

Pax

By Kimberly S. Brown

Chapter One

Riding Fence

The broken barbed wire fence curled around the post as if a demon had wrapped a belated Christmas present. Snow drifted around the bottom of the fence line, giving it a soft, pure quality that belied the truth of the harsh cold of winter. Jutting up through the feet-deep layer of the foothill snow were tips of rocks, sagebrush, with occasional patches of ground visible where the wind had wiped the earth clean, checking for any signs of spring. It was the kind of day, the kind of cold, that even stilled the birds. There were few sounds, and none made by living creatures. The Wyoming mountains, even the foothills, of the early 1870s didn't have many visitors in good weather, and in bad, only the extremely courageous or the foolhardy ventured up the slopes.

Into this scene rode a lone man on a well-fed, shaggy, bay horse. His hat was pulled low so that his features were barely visible. The part of his face that could be seen was covered by a ragged dark beard, one worn by a man who doesn't expect polite company to come calling any time soon. The collar of his well-worn sheepskin coat was turned up over a faded red silk scarf to try and keep some of the wind off his neck where his dark brown hair curled far past his collar. Work-scarred gloves held the reins lightly as he slowly moves parallel to the fence.

The rider paused at the break in the barbed wire, then without a sigh or sound, dismounted and began to root in his saddlebag for a pair of pliers and a hammer. As he started his work, snow began to lightly fall. He turned his face to the sky as if to ask a question of God, but returned to his work as he decided he already knew the answer.

I would have been hard to tell his age—somewhere between knowing enough and too much. Because Nature dictated that not many white men lived long in her rugged mountains, it was the rider's acceptance of her whims more than his years that belied the reason for his longevity.

Later that evening, a small campfire glowed against the darkness. Pax Smith sat alone sipping steaming coffee from a dented metal cup that he held in two gloved hands close under his chin, seeking any bit of warmth. A small whiff of steam rose from the cup into his beard and curled across his features. After riding line that day he'd been too far to make it back to the cabin for the night. So, he made camp behind a rock outcropping where he had a bit of shelter from the wind and some dry wood for a fire.

This was a night unlikely to bring trouble, and Pax contented himself with staring into the fire. If the territory had been dangerous or unfamiliar, Pax never would have built a fire, and if he had, he would never have stare into it and ruined his night vision. He'd seen men die from small mistakes such as those, and he had learned those lessons young, and well. Now they merely were a part of his nature.

His mind wandered, touching on one memory, then another. Finally, his wandering mind settled on his recent trip to town for a few supplies for the line shack, and a little relaxation for himself. For while he was a solitary man, he wasn't opposed to a bit of company now and again. Riding line in winter was the loneliest job a cowboy can draw, but the life, and the company, suited Pax most of the time. But even he could hunger for a bit of companionship. And there was a certain "lady" at the saloon in Hurley that he found to his liking when he was interested in such company. A small smile caused lines to form under the beard and dent it.

The smile didn't last long. He remembered standing on the porch outside the saloon with Molly feeling contented after a few drinks, a good dinner he hadn't had to cook, and some friendly entertainment. A nice cigar topped off his extravagant evening as he stood in the early evening light in weather more mild than he had endured in many months in the mountains.

Pax turned his collar up a little closer to his ears as he sat by the small fire and thought of the cold stare he'd gotten from Sarah Lewis, his boss Myron's daughter, as she rode out of town with her younger brother in the buckboard. Pax had started to smile and tip his hat at Sarah when Molly had leaned her body fully against his and put her hand possessively on his arm.

There was nothing between Pax and Sarah; in fact, he thought of her more as a kid than as a grown woman, if he thought of her at all. But the icy look that she'd thrown in his direction as she passed was adult enough to make Pax feel like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. And to make him resent the games that females played with each other.

Sarah rode out of town, never looking back, and Pax freed himself from Molly, angered that his pleasurable evening had been spoiled, although he wasn't quite sure just why that small exchange had put him in a foul mood.

Pax threw another stick on the fire forcefully as he thought back to the moment. Maybe he was mad because he thought she'd tell her father that he was in town living it up while he was supposed to be out checking fence before the spring drive to mountain pastures. He dismissed that thought as quickly as it had come. Pax knew Myron, and Myron knew Pax. At least as well as two men of the day could know one another. It was the everyday work, and everyday life, that meant the most, not what your name was, or where you came from, or even what you had been before.

Too much thinking time. That's what Pax decided as he came back to the present. Tiring of his thoughts, Pax quickly made a crude lean-to beside the scrub pines, rolled up in his blankets on the soft, fragrant needles, and curled up to catch what sleep he could on the cold ground.

Pax already was in the saddle as the dawn broke gray and cold. He always felt small when he rode alone in the mountains. It reminded him of his very young days when his mother had been alive and read to him from the Bible. Not the hellfire and damnation that he occasionally heard coming through the windows of one of the churches on Sunday mornings, but of a great being who had created all of this before putting man on the Earth to care for it. It was something to give a thinking man a bit to chew on while he was riding alone.

Making his way slowly downhill alongside the barbed wire fence, Pax was deep in thought when his sharp ear caught a sound unnatural to the winter mountains. He reined in sharply, listening intently. The horse's ears pricked down the hill, and Pax urged him forward at a walk. Anything faster would be foolish, no matter the cause of the sound, and Pax was not a foolish man.

Soon the noise became louder and more insistent. It now was easily identifiable as a calf, and a rather unhappy one at that. Pax reined up next to a red white-faced calf tangled in the barbed wire. His longhorn mother, who had managed to avoid the fall roundup, was not pleased with her offspring, and was even less happy with the man who appeared on the scene. She lowed at her calf, urging it to come along, and when that didn't work, she shook her long horns at the horse and rider, neither of whom gave her a second glance.

Pax dismounted and untangled the calf, checking it with gentle hands and taking the silk scarf from around his neck to bind the calf's leg where he was cut by the wire.

Snow began to fall again as he remounted with the calf over the neck of his horse in front of the saddle. He deftly shook out a loop and with one swing dropped it over the horns of the surprised cow. Taking a couple of hitches around the saddle horn, Pax rode off, half-dragging the struggling longhorn. Pax paid little attention to her struggles, and she soon gave up, either tiring from the struggle or recognizing the futility of her fight.

The cow path beside the fence soon gave way to an actual trail, then the trail eventually met with a muddy road. There was less and less snow as Pax descended the mountain, and the snow that was falling in the higher elevations was simply a misty rain in the valley.

The rider gave little direction to the horse, who happily recognized the road that led to Lewis Ranch. Pax rode through the main gate marked by full-sized tree trunks set up and holding a sign between them proclaiming territory, and made his way toward the barn as a man familiar with his surroundings.

Pax was unaware that his entrance to the ranch had caused a stir in the main house. Sarah was watching him through the lacy curtains as he rode by in his four-creature parade. She was tall for a woman, with long brown hair that seemed to curl and fly with a life of its own. She was slender with youth, but with a woman's figure, and mind. Sarah's mother, Mabel, came up behind her daughter and pulled back the curtain on one side to see what had taken the girl's interest. Seeing Pax, she gave a knowing motherly sigh and laid her hand lightly on Sarah's hair before turning back into the house.

"Pax is in," she said as her husband lumbered into the front room.

Myron Lewis, a bull of a man with long graying sideburns, came to look out the window himself, then without a word turned to pull on his heavy coat and hat and walked out the front door to see what his foreman had, literally, drug in.

By the time Myron reached the barn, a couple of cowboys were fighting to drag the longhorn cow into the barn as Pax dismounted with the calf in his arms. Chuckling slightly at the show the cowboys were putting on in trying to accomplish their task without getting stuck by a flying horn or hoof, Myron finally turned his attention to Pax.

“Well I’ll be, it’s one of the new Hereford bull’s calves,” said Myron as he unwrapped the calf’s leg and inspected the wound.

“Yep,” replied Pax, nodding at the wound. “That’s why I brought him in.”

Tom, one of the cowboys who had helped drag the cow into the barn, walked up to see what his boss and foreman were studying over.

“That longhorn cow’s not too happy,” he said over the bellowing in the background.

“What happened?” Myron asked as Pax handed the calf off to Tom for doctoring.

“Got caught up in the wire. Found it a few miles out while coming in for supplies,” replied Pax.

Handy, the other cowboy who helped with the longhorn, strolled up about that time. The cow had, if possible, increased her bellowing, and Myron glanced toward the barn.

“Tom, you and Handy finish fixing this little feller up,” ordered Myron. “And throw that damn cow some hay. Maybe that’ll shut her up!”

“Yessir, Mr. Lewis,” said Tom as he and Handy moved toward the side of the barn.

Myron took one last look toward the calf, then jerked his head in the direction of the main house as an indication for Pax to follow.

“Come on up to the house,” he said.

“Naw, I’d better see old Cookie and head back. It’s still winter up top.”

Myron looks at the gray sky that finally had stopped it’s misty try at rain for the day.

“Well, it’s spring here. Or close enough. Be time to come down soon, anyway,” said Myron.

“Thought I might stay on the line a while longer. Saw bear tracks, and he got a couple of the cows that we didn’t catch in the fall roundup. Thought I might just go after him,” said Pax.

“Sure. Take some of the boys along if you want,” Myron replied.

Pax smiled slightly at the ground.

“No, thanks. Reckon I can handle one bear by myself. Could use a few shells, though. Used up a few more than I’d planned,” Pax said.

Myron looks at Pax with interest and concern.

“Wolves, coyotes?” he asked.

“Poor shootin’,” Pax replied.

Myron snorted his disbelief.

“Yeah, and I’m a grandmother. Anyway, come on up to the house and see me before you leave. I’ve got a new rifle for you.”

As Pax starts to protest, Myron cut him off with a quick wave of his hand.

“I know you don’t need a new one, but all the boys got one for Christmas, which you missed. Besides, you might need an extra if something happens at the line cabin.”

Pax quickly glanced at his boss.

“You expecting trouble,” he queried quietly.

Myron answered evasively as he began to walk back to the house alone.

“Always expect trouble, then you’re never surprised.”

Pax stared at Myron’s departing back for a moment, then turned to lead his horse into the barn beside the one where the cow had finally quieted down, whether from the hay or the reuniting with her calf. Pax stowed his tack, rubbed his horse down with some straw, and gave him some hay and a measure of grain before shutting the stall and heading for the bunkhouse.

Pax paused inside the front door to unbutton his heavy coat and take off his gloves to hang them in front of the fire to dry. He paused for a moment to warm his hands. The firelight silhouetted him to reveal more of his nature, and his build. The light showed him to stand a couple of inches over six feet, but his build was deceptive. His powerful broad shoulders tapered to a narrow waist and hips of a rider. There the knowledgeable eye stopped. At his hips, even though he just came down from riding line, he wore a pistol on his right side. It was strapped low on his hip, and tied down in such a manner that while natural to Pax, was a warning to others who might be hunting trouble. His long fingers as he stretched them in front of the fire looked capable of dealing cards in a saloon, or pulling a quick trigger in a street fight.

A couple of cowboys came in from chores and began to set up the checkers, greeting Pax and passing a few tales of what had gone on in camp during his absence as Pax warmed himself.