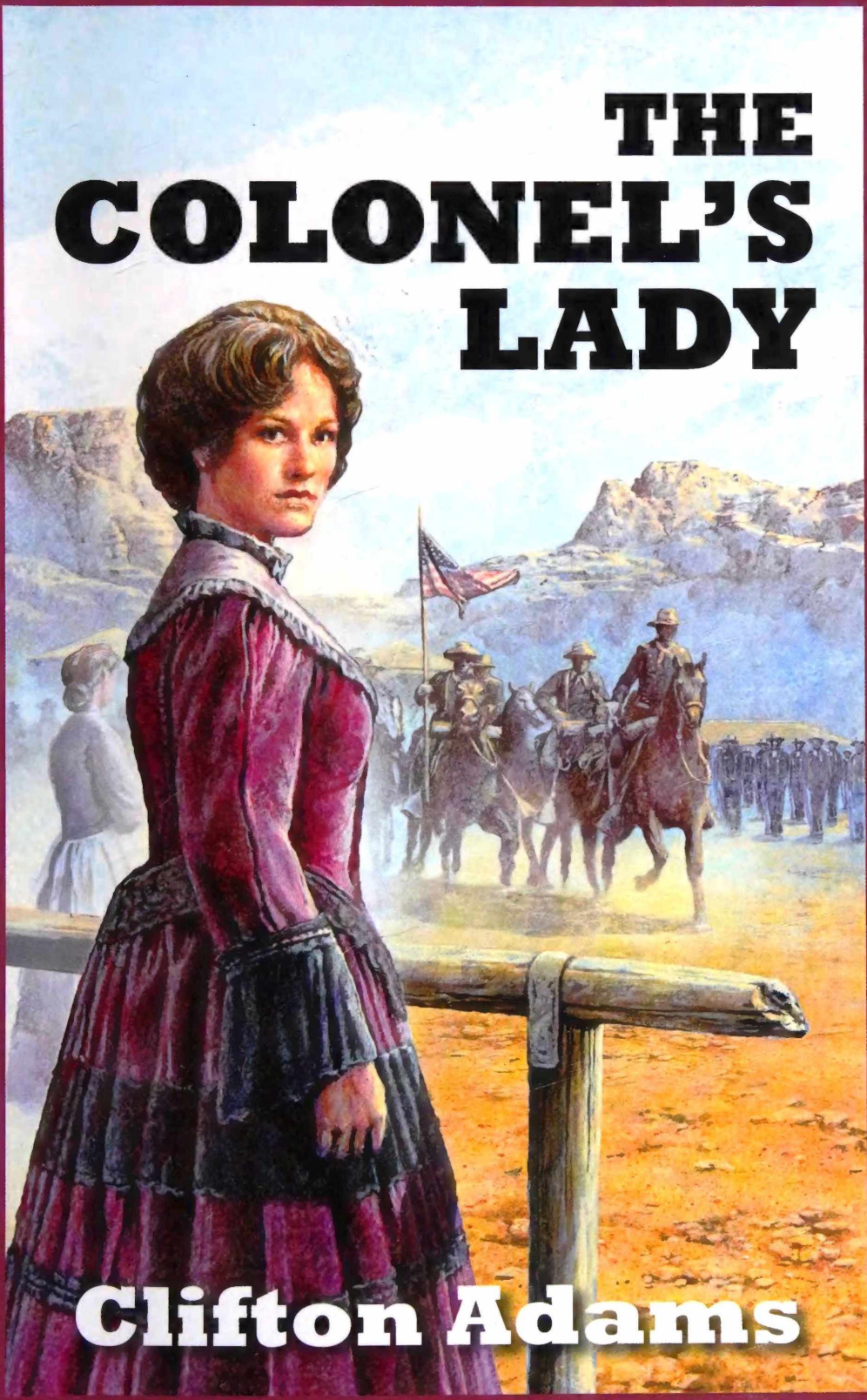
THE COLONEL'S LADY



Clifton Adams

THE COLONEL'S

Since the Civil War ended, [illegible] federate soldier Matt Reardon has bee[illegible]d the memo[illegible] Caroline. His feelings for her are a mixture of love and hate, the result of her betrayal during the war — not only of him, but of his regiment too . . . When he finds out that she's now married to Colonel Weyland — the officer in command at Fort Larrymoor, a frontier outpost in Arizona Territory — Reardon enlists in the Yankee Army so he can be stationed at the same place, and finally have a chance to resolve things with her. But a charismatic Apache war chief is putting together an army of his own, and has a cunning plan to wipe out the cavalry . . .

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CHAPTER ONE

We left Tucson one blazing afternoon in June, two cavalry escort wagons, a dozen mounted troopers, and a handful of recruits, heading for that forlorn-sounding place across the Salt River, near the foothills of the White Mountains. A place called Fort Larrymoor.

There were six of us in one wagon, not counting the sergeant up front in the driver's seat. We were the recruits, and already most of us were beginning to wish we were somewhere else. A man called Morgan was sitting beside me in the wagon, his back against the tail gate, watching the desert crawl by with solemn, steely eyes. He had caught the wagon on the outskirts of Tucson, a lean, bearded man in his early forties. A voiceless man, it seemed, for he hadn't spoken a word to anyone. Probably, we figured, he was running from the law — maybe from the cavalry itself — but a man's past didn't make much difference at a place like Fort Larrymoor.

Also with us in the wagon was a man named Steuber, a giant of a Dutchman, who kept blinking his small sun-reddened eyes at the unbelievable expanse of Arizona wasteland. He seemed likable enough and was in a good humor. We learned, a little at a time, that he

was a professional soldier and had served during the war with a regiment of New York Fire Zouaves.

The others were something else again. There was a fuzzy-faced youth who looked scared, and was probably thinking about deserting even before he was sworn in. His name was Dodson, he said, and his family had been killed up north on the Gila in a Chiricahua raid. He couldn't very well manage a homestead by himself, and besides, he was scared to go back there. So he had listened to the recruiting sergeant and had decided that the Army was the best place he could be. Now he wasn't so sure.

There was also a small, tight-wound man named McCully, who looked as if he might have been a gambler before he had decided on a military life. A fat man named Mayhew, sweating and whisky-bloated, rounded out the cavalry's catch.

We stopped that night near the black, stark peaks of the Santa Catalinas, and Sergeant Skiborsky, who was in charge of the wagon, threw our rations of bacon and hard bread at us. Morgan, the lank man with the cold eyes, smiled the smallest smile in the world. "So this is the cavalry."

The youth, Dodson, looked at him. "Not yet. We haven't even been sworn in. I guess we won't know what it's really like until then."

"I know enough," Morgan murmured, "to know I'm not going to be crazy about it." The big Steuber, soldier-like, was gathering up sticks of greasewood to build a squad fire with.

The recruits stood guard along with the troopers that night. "It's likely you'll see no Injuns," Sergeant Skiborsky growled, "but you might as well learn what a cavalry carbine feels like." He hurled a short rifle at Steuber without warning. Professionally, the big Dutchman grabbed it out of the air without blinking. Skiborsky threw a carbine at me and I managed to hang onto it. He never handed anything to anyone, it seemed. Morgan caught his and for a moment looked as if he might throw it back. Dodson, McCully, and Mayhew were not so lucky. Their carbines fell clattering into the gravel and dust of the desert and Skiborsky grinned evilly, marking them mentally for special attention when he got them to Larrymoor.

"You," Skiborsky said to me. "You ever been in the Army before?"

"No."

He grinned that grin again. He put his hands on his hips, leaned his head far over on one shoulder, studying me. "You're a goddamn liar," he said. "I'll knock it out of you, though, when you get in uniform."

I could have hit him, but that was what he was hoping I would do. I was as big as Skiborsky, and maybe I looked almost as tough. He felt obligated to prove his own hardness to the others before the wrong idea had a chance to grow. I had been in the Army long enough to understand that.

"I'll be looking forward to it," I said. "When you're not wearing your stripes."

"I can take them off right now, bucko." He grinned. He could have forced a fight then, but maybe he

thought better of it and decided to wait and do it before the entire company. Still grinning, he cocked his dirty forage cap over one eye and marched off toward a fire that the troopers had started.

"You take that talk from everybody, mister," Morgan asked softly, "or just from dog soldiers?"

I must have been wound up. I wheeled on him and hit him before he could get his hands up. Morgan took a quick step backward to keep his balance. He touched the corner of his mouth where blood was beginning to well up from a split lip, and for an instant I could see kill in those eyes of his. Then, surprisingly, he grinned.

"Forget it, Reardon. I was just wondering."

It was over before it got started. Still, I didn't have the feeling that Morgan was backing down, or that he would ever back down. In that instant of cold anger I had seen his hand go instinctively to his hip, and I had the uneasy feeling that he would have killed me in a moment, as unfeelingly as if he were brushing away an annoying fly, if he had been wearing a gun. But that moment of blind anger was over, and now he was grinning faintly, with no hate at all that I could see.

"Forget it," he said again.

"I'm sorry, Morgan. I guess I was wound up."

I had plenty of time to think about things in the days that followed. Too much time, maybe. I forgot about Morgan, and Caroline's face began coming up from the bottom of my mind to remind me how big a fool a man could be. From the cellar of my memory I could hear Caroline's laughter. It was that laughter, I guess, that I

was following. Following it right to the gates of Fort Larrymoor.

The war was over, I kept reminding myself. Had been over for five years and more. Lee had surrendered at Appomattox and the Army of Northern Virginia was no more. Johnson and Hood and even the proud Beauregard had accepted defeat. The Confederacy was no more than a memory, I told myself, and its heroes were all but forgotten, and its traitors were completely forgotten, it seemed. But not by me.

It was more than the war, of course, that kept Caroline in my mind. Long before the war, long before I had even heard of places like Pea Ridge and Chickamauga and Gettysburg; long before then there had been Caroline.

Idly, I watched the cool-eyed Morgan as he rocked uncomfortably in the jolting bed of the escort wagon. What was Morgan running from? I wondered. Steuber, the Dutchman, was easier to figure, but what about the others? Dodson, McCully, Mayhew, and even Sergeant Skiborsky — what had pushed them over the frontier and away from civilization until even a God-forgotten outpost like Fort Larrymoor could seem like a sanctuary to them? Had one of those men ever known and loved a girl like Caroline?

It had been only four days ago that I had seen her. More than five years had passed and I kept telling myself that I had forgotten her, but I hadn't forgotten. Not the sound of her voice, or the brightness of her mouth, or anything else about her. I knew that now, and I knew it then, when I saw her.

It happened in front of the Tucson stage office, and there was quite a to-do about it because the cavalry had come all the way from Fort Larrymoor to escort the stage through the Indian country. There had been a crowd of men gathered around, craning their necks to get a look at the senator, or maybe the governor of the territory, or whoever it was who was so important that he got a military escort for that distance. It wasn't a senator or a governor, it turned out, though.

"Who is it?" I asked somebody, before I was close enough to see.

"Missus Weyland," an old sourdough said, elbowing in for a closer look.

"Who?"

"Gener'l Weyland's wife. Godamighty!" he said, looking at me pityingly. "The jasper that ramrods things up at Larrymoor, I hear."

I saw her then, sitting there inside the coach, smiling coolly at the commotion she was causing, waiting for the cavalry lieutenant to clear away the crowd and get the stage rolling. It was Caroline, all right. As stiff and proud as a queen, and as beautiful as queens are supposed to be but never are. She didn't see me. I don't think she would have blinked an eye if she had. I stood there looking at her, hating her so much that it made me sick, like a kick in the groin. And loving her too, I suppose. A minute went by, or an hour, and after a while the troopers got the crowd cleared away and the stage rolled off toward Larrymoor. I stood there for a long while after everyone else had gone. Still seeing her.

It was the next day that Skiborsky came through with supplies, scouting for recruits. And now I was headed for Larrymoor, and I couldn't give the reason why because it was one of those things that men do sometimes without any reason at all that they can put into words. I just had to see her again and let her know that there was someone still alive that remembered. I wanted to see that beautiful face of hers. I wanted to see fear in her eyes when she realized that a person's past is never really left behind or forgotten, or that old debts are never shelved for good until they are paid. What I really wanted, I guess, was to see that she paid. Or that was what I told myself I wanted.

And all the time, as I thought of her, we jolted on toward Larrymoor, through the blazing early-summer heat, past ragged hills and mountains and across the gravelly desert. In the wagon bed we sat or scrunched down, trying to hide from the heat, and the monotonous, seemingly endless land crawled by. We crossed the Gila and headed west, skirting the mountains, and finally we crossed the Salt River with its bitter clear water and headed north again. Sergeant Skiborsky grinned and said we were in Coyotero Apache country, but not to worry, you couldn't be killed but once.

We saw no sign of Indians. We did begin to see towering mescal plants now and then, adding a touch of color and brilliance to this dead land, and only seeming to make it look deader than ever. There were also the occasional slender shoots of ocotillos and, in

the valleys, deep gamma grass. The needle-thorned chollas were everywhere.

"The Sergeant was right, though," a soft voice said, jarring me out of my thoughts. "You were in the Army, sometime or other, weren't you?"

The voice belonged to Morgan, who, as one day dragged into another, had become almost friendly. We had taken to sitting together, our backs against the tail gate of the wagon, keeping a small distance from the others. At first I didn't know what he meant. Then I remembered my difference with Sergeant Skiborsky.

My first impulse was to tell Morgan to go to hell, but there didn't seem to be much sense in that. It was an innocent question, one that had probably drifted into his mind from nowhere, and he had unconsciously put it into words. He grinned that very faint grin of his.

"Not that it's any of my business."

What difference did it make? It was no secret, and I wasn't ashamed of it.

"Yes," I said. "I was in the Army once."

"Confederate?"

"That's right."

He laughed quietly, but it didn't sound much like a laugh. "That's what I thought. So was I, but I'm not goin' to spread it around. They say the bluebelly cavalry can be a hard place for a man with a secesh record."

I looked at Morgan closely and decided that he was telling the truth. He had the hungry, sunken look that I still remembered seeing on the faces of men during the last days at Petersburg. His eyes were faded and worn out but somehow full of anger, like the eyes of

Confederate prisoners coming back from Fort Delaware. Or Yankee prisoners straggling north from Andersonville, for that matter. They all looked pretty much the same toward the end.

"Twenty-first Texas," he said.

I said, "Thirty-sixth Alabama Horse."

We didn't shake hands. There were a lot of ex-Confederates in blue uniforms now; it was nothing to base a friendship on.

The long jolting trip was beginning to get on the men's nerves, but later that morning word was passed along that we would be raising Fort Larrymoor before night-fall. We raised something else before then, though. Toward noon one of the point troopers came riding back at the gallop and held a quick conversation with the lieutenant in charge. The column halted, closed up, and the troopers formed tight skirmish lines on both sides before we started to roll again.

The fuzz-faced Dodson was worried. "What is it?" he wanted to know, without directing the question at anyone in particular.

Sergeant Skiborsky turned in the driver's seat, grinning fiercely. "Break out your carbine, bucko. Maybe you'll be findin' out before long."

"But what's the matter?" the kid demanded nervously.

"Apache's what's the matter!" Skiborsky roared suddenly. "I said break out them carbines!"

We broke out the carbines. We were also issued twenty rounds of ammunition per man before we

started to roll again, but neither Skiborsky nor the troopers would give us any more information.

But we found out soon enough what the trouble was. The trooper riding point waved us on from some high ground, and we went up the grade and began rattling down into a rocky valley. We saw the smoke then, and pretty soon we saw the wagon, or what was left of the wagon.

Most of it was ashes by the time we got there, and odds and ends of household furniture were scattered around, smoking and hot. And covering the valley was a stench that a man will never forget once he has smelled it, the stench that comes from the sizzling frying of human flesh. Dodson looked as if he were going to be sick. Mayhew quickly produced a bottle of whisky from God knows where and drank deeply.

Morgan was standing in the bed of the wagon when the column halted, his jaw set but no emotion showing in those eyes of his. Skiborsky dropped down from the wagon seat and came around to the back.

"On the ground, the lot of you."

Dodson shook his head, swallowing fast. "Not me —" he started, but before he could finish the Sergeant had grabbed him by the leg and jerked him out of the wagon. With his left hand he caught the front of the boy's shirt, and with his right hand he cuffed Dodson's face, once, twice, three times, every blow as sharp as a rifle crack.

"In the cavalry," Sergeant Skiborsky snarled, "orders are to be followed."

The rest of us began dropping over the side of the wagon.

"Reardon," Skiborsky jabbed a finger at me, "you and Steuber get spades out of the other wagon and start diggin' graves, three of them. Morgan, you and McCully give 'em a hand." He paused for a moment, looking at Dodson and Mayhew, grinning a grin that was no grin at all, but a fierce expression of hate and powerful disgust. "Dodson," he barked, "you and Mayhew get the bodies and wrap them in blankets and lay them out for burial. And," he added brutally, "the first one that pukes gets his face smashed with the butt of a carbine. Is that clear?"

Dodson was almost ready to cry. At that moment, I guess, he was wishing that he had stayed on the homestead, Indians or no Indians. Mayhew was concentrating on keeping the whisky down, his eyes almost closed, breathing hard through his mouth.

We went to work, with Skiborsky supervising. The lieutenant and the troopers had ridden up to high ground to make sure that Apache wasn't sitting in ambush.

"Goddamn," Steuber grunted, trying to sink a spade into the sun-baked ground. We cleared off the rocks from a space big enough for three narrow graves and began digging. We worked until our shirts were soaked and our backs stinging with sweat, and then we turned the spades over to Morgan and McCully.

"You two," Skiborsky bellowed, "come over here."

We went over to the wagon. It was the first time I had ever seen the results of an Apache massacre. I had

heard about them. I had seen artists' drawings of them in Harper's Weekly. But I wasn't prepared for the real thing. I guess nobody ever is, the first time.

"Take a good look," the Sergeant said grimly. "Maybe it'll give you an idea the way Apache makes war. They never heard of gentlemen's war out here, but people never realize that until they run into it."

There were a man and a woman and a small boy, you could tell what they were by the rags of clothing they still had on, but that was the only way. Their faces were drawn and puckered, the way, I learned, that all faces look after a scalping. The skin had slipped down from the naked, red-glistening skulls, folding shapelessly over the eyes. Their lax mouths hung open, gaping, as though silent scream on scream were still coming from them.

"Apaches don't usually scalp," Skiborsky said heavily, "unless they're crazy mad or drunk on tiswin. Then there's no mutilation bloody enough to satisfy them. These people were lucky," he said, as the green-faced Dodson and Mayhew began to wrap the bodies in blankets. "They were killed clean and then scalped; the Coyotero ain't that considerate very often, when he's mad. They *could* have been spread-eagled over an anthill with their mouths pried open and their tongues cut out." The Sergeant wiped his face on his filthy yellow cavalry neckerchief.

Completely expressionless, the big Steuber began turning the dead man over with the toe of his boot.

"What the hell are you doin'?" Skiborsky demanded.

The Dutchman shrugged. "Maybe he's got money on him. Money won't do him no good now."

"Goddamn you," the Sergeant grated, "get back to diggin'. If you stop before the graves are finished I'll tear your black heart open with a carbine bullet."

Steuber looked hurt. He couldn't see anything wrong in it. After all, a man's belongings can't do him any good if he's dead.

"Move!" Skiborsky yelled.

The Dutchman moved, slowly, reluctantly, still eying the dead man's pockets, wondering if there was anything in them he could use. Skiborsky was silent for a moment, watching Mayhew and Dodson take the sagging blankets away. I thought I could see a subtle change take place in the Sergeant as he watched the operation. A part of his hard, cavalry-conditioned crust seemed to fall away, and what I saw underneath was a man who had already seen too much of what we were now seeing for the first time. Skiborsky was a man who for years had rubbed shoulders with death and had laughed at it. He looked like a man who had forgotten how to laugh.

I said, "You didn't know them, did you? The dead man and his wife and his kid?"

He looked at me without actually seeing me. "I know them. Not their names, but I've seen a thousand just like them, and I know them, all right. They're goddamn fools. They keep movin' west, right into the Indian country, and we can't hold them back. The Army threatens them and Apache kills them and still they keep comin'. Godamighty, what do they expect to find

out here in this God-forgotten desert? Why don't they stay home?"

"Maybe they haven't got a home," I said. "Maybe that's the reason they keep coming."

Skiborsky snorted, but with no great conviction. It was a thing that he had given a lot of thought to, and it didn't add up to anything that made sense. They kept coming, the settlers, the homesteaders, looking for something, and Sergeant Skiborsky couldn't understand what. Maybe he had been in the Army for so long that he couldn't understand anything if it wasn't in the book of Army regulations.

"Get back to the grave detail," he said abruptly, as though he were tired struggling with the idea. "We'll be movin' out of here before long."

We did a good job on the graves, considering the tools we had to work with and the ground we had to dig in. We lowered the three bodies in, wrapped in the three Army blankets that the Fort Larrymoor supply officer would complain about later, and covered them up. We didn't know their names, so there was no use worrying about headboards. After it was all over and done Dodson walked off a piece and vomited behind a boulder. He didn't get hit in the face with a carbine stock, though, the way Skiborsky had threatened.

The whole thing had taken no more than half an hour, but the lieutenant was back telling us to hurry up before we were half through. The Apache war party that had killed the settlers, he said, must have been a small one — no more than four or five, according to the fresh trace left by their ponies. But he was afraid they had

seen us and had gone for help. I didn't like to think of what would happen if they came back and ambushed us in one of those valleys with thirty or forty braves. The lieutenant didn't like to think about it either. We finished the job and the column began to roll again.

"You and Skiborsky seemed to be hittin' it off out there," Morgan said, as we tried to get comfortable again in the wagon bed.

"He's all right. He's probably a good soldier."

Morgan spat over his shoulder. "Maybe. I've got a feelin', though, that he'll get a chance to prove it to me before long. He can't prove it by knockin' around a kid of a boy."

I looked at him. "I didn't know Dodson was a friend of yours."

"He's not." Morgan's eyes looked restless. The color in them seemed to deepen and glow with a dull, undirected hate. "It's just," he said softly, "seein' a bluebelly sergeant knock a boy around. I never liked to see a bluebelly knock anybody around."

I almost grinned at that. I said, "You're forgetting something. You're going to be a bluebelly yourself, as soon as they get us to Larrymoor and swear us in."

He didn't have anything to say to that.

"I can't get over it," Mayhew said thickly, and I hadn't realized until then that he was drunk. "Just think — some damn Apache goin' around with that woman's hair in his belt. And that man . . . Lord!"

"Shut up!" Dodson said abruptly, almost sobbing.

Mayhew's eyes looked stunned. "Now what's got into the boy? All I said was . . ."

"Dodson's right," the small McCully put in sharply. "Shut up. We don't want to talk about it. And besides, goddamn you, you're drunk."

Mayhew grinned slyly. "Drunk? Why, sir . . ." But his eyes lost their focus and his brain lost the thread of the thought and his chin sank to his chest. He slept, falling against the stern-faced McCully, saliva bubbling thickly at the corners of his mouth.

"Goddamn," Steuber, the Dutchman, muttered to himself. "What good are things to a dead man? Hell, I wouldn't of minded, if it had of been me." He looked as if he had been done a great injustice.

The wagon jolted, grated, ground its way over the rocks of the desert. Our rumps were as sore as boils and even the saddle-hard Morgan kept scrounging around from side to side, trying to find a comfortable way to sit. Only the big Steuber didn't seem to mind. The Dutchman sat slab-faced, as solid as a rock, muttering to himself, sleeping when he felt like it, or gazing out at the monotonous land as if he still didn't believe that there really could be such a place. After a while I began to think again of Caroline.

I wondered how a man could hate a woman and still love her. I could wonder about it, but I knew better than to expect an answer.

Weyland . . . the name went around in my mind. That was her name now. Mrs. Major General Jameson Joseph Weyland, or was it simply Mrs. Jameson J. Weyland? What difference did it make? She wasn't Mrs. Matthew Reardon.

Weyland wasn't actually a general, of course. That was only his brevet rank, a rank he had held during the war, and now he was just another colonel with another God-forgotten, civilization-forgotten outpost to command. I had learned that much from listening to the troopers talk. Only a colonel, probably eating his heart out because he couldn't forget that he had once been a major general, but he had Caroline, goddamn him. I didn't know how he got her, but he had her, and I should have been thankful that I was through with her. But all I could do was to sit there and think darkly: Goddamn him.

A big hard hand was on my shoulder, shaking me. "For God's sake, Reardon, wake up."

I had fallen asleep somehow, and the cool-eyed Morgan was shaking me. I braced myself against the side of the wagon and sat up.

"You've sure got a gutful of hate for somebody," Morgan said, grinning thinly.

I looked at him, still groggy. "What are you talking about?"

"You was givin' somebody hell. Whoever it was, you was layin' it on with a whip."

Morgan actually laughed. I glanced around and all the other men were looking at me, soberly, calculatingly. All but Steuber.

"There it is," the big Dutchman said, leaning out of the wagon and pointing straight ahead. We all looked in the direction he was pointing and about a mile up ahead we could see it too. Fort Larrymoor.

CHAPTER TWO

In the books at Washington they had Larrymoor down as being manned by a regiment of cavalry, whose job it was, with the help of other forts strung raggedly along the frontier, to keep the Indians fed, satisfied, and on their reservations. Maybe on paper it was a sensible plan. Here on the desert and in the hills it was something else again.

What they had at Larrymoor was called a regiment — because they had to give a colonel some kind of job to do, probably — but what it looked like was maybe two understrength battalions. How Weyland's superiors in Washington explained that other battalion of men that he didn't have, I didn't know. How Weyland himself explained his lack of troopers to the Apaches I didn't know either.

The fort was built of yellow adobe bricks mostly, because there was little timber to cut for logs in that country. We got a good look at it as the column clattered out of a rocky draw and clawed its way up a steep hillside toward the main gate.

Everything at Larrymoor was inside the four adobe and pulpwood walls. All the buildings were jammed together, as they always are in a fighting fort, the

magazine next to the stables, the stables next to the one-story barracks, the barracks jammed uncomfortably close to a row of squat little adobe huts that would be Officers' Row. The headquarters buildings were against the back wall and away from the front gate and the stables, and in the middle was a big parade of packed clay. The whole thing was set on high ground, somehow proud in spite of its drabness, with sun-baked wasteland all around it. The only things we could see outside those walls were the sutler's store and the post cemetery. It was a large cemetery for a post that size.

The guards had the gates open for us and the column rattled inside and dragged wearily to a halt.

"By God," the gambler, McCully, said, "this is a thousand miles from nowhere."

Skiborsky turned in the driver's seat. "You won't get lonesome, bucko. There's plenty Coyoteros less than an hour's ride into the hills." He grinned. "Maybe some Chiricahuas and Pinaleños too, if Kohi really means business. And I reckon he does."

I knew that not even Cochise, chief of the Chiricahuas, had been able to bring the Apache tribes together and hold them together. I doubted that Kohi, the White Mountain war chief, could do it for the Coyoteros.

I found myself staring, searching for something; and then I realized that I was looking for her. I wanted furiously just to look at her. But she wasn't there. She would be in one of those huts on Officers' Row, being Colonel Jameson Joseph Weyland's wife, and I would bet a month's pay that she wouldn't be liking it.

Somehow the idea that she was miserable made me feel better.

We got out of the wagon, stiff-legged and awkward, while Skiborsky lined us up and looked at us contemptuously. He took off his shabby forage cap, blew some dust off it, and set it squarely on his head. He beat some dust from his sweat-streaked blouse and some more from his trousers, then he jerked erect as stiff as a board and became an entirely different man, a soldier.

He about-faced as though he had been jerked half around by a pair of huge hands. "Forward! Ho-o-o!" Skiborsky marched at rigid attention all the way across the parade, to headquarters, the rest of us straggling along behind. Morgan was smiling faintly in amusement. "A goddamn tin soljer!" I heard him mutter under his breath.

Skiborsky's head snapped around to eyes-right. "Lock that jaw, trooper."

"I'm no goddamn trooper," Morgan said. "Not yet."

Skiborsky's mouth was a thin grim line, but I could see that fierce grin of his looking out from behind his eyes. "You will be," he snapped. "You will be!" And I thought I heard him add, "Even if I have to kill you."

We marched straight up to the headquarters porch, where a captain was waiting. He smiled faintly as Skiborsky went through the motions of bringing us to attention again, saluting, turning the recruits over to the officer.

"I suppose all of you want to enlist," the captain said mildly, after Skiborsky had marched off toward the barracks. "We might as well get started."

We went inside, where four enlisted troopers sat at desks, looking at us vaguely, without curiosity, without interest of any kind. They all began to reach for official-looking enlistment forms.

"Answer all questions," the captain said. "After that's done there will be a medical examination and then I'll swear you in." The captain got behind a desk and found a form and motioned to me. "I'll take you over here. We have to get this done before retreat or you won't be able to draw arms and supplies. Name?"

"Matthew Reardon."

He wrote it down. "Age?"

"Thirty-two."

He looked up to get the color of my hair and eyes and approximate height and wrote down what he saw. "Previous military experience?"

Without thinking, I said, "Four years."

"Rank last held?"

I paused for a moment, and then decided that it didn't make any difference one way or another.

"Captain."

His eyebrows came up at that, but he wrote it down. "Organization?"

"Thirty-sixth Alabama Horse."

He put his pencil down and sat back and studied me. He said quietly, "We already have several men out of the Confederate Army. They're good fighters mostly, the same as the rest of our soldiers. Some of them, though, can't seem to remember which war they're fighting, or who is the enemy." Then his eyes moved up and looked at mine. "When a man comes to

Larrymoor, it's usually because he is afraid to go anywhere else. What are you afraid of, Reardon?"

We locked gazes for a moment. I had a feeling that he wasn't so interested in what I said, he just wanted to watch my eyes while I said it.

"The usual things that men are afraid of," I said finally. "Death and insecurity and, of course, the fear of being afraid."

He smiled. "I was afraid you were going to say 'nothing.' If you had, I would have sent you back to Tucson with the next supply train." He fumbled in his breast pocket and came out with a ragged, dry cigar, and rolled it around between his fingers. All cigars, I thought, would be ragged and dry in this country. "Why do you want to enlist at Larrymoor?" he asked.

"The cavalry is what I know."

He sighed, indicating that he hadn't expected much of an answer to that one.

"Have you any idea of what it's going to be like here?"

"Yes."

"How long did you say you'd served with the Thirty-sixth Alabama?"

"Four years."

"Then you ought to know enough to answer like a soldier."

"Four years, sir."

"That's better." He smiled again, quietly, the way he talked. In the back of my mind I had been dreading the minute when I would have to say "sir" to a Yankee officer. It wasn't as bad as I'd expected it to be.

"The Thirty-sixth Alabama," he said thoughtfully. "Weren't you at Cold Harbor?"

"Yes, sir, we were there."

"And the battles of Johnson's Pond, and Three Fork Road?"

I felt myself stiffen. "Yes, sir."

He kept looking at me, but his thoughts seemed to turn inward. "Perhaps," he said, "you have already had the honor of meeting our commanding officer — on the field, that is. He was at Three Fork, you know. Led the regiment of Harrison's Brigade in the famous charge there. Famous, anyway, around here." He colored slightly, as if he had said something that he shouldn't have.

It didn't hit me at first. I was just thinking that it was a rather bitter coincidence having Three Fork Road mentioned, and then, slowly, the real meaning caught up with me. Weyland had led the charge of Three Fork. *The man Caroline had married*!

"What's the matter, Reardon?"

I pried my mind loose from the past, but it was an effort and it left me weak.

"Nothing, sir."

"You looked strange for a moment there. I meant no slight to the Thirty-sixth Alabama because of Three Fork."

"It wasn't that, sir. It wasn't anything."

I forced a small grin. For just a moment I could feel myself walking the razor-thin edge of hysteria, and there was an almost uncontrollable urge to throw my head back and laugh, for I was beginning to understand

just how big a fool I had been. But I choked the feeling down and after a moment it went away, and the captain was saying:

"What I was going to say," looking back at the enlistment form, "was that it won't be easy here for you. Have you ever served as a private soldier?"

"No, sir."

"That won't make it any easier. We have men here who did time in your Confederate prison at Andersonville. Some of them will never forget it, I'm afraid."

"Was Andersonville worse than the Yankee stockade at Fort Delaware, sir?"

He smiled faintly, without humor. "I know." He started to say something else, but then a major came in and the captain stood up.

"Are these the new recruits, Captain Halan?"

"Yes, sir, there are six of them."

The major, a squat rock of a man, with a fierce sand-colored dragoon's mustache hiding a thin line of a mouth, nodded impatiently. "I can see there are six of them. How are they to be split up?"

"First Battalion has first priority on new men, sir. With the major's permission, I would like three of them. A Company is twelve men under strength."

The major quickly referred to the morning report in his mind and nodded again. "All right. Three to A Company, one to C, and two to B. Have them sworn in and assign them to their units, where they can draw arms and supplies."

"Yes, sir."

The major glanced at all of us, not particularly happy with what he saw. His gaze lingered for a moment on Morgan. He took a deep breath, almost a sigh, and walked out. Three first sergeants had appeared in the doorway in time to hear part of the major's speech. One of them, a big, rawboned Abraham Lincoln of a man, grinned widely while the other two glared about the room with bitter eyes. The grinning one, I guessed, belonged to A Company. He looked at Captain Halan and said:

"Ready, sir?"

"Pretty soon, Sergeant. Is the doctor on his way?"

"Comin' across the parade now, sir."

The physical examination didn't take long. The contract doctor told us to take our shirts off and he thumped us and listened to our chests and noted scars and told us to put our shirts back on. He stood for a moment, studying Mayhew, then abruptly he closed a shutter over the doubt in his mind and said, "They'll do, Captain." He walked out.

"All right," Captain Halan said, "line up here and raise your right hands." He took up a book of Army regulations and began: "Do you solemnly swear . . ."

A few questions, a few responses, and we were members of the United States Cavalry. Morgan smiled that cynical half-smile of his through it all. Steuber was passively sober. The others seemed slightly dazed.

Captain Halan closed the book. "Reardon, Morgan, Steuber, go with Sergeant Roff. As of now you are members of the United States Cavalry, — th Regiment, attached to Company A of that regiment. Dodson and

Mayhew, go with the B Company first sergeant. McCully with C."

We walked across the parade as a twelve-man patrol rode through the gates, dust-covered, sagging wearily in their saddles, and headed for the stables. One of the companies was beginning to fall out as the bugler sounded first call for retreat. They looked hard and tough, almost picture soldiers in their dress uniforms and plumed helmets.

Morgan said, "I thought this was a fightin' fort, not a bunch of goddamn garrison soldiers."

"We stand retreat five days a week," Sergeant Roff said coldly, "a company at a time. As long as we're able to do that, Kohi's Apaches'll know we're not hurt too bad. We're under strength here, but you'll learn that soon enough. One trooper does the job of two, whether it's on patrol or cleanin' the stables."

Steuber nodded ponderously, impressed by the neatness of the dress uniforms. Morgan snorted.

"Is Halan the company commander of A?" I asked.

"That's right," the Sergeant said, "and a better officer won't be found in the cavalry."

That was when I saw her.

I had been looking for her, I suppose, expecting to see her, but I still wasn't prepared for it when she appeared. The carriage came through the gates, from outside Larrymoor's walls, and the guards came to rigid attention, presenting rifle salutes as the carriage rolled past them. The Colonel was beside her.

"The Colonel and his lady," Roff said, coming to an abrupt halt. The four of us froze, even Morgan, while

the carriage rolled within a dozen yards of us. The Colonel gazed at us vaguely, limply returning the Sergeant's old-Army salute, and I got my first look at Colonel — former Major General — Jameson Joseph Weyland.

I suppose I expected to see a very large man, or an extremely small man, or a fat man, or some kind of man who was radically different from the ordinary male human being. There was nothing different about him, except for the silver eagles on the tailored shoulders of his cavalry dress jacket. He looked any age between forty and fifty-five, medium height, lean, with a flat military belly. His mustache was the shaggy dragoon's, cultivated and twisted down at the corners of his mouth in exactly the same way every cavalry officer west of the Mississippi wore a mustache. If there was anything distinctive about him, it was his pale, almost colorless eyes.

Caroline looked straight at me as they went past. There was no change on her face, not even a lifted eyebrow to suggest that she had ever seen me before. She looked straight at me, then at Sergeant Roff, smiling the faintest smile in the world, nodding the smallest nod in the world, just exactly the way a commanding officer's wife should recognize a noncommissioned officer with a long and honorable post record. I felt myself boiling inside, with anger and God knows what else, but I managed to keep my face straight as she looked my way again, for a quick last time. Then the carriage rolled on toward Officers' Row.

Roff's breath whistled between his teeth, as if he had been holding it for a long time. "Let's go," he said.

"By God," Morgan murmured appreciatively, "I didn't know they grew them like that on the desert."

"They don't." Roff looked at him. "She's only been at the fort a little more than a week." He sounded as if he didn't think much of Mrs. Weyland, but his face colored slightly just the same, because of the thoughts that must have been going around in his head. Caroline could do that to men, even when they didn't like her. "Let's go," he said again.

At the quartermaster's supply room we drew everything the United States Cavalry considered essential. Blue pants with the yellow stripe of the cavalry down the legs, blue shirts, blue blouse, dress helmets with faded plumes, underwear, boots, shoes, socks, carbine and saber, forty rounds of ammunition, saddlebags, sewing equipment, shoeshine equipment, campaign hat, forage cap, poncho, currycomb and brush, the regimental insignia of crossed sabers and organization number, and what seemed to be a thousand other odds and ends, all a man could carry. After we had loaded our arms, the quartermaster sergeant hung a cartridge belt around our necks, to which there was hooked a holster. In the holster was a Colt's .44-caliber revolver, the long-barreled cavalry model.

We took all that to the A Company barracks and came back and got our straw-filled mattress ticking and blankets.

Morgan swore quietly through it all. Steuber sat on his bunk and immediately began inspecting his Springfield carbine. A poker game went on uninterrupted at the far end of the barracks.

I got out of my clothes and into the new uniform. As soon as Steuber was satisfied that the carbine was a serviceable weapon he did the same, but Morgan sat on the edge of his bunk, his jaws locked tightly. Until now, I guess, he had never actually believed that he would have to wear the Yankee blue that he hated.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"You were with the Alabama Horse," he said grimly. "You ought to know."

"That was a long time ago."

Retreat had gone while the quartermaster sergeant had been outfitting us. Now we heard the short up-and-down notes of mess call and the Dutchman reached for his mess kit.

The card game broke up as the men filed out, Steuber ahead of all of them. Morgan sat there, glaring. He was still sitting there when I walked out, but before we had half finished supper he came out with his mess kit. He had the uniform on.

That night the three of us, the new ones in the company, went to the sutler's store outside the walls. But the whisky was bad and the prices were high, and none of us had much money.

"Another one?" Steuber asked, fingering his empty whisky glass.

"I'm broke," I said.

"Maybe the sutler'll give us credit till payday."

"Not till we get on the books through the company."

"How about you, Morgan?" the Dutchman asked.

"I'm broke too. Goddamn!" he said abruptly, bitterly, and kicked his chair back and walked out.

"That Morgan," Steuber said thoughtfully, "he's a strange one." He scratched his big nose; he pushed his forage cap back and scratched his head. "I think he's in trouble," he said directly. "Maybe more trouble than he can get out of."

"He'll have to work it out for himself."

Steuber shrugged. "Sure. There are things you notice about him, though. The clothes he had on before he changed to the uniform, for one thing. The pants worn threadbare just above the knee, about the place a leather thong would go if you wanted to tie your holster down." The Dutchman looked sadly at his empty whisky glass. "Nobody but a gunman goes to that much trouble to see that his pistol is just right. Did you notice that?"

I had noticed it, but I hadn't thought Steuber had. I was guessing that Morgan — if that was his name — had killed somebody, somebody pretty important, from the looks of things, and had chosen Fort Larrymoor as a good place to hide out. I could see that the Dutchman was thinking the same thing.

Pretty soon I left Steuber sitting there staring forlornly at the empty glass and went outside and back toward the gates of the fort. It was dark now and it was a sad, lonesome place, that part of Arizona. I could see the heads and shoulders of sentries as they paced the runaround inside the adobe walls. And beyond, a thin

slice of moon over the hills. It was smoky-looking and pale and worn out. I had an uneasy feeling that those high sad hills were watching me, and probably they were. I remembered the family we had buried that afternoon and the night seemed cold.

Kohi was just a name to me, and not a name to be particularly feared, at that. An obscure chief of an obscure band of Coyotero Apaches making their last stand, fighting their last fight. It was a fight that they didn't have a chance of winning, because the white men would keep coming and keep coming until finally they would overwhelm them, as they were already overwhelming Cochise and his Chiricahuas in the south. I almost felt sorry for Kohi . . . and then I thought again of the family we had buried.

Then, as she always did, sooner or later, Caroline came into my thoughts. No matter what I was thinking, Caroline could push it aside and come walking into my mind.

CHAPTER THREE

In the next two weeks we learned what cavalry life was like in an outpost fort like Larrymoor. We learned to sit a McClellan saddle with ramrods for backbones, and we learned to ride in formation until we could make line turns in review as straight and precise as the spokes on a turning wheel. We learned that horses had to be cared for in a special Army way, and after spending eight hours in the saddle you took the animal to the stables and you curried him and brushed him and you inspected his hoofs and legs for unnoticed bruises and cuts and you inspected his back for traces of saddle sores. And then you curried and brushed him some more, and after all that was done you fed him and watered him and shoveled his manure for him and hauled it outside the fort and dumped it. And by the time you got back you thought you would never want to look at another horse again.

Because I had served four years in a wartime volunteer horse regiment, I thought I knew something about the cavalry. I didn't. I didn't even know how to ride a horse at a walk. But I learned. Skiborsky screamed at us and cursed us and threatened us, and the old-time troopers came down to the riding ring and

leaned on the rails and laughed at us. But we learned. Skiborsky, it turned out, was also with A Company, and he taught us. Morgan swore daily that he would kill him, but he didn't. He learned to ride.

It was harder on Morgan than it was for the rest of us because Morgan was a Texan. There wasn't a time that he could remember when he hadn't been at home on a horse — but he hadn't learned to ride the cavalry way. In Texas there had been plenty of horses for remounts. There were no remounts at Larrymoor — at least, not many — so you took care of your horse and pampered him, because your life might depend on him. Your horse came first, and then your carbine and revolver, and after you were sure that they were in perfect condition you could think of yourself. If there was time.

Skiborsky taught us that. And he taught us how to hate. We were old hands at hating, Morgan and I, but Skiborsky made it seem a new gall-bitter experience, and there wasn't a minute, day or night, that we didn't want to kill him. Skiborsky laughed at us. He grinned that goddamned fierce animal grin at us. But we learned to do things the cavalry way, and after we learned to ride Morgan walked over to Skiborsky and hit him right in the middle of that grin of his.

As punishment Morgan carried a nine-foot, hundred-pound cottonwood log around and around Larrymoor's walls, and every time he dropped the log a guard would hit him with the stock of his carbine. Toward sundown Morgan fainted. The next morning he was back in the riding ring.

We learned to jump our horses then, over a series of barriers of graduated heights, and we learned the fine art of forced marching. Skiborsky taught us to halt fifteen minutes every hour, dismounting and unbitting and grazing. He taught us to trot for a short spell every half hour to keep ourselves erect and light in the saddle, and to dismount and lead ten minutes of every hour.

Morgan carried the log twice that week, but he learned.

And then we went to the carbine range. Morgan shot the bull's-eye's black heart to ribbons. We rode some more. We drilled. We shoveled manure and curried horses. Finally our period of schooling was over. Skiborsky told us about it one day after evening stables.

"A sorrier lot," he sneered, "I never saw in cavalry blue. But I can't waste the rest of your enlistment teachin' you to stay in the saddle." He jutted his rocklike chin out, grinning at us, feeling our hate and enjoying it. "Morgan," he said, "I guess you'll be first." He walked behind the stables, unbuttoning his shirt.

Morgan was stunned for a moment. "You're takin' off your stripes?" he asked suspiciously.

Skiborsky peeled off his shirt and flung it aside. "That's right, bucko. Man to man."

Morgan's face split into an evil grin. In one quick movement he shrugged out of his suspenders and began unbuttoning his shirt. "I'm goin' to love this," he murmured softly, dropping his shirt to the ground. Bare-chested, his lumpy muscles quivering along his thick shoulders and forearms, the Sergeant waited for him.

"Enjoy it while you can, bucko." He grinned.

Morgan crouched slightly, stepped in. He circled the big sergeant warily, cautiously, the way you would approach a man with a knife. Abruptly, in a flash of movement, his left fist shot out and there was a sodden, wet sound as the knuckles smashed Skiborsky's mouth. He hit Skiborsky again, in his slightly bulging gut, before the big man could back away.

Surprise shone momentarily in the Sergeant's eyes, but he never lost his grin. Morgan began circling him again. He lashed out in that sudden explosion of motion, but Skiborsky was ready this time. The big man backed down with his left forearm, knocking Morgan's fist aside. He stepped in quickly and swung his right fist as though he were wielding a saber. The blow landed on the side of Morgan's face. Skiborsky lashed out with his left and Morgan seemed to break in the middle. He went down gasping, his face an ugly green, his eyes sick. He went to his knees, to his elbows. He crawled in a small stupid circle, like a fly with its wings pinched off. Instinctively, Morgan got his back against the stable wall and began shoving himself up. He stood swaying, his fists clenched but hanging at his sides.

"Had enough, Morgan?" Skiborsky asked, still grinning.

"You sonofabitch!" the gaunt, sick Morgan grated.

Skiborsky hit him again. This time Morgan fell like a rock, like a poled Texas steer. He doubled and hit the ground with his face and didn't move. Skiborsky took one deep breath, rubbed his hands along the legs of his trousers, and grunted.

"All right, buckos, who's next?"

He looked at me and then at Steuber. It wasn't at all the way I had expected it to be. I had expected a big crowd, the whole company gathered around, but there were only the two of us. Me and the big Dutchman. I began taking off my shirt.

Steuber seemed to consider himself a disinterested by-stander. He gazed thoughtfully at the unconscious Morgan, and then at me, and finally at Skiborsky. He shrugged. He could have broken the Sergeant's back, if he had wanted to bother. He was big enough and strong enough. He didn't want to. He had no quarrel with Skiborsky, so he merely shrugged and looked at me.

"I'm next," I said. I threw the shirt aside. It was what I had wanted for over two weeks and I wasn't letting the chance get away from me.

I don't know how long the fight lasted. It seemed like a long time. I was almost as big as Skiborsky, and I wasn't soft. But the Sergeant knew things about fist fighting that I didn't. He had learned the hard way, in drunken brawls and company fights, and the marks and lumps and ill-healed wounds were still to be seen on his body. He took a fierce joy in not moving back and in fighting a man who wouldn't move back either. I vaguely remember knocking him down and standing there stupidly until he got up again. Skiborsky wasn't so considerate when his turn came.

When I started to get up he knocked my head down with a slashing blow aimed at the back of my neck, and

as I went down his knee jerked up and crashed against my chin.

I could hear him laugh hoarsely. "You'll learn, my bucko, not to let a man up once you've got him down." It was the last sound I heard for quite a while.

I came out of it finally, with thunder in my head. Steuber was slapping me methodically, first on one cheek and then on the other. I pulled myself up to a sitting position. Skiborsky was nowhere to be seen.

"You all right, Reardon?" the Dutchman asked mildly.

My mouth was raw and full of blood. I spat. "How about Morgan?" I started to ask, and then I saw Morgan. He was fumbling with his shirt, still dazed and bloody. He looked like a man picking himself up after the van of a stampede had passed over him. I don't suppose I looked any better.

Steuber allowed himself a small smile. "He's a good man, that Skiborsky. One damn good fighter."

"You yellow sonofabitch," Morgan said, looking at the Dutchman.

Steuber looked hurt, but not angry. "Because I didn't fight him?" he asked. "Why should I fight a man like that when I'm not mad at him? Anyway, I think maybe we'll get our bellies full of fighting before long."

"You're yellow," Morgan said angrily. "That's what's wrong with you, Dutchman"

Steuber shook his head sadly. "Don't make me fight you, Morgan."

I managed to get to my feet, walk over, and pick up my shirt. "The Dutchman's right, Morgan. We've had enough for one day. Let's let it pass."

Morgan was still full of anger, but he didn't know what to do with it or where to aim it. He didn't really want to fight Steuber, maybe because he knew the Dutchman could break him in half, and use a lot less effort in doing it than Skiborsky had. We heard the bugler sounding mess call, and I found Morgan's forage cap and threw it at him.

"Let's eat," the Dutchman said, as if eating was the most important thing in the world to him right then.

The men of A Company showed no curiosity at all about the bruises and cuts and lumps that we brought back to the barracks. Most of them, probably, had been through it themselves, and they figured that you weren't really a member of the company until you had faced Skiborsky behind the stables.

But I didn't go to supper that night, and neither did Morgan. We sponged off at the washstand outside the barracks and went to our bunks and lay there like dead men, silently fighting and refighting the thing a hundred times and whipping Skiborsky every time. In our minds. And finally the thing wore itself out. We had been beaten by a better man and that was all there was to it.

About eight o'clock that night Skiborsky and the big Steuber came into the barracks roaring drunk, each of them swinging a bottle of sutler's whisky like war clubs.

"Goddamn you, Reardon!" Skiborsky yelled, and threw his bottle at me. Skiborsky never handed anything to anybody, not even whisky. "Drink!" he yelled, grinning, lurching up and down the aisle in front of my bunk. "Drink up, bucko, you earned it. Didn't he

earn it, Dutchman? Morgan, too. Throw Morgan your bottle!"

Steuber grinned foolishly. Morgan sat up on his bunk. "I thought you were broke," he said bitterly to the swaying Dutchman. "You didn't have any money the other night for whisky."

"Still don't," Steuber said mildly. "This is the Sergeant's whisky."

"What the hell?" Skiborsky demanded. "Whisky's whisky. Don't anybody want any free whisky?" Two or three men started to get up in the back of the barracks and Skiborsky shouted them down. "Not you, goddamnit. Give Morgan the bottle, Dutchman. He earned it."

Steuber lunged drunkenly at Morgan, the bottle in front of him.

"Drink!" Skiborsky commanded.

"Go to hell!" Morgan snarled.

"Drink!"

I uncorked Skiborsky's bottle and poured some of the pale liquid fire down my throat. Steuber was waiting patiently for Morgan either to drink or hand the bottle back. Angrily, Morgan jerked the cork out with his teeth and threw it across the barracks. He turned the bottle up and drank almost a quarter of it before taking it from his mouth. Skiborsky stumbled and fell across my bunk, convulsed with idiotic laughter.

"Don't drink it all," the Dutchman complained to Morgan.

"You go to hell, too!"

They began wrestling for the bottle.

"Here, take some of this, Steuber," I said. Steuber fell off the bunk and lay on his back on the floor, grinning stupidly. Skiborsky, giggling, took his own bottle, held it out at arm's length, and splashed whisky in the Dutchman's face.

"There you are, you goddamn Dutchman! There's a drink for you!" Steuber opened his mouth wide, trying to catch the whisky dribbling from the bottle. Skiborsky became convulsed with laughter again and had to sit down.

"What the hell is this?" Morgan demanded, looking at me.

"What does it look like?" Skiborsky said. "Drink up, Morgan. That's apt to be the last whisky you'll ever get out of me."

"I didn't ask for your whisky."

"Drink!"

I had a drink. I passed the bottle to Skiborsky and he had a drink. Steuber was snoring on the floor, his mouth still open. Skiborsky sloshed some more whisky into the Dutchman's mouth and almost strangled with laughter as Steuber spewed and sputtered and rolled under the bunk.

I was seeing a side of Skiborsky that I had never known existed, had never even guessed at. Skiborsky the drunken clown. It stunned Morgan even more than it did me.

"What is this?" a voice from the barracks doorway wanted to know. It was Roff, the first sergeant, looking like Abraham Lincoln in a blue cavalry uniform.

"We're gettin' drunk," Skiborsky yelled at him. "Me and Reardon and Morgan and that goddamned Dutchman, we're gettin' good and drunk."

"Couldn't you be a little quieter about it?"

"Sure we could, but we ain't. Have a drink."

"I've got work to do. The Captain's in the orderly room, he can hear you. They can hear you clean out to the sutler's store."

"Maybe Kohi'll hear me. What do you think about that, Sergeant? Maybe Kohi'll think we've got a whole damn regiment here at Larrymoor for a change. Maybe I'll scare his goddamn filthy breechclout off of him, what do you think of that?"

"Kohi'll probably think the whole post is drunk and stage a raid," Roff said.

"Let him raid! Tell the Captain to have a drink."

"The Captain's busy. Just be a little quieter or you might find yourself a common trooper again, Skiborsky."

Skiborsky snorted indignantly. "Skiborsky a common trooper? Then where'd this goddamn company be? Where would you find another noncom to take my place?"

Roff shrugged and smiled wearily. "Just be a little quieter. C Company's patrol came in just a little while ago."

"The hell with C Company."

"Three men were dead," Roff said quietly.

Something happened to Skiborsky's eyes. "Who?" he asked, this time in a normal voice.

"Wilson, McCambridge, and Lieutenant Stuart."

Skiborsky sat quietly for a moment, letting the information roll around his mind. Then he doubled one big fist and punched the bunk lightly three times. "Goddamn, goddamn. All right, Roff, we'll quiet down."

The First Sergeant nodded and went back to the orderly room, leaving the barracks in sudden uneasy silence.

"Did you know them?" I asked, to break the silence.

"I soldiered with Wilson and McCambridge in Indian Territory. The Lieutenant was a pup, just out of the Point."

Skiborsky had a drink and silence took over again. There were other troopers in the barracks who hadn't paid any attention to the uproar. Probably they were used to scenes like this after Skiborsky had finished "schooling" a man. Now they seemed to be watching, waiting for something to happen.

Morgan, who had been listening vaguely with glazed eyes, was quite drunk by now. "What we ought to do," he said in a measured, cool voice, "is mount this damn cavalry and go after the redsticks. Teach 'em a damn good lesson, that's what we ought to do." He shook his bottle, studied its contents, and had another drink. "Teach the redsticks a lesson," he said, nodding ponderously. "That's the thing to do."

Skiborsky, apparently sober now, studied him pityingly. "Trooper," he said softly, "there are a lot of things I can't teach you, and about redsticks is one of them. But you'll learn. You'll learn."

"Sure," Morgan said, grinning crookedly. He seemed to have forgotten that he hated Skiborsky. "Have a drink."

"Thanks," the Sergeant said dryly, accepting his own whisky from Morgan. The bottle went around. Steuber snored.

"When will we be getting patrol duty?" I asked, mostly to break the silence, which was becoming uncomfortable.

Skiborsky shrugged. "Pretty soon. Don't be eager, trooper, you'll get your gut full of it."

"I want to see this Kohi," Morgan said dreamily.

"And you," Skiborsky said soberly, "don't be gettin' any wrong ideas about Kohi. Where you came from maybe you had a reputation as a hardcase, maybe you were fast with a gun and had people afraid of you — I don't know about that. Kohi won't know about it either. And he won't care."

"A redstick," Morgan sneered.

"And a damn smart one," Skiborsky said patiently. "He's outgeneraled every officer Washington has sent north of the Gila."

The other troopers in the barracks went back to whatever they had been doing — shining boots, brushing uniforms, playing poker, or just thinking their own private, unknowable thoughts. It seemed strange, when I thought of it, that only a few hours ago Skiborsky and I had been fighting like savages. He wasn't a bad one, and I had an idea that the Dutchman had been right in his estimation of the Sergeant. More than likely he was a damn good soldier.

The whisky had dulled Morgan's mind, as well as his hatred, and I listened to his rambling, aimless talk go on and on. But he never talked of himself. He would never get drunk enough for that.

The whisky had gone full cycle with Skiborsky. He was right back where he started, sober and weary and full of disgust. He was beginning to regret the money he had spent on the whisky. No doubt he was also regretting the fact that he had let us see that he was human after all. Familiarity breeds contempt, the officers say. And Skiborsky was an officer — a noncommissioned one, but still an officer of sorts, with authority. I could see him turning the idea over in his mind. For a moment he grinned that old fierce grin of his and I knew that it was over. He stood up abruptly and snatched what was left of his whisky from Morgan's lax hand.

"That's all you get, trooper," he snarled. "From here on out you can buy your own goddamn whisky."

Morgan blinked, puzzled. I could see him trying to figure out what had happened, but his numb brain was not capable of coping with anything that complex. Skiborsky jutted his chin out. The old Skiborsky again. He grinned that grin at us and stalked out of the barracks.

"Now what happened to him?" Morgan started to ask, and then he forgot all about it and lay back on the bunk and kicked his boots into the aisle down the center of the barracks. "You know," he said lazily, "that Skiborsky's not so bad. I hate his guts — don't

misunderstand me — and someday I'll probably kill the sonofabitch . . . but he's not so bad."

"You won't think so tomorrow," I said. "If I know Skiborsky, he's already thinking up ways to make us start hating him all over again. He wouldn't be happy if everybody didn't hate him."

"I don't hate him." Whisky had a strangle hold on Morgan's brain, squeezing the life out of it.

"Wait until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow . . ."

The troopers began getting ready for bed, and one by one the candles and coal-oil lamps were blown out, and the night was laced with a bright ribbon of sound as the regimental bugler sounded extinguish lights. Steuber was still snoring under my bunk and I wondered if I ought to get up and try to put him in his own bunk. I thought about it for a while, but it didn't help the Dutchman. He stayed where he was and I stayed where I was, and the barracks was plunged into darkness as the last notes of the bugle died in the night.

The whisky was warm inside me and I lay there, not moving, not even getting out of my uniform. I knew that tomorrow I would start hating Skiborsky all over again, and that one of these days maybe Morgan would make good his threat and kill him. If I didn't beat him to it. But tonight wasn't tomorrow. Tonight I didn't hate anybody. Not even Caroline.

CHAPTER FOUR

I had guessed right about Skiborsky.

Steuber and Morgan and myself were put on stable detail the first thing the next morning. We forked the droppings into small piles outside the stables, and then we swept the stables and scoured them, and after a while a wagon came along and we forked the piles into the wagon and hauled it outside the fort a half mile away and forked it out of the wagon again.

"The sonofabitch," Morgan muttered over and over, heaving the piles of filth.

"You thought he was all right last night," I reminded him.

"The sonofabitch."

Steuber forked away like a well-oiled machine, not seeming to mind the blazing sun or the filth or the stinging sweat that dripped into our eyes and plastered our shirts to our backs.

When we straightened to get our breath or to wipe the sweat from our faces, there was a corporal in the front of the wagon to remind us to keep working.

"We got to finish the stables before recall," he insisted. "That's what Skiborsky said."

"To hell with Skiborsky," Morgan grated.

"Keep working, trooper, or you'll be carryin' the log again."

Toward noon we saw the horses appear on the desert horizon. Four horses, weary-looking, stumbling clumsily over the rocks of the desert in their exhaustion. We stopped working, watching them in the distance, trying to make out the riders.

"My God," we heard the corporal say softly. "It's the Boulders patrol."

"The what?" Morgan asked.

"The Boulders patrol. What's left of it, rather. Twelve men rode out on it four days ago; they were supposed to meet the Star Creek patrol and then circle through the mountains and come back to Larrymoor. But," he said, as if he didn't quite believe his own words, "they were supposed to be gone eight, nine days."

Morgan studied the approaching figures quietly. His eyes had that steely look again.

"Get the stuff forked out," the corporal said. "We'll go back to the fort and see what happened."

We knew what happened. Everybody knew, but we had to hear somebody say it. We forked the wagon clean and got back to the fort about five minutes after the patrol arrived.

Skiborsky had the word, and Sergeant Roff, and Captain Halan too, although he didn't talk about it. Ten good tough troopers dead, that was the word.

"What is it?" we asked Skiborsky.

"Apache's dancin', that's what it is," the Sergeant snarled. "Every goddamn redstick in the White Mountains is dancin'. Kohi's bringin' all the Coyotero

clans together, and some Chiricahuas and Mimbreños too, so the story goes. God knows how he's doin' it, but he's doin' it, and there's goin' to be hell to pay in Arizona, you can bet your enlistment pay on that." He grinned evilly. "We'll see now what you troopers use for guts. We'll see . . ."

Sergeant Roff, speaking for Captain Halan, said, "There will be no change in post routine until we find out what Kohi's up to. His braves are assembling off the reservation. The Boulders patrol had a stiff brush with them, but headquarters isn't sure yet if the Apaches were acting on Kohi's orders or if they were just some outlaw Indians doing some raiding on their own. Until we find out, reviews and fatigue and drills will go on as usual. Patrols will be strengthened to fourteen men and they will skirt Kohi's old stamping grounds and try to find out what the devil's up to. Maybe," he sighed, "it will cool off."

It wouldn't cool off. I knew it and the others knew it. Kohi's people had been pushed as far as they were going to be pushed. The great white fathers in Washington had made big peace medicine, putting their fine promises down on stiff white official parchment, and affixing their signatures with great piousness. And then they figuratively tore the treaties into a million bits and pieces and let them flutter with the wind.

After all, they were only Indians, weren't they? What did Indians understand about such things? Anyway, what could scattered bands of savages do against the might of the United States Cavalry? Let the settlers move on into the Indian lands. Let the cavalry take care

of the savages if they didn't like it. Our "manifest destiny," they called it, our great white fathers.

But they weren't in the frontier cavalry. And, probably, they had never even heard of the White Mountain Apache general . . . Kohi.

"Were you a carpenter on the outside, Reardon?" Captain Halan looked puzzled as he asked the question. I must have looked puzzled, too, wondering why Roff had called me to the orderly room directly after the noon mess.

"No, sir," I said.

Halan rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "I thought . . ." he started, and then he let the words trail off. "Well, it doesn't matter, I suppose. I have a special detail for you. You're to go over to Colonel Weyland's quarters and repair the steps on his back porch."

The Captain must have seen the surprise in my eyes. "You can do the job, can't you?"

"Yes, sir. I guess so. Did the Colonel ask for me, sir? I mean, did he pick me out especially for the job?"

"Why, I suppose so. Someone asked for you, either the Colonel or Mrs. Weyland. Probably a mix-up with the records at headquarters. Somebody got you mixed up with an ex-carpenter." He sighed wearily, his mind more on Kohi than on the minor problem at hand. "Of course," he said, "we could get the thing straightened out at headquarters and get the right man on the job. But if you think you can do it, it would save trouble all around."

It was Caroline, I knew. She couldn't stand it any longer, knowing I was on the post and not knowing why. She had ordered me, to come, the way she would order a houseboy to bring in more wood for the fireplace, and she had known all along that I would come.

"I can fix whatever's wrong, sir," I said, and Halan looked relieved.

"Then get to it, Reardon. And when you've finished, get your field gear together. I have you down for patrol in the morning."

I got a carpenter's kit from the quartermaster's and walked across the parade toward Officers' Row. The post was unnaturally quiet, even quieter than usual after a noon mess. I had a feeling that Larrymoor should be working with feverish activity, that every man should be working around the clock at strengthening the fortifications. I was the only man on the parade. The bachelor officers were still at mess, the married officers were eating leisurely in the privacy of their adobe huts on Officers' Row, or perhaps smoking a noontime cigar, or napping. The troopers were in their barracks, or in the sorry little knock-up shacks reserved for married noncommissioned officers, near the stables, thinking about the ten men who had died that day, probably.

Somehow I couldn't bring myself to believe that the men were actually dead. Their names would appear on the morning report as "from duty to killed in action," even as the dead horses would be reported in the horse book. The next of kin would be notified, whenever another supply train headed south with the mail. None of it concerned me.

I hadn't known them. The American flag — the Yankee flag, as Morgan would call it — still flew high from its flag-pole in the center of the parade. There was no grave detail working in the cemetery outside the post, no metallic clang of picks and shovels striking the sun-baked clay earth. The bodies hadn't been brought back.

I wondered vaguely if there were other bodies out there now, from other patrols, and what it would be like out there. Would it be as bad as Gettysburg, or Antietam . . . or Three Fork Road? Or would it be more like the skirmishing of pickets, or the harrassing action of screening cavalry before an army? There was no way of knowing. The men who had seen it wouldn't say; the men who hadn't seen it couldn't know.

I kept Caroline out of my mind as long as I could, but there are limits to how long you can keep a woman like that locked in the back of your brain. And besides, I had reached the Colonel's quarters.

The post commander's house stood at the end of Officers' Row, next to the headquarters buildings, a squat, sturdy affair of cottonwood logs and adobe bricks, slightly larger than the other houses on the row. Usually the post commander has his house outside the fort's walls, but not at Larrymoor, so deep in the enemy's own country. I went around to the back door. Colonel Weyland was just coming out.

He glanced at me without interest, returned my salute absently, as though he had something else on his mind. "You're the carpenter?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I expect you'll have to ask Mrs. Weyland what she wants done. It's the step, I think." He glanced vaguely at the steps, without seeing them.

"Yes, sir," I said again. It was the first time I had seen Weyland up close, but my first impression of him didn't change. He was just an ordinary man, cast in the same rigid mold that turned out cavalry officers by the hundreds. He looked tired, the way a man looks when he hasn't slept well for a long while. He looked as weak or as strong as the next man; he never would be the kind to lean to the extreme in anything, I thought. He nodded absently and walked off toward headquarters, straight as a ramrod, his uniform and high dragoon boots immaculate.

I should have hated him, because I had planned to hate him. Somehow I felt sorry for him. I felt anger, but it wasn't for Jameson Joseph Weyland. Then the back door opened and Caroline stood in the doorway, smiling.

"Trooper Reardon?" She said it calmly, without turning a hair. Weyland was still within hearing distance.

I heard myself saying, "Yes, ma'am."

"Come in, trooper, and I'll explain . . ." She let the words hang. The Colonel had disappeared into the headquarters building and there was no reason now for pretending.

I had made no plans. I didn't know what I was going to say or do. For a while it was enough just to stand there and look at her. Time, it seemed, had no effect on Caroline. She looked the same to me as she had five

years ago; still beautiful with a pale, almost fragile beauty. Her hair was blonde and her eyes were as blue and as deep as the Arizona sky. Too blue and too deep, like the sky, to look into long at a time.

Still smiling, she said, "Come in, Matt."

It was a fool thing to do, with the headquarters building less than fifty yards away. But I found myself going up the steps.

"You've changed quite a lot, Matt," she said lightly, conversationally, in the tone of voice you would use in meeting an old vaguely remembered acquaintance, but not a friend.

I set the carpenter's kit down. "You haven't."

She laughed lightly, musically. "That's nice of you," deliberately ignoring the real meaning. "After all, it's been five years, hasn't it, Matt?"

"Five years, four months, and a few days."

"My," she smiled, "I hadn't imagined you would remember that well."

"It isn't often that a cavalry officer loses his entire command, killed or captured. I remember the date without any trouble."

Her smile flickered, almost went out. I could smell the cleanness of her, the lavender sachet and the briskness of crinoline and laces. It was an exotic, heady scent when you're used to the stench of the stables and the man smell of the barracks. "Come into the front room, Matt," she said abruptly. "We can talk better in there."

"What would the Colonel say, Mrs. Weyland?"

"Does the Colonel need to know, Matt?" She turned, layers of petticoats rustling, and walked through a doorway toward the front of the house. I followed her, as she knew I would.

The house must have had five rooms; a mansion in a place like Larrymoor. The first thing that struck me about the front room was that there were curtains at the windows, starched, stiff white lace curtains rustling softly in a hot desert breeze. I had almost forgotten that there were such things. There was a big leather post-made chair, stuffed with horsehair and covered with horsehide; a massive tea table supporting a heavy silver tea service, two porcelain coal-oil lamps with hand-painted figures on the bases, a braided rug on the floor, wallpaper and pictures on the wall. Furnishings and luxuries that, on Caroline's orders, had been freighted half a thousand miles across the desert, simply because she was used to such things and had to have them around her. For me it was like walking into another world.

Caroline stood in the center of the room patiently waiting for me to say what I had to say. I walked slowly around the roon, touching things, feeling of them and bringing back part of an almost forgotten past. On one wall there was a copy of Titian's moody St. Margaret in live greens and sober browns, contrasted on the other wall with the sharp, sure colors of El Greco. Those would belong to Caroline. I didn't think the Colonel would care much for painting, or for any kind of art, for that matter, except perhaps the art of war.

On a table by the leather chair, beside a cut-glass decanter of amber wine, were Weyland's books. I picked one out just for the sensation of touching it. Wallhausen's "Art militaire à cheval." I glanced at the others. Machiavelli's "The Arte of Warre." Romer's "Cavalry." Nolan's "Cavalry Tactics." Wood's "Cavalry in the Waterloo Campaign." They were all there.

"Well, Matt," Caroline said.

I put the book down and turned. "It's been a long time since I've had a book in my hand or seen a painting, even a copy. But an old Alabama gentleman doesn't wander about touching things, does he? I guess you were right. I've changed."

"What do you want, Matt?" she asked coolly.

"I'm not sure."

"Why did you come here?"

"You sent for me, didn't you, to do some carpentering on your back doorstep?" I felt more at ease now. At least I could look at her without having to look immediately away. "By the way, how did you manage it? I'm not down on the records as a carpenter."

Her sudden laughter didn't sound like laughter at all. "I simply told the Colonel that I wanted a carpenter by the name of Reardon. I told him that you had done some work for Major Burkhoff's wife."

"But I haven't."

Her face sobered. "What difference does it make?" she said impatiently. "I had to talk to you. It doesn't make any difference how I managed it."

The thing that had been going around in my mind ever since Captain Halan had mentioned Three Fork Road began to take shape. Caroline could see it taking shape and she didn't like it.

"Answer me, Matt. Why did you come to Larrymoor?"

"Is that sherry?" I asked, nodding at the decanter on the table.

"It's oloroso."

It had to be oloroso. Nothing but the best for Caroline. I poured a wineglass half full and drank it, throwing it down without tasting it, the way Skiborsky would throw down the sutler's whisky. I poured the glass full and replaced the glass stopper and sat down in the Colonel's chair. Not because I wanted the sherry or because I was so tired that I couldn't stand up. I wanted to see what Caroline would do.

She didn't do anything, didn't even blink.

"I've heard," I said, "that Weyland was at the battle of Three Fork; led the Union cavalry charge there, in fact. But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Caroline?"

She still didn't move, but I saw a cetrain uneasiness in those eyes of hers.

"It's the truth," I said, "about not knowing why I came to Larrymoor. Maybe just to see you again. To look at you and wonder what kind of woman you really are. I'm not even sure why I came to Arizona, except that there wasn't much left for me in Alabama after the war. The plantation's gone. When I got back, the darkies were too drunk with their new freedom to work

for any wage, so the cotton went to pot. What cotton we had baled went to the treasury agents. And there were a lot of debts. Well . . ."

I looked at her over the wineglass.

"You remember our place, don't you, Caroline? And the time you came down from Virginia, to visit your cousins the Blackwelders, and the parties we had in those days? The South isn't the same, Caroline, but I don't suppose you would know about that. There's not much there. Old families are broken up, and the great plantations are broken up too, or in weeds. You knew it was going to be that way, didn't you? After the Wilderness campaign there wasn't much doubt about who was going to win the war. And you didn't want to be on the losing side, did you, Caroline?"

She reacted to that. She took three quick steps toward me and slashed my face with the flat of her hand. "Get out!" she rasped like a den of stirred-up rattlers. "Get out before I scream!"

But I wasn't ready to leave now. I had too many things inside me that had to come out, and I had to be sure of things. I had waited a long time and had come a long way, and now I had to know.

"Are you going to get out?"

"No. Not yet."

"I'll scream." Her voice was cold with anger. "Do you know what they will do to you? I'll tell them — I'll tell them you attacked me!"

I had to smile at that. She wouldn't scream and I knew she wouldn't, because she had to know why I had come to Larrymoor. She took a deep, shuddering

breath and got hold of herself. She sat stiffly in a graceful little dark mahogany chair and glared at me.

Maybe she was afraid of me. Maybe she was hating me. But she pulled the shutters behind her eyes and I couldn't tell. I knew now that I had never been able to tell what Caroline was thinking, not even in the old days when I thought I knew everything, and the thought was disturbing.

So I talked.

"Do you remember, Caroline . . . ?"

She remembered, all right.

Before the war we had had a plantation that we called Sweetbriar. It was my family's plantation. Not the greatest in Alabama, but not the smallest, either, especially along the Black Warrior River, where we lived. The land was black and rich and earthy smelling, not like it was here on the desert, where the land is baked to lifelessness under the blast of an everlasting sun. We had seventy-four slaves one year — although that was an exceptional year and so long ago that I hardly remember — and in the fall of the year the darkies would begin preparing for the great barbecues we used to have, and the parties. That was the time for parties, the fall and winter. It was at one of those wonderful parties that I saw Caroline for the first time.

I thought back for a moment, recalling whole pigs roasted with unbearable slowness for days, turned on spits above hickory coals in pits and basted with honey and fine old amontillado until they were crackling brown. And the guests that would come, arriving in their glittering Victorian carriages and staying for days,

eating, drinking eight-year-old bourbon saved for the occasion, and dancing in the evenings to the music of Captain Fitzhugh Dunham's brass and string orchestra, brought all the way from Birmingham. They knew how to have parties in those days.

I remembered one in particular — not at Sweetbriar this time, but one that the Blackwelders gave in Caroline's honor. I could look back and imagine the way it was, the way it must have been, but somehow it didn't seem real now. Still, I could recall old Rowel Blackwelder looking vaguely ridiculous in his skin-tight pants and velvet jacket, bowing low — and painfully, for he was in his seventies — and saying, "Matthew, I have the honor to present our lovely niece from the great state of Virginia."

I must have fallen in love with Caroline that very night, as Captain Fitzhugh Dunham's brass and string orchestra played "Annie Laurie" in three-quarter time, and we danced.

What year was that? I wondered now, with Caroline still studying me from behind the shutters of her eyes. The year of grace 1859, that had been the year, and both of us were very young. I had never even heard of a place called Fort Sumter then.

But before long we began hearing the warning rumblings around us and Caroline's father wrote for her to come home. And then a soldier's hand pulled a lanyard in Charleston . . .

"Don't forget me, Matt," Caroline said. And she meant it, too, I think, at the time. I made the trip from Sweetbriar to Birmingham, with the Blackwelders, to

see Caroline on the train that would take her back to Virginia. How could I forget her, I thought, when I was already so in love with her? But I couldn't say it there, with her cousins and uncles looking on.

"There won't be time, Caroline," I said. "Likely we'll all be in Virginia before long, to finish up this war. I'll be sure to see you there."

We were already organizing a company of cavalry, the young men from the plantations along the Black Warrior River. We got together four times a week and rode up and down Oak Grove Road in what we took to be military formation, and on Sunday afternoons we practiced with our hunting muskets until we ran out of powder and ball. There was a great excitement in those days, for the South had already won a spectacular battle at Bull Run, and we all had uniforms made of the finest gray flannel and we began to think of ourselves as soldiers.

There was a great to-do about us at all the parties. The girls presented us with enormous black ostrich plumes to adorn our wide-brimmed hats, and they tied brilliant silken sashes around our waists, and we all cut gallant figures as we rode from one party to another. Then at last, with a great many tears and kisses and promises, we rode bravely off to Birmingham to become part of the Thirty-sixth Alabama Horse.

Now, as I thought back on it, it was almost amusing to remember the way we rode into the war. It was a lark, like being on our way to an extra-big barbecue, the biggest barbecue the South had ever seen, and the most exciting. We brought our Negro houseboys with us to

keep our uniforms neatly cleaned and pressed and to do our cooking and to serve us. We brought wagons full of clothing and bedding and a great quantity of delicacies such as smoked hams and chicken and dozens of jars of strawberry and watermelon preserves. We had also two full kegs of Monongahela whisky and one keg of Kentucky rye, to sip on, I suppose, while we whipped the Yankees in a strange sort of bloodless war where there was no discomfort of any kind, only glory. But we learned soon that war was not the way we had imagined it.

I visited Caroline at her own house in Virginia that spring. It was a great white house, larger even than Sweetbriar, and there was a large gay party of officers and their ladies when I got there. I was uncomfortable at first, partly because I was the only lieutenant present, and partly because I had never imagined a house grander and richer than our place at Sweetbriar. But Caroline's house was all of that.

"Matt," she said, smiling, "I'm so glad you finally got to Virginia!"

I held myself stiffly erect, in what I took to be the correct posture of a soldier. "I got here as soon as I could. I'm with the Thirty-sixth Alabama, you know."

"I know, Matt. You look very handsome in your uniform!" Then she lowered her voice and looked directly at me with those clear blue eyes of hers. "I've missed you, Matt."

"I've missed you, too," I said. "I've missed you so much . . . Well . . ."

"I know, Matt." Then she smiled. "Let me introduce you to the other guests."

I kissed her that night for the first time. She was supposed to be dancing with a major from some Virginia regiment or other — the Richmond Cannons, I think, but she came outside with me, out on the wide, pillared porch where the night was heavy with honeysuckle. Then, for no reason at all, seemingly, she began to cry.

"Caroline . . ." I shrank inside for fear that I had offended her. I was young then, and inexperienced, and I didn't know what to do.

"Matt, I'm sorry," she said. "It's not because of you, it's just that everything is so perfect now, so gay and exciting, and the men are all so proud. It will never be this way again."

I didn't know what she was talking about. I didn't realize then that she was wiser than most people in the Confederacy in those days, and already she was beginning to see the end of things. Or at least glimpse it, in some dark part of her woman's mind.

"Matt," she said, "hold me close. I'm afraid."

We stood there for a long while, in the shadows, listening to the orchestra playing "Maryland! My Maryland!" — Virginia should not call in vain, Maryland! — to the tune of "O Tannenbaum," and I felt very close to Caroline that night.

"Matt," she said.

"Yes, Caroline."

"You should be very glad that Sweetbriar is in Alabama and not in Virginia."

It was a strange thing to say, I thought.

"Because the war is going to be fought in Virginia," she said. "The Shenandoah will be wreckage and ashes before it's finished. Everything in the valley will be lost, including this very house where there is so much gaiety tonight. This very same beautiful house, Matt, along with everything else in Virginia, will be lost forever."

"Caroline, don't talk like that!" I said in dismay. "The Southern forces are victorious on every hand. How could the North invade the Shenandoah?"

"I don't know, Matt. But I know they will." Caroline was wiser than most, but not even she could imagine the ruin that was to come in the next three years of war.

I said, forcing myself to laugh, "There's always Sweetbriar, Caroline. Surely you aren't expecting the Yankees to raid into Alabama?"

That possibility was remote, even to Caroline. Then, with some new-found courage, I heard myself saying, "Sweetbriar could be your house, Caroline."

She was silent for a long while.

"Do you mean that, Matt?"

"I love you. I'm asking you to marry me."

It was not the way things were normally done, no formalities, no announcements. But those were not normal times. So that was the way it happened, as we stood there in the night, and the orchestra played that sad new song for the thousands of men yet to die:

> "The years creep slowly by, Lorena,
> The snow is on the grass again . . ."

★ ★ ★

And now, looking again at Caroline, I saw that she remembered.

"Hold me close, Matt. You're everything to me now. You're all I have," she had said.

I didn't understand the meaning behind the words that night, but I could understand the softness of her mouth as I kissed her, the warmness of her young body as I held her against me.

"Matt, I'm afraid," she said. "I wouldn't know what to do without you."

We said a lot of things. I don't remember what, but they must have been similar to things lovers always say. Suddenly Caroline began shivering in my arms.

"The spring nights have a chill," I said awkwardly. "Do you want to go back inside, Caroline?"

"Not to the ballroom. I don't feel like dancing." I could hear fear in her voice and it disturbed me, for Caroline was not one to show such emotions. "Matt, don't ever leave me!"

"I won't, Caroline. Never."

But she began to shake again and I started to take off my jacket to put around her bare shoulders. But she shrugged it off, impatiently, it seemed, and said she would go to her room and get a wrap.

"Shall I wait for you here?" I asked.

"Come with me, Matt."

I knew what she meant, I suppose, but a great many generations of gentlemanly breeding attempted to cloak the words and give them new meaning. But there was a sudden hammering in my chest, and an excitement that

I had never known before. I took her hand. "All right," I said.

That night comes back to me now, still unreal in many ways. I can still hear the muted confusion in the front of the house as the officers and their ladies danced on and on, and I can feel over and over the new excitement of Caroline's nearness to me. And there was danger too, I suppose, but I didn't think of that.

We went up the servants' stairway in the deserted part of the house and emerged into a richly carpeted hallway where dark, disapproving family portraits stared down on us from their high places on the wall. Caroline turned a knob, opened a door. The darkness of the room seemed to leap at us and swallow us. I found her in the darkness and there was a new warmness to her mouth, a new eagerness in her body.

I had not known that there was a passion so strong that it could take you up and bend you and twist you and mold you and make you over again in its own shape. I had not known that there was so much animal in man, until that night.

We lit no lamps. There was just Caroline and me, and the rest of the world was darkness. I was glad for the darkness, for I could feel my face burning at my clumsiness. I cursed my hands for shaking, my voice for being paralyzed. But Caroline's heritage was the wisdom of Eve. I was young, and very much in love, and Caroline crooned to me and I could feel the touch of her fingers on my face, and the warmth of her breath on my neck. Her hands went behind my head and

pulled me down. And, at last, she calmed me against the softness of herself.

I remember the awakening now. How, after a long while, a whitish moon appeared and sifted pale light through the windows of Caroline's room. I could hear the orchestra still playing below us, and the scuffing sounds of the dancers. And the bright, muffled laughter. All foreign and insignificant and having nothing to do with us.

I looked at Caroline and she was even more beautiful than before. And I loved her even more, if that were possible. I touched her gently and she opened her eyes. In the milky light of the moon I saw that her eyes were wide and filled with terror.

"Matt!"

"I'm here, Caroline."

The terror dissolved itself. She smiled and reached her white arms up for me and clung to me. "Matt, I'm not afraid any more. Nothing can separate us now. Nothing!"

After that night, of course, I wanted us to be married as soon as possible. It was Caroline who wanted to wait. It was Caroline who always found excuses to set the wedding date ahead — and ahead again, when the time neared. Until at last our energies and senses and emotions became frayed and worn by the war, and finally we decided to wait until I could get a long furlough and we could go back to Sweetbriar for a while. Of course, the furlough never came, for the

South was poor in men those days, as it was poor in everything.

But I came back to Caroline's house many times, between campaigns. I watched her beautiful old house change along with the rest of the South and become shabby, and a little ridiculous too, because it was still proud. I watched her father become aged and dead-eyed, and it seemed only a matter of formality two years later when we buried him. All the South seemed to be dying. And Jackson's weary troops marched bloodily up and down Caroline's beautiful valley of the Shenandoah, and the doom she had prophesied had come to pass. And more.

With a great surge and with new life the Union armies began to crush Beauregard and Johnson and even the fierce-eyed, fanatical Jackson, and push deep into the heart of the Confederacy. Even to Sweetbriar, which had seemed to me as permanent as the mountains. Not only Virginia, but the entire South lay dying.

Now, sitting with Caroline again, in Caroline's house, I poured another glass of her fine old oloroso and listened with half a mind to the sounds of Larrymoor coming to life. It was difficult to imagine Caroline in a place like Larrymoor, but it was more difficult to imagine her standing helpless in the midst of the ashes and ruins that were now her valley. Here, at least, she had her paintings and a few pieces of silver and a certain authority and social position to remind her of better things and better times. Not many Southern ladies had as much.

"Do you want to tell me about it, Caroline?" I said.

She looked at me blankly. "About Three Fork Road," I explained.

She said nothing.

I hadn't expected her to, because that was where she met Weyland, at her fine white house near Three Fork Road, while her South lay drawing its last breath. Gettysburg then was already history, and so were Chickamauga and Chattanooga, and the Wilderness. The lemon-sucking, evangelistic Jackson was dead, and Jube Early, a good man and a good general, tried to take his place, but Phil Sheridan was not to be denied. The year was 1864, and the blue armies marched into the valley.

They took Caroline's beautiful old house, which was now shabby, and established their brigade headquarters there. There were brigadiers and colonels and majors, and of course the young and promising captains, and for a little while it must have seemed to Caroline as if the past had been regained. There was gaiety again, and fine uniformed officers and gentlemen. And, of course, the excitement that always goes with military success.

The soldiers this time were dressed in blue, but that was a small matter. And besides, the South was dead.

Three Fork Road was where the plank road to New Market crossed a narrow dirt trail near Martin's Run, and that is where the battle was. If "battle" is the name for it.

I was almost crazy when I learned that Caroline had stayed in the house while the blue armies swept over that particular part of Virginia. When I heard about it I

went through the lines, against orders and at night, to find her and bring her out. I remember lying in a wild plum thicket behind the plantation's outbuildings most of that night; then toward dawn I managed to awaken one of Caroline's darkies and got him to tell her where I was. I lay there filthy with the dirt of war, suffering a thousand agonies while I waited. But at last she came. And she said:

"Matt, you shouldn't have come here!"

I don't remember what I said. To look at her was enough for a while.

"Matt, Yankee soldiers are everywhere. They have set up brigade headquarters in the house."

I said, "I came to take you across the lines, maybe to Richmond. You can stay there with friends until the war's over."

But she wouldn't leave. She pointed out to me that it would be foolish to leave the house in the hands of soldiers, with no one to look out for things. And she wasn't afraid of being harmed. The Yankees were gentlemen, she said. More gentlemanly than the Johnny Rebs, maybe. The Southern men were all so shabby . . .

"Do you mean you prefer to remain their prisoner?" I couldn't believe that she was serious.

"I am *not* a prisoner, Matt. Can't you get that through your head?"

She had changed somehow. I should have guessed, I suppose, but how is a man to think such things when he's in love?

"Matt, how did you get through the Yankee lines?"

"My whole company is through the lines," I said. "Anyway, beyond their pickets. We've been coming up at nights, a few men at a time, along Martin's Run. Pretty soon we'll have another company up."

"Where, Matt?"

"Three Fork Road. That's where we're gathering. As soon as we're strong enough we're attacking Sheridan's headquarters in the rear."

"When, Matt?"

"Two nights from now, at midnight. Jube Early has cavalry and infantry massed to hit Sheridan's left flank at the same time. It would never work, though, unless we disrupt Yankee communications by an attack on their headquarters."

"Do you mean General Lee is to begin an offensive in the valley?"

"Not exactly. But, by throwing the Union armies into confusion, Lee gains time to regroup his scattered forces around Petersburg." Then I said, vainly and foolishly, "I'm a captain now, Caroline. Our commander was killed on the James last month."

"Two nights from now . . ." she said thoughtfully.

"You've got to come with me, Caroline."

"I'm safe here, Matt. Safer than I would be trying to get through the Yankee lines."

She wouldn't come. She said again that it would be foolish to leave all her fine china and silver and linens for the soldiers to ruin or steal.

"Matt, if General Early's attack is a success, this land will be in Confederate hands again."

"Yes, that's possible."

"Then, don't you see, it would be better for me to stay."

"There was nothing I could say to change your mind," I said. "You stayed."

"What?" Caroline said, surprised, and I guessed that I had been speaking my thoughts. Outside, on the Larrymoor parade, the high-pitched cavalry bugle sounded insignificant and lost in the vastness of the desert.

"I was just thinking of something," I said. "I was thinking of Three Fork Road. I've known for a long time that you told the Yankees we were gathered there, but I didn't know until the other day why you did it, Caroline."

Her mouth was thin-pressed, determined. She was going to face it out.

"You picked Weyland for some reason," I said. "He was young, ambitious, came from a good family, probably. Sweetbriar was lost, so there was nothing I could give you. Nothing the South could give you. So you told Weyland about our gathering at Three Fork and he made the charge that wiped my company out. And Early's attack was broken up before it got started."

She paled slightly, that was all.

"Weyland was a great hero after that," I went on, "just as you had known he would be. Promotions came fast for him. It would seem that Weyland was a very fortunate man, except for one thing. He was in love with you, Caroline." The wine I held suddenly became bitter and I put it down. "I just wanted to see if you

would deny it," I said. "That, I guess, is the reason I came to Larrymoor."

She stood up then, perfectly composed. She smiled suddenly and without warning. "That's not the real reason, Matt," she said. "You came to Larrymoor because you're still in love with me."

I had known it all along, and so had she, but still it was a shock hearing the words spoken in the silent room. Then — I don't know how it happened — I was holding her.

She walked to me and my arms went out and closed around her. Her head went back for a moment and I looked into those deep blue eyes of hers, as deep as an ocean, as the sky, and then I crushed my mouth against hers with a viciousness and fury that I had never known before. For a moment I imagined that there was the scent of honeysuckle in the room and that I could hear Captain Fitzhugh Dunham's orchestra playing:

> It matters little now, Lorena;
> The past is in the eternal past . . .

"Matt."

"Yes."

"It's true. Everything you said is true. But, don't you see, I couldn't stay in Virginia and watch the South die, the South I had loved so much. I couldn't stand it, Matt, I had to get away."

"Did you have to betray it because you loved it? Did you have to inform against me? Twenty-eight men died that day because of you, Caroline."

"They would have died anyway, most of them. The entire South was dying. That day or some other day, what difference did it make?" Her hands went behind my head and pulled my face down to hers. "Do you still love me, Matt?"

"I don't know. God help me if I do."

I kissed her again and she said, "Yes, you love me. Oh, Matt, I'm glad you followed me here. At first I thought you had come to cause trouble, and I hated you for it. But I don't any more. I love you, Matt. I've always loved you."

"You take strange ways to show it. Why did you marry Weyland if you loved me so much?"

"I explained that, Matt. I had to get away."

"I would have taken you away."

"No, you wouldn't have. You would have fought to the bitter end — just the way you did fight to the bitter end."

"Not quite. I spent six months in the Yankee prison at Fort Delaware because of you, Caroline."

"I'm sorry, Matt. What else can I say?"

What else *could* she say? I looked at her, I studied her, and I saw not a particle of regret, not the slightest twinge of conscience for what she had done. To her, it had been the sensible thing, and to Caroline the sensible thing was the only thing.

"Kiss me, Matt," she murmured. "Hold me close."

"What about Weyland?" I said bitterly. "You married him. He's your husband. You made a fine hero out of him and got him promotions and then married him

because he could offer you things I couldn't. Don't you think you owe him something?"

"Don't talk, Matt."

"I want to talk. I've got a lot of things to get out of me, and they're not pretty things. What about Weyland?"

I felt her shudder against me.

"So that's the way it is . . ." Somehow I was not surprised. "Tell me, Caroline, was it worth it? Was it worth deserting your country for, and me, this five-room mud house on the edge of God's nowhere?"

"It's better than Virginia," she said tightly. "Or Alabama."

"But you hate it just the same, don't you?"

She pressed her forehead against my shoulder and I knew she was crying, although she made no sound and her eyes were dry. "Yes, I hate it. I was going to go back — go anywhere — because I couldn't stand it here any longer. But it's different now that you're here."

"What difference can I make? I'm not a colonel, not even a lieutenant. I'm just a common trooper."

"You won't be forever. I know you won't, Matt. I can wait, as long as you're with me."

It was like talking to a child — a stubborn, persistent, spoiled child who couldn't understand that the world was not made specially for her and for nobody else.

"What do you intend to do?" I said with bitterness. "Send over to headquarters every day and get some 'carpentering' done?"

"Don't talk like that, Matt."

"How else can I talk? You married Weyland. Not me."

I wanted to hurt her now. I wanted to hurl her away from me and walk out of the place and never look at her again. But I couldn't do it. I could feel the warmness of her body against me as I held her and the old familiar hunger returned. I could recall a thousand empty nights. For all nights were empty without her. For a moment there were just the two of us, as it had been once before so long ago, with no past and no future. And for that moment I was content.

"Matt."

"Yes."

"Kiss me again."

I kissed her again, bruising her mouth against mine, and only then did I realize how much I had missed her. I don't know how much time passed before I began to feel a difference in the room — before I heard the steady, measured inhaling and exhaling of someone's breathing. I released Caroline and half turned toward the open doorway. Colonel Weyland was standing there.

CHAPTER FIVE

I won't soon forget that day. That year-long afternoon that I spent in my bunk waiting for the sky to fall. The troopers of A Company were out on detail when I got back to the barracks building, and I was glad for that because I wanted to be alone. I lay there on my bunk and waited for the end to come, waited for Weyland to do whatever he was going to do, and there wasn't a thing I could do to stop it.

In my mind I kept seeing the Colonel's face as I looked around and saw him standing there. I had never seen so much hate on a face before. Morgan's hate was a pallid, insignificant thing compared to it. Skiborsky's hate was nothing. With Weyland, hate was the man and the rest was nothing. I could still hear his measured breathing as he stood there watching us, and I could see the rage in his colorless eyes. He had said only five words.

"Get to your barracks, trooper."

That was all. He closed his mouth tightly, as though he were afraid to say any more. He stood there without moving and I walked past him and out of the house. Now all I had to do was wait. Pretty soon the sergeant of the guard would come, and maybe the corporal too,

and they would take me away to the little two-celled guardhouse behind the stables and there I would stay until a general court-martial was arranged.

I waited, but the sergeant of the guard didn't come. At last recall sounded and the troopers of A Company came straggling in from whatever details they had been on that afternoon.

"It looks like you've got this army by the tail, Reardon," Morgan, who had worked in the stables all day, said dryly.

I tried to grin, but it didn't feel like a grin on my face.

"We're goin' on patrol in the mornin'," Steuber said. "You got your field equipment ready?"

I didn't want to start them wondering any sooner than I had to, so I said I'd better get on it. No one had told me yet that I was under arrest, so I went with the Dutchman and Morgan over to the quartermaster's and drew forage and rations for eight days and two extra bandoleers of carbine ammunition. I expected somebody to be waiting for me when I got back to the barracks, but nobody was there. I made my saddle roll and then went to mess and ate the government dried beans and sowbelly and corn bread, and still nobody tapped me on the shoulder and said come along.

I couldn't understand it. There was no mistaking the hate — almost a madness — I had seen in Weyland's eyes. It didn't make sense that he wouldn't try to do something about it.

After the bugle had sounded for the last time that night, and the barracks were plunged into darkness, I

began to wonder if Caroline had somehow calmed him down and explained the whole thing away. God knows how she would do it, but if anybody could manage it, Caroline could.

But common sense told me that wasn't the answer. Weyland wouldn't be calmed and he wouldn't have the thing explained away. The only explanation was that Weyland had, for some reason, decided against a court-martial. He had figured out something better. What could be better than sending me to a government stockade for twenty years, I didn't know. Whatever it was, though, I would learn about it soon enough.

Reveille was at five-thirty the next morning. At six o'clock the fourteen-man patrol with Captain Halan, a young lieutenant named Loveridge, and a Papago Indian scout formed on the parade. Sergeant Skiborsky, as the senior sergeant on the detail, dressed us up and checked our equipment, and at six-fifteen we rode in columns of twos through the gates of Larrymoor and onto the desert.

Nobody tried to stop us.

Nobody came out of the guardhouse at the last minute to say that Trooper Matthew Reardon was under arrest and was to be held for general court-martial for the offense of attacking an officer's wife. I had expected it, but it didn't happen. I tried to put it out of my mind.

By eight o'clock we had already sweated ourselves dry, and the order was to drink from our canteens only on a command from Captain Halan. We rode north and

west from the fort, across the great boulder-strewn desert and into the barren, bleak foothills of the White Mountains. Early that morning we crossed what had once been a telegraph line — Larrymoor's only connection with the outside world — and the poles had been burned to the ground and the bright copper wire was cut in a thousand places. Morgan grinned widely when he saw it.

The men rode alert that first day, keeping wary eyes on the high, ragged peaks to the north where Kohi's Coyoteros — the White Mountain Apaches — had their stronghold. Near sundown that day the Papago scout pointed to the west, where a sheer, almost invisible column of smoke climbed leisurely into an endless sky. We watched the column part cleanly, as if it had been cut off with a knife, and after a moment another column began to rise. The smoke seemed harmless and very far away.

"Sergeant Skiborsky," Halan said, "take two men and go up ahead with the scout. If there is any trouble you know what to do."

"Yes, sir," Skiborsky said, kneeing up.

"The Boulder Springs are no more than two miles ahead. We'll bivouac there for the night if everything is all right."

"Yes, sir," Skiborsky said again. He wheeled his horse out of column, studying faces as they passed. "Reardon," he said, "you and Morgan."

I must have shown surprise that he would select two green men to go with him that far ahead of the main column. "You might as well find out now," he said,

grinning, "what this country is like." He turned to the Papago. "All right, Juan, let's go." The Indian kicked his pony and we left the column behind at the gallop.

After about a mile the country began to get more ragged and dangerous than ever and we slowed to a walk. Finally we got down and led our horses around and over the high-piled boulders. The Indian, traveling lighter and faster, forged on ahead of us.

Morgan frowned. "I don't like trustin' that redstick so much."

"Papagos?" Skiborsky said, looking around. "They haven't been at war with Americans for years. Juan's all right."

"Is that his real name?" I asked. "Juan?"

"Sure. A lot of Papagos have Mexican names. Some Apaches too, for that matter."

We moved on and pretty soon we saw an enormous hill, almost a mountain, that looked to be nothing but one great boulder piled on top of another. We topped a rise and headed down into a rocky ravine, and there we saw Juan on his belly drinking from a small pool of water. We headed straight for the spring.

"Hadn't we better scout this place first?" Morgan said.

"Juan's already done it, and a lot better than any of us could. There's nothing Apaches like better than killin' Papagos and Pimas. They call them *converted* Indians. They consider them a disgrace to the Indian race for takin' up with the white men."

We stopped at the springs and drank and filled our canteens. Juan took the blanket from his pony's back —

the only saddle he used and cut the sweat from the animal's chest and shoulders with the edge of his hand. He could have been the only living thing for miles around, for all the attention he paid us.

"Morgan," Skiborsky said, "can you find your way back to the column?"

"What the hell do you think I am, a dude?"

"All right, get back and tell Captain Halan it's all right to bring the patrol in. There's no sign of Kohi."

Morgan took a brown twist of tobacco from his shirt pocket — the only kind we could get at the sutler's store — broke off a small piece, and rolled it between his hands to crumble it. He poured the flakes into a charred brier pipe, tamping it carefully, taking his time, plainly daring Skiborsky to tell him to hurry.

The Sergeant said, "Unbit and unsaddle, Reardon. We'll stay here until the column comes." Morgan, in good time, lighted his pipe, climbed back in the saddle, and rode off.

"Is he a friend of yours?" Skiborsky asked after we had set the horses to grazing beside the pool.

"Morgan? I didn't know him until he got in the wagon outside of Tucson."

We filled our own pipes and sat down against a boulder, watching Juan inspect his pony. "He's askin' for trouble," Skiborsky said finally. "Most men get all the trouble they want in a place like Larrymoor, but Morgan goes on askin' for it." He puffed thoughtfully. "If the telegraph was up, maybe we'd find out why."

I remembered the way Morgan had grinned when he saw the telegraph lines down. "What do you mean?"

"I figure the law's after him. Government law, probably. He knows his days are numbered, because sooner or later that telegraph will go up again and we'll have a connection with the outside world."

"I didn't think civilian law bothered men in an outpost like Larrymoor."

"It depends on what the crime is."

We sat there for a while, saying nothing. Skiborsky, it seemed, could be as changeable as a chameleon. He could be an iron-hard sergeant, or a drunken clown, or, on rare occasions, he could be the way he was now, easy to talk to and thoughtful and human. Right now I had a feeling that Skiborsky was actually worrying about Morgan and what was going to happen to him. But tomorrow, I knew, the feeling would be gone.

I watched Juan as he finished rubbing his pony down with his blanket. He was a pretty good size for a Papago, slightly larger than most Apaches but not as thick or big as a Comanche. He wore regulation cavalry pants — without cutting the front and seat out of them, the way Apaches did — and soft buckskin moccasins and a leather vest. His heavy, long-muscled arms were weighted with silver bands and bangles, and around his neck was a sacred necklace of elk's teeth. A battered cavalry campaign hat sat square on his head. Quietly he replaced the blanket on the pony's back, swung up gracefully, and rode away from the springs.

"Where's he going?"

"I never ask Juan where he's going," Skiborsky said. "If it's important he'll tell somebody."

After a while we began to hear the complicated sounds of loose steel and screeching saddle leather and stumbling hoofs and we knew that the patrol was nearing the springs.

"Where's Juan?" Halan asked, after he had dismissed the column and given instructions for setting up the camp.

"He rode off, sir. He didn't say where."

"Any Indian sign around here?"

"Not a thing, sir. I guess Kohi's goin' to stay in his stronghold after all."

But Halan shook his head, looking vaguely worried. "I don't know. We saw some more smoke. They're worked up about something. I wish I knew what it was and what Kohi was going to do about it."

The men began building squad fires and putting on the spiders to cook their supper before the sun went down. The horses were put on a picket line and Halan called to Lieutenant Loveridge. "Mr. Loveridge, will you take evening stables?"

"Yes, sir." The Lieutenant began checking the mounts for cuts and bruises and fatigue and the hundreds of other subtle but fatal illnesses that horses are heir to. The men began taking heavy bags of forage from behind their saddles for feeding. The sun was still high, I noticed, as I worked beside Morgan. I dreaded to see night come, for night is the time for thinking, and Caroline was there in the back of my mind, waiting to come out.

"There's Juan now, sir," Skiborsky said to Captain Halan. "Up there on the ridge. You can just see him."

We all looked up, seeing the small figure silhouetted on the ridge against the fading sky. He rode his pony in a small tight circle. He completed the circle three times.

"He's spotted something," Skiborsky said.

Halan nodded. "It looks like it. Take the men you had before, Sergeant, and we'll go up and have a look."

So we got our horses from the picket line and saddled up again and rode up to where the Papago scout was waiting. We had no trouble spotting the thing that was bothering Juan. Down the rocky grade, on the other side of the ridge, a swarm of vultures glided sluggishly, heavy-winged, around and around. Halan took off his hat and wiped his face with his yellow handkerchief.

"I guess we'd better go down," he said quietly.

We kneed down the grade carefully, keeping wary eyes on the high ground around us. Most of us, after finishing the schooling at Larrymoor, had learned something about Indians, and especially about Kohi and his Coyoteros. The subject of Indians was brought up in all conversations when two or more troopers got together; it dominated all discussion and most of the thinking. And long recitals were heard about Indian torture and savagery.

Around Tucson it had been Cochise and his Chiricahuas. Or maybe the Pinaleño. And the newspapermen wrote long stories about the Army campaigns against them and sent the stories back east to be printed in the big-city papers. But in the White Mountains it was different. There was no publicity up here, and Army officers avoided Larrymoor like the

plague. There was little chance for advancement, and no chance at all for glory. But there were plenty of chances to fight and die, if that was what you were looking for.

We learned quickly that most of the officers were bitter, with reason, but the men for the most part took it philosophically, for there was no other place for them to go. Some of them — like Morgan, maybe — almost dreaded the day when peace would come to the frontier north of the Gila. It was their last stronghold, too, in the face of the oncoming tide of "civilization," just as it was with Kohi and his White Mountain Apaches. They fought to the death and showed no quarter, the troopers and the Indians, but they had one thing in common: They both had learned to hate the white settlers now coming into the Arizona country.

I could see that hate now on Skiborsky's face, for he had already guessed what we would find at the bottom of the grade. The vultures, startled, flapped noisily and rose heavily into the air as we approached. We saw then that it had been an Apache camp — a permanent camp, more or less, for the wickiups had been laid out in orderly rows, like an army camp. The wickiups had all been burned. Burned, and scattered, and hacked, and strewn all over the floor of the valley.

We found more than twenty fairly new graves at the far end of the camp, the mounds covered with the vulture-cleaned bones of horses. Halan looked shaken, almost sick.

"Well," he said flatly, "we know now what Kohi is mad about."

It was pretty clear what had happened, but the Captain sent Juan out to scout the nearby valleys before any of us put it into words. It didn't take Juan long to find what he was looking for. He reported that there were traces of a wagon train — twelve to fifteen wagons in it — less than a mile to the east. The trace, Juan guessed, was nearly a month old.

So the pieces fitted together. The men from the wagon train had attacked the Apache village, burned it, scattered it, killed everybody they could find — women and children and old men, mostly, because the signs showed that the braves had been away at the time of the attack. Hunting, probably. Anyway, the wagon train would never have made the move if the warriors had been there.

Skiborsky cursed softly as we kicked around through the ashes. "So this is the white man's civilization," he said bitterly. "You can't blame Kohi much, I guess, for not wanting any part of it."

"How about that wagon we saw coming from Tucson?" Morgan said.

"Part of this same wagon train, probably, that had to stop with a busted axle or something. Whether it was or not wouldn't have made any difference to Kohi, though. His village had already been sacked and burned. His old warriors and women and children already killed. What puzzles me is why he hasn't raised more hell than he has."

"Maybe this'll teach him to go back to his reservation and stay there," Morgan grunted.

"What would he do on a reservation? They can starve in the summer. And in the winter they can freeze. While the 'Indian experts' in Washington fiddle away time and rob him blind."

Halan, hearing that, said, "That's enough of that, Skiborsky."

"Yes, sir."

Juan was grinning widely, for the Papagos and Apaches were bitter enemies. He poked here and there among the burned-out wickiups while Halan got the thing organized enough in his mind to make a report. The vultures circled lazily above us and began to drift away. There was nothing for them now. Apaches always bury their dead where they fall, if possible, and that was what they had done here. They had cut the throats of the dead men's horses and poured the blood on the graves and left the dead horses beside them in the belief that the animals would serve the dead in the next world. But the horses were picked clean now. And the vultures drifted, watching, waiting.

It was near dark when we headed back toward the bivouac. We saw another gauzy column of smoke rise gracefully in the distance. But what was being said with the smoke we could only guess.

Sleep came slowly that night to most of us. Mountain darkness came down suddenly and cold and we lay in our blankets listening to the mournful barking of coyotes in the distance — wondering if they were really coyotes or Apaches. The coyotes themselves couldn't tell. Larrymoor and Weyland and Caroline seemed a long way off. I wondered what the Colonel would have

thought up for me by the time we got back to the fort. If we got back. As I listened to the coyotes, it didn't seem very important.

Reveille was at four o'clock that morning. Skiborsky came around and gave every sleeping trooper a heavy cavalry boot in the ribs.

"Rise and shine, buckos. See to your carbines and stand by until you get other orders from the Captain."

We got up numbly in the before-dawn cold of the mountains and took our prepared places around the patrol area, waiting for the sun. Dawn is the favorite time of attack for Apaches. They almost never attack at night, believing that a warrior killed in darkness will wander in darkness forever in the afterlife. After a while the guards came in, stiff and evil-tempered with the cold, and took their places behind rocks or boulders or brush, to wait.

Nothing happened. The sky paled in the east, and after a long wait the sun popped brilliant and blazing over the ridges, and the men began to relax their death holds on their carbines.

"Juan," Halan called, "you'd better go out and see what you can find."

The Papago padded off on foot, as silently as a cat, and we all held our places. After fifteen or twenty minutes he came back and said there was sign of Apaches in the nearby hills, but they had pulled out during the night.

We fed our horses and watered them and inspected them and doctored them, and after all that was done we

had ten minutes to cook breakfast, eat it, and get in the saddle.

"How do you like the cavalry?" Skiborsky grinned at Morgan.

"Go to hell!"

It was the fourth day out that Juan came back from a lone scout looking excited and more than a little worried. He led us up to some high ground and pointed to some smudged, meaningless traces. Halan and Skiborsky got down and inspected the traces thoroughly, while Juan prowled around the area, breaking up animal droppings with a stick.

Halan looked up. "Chiricahua?" he asked the scout.

Juan nodded. The Chiricahuas shod their ponies with stiffened, iron-hard rawhide. The trace was simple to identify.

"How long ago?"

The scout shrugged. About as long as it took a white man to eat four or five times. A day and a half, or thereabouts.

"It doesn't make much sense, sir." Skiborsky frowned. "What would Chiricahuas be doin' up here in Coyotero country?"

"Maybe they're renegades, Sergeant."

"Maybe, sir, but I thought the Cochise renegades were goin' with Geronimo down in Mexico."

Halan stood up slowly and beat some dust from his sweaty campaign hat. "It could be," he said thoughtfully, "that Kohi is offering them something up here in the White Mountains that not even Geronimo

can offer them. But don't ask me what that something could be, Skiborsky. I don't know."

We came out of the mountains that day and met an E Company patrol in a dry creek bed and bivouacked with them for the night. The next day we cut another wide swath across the desert and headed back for Larrymoor.

Once out of the mountains, we felt safe from attack. The men dozed in their saddles, sweated dry and dumb with fatigue. We smelled of horses and stale sweat, and were filthy with the peculiar clinging filth of the desert, and we were crawling with a hundred different kinds of sand lice that we had picked up in the brush. We didn't look much like soldiers, toward the end of the sixth day. We looked and felt more like a band of saddle tramps, and the men became irritable, and our thighs became chafed from the incessant friction of saddle leather, and our nerves wore raw as we listened to the everlasting rattle of loose steel and the grunting of the horses.

Even Halan became drugged with fatigue and heat. He rode slouched and heavy at the head of the straggling column, fully aware that such riding would likely cost him the service of a good horse because of saddle sores, but sunk too deep in apathy to care. Ten minutes of every half hour we loosened our cinches and led our mounts, and our feet became sore, for thin-soled cavalry boots were never made to walk in. Not over the gravel and rocks of the desert.

Fifteen minutes of every hour we dismounted and unbitted and grazed. We did it, not thinking of our horses, because it was cavalry routine. We did it

automatically and dumbly, thinking ahead to the time when we would see Larrymoor again. The men wondered out loud if the pay wagon had got through from Fort Hope, in the New Mexico country. And if the pay wagon hadn't got through, would the sutler extend credit until it did? Then we would bit up, tighten cinches, climb wearily into the McClellans, and ride again.

Kohi must have known how men feel near the end of a desert patrol. Because that was when he hit us.

Kohi must have smiled as he saw us straggling raggedly into the rocky draw. Later, I imagined that I had picked Kohi out of that swarming band of Indians firing down on us from the jagged walls of the draw, and I imagined that I had seen him smiling. But it was only imagination, of course.

It happened very quickly. I was to learn that everything Apaches did was quick. We rode into the draw, and the ridges and boulders became suddenly alive with a stunning burst of fire. I remember sitting stupidly, watching three troopers pitch out of their saddles. Kohi had planned it well, for three more troopers had fallen, and four valuable horses, before the shock of combat cleared our brains.

I became aware of the noise and confusion, and Skiborsky's bellowing, and the lunging and pitching of riderless horses there in the close confines of the gully. There were eight troopers now, where there had been fourteen a few minutes before. Heaven alone knew how many Apaches there were.

"Skiborsky!" I heard Halan yelling. "Take the patrol up the wall of the draw. Up to that big flat rock. We can make a stand there." He wheeled his horse, turning to the young, bewildered lieutenant. "Mr. Loveridge, take one man as horse-holder and get back up the draw with these animals. If it's possible, bring them out and get them behind us."

The men, lashed to life by Skiborsky's curses and threats, began swinging down from the saddles. Carbines came out of boots and began answering the Indian rifles. We clawed our way up the rocky wall, and when we reached the top, Halan called, "Hold your fire. Make them come after us."

They came after us when they saw us coming out of the draw. There were four of them, paint-smeared, completely naked except for breechclouts and knee-high moccasins and bright-colored, dirty headbands. They came as fast as shadows flicking across the ground, and Captain Halan yelled:

"Fire!"

One volley was enough. The four Apaches went down under the blast of the carbines and we ran for a rock.

The eight of us made it to the rock and squirmed over it on our bellies and dropped down to the other side. We now had solid rock to our backs and a scattering of boulders in front to furnish us a serviceable fortress. There was a sharp report of a carbine beside me and I looked around and saw Morgan squinting over the barrel of his saddle gun. He looked up soberly.

"By God, this is a different kind of war!"

"Where's the Dutchman?"

"The Dutchman can take care of himself." Then Steuber crawled up beside us, sweating and cursing.

"By God," he said, "we're goin' to be busy for a while."

Morgan spat. "Not for long. We're not goin' to last long. There must be half a hundred of them red bastards hidin' behind rocks out there."

It was suddenly quiet. We lay there in a rough half circle waiting for them to come after us. Skiborsky and the captain had inched their way up to some high ground to get the lay of the land. Then Skiborsky inched down again and came toward us.

"What're they waitin' on?" Morgan wanted to know. "Why don't they come?"

Skiborsky grinned that grin of his. "They'll come soon enough. Anybody here feel like bein' a hero?"

"We'll all be heroes before long. From duty to killed in action."

"The Captain says to ask for a volunteer," Skiborsky said. "Somebody's got to break out of here and bring some help, and damn quick."

"From Larrymoor?" I asked.

"Hell, no. We'd all be dead by then. The E Company patrol ought to be somewhere south of Star Creek — between the creek and the Boulders, the Captain judges. With some luck a fast rider could get through and bring them back in time to save a scalp or two."

"I don't feel lucky," Morgan said.

"I'll try it," Steuber said, looking over the barrel of his carbine.

"You make too good a target, Dutchman. Besides, no horse could hold you up for that long. How about you, Reardon?"

"All right."

"A goddamn hero," Morgan said, and spat in disgust.

Skiborsky looked at him, grinning fiercely. "Maybe all your yellow's not on your legs, trooper."

Morgan's head jerked up. "Maybe you want a hole in your gut. Say something else like that to me and you'll get it."

"You're the man for the job, Morgan. You're light and you know about horses, and you can shoot if you have to. How about it?"

"Is that an order?"

"I told you I'm askin' for a volunteer."

"Then go to hell. I'll stay here and die my own way."

"Someday," Skiborsky said, "I'll break your back, Morgan, just to hear it crack. All right, Reardon, you get the job. Go talk to the Captain. He'll tell you what to do."

The desert was still quiet, but not as quiet as it had been. We could hear them moving around out there, skittering from one boulder to another, holding a powwow of some kind or other. I slung my carbine and began edging away toward the rock where the Captain was.

"Trooper Reardon, sir. Skiborsky said you had a job for me."

"Did he tell you what it was?"

"Yes, sir."

"You may not make it," he said.

"Then I guess none of us will."

He wiped his face on his handkerchief. "Yes, I guess that's right. That's a good-sized war party for Apaches — about fifty, I'd say. They'll charge before long. We'll be able to throw them back the first time, maybe the second . . . But they'll make it on the third try. They always do. Maybe the E Company won't be enough to help us, but we've got to try it anyway."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know where the place is?"

"South of Star Creek, sir. Between the creek and the Boulders."

"That ought to be about right. Mr. Loveridge got the horses out of the draw and has them behind us now, back there on the other side of that boulder. Do you think you can get back there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well . . . good luck, Reardon."

It wasn't going to be an easy matter getting to the horses. There was about a hundred yards of open desert between us and Lieutenant Loveridge, and it had to be crossed some way. I decided that it would be better to run than to try to crawl from rock to rock, so I got a good hold on my carbine and pulled my campaign hat down on my forehead and lit out.

It was a long way. A lot longer than a hundred yards, it seemed. I must have made the jump just as they were getting ready to attack because I heard the Indians let out a howl of anger, and then they were burning the air down with bullets and arrows. The troopers were

yelling and shooting now like crazy men, and the young lieutenant up ahead was waving me on.

I finally made it, but I felt that I had already used up all my luck. I wanted to go back and tell the Captain to get somebody else to do the job.

"Are you all right, trooper?" the Lieutenant asked.

"Yes, sir," I said. "The Captain wants somebody to locate the other patrol and get them to give us a hand. I got the job."

The lieutenant and the horse-holder were out of the line of fire now, hidden from the draw by the giant boulder. But I was just as glad that I wasn't in their place. Sooner or later the Indians were going to discover those horses back there, guarded by only two men. And then they would charge the position, and I didn't like to think of what would happen after that. The horse-holder cut out a strong-looking roan and tightened the cinch for me. Then we heard the yelling and shooting begin again across the open stretch of desert and we knew the attack had started.

"You'd better ride, Reardon," the Lieutenant said. "You'll have a better chance of making it while things are hot."

I got in the saddle and looked at the stretch in front of me. Maybe I said a little prayer. I don't remember. Then I put the iron to the roan and we spurted into the open.

We went straight through it, because there was no other way to go. Over the rattle of gunfire I could hear the troopers shouting me on, while I hung onto the horse's neck and wondered how the Apaches could

possibly miss an animal that size. Maybe they were shooting at me, and that was the trouble. Maybe they all had a greedy eye on that big red horse, and maybe they were all thinking what a figure they'd cut astride an animal like that, and that was the reason they didn't aim for him. If I had been in their place, I would have put a bullet through the big roan's heart, no matter how pretty an animal he was, and then I would have gone after the rider.

But you never know what goes on in an Apache's mind. Somehow, they had missed us both, and the racket of the battle fell quickly behind once we were in the open. The roan was pounding and grunting, and finally I realized that I still had the iron to him, so I let up a little and gave him a chance to breathe.

CHAPTER SIX

It was about eight miles from the place where the Apaches jumped us to the Boulders, and about two miles farther to Star Creek. A long way on the desert, especially if you're riding a horse that's already tired and you're not sure if he's going to hold up for the distance or not. It doesn't make it any easier when you know the Indians must have fresh ponies being held back out of line of fire somewhere, and you keep wondering what you're going to do if they decide to use them and come after you.

They didn't come, though. I guess they figured the patrol was more important than just one man, and they were going to concentrate their attention there and finish it off before I had a chance to bring help.

I tried to ride light, but it's hard to ride light when the heat has sapped your energy and wrung you dry. After a while you get to feeling that it doesn't make any difference one way or the other. You're not going to make it anyway. So you just hang on and let your horse run himself to death and you don't much care if he dies under you or not.

But the big roan didn't die. He had been cared for and pampered and fed on plenty of government corn

shipped all the way across the desert from Mexico, and all that was paying off now. He was big and strong and had a heart as big as Texas. I finally realized that and gave him a chance. I began to pace him. We walked, we cantered, we galloped, and then we walked again, all in the prescribed cavalry fashion, even when my thighs ached from wanting to sink the iron to him.

The sun got hotter — or seemed to get hotter — and the big roan grunted and stumbled but he didn't go down. And finally we got to the Boulders. I loosened the cinch for a minute and let the horse drink sparingly at the spring, and I filled my saddle canteen and drank myself.

I wondered where the E Company patrol was. I looked at the sky, and the sun was still high. Too high. Apache almost always stops his attack when darkness sets in, but if I waited that long it wouldn't make any difference whether I found the patrol or not. I tightened the cinch and got back in the saddle.

When I got to Star Creek I followed it south, hoping it was the right direction, but there was no way to be sure. If I had a bugle, I thought, I could blow the thing and maybe the bugler with E Company would answer me and let me know which way they were. But I didn't have a bugle, and probably E Company didn't have one either. I did have a Colt's .44-caliber revolving pistol, though. I drew it and fired three times into the thin desert air.

I waited for what seemed a long time. Then, from far off, came the answer *spat, spat, spat*, sounding like a woman beating a rug about three miles away.

I hoped it was the patrol. I hoped it wasn't Kohi, or one of his lieutenants, setting a trap for some damn-fool cavalryman who didn't have any better sense than to be riding around by himself in the desert. But I couldn't sit there worrying about it. I nudged the roan forward again, down the creek, where the shots had come from.

About ten minutes later a two-man detail broke out of some brush ahead of me. A red-faced, red-eyed corporal, and a Pima scout.

"You from E Company patrol?" I called.

"That's right," the corporal said. "Who the hell are you?"

"With A. We got jumped up north and need some help."

The corporal took two thoughtful bites from a twist of tobacco. "That horse of yours looks about played out. You'd better take my mount and go on down the creek and tell the Lieutenant about it. That's Lieutenant Gorgan. He's in charge of this patrol."

Lieutenant Gorgan was a white-haired, red-faced man old enough to be a colonel but would probably retire no higher than a captain. If he managed to live that long. The patrol was taking a break in a sandy bend of the dry creek as I broke through the brush.

"Mr. Gorgan, sir?"

"That's right, trooper."

"Trooper Reardon, sir, of A Company."

He listened quietly while I told him about the attack and where it was and how long I thought Halan could

hold out. He gazed at the sun for a moment, then motioned to his sergeant.

"Sergeant," he said wearily, as though he were discussing the weather and the subject bored him, "you'd better pull out two men to act as trains. Strip down to battle gear, carbines, revolving pistols, and two bandoleers of ammunition per man. Throw off forage and surplus equipment — trains can bring it up later."

The thing was done with no fuss at all. "Reardon," Lieutenant Gorgan said, "would you like to go along with us?"

"Yes, sir, I would."

"Then you'd better fall into the column someplace." He rode to the head of the column, which had already formed, raised his arm lazily, and called, "Forwar-r-rd!" as though he were on the parade at Larrymoor. "At the walk, ho-o-o-o!" Then, "At the trot, ho-o-o-o!"

There is a great deal of difference between crossing the desert all by yourself and doing it with a column of cavalry. When you're alone the emptiness and silence are overwhelming, and the heat starts crazy ideas running around in your brain like demented mice, and, after a while, if it goes on long enough, you begin seeing things that you know are not really there, and pretty soon you began to wonder what is real and what isn't. That's the way the desert gets you when you're alone. But when you're in the company of twelve good tough troopers, and an officer you can trust — then it's different.

The desert didn't seem so big now, or so powerful. We strung out across that stretch of wasteland raising enough dust and making enough racket for a small

army. There was something comforting in the grunting of the horses and the rattle of loose steel and the hoarse curses of the troopers. There was even a comfort in the strangling dust that boiled up around us and over us as we rode. I was not alone, and that's the important thing when you're in the desert.

We reached some high ground finally and Lieutenant Gorgan halted the column to let the horses blow. "Reardon," he called, "you'd better come up here with me." I kneed out of line and rode up to where the officer was loosening his cinch.

"Hell on horses," he said dryly, cutting the leather from his mount's chest. He seemed more concerned with his animal than with the patrol up ahead somewhere. If there was anything left of the patrol. He looked up.

"Loosen your cinch, trooper. We're not going to be of any help if our horses break down. Now, just whereabouts is this fracas taking place?"

I pointed to a rise of boulders and cactus in the distance. "Beyond that ridge, maybe a mile on the other side, there's a dry gully, sir. I judge it to be a long one, from what I saw of it. That's where they jumped us."

Gorgan took out his binoculars and studied the rise. He put the glasses back in the case and called back, "Unbit and graze!"

"Sir . . ." I started.

Lieutenant Gorgan looked a question.

"It's just that the patrol is pretty hard pressed, sir."

He grinned faintly, wearily. "And you think we ought to be getting on. Well, maybe we should. But if there are as many Indians as you say, what could we do?"

I thought of Morgan, Steuber, even Skiborsky. Maybe they were dead by now. Maybe they were all dead. And here we sat, almost within sight of the massacre, doing nothing about it.

"Patience, trooper," Gorgan said softly, still grinning faintly. "It doesn't pay to get worked up in this heat." He called back over his shoulder, "Sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

"Have the men cut some brush, Sergeant. Mesquite, sage, greasewood, anything they can find. A good pile."

I saw then what he meant to do, but it still seemed a criminal waste of time, when time could mean the difference between life and death for ten good cavalrymen less than three miles away. But the troopers cut the brush, a big pile of it, and they tied it in three large bundles and looped the ends of their lariats around them.

"Sergeant," Gorgan said, "do you see that queer-looking rock formation up ahead, kind of like an outsized X, or maybe a spread-eagle man?"

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said.

"I think that's the place. Just behind that formation. Give us a good show, Sergeant."

The sergeant grinned. "Yes, *sir!*" He turned on his heel and bellowed, "Parker, Lorrain, get hold of that brush and follow me."

Gorgan rubbed his chin thoughtfully as the sergeant and two troopers cut out from the column and headed toward the rock formation. Each of them dragged large bundles of brush from the ends of lariats, and a huge curtain of dust boiled up behind them.

The rest of the column bitted up, tightened cinches, and mounted. We rode down the grade at the walk. Before we reached the rise the Lieutenant brought us into line, with the great cloud of dust at our backs.

"I suppose," Gorgan said to no one in particular, "that we should have guidons flying and bugles blowing for a thing like this. But we'll have to make up for that in other ways, I guess."

We topped the ridge in thin line formation. I glanced back and saw the three troopers riding crazily in circles, boiling up more red dust. The wind caught the dust cloud, seemed to lift it and drop it on top of us.

"At the gallop!" Gorgan shouted. "Guide on me!"

We swept down from the ridge, a thin insignificant line of light cavalry. But, to the Apaches seeing us coming out of that storm of dust, we must have looked like a regiment. Gorgan bellowed orders to draw pistols as soon as we came within sight of the gully. We drew our pistols and emptied them at full gallop, without hoping to hit anything. But the shock and racket of fourteen revolving pistols being emptied at once added to the illusion of numbers, and that was what Gorgan wanted. We stopped long enough to let our covering of wind-swept dust catch up with us and fired one shocking volley with our carbines. Then, as we swept past what had once been the patrol's horse-holders, Gorgan shouted orders to draw sabers and charge.

I don't know what the Apaches thought as they saw us charging down on them, shooting and yelling like crazy men, but they must have been looking past us, into that swirling dust, and wondering what was

coming after us. They had seen me get away, knowing that I was going for help. Possibly they had even let me get away on purpose, with the idea of killing off both patrols at once while they had the numbers to work with. But now they weren't sure. They couldn't see what was coming out of that dust, and what they couldn't see they didn't like.

But they didn't run in that first moment of uncertainty. They came diving at us from tops of boulders, attempting to dismount us. I saw Gorgan's horse go down under the shock of an Apache bullet. The Lieutenant went head over heels over his horse's head, hitting the ground as solidly as a rock. His face, I saw, was white as he tried to get up. He groped blindly, the wind knocked out of him, and then I saw the painted Apache flicking across the ground toward him, his scalping knife held high.

Gorgan saw him, but he couldn't move. He crouched on his hands and knees, shaking his head like a poled steer. My carbine was empty and so was my pistol, but I still had my saber. I put iron to my horse and we spurted toward Gorgan, almost riding him down. I leaned far over my mount's neck and took a whistling cut; feeling the honed edge of the saber bite into flesh and bone and come away dripping. Grinning sickly, the Lieutenant raised his hand and waved to me.

The remnants of the A Company patrol were coming out from behind their boulders now, firing and yelling and adding to the confusion. The Apaches began to break as we hacked at them with the bright edges of our sabers. Surely, they reasoned, no handful of cavalry

would charge a full war party of Apaches without knowing that there was great strength to back them up.

They began to give away, skittering from one rock to another at first, then becoming disorganized and confused in the sudden, senseless fury. Finally, with howls of anger and frustration, they turned and ran.

We made a show of pursuing. But only a show. We reloaded and fired another volley as they retreated into the gully and ran for their ponies at the far end of the draw. We then dismounted and took up positions behind rocks, but they didn't come back. We heard the beat of pony hoofs far down the draw, and a fan of dust began to rise up into the endless sky. They were gone as suddenly as they had appeared.

Captain Halan came from somewhere, out of the smoke and the dust, and shook Gorgan's hand. He turned to me and said, "A good job, Reardon. I shall mention you in my report to Colonel Weyland."

Hearing Weyland's name was a shock. I had almost forgotten that there was a Colonel Weyland, or a Caroline . . . There didn't seem to be anything to say, so I saluted and walked over to the boulders where the A Company patrol had been dug in.

Skiborsky was sitting on the ground, his pants down, inspecting an arrow scratch along his thigh. "Dutchman," he said, "how long do you figure it's been since that arrow stuck me?"

"Maybe a half hour. Why?"

The Sergeant took a deep breath, held it for what seemed a long time, then let it out. "Then I guess it wasn't poisoned."

"What happens when they're poisoned?" Steuber wanted to know.

"It depends on what they use. If it's snake poison, you get sick and turn green and in about twenty minutes you're dead. If they make poison from rotten deer liver and pulverized insects, it's something else again. After about ten minutes your head starts to poundin' like it would bust, and after about ten more minutes you start yellin' and they have to tie you down. Inside of an hour, if you're lucky, you're dead."

"Can't you talk about something else?" Morgan said.

Skiborsky grinned at him. "What's the matter, Morgan, your guts still crawling?"

Anger and old, old hate crowded Morgan's eyes. But then he saw me and said, "You took your own goddamn good time about gettin' back, Reardon."

The Dutchman grinned. "Don't let Morgan fool you. He's damn glad to see you. We all are."

"I should have taken that job myself," Morgan said bitterly. "It would have been better than lyin' here lookin' over a carbine at a bunch of goddamn yellin' redsticks. Besides, you'll probably get a medal out of it."

I thought of Colonel Weyland, and I didn't think I would get any medal. "Did anybody else get hurt?" I asked.

Skiborsky pulled his pants up. "Mr. Loveridge," he said. "And Carlston, his horse-holder."

"They got their brains scattered all over the goddamn desert," Morgan said.

Steuber, sitting with his back against a rock, puffing contentedly on a charred cob pipe, seemed untouched by it all. A picture of a man relaxing after a hard day's work, that was all.

Toward sundown E Company's trains came up with the supplies that had been left behind. We rolled Lieutenant Loveridge and Carlston up in blankets, then we went to the gully and got the six dead troopers down there and rolled them up too. Since we were less than a day's ride from Larrymoor, Halan decided to take them back for burial. But that meant riding at night, for bodies wouldn't last long in the intense heat of the desert sun.

There wasn't much talking that night. The troopers cooked their own bacon and coffee over two small squad fires, and after we had eaten we got ready to ride again. We rolled the eight dead men across their saddles, tied them on, and rode away from the gully just as darkness was coming on. We didn't bother about the Indians. Apache could take care of his own dead. If the buzzards and coyotes didn't get there first.

We all had plenty of time to think on that long road back to Larrymoor. We could think of cool water, and meals that didn't consist entirely of bacon and hard bread and greasy coffee, and of soft beds, and the sutler's whisky, and beautiful women. I found myself thinking of Caroline again.

Riding beside eight dead troopers, still hearing the Apache screams, still turning sick with fear . . . but what I thought about was Caroline. Caroline, cool and beautiful. Caroline's ripe mouth and soft body. I

couldn't think of anything else, and I couldn't hate her. I could just want her.

But, now and then, as we rode through the blackness of the desert night, I would remember Weyland. And I could see again the blazing hate in those eyes of his.

We reached Larrymoor about an hour before reveille that morning, dead tired, filthy, our throats and eyes and nerves rubbed raw with desert grit. We took care of our horses. Before anything else. We watered them and fed them and brushed them and stabled them. Then we laid the bodies out for burial and finally Captain Halan said we could go to our barracks.

We scrubbed ourselves outside the barracks. Standing in big wooden tubs filled with cold well water, we lathered our filthy bodies with yellow soap and rubbed with brushes until the crust of dirt came off. Then, raw and shivering, we went into the barracks and pulled on clean underdrawers and slept.

We slept through the simmering heat of the morning and into the baking, stifling heat of the afternoon. We didn't hear the brittle whang of shovels striking the hard clay earth of the post cemetery, we didn't hear the bugles or the goings and comings of other troopers in the barracks. We slept. And finally, when our bunks were sopping and steamy and the day had mostly passed, we awoke. But I awoke before the others.

I awoke with a big hand on my shoulder and the ugliest face I ever saw grinning into mine.

"Get up, Reardon. They want you over at headquarters." It was Roff, the first sergeant.

In the back of my mind, before I had time to figure it out, I thought, Well, I don't have to wait any longer. The Colonel's finally decided what to do with me.

"Who wants me?"

"I don't know. The Captain just said for you to report over to headquarters."

"What's it about?"

"I don't know that, either. But you'd better shave before you go over, if you're goin' to see the Colonel."

Roff grinned and walked out. My head pounded dully with the heat. My legs ached, and my rump and thighs were saddle-rubbed and sore. Automatically I reached for my garrison shoes and yellow-striped pants and pulled them on. I fumbled until I found my issued razor and soap, then I went outside and lathered and began pulling the week-old beard out of my face. I did it without thinking, the way a man must do such things on his last day, just before they lead him up the thirteen steps and put the black hood over his head and the rope around his neck and let him drop. There didn't seem to be any sense in it, but I did it anyway.

I went back inside and found my garrison cap and a clean blue shirt, because you had to look like a soldier and be a credit to the cavalry arm when you went to see the Colonel. The Colonel was particular about such things. I pulled my suspenders up and tied the yellow neckerchief, and I was ready. As ready as I would ever be.

"Reardon!"

Captain Halan caught me just as I was coming out of the barracks. He was clean-shaven and scrubbed,

wearing his best hand-tailored uniform and London boots. He looked as if he had slept, but I didn't know when he had managed it. "I'll go over to headquarters with you, Reardon," he said.

"Yes, sir. Do you know what it's about, sir?"

He grinned. "Yes, Reardon, I do, but I'll not tell you about it now. Major Burkhoff will do that in good time."

I must have looked puzzled, for Halan laughed.

"I don't understand, sir."

"You will. You will, Reardon, all in good time."

Halan seemed in good humor and well satisfied with himself. I didn't know what to make of it, but I decided I didn't like it. I didn't like that grin of his, or that casual way of talking to me — not the way an officer talks to a common enlisted man. But I couldn't break him down. We walked across the parade without saying anything else, and into the headquarters building. A grizzled old sergeant major looked up as we came in. He looked at me as if he had a special grudge against me.

"Is Major Burkhoff in, Sergeant?" Halan asked.

"Yes, sir. He'll see you now, Captain."

We went into a small partitioned office where the Major sat red-faced and sweating behind a plank desk. "Rest, Captain," he said wearily, stopping Halan's salute in mid-air. Then he looked at me as if I were the prize stud in a horse show. "Is this the man?"

"Yes, sir. Trooper Matthew Reardon, the man I mentioned in my report, Major."

Thoughtfully, Major Burkhoff took a brittle cigar from a box on the desk and rolled it in his mouth to moisten it. The Captain pulled up a chair and sat down, stretching his long legs comfortably. I didn't move. An enlisted man remains at attention in the presence of his officers until he is given permission to rest.

"At ease, Reardon," Burkhoff said after he'd got his cigar going to suit him.

I relaxed slightly. I didn't understand what was going on, but I would find out soon enough, and I didn't think I was going to like it when I did. The Major had my enlistment papers on the desk now, spread out before him. He sat back looking at the papers, then at me.

"Do you like soldiering, Reardon?" he asked abruptly.

The question startled me. I had never wondered whether or not I liked soldiering, but I had been a soldier for a good part of my adult life and I was slighty surprised to realize that I had never complained about it.

"Yes, sir," I said. "I like it all right, sir."

"According to your enlistment papers, Reardon, you were at one time a commander of a troop of cavalry."

"In the Confederate Army, sir."

"You must understand," the Major said, looking at me, "that the war of the rebellion is over and finished. The point is that you have had experience in commanding cavalry, is that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anyway . . ." He looked at Halan, and I had the feeling that he was grinning — or leering — from behind that shaggy dragoon's mustache of his. "Anyway, Colonel Weyland is a fair-minded man in such matters. It's the Indians we have to contend with now, not the Johnny Rebs. Is that clear, Reardon?"

"Yes, sir." It was all I could say. Sooner or later he would get around to what he had on his mind.

"As a matter of bald fact," the Major said, and his voice was suddenly harsh, "we're short of officers here at Larrymoor, Reardon. We're short of officers and we're not getting any replacements. Not even the shavetail pups from the Point that they used to send us. As you know, Mr. Loveridge was killed in your brush with Kohi yesterday — owing to his own damnfoolishness, no doubt, but killed anyway." He sighed and put his cigar down. "The point is this: Considering the emergency of the situation, Colonel Weyland is empowered to make promotions from the ranks to the grade of second lieutenant — temporary, of course, until it clears Washington. Captain Halan has recommended you for the job, Reardon."

I don't know how long I stood there letting the idea roll around in my mind. An officer in the United States Cavalry. The idea was ridiculous and completely impossible, for I knew what Weyland would do to a recommendation like that.

"Quite a surprise, isn't it?" Halan grinned.

"Yes, sir. It is."

"Well, do you want the job, Reardon?"

It wasn't a question of whether or not I wanted the job. There were at least a hundred men on the post who should be ahead of me when the field promotions were handed out. I remembered the sergeant major in the next room, and the look he had given me. He was one of them. And Skiborsky, and Roff, and God knew how many more.

I heard myself saying, "But a thing like this can't just be handed out, can it, sir? Like an EM's promotion?"

"It can if the Colonel says so. And the Colonel says so."

I couldn't believe it. "Colonel Weyland has already passed on it, sir?"

"The commission is signed and sealed, as far as the post commander is concerned," Major Burkhoff put in. But he gave me a shrewd, calculating look, and I knew he was thinking of all those other men who deserved promotion ahead of me. The Major didn't understand it either.

The thing didn't make sense. Weyland, I knew, wasn't making me an officer just because he liked what Halan had said about me in his report. But why was he doing it?

For a moment I wondered if maybe Caroline had something to do with it. But I didn't think so. It was the Colonel's idea. The thinking behind it was elaborate and smooth and probably deadly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It took two weeks to go through the formalities of promoting me through the ranks and setting me up for the commission. Two weeks wasn't long enough. The men didn't understand what was happening, and neither did I, and how could I explain it to them when one promotion fell on top of another and the first thing they knew I was wearing the gold bars of a second lieutenant? I couldn't explain it to myself. I could only watch it happen.

After the two weeks were over I went to the sutler's store and established the credit that officers are entitled to and bought a dress jacket and boots and shirts and all the other things that officers have to have. It didn't seem real, even when I put them on and inspected myself in the cracked mirror on the wall of my new adobe hut at the bottom of Officers' Row.

A few of the junior officers — Gorgan, Halan — came around and shook hands and congratulated me, but the others left me pretty well alone. Some of them had come up through the ranks too, but they hadn't done it as fast and easily as I had, and they resented it. The enlisted troopers — Skiborsky, Morgan, and all the others — I could imagine what they were saying.

The only time I saw Colonel Weyland was at officers' call in the mornings. But he never looked at me. I couldn't tell what he was thinking or what he was planning for me. I didn't see Caroline either until one night at a dance that the regimental officers were holding in the sutler's store.

My new dress jacket still had its original creases, my new London leather boots seemed indecently glossy with their first shine. The regimental bandsmen, already beginning to get a little drunk, played the "Blue Danube" with great vigor as the couples dipped and glided around and around the rough plank floor. I stood around the outer edge of the gathering, feeling uncomfortable and out of place.

"Hello, Reardon."

"Why, hello, Gorgan." With a great deal of difficulty I had taught myself not to say "sir" every time when speaking to another junior officer.

"What do you think of our little set-to here?"

"It's fine, I suppose. It's a little new to me, though."

The E Company lieutenant smiled vaguely, wearily. "What do you say we go over and sample the punch bowl before the bandsmen get it all?"

We went up to the front of the store, where the officers' wives had set up a long table covered with stiff white linen, loaded heavily with cakes and cookies and sandwiches. The sandwiches were mostly salmon and sardine, the only canned delicacies to be found in a place like Larrymoor. In the center of the table there was a large glass bowl filled with a sickening sweetish mixture of canned fruit and raw whisky.

"It's almost enough to make a man stop drinking," Gorgan said dryly, "but not quite." He poured two cups and handed me one.

I saw Halan dancing with her then, and for a moment an unreasoning hatred almost choked me, seeing another man holding her, smiling at her. Halan saw me and grinned. They swung up laughing.

Caroline smiled at Gorgan and me. The smile didn't mean a thing.

"We have a new officer at Larrymoor, Mrs. Weyland," Halan was saying. "Are you enjoying yourself, Reardon?"

I said something. I don't know what. Then Halan made the introductions and we all smiled and they danced away again.

"She's a pretty piece, all right, isn't she?" Gorgan said.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Weyland, of course. Don't tell me you didn't notice."

I was still hating Halan for the way he was holding her. He didn't have to hold her so damn close just to dance a waltz.

I said, "Yes, I suppose she is. Wonder where the Colonel is."

"Working, probably, on some plan to outgeneral Kohi, but he'll be around before long. If he's smart."

I shot a glance at Gorgan. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing much. Only if she were my wife, I'd be careful about leaving her in a group of young officers."

Then he must have seen something in my face. "Don't pay any attention to what I say, Reardon," he said with a grin. "I think out loud sometimes — that's probably the reason I'm still a lieutenant. You haven't met my family, have you?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, there's not much sense in putting it off." We waited until the music stopped and then Gorgan walked into the mill of dancers and came out with a graying woman on one arm and a young girl on the other. Mrs. Gorgan, I guessed, was somewhat younger than her husband, but the harshness of the frontier had not been kind to her. The everlasting heat had withered her, the wind had dried her and wrinkled her, but there was still a great deal of life in her faded eyes. There was charm in her smile, especially when Gorgan looked at her or spoke to her, and a man did not have to be psychic to know that they were still very much in love.

The girl was young, and that was all I noticed then. Twenty, perhaps, or twenty-one, but no more than that. Neither pretty nor plain, she must have looked very much as her mother had looked twenty years before. Her name was Sarah, which was perfect for her. A soft-sounding, comfortable name, but without fire.

"Remember, Mary," Gorgan said to his wife after the introductions were over, "I told you about Mr. Reardon's part in our brush with Kohi."

She nodded. "My husband tells me you are a good soldier, Mr. Reardon."

"I have a great deal to learn. He must have told you that, too."

"As a matter of fact," she laughed, "he did. Mr. Gorgan always says what he thinks, but I suppose you have learned that by now."

We all smiled. It was pleasant enough, and it was a side of Gorgan that I hadn't known existed. He was no longer a bitter, overaged lieutenant who would be stationed for the rest of his career on this God-forgotten edge of nowhere. When he looked at his wife he seemed at peace with himself and all the bitterness was gone. I had known that women — certain women — could do things to a man, but I hadn't known about things like this.

The bandsmen, after refreshing themselves at the punch bowl, took up their horns and began to play.

"My dance?" Gorgan asked.

His wife smiled and Gorgan whirled her onto the dance floor, completely oblivious of all the other couples whirling around them.

"You mustn't mind my father's bad manners, Mr. Reardon," Sarah Gorgan said. "Sometimes I think he and Mother will never grow up."

I was searching again among the dancing figures for Caroline and had forgotten that the girl was still standing beside me. I glanced at her and she was smiling hesitantly. I forced myself to smile. "I'm afraid my own manners are not so good, Miss Gorgan. All this is rather new for me." I offered my arm and she took it and we stepped out onto the floor and began circling woodenly in time to the music.

The bandsmen, sad and solemn, with puffed cheeks and bulging eyes, discorded in tough brass the almost

unrecognizable Vienna waltzes. The colored paper lanterns hanging from the naked rafters swayed and shook, casting long and distorted shadows among the dancers.

"You dance very well, Mr. Reardon."

Sarah Gorgan's voice shook me. "Dance? Yes, we used to dance a lot. But that was long ago . . ."

In the great crystal and candlelighted ballroom at Sweetbriar, and to the music of Captain Fitzhugh Dunham's orchestra from Birmingham, not the drunken slobberings of what passed for a regimental band. And with Caroline, not Sarah Gorgan. But that was long ago.

We danced for what seemed an endless time, the bandsmen breaking off briefly and then beginning again, and there was no chance of escape. I had a chance once and didn't take it.

"Really, Mr. Reardon, don't feel that . . . I mean, my father is so absent-minded at times, and I would be perfectly all right if you would escort me over to the serving table."

"I'll do nothing of the kind, Miss Gorgan. It's my honor."

And all the time I was watching Caroline, gracefully slipping from one pair of arms to another, smiling, laughing. Goddamn Gorgan, couldn't he see that I didn't want to dance with his daughter all night? We whirled and dipped and glided to the monotonous beat of brass in three-quarter time, and our smiles became frozen and words would not come. I wished that I had taken her over to the table and left her, the way she had

wanted, for by now she was as miserable as I was. And all the time Gorgan danced around and around with his wife, smiling like an overfed cat. And what young lieutenant would be innocent enough to waste his time on Gorgan's daughter, when there were daughters of captains and majors? And, of course, Caroline.

At last — at long last — Gorgan appeared and tapped me on the shoulder, grinning. Happily he swung his daughter onto the floor with the same unnatural vigor that he had displayed while dancing with his wife, and there was not much time for the usual strained and embarrassed exchange of pleasantries. I walked toward the center of the group of dancers as soon as the music stopped.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reardon." Caroline smiled at me, hanging onto Captain Halan's arm. "The Captain has already asked me for the next dance. The one after this, perhaps?"

"It would be an honor, ma'am." I forced myself to smile and bow.

"You seem to be taken with Gorgan, Reardon," Halan said pleasantly.

"Gorgan? Yes, I like him."

The Captain grinned widely — a little too widely, it seemed to me. "He has a very attractive daughter, too. Didn't I see you dancing with Sarah?"

The music began again and there was no need to answer. But what had Halan meant? I wondered. Was he trying to tell me to stay in my place? To dance with the lieutenant's daughters, if I had to dance, and leave the post commander's wife alone?

I wasn't sure, and it didn't make any difference anyway. I didn't care then what anybody thought. As soon as the set was finished I went to claim my dance with Caroline.

"Matt," she said softly, as we moved into the noisy mill on the floor, "Matt, we must be careful."

"I'm an officer now. Isn't it only common courtesy for the post officers to dance with the commander's wife?"

"Once an evening, for a second lieutenant, yes." She smiled. "But no more than that, Matt."

"But you can dance with Halan as much as you like, is that it?"

"Matt, don't get angry. People are watching."

We danced in tense silence for a while. Caroline's face was completely beautiful and completely empty.

"Caroline, I've got to see you. Not like this, but alone."

She smiled placidly. "That's impossible, Matt."

"It wasn't impossible when I was a common trooper; you arranged it then. Besides, there are things I want to know. Things I have to know."

"Matt, don't hold me so tight. I think Captain Halan is watching us."

"To hell with Halan."

"Matt!"

"All right . . . But I get a little crazy every time I see somebody else holding you. Halan or anybody else. You'd think five years would be plenty of time to forget a woman, wouldn't you?"

She didn't say anything.

"Will you meet me somewhere?"

"Matt, I can't!"

"You will, or I'll come to your house. I tell you I've got to talk to you."

Her eyes widened for just a moment, and behind her smile I could see fear. "All right, Matt. I'll manage it somehow."

"Tonight? Tomorrow?"

"I'll try, Matt."

The set was over and Captain Stockholm from C Company took Caroline away for the next dance. I fidgeted near the serving table for a while, drinking the poisonous punch to keep an unreasoning anger under control. Caroline. Beautiful Caroline! I fished for a cigar, bit off the dry end, and spat it on the floor.

Before long there was a subtle change in the room, a subdued rustle of excitement, and I knew that Colonel Weyland had at last made his appearance at the dance. His face looked drawn and somehow pale beneath his desert tan. He looked tired as he shook hands with his staff, smiled at the ladies. He looked completely harmless, completely ordinary, until he turned his vague colorless eyes on me.

"Good evening, Mr. Reardon." I thought his thin mouth smiled beneath the shaggy line of his mustache. But I couldn't be sure about that.

"Good evening, sir."

He passed on, greeting the other members of the command, leaving me to wonder what was going on in that ironbound military mind of his. Gorgan and his

wife stopped by briefly, after paying their respects to the Colonel.

"We've had enough of this," the Lieutenant said. "We're going home as soon as we locate Sarah."

"I think she's dancing with a C Company lieutenant," Mrs. Gorgan said.

"Well, I guess we'll have to wait, then, until this set's over. Come with us, Reardon, and maybe Mary can scare up something decent to drink."

I knew I should tell them to go on and I would see Sarah home myself, but I wasn't going to let myself in for anything. Gorgan was all right, but he wasn't going to saddle me with his daughter, if that's what he had in mind. I waited by the table until they had gone. Several of the older officers and their wives were going now. I went up to the front of the store and got my cap and went out too.

I walked without paying any attention to where I was going. The night air was cool and the desert was quiet, with only the stirring of the horses down at the stables and the pacing of the sentries along the runaround to break the stillness. And the music, of course, as sweet and sirupy as the punch. I walked automatically toward A Company's barracks and then realized that there was no longer a place there for me. It would be good to go inside and talk to Morgan, or Steuber, or even Skiborsky, but things were different now since the Colonel had put the two gold bars on my shoulders.

Why had he put them there?

That was the thing that kept running around in my mind. That was the thing I had to know.

I walked for a long while alone in the darkness, to the ammunition magazine, to the stables, back toward headquarters, and finally to the bachelor officers' section of Officers' Row. The dance was beginning to break up and there were sounds of officers and their wives walking in the darkness. Laughter here and there. And the metallic rattle always associated with the cavalry — this time the rattle of dress swords. My adobe hut stood quiet and uninviting at the end of the row, but there was nowhere else to go. I kicked the plank door open and walked in.

"Matt?"

I was just about to strike a match to light the coal-oil lamp. I very carefully put the match back in my pocket and closed the door. The voice was Caroline's.

"Where are you?"

"Here, Matt." I heard the rustle of her crinoline, smelled the cleanness of her sachet, and she was standing beside me. I didn't think of anything just then. I reached out and brought her against me and kissed her.

"I came as soon as I could, Matt," she said.

"Not too soon for me. How did you manage it?"

"The Colonel is working again up at headquarters. On a plan of some kind."

"A battle plan?"

"I think so. Does it matter?"

"No, I guess it doesn't. Come here, closer."

Time passed. I don't know how much. At last we moved over to the window and looked out from our

own black darkness to the paler darkness of the parade. "I'm glad I came," she said.

"Is there any danger of his — Well, how long will he be at headquarters?"

"For a long time yet. Maybe until dawn. He's been working that way every night for more than a week." I could feel her shudder as I held her. "He frightens me, Matt. I don't know what goes on in his mind. I thought I did at first, but now he's different." After a moment of silence she said, "I love you, Matt."

"You didn't act like it tonight, the way you were dancing with Halan."

She laughed softly. "You don't need to be jealous of Captain Halan."

"I'm not jealous." But I was. And she knew it. Her arms went around my neck and pulled my face down to her.

"You were very handsome tonight, Matt, in your new uniform. I told you that you wouldn't remain a common trooper. Remember?"

"Did you have anything to say about my getting a commission?"

"No, but that doesn't matter. You got it, and that's the important thing. Someday you'll be a general, Matt. I know that too."

I thought I could see the way Caroline's mind was working. But she was forgetting about her husband. If it wasn't for Weyland, I might be a general someday, at that, with Caroline directing my career for me. Hadn't she made a general out of Weyland? Only he was demoted after the war and sent to the frontier, away

from civilization, away from all the things Caroline wanted from life. And Weyland had reached his peak, with no way to go but down. But a younger man . . .

She was as clear as glass. I could look into her mind and see that she loved me, but that wouldn't stop her from dropping me again if someone else came along with a brighter-looking future. She was a beautiful, spoiled child, and she would never be anything else. I knew it, but it didn't make any difference when I had my arms around her.

"Matt . . ."

"Yes?"

"You said you had to talk to me. What did you want to talk about?"

"It can wait. I want to hold you. That's all I want to do right now."

"But what was it, Matt?"

"Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Then I guess that's what I wanted to talk about. I tried to hate you, Caroline, but it wasn't any good. On the desert the other day, when we had the brush with Kohi, do you know what I thought about? I thought about you. You're all I ever think about, it seems."

Her arms tightened. I could feel the warmth of her breath on my neck. "I'm glad, Matt."

"But it's no good like this. God knows what your husband's got planned for me, but it's something, and it won't be pretty. I shouldn't have taken this commission, but I did it, and now I don't know why."

"Because you knew I wanted you to, Matt?"

That was the reason and I had known it all along. I had even got to lying to myself. "Yes," I said, "I guess that's why. But it won't do us any good. I've got to get out of the Army, Caroline. We'll go somewhere, just the two of us. To Mexico, maybe."

I could feel her stiffen. "Matt, we couldn't do that."

"We can't stay here. We can't go on like this."

We stood there, and the night was very quiet. It had been in the back of my mind ever since. I saw her in Tucson, I suppose. I had come to Larrymoor for one reason, to take her away. The Colonel knew it now. And he would fight, even kill, to keep her. That was what he was trained for, fighting, killing.

She lay against me, very quiet for a long while. And then she said, "If we went to Mexico, what would happen, Matt? We would have no money, no country, no friends. What would we do, Matt?"

She was right, of course, and what was there to say?

"Give me time, Matt. Have faith in me and believe in me."

"Do you propose to make me a general, the way you made Weyland a general?" I said bitterly. "That would be a pretty long wait, even with you working it, Caroline, because the war is over and promotions don't come that fast any more."

It was a waste of words and I should have known better.

She spoke patiently, the way she would speak to an unreasonable child. "Of course we wouldn't wait until you're a general, Matt. But you'll be one someday."

"And what about your husband? We've forgotten all about the Colonel, haven't we? Is he going to just sit by and do nothing while you're taking care of my military career? He was the one who handed me my commission — we've forgotten that, too. And he had a reason. A deadly reason, more than likely. What are you going to do about that?"

But nothing was impossible for Caroline. She was Cinderella now and the clock always stopped a minute short of midnight. With her lips against my cheek I could feel her smiling. "Have faith in me, Matt." She pressed something into my hand — a small, velvet-covered oblong — and closed my fingers around it. "This is what I believe, Matt," she said softly. "I believe in you, and I believe in myself, and nothing else matters."

I stood there for a long while after Caroline had gone, still feeling her in the room. Still smelling the scent of her sachet, hearing the crisp rustle of crinoline. Finally I took out a match and lighted the coal-oil lamp and looked at the box in my hand. It was small and flat and covered in black velvet. I opened it and the inside was lined in black velvet, and against the black material, as black as the night, lay two glittering silver stars.

The full meaning of Caroline's gift didn't hit me at first. I reached for a bottle of raw clear whisky — I had credit at the sutler's now, being an officer — poured some into a cup, and drank it down. It dawned on me finally that they were more than mere trinkets, those

bright, shimmering, five-pointed pieces of silver. They were the stars of a general officer.

I don't know when I started laughing. There was nothing funny about it. It was insane, if anything, and frightening. But I laughed. I lay face-down on my bunk and pounded the straw-stuffed mattress and howled, and I didn't give a damn who heard me. Yesterday a common trooper, today a second lieutenant, tomorrow a general. Caroline had ambition, anyway, I had to say that for her. It was boundless. And not only for herself, but for me. I rolled and brayed like a jackass. Then suddenly I thought of Colonel Weyland and the things I had seen in those pale eyes of his. I stopped laughing.

I got up and filled a tin mess cup brimful with the sutler's whisky. I drank it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At Larrymoor, officers' call was directly after breakfast. We reported in a group to the Colonel at headquarters, where the details for the day were handed out, the patrols made up, the march routes planned. The morning after the dance was when I learned at last where I stood.

"Gentlemen," Weyland said, unfurling a large map of northeastern Arizona, "I have received vague reports from our Indian scouts hinting at the presence of foreign Apache tribes near the Coyotero stronghold here." He stabbed with a pointer at a place on the map, slightly above the Boulders, in the hills. "Vague reports and hints are not enough. If Kohi is reinforcing his troops with Chiricahuas and Mimbreños, I want to know the facts. I want to know where they are coming from, how Kohi has persuaded them to join him, and, most of all, how many there are of them. If he is planning all-out war against the United States troops in northeastern Arizona, I want to know about it now."

He held the pointer across his chest, like a carbine. He smiled at us. I could almost feel his pale glance sliding over my face.

"Furthermore, gentlemen, I intend to have these facts. I propose the formation of an independent detail to accompany the next patrol, a detail consisting of four Indian scouts and one officer whose job it will be to gather this intelligence and present it to this headquarters. Of necessity, the scout detail must screen far ahead of the patrol column. It must work every inch of the hills near Kohi's stronghold. To do this, while avoiding direct contact with the hostiles, is the direct responsibility of the officer in charge. Are there any questions, gentlemen?

There was an uneasy shuffling, but there were no questions. Making the regular patrols was one thing, but being saddled to a suicide mission was something else again. The junior officers, especially the married ones, seemed to shrink as the Colonel studied us, one after the other.

Weyland looked at me, and I thought he smiled, just a little. So this was the way it was going to be, I thought. He had planned it well. It was as clean and neat as a well-used bayonet, and as deadly. Whether or not the scout detail was necessary, I didn't know. If it hadn't been that, it would have been something else.

"Mr. Reardon," the Colonel said pleasantly, "will be in charge of the detail. Captain Halan, the Lieutenant will accompany your patrol tomorrow morning. That will be all, gentlemen."

We all mumbled something. We saluted and filed out of the headquarters building, leaving the Colonel standing there in front of his map, smiling. Or maybe I

only imagined he was smiling. Halan fell in beside me as we hit the front porch.

"That's quite a job the Colonel cut out for you, Reardon."

I felt myself grinning, but it was only with my mouth.

"Drop by the orderly room after recall and we'll go over the march orders together. We'll go over the Indian scouts too; they'll likely be as treacherous as the Apaches, once you get them alone."

"Thanks. I'll do that."

Gorgan caught me halfway across the parade, headed for Officers' Row. "Now that," he said dryly, "is what I call starting right in to soldier, without all the dilly-dally that usually goes along with a commission. What has the Colonel got against you, anyway?"

I looked at him sharply, but it was only a question. "Somebody has to do the job."

"Maybe so. But you don't know anything about Kohi, or Apaches, or the country we're going into. One patrol you've been on. After twenty patrols you still wouldn't be fit for a job like this. Why didn't the Colonel get a contract scout from Tucson to handle it? There are plenty of men who know every hill and gully up here like they know the scars on their hands."

I grinned. "Why don't you ask the Colonel?"

"I'd like to."

I had a feeling that Gorgan was putting together a lot of small pieces of information in his mind, and in that methodic way of his he was building an answer that was uncomfortably close to the truth. He glanced at me thoughtfully, and then looked away. When we got across

the parade ground Gorgan said, "Well, it's something to think about, but I haven't got time for it now." He flicked a white gauntlet at me and walked off toward his company orderly room.

After taking a dozen steps or so he paused and turned. "I almost forgot," he called. "My wife said to tell you you're invited to supper tonight, if you haven't got something better to do."

I wasn't eager to take supper with the Gorgans, for there was always a chance that I could meet Caroline once more before the patrol pulled out the next morning. But I couldn't think of any reasonable way of getting out of it at the moment.

With reluctance I called, "Thanks. That will be fine."

It was still early in the morning and the companies were just beginning to form for drill. I headed toward my hut to wait for recall. Being on special duty is all right for a time, but after a while you begin to miss the steadying routine of company life. Time goes by heavy and sluggish. It was quiet — too quiet — inside the hut, and my part-time striker had already come and gone, having buffed my boots and brushed my uniforms and straightened things around. I noticed that my whisky was about two fingers lower in the bottle than it had been an hour before, but that's to be expected when you have a striker to do for you. I found myself automatically reaching for the bottle and sloshing some of the rotgut into a mess cup.

I needed a drink. It was too early in the morning for that kind of thing, but I didn't care. I poured and threw it down and shuddered as it hit my stomach.

But the whisky didn't help. I stood at the hut's single window and watched the line companies make intricate, dusty patterns on the bald parade. But what I saw was Weyland.

It was a strange feeling, knowing that a man had deliberately and cold-bloodedly set out to kill you, and that the complicated machinery of execution had already been set in motion and there was nothing you could do to stop it. I had wondered at first why he hadn't drawn his revolver on the spot and killed me, but a thing like that would have been too simple for the Colonel. Too much of the drama would have been lost. He liked to plan these things, the way he planned his action against an enemy in the field. Any damn fool could draw a gun and kill a man, but it took a great deal of military maneuvering to do it the way the Colonel was doing it.

It wasn't as fast as the direct way, and not as clean, maybe, but I would be just as dead when it was over, and that was the important thing. The device, of course, was simple, like all effective military devices.

A scout detail.

It would look good on the books. There would be none of the unpleasantness of a court-martial. But a scout detail — the kind the Colonel planned — was as good as a one-way ticket to the post cemetery. I corked the bottle and went over to A Company to talk to Halan.

Halan wasn't there when I got there, so I sat in the Captain's chair and went through the morning report to kill time. Morgan, I saw, was pulling company duty

for insubordination, and I grinned at that. The usual number of men put in requests to see the doctor, as they always did when their turn at patrol came up. Sergeant Roff came in as I was putting the morning report away.

"Good morning, Sergeant."

"Good morning . . . sir."

I wasn't prepared for the cold, courteous hate that he managed to put into those words. Now the Sergeant's ugliness was more than physical. It was a live hate behind his eyes.

"I want to offer my congratulations, sir, on getting your commission," he said, and there was a definite sneer touching the corners of his mouth. "It came fast, didn't it, sir?" he said. "I've been in this man's cavalry a long time, sir, and I've never seen a commission come as fast. If the Lieutenant will pardon me, sir, for mentioning it."

It was broad, low comedy, the way Roff put it, coming down hard on the word "sir" every chance he got. Contempt was unmistakable in his voice, but there was nothing obvious that you could call on him. I smiled slightly as he stood there as stiff and straight as a ramrod, a brazen burlesque of military courtesy, and I couldn't blame him for being angry. The man had given his life to the Army. Over the years he had worked and sweated and maybe even prayed for a pair of gold bars like the ones I now wore on my shoulders. If I had earned them, it would have been something else, but I hadn't earned them and Roff wasn't going to let me forget it.

So I couldn't blame him for the way he felt. But I was glad when recall sounded and Captain Halan came into the orderly room.

"I've been talking to the Colonel," he said. "I'll be frank, Reardon — I don't think this scout detail is a job for you. I tried to get the Colonel to put another, more experienced officer in charge, but he seems to have his mind set on you, for some reason." He smiled, but the smile seemed a trifle weary. "I'm afraid," he said, "that I built you up too high in that report. The Colonel thinks there's not another officer on the post capable of handling this scout. He quotes from my report to back his judgment." He sat down and shoved an opened box of cigars across the desk. "Have one."

"Thanks."

We held matches to them and the dry tobacco blazed and crackled. I understood that Halan had been trying to get Weyland to put him on the scout detail. I wanted to thank him for trying to save my skin, but there was no way to do it. He sat and puffed, watching the bluish smoke cloud the small room.

"Anyway," Halan said finally, "I got four of our best Indians lined up for you, and maybe that will be some help. You'll have Juan and Black Buffalo, both Papagos; and Walking Fox and Red Hand, two Pimas. Papagos and Pimas work pretty well togther. They don't squabble among themselves and they both hate Apaches. Watch them, Reardon, and learn what you can from them. The sutler's not allowed to sell them whisky, but you'll have to watch them and keep them away from tiswin. Apaches make the stuff in shallow pits and cover it up to let it

ferment. Indians have noses like bloodhounds when it comes to smelling it out. It's against department orders to let civilians or native scouts take part in fighting, so keep firearms away from them. Let them keep their knives and hatchets, though. Where you'll be, knives and hatchets will do you more good than guns, anyway."

I nodded, and Halan talked on and on, and I began to appreciate his understanding of this frontier country and its people. He understood a little of the Apache tongue, and had even talked once with Kohi. He had met Mangas Coloradas, chief of the Mimbreño Apaches, and Cochise of the Chiricahuas, during one of the brief periods of peace between the whites and the Indians.

Halan put his cigar down and shoved a map case at me and a pair of regulation binoculars. "You'll need these," he said, and smiled without humor. "The Colonel wants a map drawn of Kohi's stronghold. He wants to know how many warriors Kohi has and how many reinforcements are coming up from the south. It's a big job and it looks like it's all yours, Reardon. Good luck."

There was nothing much to say to that. Captain Halan sat back and closed his eyes and thought his own thoughts. Maybe he was already writing me off the roster and wondering who he was going to get to take my place.

It was a long day, from that point on. I went to the quartermaster's and drew supplies for myself and the four scouts. I inspected the horse I was to ride and saw

that he was cared for and then I went back to the hut and cleaned my carbine and revolving pistol. I went outside finally and looked at those high, ragged hills, and they looked peaceful and sleepy under the numbing beat of the sun. I began to think that all my fears were imagined. There was nothing more normal than a scout detail when you wanted information about the enemy. Things like that happened all the time. Sometimes the details came back and sometimes they didn't; that was all a part of fighting a war. But then I would remember the Colonel, and I would know that it was no ordinary detail.

I went back in the hut and studied the bottle of whisky, which was almost empty, but I didn't touch it this time. I wondered if there was any way I could see Caroline before the patrol pulled out the next morning.

Thinking of her excited me, stirred me, and I imagined that if I closed my eyes I could reach out and touch her. Caroline was real, even in my thoughts. She was all woman — she was all *women*, it seemed, in this heat-drugged desert, in this last outpost of nowhere called Larrymoor. She was Sweetbriar and another, better way of living, but most of all she was Caroline, with eager lips and willing body, and she was softness where everything else was hard, and I couldn't get her out of my mind.

On impulse I went outside and walked up the row of huts occupied by bachelor officers, past the larger houses belonging to the married officers and their families, and finally I came to Caroline's house and there I stopped.

She was in there somewhere. I knew it. I could feel her in there, watching me, maybe. Smiling at me. Laughing at me. Heaven alone knew what Caroline would be doing. I thought if I stood there long enough she would see me and give me a sign.

"Haven't you ever seen a post commander's house before?"

The voice shook me. I snapped my head around to see Gorgan coming out of the headquarters building. He was grinning, but I had a feeling that there was something behind that grin, and I didn't know what it was.

"I just finished clearing my ammunition issue through the quartermaster," I said. It didn't make sense, but Gorgan didn't notice. Or pretended not to notice.

"Don't forget supper tonight," he said, walking on past, toward the stables.

I said something, turned, and walked back toward my hut. What was going on in that brain of Gorgan's? Could he look through me, the way I had a feeling he was doing, and see what was going on in my mind? Did he somehow know about me and Caroline?

It didn't seem possible, but Gorgan was a strange one and you could never tell what he was thinking. I uncorked the whisky bottle this time and emptied it into a mess cup and downed it. Gorgan, goddamn him. If he hadn't come along maybe Caroline would have . . .

But she wouldn't have. She had taken a chance once, in her own house. She wouldn't do it again.

It was A Company's turn to stand retreat formation that day, but I wasn't in it. As the band played, as the troopers marched stiffly back and forth across the parade to the bellowing of officers and noncoms, I remembered Gorgan's supper invitation.

Well, I had let myself in for it and there was nothing much I could do about it now. I began to strip down as a preparation for shaving and bathing. As I emptied my pockets I came across the twin silver stars that Caroline had given me. The symbols of Caroline's ambition for me. I threw them on the table with the rest of the things and went out on the back stoop to wash and shave.

The retreat formation broke up as I lathered my face, and before long I heard somebody knocking on my front door. "Come on in," I called. "I'm back here at the wash bench."

It was Halan. He came to the back door and looked out. "I brought you an official copy of the patrol orders," he said. "I thought you might want to look them over."

"Thanks. Why don't you wait inside? I'll be through in a minute."

"All right. You getting ready to go somewhere?"

"Over to Gorgan's. His wife invited me for supper."

I was splashing water on my face and couldn't see him, but I knew Halan was grinning. "Are you sure it was Gorgan's wife," he asked, "or his daughter?"

"His wife," I said. "And I'm going because I'm damn tired of Army mess, and for no other reason."

Halan laughed and went back into the hut. I finished shaving and rinsed my face and toweled off. Maybe it was just as well, I thought, if Halan wanted to think there was something between me and Sarah Gorgan. At least it would help keep attention away from Caroline. I found my shirt and pulled it over my head and called, "I'd offer you a drink, but I don't have any left."

No answer from inside. I gathered up the soap and towel and washpan and went in. Halan wasn't anywhere in sight.

The orders were on the table beside the odds and ends I had emptied out of my pockets, but the Captain was gone. I went to the window and saw him striding across the parade toward the A Company barracks.

Well, maybe a captain had more important things to do than talk to a second lieutenant.

I went through the orders, but there was nothing there that I didn't already know. They were exactly like any other set of orders, put forth in cold precise military phraseology, and it was difficult to believe that I was reading the master plan for my own execution. But that was what it was.

I sat down and went through them again, trying to think of them in that light. I found that I couldn't do it. I couldn't believe that this scout detail would be my last. No matter how well the Colonel had planned it. No matter how much he willed it.

Gorgan, Halan — all the others — maybe they didn't think I would come back from that scout. But I knew I would. I'd fool all of them. I would come back and I

would take Caroline from under the Colonel's nose, and to hell with all of them.

I wadded the orders up in one fist and hurled them across the room. "To hell with you especially, Colonel! If you want to kill me you'll have to do it directly, not by military maneuvering. Because I'll come back every time!"

I felt better after that outburst. I rustled up some clean pants and a blouse and headed up the row toward Gorgan's.

The Lieutenant's place was larger than my hut at the end of the row. About four rooms, I judged, with a lean-to at the back for cooking. Over the years they had managed to pick up things that gave the house a homelike touch. No expensive copies of famous paintings, as Caroline had, and no heavy pieces of silver. But there were rich colored blankets from the Navajo country, and mounted antelope heads above the doors, as well as a great many pieces of needlework, some framed and hanging, some serving as scarves and doilies on the tables. There was a pleasant mixed aroma of tobacco and scrubbing soap and rich cooking.

"We're happy you could come, Mr. Reardon," said Mrs. Gorgan.

"It's an honor to be invited to your home, Mrs. Gorgan."

"Good evening, Mr. Reardon," Sarah Gorgan said, and I was surprised that somehow she looked more grown up in a plain cotton dress than in the elaborate party dress she had worn to the dance.

"Good evening, Miss Gorgan."

"Cigar, Reardon?" the Lieutenant said, offering an open box of crooked cheroots. "I've got some Kentucky rye around here somewhere that I've been saving since God knows when." Handily, the whisky happened to be on a table in front of him, so he poured some into two glasses and handed me one. The women vanished quietly into the back part of the house, and we could hear the opening and closing of oven doors, and the heavy fragrance of venison roast drifted into the room.

We tasted the whisky. It was good, and I had an idea that Gorgan had borrowed on next month's pay to pay the sutler for it. Why he had gone to so much trouble for a second lieutenant, and a new one at that, I didn't know.

"Likely the women will be busy for a while," Gorgan said, sitting down and stretching his legs. He dallied with his glass, looking thoughtfully into the amber liquid. "Ah — I don't suppose the Colonel has changed his plans, has he?" he asked finally. "About the scout detail, I mean?"

"I got my orders a little while ago. They're still just about the same."

The Lieutenant sighed, looked as if he were about to say something, and then changed his mind. "Maybe I'm doing a lot of worrying over nothing," he said. "You can take care of yourself in an open fracas, you proved that. But going Apache-hunting on their own ground, that's something else. It looks like a job for a more experienced man, I'd say."

"I have more than three years' cavalry experience."

Gorgan snorted. "This isn't cavalry, the way we fight out here. It's dragoon work. You ride to where you're going and then get off and fight on foot." He grinned suddenly, and unexpectedly his face reddened in embarrassment. "Hell, I guess it's none of my business, but — well, I keep thinking of the way you saved my hide not long ago. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you. Just take care of yourself, Reardon, I guess that's all I wanted to say."

I had to grin at that, for Gorgan was obviously not versed in paying compliments. It was strange, in a way, but I hardly remembered anything that happened that day of the ambush. But Gorgan remembered. I knew I had a friend in the Lieutenant any time I wanted to call on him, and that thought was comforting.

Gorgan poured more whisky to cover his embarrassment, and I knew that he would never mention the incident again.

We sat for a while in silence, nursing the whisky, and I could see that Gorgan wanted to bring the conversation back around to the Colonel and the scout detail. He was curious about that. He didn't know anything, probably, but he could feel that something was wrong. Sooner or later, I knew, he would tie Caroline in with it if I wasn't careful.

"How do you like soldiering?" he asked abruptly, and I laughed.

"Major Burkhoff asked me the same question, before I got the commission."

"Well," he insisted, "how *do* you like it?"

I wondered about it now, as I had wondered about it before, and the answer was about the same. "I like it all right, I suppose. It's about all I know."

"It's a hard way to live," Gorgan said slowly. "Sometimes I think I hate it. There's no future in it for me, because I talk too much, probably. And it's hell on women. Still . . ."

He let the word hang as he thought of it.

"Still, there's something about it. Out here, you squeeze years into days. You get used to living like that and nothing else is any good for you. I had a chance to go back to Washington once as the chief quartermaster's aide, but I didn't take it. I had been out here too long, on the desert and in the mountains, where everything runs to extremes. Here you freeze at night and then maybe drop over from heat exhaustion the next day. You rot as a garrison soldier, and maybe a week later you'll die violently on patrol, fighting a little private war that nobody outside Arizona Territory will ever hear about. Extremes in everything. I don't think I could get used to civilization again. To be civilized is to be temperate, they say, and this country jades a man's taste for temperance."

It was the longest speech I had ever heard Gorgan make, and he wasn't through yet. I wasn't sure what he was getting at, but I had an idea that it had to do with me somehow.

"Some people never get used to it," he went on. "They come out here and hate the country on sight, and the Indians too. Maybe they go on living here because they're afraid of the law back east, and they

haven't got the guts to push on west. But they never get to like it or become a part of it."

I was looking into my whisky, but I could feel the Lieutenant watching me.

"One thing about the desert," he said, "and the mountains, you have to earn the right to live here. You have to be smarter and tougher and braver than the country itself, or it will kill you. You have to learn fast, and learn from the Indians, because they know more about it than anybody else." He laughed suddenly. "Now there's a hell of a lot of words said, and they don't mean a thing."

"You like this country and you like the Army. I got that much."

"I don't like them and I don't hate them. We've just learned to live together. You start feeling that way when you stop being afraid. And you'll be afraid before long, when you get out alone on that scout detail."

"Are you trying to tell me there's a good chance I won't come back?"

"A damn good chance. But it's not a sure thing, if you're willing to learn."

"I'll learn as fast as I can," I said. "I'll have Juan and Black Buffalo and Walking Fox and Red Hand for teachers."

He smiled faintly, then took the whisky decanter and shook it. "That's what I wanted to know, I guess. Whether you regarded your scouts as teachers or ignorant savages. I think we've got another good drink left here before supper."

Supper was pleasant, although we were rather crowded in the small dining room with its post-made sideboard and table and chairs. The roast — rump of young venison — was excellent and Gorgan's mood had changed again and he was in fine spirits. After the meal was over Gorgan and I went out on the front porch and smoked cigars. Blurred figures passed back and forth across the dark parade. Here and there barracks lights were beginning to be put out. The stars were out in great numbers over the desert, and the night was still.

Gorgan had something here that I envied, here in his small adobe hut on an outpost frontier fort, and I wasn't sure what it was. My belly was well filled with the kind of food we never got at regular mess, and warm with good Kentucky rye, but it was more than that. Maybe it was his peace of mind that I felt, as we stood there smoking in silence.

I began to think about the things Gorgan had said before supper, and I would have liked to have him go on talking, about the territory, the Indians. But it seemed that Gorgan was talked out. He wasn't very skilled with words, but I thought I understood what he was trying to say. There was a place for every man — I think that was what he meant — if he could only find it. And if he only knew it when he did find it. Maybe he was trying to say that Larrymoor was the place for me.

Why he bothered, I didn't know. I wondered what Gorgan would say if he knew all about me and Caroline and Weyland. The thought made me grin.

But the grin went away. I had a feeling that Gorgan did know. Not know, maybe, but he was guessing.

"There's some sherry inside," he said. "Not very good, I'm afraid, but it will do."

But I didn't want any more to drink. "No, thanks. I've got to get back down the row before long."

Someone moved in the doorway of the house, casting a long shadow across the lamplit square on the porch. "Sarah?" Gorgan said.

"Yes, Father?"

"Come out and keep Mr. Reardon company for a minute. I want to get a couple of things for him before he goes." Sarah Gorgan came out, hesitantly, and her father grinned and roughed her hair, as though she were a child. "Maybe you can tell him a thing or two about Larrymoor, eh? She's been here long enough, Reardon. Most of my daughter's life has been spent on this post."

Gorgan disappeared inside the house, leaving me to shift for myself in the company of his daughter. Sarah came over to the porch banister and leaned over slightly, looking up at the dark sky.

"The desert is beautiful at night," she said, almost to herself. "Don't you think so, Mr. Reardon?"

"Beautiful? I don't know. I guess I've never thought about it. It's not much like the country I was born and reared in."

She glanced at me briefly and then looked up at the sky again. The stars were as cold as chips of ice on sheet steel, very aloof and far away. "The desert, I guess, is

about all I know. What was your home like, Mr. Reardon?"

"Alabama?" I hadn't thought of it for a long while. "It was black and rich and slow-moving, or that's the way it seems to me now. I don't suppose it was really much different from the rest of the South." I thought of Sweetbriar, but I knew I couldn't picture it for her. And anyway it didn't seem to be worth the effort. I wondered what was keeping Gorgan.

"Father tells me you're going on patrol tomorrow," she said; and maybe she sensed that I didn't want to talk, about the past.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, and that seemed to end that subject of conversation. I gathered that Gorgan hadn't told her about the scout patrol, though, and I was glad of that. "I suppose," I said, "the desert is all right when you get used to it. Larrymoor too, for that matter. It's not like —" I started to say Sweetbriar. "It's not like the cities back east, of course, but you do have certain social activities here. The regimental dances, for instance."

I felt that I had to keep the conversation going somehow until Gorgan got back, but it was an effort and Sarah Gorgan could tell that it was. Without looking at me, she said, "Would you like to go inside, Mr. Reardon? I'm sure there's some sherry."

I could see now that Gorgan — for reasons of his own — had thrown us together again, the way he had done at the dance. I began to feel the same discomfort that I had felt before, wanting to get away but knowing there was no way of doing it gracefully.

"Not at all, Miss Gorgan," I said, with as much conviction as possible. "I find it very pleasant out here."

I could see her smile to herself. It seemed a hopeless smile, to me, and I guessed that she felt as trapped as I did. She moved down to the darker end of the porch and sat on the banister, looking out at the parade. A pale, bloated moon had come up suddenly from behind the far hills, and that vague, suffused light did something to her.

It was almost as though I were looking at her for the first time. She sat there quietly, as still as a statue, and somehow beautiful. It was the moonlight, of course, but something about her made me think of Caroline.

It happened then as it always did. The smallest crack had opened in my mind and Caroline came walking in to taunt me. To tempt me with her mouth and excite me with her body. I heard myself speaking then. Speaking to Sarah Gorgan, but thinking of Caroline.

I said, "You're very beautiful tonight," and I started to add, "Caroline," but then Sarah Gorgan's chin came up sharply, as if she had been slapped. Her eyes were wide, and I thought at first that she was angry. But then I saw that she was hurt.

She looked back at the parade. "I'm not beautiful, Mr. Reardon. You shouldn't have said that."

I don't know what made me go on with it. A thing like that could be carried off with a laugh. A light word. But I didn't do it. It was almost as if Caroline were there beside me, tempting me to go on, daring me to look at another girl.

I said, "I mean it, Miss Gorgan." I hadn't meant it to go any further than that, but I moved down to the end of the porch and stood beside her, and looked down at her. I suppose that, in the back of my mind, I thought I was hurting Caroline. Or maybe I was thinking of nothing at all when I put my hands on Sarah Gorgan's shoulders and brought her toward me.

She didn't protest. She didn't utter a sound. I could close my eyes and imagine it was Caroline I was holding. She brought her head back and I pressed my mouth on hers. The moment I did it I was sorry. Her mouth was cold at first, but it warmed suddenly and was eager.

I was the one who broke it off.

"I didn't mean to do that," I said. "I'm sorry."

She still didn't say anything. She put her face against my shoulder and I thought, She's only a kid. The thought made me feel rotten inside.

"You'd better go in now," I said.

After a while she said, "Matt. May I call you Matt?"

"Sure. But you'd better go in now." My mind darted forward to the next day, when the patrol would be pulling out of Larrymoor. At that moment I didn't care whether I came back or not.

She went inside finally. Gorgan came out in a few minutes, grinning quietly. I would have felt better if he had hit me.

"Did my daughter tell you about Larrymoor, Reardon?"

I must have said something, but I don't remember what. Then he put some things in my hand and said,

"You'd better take these with you tomorrow. Maybe you'll find some use for them."

When I got back to the hut I saw what they were. There was a long, razor-keen bowie knife made of rifle steel, the bone handle inlaid with coin silver, and a pair of long, knee-length Apache moccasins.

CHAPTER NINE

I had occasion to remember what Gorgan had said about a man having to earn the right to live in the desert. That morning, as the patrol rode through the gates of Larrymoor, I knew that a man had to earn the right to wear gold bars, too. I didn't have to go into the hills to find hostiles. They were there in the column. Skiborsky, Morgan, Steuber, all the rest of them. I could feel their hate as I brought the four scouts across the parade and reported to Halan.

I imagined that the feeling had even reached Halan. He accepted my salute coldly, as if he had never seen me before. "Very well, Mr. Reardon, fall in beside me. Your Indians can bring up the rear of the column for the time being."

I had expected my sudden rise through the ranks to cause hostility among the men, but Halan was something else again. He was the one who had recommended me to Weyland. If I had a friend at Larrymoor, I told myself, it was Halan.

But it didn't look like it. I thought at first that it was my imagination, but as the column stretched out across the wasteland and the rigid garrison discipline began to

relax among the men, the Captain continued to keep his distance.

"Mr. Reardon, please maintain the correct cavalry seat while in my column. Sloppy riders beget sloppy commanders, Mr. Reardon, and sloppy commanders can be fatal when dealing with Apache."

This was something I hadn't counted on. Halan had the rank; he could pull it on me as often as it pleased him. And it seemed to please him at least twice an hour that day.

The next day was no better. It was worse, if anything, with Halan continually finding fault with everything I did. I could feel the men behind me grinning fiercely.

I gave up trying to figure out what was happening. Too much was happening too fast. Caroline, Weyland, Sarah Gorgan, and now Halan.

"Mr. Reardon," Halan said. "Please remember that officers must set examples for their men. Square your campaign hat, Lieutenant; the cavalry campaign hat is regulation uniform meant to be worn in the regulation manner. And please ride erect, Mr. Reardon."

I was glad when we reached the Boulders on the third day, for that was the end of the line for me and my scouts. I didn't have to worry about people and why they acted the way they did. All I had to worry about was staying alive.

"Do you have the route of march memorized, Mr. Reardon?"

"Yes, sir. I'm to scout the hills near Kohi's stronghold. On the third day I'm to join the patrol

column again as it makes its return swing, near the mouth of Star Creek."

"Not scout *near* Kohi's stronghold, Mr. Reardon," Halan said coolly. "*In* the stronghold. That is the Colonel's order. On the third day my patrol will be at the mouth of Star Creek. Do you have any questions?"

I had some questions. I wanted to ask him what the hell had gone wrong with him. What had I done to him? Was it so bad that he couldn't even talk about it? But what I said was:

"No, sir. No questions."

"Very well, Lieutenant." We shook hands like strangers and he called for Skiborsky to mount the column again. I stood on a ridge and watched the column straggle down into a rocky ravine and out of sight. The last white men I would see for days. Maybe the last white men I would see, ever. If Colonel Weyland had his way about it. I motioned to Juan, who was the chief native scout.

"Tell your men they can build fires here, if they want to cook. We won't be pulling out before dark."

Building the right kind of fire was the first thing I learned from my four scouts. Juan sent Black Buffalo and Red Hand to scour up the right kind of wood — hardwood, and dry. Dried brush roots would do, if there was no hardwood. We made the fires, two small ones, and there was no smoke at all to give our position away. The four Indians remained to themselves, squatting stonelike in the heat of the dying sun as I cooked my bacon and coffee. I cooked two days' rations of bacon because there wouldn't be any more fires after

this, and I soaked the hard bread in the coffee to soften it. It was no better and no worse than field rations always are, but the bacon and bread tasted different that day, as I wondered if it was going to be my last meal. The desert was very quiet.

I called Juan over and asked him how far he judged the stronghold to be.

He shrugged. "A march for the length of time it takes the sun to cross the sky," he said, "would bring us near the place."

"Or the moon?" I asked.

He shrugged again. It was possible. He had never seen the stronghold himself, and neither had the other scouts. Then he asked, "Do we take the horses?"

"Part of the way. As far as it's safe. Then we'll have to hide them somewhere, but I'll leave that up to you."

Juan nodded and then called to the other scouts to put out the fires. They put out the fires and scooped up the ashes and buried them and then they smoothed the ground with their hands. We couldn't cover the trail of the patrol, but we could hope to keep Apache from knowing that someone had dropped off along the way. I sent Walking Fox and Red Hand up to some high ground to keep a watch on the hills until dark. There was nothing to do after that but wait.

The two Pimas came back as the sun died, saying that they had seen nothing. No smoke, no sign of any kind, but they didn't seem particularly pleased about it. They knew that Apache gave sign only when he wanted to.

We waited until it was dark. Then we waited some more. The Indians squatted, watching me, and I wondered if they would follow me if hell began to break. There was no way of knowing about that. Finally I gave Juan the nod and we mounted and began riding into the hills.

Toward midnight the scouts began to get nervous and Juan said it was about time to leave our horses and go the rest of the way on foot. The two Pimas went out and came back about twenty minutes later, saying that they had found a small box canyon up ahead. That was where we left the horses. We hobbled them and set them to graze, and hoped that they would be there when we got back.

A late moon was beginning to show now over the hills. In the pale light that sifted down I could see Walking Fox and Red Hand, the two Pimas, fingering long scalping knives. The Papagos, Juan and Black Buffalo, had knives and hatchets. Where they had hidden them during the long patrol march, I didn't know. Juan said something and the two Pimas went up the side of the canyon wall as silently as cats, and in a moment they were swallowed in darkness.

After a minute Juan motioned for me to follow him. But it wasn't as easy as it looked, going up that clay bank over loose rocks and brush; without making any noise. I kicked a loose rock with my heavy cavalry boots and it went crashing down to the floor of the canyon, sounding as if I had dislodged a boulder. I didn't like that. And neither did Juan.

I remembered something then. After motioning to Juan to stay where he was, I made my way back to the bottom and found my saddle and saddlebags. I pulled off my boots and found the soft long buckskin moccasins that Gorgan had given me and put them on. It wasn't going to be much fun traveling over sharp rocks with tender feet and nothing to protect them but the pliant soles of the moccasins, but it was better than giving our position away. I also unloaded the two bandoleers of ammunition that I had slung over my shoulders and put my carbine back in the boot. The carbine would only make the going more clumsy, and it wouldn't do much good anyway if we were discovered. I kept my revolving pistol and Gorgan's bowie knife but I discarded the map case and knapsack. Pencils and paper, along with the jerked beef that would be our food for the next two days, went into my pockets.

When I had finished I felt naked, but I also felt less loaded and clumsy. I made it up the canyon wall this time without too much noise.

I had expected rough going after we left the horses, but I hadn't expected it to be the way it was. We moved like animals most of the time, down on all fours, from one rock to another, keeping in the deep shadows. We didn't see the Pimas until sunrise, but Juan seemed to know where they were all the time. The grade was steep and the rocks were sharp, and my feet were bruised and raw before we had traveled half an hour. At the first signs of dawn I called a halt and lay flat on the ground trying to get my wind back. Trying to stop my heart from pounding through the rib cage of my chest. When

I could talk I told Juan to bring the other scouts in. We wouldn't go any farther until the sun had come up.

"How much farther is the stronghold?" I asked.

Juan shrugged. Maybe an hour. Maybe less. He would know more about it when the other scouts came in and he could talk to them.

Black Buffalo and Walking Fox and Red Hand appeared before long. They said they thought the stronghold was not far away. They had a long talk with Juan and I gathered that they figured they had come far enough and wanted to get out before Apache began stirring.

If that was the case, Juan put an end to it with a few sharp words. I took the jerky from my pocket and passed it around, and we lay behind the rocks, chewing, waiting for the first real light of dawn.

It came finally, but the Apaches didn't. Everything looked safe enough to me; the hills were quiet, the morning was pleasantly chilled before the sun got itself together to make another assault on the land. But Juan was careful. He sent his scouts out again, one at a time, at about five-minute intervals, then he motioned for me to follow. We moved from rock to rock, and I found myself imitating the Indians in my movements, moving crouched over, arms hanging. Like hunting dogs, with our noses to the ground. Near midmorning Red Hand came back and said he thought they had found the place.

We moved up a little more and pretty soon we could see the ragged rim of rock in the distance. We lay flat on our bellies for a long while studying it. If it was the

place, there were sure to be lookouts on the high points and we couldn't possibly reach it without being seen. Not in the light of day, anyway. Maybe at night there would be a chance.

I asked Juan what he thought about it, and he said we wouldn't have a chance of getting any closer that day. Walking Fox and Red Hand and Black Buffalo thought we were too close already. They were all for getting back to our horses and rejoining the patrol.

It wasn't long before we saw a band of Apaches come riding from behind the ridge and head toward us. There must have been twenty of them. But they didn't see us. They rode heavily, chins on chests. Some of them were smeared with ceremonial paint, but they looked neither to the right nor to the left. They looked sick. Or very tired.

I saw Juan grinning faintly after they had passed. He pointed to his head and made circular motions. "Tiswin," he said.

It was Juan's idea that the Apaches had had a big celebration the night before, and all the young bucks, and old ones too, for that matter, had tanked up on tiswin. I had never tasted the Apache corn beer, but if it was anything like the sutler's whisky, I could understand how they wouldn't take much interest in things on the morning after.

We lay there behind the rocks and by midafternoon we were baked dry by the sun and I cursed myself for leaving the saddle canteen behind in my sudden enthusiasm for traveling light. We tried to chew some more jerky, but there wasn't enough moisture in our

mouths to get it down. We had to give it up, and lie there and wait.

Later in the afternoon we saw more Apaches come from the deep draw behind the ridge — small hunting parties, probably. Some of them had deep-dish Mexican saddles on their ponies, and Juan said they were Chiricahuas. Professional outlaws, probably, who had deserted Geronimo down south. The scout recognized others as members of the Mimbreño tribe, by the painted designs on their bodies. They were all naked except for breech-clouts and headbands and long moccasins like my own. All of them had long bows, and filled quivers slung across their backs. Most of them had rifles.

We lay there. We sweated and cursed and were too dry and thirsty to be scared. But finally the sun began to go down and it wasn't so bad.

As long as we lay still we were safe, it looked like. But we couldn't stay there forever, without water, without food. And besides, there was a job to do, and we had to get up to the ridge to do it.

Toward nightfall we began to hear the far-off beat of drums from behind the ridge, accompanied by the high-pitched twang of one-string Apache fiddles. And then the chanting and yelling. Juan grinned that grin of his.

"Tiswin."

As the sun died and the night grew darker we could see a ghostly glow along the ridge, caused by their fires on the other side. I wanted to start moving up then, but

Juan said it would be better to hold back until the tiswin had a chance to work.

Near midnight, as the yelling beyond the ridge reached a frantic pitch, Juan nodded and said, "Now."

The other scouts didn't like it and didn't see the sense in it. They wanted to go back while they had the covering of darkness. But Juan again clipped the uprising before it could become effective, and they began to move out, sullenly, reluctantly, toward the ridge.

It was a long way, it turned out; farther than it looked in the bright light of day, farther than you would guess that sound would travel. It must have been at least three miles of boulder-strewn upgrade from our starting place to the ridge. We moved very carefully now, crawling, squirming, wriggling from rock to rock, and trying to hurry to make the ridge before the moon came out.

Juan scouted the ridge himself, when we finally reached it. He came back with the information that there were Apache lookouts on both sides of us, but there was still a good chance of making it to the top, where there were places in the rocks to hide.

As we neared the top we could see a lone Apache standing against a blood-cast sky. We moved an inch at a time now as the noise from below seemed to sweep over us. I followed Juan under a protecting shelf of rock, and there we lay for what seemed like a long time, not breathing, not moving. Then at last we began to relax. The lookout hadn't seen us.

Walking Fox and Black Buffalo and Red Hand had found places over to our right somewhere, and we couldn't see them now. But we could see the Apache, and we could see the mad scene down below us. We were looking into Kohi's stronghold.

We were seeing something that no white man had seen before — or if some had seen it, they hadn't lived to tell about it. As far as I could see in the darkness, sheer walls of rock rose up to form an unassailable fortress. There must be an opening somewhere, but I couldn't see it now.

Almost directly below us a large fire cast a bloody circle of light on the valley floor. The dance of the warriors had reached a frenzied pitch now, as they circled around and around the fire, casting long, distorted shadows over the crowded circles of onlookers. The drums beat relentlessly at the night and the throbbing became a part of the darkness. Musicians sawed monotonously on their high-pitched fiddles, and the music clashed with the shrill shrieking of the women. Old men sat woodenly in a large circle around the warriors, somehow violent in their stonelike silence, and hooded holy men urged the dancers on.

At first the violence of the scene was numbing. But gradually we became accustomed to that, and then it was the sheer number of them that overwhelmed us. I began counting quickly a part of the circle in order to estimate the whole. There were a thousand at least, not counting the women and children. That meant there would be eight hundred, and maybe more, able-bodied warriors who would be able to take the warpath.

Where Kohi had recruited them from, I couldn't guess. But there were Mimbreños and Chiricahuas and Arivaipas; Apaches gathered from every point of the territory. Renegades maybe, and outlaws in their own tribes, but good fighting men and probably the best light cavalry soldiers in the world. How had Kohi brought them together? What had he promised them?

War, for one thing, I knew. And soon. War medicine had already started, and Apaches wouldn't be held back long after that. But not the harassing war on patrols that Kohi had been occupied with for so long; he wouldn't need this large a force for that. With eight hundred young braves ready for the warpath, he could even storm Larrymoor itself . . .

The thought hit me and left me cold. I thought of Caroline there. Of the other women, and the children. Of course, there was a good chance that Kohi would never succeed in storming a fighting fort like Larrymoor, even with this great force at hand, but it was only a chance. It wouldn't be an impossibility.

It was something to think about as the night wore on. As the dancers exhausted themselves and the great fire began to dwindle. The thing died, finally, of its own violence. The circle of red light began to creep toward the center and the women began to leave. And the old men. Only the younger women remained finally — young widows who had no men of their own — and the young warriors. By twos and fours they walked into the darkness toward the wickiups.

It was very quiet now, after the hours of violence.

Juan said, after a long silence, "We go now?"

"Not yet. We'll have to wait till dawn."

Now that I was here, I wasn't leaving until I had mapped the stronghold. That was the job Weyland had given me and I wasn't going back to Larrymoor without doing it.

"Black Buffalo is afraid of Apache," Juan said flatly. "I think he will cause trouble."

"We can't go now. We've got to stay until I get a look at this stronghold."

Juan dropped it. In many ways he reminded me of Skiborsky, or Steuber. Having been in the Army for so long, he accepted what came and asked no questions. Still, he was worried, for one man's fear could mean the end of all of us.

We waited. Weyland would get his map, and I would give it to him. I wondered what the Colonel's face would look like when he saw me riding back into Larrymoor again, alive. The thought gave me comfort as the long night wore on.

At the first show of morning light I got out paper and pencil and began to sketch the country we had crossed. As the stronghold began to rise out of the darkness, I worked on that. I could see now that it was a long canyon, closed on one end with a towering formation of boulders. The other end threaded down to a needle-point opening barely large enough for a man and a horse to enter. It was easy enough to see why Kohi had never been defeated in a place like this.

When I had finished I put the rough map in my pocket and looked at Juan.

"Do you think we can get out of here now? Can we travel far enough to be safe before it gets light?"

He frowned, gazing at the paling eastern sky. "If we travel fast, it is possible. And if Apache does not see us."

"Get the other scouts, then, and we'll move."

Juan began worming his way from under the ledge of rock. But suddenly I saw something and held him. What I saw was a rider — probably one of the Apache lookouts — making his way across the canyon floor toward the large cluster of wickiups at the far end. It wasn't the rider, but where he had come from, that bothered me. He hadn't come through the small opening at the near end of the canyon, so that meant there had to be another opening somewhere. I motioned to a cluster of boulders about fifty yards to our left.

"Do you think we can get over there without being seen, Juan?"

He looked dubious. "We stay here?"

"I've got to see where that rider came from. Then we'll go."

His eyes said it would be too late then, but he only shrugged. We moved out from our hiding place on our bellies. The Apache lookouts were not to be seen now. Maybe they were asleep. Maybe they'd had too much tiswin. Or maybe they were behind the next boulder with rifles aimed at our heads. There was no way of knowing, so we crawled.

There was another entrance, all right. I could see it now, after we had moved over far enough. It was a

narrow pass between two rocky hills, leading in from the east. There was only one entrance into the stronghold, or so the story had always gone. I grinned to think what Weyland would have to say when I showed him another one.

I felt good then. Apache was sleeping. We were safe and still had a good chance of getting out before the sun was too high. But, most important, I had done the job without getting killed, and that was going to hurt Weyland. It was a good feeling, but it didn't last long. I looked up suddenly and saw six Apaches coming toward us.

CHAPTER TEN

Where they came from, I don't know. Maybe they had had women up there during the night. Or maybe they had come up to relieve the lookouts who had stood guard all night. It didn't make any difference how they got there. They were there and that was enough.

I dropped down behind a boulder and grabbed Juan as he was about to start crawling out. I didn't think they had seen us yet, but it would only be a matter of minutes. They were coming straight toward us and there was no place to run. No place to hide. I reached for my pistol, but Juan knocked my hand away. I drew Gorgan's knife and waited.

It was a long wait. We could hear them coming, talking, laughing crazily, rifles cradled in the crooks of their arms.

So Weyland had been right all along. The thought was bitter. The Colonel had planned that I would be killed and that was the way it was going to be. It was a strange thing, but I wasn't afraid at that moment. Anger was the thing I felt. Rage swept over me like a hot, smothering blanket. I would never see Caroline again. I would never know why Halan had turned against me.

Those were the things that went through my mind as the Apaches drew closer. Juan knelt beside me, his long keen "trader's" knife in one hand, his face impassive and wooden. I wondered what Juan was thinking.

Then I went cold. A yell went up in the cold gray morning. I thought they had seen us and started to jump out from behind the boulder. But Juan caught me. He held me with an arm as hard as stone, his hand over my mouth. The yell, mad with fear, went up again, and this time I recognized it. It was Black Buffalo.

The yelling brought instant activity along the ridge and on the canyon floor of the stronghold. Apaches came swarming up the sheer walls, through the openings. We heard the quick soft pad of running feet, and then the sharp, authoritative crack of a rifle. We knew Black Buffalo was dead.

Apaches seemed to be everywhere now and the quiet of the morning was shattered with cries of rage. Juan kept his hold on me. We stood as still as the hills.

How long that went on, I didn't know. We stood there, waiting for them to find us. But they didn't come. They were occupied with Walking Fox and Red Hand now. We could hear the blows landing and the cries of anger. And finally they went away, taking the two scouts with them. It was as if Death had walked up to touch us, and then had walked away.

Juan relaxed his hold on me. I said, "We've got to get them back! We can't just —" He clapped his hand over my mouth again and kept it there until the angry, hate-maddened procession made its way down from the ridge and onto the valley floor. Then he said flatly, as if

it were no concern of his, "Nothing we can do. Too many Apache."

And he was right. There was nothing we could do but wait and watch, and the thought was sickening. Even now we could see them down below. The angry mob, the hundreds of them.

The two scouts were not tied. They were pushed and kicked along in the van of the mob. Two ponies were brought into the open, and two young warriors mounted them and rode yelping up and down the canyon while the crowd cheered. Then men from the crowd handed the riders rawhide reatas, and I knew what they were going to do.

The reatas were looped and made fast around the bodies of the two scouts. They made no sound. They did not beg for mercy. If the tables had been turned they would have done the same to the Apaches. The riders took the ends of the hide ropes and began pulling Walking Fox and Red Hand toward the end of the canyon. The riders nudged their ponies and the two scouts had to run to keep up with them.

But the ponies were urged to greater speed. Up and down the canyon the riders went as the crowd roared its approval, the two scouts running behind as long as they could stand. They could not keep the pace for long. First Red Hand stumbled, lost his balance, went crashing to the ground. Then Walking Fox was pulled down, and the two of them were dragged up and down in front of the mob. The rocks tore them to pieces. The paths of the ponies became soaked and slippery with blood. The two scouts made no sound.

That was the horrible part about it, the silence. Even the Apaches became silent now, watching the bloody parade in morbid fascination. The riders continued to gallop up and down until there was nothing recognizable as human at the end of their ropes, and only then was the spell broken and the crowd began to cheer again.

I felt sick. I went down on my knees behind the boulder and gagged emptily. For many long nights, I knew, I would hear the sound of those ponies running up and down the canyon. And the silence. I would remember that.

We waited where we were that day, not daring to move until darkness. Our tongues became thick and our bellies cramped for want of water, but there was nothing we could do about that. The lookouts were still in position along the ridge, but they were exhausted with the excitement of the early morning, and they sat like stone, with rifles across their knees.

Sundown came at last, and we drank the coolness in like water. As soon as darkness fell the drums began again. It was time to move. If we were ever going to move this was the time.

We started inching down from the ridge, Juan going first, guiding me on with his hands. We hadn't gone more than a few feet when Juan pointed out a figure on a rock to our right, an Apache.

We lay there for a while, wondering if we could make it all the way down without his seeing us or hearing us. I decided that we could — but an idea had been

growing in my mind, and now it had grown until I could not ignore it.

I motioned to Juan to stay where he was. I started crawling forward, toward the Apache. It was a job for Juan, probably, but I had to learn sometime, if I meant to stay alive. That was what Gorgan had said, and Gorgan had been right so far.

It seemed to take half the night, covering those few yards on my hands and knees. But I had learned some things from the scouts, and one of them was that speed was not as important as living. No coyote ever moved more slowly getting into position for the kill. I could feel Juan watching me. He was probably sweating worse than he had ever sweated before, for I was still the pupil and he was the teacher. But I made it to the rock. And the seated Apache didn't move. I took Gorgan's knife in my right hand. My left arm went out to choke off a scream before it could begin. I found myself thinking like an Indian, moving like an Indian.

There was a brief struggle, and then I had the Apache on the ground. Juan was beside me in an instant, with his own knife raised for the kill. I stopped him.

"I want you to talk to him, Juan."

"Talk to Apache?"

"I want you to ask him what tribe he's from."

"Chiricahua," Juan said impatiently. "I tell you that. Better dead. He call others."

The Apache was growing limp in my arms, his breath cut off from the pressure of my forearm against his windpipe. I loosened the hold a little. I put the edge of

my knife against his throat and held it there. "Ask him anyway," I said.

Juan didn't like it, but I was sure that the Apache couldn't make much of a sound before I could draw the knife across his throat.

Juan asked him. He spat the words out, the guttural Apache dialect of the Chiricahuas.

The Apache didn't move. He looked at us and his eyes were filled with enormous hate.

"Tell him," I said, "that Kohi's days are numbered. Apaches are not soldiers. They are women. They fight like women. Tell him that."

Juan told him, and it had the effect I had hoped for. The Apache attempted to spit at us. His eyes swam in anger. I lifted the knife very slightly from his throat, just enough to permit him to speak. He spoke harshly to Juan while looking at me.

"He cursed you," Juan said. "That was about all."

"He must have said something else."

"He said the white man's days were numbered." Juan shrugged. "Not Apache's. He bragged that all white men in the White Mountains would be dead before the moon showed itself seven times. He said there would be no more white-dog soldiers in the White Mountains."

It was what I had wanted to know. What I had been afraid to hear. I looked at the Apache and knew that he was telling the truth. Then Juan said something to him in Apache and his eyes blazed. He attempted to lurch forward.

It was all he had to do. The blade of my knife bit into his throat and hot blood gushed over my hand.

* * *

I don't remember much about the trip back. We went on our bellies as long as we could hear the drums, and then we got to our feet and ran. And at last, somehow, we reached the little box canyon where we had left our horses, and the animals were still there. Nervous and dry and wanting water too, but they were there. Juan and I drank from the saddle canteen, and then we poured some of the precious water in our hands and let the horses wet their tongues. Then we saddled up and led the three extra ponies out of the draw. We headed for Star Creek.

It was after sunup when we got there, and the patrol hadn't arrived yet. Our nerves were rubbed raw and our insides quivered for want of sleep. We set the horses to graze and took turns sleeping in snatches. Around mid-afternoon the patrol came riding up the dry bed of Star Creek.

The men were tired and filthy and evil-tempered, but they were all there, so I guessed that they hadn't run into any war parties so far. Halan hadn't changed. At first he seemed surprised to see me still alive — even pleased to see me. But that didn't last long. His eyes were cool as we shook hands.

"Well, I see you made it back, Mr. Reardon."

"Yes, sir. Two of us did. Black Buffalo and Walking Fox and Red Hand are dead."

He lifted an eyebrow, almost seemed to smile. "Three good scouts, Mr. Reardon. That's not much of a record to start off with, is it? I don't suppose you got the maps."

I was too tired to be mad. I handed him the map case and he opened it and looked at the drawings. It jarred him, seeing a detailed diagram of the stronghold. His face sobered, and for a moment he forgot to be cold and bitter and aloof.

"My God, Reardon, are you sure this is correct?"

"As sure as I'll ever be about anything. Kohi has recruited warriors from every Apache tribe in the territory. He's got between eight hundred and a thousand braves in that stronghold of his, all of them half crazy from tiswin and war medicine."

"My God," Halan said again, staring at the map and figures. "But why? What does he intend to do?"

"Maybe he intends to attack Larrymoor itself. Maybe that's the prize he's offered to all those Chiricahua and Mimbreño and Arivaipa renegades. It would be a great prize. Sacking Larrymoor would keep white men out of this part of the territory for years."

But Halan shook his head. "Kohi wouldn't attack Larrymoor. Not even with a thousand braves."

"Then what does it mean?"

"I don't know, Reardon. It means trouble, but I don't know what kind. This information has got to get back to the Colonel. Can you take it?"

"I guess so. My horse is in pretty good shape."

"The patrol's got four more days to go. We can't wait till then."

"I'll go, then. We've got no more than a week at the outside, then all hell's going to break loose somewhere."

"How do you know that?" He frowned.

I told him about the Apache lookout I had killed, but it didn't convince Halan. "Kohi won't attack Larrymoor," he said, "but you'd better get your map to the Colonel, anyway."

The mention of the Colonel seemed to recall something to him, and he became a ramrod captain of cavalry again. "Mr. Reardon, there is no excuse for dressing like a savage, even when on scout. You will wear your boots while under my command, the same as the rest of us."

What had changed him? I wanted to ask him, but I knew it would only get me a quotation from Army regulations, and I'd had all I could take of that.

I reached Larrymoor early the next morning, and rode through the gates as first call sounded for reveille. I listened to the familiar rattle of mess gear as the men began to turn out of their barracks, and it was hard to believe that what I had seen in Kohi's stronghold lay less than a day's ride away. I turned my horse over to a corporal at the stables, and from the way he looked at me, I knew I must look like hell. But I walked on across the parade anyway, toward headquarters.

I walked into the building and a young Irish lieutenant named Hilligan, the OD, stood up. "Joseph and Mary," he said softly. "Reardon, I didn't expect to see you . . . well, not this soon, anyway."

"Is the Colonel here?"

"He hasn't come in yet."

"Then you'd better go get him."

I went into the regimental orderly room and the sergeant major looked at me as if he had seen a ghost.

"Does the Colonel know you're here, Lieutenant?"

"He will in a minute, Sergeant." I sat down. I was dog tired and I didn't think I could keep my eyes open much longer. I was almost asleep when I heard the crisp crack of the Colonel's boot heels on the plank floor.

He was furious. I knew it before I looked at him. I could feel it. I didn't move until the sergeant major said, "Good morning, sir," and then I stood up.

"Well, Mr. Reardon, you got back. Early, I see. Perhaps you will explain the meaning of this."

I put the map case on his desk and opened it. "It was Captain Halan's wish that I should bring this to you, sir."

Weyland looked at it, his face dark with anger. "Do you propose, Mr. Reardon, that I take this to be a drawing of Kohi's stronghold?"

"That's what it is, sir."

"Lieutenant," he said tightly, "do you know the penalty for falsifying scout reports."

It was like a slap in the face. It startled me, woke me up, made me mad. "I don't understand what the Colonel means," I said. But I understood.

"I mean," he said angrily, "that it is quite obvious, Mr. Reardon, that you deliberately disobeyed the explicit orders of this command." He looked sternly at the sergeant at the next desk. The sergeant got up and left the room. "Now, Mr. Reardon . . ." He smiled thinly, but there was hate in his eyes. "Mr. Reardon," he

said softly, "you are a liar. A coward and a liar and a disgrace to the uniform." His smile was frank now. A gloating smile. "And I shall have your hide, Lieutenant. I shall call a general court-martial and charge you with disobeying a direct order, cowardice in the face of the enemy, falsifying reports, bringing disgrace to the uniform. You will rot for the rest of your days in an Army stockade, Lieutenant, for thinking you could make a fool of me."

My anger was too great to speak. I opened my mouth, but no words would come.

The Colonel slapped my map with the flat of his hand. "You call *that* Kohi's stronghold? What do you take me for, Lieutenant? You didn't even see the stronghold. You didn't even get close. You were scared. Skiddering scared, Lieutenant, so you falsified the map and the report. Isn't that what happened?"

"No, sir," I said tightly. "That is not what happened."

He laughed suddenly. "But you were too ambitious, Lieutenant, too eager to make a rotten thing look good. A *thousand warriors!* I'm not the fool you seem to think me, Mr. Reardon. Kohi has fewer than four hundred able warriors in his tribe, and I know it. And *two* entrances to the stronghold! Mr. Reardon, that was going too far. It is known to this command that Kohi's stronghold has only one entrance. You should have read the reports of regimental intelligence, Mr. Reardon, before attempting your little fraud."

I couldn't say a thing. Anger settled a red haze over everything. I was afraid to open my mouth.

"Go ahead, Mr. Reardon." The Colonel smiled. "Defend yourself."

"I did read the intelligence reports, sir. They were wrong."

"That's a lie, Lieutenant! A brazen, naked lie!" He leaned across his desk, his face only inches from mine. I could have hit him then. I ached to smash a fist into that grin of his. But this was what he wanted. Another charge against me.

"Speak, Lieutenant!"

"My report is written out . . . sir."

"You are in quite enough trouble, Mr. Reardon, without adding impudence to the list of charges. Answer me."

"The stronghold is as I have drawn it. Kohi's warriors are as I have numbered them, including Mimbreños and Arivaipas and Chiricahuas."

The Colonel smiled widely. He was satisfied with himself now. The first disappointment and frustration of seeing me still alive had worn off, for he had already found another way of taking care of me. A firing squad or a lifetime in a stockade would get me out of the way as well as an Apache bullet.

He selected a cigar from a box, bit the end off, and lit it. "Really, Mr. Reardon, I find this quite amusing. Go on, tell me the rest of it."

"Kohi is going to attack Larrymoor," I said. "Within a week."

The Colonel exploded, almost choked with laughter. "I don't suppose I should be surprised, Lieutenant, but there are limits, even to lies! Kohi attack Larrymoor?

It's insane. Even if he *did* have a thousand warriors he couldn't do it."

I had said all I was going to say. I felt sick and tired and disgusted, and he could do what he wanted.

"Sergeant," Weyland called, his voice calm at last, satisfied. "Call the Officer of the Day, Sergeant. Have him turn out four guards to escort Mr. Reardon to his hut. He is under arrest, confined to quarters."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

During retreat that afternoon, after I had slept, bathed, and shaved, Gorgan came around to see me. He was carrying a linen-covered tray.

"Mary and Sarah thought maybe you'd be hungry," he said.

I was glad it was Gorgan. He was the only man I wanted to see right then. He came in and took a bottle of the sutler's rotgut from under the linen cover. "I figured maybe you'd be thirsty, too," he said dryly. "Where do you keep your glasses?"

I got two tin mess cups and he poured into them. We drank. "Now you'd better eat," he said, "while it's hot. It's not much, but it's probably better than you get at bachelor's mess."

I felt better with Gorgan there. I found that I could grin without cracking my face. There was a large bowl of hot stew on the tray, and half a loaf of freshly baked bread. Gorgan tamped his pipe casually, poured himself another cup of the whisky, and sat quietly until I had finished eating.

"Well," he said finally, "do you want to talk about it?"

"What are they saying on the post?"

"That you falsified a scout report, among other things."

"What other things?" I asked.

"Enough to keep you in an Army stockade the rest of your years, if you're convicted."

And I would be convicted. The Colonel would see to that.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I think," Gorgan said, "that I would like to hear the story from you."

"Is there any way for a man to get his family out of this part of the territory?" I asked, pouring myself another cup of whisky. "Say down to Tucson, or maybe over to the New Mexico country?"

"Not unless some mail or supply wagons get through, and that won't be likely for a few weeks yet. Why?"

"You ought to get your wife and daughter out of here, if you can. Kohi's going to attack Larrymoor. He's going to do it within a week."

Gorgan whistled softly. "That doesn't seem reasonable. The regiment is under strength, of course, but behind these walls we could stand him off. How does he mean to swing it?"

"I don't know. All I know is that an Apache bragged about it a few seconds before he died. Kohi has gathered renegades from every clan and tribe in the territory, eight hundred able warriors at least."

Gorgan whistled again. "Did you see them?"

I told him about the scout, leaving nothing out. When I finished, the Lieutenant sighed deeply. "Well, it's easy to see why the Colonel didn't believe you. It's

hard for me to believe you — but I guess I do. There's sure not much sense in lying about a thing like that." He stood up. "Well, thanks, Reardon. I'll see what I can do about getting my family out of here."

I didn't have any more visitors until my striker came in to see if I wanted supper. I didn't want anything to eat, but there was something I did want. I wrote a note to Caroline and I told her as briefly as I could about the danger of staying at Larrymoor. I told her to contact Gorgan and maybe he could help her get away until the danger was over. I wanted to ask her to come to me; I wanted to hold her and forget. But I didn't do it. I put the note in an envelope and sealed it and gave it to the striker.

"I want you to deliver this to Colonel Weyland's house," I said. "If the Colonel isn't there, leave it with Mrs. Weyland. Just tell her who it's from."

I knew that Weyland would still be at headquarters and Caroline would understand that the note was for her. But the striker wasn't sure if it was the thing to do. I was under arrest and confined to quarters, and he didn't want much to do with me.

"And take that bottle of whisky with you," I said, "and do something with it. I don't want any more."

His eyes brightened at that. He took Gorgan's bottle before I could change my mind.

"And keep your mouth shut about this," I said.

He wouldn't keep his mouth shut, of course, but there wasn't much chance of dragging Caroline into it, anyway. Even if the Colonel found out, it couldn't make things much worse than they already were. The striker

went out with the whisky and the note and I lay on my bunk and tried not to think. Tried not to do anything. Wait, that's all I had to do now.

I went to sleep finally, and in a dream I saw Indian ponies running up and down a canyon floor, dragging bloody, shapeless hulks behind them . . .

The next morning Gorgan came around again.

"I hope you're guessing wrong," he said wearily, "about Kohi attacking the fort."

He sat down on my bunk, rubbing his face. I hadn't realized before how old Gorgan really was. "There's no chance of getting the women and children out," he said. "I tried to talk to the Colonel, but he wouldn't listen to it. He said we couldn't spare the men for escort, although I learned that we're getting reinforcements. Have you got any of that whisky left?"

I grinned stiffly. "My striker got it. What's this about reinforcements?"

"Two companies of infantry are being sent up from the Chiricahua reservation, because of the renegade trouble, I guess. They're on the road now, according to Operations, maybe a day or two away."

Two companies of infantry. I felt better after hearing that. With that many men, Kohi wouldn't have a chance of breaking the fort's defenses. Gorgan saw what I was thinking.

"If they get here in time," he said. "Or if Kohi doesn't find out somehow that they're on the march and cut them to ribbons before they get a chance to do us any good."

"How could Kohi find out? He doesn't operate in the south much."

Gorgan shrugged. It wasn't much of an answer. "Oh, yes," he said. "I almost forgot. There is one other thing. Maybe the Colonel doesn't take much stock in your scout report, but something prompted him to send his own wife away from Larrymoor."

I must have shown my surprise, for Gorgan looked at me with interest. "What's the matter, Reardon?"

"Nothing. It just struck me as strange. Did she go alone?"

Gorgan grinned without humor. "Mrs. Weyland? You ought to know better than that, Reardon. She went with a cavalry escort — the men we can't spare, according to the Colonel. Going down to Tucson on a little shopping trip, so the story goes. What do you think of that?"

"I don't know. I guess the Colonel's wife has a right to go shopping, if she takes a mind to."

Gorgan shrugged. "I guess so. But it seems to be stretching a coincidence, going at this particular time."

So Caroline was gone. Caroline was safe. That was what I had wanted, but now the thing left me empty of feeling. Let the Indians do what they would — Caroline wouldn't have to be here to face it. Something in that thought struck me as funny and I laughed abruptly.

"Maybe you'll let me in on the joke," Gorgan said.

"It's nothing. I was just thinking of another time." Now, it didn't seem so long ago. "And another place." Three Fork Road.

The day passed. The night passed. I lay on my bunk and thought of nothing. Let the sand run out — that was about all I could do.

Gorgan was the only one who came to see me. Being under arrest made me poison to the others, but Gorgan didn't have anything to lose. He wasn't going anywhere in the Army anyway. We talked about a lot of things, but we didn't talk about Apache, or wonder what he was doing. Not aloud, anyway.

Larrymoor went on the same as ever. No changes were made in the routine, and garrison life went on as monotonously as ever. What was happening to Halan and his troopers on patrol, we didn't know.

I wondered about Halan. What kind of man was it who was your friend one minute and your enemy the next, for apparently no reason at all? I didn't have the answer to that. I didn't have the answer to anything, it seemed. I ate, and slept, and waited. Vagrant thoughts floated in and out of my mind without stopping long enough to make sense.

I felt something pinching me. The two silver stars that Caroline had given me had worked out of my pocket and I was lying on them. I found them and flung them across the room. To hell with them.

There was a knock on my door the next morning and I guessed that it was Gorgan again. I called, "Come in," without bothering to get off the bunk.

But it wasn't Gorgan this time. It was his daughter, Sarah.

"Oh," I said. I swung my legs off and stood up. "I'm sorry. I guess I was expecting your father."

She stood in the doorway, not knowing exactly what to do. And I wasn't much help. Both of us, I guess, were thinking about that night, and our faces were burning.

"My father has gone out on a special detail, Mr. Reardon," she said formally. "He wanted you to know. He was afraid you would think he had forgotten you."

"Why, thank you, Miss Gorgan. Won't you come in?" It wasn't the thing to say, for young ladies didn't come unescorted to bachelor quarters. Then I tried to cover it up and made it worse. "I guess," I managed finally, "I've forgotten how to talk to people. Did your father say what kind of detail it was, Miss Gorgan?"

I noticed then that her face was sober, her eyes solemn. She was almost pretty, but I kept comparing her with Caroline, and no woman could stand up to Caroline. "Yes, Mr. Reardon," she said. "My father wanted me to tell you. Mrs. Weyland's escort was ambushed by Apache."

I didn't hear the rest of it. I stood there with the words going around and around in my mind. I didn't believe it. I didn't understand it. Not Caroline. Nothing ever happened to Caroline.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reardon," Sarah Gorgan said softly.

"Sorry, Miss Gorgan?"

"You were in love with her, weren't you, Mr. Reardon?" It was hardly more than a whisper.

I went over to the bunk and sat down again, looking at the floor. It was all some kind of mistake, I kept telling myself. It would all be cleared up in a little while and they would find Caroline was all right. Nothing could happen to Caroline. Then I heard Miss Gorgan's question. "You were in love with her, weren't you, Mr. Reardon?"

I looked up. "What makes you say that?"

"I don't know. The way you looked just now. But I've known for some time now, somehow. I've seen you looking at her. Remember the night of the dance? I saw you looking at her that night, and I guess that was when I knew."

I remembered the night on Gorgan's front porch. She had known, even then. I didn't know what to say. After a long while I looked up again and she was gone.

I heard Gorgan's detail coming in late that afternoon, but didn't get up to watch. Gorgan, Larrymoor, nothing seemed to have any meaning. Nothing seemed important enough to bother with. I sat there on the bunk, where I had sat all day.

But I heard them. I heard Gorgan dismissing the troopers, and then the thud of boots on the packed-clay parade as the officers headed toward headquarters. Maybe a half hour passed before I heard the boots again, this time coming down the row, toward my hut.

Gorgan didn't bother to knock. He pushed the door open and came in.

"Have you heard?" he said.

I nodded.

"They're dead," he said hoarsely. "Joseph and Mary! I hope I never see a thing like that again. Almost two full companies, and they're all dead!"

My head jerked up. "What are you talking about?"

"The two companies of infantry that were supposed to reinforce us. Kohi ambushed them."

Things were moving too fast for me. I couldn't keep them straight in my mind. "But what about — the others?"

"Mrs. Weyland?" he said. "She's captured, it looks like. The escort was killed, all but one trooper. He got away and made it back to Larrymoor this morning. Didn't Sarah tell you?"

I didn't remember. I didn't remember much of anything. But Caroline captured! I had got used to the idea that Caroline was dead, but she wasn't dead at all! Then I thought of something else and I could feel the blood drain from my face.

"If you're thinking what I think you are," Gorgan said, "you can forget it. Apaches don't take much to rape. They leave that to the white men. Likely they're keeping her as a hostage, and if that doesn't work they'll put her to work, like they would a horse or an ox."

I knew then that Gorgan had finally put the pieces together. He had guessed about me and Caroline. He knew. Studying me, Gorgan took out a battered cigar and rolled it in his mouth. "Well," he said, "you'd better start getting your things together. Get down to the quartermaster's and draw emergency ammunition and supplies. We're going to be riding before sundown."

I thought he was taunting me at first, but then I saw that he meant it.

"Have you forgotten I'm still under arrest?"

"Not any more you're not," he said, holding a match to his cigar. "The Colonel, I guess, is the one who's crazy. He's stripping the fort naked. He's taking every

man who can sit a saddle. I guess we're going to get his wife back, or die trying — which doesn't seem very unlikely at this point." To punctuate Gorgan's words, the staccato sound of a cavalry bugle sounded "to horse." Gorgan shot his burned-out match to the floor, turned, and walked out of my hut.

"I almost forgot," he said, appearing in the doorway. "The Colonel wants to see you. Right away."

The regiment was already forming on the parade ground as I went up the row toward headquarters. I felt like a different man. I was free — for the present, anyway. Free to walk, to ride, to fight. Free to die — even that was something. But Caroline was alive, and that was the important thing.

I took the steps two at a time when I reached the headquarters building. The place was deserted. Even the clerks and staff officers had left the place in the excitement. But the Colonel was there, standing in front of his desk waiting for me. His face was hard, masklike, as he stared at me.

"Mr. Reardon," he said flatly, "do you still maintain that the scout report you submitted to this command was accurate?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you were actually at the site of Kohi's stronghold and saw it for yourself?"

"Yes, sir."

He fingered the flap of his revolver holster, staring past me, a thousand miles into nowhere. "Mr. Reardon," he said hoarsely, "I want you to find my wife. I want you to bring her back. How you do it, I

don't care. As long as I live I shall wish you dead, but on this single point I shall bargain with you. Bring my wife back, Mr. Reardon, and I shall drop all charges against you."

A dead silence fell between us. Then I said, "You believed my report all along, didn't you, sir?"

"I am not stating my beliefs, Lieutenant. I am grasping at any last chance to get my wife back, no matter how desperate it may be."

I think I realized for the first time how deeply Colonel Weyland loved his wife. If he hadn't, he would have seen himself dead before bargaining with me. And why else would a career soldier marry a woman who would surely hinder his future as an officer?

It had been obvious all the time, of course. He had been willing to juggle Army law, and even kill, to keep her, but the idea jarred me just the same. I had loved Caroline for so long — it hadn't occurred to me that it could happen to others. At that moment — buried deep somewhere in the midst of hate — I felt pity for him.

I think he knew what I was thinking, for he smiled suddenly, bitterly. "Make no mistake, Lieutenant, this is one mission in which failure will not be tolerated. In war, Mr. Reardon, the penalty for failure is often death." His eyes glazed. His gaze wandered past me again: "This time," he said, "the penalty is certain."

I said nothing.

"Do you understand, Mr. Reardon?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you will undertake the mission?"

I said, "I want Caroline back as much as you do, sir."

He winced visibly, as if I had slapped him. He opened his mouth once, then closed it. "That will be all, Mr. Reardon," he said tightly.

"Am I to have freedom of movement, freedom of command, sir?"

"That is understood."

"Do you still intend to take the regiment out, sir?"

"That is also understood, Lieutenant. Isn't it obvious that I cannot sit by and do nothing as long as my wife is in the hands of savages?"

There was no use arguing that, I knew, so I said nothing. I saluted and walked out.

There was a brief call as the companies assembled on the parade.

"Evidently," the Colonel said, "Kohi has elected to make one last desperate attempt to force the white soldiers out of Arizona. The savages have asked for a fight, gentlemen, and a fight they shall have. We shall meet this uprising directly, on the savages' own ground, if they elect to fight there . . ." He talked on, a perfect picture of military confidence. He didn't mention Caroline. "The route of march will be screened by an independent detail under the command of Mr. Reardon . . ." If the Colonel felt the uneasy surprise among his officers, he did not show it. I could feel Gorgan and the others watching me, wondering.

After officers' call I caught Gorgan as he walked toward his company.

"Will you take the job, Gorgan?" I asked.

"Screening with your detail?"

"It's more than that."

He took soiled gauntlets from his belt and pulled them on his hands. "There's something I've got to know first," he said, looking at me. "Before, I figured it was none of my business, but now it looks like it's everybody's business. What is it between you and the Colonel?"

I couldn't lie to him. I couldn't dodge it.

"It's a long story, Gorgan. And not a very pretty one."

"I'd like to hear it anyway."

So I told him, as well as I could and as briefly as I could. About Caroline, and Sweetbriar, and Three Fork Road. I didn't tell him about the day the Colonel had found us, but Gorgan could fill that in. The Lieutenant was still watching me carefully.

"Do you still love her?" he asked abruptly.

"God knows, Gorgan. I wish to heaven I was sure."

"So the detail's job isn't to screen," he said, "it's to get Mrs. Weyland back." He shook his head. "It can't be done, Reardon. Not this way. Maybe, in time, we could bargain with Kohi for her return, but that's the only way now. If he wants to keep her, he'll keep her, even if he has to kill her."

"But I've got to try, Gorgan! If she were your wife, wouldn't you try?"

He sighed. He looked older, more tired than I had ever seen him. "All right, Reardon," he said finally. "I'll select the detail from my company."

It was late that afternoon, with a blood-cast sky at our backs, when we rode out of Larrymoor with drums

beating, guidons flying. The women of the fort came out to watch in silence as their men rode off to do battle. Young women, old, wind-dried and solemn-faced, they raised tiny scraps of handkerchiefs as we passed. They were dry-eyed, most of them. They would do their crying later, when the men had gone and could not see them. The skeleton force of troopers left behind lounged near the gates, spitting, scratching, joking with friends as they went by. Colonel Weyland and Major Burkhoff sat their mounts like stone figures until we had cleared the gates.

The column stretched out on the desert, putting the fort behind it. I nodded to Gorgan and he kneed up with his detail of twelve men.

"Are we heading straight for the stronghold?" Gorgan asked.

"The Colonel's taking the main column that way. He's looking for a fight and there's no way to stop it. I figure Halan's patrol ought to be somewhere to the west of here. If we can pick them up before morning, maybe we can learn something about where Kohi's going to hit next."

"You don't figure they've gone back to the stronghold?"

"They've just tasted blood. Kohi can't hold them back now. Anyway, he's setting out to drive the dog soldiers out of the White Mountains, and he can't do that by running to his stronghold and fighting a defensive war."

Gorgan spat into the dust. "It's your detail."

We pulled away from the column and rode at a gallop toward the dying sun.

According to the march orders, Halan's patrol was supposed to be bivouacked that night at a place called Fire Rock, on the edge of the desert. We reached the place about an hour before sunup the next morning. The patrol wasn't there.

Gorgan and I looked at each other, thinking of the two companies of infantry. The cavalry escort that had gone with Caroline.

"What do you think?" I said.

Gorgan rubbed his face. "Do you know the march route Halan was to take?"

"Yes."

"Then we'd better start out in the direction they would be coming from."

We unbitted and loosened cinches and let our horses rest for a while. The early morning was dead quiet. We waited out the few minutes of blackness that always comes before the dawn, then we climbed into saddles again and headed into the foothills. I kept telling myself that lame horses could have slowed the patrol and maybe Halan had decided not to come on to Fire Rock that day. But I didn't believe it. We rode as quietly as we could, higher into the hills — the freakish, piled-up boulders called hills in that country. The eastern sky began to pale. The horizon — what we could see of it — became edged in red, and the red crawled up in the darkness, like blood spilled on a blotter.

Gorgan reached over and held my reins. "Do you hear that?"

I heard it. Little round balls of sound. The casual, unimportant sound of rifle fire in the distance. I looked at Gorgan and we were both thinking that dawn was Apache's favorite time to attack. Behind me, I could hear the nervous sounds of the troopers working carbines in and out of the leather boots.

"I guess," Gorgan said, "we know now why Halan didn't make it to Fire Rock." We put iron to our mounts and began the steady climb in the direction the sound was coming from.

We reached a high ledge and the sound of gunfire became suddenly louder. Below us now we could see the stringy clouds of black powder smoke drifting sluggishly across a rocky gully where the patrol had dug in for the attack. Without speaking, Gorgan and I swung down from our saddles, drawing our carbines as we hit the ground.

"Two men for horse-holders," Gorgan called.

Two troopers came forward at the trot, bunched the reins together, and led the horses down from the ledge. I remembered, for some reason, what Gorgan had said about the frontier cavalry not being cavalry at all, but infantry merely riding to battle on horses. It was true now, at least.

We couldn't see the Indians, but they could see us. The heavy lead bullets from their Henrys spat against the rocks behind us as Gorgan got his troopers spread out and we began working down toward the gully.

Gorgan was the first to reach the gully, rolling, stumbling, falling into the draw. I came after him, and the troopers from E Company were right on top of us.

The men of the patrol were busily sighting and firing over the lip of the gully, hardly noticing us as we fell in beside them. I saw Morgan leaning across the clay breastwork, firing with intense concentration. Steuber, the big Dutchman, farther down, cursed as he dug a bad round out of his carbine. I saw Skiborsky then, on down toward the end of the gully. I ducked my head and headed toward him.

"Where's Captain Halan, Skiborsky?"

The Sergeant turned. He didn't grin that fierce grin of his this time. His face was gray. He looked sick. "By God, you do manage to get here just in time," he said. "I'll say that for you. The Captain's on down the draw a way. He's shot."

"How bad?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time to see."

I moved on down the gully and almost fell across Halan, sprawled limp on the floor of the draw. He had caught a bullet about an inch above his belt buckle, and another one up higher, into the lungs. His face was yellow, the cast of death. The only thing alive was his eyes.

I knelt beside him and opened his collar and tried to move some rocks away from his head. His mouth moved. He tried to speak but only bubbles of blood came out.

I bent down close. "What is it, Halan? What do you want to say?"

He tried again. "Leave me . . . alone . . . Mr. Reardon. Let me . . . die in peace."

"What have you got against me, Halan? You were my friend once, not long ago. What did I do to you, anyway?"

He closed his eyes and more blood bubbled silently from the corners of his mouth. He said nothing more. Halan was through talking, forever. I knelt there for a long time, a heaviness inside me. Strangling white smoke drifted down the gully. Carbines crashed. What was it, Halan? What did I do to make you hate me? Halan smiled thinly in death.

A trooper came up behind me and said, "Is there anything I can do, Lieutenant?"

I shook my head.

I untied Halan's neckerchief and spread it over his face. Automatically, I began to go through his pockets in search of any personal effects that he would want sent back east somewhere — if there was anybody back there who cared. There wasn't much there: two crushed cigars, a few coins, a pocket knife. Then I went cold inside as my fingers touched something else.

I held them in my hand, those two glittering five-pointed pieces of silver, staring at them. I imagined that something snapped inside me.

"Reardon!" I heard Gorgan calling. "Get up here! Here they come!"

They came, all right. But at that moment I didn't care if there were ten of them or a thousand. I picked up a carbine somewhere and began firing over the breastwork — firing automatically, because that was what I had been trained to do — but I hardly saw the naked brown bodies as they came on, melted away, and

came on again. What I saw were those stars that I had taken from Halan's pocket — the twins to the ones Caroline had given to me.

I must have gone a little crazy for a few minutes. I leaped up to the lip of the draw, yelling curses and swinging the carbine like a club as the Apaches began to filter through our patrol's curtain of fire. There was a vicious pleasure in hitting, in lashing out savagely and feeling the jar of my wrists as I smashed a skull or broke a bone, maiming, ripping, slashing. In the back of my mind I could hear the troopers yelling, and some of them had climbed up to join me. I could see Steuber hacking, slashing like a crazy man, towering above the Indians and wading through them swinging his saber two-handed, like Death wielding a bloody scythe. I could see Morgan fighting viciously, wolflike for the sake of violence.

But I saw those things only in the back of my mind. What I really saw at that moment was Caroline. I saw her clearer than I had ever seen her before. And I understood at last Halan's sudden hatred for me, for I knew now that he had seen those stars that Caroline had given me. The twins to the ones she had given him. I didn't remember at the time, but later I recalled the day Halan had come into my hut with Weyland's orders for me. I had emptied my pockets before shaving. The stars, along with other odds and ends, had been on the table where Halan could see them.

And he had seen them. And from that moment on he had hated me, for it was then that he knew that Caroline had belonged to me as well as to him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I don't know how long the attack lasted. They don't make clocks to measure time in battle. A minute can be a lifetime. An hour can be no time. But at last it was over and I stood there clutching a carbine with a split, bloody stock, cursing because there was nobody else to hit. I saw Gorgan's face in front of me, smoke-blackened, scowling. "Great God, Reardon, get back in the gully! Willingness to fight is one thing, but being a damn fool is another."

I let him shove me, lead me back into the draw. "Where did they go?" I said.

"Apache got a shock, I guess, that he wasn't expecting, and fell back to regroup. But they'll be back before long."

I still didn't know how many Apaches there were, or understand clearly what had happened. The men looked at me in a way they had never looked at me before, half in fear, it seemed. But apparently they didn't hate me or envy me any more. Morgan grinned at me, showing yellow teeth. Steuber, the big Dutchman, was still cursing his jammed carbine.

"Get back to your positions, men," Gorgan said. "They'll be coming back in a minute."

They went back to the clay breastwork and leaned over it with their carbines. All but the two men who were dead.

"What the hell's got into you?" Gorgan demanded when we got near the end of the gully.

"Nothing," I said.

"No man would beg to get himself killed, the way you did, unless . . ." Then he shrugged. "All right, I'll mind my own business."

We stood there, waiting for the next rush. "Halan's dead," I said finally.

Gorgan nodded.

A sergeant from E Company called, "These redsticks are up to somethin', Lieutenant. Damn if I know what, though."

"I'd better take a look," Gorgan said. "Take it easy, Reardon. There's no sense getting yourself killed if you don't have to."

I pretended to check my revolver and prepare for the next rush, but Apache could have been a thousand miles away for all I cared then. The same crazy thoughts went round and round in my mind, and the vision of Caroline was the center of all of them. Caroline. The taste was bitter. How far did that ambition of hers reach? How many more officers had she given those stars to? How many more men had she held, kissed, made the same promises to? The questions flitted and darted like mice on a treadmill, getting nowhere.

I heard a stirring toward the end of the draw, and I wheeled, my revolver pointed in that direction. There

was nothing there. I moved on down, carefully, around a bend in the gully, half hoping that an Apache would be there — someone I could take my anger out on. But it wasn't an Apache. It was Skiborsky.

The Sergeant was sprawled stiffly along the wall of the gully, his teeth clenched, his eyes staring wildly at nothing.

"Skiborsky, what's wrong?"

He shook his head from side to side, still staring with those fixed eyes. I knelt beside him and went over him quickly for wounds. There weren't any, except for a small scratch along his neck glistening with tiny beads of bright red blood.

"Skiborsky, what is it? Answer me!"

He worked his mouth. "I'm . . . finished, Reardon."

"I don't see any wounds. What's wrong?"

His jaws quivered with the effort of speaking. "My . . . neck. They got me . . . goddamn them. A poisoned arrow."

A cold wind seemed to sweep down the gully and hover over us. It was a rotten way to die. The thought of it sickened me as I tore his collar open to see if there was still a chance of bleeding the small wound. I took out Gorgan's bowie knife and started to slit the neck. But something was wrong. The scratch was not inflamed, the flesh was not burning with fever. I looked around and found the arrow embedded in the clay bank of the draw.

I said, "Get up, Skiborsky. There's nothing wrong with you."

His eyes blazed. "Goddamn you, Reardon. If you can't help me . . . let me alone!"

"Look at this flint head." I held the arrow in front of him. "It's clean, no sign of poison. Besides, that scratch on your neck shows no sign of inflammation, and your forehead's as cool as mine."

He didn't believe it. But he felt of his forehead, he felt of the scratch, and he stared at the clean head of the arrow. After a while he put his hands under him and sat up — his face red now, but not with fever.

"I'll be damned!" he said hoarsely.

"Are you convinced now?"

"Sure. I guess so, anyway. Look here, Reardon . . ."

"I haven't seen a thing," I said. "If that's what you mean."

He grinned suddenly and was the old Skiborsky again. "By God, I was scared, Reardon. I was so scared, I might have died, at that!"

"Maybe you've been out here too long," I said. "There's a limit to how much a man can take, Skiborsky."

But he shook his head. "It's them damn poisoned arrows. I've been thinkin' about them for a long time now. I've seen the way they work and it's not pretty. I knew just as sure as hell that I was hit by one! Goddamn, the men will never let me hear the last of this, if we ever get back to Larrymoor."

"They won't hear about it," I said. "Not from me."

The big sergeant rubbed his face sheepishly, and maybe he was thinking of that whipping he had given me behind the stables. Or the time he had given us in

the riding ring. Then he picked up his carbine, stood up, and grinned that old fierce grin of his. "I guess I'd better be gettin' back to the patrol then . . . Lieutenant."

Pretty soon I began hearing the Apaches scurrying around, and whoops and yelps went up and I guessed that they were coming again. But no shots had been fired by the time I had reached the other end of the draw, where the patrol was.

"It looks like the party's been postponed," Gorgan said dryly. He pointed down the grade where the Indians had been gathering, and there was nothing there now. But over to the right we could see the dust clouds boiling up from behind the boulders and we knew that the war party had decided to pull out for some reason.

"What do you make of it?" Gorgan asked.

I didn't know for sure, but I had a feeling. "It might be they've found bigger game to kill."

"The regimental column?"

"They were headed this way and the Colonel was looking for a fight. Maybe Kohi obliged him. That sure wasn't Kohi's main force that attacked the patrol."

But while I talked I kept thinking: Caroline's out there somewhere. In the hills. On the desert. Maybe dead, for all I know. Knowing what I knew about her, I still couldn't get her out of my mind.

After the last trace of the Indians had vanished we went down to the bottom of the slope, where Juan and a trooper were holding the patrol's horses. Gorgan had the detail's horses brought down and we headed back

in the direction we had come from, toward the Colonel's column coming up. In my mind I counted the hours we had been on the march — almost thirteen hours since we left Larrymoor. And Caroline had been gone longer than that.

I suppose, in the beginning, I had some sort of idea that would get us in Kohi's stronghold again, but I knew it was useless now, for Kohi wouldn't have returned to the stronghold after the massacre of the infantry column. But did they still have Caroline with them?

My mind was numb and I couldn't think. It was almost as if Caroline had died back there when I found the stars in Halan's pocket. I didn't hate her. I didn't love her. After a while she didn't even seem real, and it was hard to imagine that she had once been the reason for everything. I kept thinking: Caroline won't be hurt. She'll find a way to get out of it, even with Kohi. Caroline always finds a way.

It was strange that after all these years I could think of Caroline that way. Without feeling. I felt sorry for Halan; I even felt a kind of pity for Weyland, but the thought kept growing in my mind that there was no need to feel sorry for Caroline, because Caroline never got hurt.

"Snap out of it, Reardon," Gorgan said. "You look like you're riding in a dream."

I said, "I guess I was," but Gorgan didn't hear me.

Juan, who was riding at the point of the column, held up his hand, signifying that he had spotted something.

When Gorgan and I reached the high ground we could see the long streamer of dust in the far distance.

I looked at Gorgan and he shrugged. "I guess," he said, "the Colonel has found his fight."

"I don't think it's a fight," I said. "If it is, it's stretched out all over God's nowhere. Could it be a chase?"

Gorgan rubbed his face. "Maybe."

I thought I knew what it was. My head was suddenly clear now, but there was a cold emptiness in my guts as I realized what the chase might mean.

"It looks to me like they're heading straight for the stronghold," Gorgan said. "Where the stronghold's supposed to be, anyway. Does that make sense to you?"

"If Kohi's letting himself be chased, it's because he's got a reason for it, not because he's not strong enough to stand up and fight. If the reason's what I think it might be . . . Gorgan, we'd better start riding."

Gorgan straightened his seat and looked at me. "And where do you suggest we ride to, Mr. Reardon?" he said in that dry voice of his.

"Toward the point of the cavalry charge, because that's where the Colonel will be."

If Gorgan had any questions, he didn't ask them. He signaled for the column to come up. He tugged his battered campaign hat down over his right eye and grinned a humorless grin. "All right, Reardon. As the Colonel pointed out, this is your detail. But I don't think he's going to be very glad to see you, considering you haven't found his wife yet."

I let that go, and Gorgan didn't push it. When the detail reached the top of the grade, we rode.

We took the shortest way, which was also the roughest way, to Kohi's stronghold. The horses grunted, stumbled, sometimes went down as we made our own trail over the rugged, pathless hill country. The men, when they lost their seats, picked themselves up cursing and got in the saddle again. We rode where we could, and where we couldn't we got down and led. We lost sight of the dust trail, but that wasn't important now because we could guess where it was leading.

Gorgan's horse stumbled once, almost went down as we swung tight around one of the curious, senseless mounds of boulders. "I hope you know what the hell you're doing. Reardon," he shouted.

I hoped so too, but I couldn't be sure of anything until we finally came within sight of the ridge that bounded the stronghold. Then we began hearing the firing and yelling. It was to the west of us somewhere, and below us, near the western pass that led into Kohi's private fortress.

At that instant I had some idea of trying to get inside the canyon while the cavalry had Kohi's warriors occupied outside, but that idea didn't last long. A band of Apaches — the guardians of the stronghold, probably — came barreling out of nowhere. There looked to be a hundred of them. Probably there were half that many, but still too strong to fight.

Gorgan stood up in his stirrups, calmly looking back at the anxious faces of the troopers. As the Indians bore

down, he raised his arm and let it fall lazily. "At the gallop! Follow me!"

We went slamming down the rocky slope, with Gorgan and myself in the van. The Apaches gave up the chase after letting one volley go at us. They must have figured that it didn't make much difference if they killed us or if their friends down by the pass did it.

Pretty soon we saw where all the noise was coming from. In front of the pass the cavalry was locked in bloody hand-to-hand fighting with the Indians. Pistols, sabers, hatchets, knives. The fight swirled senselessly about three hundred yards from the pass.

I lost Gorgan after a moment, and I lost the detail and became just another dirty blue-clad figure in the screaming mill of horses and men. I emptied my pistol and pulled back a little way to where Skiborsky, his arm slit open and blood dripping from his elbow, was trying to reload his revolver.

"Have you seen the Colonel, Skiborsky?"

"By God, I haven't seen anybody, except a thousand goddamn redskins!"

"You'd better look after that arm."

"Sure. I'll wait here until a pretty nurse from the Sanitary Commission comes along to fix me up." He got the last round in the cylinder of his Colt's and rode back into the thick of the fight.

A strange thing happened then, and it happened so fast that Kohi must have planned it just that way. The Indians somehow disengaged themselves from the battle and broke for the pass of the stronghold. The

cavalrymen found themselves suddenly slashing at empty air.

Gorgan came riding out of the mill and dust, his hat gone and one gauntlet missing, but unhurt. "You all right, Reardon?"

"I'm all right. Have you seen the Colonel?"

"He was over on the right somewhere. It looks like the Apaches have had a bellyful. They're crowding into the stronghold, anyway."

But I wasn't sure about that. The cavalry, still stunned at finding nobody to fight, had failed to follow up its advantage. Over on the left I could hear Major Burkhoff bellowing, trying to get the troopers into some kind of formation. I rode to the right.

By now Kohi had set up a rear-guard action, dismounted Apaches taking up positions behind boulders overlooking the pass, harassing the bewildered cavalry. At last the troopers began to move forward again, but uncertainly, still not understanding what had happened. It looked as if almost half of Kohi's force had disappeared into the stronghold. Then, without warning, they wheeled and attacked again.

They hit hard, fast, swinging low over the necks of their ponies. They hit while the column was still disorganized, firing their volley, slashing with their hatchets, and then they ran again. More Apaches were being swallowed up by their stronghold canyon. More dismounted warriors were taking up positions to guard the pass.

I saw it then, the telltale feather of dust beginning to rise up at the far end of the stronghold. And I saw the

Colonel, too, sitting stone-faced, ramrod straight, near the center of the new cavalry line.

"Colonel Weyland," I said.

His head snapped around. He had a revolver in one hand and I thought for a minute that he was going to use it on me. "I presume, Mr. Reardon," he said stiffly, "that you have found my wife. Else you would not be here."

I said, "No, sir, I haven't found Caroline, but I think I've discovered what Apache is up to."

His eyes went suddenly wild, and I think he would have killed me then if Major Burkhoff hadn't reined in beside us.

"The left flank got it pretty bad on that last pass, Colonel," Burkhoff said. "Shall we dismount and fight on foot?"

"No," Weyland said, without taking his eyes from me. "We shall regroup and assault the pass. And we shall do it on horseback, Major, like cavalry."

The Major's mouth dropped open in surprise. "Sir, do you think it's wise to order a frontal assault on the pass?"

Weyland turned on the Major then, his voice edged with steel. "Major, I make the decisions for this command. What is wise and what is unwise I alone shall decide; I had hoped that you understood that."

Burkhoff's surprise turned to anger. He snapped his hand up in a stiff salute, wheeled his horse roughly, and rode back toward the left.

I said, "I don't believe Caroline's in the stronghold, Colonel, if that's what you are thinking."

"I don't care what you believe, Mr. Reardon," he said tightly. "I informed you before this command set out from Larrymoor that failure in your mission would not be tolerated." He cut me with a glance, almost smiled. "And you have failed, Mr. Reardon."

A sudden anger grasped me, almost choked me. I wanted to tell him about that dust rising at the far end of the canyon and what I thought it meant, but the words would not come. I wanted to tell him that the safety of the fort, the safety of northern Arizona, was more important than the welfare of any one individual. But I said nothing. Maybe because I could understand how he felt about Caroline. And if I had been in his place I would have done the same thing. I would spend every man, fire every round, trail blood over half of Arizona Territory to get her back.

Major Burkhoff had formed the regiment in line formation, and up ahead we could see the Indians getting set for us. The Major rode front and center of the formation, then Weyland reined out and said, "You follow me, Mr. Reardon."

We rode out to where the Major was waiting. In the pass, the Indians were quiet now, waiting for us to come well within rifle range before opening fire. I imagined they were smiling, for it must have been amusing for them, watching the dog soldiers play at war. Guidons flying, the smart staccato of a bugle piercing the early morning.

"Ready, Major?" Weyland said.

"Yes, sir," grimly.

"Take the left flank, Major. The orders are to take the pass. To take Kohi's stronghold. The orders are to kill every single red-skinned devil in the canyon if my wife has been harmed. Is that order clear, Major Burkhoff?"

The Major's neck was swollen, his face red. "Yes, sir."

"Very well, that is all. Have the bugler and color bearers ride front and center. I will lead the charge . . . and Mr. Reardon has requested to ride beside me."

The Major's eyebrows raised, but that was all. He saluted stiffly and rode off at the gallop.

The cavalry line was formed just far enough from the pass to be out of rifle range. Bodies littered the dust between us and the pass, both Indians and troopers. Dead horses lay in silent mounds, riderless horses galloped frantically toward the higher hills.

Weyland lifted a white-gauntleted hand. "For-war-r-r-d!" The line began to move, wavering at first, as if in uncertainty, then straightening and gaining momentum. "At the gallop!" we heard the officers bawl behind us, and then the colonel turned slightly in his saddle and called, "Bugler, sound the charge!"

As soon as we got into rifle range it was like hitting a steel wall. Horses went plunging in great clouds of dust. Riders went over their heads, sprawling. Kohi, if he was up there in the pass, must have been smiling. I felt a tug at my shoulder, stinging for a moment, but that was all. The cavalry kept plunging on. I heard the yelling and the shooting, but for some reason the sound got weaker as we came closer to the pass. The sheer

walls of the stronghold began to waver and blur and I lost sight of the Colonel. I turned then, for a moment, and what I saw in that moment left me cold.

Weyland had fallen back the length of his horse. He was staring with crazed intentness . . . and the revolving pistol in his hand was pointed at me.

I don't know where Morgan came from at that moment, but he came from somewhere, plunging out of the crazy mill around us. With cold deliberation the Texan bumped the Colonel's horse, and as the horse went down Morgan drew his revolver and put two bullets in the Colonel's back. That was the last thing I saw for what seemed a long while.

When I came to, Morgan had dismounted and was dragging me over the rocky ground in front of the pass. He got me behind the boulder finally, seeming completely oblivious of the grim battle going on around us.

"By God, Reardon," he said dryly, "you ought to be more careful who you pick for enemies!"

I still wasn't sure that it was real. I had seen Weyland trying to kill me, and I had seen the cool-eyed Texan kill Weyland, but I still couldn't believe it. I felt the blood then, and the dull beginning of pain just below my shoulder. I looked and saw that Morgan had already tied his neckerchief around my upper arm to slow the bleeding.

"The Colonel . . ." I managed to say.

"The sonofabitch is dead," Morgan said, tightening the neckerchief bandage. "What did he have against

you, anyway? It must have been somethin' pretty bad to make him shoot you in the back."

"Is that how I got hit?"

"Sure. There wasn't no Indians in back of us, was there? And that's where you got it. He was gettin' ready to put another one in you, until I butted in and spoiled it for him." He stood up then, took off his campaign hat, and scratched his head, while men died all around us. He looked toward the pass with detached interest. "Goddamn," he said, "we'll never get into that stronghold . . ."

Then he took two steps forward and two steps backward, almost as if he were doing a little dance. His knees buckled; he broke in the middle and suddenly sprawled at my feet.

"Morgan!"

He didn't move. I turned him over and saw that a bullet had gone through his lungs. He moved his mouth, almost grinned. "My God!" he whispered hoarsely.

He did grin then, shaking his head. "Well, I guess it doesn't matter. I'd of got it one way or another. I think Burkhoff saw the whole play back there." He began to breathe faster, blood bubbling from his mouth. I remembered Halan.

"Anyway," he said, "the federal marshals would of found me before long. I killed one of them in Texas a while back."

"Don't talk, Morgan. Just take it easy and you'll be all right."

"I'm downright curious, though . . ." he rambled vaguely. "What did Weyland have against you?"

He fell to coughing before I could say anything.

Lieutenant Gorgan rode up then, out of the dust and smoke and noise. "You all right, Reardon?" he shouted.

"I'm all right."

"Who's that with you?"

"A trooper I used to know in A Company."

Gorgan swung down from his saddle and looked at the Texan's yellowed face. "Your friend's dead," he said flatly. "So is the Colonel, for that matter, and a lot of others. Great God, Reardon, the whole regiment will be dead if this insane attack goes on!"

"Where's Burkhoff?" I said.

"Lord knows. Out there somewhere, I guess, in that mess."

"Find him. He'll be in command now that the Colonel's dead. Tell him that Kohi's warriors are pouring out the rear entrance of the stronghold. They're already out, maybe, hell-bent for the fort."

Gorgan looked slightly dazed.

"Kohi knows there's nobody at the fort to protect it," I said. "If he can hold the regiment here with part of his force and make a raid on the fort with what's left . . ."

But I didn't have to explain any more to Gorgan. He had a wife and daughter back at Larrymoor. "Stay here, Reardon," he said, and started running toward his horse. "If I get a chance, I'll send somebody to get you."

He disappeared, and I sat there staring blankly at Morgan. Why had he bothered to help me? I wondered. I had never done anything for him. But, as Morgan had

said, maybe it didn't make any difference whether he got it now or a while later. Morgan, the Texan, the killer — I'd never really known him. Nobody had, more than likely. I felt too weak to move, so I continued to sit there, waiting for something to happen.

After a while a kind of order began to take shape in the confusion of battle. The cavalry, some of it, began to dismount and take up positions behind the boulders. Others were pulling back somewhere. I couldn't see where. Gorgan, I guessed, had found Major Burkhoff.

The firing settled down to a harassing spatter now, but I could hear a great deal of movement behind me. My arm hurt. I felt like going to sleep.

I tried to stay awake by thinking of Caroline. I still couldn't believe that anything could have happened to her. Not to Caroline.

After a while a corporal from C Company came crawling over the rocks and squatted beside me.

"You Mr. Reardon, sir?"

I nodded.

"Mr. Gorgan says to tell you most of the regiment's pullin' out. The rest of us are stayin' here to hold things off for a while."

I nodded again. It was going to be a rude shock to Kohi to find that his carefully laid plans had backfired, but I couldn't feel proud at having any part of it. I couldn't feel anything much, except the pain in my arm.

"Oh, yes," the corporal said, as he started to crawl away again. "There's a Papago scout back in the rear. He says he's found Mrs. Weyland."

The words didn't mean anything at first, but when they did hit they hit hard. "Corporal, are you sure?"

"That's what the scout says, sir."

"Then I'd better go back and talk to the scout." I began getting to my feet. It wasn't an easy job, but the corporal helped me and finally we started working our way back.

The scout was Juan, as I had figured. He squatted stonelike behind a high rock. If he was aware of the spatter of battle around him, he didn't show it.

"What's this about Mrs. Weyland?" I said.

Juan shrugged. "I think the Colonel's woman is crazy. I rode back to the hills when I saw this battle, as the government law says Indian scouts must do. That was where I saw her."

"Is she all right, Juan? Was she harmed in any way?"

He shrugged again. "She ran," he said. "She made a noise like the scream of the cougar and ran from me."

I stood up. My head was beginning to get light from the loss of blood, but I closed my eyes for a moment and the dizziness went away. I said, "Show me where you saw her, Juan. We've got to find her."

We went back to a small draw where the horse-holders were. Juan got his pony and I climbed heavily, clumsily onto the first cavalry mount I found. We put the battle behind us, except that it wasn't much of a battle now — just some sporadic firing from cover and neither side doing much good.

"Down there," the scout said, pointing, as we reached a brush-grown ridge. But I didn't see Caroline. There was a rocky ravine with plenty of boulders and

greasewood, but that was all. We rode on down to the bottom, and every so often the hills would tilt sickeningly and I would have to close my eyes and hold on.

"About here," Juan said.

She couldn't have gone far, I thought. We rode on down a way, then Juan reined his pony in and nodded to some brush on our right.

"Caroline," I called.

No sound. Just the wind through the draw. I got down and began stumbling toward the brush.

I didn't recognize her at first. Her eyes were wild, wide, like an animal's eyes. She was crouched on her hands and knees behind the scrawny thicket, and I heard myself saying, "It's all right now, Caroline. Nobody's going to hurt you now."

"Matt!"

It was just a whisper. Then she said it again, louder, and she got up and ran to me.

"Matt, oh, Matt!"

That was all she could seem to say. She said it over and over as she clung to me.

"It's all right, Caroline. Everything's all right."

That was all I could seem to say.

We must have stood there for a long while, Caroline clinging to me and sobbing hysterically. Juan took his pony and went back to the ridge.

"Are you all right, Caroline?"

"Hold me, Matt. Hold me and never let me go!"

"Did they hurt you, Caroline? Did they . . . ?"

She shook her head, beginning to get over her hysteria now. "No, but they would have. They would have, Matt, if I hadn't told them. I *had* to tell them. You understand that, don't you, Matt?"

I went cold inside without knowing exactly why. "What do you mean, Caroline? You told them what?"

"About the infantry," she said hoarsely, her voice again edged in wildness. "I had to tell them, Matt. Heaven knows what they would have done to me if I hadn't."

There was a long silence. I was glad that Juan had gone back to the ridge. I was glad that there was no one else to hear.

"You bargained with Kohi?" I said woodenly. "You told him about the reinforcements and he let you go. Is that the way it was?"

"I had to, Matt! I had to!"

She had to. And the awful thing about it was that she was telling the truth. She had betrayed her country and me at Three Fork Road — because she had to. She had married Weyland, not because she loved him but because she had to. It was Caroline's' explanation for all the things she did, and, for her, it was the truth.

But what I heard was the pound of horses running up and down a canyon floor, and I remembered the bloody hulks that had once been two good Indian scouts. I thought of the reinforcements. Two whole companies of good tough infantry, and they were dead now. I couldn't blame Caroline for trying to save herself, but I couldn't get these visions out of my mind. As I held her, Caroline seemed to lose all her warmth.

Her softness became hard. It was like holding a stone statue, without feeling, without warmth or life.

"You don't blame me, do you, Matt? You *can't* blame me!"

There didn't seem to be anything to say to that.

"Don't hate me, Matt. I couldn't stand it if you hated me."

I saw Caroline then as clearly as I would ever see her. As a little girl who never grew up — who never learned that she was not necessarily the center of the universe, the core of all life. "I don't hate you, Caroline. I'll never hate you."

The Colonel's dead, Caroline. And so is Halan. But I couldn't say it then. And those two scouts, and two companies of infantry. Are you worth all that, Caroline?

My head swam and my arm throbbed. I released Caroline as gently as I could. I stood back and her eyes widened. I don't hate you, Caroline, I thought. But I don't love you either. And she could see what I was thinking.

I walked a pace or two away and sat down on a rock. The mountains tilted again and that was the last I saw.

Later Gorgan fitted the pieces together for me, when they got me back to the post hospital at Larrymoor. Kohi had been killed. With Weyland dead, Burkhoff had taken command and swung the column behind the stronghold and caught the Apaches filing out their rear emergency exit, and that was where it happened. He was a little man, Gorgan said, the war chief of the Coyotero Apaches. Little and wizened and very ugly.

But he had been a man of power and military genius, and the bullet that entered his heart had put an end to the uprising.

"I guess we've got you to thank for that," Gorgan said. "Maybe Larrymoor would be in ashes now if you hadn't found that second entrance to the stronghold."

I didn't want to be thanked. I wanted to forget. Kohi was dead — a man I had never even seen — and so were Weyland, and Halan, and a Texan named Morgan. I wondered who was the winner.

In a few days they turned me out of the single crowded hospital room and I went back to my hut at the end of Officers' Row. Gorgan came there to see me when he wasn't on duty. And Skiborsky came once to tell me that the telegraph lines were up again, and about the first thing to come over them was an order for Morgan's arrest. He thought it was a good joke that the Texan had fooled them by getting himself killed. Maybe it was. The Dutchman, Skiborsky said, was in the guardhouse for taking scalps on the battleground. There was talk again of getting more reinforcements.

The regiment, the patrols, the routine went on the same as it always had and probably always would in the Army. The ranks were thinner. The post cemetery was larger. That was about all.

Toward the end of the week I learned that Caroline was leaving Larrymoor.

I hadn't seen her since the day of the battle, and I didn't want to see her now. With no duty to pull, I lay on my bunk day after day and did nothing, thought nothing, and that seemed to be an end in itself. From

my window I watched the big escort wagons back up to the front of the commanding officer's house. I watched the troopers load the furniture and the paintings and the fine silver tea service . . . Caroline, dressed all in black, and very beautiful, supervised the job expertly.

Good-by, Caroline, I thought. But they were only words.

Where would she go? What would she do? I wondered. But there was no use worrying about Caroline. Somewhere there would be more Reardons, and more Halans and Weylands. And she had never liked Larrymoor anyway.

Gorgan came around again that afternoon.

"There's a mail stage coming through from Tucson," he said. "Due tomorrow morning, according to the telegraph operator."

The news would cause great excitement in some quarters — to the people who were expecting mail. I nodded.

"The Colonel's widow will be going back with the stage," he said.

I nodded again.

"What are *you* going to do, Reardon?"

I didn't know. I hadn't thought about it. "I guess I'll stay here at Larrymoor," I said. "Until my hitch runs out, anyway."

"And after that?" No more mention of Caroline.

I looked at him. "Where else is there to go? You said yourself that a man gets used to this country, and then he's not fit for civilization."

Gorgan grinned. He sat back and stretched his legs, a look of self-content in his faded eyes. "I thought maybe this country would get you," he said. "It gets a lot of us, men and women too . . ."

But not Caroline.

"Supper tonight, Reardon? My wife says to invite you, if you feel like coming."

His wife or Sarah? Outside, I could hear the escort wagons pulling away from Caroline's house. They would be on the road the first thing in the morning. Everything at Larrymoor that was Caroline's would be gone.

"All right," I heard myself saying. "I'll be there."

Major Burkhoff dropped the charges against me after he took over the regiment, and my striker was more cooperative after that. He drew some water for me and set it in the sun to warm, and that afternoon I bathed as well as I could with a bandaged arm. Toward nightfall I heard a commotion on the parade and the striker came around to say that the mail stage had arrived early. It would be heading back to Tucson, he said, the first thing the next morning.

I didn't bother to see if I had any mail. I waited in the hut until well after dark thinking that Caroline might have some last word to say before she left. But I guess she knew as well as I did that whatever had been between us was dead now. I had my striker help me into my dress jacket, and I went up the row to Gorgan's.

"My husband tells me you're in a way of being a hero, Mr. Reardon." Gorgan's wife smiled.

"I don't believe so, ma'am," I said. "There were some heroes out there, but they didn't come back."

I saw that I had said the wrong thing. The women of Larrymoor didn't talk about the men who didn't come back. They thought about them, maybe, and cried about them, maybe. But they didn't talk about them, and the men never knew — or pretended that they never knew. For the women of Larrymoor it was a fearful game of waiting, and praying, and hoping. And keeping silent and not showing what they felt. I began to understand that it took a special kind of woman to be an Army wife in a place like this.

Gorgan, it turned out, had a reason for throwing this little party of his. Major Burkhoff, he said, was putting him in for captain. If he was aware that he would probably be the oldest captain on the frontier, he didn't show it. Grinning, he filled our glasses with Monongahela whisky that he had gone in debt for at the sutler's store.

"What shall we drink to, Reardon?"

"The twin silver bars you'll soon be wearing?"

He shook his head. "It's too small a thing for a country as big as this. Let's drink to Arizona Territory — the last outpost."

After supper Gorgan was still feeling good — so good that he decided to go down to the sutler's store and go in debt some more for a bottle of New Orleans brandy that had lately been shipped in.

"I'll go with you," I said.

But Gorgan was afraid I would want to pay for something, and the party was his. I went to the porch

with him and waited there in the darkness, listening to the small sounds of a fort getting ready to go to sleep. I sat on the railing and looked up the row toward Caroline's house. It was dark. Tomorrow Caroline would be gone, and Major Burkhoff and his family would move in, and a big part of my life would be a void. I wondered if Caroline felt that way about it.

After a while the screen door opened and Sarah Gorgan stood framed in the lighted square of the doorway. Ever since that night we had been very formal: Yes, Mr. Reardon. Thank you, Miss Gorgan . . .

I could see now that she was remembering too. She stood in the doorway for a long moment, as if she were afraid to step into the darkness. Afraid to be alone with me.

"Mr. Reardon."

I straightened in the deep shadows of the porch. "Yes, Miss Gorgan."

She came out then. She closed the screen door carefully and came toward me, but not too close. "There . . . there's something I thought you would want to know," she said quietly.

I waited. She didn't seem to know how to go on. At last she said, "I was out in the lean-to a while ago. I saw someone go into your hut, by the back door."

"It must have been my striker, Miss Gorgan."

"It was Mrs. Weyland," she said.

I didn't move. I could only think: Caroline's waiting for me. She wants to see me. And for a moment the old passion rose up burning and almost choked me. But it

was a brief thing. It burned itself out and left me empty and without feeling.

I still didn't move, and I knew that I wasn't going to move. I said, "Sarah, I think you've got a right to know something. You were right that day when you told me I loved her. Ever since I can remember, almost, I've loved her. But the thing finally burned itself out of its own heat and violence. Do you understand that?"

She said nothing. I wasn't sure why I was telling these things to Sarah Gorgan, but it suddenly seemed important that she should understand.

"Do you understand that, Sarah?" I said.

"Yes. I think so."

Then it was almost that first night all over again. I almost reached out to take her shoulders and pull her against me. I could look at her now and not see Caroline. I could kiss her, if I wanted to, and never think of Caroline. And I suddenly wanted to, but I didn't.

I sat on the railing again and looked out at the night. It was a strange feeling, having control of my own thoughts again, and it would take some time to get used to it. The wind was soft and the stars were out in great numbers. The night was very quiet.

She said, "I'll go inside now."

I looked at her and began to understand that I liked having her there. I said, "You said once that the desert had beauty. Maybe you'll stay a while and tell me about it. There are a lot of things, I guess, that I don't know."

I saw a light flare in the window of Caroline's house. Caroline had given up. After a while the light went out.

I half listened to what Sarah Gorgan said, and I felt comfortable and the world seemed all right for a change.

Let the old fire die, I thought, and then start again, slowly. Sarah Gorgan seemed to understand that. It takes longer than a day to change the world. Or a man. It takes time to adjust yourself to a comfortable warmth when you've been used to white heat for so long.

We saw Gorgan coming across the dark parade with the brandy. "Is that you, Reardon?" he called. "Sarah?"

"Yes," I said. "We're just beginning to get acquainted."

THE COLONEL'S LADY

Clifton Adams

Since the Civil War ended, former Confederate soldier Matt Reardon has been carrying around the memory of a beautiful blonde named Caroline. His feelings for her are a mixture of love and hate, the result of her betrayal during the war – not only of him, but of his regiment too . . . When he finds out that she's now married to Colonel Weyland – the officer in command at Fort Larrymoor, a frontier outpost in Arizona Territory – Reardon enlists in the Yankee Army so he can be stationed at the same place, and finally have a chance to resolve things with her. But a charismatic Apache war chief is putting together an army of his own, and has a cunning plan to wipe out the cavalry . . .

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