

TWO



JACK MERCY'S OFFICE, ON THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE main house, was big as a ballroom. The walls were paneled in yellow pine lumbered from his own land and shellacked to a rich gloss that lent a golden light to the room. Huge windows provided views of the ranch, the land and sky. Jack had been fond of saying he could see all a man needed to see from those windows, which were undraped but ornately trimmed.

On the floor were layered the rugs he'd collected. The chairs were leather, as he'd preferred, in rich shades of teal and maroon.

His trophies hung on the walls—heads of elk and bighorn sheep, of bear and buck. Crouched in one corner as though poised to charge was a massive black grizzly, fangs exposed, glassy black eyes full of rage.

Some of his favored weapons were in a locked display case. His great-grandfather's Henry rifle and Colt Peacemaker, the Browning shotgun that had brought down the bear, the Mossberg 500 he'd called his dove duster, and the .44 Magnum he'd preferred for handgun hunting.

It was a man's room, with male scents of leather and wood and a whiff of tobacco from the Cubans he liked to smoke.

The desk, which he'd had custom-made, was a lake of glossy wood, a maze of drawers all hinged with polished brass. Nate sat behind it now, fiddling with papers to give everyone present time to settle.

Tess thought he looked as out of place as a beer keg at a church social. The cowboy lawyer, she thought with a quick twist of her lips, duded up in his Sunday best. Not that he wasn't appealing in a rough, country sort of fashion. A young Jimmy Stewart, she thought, all arms and legs and quiet sexuality. But big, gangling men who wore boots with their gabardine weren't her style.

And she just wanted to get this whole damn business over with and get back to LA. She rolled her eyes toward the snarling grizzly, the shaggy head of a mountain goat, the weapons that had hunted them down. What a place, she mused. And what people.

Besides the cowboy lawyer, there was the skinny, henna-haired housekeeper, who sat in a straight-backed chair with her knobby knees tight together and modestly covered with a perfectly horrible black skirt. Then the Noble Savage, with his heartbreakingly beautiful face, his enigmatic eyes, and the faint odor of horses that clung to him.

Nervous Lily, Tess thought, continuing her survey, with her hands pressed together like vises and her head lowered, as if that would hide the bruises on her face. Lovely and fragile as a lost bird set down among vultures.

When Tess's heart began to stir, she deliberately turned her attention to Willa.

Cowgirl Mercy, she thought with a sniff. Sullen, probably stupid, and silent. At least the woman looked better in jeans and flannel than she had in that baggy dress she'd worn to the funeral. In fact, Tess decided she made quite a picture, sitting in the big leather chair, her booted foot resting on her knee, her oddly exotic face set like stone.

And since she'd yet to see a single tear squeeze its way

out of the dark eyes, Tess assumed Willa had no more love for Jack Mercy than she herself did.

Just business, she thought, tapping her fingers impatiently on the arm of her chair. Let's get down to it.

Even as she had the thought, Nate lifted his eyes, met hers. For one uncomfortable moment, she felt he knew exactly what was going through her mind. And his disapproval of her, of everything about her, was as clear as the sky spread in the window behind him.

Think what you want, she decided, and kept her eyes cool on his. Just give me the cash.

"There's a couple ways we can do this," Nate began. "There's formal. I can read Jack's will word for word, then explain what the hell all that legal talk means. Or I can give you the meaning, the terms, the options first." Deliberately he looked at Willa. She was the one who mattered most, to him. "Up to you."

"Do it the easy way, Nate."

"All right, then. Bess, he left you a thousand dollars for every year you've been at Mercy. That's thirty-four thousand."

"Thirty-four thousand." Bess's eyes popped wide. "Good Lord, Nate, what am I supposed to do with a fat lot of money like that?"

He smiled. "Well, you spend it, Bess. If you want to invest some, I can give you a hand with it."

"Goodness." Overwhelmed at the thought of it, she looked at Willa, back at her hands, and at Nate again. "Goodness."

And Tess thought: If the housekeeper gets thirty grand, I ought to get double. She knew just what *she'd* do with a fat lot of money.

"Adam, in accordance with an agreement Jack made with your mother when they married, you're to receive a lump sum of twenty thousand, or a two percent interest in Mercy Ranch, whichever you prefer. I can tell you the percentage is worth more than the cash, but the decision remains yours."

"It's not enough." Willa's voice snapped out, making

Lily jump and Tess raise an eyebrow. "It's not right. Two percent? Adam's worked this ranch since he was eight years old. He's—"

"Willa." From his position behind her chair, Adam laid a hand on her shoulder. "It's right enough."

"The hell it is." Fury for him, the injustice of it, had her shoving the hand away. "We've got one of the finest strings of horses in the state. That's Adam's doing. The horses should be his now—and the house where he lives. He should have been given land, and the money to work it."

"Willa." Patient, Adam put his hand on her again, held it there. "It's what our mother asked for. It's what he gave."

She subsided because there were strangers' eyes watching. And because she would fix the wrongness of it. She'd have Nate draw up papers before the end of the day. "Sorry." She laid her hands calmly on the wide arms of the chair. "Go on, Nate."

"The ranch and its holdings," Nate began again, "the stock, the equipment, vehicles, the timber rights . . ." He paused, and prepared himself for the unhappy job of destroying hopes. "Mercy Ranch business is to continue as usual, expenses drawn, salaries paid, profits banked or re-invested with you as operator, Will, under the executor's supervision for a period of one year."

"Wait." Willa held up a hand. "He wanted you to supervise the running of the ranch for a year?"

"Under certain conditions," Nate added, and his eyes were already full of apology. "If those conditions are met for the course of a year, beginning no later than fourteen days from the reading of the will, the ranch and all its holdings will become the sole property and sole interest of the beneficiaries."

"What conditions?" Willa demanded. "What beneficiaries? What the hell is going on, Nate?"

"He's left each one of his daughters a one-third interest in the ranch." He watched the color drain from Willa's face and, cursing Jack Mercy, continued with the rest. "In order to inherit, the three of you must live on the ranch, leaving the property for no longer than a one-week period, for one

full year. At the end of that time, if conditions are met, each beneficiary will have a one-third interest. This interest cannot be sold or transferred to anyone other than one of the other beneficiaries for a period of ten years.”

“Hold on a minute.” Tess set her drink aside. “You’re saying I’ve got a third interest in some cattle ranch in Nowhere, Montana, and to collect, I’ve got to move here? Live here? Give up a year of my life? No way in hell.” She rose, gracefully unfolding her long legs. “I don’t want your ranch, kid,” she told Willa. “You’re welcome to every dusty acre and cow. This’ll never stick. Give me my share in cash, and I’m out of your way.”

“Excuse me, Ms. Mercy.” Nate sized her up from his seat behind the desk. Mad as a two-headed hen, he thought, and cool enough to hide it. “It will stick. His terms and wishes were very well thought out, very well presented. If you don’t agree to the terms, the ranch will be donated, in its entirety, to the Nature Conservancy.”

“Donated?” Staggered, Willa pressed her fingers to her temple. There was hurt and rage and a terrible dread curling and spreading inside her gut. Somehow she had to get beyond the feelings and think.

She understood the ten-year stipulation. That was to keep the land from being tax-assessed at the market price instead of the farm rate. Jack had hated the government like poison and wouldn’t have wanted to give up a penny to it. But to threaten to take it all away and give it to the type of organization he liked to call tree huggers or whale kissers didn’t make sense.

“If we don’t do this,” she continued, struggling for calm, “he can just give it away? Just give away what’s been Mercy land for more than a century if these two don’t do what it says on that paper? If I don’t?”

Nate exhaled deeply, hating himself. “I’m sorry, Willa. There was no reasoning with him. This is the way he set it up. Any one of the three of you leaves, it breaks the conditions, and the ranch is forfeited. You’ll each get one hundred dollars. That’s it.”

“A hundred dollars?” The absurdity of it struck Tess

straight in the heart, flopped her back into her chair laughing. “That son of a bitch.”

“Shut up.” Willa’s voice whipped out as she got to her feet. “Just shut the hell up. Can we fight it, Nate? Is there any point in trying to fight it?”

“You want my legal opinion, no. It’d take years and a lot of money, and odds are you’d lose.”

“I’ll stay.” Lily fought to regulate her breathing. Home, safety, security. It was all here, just at her fingertips, like a shiny gift. “I’m sorry.” She got to her feet when Willa rounded on her. “It’s not fair to you. It’s not right. I don’t know why he did this, but I’ll stay. When the year’s over, I’ll sell you my share for whatever you say is fair and right. It’s a beautiful ranch,” she added, trying to smile as Willa only continued to stare at her. “Everyone here knows it’s already yours. It’s only a year, after all.”

“That’s very sweet,” Tess spoke up. “But I’m damned if I’m staying here for a year. I’m going back to LA in the morning.”

With her mind whirling, Willa sent her a considering look. However much she wanted both of them gone, she wanted the ranch more. Much more. “Nate, what happens if one of the three of us dies suddenly?”

“Funny.” Tess picked up her brandy again. “Is that Montana humor?”

“In the event one of the beneficiaries dies within the transitory year, the remaining beneficiaries will be granted half shares of Mercy Ranch, under the same conditions.”

“So what are you going to do, kill me in my sleep? Bury me on the prairie?” Tess flicked her fingers in dismissal. “You can’t threaten me into staying here, living like this.”

Maybe not, Willa thought, but money talked to certain types of people. “I don’t want you here. I don’t want either one of you, but I’ll do what has to be done to keep this ranch. Miss Hollywood might be interested to know just how much her dusty acres are worth, Nate.”

“At an estimate, current market value for the land and buildings alone, not including stock . . . between eighteen and twenty million.”

Brandy slopped toward the rim of the snifter as Tess's hand jerked. "Jesus Christ."

The outburst earned Tess a hiss from Bess and a sneer from Willa. "I thought that would get through," Willa murmured. "When's the last time you earned six million in a year . . . sis?"

"Could I have some water?" Lily managed, and drew Willa's gaze.

"Sit down before you fall down." She gave Lily a careless nudge into a chair as she began to pace. "I'm going to want you to read the document word for word after all, Nate. I want to get this all straight in my head." She went to a lacquered liquor cabinet and did something she'd never done when her father had been alive. She opened his whiskey and drank it.

She drank quietly, letting the slow burn move down her throat as she listened to Nate's recital. And she forced herself not to think of all the years she had struggled so hard to earn her father's love, much less his respect. His trust.

In the end, he had lumped her in with the daughters he'd never known. Because in the end, she thought, none of them had really mattered to him.

A name Nate mumbled had her ears burning. "Hold it. Hold just a damn minute. Did you say Ben McKinnon?"

Nate shifted, cleared his throat. He'd been hoping to slide that one by her, for the time being. She'd had enough shocks for one day. "Your father designated myself and Ben to supervise the running of the ranch during the probationary year."

"That chicken hawk's going to be looking over my shoulder for a goddamn year?"

"Don't you swear in this house, Will," Bess piped up.

"I'll swear the damn house down if I want. Why the hell did he pick McKinnon?"

"Your father considered Three Rocks second only to Mercy. He wanted someone who knows the ins and outs of the business."

McKinnon can be mean as a snake, Nate remembered

Mercy saying. And he won't take any shit off a damn woman.

"Neither of us will be looking over your shoulder," Nate soothed. "We have our own ranches to run. This is just a minor detail."

"Bullshit." But Will reined it in. "Does McKinnon know about this? He wasn't at the funeral."

"He had business in Bozeman. He'll be back tonight or tomorrow. And yes, he knows."

"Had a hell of a laugh over it, didn't he?"

Had nearly choked with laughter, Nate remembered, but now he kept his own eyes sober. "This isn't a joke, Will. It's business, and temporary at that. All you have to do is get through four seasons." His lips curved. "That's what all of us have to do."

"I'll get through it. God knows if these two will." She studied her sisters, shook her head. "What are you trembling about?" she asked Lily. "You're facing millions of dollars, not a firing squad. For Christ's sake, drink this." She thrust the whiskey glass into Lily's hand.

"Stop picking on her." Incensed, instinctively moving to protect Lily, Tess stepped between them.

"I'm not picking on her, and get out of my face."

"I'm going to be in your face for a goddamn year. Get used to it."

"Then you better get used to how things run around here. You stay, you're not going to sit around on your plump little ass, you're going to work."

At the "plump little ass" remark, Tess sucked air through her nose. She'd sweated and starved off every excess pound she'd carried through high school, and she was damn proud of the results. "Remember this, you flat-chested, knock-kneed bitch, I walk, you lose. And if you think I'm going to take orders from some ignorant little pie-faced cowgirl, you're a hell of a lot more stupid than you look."

"You'll do exactly what I say," Willa corrected. "Or instead of having a nice cozy bed in this house you'll be pitching a tent in the hills for the next year."

"I've got as much right to be under this roof as you do.

Maybe more, since he married my mother first.”

“That just makes you older,” Will tossed back, and had the pleasure of seeing that nice shaft strike home. “And your mother was a bottle-blonde showgirl with more tits than brains.”

Whatever Tess would have done or said in retaliation was broken off when Lily burst into tears.

“Happy now?” Tess demanded, and gave Willa a hard shove.

“Stop.” Tired of the sniping, Adam seared them both with a look. “You should both be ashamed of yourselves.” He bent down, murmuring to Lily as he helped her to her feet. “You want fresh air,” he said kindly. “And some food. You’ll feel better then.”

“Take her for a little walk,” Bess told him, and got creakily to her own feet. Her head was hammering like a three-armed carpenter. “I’ll put dinner on. I’m ashamed enough for both of you,” she said to Tess and Willa. “I knew both of your mas. They’d expect better of you.” She sniffed and, with dignity, turned to Nate. “You’re welcome to stay for dinner, Nate. There’s more than plenty.”

“Thanks, Bess, but . . .” He was getting the hell out while he still had all of his skin. “I’ve got to get on home.” He gathered his papers together, keeping a wary eye on the two women who remained in the room, scowling at each other. “I’m leaving three copies of all the documents. Any questions, you know where to reach me. If I don’t hear from you I’ll check back in a couple days, and see . . . And see,” he ended. He picked up his hat and his briefcase and left the field.

In control again, Willa took a cleansing breath. “I’ve put sweat and I’ve put blood into this ranch from the day I was born. You don’t give a damn about that, and I don’t care. But I’m not losing what’s mine. You figure that puts me over a barrel, but I know you’re not walking away from more money than you’ve ever seen before, or hoped to. So that makes us even.”

With a nod, Tess sat on the arm of a chair and crossed her silky legs. “So, we define terms of our own for living

through the next year. You think it's a snap for me to give up my home, my friends, my life-style for a year. It's not."

Tess gave a quick, sentimental thought to her apartment, her club, Rodeo Drive. Then she set her jaw. "But no, I'm not walking away from what's mine, either."

"Yours, my ass."

Tess merely inclined her head. "Whether either one of us likes it, and I doubt either one of us does, I'm as much his daughter as you are. I didn't grow up here because he tossed me and my mother aside. That's fact, and after being here for a day, I'm beginning to be grateful for it. But I'll stick the year out."

Thoughtfully, Willa picked up the whiskey Lily hadn't touched. Ambition and greed were excellent motivators. She'd stick, all right. "And at the end of it?"

"You can buy me out." The image of all that money made her giddy. "Or failing that, you can send the checks for my share of profits to LA. Which is where I'll be one day after the year is up."

Will sampled the whiskey again and reminded herself to concentrate on now. "Can you ride?"

"Ride what?"

With a snort, Will drank. "Figures. Probably don't know a hen from a cock either."

"Oh, I know a cock when I see one," Tess drawled, and was surprised to hear Willa laugh.

"People live here, they work here. That's another fact. I've got enough to do handling the men and cattle without worrying with you, so you'll take your orders from Bess."

"You expect me to take orders from a housekeeper?"

Steel glittered in Willa's eyes. "You'll take orders from the woman who's going to feed you, tend your clothes, and clean the house where you'll be living. And the first time you treat her like a servant will be the last time. I promise you. You're not in LA now, Hollywood. Out here everybody pulls their weight."

"I happen to have a career."

"Yeah, writing movies." There were probably less useful enterprises, but Willa couldn't think of any. "Well, there're

twenty-four hours in a day. You're going to figure that one out fast enough." Tired, Will wandered to the window behind the desk. "What the hell am I going to do with the little lost bird?"

"More like a crushed flower."

Surprised at the compassion in the tone, Willa glanced back, then shrugged. "Did she say anything to you about the bruises?"

"I haven't talked to her any more than you have." Tess struggled to push away the guilt. Noninvolvement, she reminded herself. "This isn't exactly a family reunion."

"She'll tell Adam. Sooner or later everyone tells Adam what hurts. For now at least, we'll leave the wounded Lily to him."

"Fine. I'm going back to LA in the morning. To pack."

"One of the men will drive you to the airport."

Dismissing Tess, Willa turned back to the window. "Do yourself a favor, Hollywood, and buy some long underwear. You'll need it."

WILL RODE OUT AT DUSK. THE SUN WAS BLEEDING AS IT fell behind the western peaks, turning the sky to a rich, ripe red. She needed to think, to calm herself. Beneath her, the Appaloosa mare pranced and pulled on the bit.

"Okay, Moon, let's both run it off." With a jerk of the reins, Will changed directions, then gave the eager mare her head. They streaked away from the lights, the buildings, the sounds of the ranch and into the open land where the river curved.

They followed its banks, riding east into the night where the first stars were already gleaming and the only sounds were the rush of water and the thunder of hooves. Cattle grazed and nighthawks circled. As they topped a rise, Will could see mile after mile of silhouette and shadow, trees spearing up, the waving grass of a meadow, the endless line of fence. And in the distance in the clear night air the faint glint of lights from a neighboring ranch.

McKinnon land.

The mare tossed her head, snorted, when Will reined in. “We didn’t run it out, did we?”

No, the anger was still simmering inside her just as the energy simmered inside her mount. Willa wanted it gone, this tearing, bitter fury and the grief that boiled under it. It wouldn’t help her get through the next year. It wouldn’t help her get through the next hour, she thought, and squeezed her eyes tight.

Tears would not be shed, she promised herself. Not for Jack Mercy, or his youngest daughter.

She breathed deep, drew in the scent of grass and night and horse. It was control she needed now, calculated, unbending control. She would find a way to handle the two sisters who had been pushed on her, to keep them in line and on the ranch. Whatever it took, she would make certain that they saw this through.

She would find a way to deal with the overseers who had been pushed on her. Nate was an irritant but not a particular problem, she decided as she set Moon into an easy walk. He would do no more and no less than what he considered his legal duty. Which meant, in Willa’s opinion, that he would stay out of the day-to-day business of Mercy Ranch and play his part in broad strokes.

She could even find it in her heart to feel sorry for him. She’d known him too long and too well to think even for an instant that he would enjoy the position he’d been put in. Nate was fair, honest, and content to mind his own business.

Ben McKinnon, Will thought, and that bitter anger began to stir again. That was a different matter. She had no doubt that he would enjoy every minute. He’d push his nose in at every opportunity, and she’d have to take it. But, she thought with a grim smile, she wouldn’t have to take it well and she wouldn’t have to make it easy for him.

Oh, she knew what Jack Mercy had been about, and it made her blood boil. She could feel the heat rise to her skin and all but steam off into the cool night air as she looked down at the lights and silhouettes of Three Rocks Ranch.

McKinnon and Mercy land had marched side by side for

generations. Some years after the Sioux had dealt with Custer, two men who'd hunted the mountains and taken their stake to Texas bought cattle on the cheap and drove them back north into Montana as partners. But the partnership had severed, and each had claimed his own land, his own cattle, and built his own ranch.

So there had been Mercy Ranch and Three Rocks Ranch, each expanding, prospering, struggling, surviving.

And Jack Mercy had lusted after McKinnon land. Land that couldn't be bought or stolen or finessed. But it could be merged, Willa thought now. If Mercy and McKinnon lands were joined, the result would be one of the largest, certainly the most important, ranches in the West.

All he had to do was sell his daughter. What else was a female good for? Willa thought now. Trade her, as you would a nice plump heifer. Put her in front of the bull often enough and nature would handle the rest.

So, since he'd had no son, he was doing the next best thing. He was putting his daughter in front of Ben McKinnon. And everyone would know it, Will thought as she forced her hands to relax on the reins. He hadn't been able to work the deal while he lived, so he was working the angles from the grave.

And if the daughter who had stood beside him her entire life, had worked beside him, had sweated and bled into the land wasn't lure enough—well, he had two more.

“Goddamn you, Pa.” With unsteady hands, she settled her hat back onto her head. “The ranch is mine, and it's going to stay mine. Damned if I'll spread my legs for Ben McKinnon or anyone else.”

She caught the flash of headlights, murmured to her mare to settle her. She couldn't make out the vehicle, but noted the direction. A thin smile spread as she watched the lights veer toward the main house at Three Rocks.

“Back from Bozeman, is he?” Instinctively she straightened in the saddle, brought her chin up. The air was clear enough that she heard the muffled slam of the truck's door, the yapping greeting of dogs. She wondered if he would look over and up on the rise. He would see the dark shadow

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of horse and rider. And she thought he would know who was watching from the border of his land.

“We’ll see what happens next, McKinnon,” she murmured. “We’ll see who runs Mercy when it’s done.”

A coyote sang out, howling at the three-quarter moon that rode the sky. And she smiled again. There were all kinds of coyotes, she thought. No matter how pretty they sang, they were still scavengers.

She wasn’t going to let any scavengers on her land.

Turning her mount, she rode home in the half-light.