourselves the rest of the day—and tonight we can sleep in our new beds. Jim, come home."

Slowly Jim turned, the fine mist glistening on his cheekbones and scarred forehead and rigid chin. "I'll stick to sleepin' outside."

"Outside?" Jonnie's voice hardened. "You mean you ain't gonna live with us in the cabin at all? Ain't we good enough for you? What's wrong with sleepin' under a roof for once?"

"I can't do it."

The finality of the words hung on the quiet air, turning Jonnie wild with disappointment. "You 'can't' do it!" he

echoed savagely. Suddenly he was shaking all over. "By golly, you mean you *won't* do it! You won't even try, you won't face up to it, you run away! That's what you been doin' all your life, is run away! Let the goin' get a little tough and you're on your way, you're gone, you're runnin'! And where's it ever got you, that's what I want to know? Where's—"

He stopped, gulping for breath. Jim had vanished noiselessly into the woods.

Jim didn't even want the slight confinement of trapper's clothes. He stripped to his breechclout and moccasins before he fled, in silent haste, north through the woods and over the ridge toward the glades and Buckskin. With the sight of that clock the doors of memory had flown wide open, loosing images as vivid and powerful as when they were fresh, nine years ago. He could see Pa's hand reaching for that hickory stick, hear the harsh voice that had dominated his childhood and finally driven him out of the old home and across the plains after Uncle. And he could see his mother's eyes, as he had seen them everywhere he looked those first few weeks, silently tugging at him to come back. Rebellion, grief, and crushing guilt alternated in him as if the years had never been.

He flung himself on the startled mare and was off like an arrow. He must get the gates closed on the whole thing, it was all he could think of. Never mind what Jonnie said. What right had Jonnie to bring it all back? And Sally! Had she known what she was saying? Cut off his braids, throw away his feather of valor—in short, deny that he was a Crow and a warrior and so enrage his helpers that the medicine would never work for him again! Well, they couldn't do it, he wouldn't stand for it. They could take him as he was or not at all, and it was time they knew it.

Rebellion flared higher now than guilt, fury swept through him. He streaked up hills and down gullies and across meadows, the wind flowing past his naked body, Buckskin's smooth muscles swelling and rippling against his thighs and her white mane waving like a banner. He would show the whole valley who it was and what it was that they dared to tamper with! Jonnie Keath's brother, *wagh!* He would show them Talks Alone the son of Scalp Necklace.

That was the day the rumors began to spread from cabin to cabin all up and down the east side of the broad Willamette; the day that settlers from the outskirts kept riding in to the post at Willamette Falls on lathered ponies shouting warnings of an imminent Indian uprising. No, not these sleepy Chinooks or Multnomahs, but real wild Injuns. No telling what kind, they'd only got a glimpse of one of them and that was enough—riding naked, he was, on a horse swifter than an antelope, and yelling bloody murder and shooting in all directions and scaring the wits out of the stock.

Later reports revealed that the horse was ten feet tall and the Injun's face painted for war. Still others insisted it was blood that streaked his cheeks and chest, and children were snatched from play and herded to safety behind bolted doors. Horses began to vanish—three saddle ponies were discovered missing from a claim about five miles upriver and several others from cabins beyond that. Eventually all were found tied to a tree at the edge of the placid village of Multnomah Indians down Champoege way, and feeling ran high until it was discovered that the Multnomahs themselves were in an uproar from a late afternoon visitation which they insisted must be supernatural—a lone warrior whose paint nobody recognized, with the golden eyes of a wolf and the scars of a demigod's battle, whose horse's mane was made of white flame and who was totally impervious to the hail of bullets that followed him out of the village.

About moonrise that night—for the clouds had pulled apart to show patches of stars and the white glow edging piled black thunderheads—Jim and Buckskin trailed slowly home. There was a foul taste in Jim's mouth, his throat ached from yelling, and he had a bullet furrow in the side of his neck. But the gates of memory were shut—for the moment.

He wondered bewilderedly why he was coming back at all. Because he'd left the mule and Moki there, he told himself. Because he couldn't bear to part from Dan'l. Because the medicine song was pulling him back against his will and his common sense to the still waters and green pastures, so that its painful, incomprehensible magic could be fulfilled in spite of him.

It wasn't because of anything Jonnie had said, by thunder, he knew that much.

He sighed deeply, stopped a mile or so down the Tualatin to wash the stripes of vermilion off his face and chest lest Sally see them—no, only because the dried paint was uncomfortable—and then rode slowly home. The cabin was ghostly in the moonlight, the fire was out, the clearing silent. Moki alone slipped out of the shadows to greet him.

Jim dug his fingers into the dog's coarse ruff, clinging fast to him. At last he roused himself enough to eat a fistful of jerky, then wrapped the grizzly robe about him and fell into exhausted sleep.

## Chapter XI

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In the morning Jim wondered if he could possibly have dreamed the whole thing. Jonathan and Sally greeted him exactly as usual, asked not one question as to where he had been or what he had done, and did their best to pretend the quarrel had never been. This went on for several days. Jim was not urged inside the cabin; where he slept or how he dressed was never mentioned. Even when yesterday's rumors concerning the mysterious Indian with the scars began to drift up the Tualatin, becoming less fanciful and more shrewdly speculative all the time, Jonnie held his peace. He merely advised Jim not to take off his shirt when there were other settlers around.

Jim began to wonder incredulously if he'd won his battle overnight. Then one morning Dan'l asked an innocent question.

"Hey, listen, Jim, how come you don't just go ahead and cut them braids off now? Sis says she's bound she'll make you do it sooner or later."

Jim froze. "A Crow wears his hair long, and I'm a Crow," he said stonily.

"And you ain't gonna live in the cabin?"

"No."

That very day he cut lodge poles in the forest and set them



up beside the big oak tree, lashing them securely at the top and spreading them at the bottom into a roomy circle. Over this framework he stretched his hides—elk, deer, buffalo, anything he had in his possibles, patched out with rabbitskins. He worked on it for several hours, making a back rest and a bed frame of willow and rawhide to furnish it, hanging more hides in a heavy circular curtain inside, stuffing dried grass snugly under the outer edges until it looked uncivilized and good and natural. He moved his pack and his few belongings into it that evening.

The first real break was made. From then on the gulf widened continually. Jim cooked his own food at his own times, eating whenever the mood took him. He lived, dressed, and even bathed in his own wild way—in a sweat lodge he built just upstream from the raft landing. He would disappear into it for long periods with a pile of heated stones, then dash out in a burst of steam to plunge into the icy river and swim till he was exhausted. He took no part in the whittling and pounding and creating with which the others were busy as the cabin slowly acquired benches and shelves and utensils and beds and cupboards. He ranged the hills on Buckskin or brooded on his grizzly robe while the rain drummed on the hides of his lodge, or prowled with Moki and Dan'l through the woods, taking refuge in the only companionship that offered him unqualified approval.

Jonnie, sick at heart, found himself involved in a desperate tug of war over Dan'l. The boy had lost interest in the cabin as soon as Jim did, begging to move out to the tepee too. Refused that in no uncertain terms, he compensated by being with Jim every minute he was not actually engaged in doing chores. There were chores aplenty, but even Jonnie's enthusiasm had dimmed; the work was a burden.

"Seems like we'll never get through with all this, so's I can start clearin' land," he growled irritably one day, more to

himself than Dan'l, as the two worked together behind the cabin, Jonnie finishing the last of the bed frames, the boy gouging out the inside of a bowl. "I gotta have wheat planted this spring, or we can't pay off that debt. And a garden—Crimeny, we got to have a garden!"

"Aw, you and Sally, you're allus worryin' about somethin'. We got along just fine settin' on the ground and eatin' our fish and pemmican off of bark with our fingers." Dan'l waved a contemptuous hand at the pile of newly made wooden forks on the grass between them. "What's the good of botherin' with all this fooforaw? You're a regular bourgeway!"

"And you're a regular rubber stamp of Jim Keath!" exploded Jonathan. "By golly, if he says a thing of a mornin', I get it back from you before nightfall! Ain't you got a mind of your own no more?"

"I sure do!" Dan'l came back at him defiantly. "I got a mind to be just like Jim, and you ain't gonna stop me!"

Oh, lord, thought Jonathan, clawing back his tumbled hair wearily. I shouldn't've busted out at him like that, he'll turn clean against me! How do you go about raisin' a young 'un, anyhow? How do you handle 'em?

January slipped into February, with the quiet, constant rain shadowing the valley, and the tepee standing there always before Jonnie's eyes, like a symbol of the split in the family and his inability to mend it.

The cabin at last complete and livable, he turned to his land. The stumps and blackberry thickets began to disappear laboriously, one by one, from the western acres of the glades, where the first wheat field would come into being.

"Jonnie, you look plum beat," Rutledge said one evening as he walked slowly down to the raft landing with a borrowed candle mold. "Ain't Jim helpin' you at all, son?"

"I doubt Jim'll be around much longer, Mr. Rutledge,"

Jonnie said. "When the snows melt up yonder in them mountains he'll go back."

"Jonnie, I bet he don't. Jim's tamed down considerable since I first seen him that day in The Dalles."

"He ain't no more tame than Moki, Mr. Rutledge. Not underneath. Watch him sometime. Watch his eyes."

"I been watchin' him." Rutledge drew deep on his pipe and talked around the stem. "You know, Jonnie, I feel mighty sorry for Jim."

"*Sorry* for him?"

The big man nodded slowly, his eyes thoughtful. "He don't seem to belong nowhere. He ain't a Injun, but he ain't quite a white man neither. He's a kind of a homeless critter."

"That wouldn't bother Jim none," Jonathan said bitterly. "He don't need no home."

Rutledge thought that over, with his huge hand cupped around his pipe and the smoke wreathing his head. "Jonnie, you're wrong," he said at last. "Ain't ever a man born on this earth that don't need a home."

Jonnie tried to believe him, he wanted desperately to believe him, but deep in his heart he couldn't. Jim had stayed away too long. He was too much Injun. It was too late.

Jonnie and Sally were plagued these days by small articles mysteriously disappearing from the cabin and its environs, then reappearing just as mysteriously exactly where they had last been seen; Dan'l was harder than ever to find when there was water to be fetched or wood to be chopped. The more settled and civilized the life around Jim became, the more restless and caged he felt. What did you do with yourself with no enemies to outwit, or sign to read, or distances to gauge, or routes to find, or hazards to watch out for? What did you do when you neither fought nor escaped, were neither hunter nor hunted?

You chopped trees, thought Jim resentfully. You aired blankets and built cabins and tables, and fussed with oxen, and measured off a beaver's worth of land, and built fences around yourself, and turned farmer.

Oh, no, thought Jim. Not me, nobody's gonna build a fence around Talks Alone.

He could go kill a deer, but it seemed foolish. They had plenty of jerky. He could ride up to the falls and talk to the old one-eyed ferryman, Iakhka Tcikeakh—known to the settlers as Jake. The old man's skull was flattened to a point after the manner deemed stylish by his people, and in addition to Chinook jargon he spoke real Chinook—a guttural, clucking, sputtering language which ignored the use of the tongue entirely and had to be croaked out with the lower part of the throat. That had been hilariously amusing—at first. But now it had lost its flavor.

Well, then, he could go out to the new field and grub out stumps along with Jonnie.

And with a scowl Jim would be off up the Tualatin or into the woods, anywhere away from the clearing and everything in it. He was almost ready to buck the gorge again and get clear away, back to Absaroka and the stretching wilderness, or to the cottonwoods rustling along the banks of the quiet beaver streams.

You ran away from Absaroka, too, said a nagging voice inside him. The streams are trapped out now, remember?

But every time the thought of Absaroka drifted across his mind, his games with Dan'l grew a little more reckless. They were playing a new game now, a dangerously exciting one for Jim as well as Dan'l, for it stirred his memory like distant war drums.

It always started out the same way—with Jim leaning over Dan'l unnoticed by the others, and whispering "Follow." Then he would disappear into the oak woods or through the

willows, Moki at his heels, and the boy would watch his chance and slip away after him.

"We lost three horses in that Sioux raid yesterday," Jim would say sternly when they came together some distance from the clearing. "And we need three in their place. More if you kin git 'em. I'll wait the count of two hundred afore I stampede their loose stock. Best be outa there afore the alarm spreads."

Eyes shining with excitement, Dan'l would slip stealthily back to the clearing, which in his mind and Jim's had now become a Sioux village. Of course to make everything proper he should be wearing a wolfskin, and a coating of the Absaroka mud that dried gray as a wolf's fur over arms and face. But Jim had reluctantly departed from tradition because the sight of a wolf, so usual as to go unnoticed by the Crow squaws he had outwitted in his own boyhood, would attract Jonathan's immediate and murderous attention. Among bourgeois the best disguise was no disguise at all.

Counting the agreed two hundred, he would drift toward the glades, and a sudden unexplainable disturbance would break out among the animals—the oxen, Buckskin, and the mule.

"Now what are them critters so excited about?" Sally would exclaim, stopping short on her way to the cabin with an armload of brush cuttings.

"Dunno, they keep actin' that-a-way lately." Jonathan would leave off sharpening his ax and frown toward the glades. "Must be some varmint around the woods there."

"Well, they're calmin' down now." Sally would vanish into the cabin, only to emerge a moment later, flushed and exasperated. "Now *where* did them rawhide strings get away to? I cut 'em just special to bind me a broom out of this stuff, and they was right here not five minutes ago!"

"I'll cut you some more, sis. Hey! Where's my knife? Why, it was stuck right in this stump—"

And by this time Dan'l would be off in the woods, proudly dumping in front of Jim the strings, knife, and the squirrel-tail duster Sally had not yet missed.

"Three horses. Good. Kin you count coup?"

"Yeah, Jim—honest, I can this time! I touched Jonnie on the back of his collar afore I took that knife—an' he never even knew I was there!"

Jim's stern mask would vanish before a grin. "All right. When you've counted twenty coups I'll take you to steal a real horse. Now hang around outa sight till the fuss dies down, then go put 'em all back."

But one day Ned Rutledge and his father were in the clearing, lingering on the way back from a trip to Willamette Falls, and Dan'l's "horses" included Ned's jews-harp, which the boy had long coveted. It led him to protest the familiar order to "put 'em all back."

"Shucks, Jim, why do I have to? *You* never used to put back stuff you practiced on!"

"Well, we allus just stole meat off'n the dryin' racks. That's why we wore the wolfskins, 'cause they was allus wolves around stealin' the jerky anyways. But you mustn't ever steal nothin' valuable."

Dan'l frowned up at him, bewildered. "Horses are valuable. Real horses, I mean."

"Oh, well, that's different. Ain't no other way to git a good horse."

Jim paused, frowning a little. Here in this valley, that remark didn't sound quite the simple statement of fact it would have in Absaroka. He thought a minute, then amended slowly, "What I mean is, you don't steal nothin' valuable from yer own people—just yer enemies. Now go take them things back."

But there were no enemies here, he thought after the boy was gone. It was a queer life without them, it was what made this valley so uneasy. You kept feeling there was something missing, that you'd neglected something; you kept listening but not hearing anything except the wind in the trees, or the river whispering to you, or the nagging, insistent sound of Jonnie's ax. Nothing ever happened!

He padded restlessly through the wet woods, feeling as though he'd give almost anything for the sight of a war bonnet and a painted face emerging from the bushes ahead of him, for the sudden spring and the yell splitting the silence, and the wild ferocity blazing up inside himself, with something right there to vent it on. The only enemies he had now were things you couldn't fight—a clock, a cabin, a bleakness in Jonnie's eyes.

He snarled suddenly and broke into a run, dodging between the dripping trees with Moki panting behind, in a spurt for the glades. If he couldn't fight, at least he could ride—fast and hard enough to forget all this for a while.

He broke cover at the top of the ridge behind the cabin and bounded across the open space between the woods and the fir grove, running along its edge until the ground dipped and then flattened out into the broad stretch of the glades. Buckskin was grazing yonder along with the oxen, Rutledge's bay horse, and his own mule. She took fright the moment he darted out of the underbrush toward her, and he raced to cut her off, everything in him responding to the joy of violent action.

Moki, equally delighted, flattened himself into a furry streak and dashed around Buckskin's other flank, yapping and snarling almost under her pounding hoofs. She brought up short in a rear, wheeled and found Jim directly in her path. As she reared again he leaped with her, clinging to the rawhide rope she wore for halter. In another instant he was half on her

back, one leg flung over and a hand twisted in her mane, sticking like a burr and yelling with delight as she plunged and raced across the glades. Plastered to her off side, he screeched a war whoop and aimed imaginary arrows over her tossing neck at the oxen milling confusedly on the other side of the field. As the mare swerved at the other end of the glades and turned sharply back, he lashed upright and then down again under her other shoulder, feeling her mane whip his face and the wind tear past as he pressed his cheek against her smooth-rolling muscles.

He was halfway back to the fir grove, laughing at the turmoil he was causing among the rest of the animals, when he caught sight of Jonnie coming down the near side of the ridge. His excitement dimmed instantly.

He fought the overwrought mare into some semblance of control and pulled himself upright, catching the halter into a tight loop. A string of Crow gutturals, alternately cursing and comforting, steadied her to a jerky canter and he halted her with a final wheeling rear alongside his brother.

"What's up?" he demanded, as he slid to the ground.

"Nothin's up. I just come to fetch Mr. Rutledge's horse. I got to watchin' you." Jonnie's eyes met his. "You make a good sight to see, you and that mare."

The words were as direct and simple as the look, and they filled Jim with wonder. Why, it was a truce. Jonnie was tired of this silent war, as tired as he was himself.

Almost afraid to speak for fear of spoiling the moment, Jim muttered, "She's a good horse."

"Fast as light, ain't she?" Jonnie flashed a quick, hesitant smile, then actually laughed as the mare reared impatiently and he sprang out of range of the plunging hoofs. "Crimeny! She's a beauty. But mighty wild."

"I like her wild," Jim admitted. "I scared her a-purpose so's



she'd kick up her heels and gimme a little fun. Why'n't *you* try her onct?" he added suddenly.

"What? Me ride that critter? Lord, she'd dump me the first half minute! Plow horses is about all I've ever rode."

"Try her anyhow!" Jim was grinning now, thoroughly pleased with his idea.

"Stand aside, then! No tellin' what'll happen."

Jonnie moved eagerly to the mare's side and was halted by a whoop from Jim. "Hey, hold on! Don't come at her from that side or she'll kick you into the middle of next week! This here's a Injun horse. Git on her from the right."

"The *right*? Feels all backwards." Jonathan circled obediently, then stood there scratching his head and laughing. "By golly, you make it tough enough! No saddle, no stirrups—"

"Grab her mane, she's used to me yankin' on it. Ho, there, Buckskin, take it easy, you skitterin' little squaw." Jim soothed her in the guttural tongue she knew and trusted, while Jonnie grasped a handful of mane and pulled himself astride her. Instantly her head tossed up, jerking the halter from Jim's hand and all but unseating Jonnie. But he only gave a shout of laughter and hung on, sticking with her as she whirled and made off for the far end of the glades. He managed to stay on through her abrupt, snagging turn, and through most of her deerlike flight back. But then Jim saw him tugging on the halter to stop her, and knew trouble was coming.

It came in short order—Buckskin didn't want to stop, she wanted to run. And as soon as Jonnie's tugging grew insistent, she decided she wanted to buck and pitch, too. Jonathan sailed over her head in a graceful curve, landed in a rolling scramble of legs and arms, and sat up, dazedly watching her receding heels.

Jim was laughing so hard he could barely hoist his brother

to his feet. "By gor, that was the prettiest sight I ever see! Any bones broken?"

Jonnie shook his head, after a gingerly investigation of his anatomy. "Darn fool thing to do anyhow," he said with a grin. "I knew I couldn't handle her."

"By gor, you oughta have one you kin! You oughta have *some* kinda horse! Yer allus needin' one."

"I know it, but that don't get me one." Jonnie combed his fingers through his hair. "By golly, I wisht I had one just like Buckskin! After a day of grubbin' stumps . . ."

"Ain't nobody makin' you grub stumps all day long."

Jonnie let it pass. He shrugged and tried to grin, but the barriers were up again between them. "Well, Mr. Rutledge'll be down here in a minute wonderin' if I fell in the creek. I better get his pony—"

He started for the corner to which Rutledge's horse had retreated. Jim watched him go. An idea that struck him as brilliant began to form in his mind. For weeks he'd been wishing he could do something to make Jonnie look at him again—just once—as he had that day in the recorder's office. Now he believed he'd found it.

He started on a run to catch Buckskin. When Jonnie topped the rise back of the cabin, Rutledge's horse in tow, Jim was beside him on the mare, panting a little with exercise and inward excitement, hoping he could get his rifle from the lodge and his medicine bundle from the hollow stump upriver where he'd hidden it safe from prying eyes—and be out of the clearing before anyone asked too many questions.

## Chapter XII

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But the moment they came in view of the cabin it was obvious that something unusual was afoot.

"Well, look at that!" exclaimed Jonathan, halting in surprise at sight of Sally, Dan'l, and all the Rutledges clustered about four men on horses. "Sam, and Ab Selway, and Mr. Mills, and Mr. Burke. They must've just come. Wonder what's up?"

He started hastily down the slope and Jim followed, frowning because all these visitors were likely to complicate his plan. Rutledge heard them, and turned to shout at Jonathan. "Ain't lost your oxen, have you? They still safe and sound?"

"Why, sure. Why?"

"Some cattle's been stole from up around— Say! Yonder's the fella to help you, folks! Jim, come along over here, will you, son?"

Reluctantly Jim turned Buckskin away from the direction of the lodge and joined Jonathan beside the others. Rutledge looked up at him. "I bet my hat you've had some experience follerin' tracks. Am I right?"

"Sure." Jim slid to the ground, keeping a fast hold on the mare's halter and signaling Moki to keep guard. "You aimin' to ketch a thief?"

"Well, locate him, anyways."

"Whose cattle's stole?" put in Jonathan.

"Mine," spoke up Ben Mills gloomily. He was a thick-set man with a round pink face and rounder blue eyes. "And a couple of Burke's here, and Sam's milk cow. Eight head, altogether. We think they headed north—"

"Injuns?"

"No, a white man, that's sure. They's a boot print in Burke's pasture and another'n just like it at Sam's."

"That's what makes it so touchy." Clyde Burke, a spare, gray-headed man in a battered coonskin cap, scratched his ear uneasily. "It's a white man, likely a settler like us. We gotta go easy, find out where he's at and who it is, then keep an eye on him till the law gets here."

"Who is the law around here anyway?" Sally put in.

"Sheriff. He's a good 'un, too, they say. We've sent for him. But he's away down in Yamhill County right now."

"Aw, shucks!" Dan'l's eyes sparkled suddenly. "Just forget that sheriff and turn Jim loose on the job. I bet he could get your critters back."

Jim brightened. Now that suggestion had some sense to it! He listened attentively as Mills told of discovering his loss shortly after noon, of thinking the cattle must have strayed, until he found the stranger's boot print. He had ridden over to Burke's then, found everybody in a turmoil there over a similar disappearance, and he and Burke had decided to check all the claims south to the Tualatin on their side of the Willamette. Young Selway's one cow was safe, but Sam's was gone, and both had joined the search. Now that they knew everything was all right on the Rutledge and Keath claims, they intended to head back north, feeling that was the most logical direction to pick up the thief's trail.

"How about it, Jim?" said Sam Mullins. "Reckon you could help us track this feller? We got nothin' to go on but a couple boot prints five mile apart."

Jim was inwardly amused. The place was probably full of sign, if you knew how to look for it—and if these bourgeways hadn't trampled it all out with their clumsy boots. "Sure, I'll go. You comin', Jonnie?"

"Blast it, I got no horse."

"I'll fetch Bad Medicine fer you."

When he came back again from the glades he found Rutledge preparing to go along too. Everything was arranged for Sally and Dan'l to spend the night across the river with Mrs. Rutledge and the girls, if the search should keep the men away that long. Ned was to look out for all of them.

"Keep Moki too," Jim offered. "He's worth a couple extra sentries all by hisself."

Sam looked surprised. "I thought you'd be takin' him to smell out the trail."

"I'll take keer of the trail. Less'n this thief of yours is a mountain man, he ain't gonna be hard to foller. And mountain men don't wear boots."

"Well, I dunno," said Clyde Burke dubiously. "I hope you can find more traces of this feller than we could. We can show you the two boot prints, anyways. Come on, let's head back for Sam's."

Half an hour later Jim was bending over the print in Sam Mullins' creek bottom, while the others, still mounted, waited with varying degrees of doubt and curiosity to see what he would make of it. It was none too fresh, Jim found; the muddy front edges were pocked from the rain that had fallen about noon, and most of the thin grass mashed by the heel had sprung upright again.

He straightened, searching the surrounding grass which had prevented more prints from showing. There was cattle sign all around, of course, but it meant nothing since Sam's cow grazed here regularly. And the hoofprints of the man's horse

would not be visible with the creek right here handy as a passage in and out of the bottom.

Jim frowned, remembering suddenly it was a bourgeway they were after. Keeping to the creek would be second nature to a mountain man or an Indian, but it surprised him a little that a bourgeway would have thought of it. He moved northward along the creek for a short distance to look for further evidence, and found it in the form of dislodged pebbles shining through the clear water, a couple of freshly broken twigs on an overhanging branch. The thief had gone northward up the creek, that was certain.

He walked back to the print and looked at it again. It was unmistakably a bourgeway boot. For a minute he was baffled, trying to make the two facts fit logically. Then a thought struck him. He gave a grunt and began to circle the print, squinting at it from all angles.

"Well?" demanded Burke a little impatiently. "You know the color of his hair yet?"

"I might, at that," retorted Jim. "Let's take a look at that print at your place. This feller went up the creek, but ain't no need fer us to bother with that. We kin cut through the woods."

He mounted and led the way. It was too soon to be sure yet, but if the print at Burke's should be plainer—

It was much plainer, traced entirely in the thin mud beside a big boulder at the edge of Burke's pasture. The minute Jim saw it he was sure he was right—if only the print of the other foot had showed too, he could have been positive.

"Well, you figger like us, that he headed north?" Mills asked.

Jim shook his head. "West. They's some Cayuses winterin' in the hills over yonder, 'bout seven, eight miles west of here."

"Cayuses!" All six men stared at him blankly.

"Why, the Cayuses live up around Fort Walla Walla, clean on t'other side of the gorge!" Selway exclaimed.

"They's a few up in the hills west of here, all the same," Jim insisted. "I seen their camp."

Burke was frowning impatiently. "Lookee here, Keath, Cayuses is thievin' enough devils, I give you that. And mebbe they's some around here. But we ain't *after* Injuns, we're after a white man. That there's a *boot* print."

Jim grinned. "But they was a Injun inside of the boot."

"Pshaw! I never see a Injun yet that wore boots!" Ben Mills snorted. "I think the feller's a white settler from up north of here somewheres."

"That's what he aimed fer you to think," Jim said. "Ain't much need to track this feller. We kin just head fer that Cayuse camp and ketch 'em afore they move on."

"And have to come back here and start all over when we find out the cattle ain't there!" retorted Burke. "Nawsir, I don't think that's smart. They's all sorts of Injuns around about, if you're so dead set on havin' it a Injun. Multnomahs acrost the Willamette south a ways, Molalas east of them, Chinooks up around Fort Vancouver—"

"We best foller the tracks, that's sure," Mills agreed. "If this young feller really thinks he can do it." He looked dubiously at Jim. "Ain't nothin' about that print a-tall that says it's Injun."

Jim shrugged and mounted Buckskin, who as usual was in eager motion before he was seated. If these bourgeways wanted to waste time, and risk having their cattle get clean away from them, it was all right with him, he'd follow the trail. But no Indian in his right mind was going to hang around long, with white men's stolen cattle tied to his lodge. And he was sure it was Indians. Boot or no boot, that print *toed in*. The foot that made it was used to moccasins.

He kept the impatient Buckskin down to a jumpy trot, enjoying the familiar sensation of being on the prowl. The forest was dense and wet, full of small rustlings and the scent of hemlock and crushed fern. Jim headed northward through it, the other horses strung out in twos and singly behind him. Mills was still muttering dubiously to young Selway, and Jim heard Sam Mullins make some remark about Moki.

"I reckon we'll find out Jim's a pretty good tracker with or without Moki," Rutledge said. And Jonathan added loyally, "Jim knows what he's doin'."

Jim smiled. Anybody but a bourgeway would know what he was doing on this trail. He might wish for Moki's sharp nose later, but along here the sign was plain as daylight; a trampled bush, twigs broken all in one direction on the side of a dead pine, disturbed swirlings in the carpet of damp brown needles underfoot. You'd have to be blind to miss it. That Cayuse wasn't even trying, he felt so safe in his disguise.

Jonathan pressed up beside him, presently, on the mule. "Jim, tell me somethin'. How you figger we're after Injuns?"

"You oughta know that, after the trouble you had learnin' to walk in moccasins!"

"By golly! I'd never've thought of that!" Jonnie said. He was silent a moment. "That still don't prove it's Cayuses. Why not Multnomahs or Molalas?"

"*Wah!* Bunch of squaws. Them Injuns ain't wuth the name."

Jonnie studied his brother's profile speculatively. "You know what, Jim? I think you're just *hopin'* it's them Cayuses so's there'll be a good bang-up fight when we get there."

"Mebbe I am." Jim fingered his knife hilt and grinned. Jonnie had hit close to the truth. But he had other reasons for singling out the Cayuses. For one, not even Molalas and Multnomahs were stupid enough to steal animals on the opposite side of the river from their villages. For another, both



of these tribes were far too beat by poverty and the ravages of smallpox to risk trouble with the white man. Jim had reconnoitered their villages in his solitary wanderings on Buckskin, and felt nothing but disgust for their squalid, spiritless ways. Cayuses were quite a different kettle of fish. They were warriors well feared for their ferocity up around Fort Walla Walla on the other side of the Cascades, where they normally lived. What this small bunch was doing in the valley he didn't know, unless they were castoffs from their own people. He'd been curious about them since the day a couple of weeks ago when he'd run onto their horses grazing in a sheltered pocket of the hills, and discovered eight or ten lodges in the woods nearby.

He was thinking of those horses now, as he automatically followed the broad trail of crushed underbrush and horn marks on trees that led ever northward through the forest. The memory of their well-muscled flanks and curving necks was as interesting as the hopeful idea of a bit of good lively fighting.

"Lookee here, Jim," Jonnie said presently. "Nobody ever said nothin' about this junket includin' a battle."

"You want them cattle back, don't you?"

"Sure, we do. But we got law in this valley, and that's what we got it for. Sheriff's on his way, remember."

Jim flung him an impatient glance. "Think Injuns are gonna set around and wait while he gits here?"

"We'll have to keep a guard on 'em. 'Course we never figgered it *was* Injuns. I dunno—"

"I dunno either! Only guard you kin put on a Cayuse is a good strong piece of rope. A bullet's better. Here, hold back a minute, Jonnie."

The busy, automatic corner of his brain had been hesitating between a flattened clump of weeds up ahead and a scraped place on a tree trunk farther to the left. Jim tossed Buckskin's

halter to Jonathan and slid down to approach the flattened weeds. Dropping to a low crouch, he put his nose close to the broken stalks and sniffed. Old sign. Probably some varmint had rolled around there scratching his back a couple of days ago. He was up again instantly with one of his lithe movements, swinging atop Buckskin and pulling her to the left.

Jonathan swerved to follow him. "What was it about that bunch of weeds that told you to come this-a-way?"

"Didn't smell right. Sap's all run out'n them stems a'ready. Yonder's the fresh sign." Jim pointed to the faint scar on the tree trunk. "Cow's horn scraped along there."

"How you know it wasn't a deer's horn?"

"Too low! By gor, Jonnie, use yer head!"

Jonathan's grin was half sheepish, half resentful. "You wait. One of these days I'll show you up at somethin'. Plowin', maybe!"

"Hey, up yonder!" called Ben Mills from several yards behind. "You sure you know what you're doin'?"

Jonathan turned the mule and started back toward the others. "He knows, all right. And you notice we're veerin' west now, like he said we would. If it is them Cayuses, we better lay some new plans, hadn't we? The sheriff—"

Jim frowned and let his mare out into a faster pace as the woods began to thin. For the life of him he couldn't see why they wanted to drag in a sheriff. The whole thing was a simple, clear-cut problem of stealing back what had been stolen. He wished Eye of the Bear or Many Feathers were behind him, instead of this bunch of bourgeways. Or Hides His Face, who had carried the pipe—been the leader—so often when Talks Alone was going on his first raids. His breath came faster, as the memories drifted back over him, and the sensations—lying prone on a ridge with the enemy lodges clustered below you and your companions hidden all around, silent and waiting. The sun would be gone and the dusk gathering; the squaws

on the plain below—maybe Blackfoot, maybe Piute, maybe Rappahoe—would be hustling in the last of the firewood, cursing the dogs that pulled their travois, herding the children into the safety of the village. You could hear their voices floating out on the cooling air, feel the prickle of buffalo grass against your naked chest and thighs, smell the odors of sweat and sun-baked earth and the vermilion that smeared your face. And all the time your eyes and brain would be automatically noting the arrangement of the lodges, the position of the picketed horses; estimating the number of warriors in the village and the location of their sentries.

Then full night, at last, the whispered plans; and three or four of you would steal down the ridge and past the sentries to prowl among the lodges, melting into their looming shadows at the sound of a laugh or a footstep. You would pass up the first horse you found tied to a lodge, and the second, searching for the perfect mare, the finest stallion, then suddenly it would occur to you that time was slipping away, that any second the companions waiting on the ridge would dash down to stampede the loose stock and the alarm would be raised. Hastily, you would cut the next horse you saw, turn silent but swift in escape, cut another in passing, grow reckless and swerve back to get a tall roan you remembered—then would come the sudden shout, the sound of whinnies and beating hoofs and the crack of a rifle. The whole village would erupt into an uproar of yells and running feet and bobbing torches, with the bullets humming like great bees past your head as you flung yourself on the tall roan and streaked for open country, your three prizes pounding along behind you. The chase might last for miles; you would lose your companions but never all of your raging pursuers. Sooner or later you'd find yourself grappling with another sweaty body in grunting, deadly combat while the horse under you struggled and shoved against your enemy's. You wouldn't feel the tear

of his knife through your shoulder, only the swift plunge of your own, and the blaze of ferocity inside you and the rush of wind on your face as you tore loose to freedom.

"Jim, wait!"

At the sound of Jonathan's voice Jim gave such a start that Buckskin plunged and curvetted, momentarily out of control. Totally absorbed in his thoughts, he had unconsciously increased Buckskin's pace until she fairly flew. Now he heard hoofbeats behind him, and another shout. "Lord a'mighty, wait a minute!"

He mastered the nervous mare. "Wait fer *what?*" he growled.

"For the rest of us," put in Rutledge, riding up beside them. "If it's Cayuses we're after, we best do a little figgerin'. Gotta know what we're gonna do when we get there."

The others had caught up now, and Jim found himself surrounded by a ring of lathered horses and puffing men. "You still followin' a trail, at *this* rate?" panted young Selway, dragging a sleeve over his gleaming forehead. "You set a pace, I'll tell you—"

"I'm for easin' up a little," muttered Mills. He was eyeing Jim almost suspiciously. "Horses is gonna play out on us first thing you know. Besides, it's gettin' on toward sundown. I wanta know where I'm headin' and what I'm gonna run into. Seems to me this ain't nothin' but a wild-goose chase so far."

"Yeah, ain't seen them cattle yet—"

"Better use our heads a little. Can't bust into a camp of Cayuse devils without no evidence nor nothin'. I—"

"*Wagh!* I'll show you evidence when we git thar," burst out Jim. "I'll show you yer *cattle*. Sign's been plain as a wagon trail!"

He wheeled the mare and started on again, across an area of glades and into trees on the other side. The light was fading from the heavy sky and the ground had been steadily ris-

ing for some time now. He needed no trail to take him to that Cayuse camp. In fact he hadn't been following the sign lately for the very good reason that it had vanished. He'd known it would, sooner or later, and had spotted the beginning of the false trail at a wide, shallow brook back yonder a way. The thief had driven the cattle into the brook, ridden across it himself to trample the opposite side with hoof prints that apparently led north through a fir grove. Then of course he'd come back and driven the cattle up the brook. It was what Jim would have done himself in such a circumstance, and he had kept the brook in sight, knowing he could pick up the trail farther along when it took to dry land again. Even that was a waste of time, it would be shorter to cut right for the camp.

There! Those broken ferns. Now he could turn away from the brook and head through this thicket.

Then he saw something, and halted Buckskin so suddenly she reared. They still doubted they were after Injuns, did they? Well, he could prove it now. He shot a defiant glance over his shoulder as the others rode up, and jerked his head at a pile of clothing stuffed under a bush.

Burke swung down and ran over to it, pulling out a rusty old jacket, a pair of broken boots, and a crumpled hat. "White man's clothes!" he cried. "But why would he shed 'em?"

"'Cause he's a Injun," Jim snapped. "Bourgeways allus wear too many clothes, sure—but they never take any of 'em off! This feller figgered he was safe now. He got tired of playin' white man, he's hurryin'. And if you ever want to see them cattle agin, we gotta hurry too. I'm gonna leave the trail and cut straight fer that camp. You comin'?"

They believed him, then. Burke leaped on his horse and they all surged after Jim, not talking any more. Thickets, sloping glades, patches of forest flew by, and Jim loaded his rifle as he rode, hearing the small clicks and cursings behind him as some

of the others did the same. The war drums were pounding in his veins now, harder and faster every minute. As he topped the last ridge he smelled the smoke of the lodge fires. The Cayuses were eating before they broke camp—probably felt safe for another hour or two, in this valley full of bourge-ways. Jim grinned as he flung himself off Buckskin and crept through the fringe of bushes that concealed the hollow. They didn't know they had an Absarokee named Talks Alone stalking them.

Rutledge's hand on his shoulder brought him to a halt. "We there, son?"

Jim nodded, jerking his head toward the tangled edge of the ridge. Rutledge moved cautiously forward at his side until they both crouched on the rim, peering down into the hollow where eight or ten horses, as well as the stolen cattle, grazed quietly in the dusk.

"By golly, there they are!" breathed Sam Mullins, behind them. "Burke! Mills! Lookee here, we—"

"Shut up!" hissed Jim. The whispers and crackling twigs as the others crowded closer seemed as loud as gunshots. Rutledge nudged him and jerked a thumb toward the rear, herding everybody back into the woods where they had left the horses. Jim followed impatiently. What now? He ought to be getting the lay of the land, the position of the sentries, in the few minutes before full dark.

Rutledge turned to him when the group was complete, a curious gravity in his face. "Jim, what's your plan?"

"Why, smell out the sentries, a-course. Get rid of 'em on the quiet when dark's come, sneak down and git the cattle moved out'n there while some of you keeps watch up here. When you git a good start I'll stampede them horses and start shootin'. While they chase me south you kin git away east—"

"All right," said Rutledge heavily. "Now I'll have my say. This here's a peaceful valley and I ain't gonna be a partv to

stirrin' up no Injun trouble for *anybody's* cattle. Kill one Cayuse and they's gonna be five or six white settlers picked off in their own cabin yards before a week's up, and then we'd fight back and then the Cayuses would get some other Injuns to join with 'em, and first thing you know we got a real up-risin' on our hands. We're gonna settle this without spillin' blood or we ain't gonna settle it. That's my stand."

There was a moment's silence. Then Burke said, "You're dead right, Bob."

"By golly, you are," came Jonathan's voice.

There were murmurs of agreement; the whole temper of the group calmed and steadied. In the fast-falling darkness came the sounds of rifles being uncocked and tossed aside.

Jim stood with clenched jaw, feeling one pair of eyes after another turning to him speculatively, feeling a solid wall of resistance building up against everything he was craving to do.

He swung away, seething with frustration. Nobody could deny that those Cayuses yonder were enemies—friends didn't steal your cattle. And if you couldn't get a little excitement out of your enemies, where in thunder could you get it?

Rutledge's deep voice came again. "Got any other ideas, Jim, or should we settle down to watch this place while we wait for the sheriff?"

"*Wagh!* The sheriff!" Jim snarled, ready to defy them all, cut away and do what he wanted to and let them scatter the best they could. Then he saw Rutledge's quiet, waiting face, the challenge in Jonnie's eyes, and knew he wouldn't.

He heaved an explosive sigh and got himself under control. "I'll git yer cattle fer you without no sheriff! And without spillin' no Cayuse blood neither. Will that do you?"

"That'll do fine," Mills said cautiously. "How you aim to go at it?"

"Jest steal 'em back, is all. They stole 'em from you, didn't they? Or have I got to ask pardon afore I do it?"

Burke began to chuckle softly. "I don't reckon that's necessary. You mean you can really pull it off?"

Jim grunted scornfully. He could pull it off, all right, but there wouldn't be any fun to it. "Set down and rest yourselves, we gotta wait till full dark."

He watched them ease down among the trees, relief in their shadowed faces, and curiosity, and something else—approval. By gor, had he done the right thing for once? He darted a glance at Rutledge and found the broad, kindly face alight with satisfaction. And Jonnie—

There was that look again, blazing at Jim just as it had in the recorder's office.

Jim turned hastily and moved through the underbrush back to the ridge, full of an altogether new excitement. He was thinking of the plan he'd had, earlier today, for mending the rift between him and his brother. He could still make it work—he could make it work better than ever. Here was opportunity playing right into his hands. By thunder, after tonight Jonnie wouldn't care about the old picture and the leather box and the cabin no Absarokee could stand to live in. He'd be so pleased he'd forget everything, and they could start fresh.

Jim's glance swept the hollow in an eager search, failed to find what he wanted, and moved anxiously to the lodges half-visible among the trees beyond. There! Was that it? The light was growing too dim to be sure. Impatiently he waited for night. Then, after a word of instruction to the quiet group behind him, he crept on foot out of the sheltering underbrush along the ridge, paused a moment to listen, and vanished into the darkness.

Not quite ten minutes later the call of a white owl drifted softly across the night air. The men on the ridge stiffened. At the second call they scrambled to their feet and ran as silently as they could toward their horses. A moment later,



taking Buckskin with them, they were circling southeastward away from the ridge, every ear strained to catch sounds of disturbance behind them, shots or shouts or war whoops. The silence was broken only by the thudding of their own horses' hoofs. Then, from somewhere ahead and to the left, came the soft lowing of a cow.

"By the almighty, he's done it!" exclaimed Mills. "Over this-a-way, men."

The group swerved and a moment later entered a patch of woods well away from the ridge and the still-silent Cayuse camp. Jim, waiting in a little clearing deep in the trees, heard them coming and hastily finished binding a long, thin bundle of brush together with a length of vine. He was panting from his recent exertions and almost feverish with suspense. Everything had gone without a hitch and he could barely wait until they'd put a mile or so behind them and he could light his torch and show Jonnie—

"Keep goin', fan out around the cattle," he panted as the first horsemen appeared in the clearing. They surged past, Rutledge in the lead with Buckskin in tow. Jim caught the halter and swung atop her, but held back until all the others had gone on. Then he pulled his prize out of the concealment of a thicket and followed eagerly.

The men had gone a mile and a half before they stopped for a breather. They were talking freely now, laughing with elation and relief, shouting back to Jim to hurry and catch up, and tell them how he'd turned the trick.

Jim paused in the shelter of a little rise just long enough to find flint and steel in his pouch and light his makeshift torch. Then, triumphant, he rode slowly toward them, holding the torch high and leading the gift he had stolen for Jonnie at a risk far greater than his brother knew.

Their eyes riveted on it as he approached, and he swelled with pride. They ought to stare. It was a gift good enough to

buy a chieftain's daughter. It was the finest young mare he had ever seen, tamer than Buckskin but proud of eye and dainty of foot, her neck arched like a good bow. And she was pure cream in color, with a flowing white mane. He had found just what Jonnie wanted—a horse exactly like his own.

He sat there with his knees trembling against Buckskin's sides, watching his brother's face and waiting for it to light with joy. But Jonnie seemed dazed—almost stunned. Everybody seemed that way.

"She's yours, Jonnie!" he murmured. "Just like you wanted. She's gentle, too. She—"

"She's *mine*?" Jonathan's voice was hard. "She *ain't* mine! She ain't yours neither!"

"Why, sure she is! I pulled a coup as neat as any I ever—"

"Jim, you stole that horse! Crimeny, you can't *do* that, it ain't right! You're breakin' the law same as them Cayuses was! You can't go stealin' animals away, it's—"

"What're you talkin' about?" demanded Jim. "Ain't that just what we been doin' tonight, stealin' animals?"

"That's different! The cattle was ours already!"

"They warn't when they was down in that Cayuse holler!"

"Oh, yes they was, Jim!" put in Rutledge. His blue eyes were stern in the light of the torch. "They never stopped bein' ours, no matter who had 'em. We only took back our own, the quietest way we knew. But this is wrong. This is makin' thieves of all of us—"

"Mr. Rutledge, he don't understand," said Jonathan, in a tight, shamed voice. "He just don't understand yet."

"By golly, I'll say he don't!" exclaimed Burke exasperatedly. "All this trouble to get around rilin' them devils, then he swipes one of their own horses right out from under their nose! We're in a wuss fix than before!"

Jim heard them through a fog of pain and outrage. "You

ain't in no fix," he growled. "If Jonnie—don't want her, I'll go put her back. Right whar she come from."

Jonnie's voice grated when he spoke, and his palms were rubbing along his thighs in that old gesture. "I couldn't keep no stolen horse."

There was a small silence. Then abruptly Jim wheeled Buckskin and started back the way he had come, the beautiful, rejected mare trotting behind. Jonathan watched a moment, his face twisting, then galloped after him. "Hold on. I'm comin' with you!"

"I don't want nobody with me!"

"Don't be a fool, there's danger. They'll be huntin' that ridge now—"

"*Stay back!*" It was a wild yell. Jim glared over his shoulder, gesturing with the torch. "Go on back to that cabin!"

"Blast it, I won't! They might kill you!"

"*Let 'em*, by thunder!"

Jim's torch sailed over both horses and landed in a flaming mass just in front of Bad Medicine. The mule halted abruptly, and Jonnie sat there staring at the blazing twigs until they burned out to nothing and the thud of hoofbeats had died away into the forest. Then he turned, his jaw tight and his body rigid, and went back to the others.

In awkward silence the men turned their horses and headed east.

## Chapter XIII

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It took Jim about five minutes of blindly furious riding to reach the hidden clearing in the forest. He stopped there, cleared his head with an effort, and flung himself off Buckskin to prepare for what lay ahead of him. Jonnie was right about one thing—the Cayuses would be up in arms, prowling the ridge. They'd be in an ugly mood, too. Jim didn't care. There was a violence inside him no more to be controlled than a buffalo stampede, and he wasn't trying. The one thing he craved was to plunge headlong into the worst danger he could find.

He tore off his clothes with savage haste, fighting to stave off the memory of Jonnie's shamed apology for him. The faster he got to the ridge the sooner he'd lose that humiliation in the uproar of battle and escape; the more wounds he got the less he'd ache from the one Jonnie had dealt him.

He was stripped to his breechclout now, strapping the tight bundle of discarded clothes to the apishamore just behind where he would sit. There was a chunk of pemmican in his pouch; he chewed it ravenously while he checked his rifle's loading and primed the pan. Next he must tie the medicine bundle behind his braid; in spite of his defiant shout to Jonnie, he had no wish to part with his hair just yet. The bundle would turn Cayuse bullets as well as Sioux. He reached

hurriedly into his pouch for it, frowned, searched again—and then remembered. It was back on the claim, cached in the hollow of the old stump beside the Tualatin.

For a moment he felt utterly forsaken. Nobody in his right mind would ride into danger without the protection of his helpers; it was more than reckless, it was foolhardy. The spirits grew angry at such arrogance; they might take away their power from your medicine, they might desert you forever.

Jim dropped to his knees, grim jawed, and drew a packet of vermilion from his pouch. Never mind the spirits, never mind anything. He had said he would take that mare back where she came from and he meant to do it. Obstinate he shoved away a wave of foreboding as he crouched there in the dark striping his cheeks, his forehead, the bridge of his nose with the paint of defiance. But a moment later when he pushed through the woods with his rejected gift in the direction of the ridge, his heart sank at the empty feel of his left braid against his shoulder. He was alone indeed.

It was not long before he had company of a perilous sort in his wary progress up the rise. To his left he could hear the thrashing of several horses through the underbrush, the angry grunts of their Cayuse riders. Ahead of him on the right another party was approaching with a lack of caution that surprised him. Didn't they know he could hear them perfectly, and as long as he did hear them, could stay out of their way? He guided Buckskin and the stolen mare into a thicket and stayed there, a hand clamped over the nostrils of each, while the second party passed so close he could hear the squeak of their saddles. He eluded a third group with the same ease a few minutes later and had almost gained the ridge before he realized that all the searchers were behind him, fanning out across the wooded slope but moving down it, toward the east.

He understood, then, why they were careless of the noise they made. He was in the one spot they wouldn't expect him to be—within a stone's throw of their own camp. He smiled wryly in the dark. Pure rashness had gained him a safety he'd never expected—and wasn't sure he wanted. But the night wasn't over; they must have left sentries at the camp. Things were bound to get lively yet.

He moved southward along the ridge, keeping well back from the edge. It was certain now that his escape, if he managed it, would not be to the east, into the arms of those searchers. The gully up which he'd driven the cattle would be a good place to take the mare down; he could leave Buckskin in the thick clump of pines at the head of it.

In another few minutes he was looping her bridle over a pine bough and cocking his ears for sounds of movement in the gully below. All was still—too still to suit him. It was one thing to steal into that hollow on your own silent moccasins, sure of a swift horse under you when you'd pulled off your coup and didn't mind making a racket. It was quite another to reverse the procedure—have a horse to encumber you in the beginning and only your own legs to outrun pursuit. He took time to muffle the stolen mare's hoofs with chunks of moss tied on with vines; then he looked at her one last time, glimmering there in the darkness like a phantom horse, proud and gentle and beautiful. Why, *why* couldn't Jonnie have taken her? What was wrong with her? Just the fact that he'd stolen her from a Cayuse? But the Cayuse had stolen her from somebody else; that was the way you got horses. Besides, the Cayuses had no rights under all those fancy bourgeway laws. They didn't even belong in this valley!

He couldn't understand it. All he knew was that he'd given the best gift he could imagine, and it still wasn't good enough.

He led the mare out of the trees and down into the gully.

He heard the faint mutter of voices when he was halfway down—they seemed to come from above, to his right. He crept on warily, crouching to get the ridge between him and the sky so he could locate the sentries. Yes, there they were, two of them, blacker shapes against the gloom. He hugged the right bank of the gully and moved on. Then the mare's foot struck a loose pebble; she stumbled, the pebble rolled and dislodged another. The clatter seemed to fill the world.

Jim was running before he took conscious thought; there was a thrashing overhead and two shots rang out, spattering on the loose rocks where he had crouched an instant before. He heard grunts, a shout, crackling underbrush; they were racing toward the gully, reloading as they came. He dived beneath the trailing branches of a tree projecting out of the side of the embankment, and dragged the mare in after him. Clamping a hand over her nose, he waited. Almost immediately a figure hurtled over the bank a few hundred feet behind him, and another followed. Too far away to aim on a night as dark as this.

Jim didn't wait for them to get any closer. He sprang out of his shelter and onto the mare, bringing his heels back against her sides with a force that sent her spurting down the gully in a spray of pebbles. Two more shots followed him but he was an uncertain target, dodging and zigzagging and hugging the mare's neck close. Excitement rose up in him. The only course remaining now was the boldest, and it suited his mood exactly. He swung south as soon as he emerged into the hollow, circling its outer edge as fast as the mare could run. Light-colored horses were the hardest to see at night, he had that in his favor. And the hullabaloo that had risen from the lodges covered the beat of the mare's hoofs. Now if they did what he thought they would—

The first Cayuses erupted at that moment from the edge of

the forest where the camp lay, and raced for the loose horses. Jim laughed exultantly under his breath as more streamed out into the hollow—squaws, young boys, and the few warriors who were not beating the far slope of the ridge looking for him. By the time half a dozen men were mounted he had dived into the woods behind the lodges they had emptied. Branches crashed against him, vines tangled the mare's feet as she plunged headlong through a maze of trees and thickets. In another instant he caught a whiff of smoke and swerved toward it, sliding down from her back to pick his way, warily now, toward the first lodge. In a moment he saw it through the trees, faintly luminous from the cook fire inside. Now was the time for caution.

He stole closer, eyes and ears straining, rounded the last tall clump of ferns and stood with pounding heart at the edge of the tiny open space where the lodge stood. To his right and left and ahead he glimpsed other luminous cones, but all the noise was coming from eastward in the hollow, and the mouth of the gully. Swiftly he crossed the open place and tied the mare exactly where he had found her, to the lodge itself.

There, by gor! he thought bitterly. I done what I said.

He started to turn away, then stopped. He had seen a shadow move across the faintly glowing hides of the lodge—someone was inside it. He leaped for the clump of ferns and felt himself suddenly outlined in yellow radiance as the lower flap of the lodge was yanked up and the firelight streamed out. At the same moment a screech split the silence, and someone scrambled under the flap, yelling in a dozen different keys. It was a squaw, from the pitch of her voice, but Jim didn't wait to find out. He was already dodging through the tangled woods, hearing an answering shout from the direction of the hollow and the thud of hoofbeats as the searchers in the gully turned back to race toward this new alarm.

He'd have to use his wits now, and fast. He couldn't get



to Buckskin without running head on into his pursuers or else ranging in a wide circle to avoid them. There simply wasn't time for circling; he couldn't outrun their horses. Instinctively he doubled back on his own tracks, heading straight for the lodge again. The hoofbeats were thunderous now; as he glimpsed the lodge he heard the first Cayuses break into the woods behind him. The squaw was still standing beside the tethered mare, chattering excitedly to two others who had appeared beside her; Jim gave them a wide berth, slipped through the perilously thin fringe of trees between them and the next fire-lit cone, melted into the black shadow behind the third, and paused to gasp for breath. He could hear a small child wailing on the other side of the stretched hides, not a foot away from him. The sound faded as he set off again, darting from lodge to lodge in a northeasterly direction. Behind him the sounds of pursuit were growing vaguer as the Cayuses thrashed through the forest he had just quitted. But it wouldn't last long.

He swerved abruptly due east, passed behind a last lodge, and broke out of the trees into the open hollow. He was almost across it, running like the wind, when a shout rang out from the edge of the forest. They'd spotted him. It was all up now, the gully looked a mile away. He had time to curse himself for his own obstinate insistence on tying the mare exactly where he had got her, instead of simply sending her down the gully with a spank, and getting out fast. And then he was in the gully, and the first bullet ricocheted off the side of it.

He flung himself onto the vines that trailed down the embankment and began scrambling up them. He had almost reached the top when the Cayuses burst into the lower end of the gully. He froze to immobility, his fingers and moccasins dug into the vines and crumbling dirt, his cheek smashed against the rough, twiggy stems. The smell of sweat and

earth and vermilion was in his nostrils as he clung there fighting for breath. They could either spot him and pick him off as easily as shooting a blackbird off a limb—or they could fail to see him and race on up the gully.

They raced on up the gully, yelling vengeance.

In an instant Jim had gained the top of the bank and was streaking through the tangle of underbrush to the clump of pines where Buckskin—the spirits willing—was still waiting. Once he was on horseback the odds would be evened, he could fight like a warrior instead of dodging and hiding like a fox chased by dogs. He reached her just as the first Cayuse emerged from the top of the gully, yanked free her halter, and flung himself with wild elation on her back. A rear and a plunge and she was streaking south, and the world was transformed into a confusion of yells and whining bullets and wind streaming through his braids. He felt a blow on his right shoulder, and a ripping pain. Twisted on the apishamore with a screech of defiance, he leveled his own rifle. He could see nothing but moving dark blurs behind him, but he heard a fresh confusion following his shot and took advantage of it to swing eastward and then south again in a broad zigzag.

Their aim was bad now, and he was outdistancing most of them, for Buckskin was comparatively fresh and their horses jaded from the chase he had led them. But there was one he couldn't lose—there was always one you couldn't lose. He swerved in and out between scattered thickets and the patches of pine that dotted the long ridge, and the hoofbeats behind gained steadily. He fired at the sound as fast as he could load and reload, but they only thudded louder, while Cayuse bullets buzzed closer and closer to his own head.

The Indian ran out of ammunition at last, but the flame in Jim's shoulder was hampering his own movements, and he had time for only one more shot—which hit, he could hear the Cayuse grunt—before he felt the jarring impact of another.

horse against his own, and an arm like steel encircled him, striving to drag him from Buckskin's back. He clung hard with his knees, twisting and struggling, striking out savagely with the butt of his rifle, hearing the rasping breath of the two beasts and the Cayuse mingling with his own. A new flame from a knife wound ripped across his cheek and the smell of blood rose strong through the smell of sweat and horses; he found his own knife at last and grasped at slippery flesh and struck hard, twice. Coarse hair scraped his shoulder as the Cayuse sagged against him; he shoved at the weight, twisted violently, and tore loose at last from that suffocating embrace. Then he and Buckskin were in motion again, plunging across a shallow ravine and up on the other side and running, flying, south and eastward down through the hills—and this time no hoofbeats echoed behind them.

He never knew how much later it was that he slid down Buckskin's heaving side and dropped full length beside a stream. He groped toward the water, whose bell-like murmur he could hear in the darkness. The moss was cool and wet under his aching body, the water an icy shock when he plunged both arms into it. He drank deeply, then lay there dragging air into his lungs and feeling the pain dance along the side of his cheek like flames, and his shoulder burn like a coal. Gradually the tumult of the last few hours faded from his brain and the thudding of his heart began to sound like voices. "*You can't do that, it ain't right!*" "*By golly, all this trouble to get around rilin' them devils . . .*" "*. . . makin' thieves of all of us . . .*" "*Trouble in the valley . . . kill one Cayuse . . . trouble in the valley . . .*"

He sat up painfully, staring into the velvety darkness. Would dawn find livestock slaughtered, a cabin in flames, a settler lying bloody and still in the mud of his own dooryard? Then he remembered the squaw and sagged all over with relief. She'd seen him clearly in that instant of discovery behind

the tepee, when he'd stood flooded with yellow light. She'd be able to swear to his feather and paint, his naked body. No white man would ever be suspected of any part of this night's work.

He drew a long, ragged breath and ran his fingers through the tangled lock that hung over his forehead. It was sweat drenched, clotted with blood and paint. He felt that way all through, inside him. Bewildered, he tried to summon pride in his recent coups, gain some satisfaction from the hullabaloo of danger and violence and escape he had finally stirred up after craving it for weeks. But he could not forget Rutledge's stern eyes, which once, back at The Dalles, had looked at him so gently in the moment of his deep humiliation. He could not forget Jonnie's shamed excuses for him, or the faces of those men.

But why? Why couldn't he?

The question loomed up, grew, and spread until it filled his mind. He was totally unskilled at finding the answer, for he had never before asked such a thing of himself.

He sat probing and floundering, trying to understand. Gradually the outer world faded from his consciousness, as for the first time in his life, one part of Jim Keath stood off and scrutinized the other. It was a curious experience, a little frightening. He had a clear sensation of slipping out of himself, then turning back to look. And there he was, sitting alone in the dark with his head in his hands, aching and sore from a night of blundering mistakes—too stubborn to admit how wrong he'd been.

You fool, he thought. It ain't coups you care about, it's what them men think of you. It ain't enemies you want, it's friends!

Without knowing it he'd outgrown this sort of life. He'd changed. Slowly but inescapably the thought completed itself: No longer was he Talks Alone, the son of Scalp Necklace.

He was Jonnie Keath's brother, and a white man. It was time to act like one.

He sat a long time, thinking about it. At last he rose stiffly to his feet. With the first motion he was again vividly aware of the darkness, the bell-like rush of the stream, the chill breath of the night air against his sore flesh. He moved across moist and spongy moss into icy water and stood there knee-deep, splashing away the grime and paint and dried blood he could feel but not see, while that busy corner of his brain automatically analyzed the mingled smells of horseflesh, earth, and fir trees. He was not thinking now, not peering inward at himself in that unaccustomed way. But he didn't need to.

He waded to the bank, unstrapped his clothes from Buckskin's back and dressed himself, shivering. A short while afterward he was riding down out of the hills and into the broad and sleeping valley. The violence of the night seemed far behind as he looked out across the lowlands, dim and mist swirled with approaching dawn. *Green pastures, still waters*—Jonnie's valley.

My valley, he thought experimentally.

In spite of himself, his eyes moved eastward, where the mountains lay hidden and snow locked behind their banks of cloud. But it was south to the Tualatin he turned his mare.

## Chapter XIV

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Jim rode into the clearing just as the sun broke through to touch the tops of the fir trees. Jonnie sat huddled in the grizzly robe directly in front of the door flap of the lodge. He looked as if he'd been there all night.

His head snapped around at the sound of Buckskin's hoofs, and as Jim slid to the ground and came toward him, he rose slowly and stiffly, like someone in a dream. Then suddenly he was across the intervening space and clutching Jim by both arms, examining him all over.

"You're all right? You're—oh, crimeny, Jim! That cheek—your shoulder—"

"Aaa, never mind them."

"Never *mind* 'em?" After an inarticulate moment Jonnie whirled and yelled joyfully toward the cabin. "Sally! Dan'! Come outa there, *Jim's back!*"

There was an explosion of voices from the cabin and a moment later Dan'l burst out, half clad, Sally at his heels. The boy took one look then streaked down the slope to fling himself on Jim.

"Oh, cracky, they said you was mebbe gone for good! They said they'd likely gone and drove you off so's you'd never wanta come back! But I *knew* you would."

Jim crushed the boy against him with his good arm and

looked over the tousled gold head to Sally, who stood small and tremulous just behind Dan'l. She was enveloped in a hastily snatched blanket and her eyes were brimming.

"Drove me off?" he said.

"That's the way we felt," she told him shakily. "Jonnie and me. Allus naggin' you about your braids and all—Jim, it don't matter, ain't none of that matters! We found that out last night."

"It was one mighty blasted long night," Jonnie mumbled. "I ain't never lived through a longer. Settin' there waitin'—and thinkin'."

Jim was staring at them, swallowing. They'd wanted him back, they'd worried about him. And Sally was saying the braids and feather didn't matter.

"You mean it?" he said cautiously. "That it don't matter if I—"

Jonnie cut in. "We mean it all right! Ain't nobody gonna say another word about how you live or when you eat or whether you wear your hair hangin' to your heels or shave it off to your skull! Just so you're safe back—that's all we care."

Jim began to grin. Instantly three tired and anxious faces lighted with answering smiles. Dan'l clutched his good arm eagerly.

"Jim, what happened? Tell us what happened?"

"Oh, not much." Jim glanced at Jonnie and added, "I tuck the mare back."

Jonnie flushed. "It's a wonder to me you ain't dead."

"Well, it was close fer a while there," Jim admitted. Hesitantly, with one eye on Sally, he began to describe the happenings of the night, gaining confidence as he saw they weren't going to criticize him for any of it. Before long he was thoroughly enjoying the recital, counting his coups as he used to at the council fire in Absaroka, swaggering and proud of them. He laughed aloud as he told how he'd baffled the Cayuse by

vanishing into the side of the gully, and threw out his wounded arm in a gesture that ended in an involuntary grimace of pain. His face went blank instantly but Sally uttered a horrified exclamation and whirled toward the cabin.

"My stars! Keepin' you here talkin' while that shoulder gets worse and worse—Jonnie, take him into the lodge while I fetch bandages. Dan'l, honey, go see to Buckskin." She was already hurrying toward the cabin, the blanket flapping around her.

Dan'l only clung tighter to Jim. "I want to hear the rest! Go on, Jim—"

Jim shook his head. It was just as well to skip the rest. "That's about all. I found Buckskin and got away."

"But you got hurt?"

"They was a little shootin'. Get along with you now."

The boy went reluctantly, and Jonnie followed Jim to the lodge. As they ducked under the door flap, he jerked a thumb toward Jim's wound. "That bullet still in you?"

"Yeah."

"Crimeny! It'll be nasty, gettin' it out."

"Not so bad. Arrer heads are a sight worse."

Jonathan gave a short laugh. "Well, mebbe you're used to havin' 'em in you, but I sure ain't used to diggin' 'em out. Better I do it than Sally, though. Let's get at it before I lose my stomach for the job."

Jim peeled off the buckskin shirt, then flipped his knife from its sheath and held it out. He stopped at sight of the red-brown stains that dimmed the blade. Conscious of Jonnie's probing eyes, he cleaned the steel on a lock of his damp hair before handing it over.

"Sold that shoulder of yours dear," Jonathan said softly.

There was no more talk then, for a few grim moments. But at last Jonnie let out his breath with a thankful "Whooo!" and flung the bullet away as if it burned his hands. Sally stepped



into the lodge at that moment, wearing the familiar blue dress and festooned with long clean strips of what looked like petticoat.

"My stars, it's still bleedin'!" she began, then took in the situation. "You shoulda waited," she told Jonnie. "I could prob'ly have done that gentler. Now set down there on that bed thing, Jim Keath, you're gonna be doctored proper for once."

A few moments later Jim's wound was bandaged, the gash in his face taped with court plaster, and his eyelids drooping with a drowsiness he could no longer stave off.

"You go to sleep," Sally ordered, rolling up the extra bandages. "And *stay* asleep till noon, you hear?"

Jim grinned and lay back on his willow bed frame. She flung the grizzily robe over him, then left the lodge. But Jonathan lingered, looking down at his brother as if he wanted mightily to say something but didn't know how. "I'm gonna paddle acrost and tell the Rutledges," he muttered. "They was mighty anxious too. Mr. Rutledge was over here half the night." He paused, slowly rubbing his palms on his thighs. Then he muttered, "Sleep good, Jim," and left the lodge abruptly.

Two minutes later Jim sank into oblivion as into a sea of feathers.

Jim came wide awake all over, at the touch of Moki's nose on his hand. He sat up, wincing a little, and rumbled the dog's ears, wondering what else it was that had aroused him. A noise? A footstep? He heard it now, Jonnie's bold, incautious one. An instant later his brother's head thrust through the flap.

"Oh. You're awake a'ready. Best come out, Jim. They's—somebody wants to see you."

Puzzled, Jim reached for his shirt as Jonnie disappeared, and struggled into it—clumsily, because of the bandages and

his shoulder's dull throbbing. Stepping outside, he noticed automatically that it was nearly noon and that Jonnie stood nearby, his back and shoulders tense. Beyond him— Jim frowned and stood still. There was a man, a stranger, framed in the cabin door.

As Jim watched, the man turned and started down the slope. From that moment he dominated the clearing. Tall, black bearded, he moved with a careless, powerful grace that Jim identified at once. Surely he was a mountain man! Jim's eyes flicked over him—moccasins, fringed buckskin, squirrel-skin cap—then riveted on the huge brass star fastened to the bosom of his shirt.

It was the sheriff.

Had they found out that it was no Indian but a white man in that camp last night? *Kill one Cayuse . . .* What would happen now? There was a jail in Willamette Falls. He'd seen it, brand new and strong, a small, thick-walled structure built out over the river. It had one tiny window covered with bars, and massive locks on the door. An icy sweat broke out on Jim's body as he pictured the dark, enclosed space inside, the walls pushing in. Everything in him screamed "*Run!*" but he stood still.

The sheriff advanced to within a yard of him, his glance running from feather to moccasins with a casualness that did not deceive Jim for a moment. This man would be able to describe him minutely a year from now. The glance shifted to Jonnie. "I reckon you two'd be the Keath brothers," boomed the sheriff.

"That's right."

"Well, my name's Joe Meek."

The wind suddenly left Jim's lungs. "*Joe Meek!*" he exclaimed.

"Heard of me, have you?"

"By thunder, yes!"

Jim looked the man over with new eyes. There wasn't a trapper in a million square miles who didn't know Joe Meek, at first hand or by reputation. Tom Rivers and Adam Russell had both had inexhaustible stocks of stories about his exploits—the grizzlies he'd done in, the Indians he'd outsmarted, his nerve, his wit, the bottomless pit that was his stomach, the unending supply of high spirits and enormously tall tales that made him welcome at any campfire between the Missouri River and the Sierra Nevada. It was like coming face to face with a legend. So Joe Meek was the sheriff of the Oregon territory! Jim's respect for law and order took an abrupt turn upward. "You come here to see me," he said warily. "What d'ya want?"

"Jest dropped in to git acquainted. They tell me you done a mighty pretty job of smellin' out some missin' cattle yesterday. Now I've seen you, I ain't surprised! When did you leave the mountains, boy?"

"Jest afore snow flew, last fall." Jim was warier than ever. Meek had the easy confidence of a three-hundred-pound cougar.

"No longer'n that, eh? Say, how was the beaverin'?"

"Warn't none."

Meek shook his head and grinned. "We cleaned 'em out fer good, I reckon. Put in eleven year myself at the job, so it ain't no wonder." He squinted again at Jonnie. "Say, looker here, boy. Ain't I seen you somewheres before?"

"I don't think so."

Jonnie sounded baffled. But Jim, though equally mystified by the amiable tone of the conversation thus far, did understand this last. "My brother look familiar?" he asked Meek.

"By golly, he does. 'Ceptin' fer the eyes—"

"He's the spit of our uncle, Adam Russell."

"That's it!" burst out the sheriff delightedly. "So Russell's your uncle! Was you with him when he lost his hair?"

"No. I was in Absaroka by then."

"Oh, it was Absaroka, was it? Good country! But hard to git out of with all yer belongin's." Meek grinned. "I must've left more'n half a dozen good horses there at one time or another, without exactly meanin' to. You been back lately?"

"Not fer a couple years. Me and Tom Rivers—"

"Rivers! Say, you know ever'body!" Meek burst into sudden laughter. "Last time I seen Tom Rivers he was high tailin' it out of a thicket with fifty Comanches on his heels. He was in kind of a hurry. Passed up three jack rabbits while I was watchin' him."

"Where was you?"

"Me? Oh, I was hidin' in a prairie dog hole about a mile further on. You know, them things are right roomy, onct you git inside."

Jim was beginning to enjoy himself. "Must've been quite a rumpus."

"Well, it warn't no time to set around. We'd got back some beaver them dratted Injuns had stole from us the day before, and a couple of them fast little Comanche ponies had foltered us off when we was leavin'. Warn't our fault, but you know Comanches. Their feelin's was hurt. Listen, where's ole Tom now? Set down here and catch me up on things, boy!"

Without quite knowing how it had come about, Jim found himself hunkered down on the grass beside the sheriff, talking as if he'd known him all his life. Meek fired questions, thick and fast, about Rivers and a dozen others. And in-between times he managed to find out more about Jim Keath than anybody but Jim and his family knew. Jim was a little astonished at this but too busy swapping yarns and good trapper's talk to give it much thought. He did keep wondering when the subject of last night was going to come up, and could see by Jonnie's bemused face that he was wondering too. But nobody could

worry too much while roaring at one of Joe Meek's tales, tall enough to begin with and adorned with those added flourishes that had won him a reputation as the best liar west of Washington, D.C.

Jim was drawn to him as he had seldom been to anyone. Meek talked loud, laughed loud, radiated good nature—but he was thoroughly dangerous. Jim liked that best of all.

By the time Sally came out to invite the sheriff to stay for the noon meal, the purpose of his visit, if there were a purpose, had been forgotten. Jim walked beside him into the cabin, thinking hard. Meek hadn't got beavering out of his blood, that much was plain from every word he said. Yet here he was, with a dozen years of it behind him, settled down cheerfully to the length and breadth of one valley. How had he done it?

They all enjoyed that lunch, Meek most of all. His appetite had not been exaggerated. He polished off half a deer's haunch and a pan of hoeecake, washing the whole down with quarts of coffee. And he commented on everything he saw, from Jonnie's home-carpentered furniture to the old Keath clock. At last he drained his cup and leaned back with a sigh of satisfaction, his tough, vigorous body showing no more bulges than it had an hour before.

"Miss Sally," he said with a grin, "either I'm the hungriest man in this here valley or you're the best cook."

Won over, Sally insisted that he stay on for supper too, but he laughed and reached for the squirrel-skin cap. "Nope. That horse of mine'll be thinkin' I aim to retire him. Walk with me down to the glades, Jim, and gimme a send-off."

It was exactly what Jim had been planning to do—he wanted a word with Meek alone. He fell in beside him readily, steadying the wounded arm with his other hand as he matched the sheriff's swift and silent stride.

"Meek, how come you to end up in this here valley?" he asked bluntly as they topped the ridge.

"End up? Thunder, boy, I'm just startin'." Meek grinned and headed down the other slope. "You wait'll them plughatted coyotes back in Washington wake up and make this territory a state. Anything kin happen then."

"Like what?"

"Why, hallelujah, I dunno, man. But somethin' big."

As Jim only looked more puzzled, he jerked his head impatiently toward the east. "Ain't you watched them wagons comin' over the plains?"

"Bourgeways," grunted Jim. He couldn't make out what Meek was driving at.

"Yeah, bourgeways." The sheriff smiled, then grew serious. As they reached his black stallion, he loosened the tether with a practiced hand and swung into the saddle. "Having a tough time settlin' in, ain't you? I know. I done that too, at first. Moseyed around, one place to the other, couldn't figure out what to do with myself. Seemed like if I couldn't bust out and chase a Injun or somethin' pretty soon I'd jest blow off my scalp lock."

"What 'ja do?"

Meek laughed. "By gosh, I planted thirty acre of wheat. Can you beat that?" He shook his head as if he still couldn't believe it. "Me, Joe Meek. I plowed."

"Oh."

"I was hungry," Meek explained apologetically. "Can't say I ever really tuck to hard work. But I tell you, Jim, I got so I tuck to this valley." His voice had turned thoughtful. "Folks around here are tryin' to git somethin' done. Somethin' big. Like I said, I ain't much count at workin'—so they got me shootin' their wolves for 'em while they get on with it."

He paused and Jim felt that three-hundred-pound cougar stretch and unsheath its claws. So here it came, after all.

Meek said, "Jim, this ain't Absaroka. It ain't Pierre's Hole or the Yellowstone, neither. All the rules is different. Now they was trouble last night up to that Cayuse camp. I didn't like it. I didn't like some other things I've heard."

Jim was suddenly conscious of the tell-tale furrows on his chest, half revealed between bandage and loosened shirt. Meek had heard about the Indian with the scars, about Jonnie Keath's brother and his wild ways. He'd come to find out for himself whether this wolf needed shooting or only warning.

"It's a funny thing," mused the sheriff. "I had me a time finding out anything about this rumpus last night. Ask Mills, they told me down at the Falls. Ask Burke. Rutledge'll know. Well, I asked 'em. And you know, them fellers clammed up on me like Blackfeet at a council smoke. Oh, sure, they knew the Keaths, they says. Fine boys. If t'warn't fer Jonnie Keath's brother they'd never've got them cattle back." Meek paused, nodding. "I'll go along with that—so long's there's no more trouble. Trouble's my business. I reckon you didn't know that before, boy. But you do now."

He was smiling, but it was plain enough what he meant. *Bust out once more and you'll have Joe Meek to reckon with.* Jim absorbed this in silence, along with the astonishing fact that nobody had wanted to inform on him. For Jonnie's sake? Or because he'd won their approval by taking that mare back? Both, perhaps.

He took a long breath. "I got a notion," he told Joe Meek, "I'll be too busy fer trouble fer quite a spell now. Plantin' wheat."

Meek's smile broadened. "I had a notion you was gettin' that notion. Good luck with it, boy, and watch your float stick." He straightened in his saddle, wheeling the stallion. "If wheat and spuds and fences get too much fer you," he added casually, "hunt me up and we'll swap a yarn or two. Might

even put you to work. Anybody as can foller a passel of cattle twenty mile from two boot prints would make a good wolf hunter."

He cantered off across the glades, leaving a glittering vision in Jim's mind—himself straight and stern on Buckskin, a fine brass badge on his chest and Meek just ahead on his impatient stallion, speeding west or north or south in pursuit of lawbreakers, being always in the thick of every excitement from the Siskiyous to the Columbia, living a life of danger, forays, shrewd wits, and bold doings, "hunting wolves."

Jim squashed the vision with a disgusted growl. What was he thinking of? As far as Meek was concerned, it was yet to be proved that Jonnie Keath's brother was not a wolf himself. And it would take a lot of proving to convince the other settlers. Maybe if he plowed and planted wheat—there must be a kind of medicine in it, if even Joe Meek had had to do it before he learned how to live here.

Jim pushed away the echo of pounding hoofbeats, the gleam of a big brass badge, and angled up the slope into the woods, heading for the spot upriver where the medicine bundle lay, too long neglected, in the hollow stump. His helpers had served him well, against heavy odds and at a distance. But for them he'd be rubbed out or locked up, lost and finished instead of welcomed back with a chance to start afresh.

But for them—and Jonnie.

He reached up to touch one of the heavy long braids, profoundly relieved that they need no longer be a problem. Not even for Jonnie could he give up the braids or the feather, since it would mean giving up his helpers as well; but no bourgeway would understand that, and he doubted he could have explained. Now he didn't have to try.

He found the medicine bundle in the hollow stump and fingered it respectfully. Wrapping it in a clean scrap of elk-hide from his pouch, he replaced it in hiding and hung cloth



and tobacco from a nearby limb as a present to his helpers. He thanked them silently, wishing it were as simple to show gratitude to humans as to spirits.

He walked slowly back to the clearing, thinking about it. What did Jonnie want, really want bad? Not cloth and tobacco, not gunpowder, not the finest Nez Perce bow. Even a horse hadn't been good enough. Then what?

The answer came and he tried to evade it, because it stabbed him with the old unreasoning panic. He was still frowning and undecided when he broke through the last willows into the clearing and saw Dan'l and Moki turn simultaneously and rush toward him.

"Cracky! Where you been? Me and Moki's been waitin'—" Dan'l lowered his voice excitedly. "Can we play the 'follow' game, Jim? They's plenty of time before supper, and I seen three of Sally's trenchers I could swipe just as easy, and count coup too, I betcha, 'cause—"

"Hold on," Jim broke in. He hunkered down beside the boy. "Dan'l, we—we ain't playin' that game no more."

"No more? Not *ever* any more? But why, Jim?"

"Well, I kinda been thinkin'. Jonnie wouldn't like that game."

"Why, don't matter none what Jonnie thinks, he's—"

"It does, Dan'l!" Jim stood up. "It *matters*."

It mattered so much that his mind was suddenly made up. Turning his back on the bewildered, snub-nosed face, he strode to his lodge and snatched up the grizzly robe, his weapons and his pack, then walked swiftly toward the cabin, where Jonathan was helping Sally ease a fresh log onto the fire. Jim stopped in the doorway, waiting until they turned, then took a long, resolute breath.

"Kinda lost my taste fer sleepin' outside," he said. "From now on I'm livin' in this cabin with the rest of you."