

# **PECOS BLOOD**

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*Dedicated to Howard Joseph Wetherbee*



## Chapter I

The sun was ablaze in the bright blue sky. Joe Howard rode down the dusty street, was amazed at how many people were out in the heat. Sweat rolled down his face and the blue shirt stuck to his back. Hunger pains gnawed at his stomach.

"Serge, are you as hungry as I am?" He leaned over and patted the horse's black neck. The big horse nickered low in his throat as if he knew exactly what Joe had said. "If we find a restaurant first, I eat. A livery, you eat."

Joe got lucky first. Pulling up in front of Mitchell's Restaurant, Joe swung down, tied Serge to the hitching rail and stepped up on the porch. When he opened the door, the aroma of food was so overwhelming that he thought he'd starve before he could get to a table. He made it to a table in the corner, pulled out the chair against the wall and sat down. Pushing his hat back, Joe looked around the restaurant. He couldn't believe his eyes! Every head was turned toward him and the looks he was getting weren't out of curiosity. Open hostility was plain to see and a buzz of voices soon filled the long room.

"The nerve of him." Joe heard one sedately dressed woman say to her companion at a table to his right.

"He should be strung up," one man said to another.

Maybe they were talking about someone behind him. But his back was to the wall, so it had to be him. Joe was puzzled to see a waitress coming toward him with no purpose at all in her walk. "What do you want?" she asked crisply, glaring down at him.

"A menu would be nice," Joe answered, a small smile on his unshaven face.

"We don't have a menu," she replied, her hands defiantly on her hips. "We're almost out of food. I'll bring you some mashed potatoes and coffee."

Without waiting to see if that would do, she flounced off.

What's wrong with these people? He looked around again. Everyone was still staring at him and he was starting to get angry.

It didn't take the waitress long to return with the plate and cup. "That was quick," Joe said, looking up at her. Without saying anything, she slammed the plate down and let the hot coffee spill out when she put it beside the plate.

"How can you be almost out of food?" Joe asked, narrowing his brown eyes. "It's only a little past noon. There should be plenty of food back there." He motioned toward the kitchen with his thumb. The girl's face remained expressionless, but her blue eyes burned in anger.

"Look, mister," she said coldly, "don't press your luck! I brought you this. Be glad." Tossing her head, she spun around and stomped off toward a table

where an older couple were sitting.

The rumbling in his stomach couldn't be ignored, so he picked up the fork. He could tell in an instant that the potatoes had been watered down. Feeling eyes on him, Joe glanced up to find the waitress watching him, a smirk on her mouth and a challenge in her eyes. Turning his head from side to side, he was puzzled to find everyone still looking at him with unfriendly eyes.

The sooner I get out of here, the better, he told himself. The thin potatoes were well seasoned and the coffee was hot and strong. That helped a lot. The plate was soon clean and, even though he could have eaten twice as much, something told him it would do no good to ask for more. Taking a few coins from his pocket, Joe put them on the table, pulled his flat-crowned hat low over his eyes, stood up and, amid hostile glares, walked out of the restaurant and got on his horse.

"Serge," he said to the horse as they headed toward the opposite end of town, "if all of the people in Pecos, Texas are like those in there, they're all crazy! They were staring at me like I didn't have on all of my clothes or had done something wrong. I must have had my hat on the wrong way." He laughed at his joke.

Pulling up in front of the livery, Joe dismounted and patted the big horse's neck.

"I hope you get better treatment here than I did at the restaurant," Joe said, removing the saddlebags and bedroll. His back was to the sun as he loosened the saddle, and the scruffy old man shuffling out of the livery in run-down brown boots had to squint in

the glare.

"What can I do fer you, young feller?" he asked in a wheezy voice as he scratched the grizzly beard on his thin face.

He sounds friendly enough, Joe thought. Maybe he was the only sane person in town, or maybe that was some kind of sick joke the people in the restaurant played on strangers.

As soon as Serge was stabled, Joe planned to go to the hotel, get a room and a good bath, then rest until morning and start out for Fort Davis.

"Well, old Serge needs a rubdown, some water and a good feed of whatever you've got," Joe said, and was bewildered as a frown crossed the man's deeply wrinkled forehead. He wondered what there was about him that would cause a stranger to look at him like that.

Uncertain recognition flashed in the old man's eyes. "What's the matter?" Joe finally asked, throwing the saddlebags over his shoulder and pulling his rifle from its holster.

"Boy, you gotta be clear out of your mind comin' back here," the old man said slowly, shaking his head. He hooked his thumbs around the grayed suspenders that held up his baggy green pants. "Pecos oughta be the last place on this earth you'd want to see."

Here we go again, Joe thought irritably. Just as he'd done in the restaurant, he looked around to see who else the old man could be talking to. But again, there was no one, so it had to be him.

Something was wrong here. First, the people in the restaurant. Now this old man. They were all treating



him like he had a disease.

"What are you talking about?" Joe asked, frowning down at the old man. "How the devil can I come back to Pecos when I've never been here? You've got me confused with somebody else, mister. I'm Joe Howard. I'm just passing through Pecos on my way to Fort Davis to go to work for the army. I've got a letter in my pocket from Colonel Eric McRaney."

Joe was sure that explanation would settle the whole thing. Maybe the old man's eyesight wasn't all that good and the explanation would clear up the misunderstanding.

But the old man squinted doubtfully at Joe and shifted his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"Mister, it don't make no never mind to me what you're callin' yourself now," the old man said, shaking his head slowly, "or where you say you're from or where you say you're goin'. I don't care if you've got a letter in your pocket from God. After what you done, I'd get my tail back on that black horse and get outa town as fast as I could." He nodded his head and spat brown tobacco juice, then wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

Joe hadn't been born with a lot of patience, and what little he had left had just run out. He couldn't imagine what he was supposed to have done. Apparently, the old man and the people in the restaurant knew some kind of secret!

"Look," he said slowly, anger turning his brown eyes darker, "I'm not going anywhere until I find out what you're talking about. Just what is it that I've done?"

"Mister, I ain't gettin' involved in somethin' like this," the old man said, pushing his shabby hat back on his head. "If you're stayin' in town, don't expect no help from old Gib Colson." He jabbed a thumb against his chest, then hooked it around his suspenders again.

Joe expelled an exasperated breath and glared down at Gib Colson. "Would you at least feed and water Serge?" he asked irritably, thinking that maybe the old man had been out in the hot sun too long, or that too much rot-gut whiskey had taken its toll on his brain. His red nose was evidence that he'd drunk more than his share of the stuff. Joe took another deep breath and shook his head, realizing that Colson wasn't going to tell him anything.

"Sure," was Colson's sullen reply as Joe turned and walked away toward the Hunter Hotel. "It ain't your horse's fault you're crazy. Don't say you ain't been warned." He raised his voice so Joe would be sure to hear him.

Shaking his head again, Joe kicked through the dust and readjusted the saddlebags on his shoulder.

The heat had kept most people inside, and there was no one on this side of town to see him as he opened the half-glass door and walked up to the desk in the hotel. He had to tap the brass bell twice. A tall, emaciated man came hurrying from the back, polishing a pair of small square glasses with a handkerchief.

Apparently, he couldn't see very well without them, because even though he looked straight at Joe, his eyes didn't take on any expression until he had placed his glasses on the end of his thin nose. But as

soon as his vision improved, he had the same reaction that Gib Colson and the people in the restaurant had when they first saw Joe. His eyes widened in fear and suspicion and the color drained from his face. He licked his thin lips quickly.

"Ah, now look," he stammered in a high-pitched voice, backing well out of Joe's reach. "I don't want any trouble out of you, so why don't you just go someplace else?"

Joe felt like somebody was playing him the same song but a different verse as he looked at the scared little man. If he'd known either of these men he'd have sworn that they were playing a joke on him. But he'd never been in Pecos before. He'd never met Gib Colson or any of the people in the restaurant, and until a few seconds ago he had never laid eyes on the frightened man behind the desk.

"All I want is a room and a bath," Joe said wearily, dropping his bedroll to the floor with a thud and leaning against the desk. "I'm tired, I'm dirty and I'm getting a little angry." He'd kept the rifle in his left hand and brought it up against the edge of the desk. Joe frowned and the desk clerk took another stumbling step backward.

"We don't have any rooms," the man said so quickly that the words ran together. He gripped his long fingers in front of him. They were shaking. "We're all booked up." The man wasn't very good at telling lies.

Joe leveled a brief stare at the man, then shifted his gaze to the wall where room keys were hanging on wooden pegs. Six keys were in plain sight. Why didn't the man want to give him a room?

"You're lying," Joe said in a cold voice. "You've got six keys there and that means at least six rooms are vacant. I'll take number four. Is there a bath out back?"

Joe unconsciously dropped his right hand down by his side, only inches from the Dixie Navy Revolver tied to his muscular thigh. The desk clerk turned even whiter and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down spasmodically.

"Number four is fine," he squeaked, pressing his lips together and trying to swallow. "There should be fresh water out back. There are some towels in your room."

A small voice in the back of Joe's mind told him that he'd better keep his gun hand free. Putting the key in his shirt pocket, he took several bills from his pants pocket and shoved them across the desk. Stuffing the bedroll under his left arm, Joe picked up the saddlebags and rifle and moved toward the stairs, all the while watching the nervous man from the corner of his eyes.

Going up the stairs, he turned to the right and opened the second door from the end of the hall on his left. Two rooms were across the hall and one was next to his.

Dumping his gear on the brass double bed, he wondered about the sanity of Pecos' citizens. What's wrong with them? They think I'm somebody else who's done something awful. Who could I favor that much? I've heard that everybody has a twin, but surely not me!

Taking clean clothes from the saddlebags, Joe started toward the door. Normally he'd have left the

carbine in the room, but he decided to take it. Something told him he might need it.

Walking to the end of the hall, he opened a door leading to a flight of stairs. At the back of the hotel was a low, wide, unpainted building, with BATHS burned into a piece of wood that was nailed over the door. Inside were three cubicles. Blankets on ropes provided a little privacy. True to the desk clerk's word, there was water, which appeared to be fresh, in two of them. The water was tepid to the touch. The building was stiflingly hot and he wanted to hurry and get out.

Dropping his clean clothes on the floor by the tub, he leaned the rifle against the wall and pulled the blanket across the enclosure. Removing his gun belt, Joe took off his boots and clothes and stepped into the tub. Splashing water all over his lean body, he lathered up and then rinsed off.

He knew that there was at least one layer of skin mixed with the dirt and grime on the bottom of the tub. He got out and dried off with a once-white towel that had seen a lot of use. It was almost thin enough to read through.

He'd just stuffed his shirt into his pants and strapped the Dixie Navy Revolver around his waist, when the door opened and he heard the hammer being cocked back on a rifle. He froze where he stood.

Cold chills raced up and down Joe's back and his heart slammed against his ribs. He'd been in similar situations before, but each time was no less scary than the first. He'd ridden shotgun for Wells Fargo for a year, and that wasn't all fun and games. The only thing between Joe and whoever was holding the rifle

on him was the thin blanket. The carbine was out of the question, since it was standing against the wall. He cursed himself for being so careless.

But, with the agility and speed of a cat, which had kept him alive for at least seven of his twenty-three years, Joe dropped to a low crouch and spun around, drawing the pistol as he went and jerking the blanket down with his left hand. Joe wasn't prepared for what he saw.

Aiming a Henry Rifle at him was one of the biggest men Joe had ever seen. Standing well over six feet, and with a bulk of nearly three hundred pounds, the man looked at Joe with a tolerant smirk on his pudgy red face. The rifle looked like a child's toy in the ham-sized hands, and the five-pronged star was almost lost on his plaid-shirted barrel chest. A gray, high-crowned hat was set squarely on a mass of brown hair.

"Well, well," the sheriff drawled easily in a deep, gravelly voice. "You got nerve, boy. I'll say that much for you. Too bad you don't have that much brains." A noise that was supposed to be a laugh rumbled up from deep in his throat. "I sure as the devil wouldn't have come back to Pecos to take a bath." Again the huge man laughed.

I don't believe this, Joe thought impatiently, dropping and shaking his head, his finger still on the trigger of his revolver. The sheriff's as nutty as the rest of these people! Joe knew he hadn't done anything wrong, but the whole town thought he had, and drawing a gun on a lawman was only going to complicate things. But he couldn't give up so easily.

"Sheriff, I don't know what everyone thinks I've

done," Joe began slowly, "but evidently it's bad enough to get you after me. Since I'm supposed to have done something pretty bad, I could kill you where you stand and leave, and it wouldn't make any difference to the people of Pecos as far as they're concerned about me. So if you don't want to be known as the dead sheriff of Pecos, Texas, you'd better tell me what's going on."

Surprise wiped the smile from the sheriff's face and he stared at Joe for a full minute. "That sounds like a threat to me, boy," he drawled, his eyes narrowing. "Nobody threatens me. Now drop your gun." A twitch pulled at his thick mouth. When Joe hesitated a second, the sheriff took a step toward him. "Drop it, I said."

Joe had no choice, but thought he could get by with just lowering the hammer and dropping the pistol back into the holster. But that didn't work.

"That's not what I said," the sheriff bellowed, glaring at Joe.

Realizing that the sheriff would probably kill him if he hesitated any longer, Joe removed the pistol from the holster and dropped it to the floor.

The sheriff lowered the hammer on the rifle, bent and laid it on the floor with an easy motion that surprised Joe. The surprised look was still on Joe's face when the big man charged at him and slammed his fist into Joe's stomach.

The punch exploded the air out of Joe's lungs and doubled him over. With the same fist, the sheriff let Joe have it square on the chin. Grabbing him by the shoulders, the sheriff slammed him back against the wall and smashed a fist squarely into the middle of

Joe's face. Joe tasted blood.

The image of a small yellow cat being thrashed to death by a big brown dog flashed into his mind. That's what he felt like.

His head was buzzing, but he had enough sense left to know that if he didn't do something fast, this big man was going to beat him to death.

The sheriff moved back a step and Joe took advantage of it. Straightening up fast, he pulled a painful breath into his lungs. Jerking up his right knee, he planted it hard in the sheriff's crotch. Letting out a yell of pain, the big man doubled over, dropped to his knees and grabbed the injured part of his body. The big hat landed upside down near the tub.

Joe was never one to question fate, and jerked the pistol up from the floor. Thumbing back the hammer, he aimed it down at the man moaning and kneeling on the floor.

"Now, Sheriff," Joe said coldly, spitting blood and a piece of chipped tooth on the floor, "like I said before, I could kill you. But I'm not going to do that. What I'm going to do is stand here with this gun aimed at you until you tell me what the devil is going on. I sort of get the impression that most of the people here think I'm somebody else. I want to know who and why."

Joe's voice was hard, his eyes cold, and his hand steady.

"Ezra Stillman and Gib Colson said you had gall," the sheriff groaned, his pudgy red face contorted in pain. "I just didn't suspect how much." He took a deep breath and struggled to his feet. "And I do



believe you'd kill me." Despite the obvious pain, a small laugh erupted from his throat and he nodded his huge head. "Would you?"

"Faster than you can spit," Joe said coldly, his eyes blazing. "Now start talking before I lose what little patience I've got left."

From the overall appearance of the young man standing before him, the sheriff knew he was serious.

"Well, first of all, I'm Sam Bentley," the sheriff began, taking a deep breath. "You told Gib Colson your name is Joe Howard. It's how you signed at the hotel. Everybody in town knows you're Ben Milligan and that you assaulted Beth Jennings, the only daughter of Judge Wilson Jennings. My deputy, Amos Cooper, is still sporting an egg-sized lump on his head where you smacked him with his gun when he tried to arrest you last week. Then you stole a horse that belongs to Vana Glaser from behind her saloon."

Joe stared at the sheriff for a long time. He glanced away, then looked back at Bentley again. If the situation wasn't so serious, he would have laughed at the mountain of a man standing before him. But he only shook his head and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. Taking a long breath, he expelled it through clenched teeth.

"Then I suppose I jumped on that stolen horse and lit out for parts unknown, huh?" Joe said sullenly, lowering his head and leveling a look at the sheriff.

"You got it," Bentley agreed, "and for the life of me I can't figure out why you came back."

Joe couldn't believe the grudging admiration gleaming in the big man's brown eyes, and the smile

now pulling at his wide mouth.

"Sheriff, I'll tell you like I told Gib Colson and the desk clerk: I didn't come back because I've never been here! I just rode in from Tucumcari. I'm going to Fort Davis for a job. I've got a letter from Colonel Eric McRaney, commander at Fort Davis. I've never heard of a Ben Milligan and I'm sorry about the little girl. Any man who'd do a thing like that to a child should be shot, or at least castrated. I've never had to use a child to prove how much of a man I am."

Anger tightened Joe's lean jaw and his brown eyes darkened as he spoke. His fingers began wavering and the pistol dropped a little, but he quickly steadied his hand and brought the gun back up. Bentley looked down at the floor and shook his head.

"I almost believe you," Bentley said slowly, cocking his head to one side as he looked up. "Only an innocent man wouldn't know that Beth Jennings is nineteen years old." He squinted his eyes at Joe. "For some reason I do believe you. Nobody would be stupid enough to come back to where he was supposed to have done all them things. But I'll tell you right now, you'd better not stay here in Pecos. I'm even going to overlook what you did to me. I could still arrest you for assaulting a lawman." Reaching down, Bentley patted the front part of his pants.

"I had no choice, Sheriff," Joe said, a small grin on his swollen mouth. "I had to get your attention before you killed me."

The big man suddenly threw back his head and loud laughter filled the bath house. Joe grinned at him.

"Feelings are still running high against Ben Milligan," the sheriff went on, clearing his throat, "and you look enough like him to be his twin. I've never seen such likeness. So if I was you, I'd high tail it up to my room, get my things together and leave before the shirt hits my back. Like I said: you're a dead ringer for Milligan. His mother wouldn't know the difference."

Joe watched the sheriff take a deep, slow breath. When there was no evidence of pain, he took a longer breath. Then he bent over and picked up his hat and rifle.

"Sheriff, I really appreciate this," Joe said earnestly as he holstered his revolver. Turning around slowly and watching the sheriff closely, Joe jammed on his hat, pulled on his boots and picked up his dirty clothes and the carbine. Leaving the bath house, he ran up the stairs back to his room and gathered up his gear.

Ezra Stillman was leaning against the desk, a smirking grin on his thin face as Joe came down the stairs carrying all of his things. Joe was sure that Gib Colson at the livery was the one who'd gotten the sheriff. But there was satisfaction in the desk clerk's blue eyes and Joe got mad all over again. He walked over to the desk slowly and dropped the bedroll to the floor with a thud. He slammed the saddlebags down on the desk and grinned when Stillman jumped.

"Well, Mr. Stillman," Joe said coolly, a sarcastic smile on his sore mouth, "it seems that I'm not going to be staying in your illustrious hotel after all. That should make you happy. Since I really didn't use the room, I want my money back."

Leaning against the desk, Joe cocked an eyebrow and gave Stillman a level look, a challenge in his brown eyes.

"I don't have to give your money back," Stillman said smugly, a small smile twinkling in his eyes. But the smile was soon wiped from his thin face when Joe reached across the desk, grabbed him by the front of his starched blue shirt and pulled him roughly up against the desk. The breath was knocked from his chest in a loud swoosh.

"You don't have to go on living, either," Joe said softly. His eyes were blazing. He'd had just about all of this town and its people that he could take. He'd missed out on a meal, was almost denied a room, which he hadn't used, and this poor excuse for a man was arguing with him about a refund of some money. What would happen to him next?

"And if you don't give me at least half of that money back, I'm going to take it out of your skinny hide!" Joe couldn't remember ever being this angry before. "I just beat the daylights out of the sheriff and he's a lot bigger than you are, so you can imagine what would be left of you."

The two men stood almost nose to nose, their eyes meeting. The brown eyes cold and deadly. The blue eyes snapping and scared.

"All right! All right!" Stillman sputtered, bracing his skinny hands against the edge of the desk and pushing out of Joe's grip. "I'll give you all of it. Just let me go!"

Joe released his hold and the trembling man stumbled backward. The wall saved him from hitting the floor. When Stillman regained his

balance, he opened the cash drawer and threw all of Joe's money on the desk.

"Now, get out of here before I call the sheriff," Stillman ordered in a shrill voice. Joe put the money in his pocket and moved toward the door.

Out on the plank sidewalk, Joe stopped. Do I resemble this Ben Milligan enough to be mistaken for him by so many people? The sheriff said Milligan's own mother couldn't tell the difference between us.

Apparently Gib Colson and Ezra Stillman think so. The sheriff seemed to be the only person he'd met so far who had any sense at all, and that was after Joe had beat it into him. But at least he was willing to listen to what Joe had to say. Of course, the sheriff could have arrested him for assault. It would have been his duty.

Serge was chomping away on a bucket of oats when Joe got back to the livery. Gib Colson wasn't around and Joe was a little disappointed. Dropping the bedroll and saddlebag on the ground, and leaning the carbine against the wall, Joe picked up the saddle. The horse made a low rumbling sound as Joe walked toward him.

"Well, Serge," Joe said laconically, straightening the blanket on the horse's broad back, "looks like we'll be on the move again. Some fool was in town, a Ben Milligan, looked enough like me to be my twin and he's been doing all kinds of dumb things. So to save ourselves some trouble, we'd better head on to Fort Davis."

When the horse was saddled and all of the gear tied on, Joe swung up and turned the horse toward the

door. But blocking the entrance was Sam Bentley! The same rifle was aimed at Joe's middle again.

"What's the matter now?" Joe asked, looking down at the rifle barrel.

"You just couldn't stay out of trouble, could you?" Bentley said, a slow smile pulling at his slack mouth. "You're under arrest for assault on Ezra Stillman, and Judge Jennings will want to see you. Gib Colson told him you're in town. Jennings ain't real sure you're tellin' the truth about not being Ben Milligan."

"Ah, Sheriff," Joe cajoled, shaking his head and grinning down at the big man, "a summer wind would shake up Stillman. I wasn't that rough on him. He didn't want to return my money, and since I didn't use the room that much I thought I was entitled to at least half of it back. He was glad to oblige, after I convinced him."

"Don't make no difference," Bentley argued, shaking his head slowly and squinting up at Joe. "Stillman said you threatened him. Claims you said you'd take the money out of his hide. He doesn't have much hide to go around, you know."

"Well, I did say that," Joe admitted, pushing back his hat. "But you know how it is. You'd do the same thing."

"Well, it ain't me," Bentley replied, shaking his head again. "Now get down, and don't try anything funny. I know you're good with that gun and you could probably get me. But this town would string you up before supper."

Joe couldn't see any point in compounding his problems, so he dismounted, handed Bentley his

pistol and rifle and unsaddled Serge. Picking up the saddlebags and bedroll, Joe walked ahead of Bentley across the street to the sheriff's office. A few people and a stray dog watched them, and Joe heard one man say, "It looks like Bentley finally got Ben Milligan."

The sheriff's small office was stiflingly hot. The two windows, one on the side next to the street and one in front by the door, didn't let in much air. A door leading back to the cells was open, and even though each cell had a window, the heat was unbelievable. Sweat rolled down Joe's face and back. He started to drop his gear by the sheriff's desk, but Bentley stopped him.

"Oh, no," Bentley said, shoving back his hat. "Take all of your stuff on back to the middle cell. It might be a little cooler. I'll leave the hall door open." Bentley walked around the cluttered desk, opened a drawer, dropped in Joe's gun and holster and got the keys. He stood the carbine in the corner.

"Look," Joe said, frowning at Bentley. "There's no need for this. You know I was leaving town. You know I'm not Ben Milligan. Just tell me what my fine is, I'll pay it and be on my way. I'll even write a letter of apology to Stillman. I'll even shine his boots."

Joe reached for the roll of money in his shirt pocket.

"Nope, I can't do that," Bentley said quickly, shaking his head as he straightened up and frowned at Joe.

"Why?" Joe asked incredulously, staring at the big lawman. "Whatever happens between now and the

time I leave town will boil down to paying somebody some money."

Joe didn't know what kind of town he'd ridden into, but he knew that he should have kept riding to Fort Davis instead of stopping in Pecos. He could have been there tomorrow night. But now it looked like he was going to be stuck in a hot jail on some trumped up charge for no telling how long.

"Judge Wilson Jennings don't do things like that here in Pecos," Bentley explained dryly, arching brown bushy brows. "You will have to stand trial."

The small, hot jail spun around Joe. He couldn't believe what he'd just heard. Usually there was only a hearing and a fine to be paid.

"Stand trial!" Joe shouted, blinking his eyes a couple of times in disbelief. Lowering his head, he leveled a steady look at Bentley. "What are you talking about? Why do I have to be tried just because I roughed up Stillman? You know what will happen—I'll go on trial, I'll pay a fine, I'll leave town. Why can't I save the Pecos taxpayers some money, pay the fine now and leave town as I was going to do when you stopped me?"

A slow smile slid across Bentley's face and once again he shook his massive head. Puckering his thick lips, he shrugged his wide shoulders.

"Because Judge Wilson Jennings thinks that every man is entitled to a day in court," Bentley said, drawing his mouth into a thin line. "So I guess you'll be getting yours."

Gesturing with the keys in his hand, Bentley waited for Joe to precede him down the short hall to the cell. "Jennings may not be so convinced that you



ain't Ben Milligan," Bentley said, clanging the door shut and locking it.

"He'll know I'm not Milligan when he sees me," Joe insisted, dropping his gear on the floor. He turned around, gripped the bars and glared at Bentley. "Why don't you bring Jennings' daughter over here and let her see me? She could clear this whole thing up today and I could be gone."

Bentley looked at Joe for a long minute then threw back his head and roared in laughter. The sound seemed to come from deep in a barrel and filled the entire jail, making the walls shake.

"I'll say one thing for you, boy," Bentley said, clearing his throat. "You do have nerve, and it shows you don't know the judge or his daughter. There ain't no way on God's green earth that Wilson Jennings would ever let his daughter degrade herself by coming to a jail. You'll just have to wait for her to see you in court."

Joe got the feeling that Bentley was glad he was going to trial. That would make him feel better over the beating that Joe had given him.

Grinning and shaking his head, Bentley turned on his heel and went back to the office. Even though he left the door open, there wasn't enough air to blow away a flea's shirt. Joe didn't know how long he stood clenching the bars. This wasn't how he'd planned to spend his time in Pecos. He'd just wanted to spend the night and leave the next morning for Fort Davis. But all of that had changed now.

Well, he decided, spinning away from the door, there's no need to stand when I can sit. Removing his hat and shirt, he dropped them on top of the

saddlebags. Dusting off the faded brown wool blanket, Joe sank down on the bunk.

Time stood still. He didn't know how much of it had passed when Bentley appeared in the doorway and called out that he was going to eat supper and would bring something back for Joe. He didn't ask what Joe wanted. Apparently there wasn't a choice.

Joe felt more alone than he ever had before, when he heard the front door open and close.

How am I going to get out of this mess, he wondered, stretching out on the bunk. Suddenly a thought struck him and he sat up. As soon as this Judge Jennings saw him or had his daughter see him, they would realize that a mistake had been made and let him go. Nobody could be that much of a look-alike for somebody else. There was always some small difference.

Reassured that he would soon be free, Joe stretched his arms out and under his head. Sweat glistened on his broad chest and flat stomach.

Bentley must have shoveled the food in, Joe thought when he heard the door open. But he changed his mind when he heard the light steps coming down the hall and knew that it couldn't be Bentley. Every board squeaked when the big sheriff walked.

Turning his head slowly, Joe got another surprise. Standing on the other side of the iron bars was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Hair the color of midnight was pulled up into a coil around her head. Dark blue eyes with long black lashes raked over his prone figure, while an amused smile turned up the corners of her mouth. Her olive-toned face was

damp with sweat.

A yellow muslin dress fitted her tall, supple figure like a second skin. The short sleeves and scooped neck made her look a lot cooler than she actually was.

"What can I do for you?" Joe asked caustically, rolling slowly to his feet and walking toward her. He wondered if she was Beth Jennings.

If she was, no wonder Milligan had wanted her. She looked like the kind of woman any man would want. If she wasn't Beth Jennings, he wanted to know who was she and what was she doing in this hot jail looking at him in a way that started his heart pounding.

"Well, I just wanted to see the man who attacked Beth Jennings, stole my horse, left, and then was stupid enough to come back to town."

"I guess, since you mentioned your horse, that you must be Vana Glaser," Joe said, breathing in the fragrance of her spice cologne.

"You guessed right," she said slowly, her lips sliding into a sultry smile. "And if you were Ben Milligan, you'd know that better than anyone."

Joe let his gaze hold hers for a long time. Something passed between them, but at that minute neither was actually aware of it.

"Why would I know who you are if I was Ben Milligan?" Joe challenged, letting his eyes travel over her well-rounded figure.

"Because," she shot back shrewdly, "you worked for me at the saloon for two weeks. But you're not Ben Milligan," she went on simply, easing her gaze over his bare, wide shoulders, down his muscled chest, flat stomach and strong arms. Open apprecia-

tion gleamed in her smoldering blue eyes. "He never looked like that." The expression changed in her eyes, and Joe knew not to ask how she could tell the difference just from looking at his naked chest.

"Well, Miss Glaser," Joe said, resting his arms on the cross-bar, "since you know I'm here, you probably know that I've got to stand trial for roughing up Ezra Stillman. Sheriff Bentley knows I'm not Milligan. He said so. But there's several people in town who think I am. I've been Joe Howard all of my life."

"Well, Joe Howard, would you like me to go to court for you?" Vana offered smugly, arching her brows again. Something was in her eyes that Joe didn't understand. Was her offer for herself or for him?

"It would help," Joe replied, nodding. He grinned down at her.

"All right," she replied slowly, pursing her lips and looking closely at his face. "What or who did that to you?"

"Oh, I had to convince Sam Bentley that I wasn't this Ben Milligan," Joe answered, smiling at her. Surprise shot across her face.

"When you find out when your trial is," she went on, "have Sam get word to me and I'll . . ."

"You'll what?" Bentley asked, coming through the door, a towel-covered plate in his big hand. Before he could close the door a young red-haired girl came charging in almost on his heels. Stopping short was the only thing that kept her from running into him.

Rushing past Bentley, she hurried up to the cell, stopped at arm's length and stared at Joe for a second.

Her green eyes were wide and wild and she was breathing hard.

"That's him!" she screamed, pressing the back of her thin hand against a sullen mouth. "That's Ben Milligan! He'll try to attack me again. Don't let him out of jail!"

Silence hung over the hot jail. All eyes were glued on the girl who was still staring at Joe. He was the first to say anything.

"Who the devil are you?" Joe demanded, frowning at the nearly hysterical girl.

"Don't pretend you don't know who I am," she sneered. "I'm Beth Jennings. Judge Wilson Jennings is my father and he'll get you for what you did to me." Her green eyes blazed in hatred.

"Miss Jennings," Joe said softly, "I've never seen you before in my life."

The girl, dressed in a long blue skirt and white-and-blue checked blouse, took a quick step toward the cell, but stopped abruptly.

"Beth, why are you doing this?" Vana asked urgently, tentatively reaching out toward the girl. "He's not Ben Milligan. Believe me, I . . ."

Before Vana could say anything else, the girl spun around to face her. Her eyes were blazing.

"You stay out of what's none of your business, you saloon hussy," Beth hissed, doubling her hands into fists at her side. A slap across Vana's face couldn't have had any more drastic affect. Her blue eyes popped open in shock and her mouth gaped open.

"You don't know what it's like to . . ." Beth ceased her tirade by clamping her hand over her trembling mouth. Dropping her gaze to the floor she slowly

raised her head. Glancing furtively at Joe, she turned abruptly and faced Bentley. "Sheriff, that's Ben Milligan."

Crossing her thin arms over her flat chest, she spun on her heel and ran from the jail, leaving three stunned people staring after her.

## Chapter II

The Silver Star Saloon had been turned into a makeshift courtroom. A small table and armchair were in front of the bar, which ran the length of the room. The ornate mirror behind the bar and a polished brass rail gave evidence of how successful Vana Glaser had been.

Two long and nervous days had passed since Joe had been arrested. The meals that Sheriff Bentley had brought him were good, but not what he'd expected to be eating. Steak, not meatloaf, was what he'd counted on.

Joe had tried to persuade Bentley to let him out of jail until Wilson Jennings came back to town. Jennings, who happened to be the circuit judge, had gone to San Angelo and was due back in two days.

"If Beth Jennings hadn't come running in here screaming at the top of her lungs that you were Ben Milligan, I'd have let you out of jail until the judge got back," Bentley said after Beth and Vana had left the jail. "But with the town feeling like it does about Beth's attack, it's probably best that you stay in a place where I can keep an eye on you." There wasn't

much conviction in Bentley's voice.

"Sheriff, I don't mean any disrespect to Miss Jennings," Joe said as he cut into a piece of cold meatloaf, "but I don't see how she can claim that I'm Ben Milligan. You've got to admit she isn't the prettiest woman you've ever seen." He could still see the young woman with her dull red hair pulled back into a tight bun, standing in front of the cell and glaring at him. Her thin mouth had probably never smiled very much, and even in her rage it had a sullen, drawn-down grimace. The only good feature on her freckled face was a small turned-up nose. She was thinly built, and the only credence to the fact that she was a woman was the blue skirt and blue-and-white blouse she'd worn.

"Just how much am I supposed to have attacked her?" Joe asked Bentley, a shrewd gleam in his eyes. Joe knew what the answer would be, as Bentley shoved his hat back on his big head and cocked an eyebrow at him.

"How about rape?" Bentley stated slowly. It really wasn't a question. He ran his thumb across his chin and squinted.

Joe stared at him for a second. "Sheriff, it's like I told you before," Joe said, feeling the blood rush to his face. "I'd have to be so drunk that I couldn't hit the ground with my hat before I'd do something like that."

Joe had never considered himself much of a ladies' man, but on the other hand he'd never had to force his attentions on any woman, either. He'd left no one in particular in Tucumcari as far as he was concerned, but he knew at least two women there



who would miss him for a little while.

"Sheriff, you know I'm not Ben Milligan," Joe said slowly, frowning, a thought building in his mind. "And Vana Glaser says she knows for sure that I'm not Ben Milligan. She will testify to that in court. What do you think Jennings will do if his daughter swears that I am Ben Milligan?" Joe swallowed, even though his mouth was bone dry. He knew as well as Bentley what the penalty for such a crime would be. A rope!

The sheriff looked at him for a long time in deep thought and then shook his head. The thoughtful look passed.

"I don't know," Bentley said, scratching his chin. "Beth is the sugar of Wilson Jennings' coffee. You could be in a lot of trouble, boy, even though Vana and I will swear that you're Joe Howard. Judge Jennings will no doubt take Beth's side, and don't forget Gib Colson and Ezra Stillman believe you're Ben Milligan, too."

Joe and Bentley had convinced the deputy, Amos Cooper, that Joe wasn't Ben Milligan, and he'd go along with Vana Glaser and Bentley in his defense.

The saloon was packed with curious spectators. The female citizens of Pecos didn't normally frequent the Silver Star, and didn't bother with courtroom proceedings unless they were directly involved as a victim or a witness. But this trial, as gossip had it, involved the violated virtue of Beth Jennings, the daughter of the illustrious Wilson Jennings.

Joe had asked Bentley why Jennings was so revered in Pecos.

"Well," Bentley had answered, "he's brought a

new meaning to justice since he was appointed circuit judge four months ago. He's tried more cases than Judge Isley did in six months. If a suspect is proven guilty to Jennings' satisfaction, and if the sentence is hanging, it's done in a matter of days. No questions asked. If the sentence is prison, that's carried out in a matter of days, too. Nobody messes with Wilson Jennings."

Joe knew that explained why there were so many women there with dainty handkerchiefs fluttering under their noses.

Not much had been said about Joe's fine for roughing up Ezra Stillman. In fact, Joe was so confident that all he'd have to do was answer a few questions in front of the judge, pay a fine, get on old Serge and head for Fort Davis that he hadn't thought about a lawyer.

Joe had always been an easygoing man and hadn't seen any reason to get really mad at any of the things that had happened to him in the past two days—except for Bentley nearly knocking his teeth out. Joe felt there had only been a series of misunderstandings, and as soon as he saw the judge and told his side of things, Jennings would fine him and that would be the end of this business. Joe was of the opinion that all judges were reasonable people.

But Joe wasn't prepared for what happened when the tall, white-haired man, dressed in a dark brown suit and white shirt emerged, from a room marked "Office." He carried a stovepipe hat in one hand and a gavel in the other. He looked over at his daughter, who'd preceded him into the saloon.

Joe, sitting at a knife-marked table with the sheriff,

rose to his feet, as did everyone else when the judge came in. Bentley had removed the handcuffs from Joe's wrists and put them in his back pocket. When Joe's brown eyes met the green eyes of the judge, a look froze on Jennings' face that could knock a bird from a tree. The color drained from Joe's tanned chiseled features. He could almost feel two green knives boring into his chest as the judge stared at him. Jennings put his hat carefully on the floor and the gavel on the table. He watched Joe every second.

A hush hung over the stuffy, makeshift courtroom, so thick a knife could cut it. The spectators quickly shifted their gaze from Jennings to Joe, anxiously waiting to see what would happen between the two men. Then they looked at Beth Jennings, who sat conspicuously at the far left side of the room, her back to the crowd.

"Poor little thing," Joe heard a woman whisper to another sitting behind him.

"I hope he gets exactly what he deserves," the other replied.

Joe wanted to whirl around and slap them. But he knew they would change their minds when he was found innocent.

He kept his eyes on Beth. She wore a simple, blue short-sleeved cotton dress, and a blue hat with a matching veil hanging down across the front and side of it, apparently to hide her face from the curious stares. She looked stiff and nervous. Her hands were gripped tightly around a blue drawstring purse.

Vana Glaser, on the other hand, was dressed to fit her position in life. Her black hair was pulled back from her oval face with an emerald-green velvet

ribbon, and done up in curls on top of her head. The matching green dress was molded to her supple figure like a glove, with a white-laced, edged-scooped neck that bared the tops of her rounded breasts. She sat poised and relaxed like a queen, her long legs crossed.

All courtroom amenities were dispensed with as Jennings shouted out in a deep voice: "Everybody sit down!" He continued glaring at Joe. When everyone was seated, Jennings snatched up the gavel and gave it a hard whack against the tabletop. Jerking the chair back from the table, he lowered his tall, rigid body into it, his eyes never leaving Joe's face.

"The Circuit Court of Pecos, Texas is now in session," Jennings boomed in a cold monotone. "What do you have to say for yourself?" he demanded more than asked. But before Joe had time to say anything, Jennings continued quickly. "You're going to curse the day you came back to Pecos. You should have gone to Mexico and stayed there, because when I'm through sentencing you, you'll have to live two lifetimes to make up the years!"

A murmur rumbled over the saloon and everyone stared at Jennings. Joe couldn't believe what he was hearing. Jennings was already implying that he was actually guilty of something he hadn't been tried for. In stunned surprise, Joe jerked his head around to look at Sheriff Bentley. It was definitely time for him to do something! The sheriff nodded his head slowly and cleared his throat.

"Your honor, may I say something?" Bentley requested in his deep voice, getting lazily to his feet. Confidence showed in his thin smile.

"Go ahead," Jennings snapped, shifting his hate-filled eyes from Joe to the sheriff, "but make it fast. I don't have all day. There are other cases to be tried."

Joe didn't know why he'd said that. He was the only one in jail.

"I know you think this is Ben Milligan," the lawman began, nodding his head down toward Joe. "At first I did, too. But, look at it like this, Judge. If he really was Milligan, do you honestly think he'd be dumb enough to come back here after what he'd done? I don't think so, and besides, Miss Glaser says . . ."

Jennings didn't let Bentley finish. The judge was breathing hard and a knot stood out in his jaw. "If Miss Glaser has any comment, she can make it herself," he interrupted in a rage. "Sit down." His eyes touched Joe briefly as he shifted his gaze from Bentley over to Vana. "Well?" he snapped, arching an eyebrow.

"Your honor," Vana said in a clear voice, standing up and smoothing her dress over her legs. "Ben Milligan worked here at the saloon for two weeks. I've been as close to him as the sheriff is to Mr. Howard right now. Two days ago I visited Mr. Howard in jail and got a good look at him. That man," she pointed a slender finger at Joe, "is not Ben Milligan. I'll swear to that fact on as many Bibles as you want me to."

Vana Glaser wasn't afraid of Wilson Jennings. It showed on her face. She looked him straight in the eye. In fact, she wasn't afraid of anybody in Pecos.

She'd owned and operated the Silver Star for three years. She'd met all kind of men: intelligent,

ignorant, industrious, lazy; those wealthy enough to afford the best whiskey and those with just enough in their pockets to buy the cheapest rot-gut. To Vana Glaser, people were people and she'd never been intimidated by any of them. So it didn't bother her when Jennings leveled a cold-eyed glare at her.

"Miss Glaser," Jennings said through clenched teeth, slowly shaking his head, "I don't know why you're opening yourself up for perjury. My daughter had to be a lot closer to her attacker than you were to this man, and she should know better than anyone who he is. Did he pay you to lie for him?" He jerked his head toward Joe. "Sit down."

Vana started to say something, but glanced over at Joe. He shook his head. No need for her to get into trouble on his account. Joe glanced back at Jennings. The judge was still breathing hard, and his right hand was doubled into a fist at the edge of the table. Suddenly, a thought struck Joe and he wished he'd thought about it sooner.

Judge Jennings had no business presiding over this trial! He was personally involved and should disqualify himself. How could Joe get him to do it? Leaning over to Bentley, Joe whispered his thoughts to him. Joe's movement didn't go unnoticed by Jennings, and the judge banged the gavel against the table.

"You're out of order, Milligan," he bellowed, his lips tight against his teeth. "Your time will come!"

Up until then Joe had been silent, positive that things would go in his favor. But now he wasn't so sure. It was becoming clear to him that Jennings was absolutely convinced that he was the guilty Ben

Milligan and nothing was going to change his mind.

"Well, if I'm out of order for that," Joe said quietly, jumping quickly to his feet, "I might as well be out of order for this, too. You should disqualify yourself from this trial. You're too involved. Postpone this and send for another judge."

Joe's accusation made the judge seethe. Rage and contempt clouded his green eyes and the blood drained from his face.

"Sit down and shut up!" Jennings roared, placing the palms of his hands down on the desk and standing up. "Nobody tells me how to run my court! One more outburst like that and I'll have the deputy take you back to the jail and we'll continue without you."

Joe looked around at Amos Cooper. The deputy had given his word that he'd speak up for Joe, and now would be a good time for him to do it. As if reading Joe's thoughts and knowing what was expected of him, the tall, gaunt young man stood up.

"Your honor," he began in a nervous voice, "could I say something?"

It was plain that Jennings was becoming flustered by so many people speaking before they were called on. Taking and expelling a deep breath, he glared at Cooper, disgust as evident in his stare as the heat in the room. Finally, he nodded in exasperation.

"Judge," Cooper continued in a squeaky voice, clutching a worn brown hat before him in his long fingers, "I was close enough to Ben Milligan for him to crack my skull with a gun. I got a good look at him. That there man," he pointed a shaking finger at Joe, "ain't Ben Milligan. If he's anybody at all, he's

who he says he is: Joe Howard."

That was more than Jennings could take. He glared at Cooper, shifted his gaze back to Bentley, over to Vana Glaser and finally stopped at Joe. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, then opened them slowly.

"How much did you pay these people to lie for you?" he demanded, a slyness in his green eyes. "Lying to a judge is as bad as, as . . ." he stopped and looked over at his daughter, who sat as rigid as a piece of stone, "as attacking an innocent young girl and making her the scandal of the town."

A soft fatherly expression replaced the rage in Jennings' face, and he smiled benevolently at her. The spectators couldn't see her face through the veil, and missed her returned smile.

"I wasn't paid nuthin', your honor," Cooper said nervously, a hurt look pulling his mouth into a tight knot. He turned the battered hat around and around in his long fingers again. "I'm just tellin' the truth. He ain't Ben Milligan."

As quicky as the soft look had crossed Jennings' face, it left and the rage returned. He shifted his gaze back to Amos Cooper.

"Don't try to fool me, young man," he snapped, his eyes blazing. "You're saying exactly what you were told to. Sit down. There's one way to get to the bottom of this and settle the whole thing." He raised his bushy eyebrows and a calculating smugness tightened his mouth. "Beth, you don't have to get up, but I want you to take a good look at this man and tell me if he was your attacker."

Pausing shortly for a breath, he looked at Joe.



"Milligan, or whoever you're calling yourself now, I want you to take off your hat, walk over, stand in front of my daughter and let her take a good look at you. And don't think of trying anything funny. If you do, I'll order Bentley to shoot you."

Joe stood up, walked around the table and across the saloon, and stood before Beth Jennings, facing her and the spectators. She raised her head slowly and her eyes wavered momentarily when she looked up at him. Joe wondered why she wasn't as hysterical now as she'd been at the jail the other day.

From the way she batted the short brown lashes that fringed her green eyes, Joe knew that a battle was raging inside her. An embarrassed shade of pink covered her face. She looked up at him for a brief second and then lowered her gaze.

There was caution in Jennings' voice when he called out, "Be sure, Beth," and Joe saw her flinch at the sharpness of his voice. "Look at him again. Is that Ben Milligan? Is that the man who attacked you?"

Joe could almost hear the wheels turning in her head and knew what she was thinking. Her word was all that stood between him and a rope. He felt cold all over and his heart slammed against his chest. Time had never gone by so slowly for Joe.

"Your father's right, Miss Jennings," Joe said softly, looking her squarely in the eye. "You've got to be certain. This whole thing rests entirely on you. So take a good long look."

In a way, Joe felt sorry for the homely young woman sitting before him. He was beginning to agree with Vana Glaser and doubted very seriously if

a rape had ever taken place. That little bell in the back of his head was talking to him again. He couldn't understand why a woman would want to accuse a man of something this serious if it hadn't taken place. She should know that the final outcome would be that man dangling at the end of a rope until he was dead! Why was she doing this? What would she get out of it?

A short lifetime passed while Joe stood before her. Beth, apparently accustomed to following her father's instructions, looked up at Joe again. He could see decisions made and changed as she ran her gaze over his face. She closed her eyes and dropped her head, then nodded slowly.

"Yes," she whispered just loud enough for her father to hear. "That's Ben Milligan."

"All right, Milligan, you can sit down," the judge snapped, still watching his daughter. Joe turned on his heel and went back to his chair by the sheriff. He felt sick to his stomach.

"Speak up, Beth," Jennings said softly this time. "Are you sure? Are you positive he's the one? Speak up so everyone can hear. Is that Ben Milligan? The man who attacked you?"

A silence hung over the saloon. The spectators held their breaths, waiting for the girl to answer.

Joe's mouth was dry and he never took his gaze from the veiled figure across the room. His hands began to sweat and he wiped them against his pants. There was still time for her to change her mind! The veil moved as Beth raised her head. Joe heard her clear her throat, knowing that the words she spoke

again would either set him free or seal his fate.

"Yes, Papa," she said softly. Then she cleared her throat and spoke louder. "Yes. He's the one. He's Ben Milligan. He's the one who attacked me." As soon as she spoke, Beth dropped her gaze to her hands folded around the purse in her lap.

A murmur swept through the saloon and the spectators exchanged knowing looks.

"I knew it was him," the woman behind him said.

Joe sat stunned. He hadn't really believed that Beth Jennings would go through with identifying him as Ben Milligan. Staring at the floor, Joe thought maybe if he waited a second this madness would disappear and he'd be on his way to Fort Davis.

But when he slowly raised his gaze from the floor and saw the contemptuous look in the judge's eyes, he knew he was wrong. Then something else dawned on Joe. Nothing had been mentioned about him roughing up Ezra Stillman, and Joe knew the judge wasn't going to say anything about it because he had him right where he wanted him.

Joe glanced furtively across the saloon at Beth. Hopefully, she would change her mind and get him out of this. But that wasn't going to happen.

Beth lowered her head even further and gripped her hands tighter in her lap. Her knuckles were white. Joe wasn't sure, but he thought he saw her shoulders shaking. Was she crying? Or had her nerves gotten the best of her?

"Well," the judge said sharply, his voice breaking the uncomfortable silence. In unison, all heads in the saloon turned toward the smiling judge. "Every-

thing seems to be in order. We have a crime. We have a victim. We have a suspect and we have an eyewitness, possibly two." Jennings looked around the saloon until he found Gib Colson and Ezra Stillman. Joe already knew where the two men were sitting and turned around to see them.

The two informers returned his look with a you-got-what-you-deserve expression. Then they looked back at Jennings and nodded in agreement with his remark.

Joe couldn't believe how calm Jennings was now. He was a completely different person. His breathing was even and his eyes had lost some of their rage.

"So all that's left to be done," Jennings went on, lacing his long fingers together and rotating one thumb around the other, "is to pass sentence."

A quick gasp passed throughout the saloon. The men shuffled their feet noisily and the women clasped their hands over their mouths. Beth's head snapped up and Vana's eyes almost popped out of her head.

Joe had never felt as helpless in his life as he did at that moment. He knew Jennings was so bent on revenge for his daughter that he wouldn't sentence him to anything reasonable. His suspicion was confirmed when Jennings leveled a hard look at him and ordered him to stand up. Joe rose slowly to his feet. Bentley got up, too.

"Ben Milligan, or Joe Howard, as you choose to call yourself now," Jennings said in a sarcastic monotone, his eyes cold under raised brows, "by the power invested in me as circuit judge of Texas, I find

you guilty as charged in the horrible crime of rape, and sentence you to be hanged by the neck until dead. This sentence will be carried out no later than Friday, two days from now."

Joe stared at the judge. Jennings had to be playing some kind of joke on him. Surely he'd change his mind and reverse the sentence.

But as Joe looked closer at Judge Wilson Jennings and became more conscious of the cold glare in his eyes and the hard knot in his angular jaw, he knew this was no joke. Joe wished he was back riding shotgun for Wells Fargo. But he couldn't just sit still and do nothing.

"Judge," Joe said, wiping his wet palms on his pants, "isn't a condemned man entitled to a last word?" He couldn't get into any more trouble than he was already, so what did he have to lose? He stood up and put on his hat.

"Yes," Jennings snapped coldly, "but be quick about it."

"Judge," Joe began nervously, "you're making a big mistake. I'm not Ben Milligan. I've never been in Pecos. All you have to do is send a telegram to Archie Fentley in Tucumcari. He's the Well's Fargo agent there. He'll vouch for me. I'm sorry for what happened to your daughter. But I swear to God I never touched her. I never saw her until two days ago when I was in jail. If you hang me, you'll have the death of an innocent man on your conscience!"

He'd forgotten about the letter from Eric McRaney in his bedroll.

Joe's petition swept over the judge like a drop of

rain on the ocean, with no effect at all.

"My daughter says you're guilty," Jennings raged through clenched teeth, his face changing expressions again. He smiled slowly. "I believe her. I've made my decision. It stands. You will hang on Friday. Sheriff, take him away and get an extra deputy if you need one. Court is adjourned." He banged the gavel down on the table. Standing up, Jennings jammed his tall hat on his head and walked purposefully over to his daughter. Taking her hand, he helped her up from the chair and led her, with her head still bowed, from the saloon.

"Let's go," Bentley said, nudging Joe in the side. Snapping the handcuffs back around Joe's wrists, Bentley clamped his hamlike hand on Joe's shoulder and followed him through the gawking crowd. Some looked sympathetic. Others scoffed.

"He got exactly what he deserved for what he did to that poor girl," a man said to his companion as Joe passed them. The plank sidewalk was lined with people who couldn't get into the saloon, and Joe felt like a circus performer with everyone watching.

The distance to the jail across the street seemed like a mile to Joe. He couldn't believe that he'd just been condemned to hang for something he didn't do or would ever think of doing. To him, if a woman's favors had to be forceably taken, they weren't worth having.

Joe had been forced to kill men in the line of duty during the war, and he'd been in his share of barroom brawls. The women he'd spent nights with had been as willing as he had been. Not all of the women had

been saloon girls who liked his tall and lean good looks. But he'd never had to force himself on any woman, and when they weren't responsive to his initial overture, he stopped and moved on.

Suddenly an anger that he wasn't used to flashed over him like a fire. Why was this happening to him? Why didn't the judge believe him? If Beth Jennings had been that close to Ben Milligan, why couldn't she see the difference in the two men? Why was she doing this to him? If he could get his hands on her skinny neck right then he would deserve to hang on Friday! He would kill her!

A knot tightened in his stomach when Bentley unlocked the handcuffs and closed the cell door. For a minute, Joe stared at the back wall with the small window. The sound of the clanging cell door had a finality to it. He knew that unless something happened between now and Friday, the next time that door opened he'd be on his way to a rope!

Spinning around, he grabbed a bar in each hand and gripped it until his knuckles turned white. Bentley, holding the keys on the big iron ring, stood watching him, sympathy splashed all over his wide face. Amos Cooper leaned against the door frowning. Joe looked at Bentley for a second. Bentley returned the look.

"Sheriff, you've got to help me," Joe pleaded, something unusual for him. But he was desperate. "I know you did your best in court, or the best that Jennings would let you do. I appreciate it. Thanks. But you've got to let me go! You've got to let me out of here! If you don't let me go, he'll have me hanged!"

His voice broke.

Bentley shifted his ponderous weight from one foot to the other and wiped his big hand across his face. Taking a deep breath, he shoved his hat back and hooked a thumb in his wide belt.

"Wish I could, boy," he said remorsefully. He shook his head. "But if I did something like that, Jennings would have my head. Maybe something will happen between now and then." Dropping his head, Bentley looked at his scuffed boots. Turning abruptly, he hurried past the deputy and soon they heard the front door open and close.

"Old Jennings sure gave you a hard time, didn't he?" Cooper reflected, ambling slowly over to the cell but not close enough for Joe to touch.

"Yeah, he sure did," Joe agreed, wondering what the deputy was thinking. "I've never seen anybody like him before. I don't believe he's got all his marbles. But something's got to happen. This can't be."

Nodding thoughtfully, Cooper turned, went down the short hall and left the jail.

In frustration, Joe gripped the bars and shook them as hard as he could. But the iron door didn't budge. He only heard the sound of metal clanging against metal. He jerked off his hat and threw it across the cell.

Walking dejectedly over to the window, he raised up on his toes and tried to peer over the sill. The four bars hampered his vision a little, but he could see miles and miles of desert, with enough rocky mountains to hide a man for a lifetime.



Joe just knew that, if he could get out of jail, he could make it to those mountains and hide for a few days, then go on to Fort Davis and everything would be all right.

Gripping the bars, Joe tested their strength. They were solidly set in the cement wall. There wasn't enough time to dig through the wall, even if he'd had something sharp enough to do the job. Angrily, he drew back his foot and kicked the wall. Muttering an oath at the pain in his toes, he dropped down on the bunk and leaned back.

Darkness would soon be falling and that would only give him one more full day to live. Hate and fear made him cold all over, and he shivered despite the heat. His stomach rolled over and he wanted to vomit.

A thought suddenly struck him and he jumped up from the bunk. Hurrying over to the cell door, he knelt down in front of the lock. He remembered the piece of wire he'd carried in his boot since he'd used it to escape from a stockade at Camp Chase, a Union prison during the war. It had worked in opening a lock then. Maybe it would work now.

He'd just inserted the wire in the lock when he heard the front door open and steps coming across the office floor. If it was Bentley or Cooper, they could shoot him for trying to escape!

But it was neither Bentley nor Cooper who stood before him. Vana Glaser, still dressed in the flashy green velvet dress she'd worn that morning in court, smiled mysteriously down at him, one brow slightly raised. Her left hand was braced on her hip, the other

hand behind her.

"What are you doing here?" Joe asked, getting to his feet. He thought he was seeing things when she brought her right hand around in front of her. She was holding the key ring!

"What does it look like?" she asked irritably, inserting the key into the lock and turning it. "I'm helping you get out of here so that stupid Jennings can't hang you on Friday. Is that clear enough, or do I have to draw you a picture?"

The lock clicked, slid back and the door swung open on squeaky hinges. Joe, never one to question luck very long, put on his hat, picked up the saddlebag and bedroll and walked out of the cell.

"How did you get the key?" he asked over his shoulder. He didn't waste any time as he ran over to the desk, jerked open the bottom drawer, snatched up the gun holster and strapped it around his waist.

When Vana didn't answer right away, Joe looked around and saw a smug smile on her pursed lips.

"Sam Bentley loves beer," she said, drawing out the words, still smiling. "So when he came in a little while ago for his usual drink, I simply dropped a little something in it."

Suddenly, the smile left her face. "But you've got to hurry," she urged, reaching out and lightly touching his arm. "Amos Cooper has your horse in the alley and the canteens are full."

Joe straightened up slowly and looked down at her. He couldn't understand why she was taking such a risk to help him. Bentley could arrest her for helping a criminal escape. The same thing was true

for Amos Cooper.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked, a frown pulling his brows together. "Until a few days ago, you'd never seen me. You could be put in jail yourself for helping me."

A pink blush crept up Vana's face and she smiled, dropping her head.

"Well, let's just say I like the way you wear your hat," she said simply. "Besides, I know you didn't, ah, attack Beth Jennings. Like I said before, I doubt very seriously that she was attacked at all."

Giving Joe a knowing look, she slowly closed her eyes and then opened them. "I know Beth had her eye on Ben, but for obvious reasons he didn't look back. So to get even with him, she made up the story about him attacking her. The part about him hitting Cooper is true. I saw the lump on his head. You could almost hang your hat on it." She laughed at the description. "Ben did take my horse. But he didn't steal it. He didn't have time to get to the livery for his own horse. I would have given it to him to get him away from that Jennings girl. Something doesn't quite make sense about this."

Vana shrugged her shoulders as if dismissing the whole thing from her mind. A thought suddenly struck Joe that both dismayed and bothered him.

"Do you have any idea where Ben Milligan might have gone?" He surprised Vana with the question.

"Why do you want to know where he is?" she asked, frowning. Her blue eyes narrowed and she stared at him.

"Well, I thought I'd try to find him," Joe replied, a

knot in his jaw. "He got me into this and he should get me out of it. If he didn't rape Beth Jennings, he shouldn't have to pay for it any more than me. He should have a chance to come back to Pecos and clear himself."

"He told me . . ." She stopped and swallowed. Joe saw tears in her eyes. "He told me he'd come here from El Paso. He might have gone back there." Blinking, she walked with him to the side door. She opened it and peered out. "I believe he has family there. If you go after him, be careful. Ben knows how to use a gun. Your horse is waiting. Be careful."

Vana and Joe stood for an uncomfortable minute at the partially open door.

"Vana, I want to thank you for what you've done for me," Joe said softly, taking a deep breath. "I hope you don't get into any trouble for this."

Laying her hand on Joe's arm, Vana smiled up at him. "Don't worry about me," she said, tossing her head and shrugging her shoulders. "Take care of yourself."

Touched by her concern, Joe surprised himself and bent down and kissed her upturned mouth. Her red lips were warm under his and he felt her return the soft kiss.

Straightening up, Joe pulled his hat low on his forehead, looked both ways down the alley. Cooper was gone. Joe tied the saddlebags and bedroll on the back of the saddle. Remembering the carbine he hurried back into the office, found it against the wall and ran back out to the alley again. Shoving the rifle down in its holster, he swung up into the saddle and looked down at Vana for a second. Tipping his hat,

he rode down the alley behind the buildings and headed south.

He was going to find Ben Milligan, come back to Pecos, clear his own name and probably help Milligan also. Then he was going to make Judge Wilson Jennings and his spoiled daughter Beth wish that they'd never laid eyes on him.



## Chapter III

The evening was almost as hot as the day had been. Sweat rolled down Joe's back as he rode out of town and headed toward the rocky mountains. He'd spend the night there and get a good start in the morning. He decided against going to El Paso right now to look for Ben Milligan. Instead, he thought it would be best to go on to Fort Davis, start working, and look for Milligan on scouting trips. He'd have to end up in El Paso sooner or later.

The important thing now was putting as much distance as possible between himself and Pecos. He'd only allowed himself one backward look when he left town. The mountains ahead had been a welcome sight.

Riding far back into the rocks, Joe had found an outcropping with a recess about ten feet deep. It wasn't cool, but did offer a little shelter from the setting sun.

He had unsaddled his horse and was just about to throw it on the ground, when he heard the warning rattle. Looking around slowly, his eyes stopped on a coiled-up, reddish-brown rattlesnake. Its forked

black tongue darted in and out of its mouth. He eased the saddle back onto the horse.

Out of habit, he dropped his hand down to the Dixie Navy Revolver. Then, realizing the mistake he'd almost made, he let it slide back into the holster. By now Sheriff Bentley knew he was gone and no doubt had a posse after him. A shot would be a dead give away.

Reaching into the saddlebag, he withdrew a long-bladed knife and, in one deft motion, threw it. A swishing sound was followed by a thud, and the long blade was imbedded in the snake's head. The rattling stopped. Pulling the blade out, Joe cleaned it on some grass and returned it to the saddlebag.

Before spreading the bedroll on the ground, he looked around for spiders, scorpions and other snakes. The sun was sliding slowly down in the blue-gray sky and the land began to cool. A gentle breeze carried the fragrance of sage. An eagle, probably the same one he'd seen two days ago when he'd ridden into Pecos, was soaring on the air currents.

Two days ago! He couldn't believe so much had happened to him in only two days. None of it would have happened if he'd gone straight on to Fort Davis.

Joe dropped the bedroll on the ground, untied it and kicked it out. Unsaddling and hobbling Serge, Joe dumped the saddle at one end of the bedroll to use as a head rest.

Would Milligan be in El Paso? Would he be easy to find? What if Milligan had gotten into some kind of trouble there and Joe ended up being blamed for that?

Maybe he should just leave well enough alone,



head straight for Fort Davis and let the chips fall where they would.

But Joe knew he couldn't do that. He more or less had a price on his head now, and knew that Jennings would make Bentley send a posse after him.

Just before Joe dozed off, his thoughts turned to Vana Glaser. Why would she risk getting into trouble with Jennings and Bentley just because of him? Was it because she didn't like Beth Jennings? What kind of an ax did she have to grind with her? Was she jealous of Beth's money, or her position in being a judge's daughter? Why did she keep suggesting that Milligan hadn't raped Beth? Why would Vana say one thing and Beth swear the opposite?

Oh well, all of that would come out when Joe found Milligan and brought him back to Pecos. And he was sure going to do that! He closed his eyes and went to sleep, confident in the idea.

The sun's bright rays woke Joe the next morning. He'd overslept! He'd meant to be up before daylight and be well on his way before the sun rose. He could have been that much closer to Fort Davis.

Jumping to his feet, he threw the blanket and saddle on the horse and was tying on the bedroll, when he caught sight of the sun glinting off a rifle barrel.

Swinging onto the saddle, Joe rode up the rocky ledge to confirm what he already suspected. Sure enough, he could see a group of men about a mile away. Reaching back, Joe took a pair of binoculars from the saddlebags. Bringing them up to his eyes, he saw the sheriff leading a posse, and right behind him

was Judge Wilson Jennings.

In a way, Jennings reminded Joe a little of Abe Lincoln with his stovepipe hat. Joe had been impressed with Lincoln and felt that the country had lost a remarkable man when he was killed.

Joe could understand the sheriff leading a posse. That was his job. But why was Jennings along? It was highly unusual for someone in his position to do something like that. Poses were normally made up of the common folk. Then it dawned on Joe that Jennings had a vendetta against him because of his daughter. Maybe the posse was Jennings' idea and Bentley was just along for the ride.

Watching the posse stop, Joe saw one man get off his horse and look down at the hard-packed ground. Mounting, the man pointed toward the rocks where Joe was, and the posse began moving again. Something told Joe that if he was caught he wouldn't live to get back to Pecos, and it wouldn't be at Bentley's hands.

Kicking the big horse in the side, Joe headed Serge toward the south. Both man and horse were well rested. Knowing that the horse wanted to run, and since the morning was still cool, Joe let him go and soon they were far enough ahead of the posse that Joe was confident he wouldn't be caught.

Miles passed under the horse's flying feet and Joe was a lot nearer to Fort Davis than he would have been if Jennings hadn't been after him.

He stopped the horse by a clear, running stream to rest for a few minutes. Serge munched on the sparse green grass while Joe chewed on a strip of jerky from the grub sack that Vana had given him. Stretching

out his long legs, he crossed his ankles and leaned back against a small sycamore tree. Before he knew it, the quiet and peacefulness brought a drowsiness over him and he shook himself awake and jumped up. It wouldn't do for him to go to sleep now. Going to the stream, Joe splashed water on his face. Then he swung back up onto the saddle.

Riding through the log gate of Fort Davis and across the dusty parade ground, Joe stopped the horse in front of the enlisted men's barracks. Dismounting, he took his rifle and went up the two steps to the door. The long building was empty when he looked inside. Untying the horse, he kicked through the dust toward the tack shed.

An old man wearing a faded blue shirt with ragged sergeant stripes sat on a low stool mending a saddle stirrup.

"Can I hep you, young feller?" he asked in a flat voice, pushing a dark blue cap back on his head. Inquisitive blue eyes twinkled in a round face.

"Maybe so," Joe replied, resting the stock of the carbine on top of his foot, the barrel gripped in his hand. "Where can I find Colonel Eric McRaney? He's a friend of mine and is supposed to have a job for me here."

The old man threw back his head and laughed long and hard. Joe frowned as he looked down at the amused soldier. When the old man finally regained his composure, he cleared his throat and spat a stream of tobacco juice in the dirt.

"You must be Joe Howard," the old man said, extending a gnarled hand. It sounded strange for someone to take for granted that he was actually who

he said he was. "I'm Boss Owens. Colonel McRaney's been kinda worried about you. Thought you'd be here a couple of days ago." A smile pulled at his mouth and a sly gleam twinkled in his blue eyes. "Then he got the notion that you coulda got yourself tangled up with some gal."

Joe leveled a grin at the old man. "Where's McRaney?" he asked, running his thumb up and down the sight of the barrel.

"Oh, he went out early this morning on a patrol," Owens replied, clearing his throat again. "Some Indians are acting up. Ah, here they come now."

Joe turned and looked in the direction that Owens was pointing. The tall, blue-clad man dismounted in front of a low building. An aide took the reins of McRaney's horse and joined the rest of the patrol heading toward the corral.

"Eric, wait a minute!" Joe called out. McRaney went on up the steps and waited on the porch. Joe hurried across the parade ground, stomped the dust from his boots and stepped up by the colonel.

"Joe, you son of a gun!" McRaney said in a booming voice that belied his slender build, and extended his hand. "I told Owens that you'd undoubtedly fallen into the clutches of a woman. She must have been something, to take up so much of your time." Chuckling, McRaney opened the door and Joe followed him into the office.

"If I hadn't 'fallen into the clutches of a women,' as you put it," Joe said, dropping his lanky frame into a straight-backed chair that faced the desk, "I wouldn't be here right now."

McRaney walked behind the desk and sat down.

Joe looked around the office. A rebel flag hung on one wall over a safe, and an American flag hung at the opposite end of the office. A wide window gave a view of the Davis Mountains in the distance. A wood stove stood in the far corner, and at the opposite end was a four-pronged hat rack.

"What do you mean?" McRaney asked.

"A saloon owner, Vana Glaser, in Pecos, helped me escape from jail yesterday evening," Joe replied casually, crossing his left ankle over his right knee. "If she hadn't, I was going to be hanged at noon tomorrow."

When Joe's words hit him, McRaney jerked his head up and he stared at Joe with wide, slate-blue eyes. "Hanged!" he shouted. He slammed his hands on the desk top. "Joe, if you weren't a couple of days late, and if I didn't know you better, I'd swear that you were shooting me a line."

McRaney leaned back in the chair and his deep laughter filled the room. He enjoyed the laugh until he noticed the solemn expression on Joe's face.

"You're serious, aren't you?" McRaney asked, pulling himself up straight in the chair.

"As serious as Judge Wilson Jennings was when he sentenced me to hang," Joe said slowly, nodding with each word. The two men looked at each other for a tense second.

"What the devil did you do to get hung?" McRaney asked incredulously. Frowning, he pushed the chair back from the desk and crossed his long legs.

"You won't believe this, but I was mistaken for someone else," Joe told him.

"You mean there's another man in this world

who's as ugly as you are?" McRaney asked, grinning at him.

"I'm afraid so. A man named Ben Milligan, who is supposed to look just like me, is accused of raping Beth Jennings, a judge's daughter. He took a horse and hit a deputy. The girl claims that I'm Milligan."

McRaney stared at Joe, a blank expression on his thin face. Then a slow grin began twitching at his mouth and he shook his head. "I'll say one thing for you, Joe, when you get into trouble, you do it right! At the risk of sounding stupid, is there a posse after you?"

"As sure as the desert's hot," Joe said calmly. "The judge is leading the posse, along with the sheriff."

McRaney leaned back in the chair and ran his hand over his head. A thoughtful frown darkened his face.

"Is Sam Bentley still sheriff in Pecos?" he asked. When Joe nodded, McRaney shook his head slowly and said, "I'll bet he was on your side for a while, wasn't he?"

"He was, after I beat him up," Joe said, and waited for the reaction he knew his statement would have on McRaney.

"You beat up Sam Bentley?" McRaney repeated, shock all over his face. "A man that big?"

"I got lucky, before he beat me to death," Joe said, touching his still tender mouth. "I didn't get these marks on my face by walking into a pillow."

McRaney laughed, then turned serious and said, "How far behind are they?"

Joe frowned and thought about Jennings' tenacity. "About three hours," he said.

"You can't blame Jennings," McRaney said, standing up and walking over to the window. "Any parent wants to take care of their children."

Joe watched the tall man standing by the window. McRaney had been a sergeant during the war, and had been rough on his men when he'd learned that his two-year-old son had died of pneumonia. His wife had died the next spring with the fever.

"Joe, are you telling me the truth about all of this?" McRaney asked, turning abruptly to face him.

"Sure," Joe replied, surprised at the question and the sad look in McRaney's eyes. "Why? I sure wouldn't make up a story like this."

"Well," McRaney began, walking purposefully around the desk and sitting down on one corner. "In a way I feel responsible for this. You're down here because I asked you to come work for me. I've got a job for you to do, and it will have you away from the fort by the time the posse gets here."

Joe couldn't believe what McRaney was saying. In essence, the colonel was aiding and abetting an escaped criminal. But he had no choice. If Joe was at Fort Davis when Jennings and the posse arrived, he'd be taken back to Pecos and hanged. Or hang before reaching Pecos. He knew Jennings would make sure of that. He felt cold all over, thinking about a rope around his neck.

"What do you want me to do?" Joe asked with a mixture of excitement and relief. Maybe he'd be able to find out something about Ben Milligan while he was away from the fort.

"I want you to take a message to Chief Keoni," McRaney said. "He'll meet you at a way station

about ten miles from here. He reads English well and won't have any problem with the letter."

McRaney went to the other side of the desk, opened the middle drawer and took out a small white envelope. He handed it to Joe.

"Should I know what's in this?" Joe asked as he put the envelope into his shirt pocket and buttoned the flap.

"Oh, sure," McRaney said. "Keoni and I are supposed to have a meeting to discuss an end to his braves attacking stage coaches between San Antonio and El Paso. His people have lived here in Limpia Canyon for years. They resent the white man coming through here. In a way, you can't blame them. They were here long before Cabeza de Vaca ever thought about setting foot in Texas. Would you like it if a bunch of strangers came through your home and disrupted your way of life?" Anger edged his words.

Joe had known McRaney for a long time. They'd fought together at Chickamauga. But even then the colonel hadn't shown such rage.

"Eric, take it easy," Joe cautioned, frowning at the man. "You'll have a stroke."

McRaney shook his head to clear his mind. His mouth relaxed and a slow grin spread across his face. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"You're right," he said easily, sitting down in the chair. "But sometimes I feel like an intruder, and the only way I can stay out here in this wasteland is to have a gun in one hand and a saber in the other."

Joe understood McRaney's feelings, but he was in a hurry to be on his way before Jennings and the posse arrived.



"What's in the letter?" Joe prompted, standing up and adjusting the gun belt around his waist.

"Oh, yes," McRaney said. "Senator Powers wants to meet with Keoni and me next month in Langtry. I was going to send a messenger with that," he pointed toward Joe's shirt pocket, "but since you're here, it will be a good job for you, under the circumstances."

Nodding, Joe tightened the leather thong around his thigh that held the Dixie Revolver tightly against his leg. "I'll get a fresh horse from the corral and leave in a few minutes. What do you think this Keoni's reply will be? Will he be waiting?"

"He'll be there," McRaney said confidently. A smile softened his features. "To be summoned by a U.S. Army colonel's scout personally to a meeting with the Senator of Texas will really make him a big man with his people."

Joe opened the door and turned back to face McRaney. "Thanks for doing this for me, Eric," he said. "I'll get the horse and be on my way. I'll be back as soon as possible." The two men shook hands.

Unhitching Serge, Joe led him across the yard to the corral. A young private, with a deep sunburn on his fair face, took a rope from the fence and lassoed a pinto mare. Joe transferred the saddle from one horse to the other and swung up on the smaller horse. If Joe's thoughts hadn't been on getting away from the fort before the posse arrived, he'd have noticed the strange expression on the private's face as the young man did a double-take.

Riding out of Limpia Canyon, Joe headed west. A feeling of trepidation ran through him as he thought about meeting Keoni. He'd never had any dealings

with Indians before, and wasn't quite sure how to approach the man who was responsible for the attacks on wagon trains and stage travel in this area. How would the Indians react to a strange white man? Better yet, how would Keoni react to a white man being sent to see him by the army?

The pinto wasn't as comfortable as Serge, and Joe's wandering thoughts were drawn several times from the rocky mountains around him, where, he knew, he was being watched by hidden eyes.

The ride took more time that Joe thought it would, but less time than he hoped for. The Indians, five braves and the chief, waited about one hundred yards from the relatively new way station.

Dismounting and tying the reins to the hitching rail in front of the wooden building, Joe's right hand automatically reached down and loosened the Dixie Revolver in the holster. Before he turned around, he felt the Indians' penetrating eyes and the hair on the back of his neck sprang up. He shivered in the blazing heat.

Turning to face the Indians with a whole lot more confidence on his face than he felt, Joe walked easily toward them, his boots kicking up the dry dust.

The most austere of the six brown-skinned men was dressed in black cotton pants and a deep-purple shirt, with a leather thong belt around his thin waist. His chin-length black hair was held out of his face with a purple headband. Wide and deepset dark-brown eyes and a thin nose gave his angular face a hawkish appearance. Joe had just seen his first Apache!

Keoni's steady gaze never left Joe's eyes, as the new

army scout walked toward him.

"Chief Keoni?" Joe ventured, unsure of whether to offer to shake hands with the Indian or not. "I'm Joe Howard, an army scout from Fort Davis. Colonel Eric McRaney sent me with a letter for you."

The Indian's face was devoid of any expression as he watched Joe reach into his pocket, withdraw the envelope and hand it to him. He extended a long-fingered brown hand, took the envelope and opened it. Lowering his eyes, he scanned the single sheet of white paper. A small frown pulled his black brows together.

One Indian, dressed similarly to Keoni, noticed the look and spoke in a jumble of guttural sounds that was totally alien to Joe. Keoni answered and the brave frowned also.

"Is something wrong?" Joe asked cautiously. Keoni jerked his face up to look at Joe. His eyes had darkened in anger.

"Paper says I must go to Langtry to meet Senator Powers," Keoni said in a low, deep voice. "Why cannot Senator Powers come to Fort Davis to meet me and Colonel McRaney?" Each word was edged in irritation, and his dark eyes narrowed as he looked down at the paper and back up again, apparently expecting an answer from Joe.

"I don't know anything about this," Joe told him, shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders, seeing the logic of Keoni's question. Keoni felt he was as important in being chief of his people as Powers was in being Senator of Texas. The Indians had been around a heck of a lot longer than Texas had been a state.

"I just started working for Colonel McRaney today. He told me a little of what's been going on, but I don't know why the Senator can't come here. Why don't you ride back to the fort with me? Maybe you and McRaney can work something out." Joe knew he was going out on a limb, but that was the only thing he could do. The Indian wanted some kind of answer.

Apparently the other five understood English, because one of them asked a question that brought a negative motion from Keoni although he didn't turn around.

"What did he say?" Joe asked, feeling he had a right to know since he was in the middle of this. Keoni smiled a little—if a slight pull of his thin lips could be called a smile.

"Noka thought you meant just me to go with you," Keoni replied, replacing the paper in the envelope and then putting the envelope inside his shirt.

"Oh, no," Joe said quickly, looking over Keoni's shoulder to the tall young brave. He smiled slightly at the Indian. A blank stare was all he got. "I meant for all of you to come along." The more, the merrier, he thought to himself. A ruffled Indian was the last thing Joe needed right then.

"No," Keoni said, shaking his head slowly but firmly. "We not go to fort right now. Too many long knives on the pony soldiers."

Joe didn't know what to do. He couldn't force the Indians to go with him, and really, there was no point in it if the Senator wasn't going to be there. Joe felt that he and Keoni were in some kind of stand-off.

Suddenly, a little stiffness left Keoni's shoulders and he lowered his head a fraction.

"Maybe you tell McRaney to send for Senator Powers," Keoni said, giving Joe a level look. To Joe, it was a suggestion. But to Keoni, it was a subtle demand.

"How far is your camp from here?" Joe asked, adjusting his hat. He had to do something with his right hand to get it away from the pistol. He felt like he was threatening the Indian. "I'll tell the colonel what you said. He may want to meet with you soon."

Once again the expression changed on Keoni's austere face. He hadn't thought that his pensive words would have any effect on Joe.

"We camp half a day's ride from here to the west," Keoni replied, turning slightly and pointing his right arm in the direction where the sun had begun slipping down behind the looming mountains.

Knowing that they were closer to the fort than the Indians camp, Joe made a suggestion.

"Why don't you spend the night here?" he said, watching the Indians. Joe had heard that all Indians did things their way and any suggestions made by non-Indians always fell on deaf ears. "You won't have to travel so far, just to turn around and come back. I'll tell McRaney what you said and return tomorrow."

Keoni thought for a moment, then nodded quickly after digesting Joe's words. Not many white men had been so accommodating toward him.

"Your words sound good," Keoni said with a warm look in his dark eyes. "Too bad your brother

not as good as you."

Joe's head jerked up at the Indian's unexpected statement, and he stared at Keoni. For a minute he had no idea what the Indian was talking about. Then suddenly Joe realized that somehow Keoni had met Ben Milligan!

"Who do you mean?" Joe had to ask. "What brother?"

Surprise lifted the Indian's black brows, and he blinked his eyes slowly a couple of times.

"The brother born same time as you," Keoni replied slowly. "The man with your face."

Animosity was once more building up in Joe against a man he'd never seen. He'd already been put in jail and sentenced to hang because of this man who resembled him so much. What had he done to the Indians?

"How long ago did you see my brother?" Joe asked. "Did he cause any kind of trouble for you?" Joe waited nervously for Keoni's answer.

"Man with your face come through camp two weeks ago," Keoni said as he watched Joe closely. "Wanted to trade horses. Was going to the pass of the north. He think his horse not make it."

"Did you trade with him?" Joe asked, watching the Indian intently. The Indian nodded.

"White man's horse had loose iron," Keoni said contritely. "Foot sore. Horse not all time lame." He squinted his eyes. "I have good horse."

Joe remembered that Milligan had taken Vana's horse. He had to get the horse back, but he knew he couldn't just take it. There had to be a way.

"I'm afraid not, Chief," Joe told him solemnly.

slowly shaking his head. "That horse was taken in Pecos. It'll have to go back. The lady who owns him sets quite a store by that horse and wants him back."

The chief regarded Joe for a while, looked off into the mountains then slowly returned his gaze to the new army scout.

"I make you deal," Keoni said, narrowing his eyes with a challenge. "If you bring back other horse and man with your face, too, you can have lady's horse."

For some reason, Joe really wasn't surprised at the Indian's suggestion. In a way, Joe felt the same way. Why should Keoni give up something for nothing?

A smile slid across Joe's face and he nodded at the dark-skinned man standing before him, arms folded across his chest. "You've got a deal," Joe said, nodding. He realized that until he found Ben Milligan, he would have nothing but misery. He'd have to get McRaney to send him to El Paso on a job, so he could have some money in order to find this no-account man with his looks.

If Milligan still had the chief's horse, Joe could bring them both back to Pecos, have a chance to see Vana Glaser again and clear his name.

"What you do about Senator Powers?" Keoni called out as Joe turned and started walking back to his horse.

"Personally, I can't do anything about the Senator," Joe said, looking over his shoulder. "That will be up to McRaney. Maybe he can send a wire to the Senator. As soon as I get back to Fort Davis, I'm going to see if there isn't a reason for me to go to El Paso. If there is, I'll come back this way in the morning and tell you what McRaney says."

Keoni nodded, turned slightly on his heel and was followed by the five braves as they went toward their horses.

The small pinto seemed to take forever getting back to the fort, and Joe was really edgy when the fort, framed by the surrounding mountains, came into view. Tying the horse to the hitch rack, he stepped up on the wooden porch and knocked on the colonel's door.

"You look fit to be tied," McRaney observed, when Joe slammed the door shut behind him and dropped into a chair with a disgruntled sigh.

"That horse is the slowest thing to wear a saddle," Joe said, pushing back his hat. "Was the posse here?" he asked before the colonel could comment on the pinto.

"Yeah," McRaney said, nodding his head. "You'd been gone about an hour when Wilson Jennings came pounding up the steps. The sheriff might as well not have been along. Jennings did all of the talking." There was no emotion on the colonel's face and it almost drove Joe crazy.

"What did you tell him?" Joe finally asked in exasperation. "What did he ask?"

"He wanted to know if you'd been here," McRaney said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his long legs. "I told him you had, and that you'd already left."

"Why did you tell him that?" Joe asked impatiently, frowning at the man sitting so nonchalantly across the desk from him. "He'll be sure to come back looking for me."

"Oh, I don't think so," McRaney drawled, shaking



his head slowly. "I told him you were going to Laredo. He asked me why I didn't hold you here." A sly smile eased across his face and his eyes twinkled. "I told him that I didn't know you were wanted for anything."

Joe leaned back in the chair and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Did you find Keoni?" McRaney asked.

Joe nodded and told him about the Indian's reaction to the proposed meeting in Langtry. McRaney listened thoughtfully then nodded in agreement with Keoni.

"I'll send a telegram to Senator Powers in the morning," he said, and was about to say something else when Joe interrupted.

"Eric," Joe said, urgency edging his voice, "is there any way you can send me to El Paso tomorrow?" The question caught McRaney off guard, and he frowned at Joe. He leaned forward, an unasked question in his eyes. Joe explained his reason.

"Yes, there is," McRaney said decisively, standing up and nodding. "I need to know if the other two way stations between here and El Paso have been started yet. The driver on the last stage through here said they hadn't been, and they're way behind schedule. I want to know why they aren't finished. How soon do you want to leave?"

Joe was glad that his idea had been approved by McRaney.

"I could go in an hour," Joe said, a feeling of accomplishment rolling over him as he changed his mind about leaving tomorrow. The sooner he found

Milligan, the sooner his troubles would be over.

"Do you need some money?" McRaney asked. When Joe nodded, the colonel got up and walked in long strides to the black iron safe. He turned the dial, opened the door and counted out thirty dollars. "This is your first month's pay. Go by the mess hall and have Wetherbee fix you a grub sack."

Joe shook hands with McRaney, left the office, untied the pinto and led him to the corral. Serge, looking rested and fed, came toward him at a trot. After transferring the saddle to the black's back, Joe led him over to the mess hall. He watched Wetherbee, a big, burly, red-headed man take beans, jerky, flour, a frying pan, some coffee, a coffee pot and peaches and put them in a burlap sack.

"That should hold you, if you ain't gone too long," he said in a gruff voice that sounded like it came from a barrel. He gave Joe a snaggle-toothed grin as he clapped him on the shoulder.

## Chapter IV

Joe was worried as he rode Serge out of Limpia Canyon.

Riding back the way he'd come less than two hours ago, he wondered if Keoni would be satisfied that McRaney was sending a telegram to Senator Powers, insisting that he come to Fort Davis to meet with him and the Indian leader.

The six Indians were sitting in a semi-circle under a juniper tree when Joe reached the way station. Two were leaning against the tree sound asleep, chins almost touching their chests. Three were cleaning their guns and the chief sat gazing off into the distance. Joe wondered what his thoughts were.

No other movement gave credence to the fact that they knew or cared that Joe was riding up. Dismounting, he tied Serge to a small scrub tree and walked quickly over to Keoni, who slowly took his gaze from the distance and looked solemnly up at him. Then, with the agility of a cat, Keoni stood up.

"I told Colonel McRaney what you wanted," Joe said, liking the Indian's independence and poise. "He agrees with you and is going to send a telegram

to the Senator tomorrow. I'm leaving now for El Paso, to find the man with my face."

Joe was surprised at the astonished look on Keoni's brown face. "What's the matter?" he asked. "What's that look for?"

Keoni turned his head slowly and looked at the vast mountains around them. Then just as slowly he looked back at Joe.

"You and McRaney good men," Keoni replied mildly. "Most white men not try to help Indian. Why you do this?" Confusion and bewilderment filled his dark eyes.

"Well, everybody should be treated the same," Joe told him, a feeling of compassion easing over him. "I'm on my way to El Paso—or, as you say, the pass of the north—to find Ben Milligan. Maybe he can help clear up something I've been accused of and another injustice can be corrected." When Keoni frowned at the name, Joe explained: "the man with my face." The Indian nodded.

Swinging up on Serge, Joe felt a friendship building between himself and the man who had been called a savage by more than one person.

"I don't know how soon the Senator will reply," Joe told the dark-skinned man looking up at him, "but I'm sure something can be worked out. If I'm back from El Paso in time, I'll come and tell you. Either way, you'll know something soon."

Impulsively, Joe extended his right hand and was more than pleasantly surprised when Keoni reached up and took it in a firm grip.

"May the good spirits ride with you," Keoni intoned. A small flicker of a smile tugged at his

thin mouth.

Turning his horse, Joe left Keoni standing with his arms folded across his chest. Confident and relaxed in the knowledge that Judge Wilson Jennings and the posse were on their way to Laredo, Joe set Serge at an easy gallop toward the west.

Even though the sun was going down, it was still hot enough to send sweat rolling down Joe's back, and the brown shirt stuck to his skin. Removing his flat-crowned hat, Joe pushed back his damp black hair and wiped the inside of the hatband with a red bandana. Replacing the hat, he pulled it low over his forehead to shield his eyes from the rays of the setting sun.

The first way station came into view as Joe rode over a small hill. The sun had slipped behind the mountains and the land was cooling.

It didn't take long to tell that not much work had been done on the building construction. The floor had been laid and nine split logs supported a half-done roof. Boards and nails were scattered on the ground. Something told Joe that a lot more should have been done.

"Somebody sure is resting on his rear end, Serge," Joe muttered to the horse. The black whinnied low, as if he understood what the man on his back had said. "Eric isn't going to like this."

As Joe swung down and tied the horse to a support beam, he heard the clatter of a shod horse's hoofs on the rocks. Turning around, Joe was disgusted at the sight of the most disreputable looking man he'd ever seen riding toward him.

Even if Joe had been standing up-wind of the

huge, red-headed man, now dismounting from his gray horse, the odor of a long-dirty body would have reached him. Joe's stomach turned over. The once green-and-black checked wool shirt was filthy with sweat and food stains. Tobacco juice was matted with dirt on the bushy red beard. A battered tan hat covered the head of thick red hair that hadn't seen scissors or comb in a long, long time.

"Are you lost er lookin' fer somebody?" the deep voice growled. Keeping a skeptical eye on Joe, the big man led the horse to the opposite side of the building and tied the reins to the post.

"No, I'm not lost," Joe replied curtly, irritated by the dirty man's tone of voice, "and I'm not looking for anyone. Are you supposed to be working here?"

The man lowered his head and leveled a scathing look at Joe. "Now what makes you think that I'm supposed to be workin' here?" he asked slyly, shifting a chaw of tobacco to the right side of his mouth. He wiped the back of his hand across his beard and mustache. "Why do you want to know? What business is it of yours, and who the devil are you anyway?"

The look in his eyes dared Joe to argue with him.

"I'm Joe Howard, army scout from Fort Davis," Joe said, his brown eyes flashing. "I was sent here by Colonel Eric McRaney to find out why this and the other way station aren't completed yet. From the looks of things," Joe went on, slowly turning away from the man and toward the building, "not a lot has been done."

Hearing the man clear his throat and spit, Joe quickly turned back. The cold gleam in the man's

pale eyes sent a chill up and down Joe's spine. Sam Bentley was a big man, but Joe hadn't felt as threatened by him as he did by this man, who weighed well over three hundred pounds and looked like a red bear.

"Just what business is it of yours how much work's been done here?" the man asked again in a mocking tone. He hooked dirty thumbs in the loops of his filthy brown pants and looked at Joe as if sizing him up—probably for a pine box.

Uh-oh, Joe thought, seeing the man shift his ponderous weight from his right foot to the left.

"Like I said," Joe told him in a steady voice, "it's the business of a scout sent by a commanding officer in the U.S. Army. Who are you? What are you doing here? It couldn't be work." Joe shook his head with a lot more confidence than he felt. This man could break him in half with one hand or take his head off with one swat of his fist.

Joe got the strong feeling from the hostile way the man was looking at him that he wasn't used to being questioned by anyone. The gut instinct that he'd come to rely upon told him that he and the big man would mix it up before he rode away. No doubt Joe would be on the thin side of the mix.

"I'm Will Dillinson," was the slow reply, "and it ain't none of your damn business what I'm doin' here. Now you'd better get your butt back on that black horse of yours and ride out here while you're still in one piece."

Dillinson's threat fired Joe's temper. He was here in an official capacity and a dirty, lazy bum was telling him what to do. All thoughts of Ben Milligan

and El Paso left his mind.

"I'm not leaving here until you tell me what I want to know," Joe told him doggedly, easing his right hand toward the handle of the pistol strapped to his thigh. "Colonel McRaney wants to know why this and the other way station aren't finished. Stage passengers don't have a place to rest and they're complaining. It's that simple."

Joe thought he'd get some cooperation from the man if he played on his sympathy for the stage passengers. But that didn't work, either. Dillinson glared coldly at Joe.

"Now that's a real shame," Dillinson said slowly, and spat. "You know, it don't matter a whole heck of a lot to me about no passengers," he growled, and sent another stream of tobacco juice in the direction of Joe's feet. "If McRaney, or whatever the heck his name is, wanted to know about this way station, why didn't he come out here his own self instead of sending some errand boy?"

The insult, and the spit almost hitting his feet, were bad enough. But being called an errand boy by someone of Dillinson's caliber was more than Joe could tolerate. Dillinson stood spraddle-legged, thumbs hooked in his pockets, a cunning in his eyes that rankled Joe to the depths of his being.

The two men eyed one another, each waiting for the other to make the first move. Joe thought he'd try reasoning once more. There was no sense in getting his brains beat out if he didn't have to.

"I don't want any trouble," he cautioned, resting his hand on the handle of the pistol.

"Mister, you got trouble when you come ridin' in



here like you owned the whole dang place and start askin' questions like a fancy judge," Dillinson growled. A maniacal gleam in Dillinson's eyes warned Joe that the fight was about to start. Joe knew he couldn't whip the huge man in a fist fight, but he didn't want to shoot him, either. That would be murder. The man didn't need killing, no matter how dirty and lazy he was. Maybe he could get lucky with one punch. Joe knew that was about as likely to happen as snow in July!

Doubling up his right fist, Joe took two steps toward Dillinson and hit the big man as hard as he could in the stomach. The impact was like hitting a tree! Pain shot up Joe's arm all the way to the shoulder. Joe looked at the smirking hulk standing undaunted before him.

"Boy, if you're gonna do a man's job, you'd better take some more lessons," Dillinson said and laughed, showing uneven yellow teeth. In one swift motion, Dillinson slammed his hamsized fist into Joe's stomach, doubling him over with a grunt. Small black dots swam before his eyes.

Joe had been in his share of fist fights and barroom brawls, but he'd never been hit as hard as just then. In one swoosh, the air left his lungs and he wanted to vomit. Clutching his stomach, Joe pulled in a ragged, painful breath.

Struggling, he straightened up and stepped back, well out of Dillinson's reach, to consider his options. He couldn't live with himself if he walked away from the big man. On the other hand, common sense told him that Dillinson would beat him to death if he tried to take him on with his fists. But McRaney had

sent him here on a job, and he meant to go back to Fort Davis with the answer.

"Well, boy, what's it gonna be?" Dillinson prompted, cocking a bushy brow over a jaundiced eyes.

The word "boy" sent hot rage through Joe, and without thinking about the consequence, he bent down and picked up a stick of wood about three feet long and four inches across. Straightening up just enough to move, Joe rushed at Dillinson and hit him broadside. The big man bent over, gasping as the air rushed out of his lungs. Joe brought the stick down across the back of his head. Dillinson dropped like a slaughtered pig.

Taking advantage of the big man's prone condition, Joe jerked the Dixie Revolver from the worn holster, bent down and turned the rancid-smelling man over on his back. With the toe of his boot Joe nudged Dillinson in the side and thumbed the hammer back as Dillinson groaned, coming around. He was only stunned. The big man opened one eye and squinted up at Joe, who held the gun only inches from his nose.

"Now, you filthy piece of humanity," Joe said softly, "how soon is this way station going to be finished?"

The big man took a slow, ragged breath, but remained quiet.

"Tell me, or I swear I'll beat your head in with that stick," Joe ordered in a level tone, inclining his head sideways in the direction of the discarded piece of wood.

"What's with you and this damn way station

anyhow?" Dillinson mumbled, starting to sit up. Joe put his foot in the center of Dillinson's big chest and pushed him back down on the ground.

"The same as before," Joe replied complacently. "The colonel at Fort Davis wants to know why it and the other station aren't finished. He sent me to find out. I don't know why you're so contrary and won't answer a simple question. It would save us both a lot of trouble and effort. Not to mention pain."

"Well," Dillinson said slowly, sitting up, "if I knew you wanted to know this bad," he touched the lump on top of his head, "I'd a told you sooner. I always thought a scout's job was chasin' after dadblame Injuns. Not checkin' out a place for prissy ladies to change their hats."

"A scout's job," Joe said, wanting to laugh at the big man, "is to do what he's told to do."

Dillinson stood up with no interference from Joe, although Joe kept the revolver aimed at him.

"You were saying," Joe prompted irritably.

"Well, since you've given me a reason," Dillinson said rubbing his stomach, "I don't see why this one can't be done in a couple of days."

Joe turned around and looked at the skeletal structure. It would take a miracle, or an extraordinary man, to complete the way station by that time. Joe's thoughts must have been visible on his face, because Dillinson lost no time in assuring him that it could be done.

"I'll make you a deal," Dillinson said, nodding his shaggy head rapidly. "If this place ain't done in a couple of days, you can whomp me with that stick again." A grin spread over his bearded face and

he chuckled.

"You've got a deal," Joe said, holstering the revolver and bursting into laughter. "How far is the other way station?"

"It's about fifty miles from here," Dillinson replied, extending his massive right arm in the direction of the setting sun. "You can't make it tonight," he said, shaking his head. "I'm gonna stay the night here and get started on *that* tomorrow." Sheepishly, he nodded toward the pile of lumber. "Why don't you stay and light out in the mornin'?"

Joe couldn't believe what he was hearing! The same man he'd just beaten with a stick was inviting him to stay the night.

"No, thanks," Joe said, shaking his head. "I can make a few miles before dark. The sooner I get there and check on the other way station, the sooner I can get to El Paso."

Dillinson's busy brows shot up in bewilderment. "El Paso? Why do you want to go there? It's a long way." A smug smile crossed his face. "It's a gal, ain't it? I know that's why you're in such a danged hurry."

"Could be," Joe answered, wondering how the man would react if he knew the real reason he was going to El Paso. "See you in a couple of days," Joe said. He untied Serge and swung up into the saddle.

With a lot of doubt in his mind as to the completion of the way station in the promised time, Joe set Serge in an easy gallop across the desert wasteland.

Night began settling over the land like a soft blanket, and as the sun sank in the cloudless sky the temperature began dropping. Even though it was

still warm, the intense heat was gone. Joe's shirt had dried and was stiff with sweat.

Joe stopped a couple of times before finding a good place to spend the night. Coming to a small stream with a sparse amount of grass, Joe dismounted, led Serge to the water and let him drink his fill, then hobbled him near the grass.

Removing the saddle and bedroll, Joe dropped them on the ground under a juniper tree. Untying the bedroll, he kicked it out and dropped the saddle at one end of it for a pillow.

Flopping down on the blanket, Joe began removing his boots, but thought better of it and pulled them back on. All kinds of crawley things called the ground home, and he didn't want any uninvited guests in his boots the next morning. Stretching out, Joe drew the other blanket over him. Everything seemed right with the world as he looked up at the black sky where a million stars twinkled like diamonds on velvet. Momentarily forgetting his problems, Joe took a deep breath and smiled. Then he pulled the flat-crowned hat down over his eyes and tried to sleep.

After a while, the night came alive with night-bird calls. Crickets chirped, and the mournful cry of a coyote filled the air.

Sleep finally closed Joe's eyes, and for a while he slumbered peacefully. But then a jumble of images raced through his brain and he began tossing on the hard ground.

He could see a gallows with a faceless body dangling on a rope over a gaping hole. Vana Glaser and Beth Jennings were laughing up at him and

pointing their fingers. Suddenly, the hanging body began spinning wildly and, when it slowed and turned toward him, Joe saw that the face was his!

A grotesquely slashed mouth leered down at him, then opened wide in a soundless laugh. It changed quickly into a choking grimace. The bound hands tried to reach up and loosen the rope but couldn't.

When Joe woke up he was on his back, his mouth was open and dry and the blanket was tight across his throat. For a while he lay there exhausted. Then, slinging the blanket away, he jumped up and grabbed the water canteen. It was only after he'd taken a couple of drinks and splashed water on his face that he realized he'd had a nightmare. The first one he'd ever had. The sun was already up, throwing its rays down at him.

Joe stood for a minute gripping the canteen in his hands. They were cold and shaking. It was then that he noticed he was breathing hard. The dream had upset him more than he wanted to admit.

Expelling a ragged breath, Joe took another drink. Then he remembered the stream, poured the old water out and watched the dry ground absorb it like a sponge.

Unhobbling Serge, Joe led him to the stream to drink and refilled the canteens. Hunger began gnawing at his stomach. He got a fire going, made coffee and sliced off a good-sized piece of meat and fried it. Nothing had ever tasted as good. He washed it down with two cups of black coffee. He kept thinking about the dream as he ate. Was it some kind of omen? Would he end up being hanged?

Joe wasn't in a big hurry to get to the second way

station, but he was in a hurry to get to El Paso and find Ben Milligan. As soon as he finished eating, he washed out the coffee pot and frying pan, and put them back in the grub sack. Throwing the saddle on Serge, Joe swung up and headed west again, the dream still in the back of his mind.

Joe let Serge pick his own pace. The horse was well rested, and the miles flew under his feet in a steady gallop. At any other time Joe's thoughts would have been on something entirely different: A card game. A cool beer. Spending time with some willing young thing. A new place to go. New things to see.

But things were different now. Ben Milligan's shenanigans had taken care of that. Joe still couldn't believe the things that had happened to him during the past week. False accusations. Arrest. Trial—if that's what it could be called. Escape from jail.

Joe had never been arrested in his life. Then suddenly, arriving in a town for the first time he was arrested for the rape of a girl he'd never seen, put in jail, had one of the quickest trials in history and was sentenced to hang by the girl's father. Everyone in Pecos, except for Vana Glaser and Sam Bentley, swore he was the spitting image of someone he'd never heard of.

Then came the Indians! By some quirk of fate, he'd become an intermediary between them and Senator Powers, someone else he'd never heard of. To cap it all off, he'd met that moose of a man, Will Dillinson. The man had almost killed him with one ham-like blow.

Those things were behind him now, though, and

he was thinking about what awaited him in El Paso when he found Ben Milligan.

What if Milligan had caused trouble similar to that in Pecos? What if some victim of Milligan's saw Joe first and tried to get revenge, before finding out who Joe really was? That thought sent shivers up Joe's back as much as the possibility of being hanged did.

Rattling chains, rolling wheels, horses' hoofs and a yelling voice brought Joe out of his thoughts. Turning in the saddle, he saw a stage rocking back and forth on its springs, drawn by six horses, hurtling toward him. Pulling Serge aside, Joe returned the driver's wave and watched the stage with four passengers disappear in a cloud of dust.

I hope they have a place to rest ahead, Joe thought solemnly, pulling Serge back on the road. Joe and Serge hadn't gone too far when Serge began limping. Dismounting Joe lifted the horse's right front foot. A pebble had lodged there. Taking a knife from his pocket, Joe flipped it out, rubbed the strong leg, got back on and they started again, a little slow at first.

As the horse trotted along, Joe's thoughts snapped back to Beth Jennings. He couldn't understand why she had been so quick to accuse him of being her attacker. If what she said had happened to her had really occurred, Ben Milligan had to be a lot closer to her than the space between them when Beth came to jail. There had to be some tiny difference on their faces. A mole. A freckle. Joe had a scar under his eye from a fight in school. Did Milligan have a similar scar?

Suddenly something dawned on Joe! Beth hadn't been alone when she'd confronted him in the jail.



She was upset. That was expected. But she seemed to be in command of herself as she screamed at him through the bars. Then, two days later, she was so subdued at the trial. Joe could understand her shame at being in the public eye in such a situation, but she seemed totally cowed and dominated by her father during the trial. What had caused the change?

Did Beth and her father have some kind of plot against Ben Milligan? With Milligan out of town, did Joe just happen to be the lucky sucker?

But, no, that couldn't be. Gib Colson and Ezra Stillman, not to mention the people in the restaurant, had thought he was Milligan long before Beth had seen him. So had Sheriff Bentley, along with the deputy, Amos Cooper. Only Vana Glaser had been instantly sure that he wasn't her former employee.

Rage rushed over Joe and he gritted his teeth so hard that a knot tightened his lean jaw. How should he handle Milligan when he found him? If Milligan wasn't in El Paso, where else should he look? Would Milligan go to Mexico? He should know that, sooner or later, someone from Pecos would be after him.

Maybe I should just forget about Milligan, Joe thought morosely. Jennings thinks I'm in Laredo. I could stay at Fort Davis, do scouting jobs for Eric and never have to go back to Pecos.

But, just as suddenly, the thought left Joe's mind. He couldn't let something like this slide by. He had to find Milligan, take him back to Pecos and clear both their names.

Joe didn't know how many miles he'd covered, but it seemed like a lot when he rode out of a canyon and

topped a hill. He couldn't believe what he saw, and wished to God that he'd been riding in a different direction.

Below, he saw carnage almost too horrible for the human mind to comprehend. The stage, which had passed him only a short time ago, was standing with both doors wide open, the horses still in their traces.

Crawling over the stage like flies were four Indians. Just then a fifth Indian jumped out of the stage, holding something yellow in his hand. Across the distance, Joe could hear their laughter.

Jerking the rifle out, Joe slammed off a shot. He felt good when he saw the Indian hit the ground, clutch his chest and drop the yellow object.

The four on top of the stage spun around in his direction. One put an arrow in his bow and pulled the bow string back. Before he could let it to, Joe got off another shot. It caught the brown-skinned man in the face. As he toppled over and hit the ground by his companion, the other three jumped on their horses and took off like the devil was after them. Joe got off another shot, but it missed.

Before going down the hill, he replaced the spent cartridges. Then, kneeling Serge in the side, he eased forward. Joe rode first to the front of the stage without looking in. Clothes, from the open trunks and cases that had been tied securely on top of the stage, were scattered in colorful disarray on the ground.

Hesitating as long as he could, Joe looked up. The driver, slumped over the footrest, had an arrow imbedded in his back. The guard, a rifle still gripped in his right hand, lay sprawled across the seat. In his

chest was an arrow. A dread filled Joe as he turned and rode around to the door. Since no sounds came from inside the stage, he figured that everyone had to be dead.

His suspicions proved true when he dismounted and walked slowly to the open door. The oldest of two men, perhaps in his sixties, stared with sightless blue eyes at the opposite wall. His slender throat had been slit from one ear to the other. The front of his shirt, which had been white only a short time ago, was covered with drying blood. A grotesque expression was frozen on the old man's face. His mouth was gaping open. No doubt a scream had just been cut off. The thin fingers were gripped into fists at the old man's side.

The other man couldn't have been much older than Joe. The Indians had been a little kinder to him. One swift thrust of a knife into the man's heart had ended his life. His eyes were shut, but his mouth was drawn into a thin line.

Joe had seen dead men before. He'd seen men killed in various ways: by rope, knife, gun. He'd even killed men during the war. But what he saw next made his blood run cold. He didn't have a good view of the woman's face because it was turned away from him. But her whole head was covered in blood. Although he'd heard about Indians' brutality to white women, he couldn't believe his eyes when he walked around to the other side of the stage.

His foot touched the yellow object that the Indian had dropped. He bent down and picked it up. His stomach turned over and he felt like his insides were being torn out. It was a scalp with long yellow curls!

Turning his head aside, Joe dropped the sickening thing and took a deep breath. The woman sagging against the wall had to be the mother of the little girl crumpled on the floor.

Joe got sick to his stomach when he turned the woman's face toward him. She would have been beautiful, if a dozen or so thin cuts didn't criss-cross her fair face, making it a bloody mess. Her red velvet dress had been ripped open from the shoulders to the waist. Her full and firm breasts had been slashed like her face. She had died from a stab in the heart. Her entire body was covered with blood.

With shaking hands, Joe reached down and turned the little girl over. She couldn't have been more than seven years old. A rag doll was clutched in one arm. Her head, cropped but not scalped like her mother's, fell against Joe's arm. The child's throat had been cut all the way to the bone, just like the old man's. The front of her light-blue velvet dress was soaked in blood.

Joe laid her down and turned away to vomit. The feel and smell of death poured from his stomach and out on the ground, leaving him weak and shaking.

Rushing around the stage, Joe grabbed the canteen, poured some water into his cupped hands and washed his face. Taking several gulps, he leaned against Serge until his rolling stomach settled down.

How could one human being do this to another, Joe wondered, shaking his head slowly and swallowing hard.

The passengers had probably been on their way to El Paso. They had been minding their own business.

Suddenly, a thought struck Joe. The Indians had

been minding their own affairs also. For a long time white people had been heading west in droves, pushing the Indians further and further back on land that had been theirs for ages. They hadn't asked the whites to come and disrupt their way of living. They were pushing back the only way they could, with attacks on wagon trains and stage coaches.

Fort Davis had been established as a defense post against Indian attacks between San Antonio and El Paso. Somehow, that defense hadn't been enough for these people. There were a lot of miles and mountains between the towns, and there were more Indians than soldiers.

Standing there with those mixed thoughts racing through his mind, Joe felt a little betrayed by Keoni. He was supposed to have a meeting with Senator Powers soon to find a way to stop the raids on stage coaches. Were these Indians Keoni's braves? Were they acting on his orders, or were they a bunch of renegades?

There wasn't much that Joe could do about the Indians right then. It really wasn't up to him to do anything about them. They were the army's business. The important thing was giving the dead a decent burial. That included the Indians. Rummaging through the stage's boot, Joe found a short shovel and began the arduous task of digging graves in the hard-packed ground. To save time, he buried the woman and child together. There were no blankets to wrap around the bodies, and he felt sick again when the first clods of dirt hit the faces. The two Indians shared a single grave.

More time had passed than Joe realized, as he

pushed a makeshift cross atop the young man's grave. He didn't know what to say but felt that some act of ceremony had to be made. So he removed his hat and stood silent for a moment, his head bowed. Then, pulling his wet shirt away from his back, Joe gathered up the passengers' personal things, tied Serge to the back of the stage, closed the doors and climbed up onto the seat. Gathering up the reins, he snapped them over the horses' backs and headed the stage toward the next stop.

The second way station lacked only doors. After telling the man who appeared to be in charge what had happened, Joe mounted Serge and turned in the direction of El Paso.

It was two days later when Joe reached the outskirts of the town. Dusk was settling over the desert like a soft gray haze. Even though the sun had already slid down behind the mountains, enough heat still remained to cause sweat to roll down Joe's back and face. His blue shirt had salt marks under the arms and around the neck.

Pulling the horse to a stop at the edge of town, Joe was faced with a problem. Should he ride on into town, take a room at a hotel and risk being mistaken for Milligan again, go to the sheriff and tell him the situation, or spend the night out in the open and get a good start in the morning?

True to his nature, Joe kneed Serge in the side and rode into town.

Pulling the well-worn hat low over his eyes, Joe reined Serge to a stop in front of the sheriff's office. Knowing he was taking a chance in going to the

sheriff first, Joe decided to get it over with. Stepping up on the plank sidewalk, he opened the door to the sheriff's office. His hands were damp and shaking. His mouth was dry.

"What can I do for you?" the medium-built, dark-skinned man sitting behind the desk asked in a deep and tired voice. The sheriff ran solemn gray eyes slowly over Joe in a way that a seasoned law man would. No recognition showed in his gaze, and Joe breathed a little easier.

"I was told that a friend of mine was here in town," Joe began, sounding as truthful as he could. "His name's Ben Milligan."

A thoughtful frown crossed the sheriff's weathered face and he shook his head slowly.

"I don't recognize the name," he said, squinting. "How long has he been in town? What's he look like?"

Joe paused for a long time and got a curious look from the man with the star pinned to his dark-blue shirt. His heart skipped a beat. How could he describe Milligan without describing himself? Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he hooked his thumbs over his belt. He hoped he looked more relaxed than he felt.

"I don't have all night," the sheriff said irritably. "What does this friend of yours look like?"

"Well," Joe began lamely after clearing his throat, "he's about my size and build." Then an idea hit Joe and he smiled. "He used to be real fat. That was some time ago. I told him that if he ever lost down to a hundred and fifty like me, I'd buy him the biggest

steak he could eat. If he hasn't colored his hair again it should be a little lighter than mine." He chuckled in amusement as a false memory twinkled in his eyes. "Old Ben dyed his hair green one time."

But the sheriff wasn't amused at anything Joe was saying. He leaned back in the swivel chair that needed some oil and watched Joe without expression.

"In other words," he said, raising his brows, "this Ben-whatever-his-name-is could almost be your twin brother, huh?"

Joe felt the blood drain from his face and his mouth went dry. "Well, uh," he stammered and swallowed hard. "Yeah, I guess he could at that. When we were younger we were together a lot and people wondered if we were twins."

The lie seemed to be like a snowball, getting bigger and bigger as it went, and Joe wished that he hadn't started it. He should have just asked for Ben Milligan and let it go at that.

"I guess the best place to look for somebody would be in the saloons," the sheriff suggested. "There's two in town. The Five Aces at the opposite end of town is sort of a high-class joint. The Last Penny is just that—you gotta be down to your last penny to go there. It's just down the street. Then there's the hotel and restaurant. If your friend isn't in any of those places, he's not in town."

Apparently Ben Milligan hadn't caused any trouble in town or the sheriff would have seen him. Maybe he wasn't even in El Paso. Maybe he'd made this long ride for nothing.



"Thanks a lot, Sheriff," Joe said, bending over and extending his hand. "I appreciate your help."

"Any time," the sheriff replied complacently, shaking Joe's hand without getting up. "Good luck in finding your friend."

Not pressing his luck any further, Joe left and got on Serge

Considering his own financial situation, he went to the Last Penny first. Dismounting in front of the small, nondescript building, Joe opened the door and stepped into the smoke-filled room.

One open window on either side of the door didn't do much good in letting fresh air in or the stale air out. There were only four tables with card games going. The bar was two side boards, supported by three empty beer kegs. Bottles and glasses were stacked on an empty box. They didn't look too clean.

Joe glanced around the hot room at the few men drinking cheap whiskey. No one in the room resembled him, so he turned, left and got back on Serge. The street was crowded with horses and riders, wagons, and carriages of different sizes, and it took a little while to reach the opposite end of town.

The Five Aces was a wide, two-story yellow building where loud piano music poured out of four open windows. Dismounting, Joe tied Serge to the hitch rack and pulled open the bat-wing doors. Stepping inside, he looked around a saloon that was in complete contrast to the Last Penny.

The bar ran the length of the saloon, with a mirror on the wall reflecting bottles and glasses in clean, neat rows. Men stood elbow to elbow at the bar,

enjoying good whiskey and beer. A roulette wheel invited those who felt lucky and three card games were in progress. A lively rendition of "Buffalo Gals" was being played on a piano in the corner by a young man who was obviously enjoying himself.

"Buy me a drink, mister," a sultry voice invited. Feeling a tug at his arm, Joe looked down to see a green-eyed, red-haired saloon girl smiling seductively at him. The thin-strapped blue taffeta dress was cut to show off the rounded tops of her pale breasts.

"Not right now, beautiful," Joe refused with a crooked smile, shaking his head slowly. "I'm looking for a friend of mine, and when I find him we'll both buy you a drink. Maybe even champagne."

Shrugging her arm off, Joe started walking slowly toward the bar.

Men of various sizes, shapes and ages downed the best whiskey and beer the Five Aces had to offer. Each face was different. They were wide, narrow, fat, thin, fair, dark. As Joe looked at each man, he let his eyes slide on slowly to the next reflection in the mirror.

Suddenly, he felt like he was looking at himself!

Standing third man from the end of the bar was a young man who was the spitting image of Joe Howard!

For a long time Joe just stared at his double. He couldn't believe what he saw. If he hadn't known better, he'd have sworn he was standing at the bar and raising a foamy mug of beer up to his mouth. He could have been the one wearing a black vest over a red shirt. A black hat with the sides rolled up could have been perched at a cocky angle on the right side

of his head. Walking up close behind the man, Joe tapped him on the shoulder.

"I think we need to talk," Joe said, leaning close so he could be heard over the noise of music and voices.

The beer mug was poised in midair, and the man turned pale when he met Joe's eyes in the mirror.



## Chapter V

It was hard to tell who was more surprised. The two men stared at each other after the one leaning against the bar turned around, the color draining from his face, to look at Joe. The hand holding the beer mug began shaking and he set the mug down.

"If I weren't seeing you with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it," Joe finally said, shaking his head in total bewilderment. His eyes narrowed and a knot worked in his jaw. "You've got to be Ben Milligan."

The men standing on either side of Milligan gaped at Joe and the man who favored him so much. The man blinked and swallowed hard a couple of times.

"Yeah, I'm Ben Milligan," he said cockily, a little confidence and color returning to his voice and face. "Do you know me? Who are you? Are we kin?" He raised a thin eyebrow and leveled a frown at Joe. Disbelief widened his eyes.

"No, I don't know you," Joe answered, anger building as he thought about all the trouble this man had caused him. Of course, Milligan had no way of knowing that Joe even existed. But from Milligan's

present attitude, Joe got the feeling that Milligan had a penchant for getting into trouble, and Joe had been on the receiving end of the most recent batch of it.

"I'm Joe Howard," Joe told him irritably. "I'm an army scout from Fort Davis. Up until two weeks ago, I'd never been in much trouble in my life. Then I rode into Pecos." Joe let the final words trail out as he watched Milligan.

Milligan's mouth dropped open and his eyes almost popped out of their sockets. His face turned a brilliant red and he sucked his lips against his teeth.

"Let's sit down," Milligan suggested, shifting his eyes back and forth. "That table's vacant."

The two men had no more than sat down, when the saloon girl who'd stopped Joe only a few minutes ago sauntered up to him and looked from one to the other, frowned and did a double-take. Glancing back at Joe, she smiled slyly down at him.

"Looks like you found your friend," she said, smiling shrewdly at him. "You didn't tell me you were looking for your brother. Do I still get the champagne?" She ran the tip of her tongue slowly around her red lips.

Joe and Milligan looked up at her in disgust and then back at each other. "Yeah, you get the champagne," Joe said placidly, wanting her to hurry and leave so they could get some of this situation settled. "And bring us a bottle of the best whiskey the house has. Put it on his tab." Joe jerked his head toward Milligan, thinking the man owed him something for all of the trouble he'd gotten into because of him.

"Sure. Why not?" Milligan agreed. The two men

sat staring at each other. From time to time, Milligan shook his head. They didn't say anything until the girl brought the bottle and two glasses and, in a whirl of blue taffeta, left them. "Now, let's get down to business," Milligan said in a tone that really angered Joe. "How did you find me and what do you want? Are you sure we're not blood kin?"

It was all Joe could do not to reach across the table and shake the daylights out of Milligan. He acted like Joe was causing him some kind of inconvenience, when really it was the other way around.

"Well, for starters," Joe said, lowering his head and leveling a stare at Milligan, "Chief Keoni, the Indian whose horse you traded for Vana Glaser's, told me you were headed in this direction." Joe could hardly contain his irritation. "He wants his horse back. I want you to go back to Pecos with me and tell Judge Wilson Jennings that it was you and not me who raped his daughter. If Vana hadn't helped me get out of jail, I'd be a dead man right now because of you!"

Joe stared at the man and his eyes were cold. A bitter taste filled his mouth and he knew it wasn't the whiskey.

Shock and disbelief snapped Milligan's head up and he stared at Joe. He took a sip of whiskey and swallowed hard. The hand holding the shot glass shook.

"Dead! What do you mean?" Milligan asked, a frown drawing his brows together. "Why would you be dead? Wait a minute," he drew out slowly and flopped back against the chair. "What do you mean about me raping Judge Jennings' daughter? Have

you seen her? Why were you in jail?"

Joe couldn't believe what Milligan had just said. He was acting like he didn't know what Joe was talking about! Rage tightened Joe's jaw.

"I was in jail," Joe said slowly, arching his brows, "because I look like you, for one thing! I was sentenced to hang because Beth Jennings swore that I was a man named Ben Milligan and had raped her."

A stunned look replaced the frown on Milligan's face, then a thoughtfulness narrowed his eyes. Joe was dumbfounded when a slow smile eased across his mouth. Then Milligan threw back his head and roared in laughter. Leaning forward, he slapped his hand down on the table. The whiskey in the glass sloshed out. At the outburst, the saloon patrons turned in their direction. Milligan quieted down, cleared his throat and leaned back in the chair. A different look was taking shape in his eyes.

"What's so dang funny?" Joe asked sharply, failing to see anything amusing in what he'd just told Milligan. "I could be dead! That's nothing to laugh at."

"I know," Milligan said, a trace of an apology in his voice. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. "I know. I just didn't think she'd do something like that." Milligan shook his head slowly, stared down at the table for a second and then looked up at Joe, a puzzled expression tightening his thin mouth.

"What do you mean—you didn't think she'd do something like that?" Joe said. "Like what? She swore you raped her! The deputy is still rubbing his head where you clouted him with a pistol and Vana is



minus a horse because of you. Not to mention the Indian. You really believe in burning the candle at both ends, don't you?"

Joe expelled a deep breath, shook his head and slumped back against the chair. If what Milligan was implying were true, it would be hard, if not impossible, to get him to go back to Pecos and clear him!

But, in Joe's way of thinking, Milligan should jump at the chance to go back and clear his name.

"Well, like I said," Milligan began, pausing to take a long sip, "if you've seen Beth Jennings you know she was lying about the whole thing. I never laid a hand on her, let alone raped her!"

Joe felt like he'd been hit in the stomach again by Will Dillinson's big fist. Had Beth Jennings lied, or was Milligan lying now? What would either of them have to gain?

"If you're lying, why did that deputy try to arrest you?" Joe asked, leveling a sarcastic look at the man who resembled him so much that it was mind-boggling. "Why did you take Vana's horse, and why does that Indian want to nail your hide to a tree? Milligan, if I knew you better I swear I'd kill you myself."

Milligan's smile was friendly and humorous. "I suppose that you are entitled to an explanation. I guess Vana told you that I worked at the saloon for a couple of weeks." Joe nodded. "I ate lunch at the restaurant. Beth Jennings started coming in every day at noon. I thought it was coincidence at first. She began talking to me; friendly at first. You know. I'd talk to her. Then she began getting the idea that we

had something going. She asked me to come for dinner one night. I refused. I really had something else to do. It wouldn't have mattered, anyway. Beth Jennings isn't my type of woman, even if her father is a judge. I guess her feelings were hurt."

From the sly look in Milligan's eyes Joe, suspected that the "something else" had been a woman. Was that woman Vana Glaser?

"I was on the way back to my room at the hotel after work," Milligan went on, smiling at the dubious look in Joe's eyes. "when Cooper came up behind me and jabbed a gun in my back. He said I was under arrest. He wouldn't say for what. I knew I'd done nothing against the law, but I'd heard about Wilson Jennings and the way he ran his court. Something told me that Beth was behind the whole thing. My horse was at the livery, and I knew Vana's horse was always tied behind the saloon, which was closer."

Joe sat listening to Milligan's story, almost spellbound by the narrative. "How did you manage to hit him with his own gun?" Joe asked, turning the chair sideways to cross his long legs. Amusement twinkled in his brown eyes.

"Well, Amos Cooper is a little short on speed," Milligan answered, smiling slightly. "I just turned around, took the gun away from him, tapped him, on the head, jumped on Vana's horse and rode away."

If Joe hadn't been so directly involved in what Milligan was saying, he'd have laughed as hard as Milligan had a little while ago. But this man's wild escapades had almost cost him his life.

"Now, since you've explained that," Joe said,

taking a long swig from the glass, "I want to hear about Keoni."

A sheepish grin pulled at the corner of Milligan's thin mouth. "Oh, that," he said off-handedly, with a slight wave of his right hand. "It's simple. Vana's horse was almost done in. She was limping. I saw the Indian's camp and knew thay had fresh horses. I traded with the chief."

Joe refilled his glass, drained it and coughed as the whiskey burned a path to his stomach. He shook his head and pursed his lips.

"You don't know very much about horses or Indians, do you?" Joe asked, a bit of malace in his voice. "Vana's horse only had a loose shoe. Keoni thought he had a new horse. When I told him the circumstances, he agreed to give Vana's horse back for the one you took."

Once again, the two men stared at each other. Neither knew what to say. Milligan knew that Joe wanted him to go back to Pecos. Joe wondered what it was going to take to get him to do it. Joe knew it wouldn't be easy. He put himself in Milligan's boots and was sure that he wouldn't volunteer to return with a man like Judge Wilson Jennings being so rope-happy. Would Jennings believe Milligan's explanations? Beth was Jennings' only daughter, and he would naturally take her side.

At the thought of Beth Jennings, hot rage raced through Joe. The old saying about a woman scorned popped into his head. Her overtures toward Milligan had been ignored, she had wanted revenge and so she had cooked up a lie about him. If Milligan had gone to trial, would she have let him hang? Would she

have actually let Joe hang? Joe had to admit that he and Milligan did look a lot alike. But there was always that little something that set even identical twins apart. Beth should have been able to tell the difference between Joe and Ben. For one thing, their eyes were a different color.

"You know what I want you to do, don't you?" Joe asked, lowering his head and looking Milligan straight in the eye. No expression showed on Milligan's face for a long time. Joe thought Milligan was ignoring him and slammed his fist down on the table, jarring the whiskey in the glasses. "Did you hear me?" His raised voice turned the heads of the other people in the saloon.

"Yeah, I heard you," Ben replied slowly, pursing his mouth and nodding. His eyes narrowed. Joe would have been as mad as an aggravated bull if someone had yelled at him like that. But Milligan just looked at him. Joe wished he could have looked inside Milligan's head to see what kind of thoughts were there. "I know what you want me to do." The look in his green eyes challenged Joe to argue with him. "You can't make me go back to Pecos, you know. If I do go," he wrinkled his brow skeptically and turned his head sideways, "it'll be because I want to."

A frown pulled his brows together as a thought struck him. "You're not some kind of lawman, are you?"

"No, I'm not some kind of lawman," Joe snapped sarcastically, shaking his head. "I'm only a scout for the army at Fort Davis."

He was rankled that Milligan had this attitude. He

thought Milligan would have jumped through a hoop at the chance to go back to Pecos and clear two names. Especially his own. Joe had to make it clear to Milligan what was expected of him. "But something tells me that you're going back to Pecos whether you want to or not." Joe nodded his head slowly. "I'm up to my neck in this because of you, and I don't like it."

This time, anger blazed in Milligan's green eyes.

"Look, I said I'd go back to Pecos, but only if I wanted to," he snapped. He would have said more, but the waitress was coming toward them, her blue skirt swirling and swishing with the motion of her hips.

"My glass is empty," she said petulantly, a pout on her red mouth. She dangled the glass between a thumb and finger. "Looks like your bottle is, too. Can I get you another one?" An expectant look brightened her eyes as she waited for their answer, a hand on her hip.

"No, I guess not," Milligan said, shaking his head slowly, glancing up at her and then casting a rueful look at Joe. "We don't have time. It's a long way to Pecos."

In a huff, the girl spun around on her heel and flounced off.

The only other time that Joe had felt such relief was when Vana had opened his cell door and told him there was a horse waiting for him in back of the jail.

Now, expelling a long breath, he leaned back in the chair with a feeling that he'd regained part of his life. They'd go back to Pecos, Judge Jennings would be back from his wild goose chase, Milligan would

tell him the truth and that would be the end of it. He'd have his job at Fort Davis and life would be good again.

Suddenly, that little bell rang in the back of Joe's head, and he remembered not too long ago when he'd felt confident in being cleared of this very same thing. Everything had backfired.

"Judge Jennings *will* believe you, won't he?" Joe asked as he and Milligan left the saloon and walked down the plank sidewalk to the livery for Milligan's horse. Serge followed close behind Joe.

"Will a bull give milk?" Milligan asked with a snort. "Would you believe some stranger, or your own flesh and blood?" Milligan looked sideways at Joe with raised eyebrows.

"You've got a point," Joe agreed, and nodded slowly. Reaching the livery, Joe sat down on a wooden box while Milligan saddled a dun mare and tied on saddlebags and water canteens.

The sun had disappeared behind the purple mountains when the two men finally headed back east. A yellow moon was peeping over the horizon. The night air had cooled some, and Joe couldn't remember feeling this good in a long time.

Joe wasn't in any particular hurry to get back to Pecos, now that Milligan was with him, and the horses were set at an easy gallop. He had to believe that everything would work out for the best.

Joe glanced sideways at Milligan in the dim moonlight. His attitude was changing toward Milligan. He had been sure that he'd have to hog tie the man and throw him across a horse to get him back to Pecos. He was a little surprised that Milligan had

agreed to go with him with so little argument. Of course, a lot could happen before they reached Pecos. Milligan could change his mind and ride away and Joe couldn't stop him. But now, instead of wanting to do bodily harm to Milligan, Joe wanted to shake his hand.

"How do you think Beth Jennings and the judge will act when they see you?" Joe asked, dropping his hands to his lap, the reins loose in his fingers.

"Well," Milligan began a slow smile easing across his face, "Jennings will probably want to string me up like he wanted to do to you. On the other hand, a few minutes alone with Beth will bring her around and she'll change her mind." He clucked his tongue and a knowing smile twinkled in his eyes.

Joe threw back his head and laughter drifted across the desert and bounced off the mountains. He was amazed at the man riding so relaxed on the horse next to him. Milligan was a candidate for the same rope that he'd just escaped, and he was talking about changing Beth Jennings' mind in a few amorous minutes. If he'd shown her a little attention at first, all of this wouldn't be happening to them now.

"What are you laughing at?" Milligan wanted to know, a chuckle in his voice. He turned in the saddle to peer closer at Joe.

"You beat all, you know that?" Joe said, clearing his throat. "You ignored a woman's attention. It gets me and you in a lot of trouble—me almost hung—and now you're going to try and get her to help us with sweet talk. I'll say one thing for you, Milligan, you've got guts enough for both of us."

This time, Milligan's laughter filled the air. He

removed his hat and wiped the inside of it with a blue handkerchief. Passing the handkerchief over his damp face, he put it back in his hip pocket and replaced the hat.

Another thought struck Joe as he took a drink of water from the canteen.

"You've got another problem before seeing the Jennings," Joe told him, tapping the stopper back into the canteen and cocking an eyebrow.

"What?" Milligan asked. He leaned toward Joe to see him better in the dim light. "What are you talking about?"

Joe let out an exasperated breath and shook his head. "Are you forgetting about the Indian? That's his horse you're riding, you know. He wants it back. He doesn't like riding a horse with iron feet. I guess he doesn't want that much association with white men."

Milligan smiled at Joe. "I think I'd rather face Wilson Jennings, even though his daughter lied, than an Indian over his horse."

Joe threw back his head and laughed again. He agreed with Milligan. But he'd hate to be in Milligan's boots in either case.

The two men stopped only twice to rest the horses before reaching the way station where Joe had left the stage coach.

"Did you see any sign of them renegade Indians?" the station master asked, stoking wood in the potbellied stove to get a fire going for fresh coffee. The room was still hot from the day's heat, but nobody complained when the aroma of freshly brewed coffee soon filled the air.



"What renegade Indians?" Joe asked, leveling a spoonful of sugar before stirring it in the tin cup of steaming black coffee. He looked over at Milligan, who had surprise all over his face.

"The ones who killed those folks you found earlier," the man answered, glancing from Joe to Milligan. "Say," he went on before Joe could answer. "You didn't mention about going after your brother." He did a couple of double-takes, then shook his head and frowned.

That was the last straw for Joe. How the devil could a man's interest switch from something as important as the renegade Indians who'd killed those innocent people to something as mundane as this man who looked so much like him?

Joe slammed his fist down so hard on the table that the coffee cup turned over, spilling the hot liquid all over the table. Jumping to his feet, Joe leaned across the table and glared at the startled man. He added the manager's name to the long list of people he wanted to choke because of Ben Milligan.

"Forget this face," Joe grated between clenched teeth, inclining his head sideways to Milligan. "He's not my brother! I'll worry about him when I get back to Pecos. It's his fault I'm here, but that's not important right now. What were you saying about some renegade Indians? How do you know they're renegades?"

Maybe the Indians who'd killed the stage passengers weren't Keoni's men.

The station master blinked. The young man facing him looked like he could bite a nail in half.

"Hey, don't get mad at me, mister," he snapped, a

knot working in his jaw. "I can't help it if he can pass for your twin."

Milligan had been quiet while Joe and the man argued, but his eyes did double time switching from one man to the other.

"I don't want to hear any more about my twin, or how much this man looks like me until you tell me about those Indians," Joe raged, easing back down on the log bench and staring at the man.

"Sure," the man agreed quickly, taking a deep breath and swallowing hard. "I guess you met Keoni." Joe nodded. "Well, Keoni and his braves are good people. They really can't be blamed too much for what's happening. This is their land. Keoni wants the raids stopped. One of his braves, Tolka, wants to keep them going until the white people stop coming out here. That's not likely to happen."

Joe had calmed down a little. He took a sip of coffee and frowned. The coffee was cold. Keoni hadn't mentioned Tolka. "What does this Tolka have to do with the renegades? Joe asked, watching the station master intently.

"Keoni and Tolka had a falling out some time ago," the master answered, pouring himself a cup of coffee. "Tolka called Keoni a soft-headed old woman for not attacking all stages that come from San Antonio or back from El Paso."

Joe thought about the stage earlier, and the people who'd been on their way to El Paso but had never made it. The picture of the little yellow-haired girl with her throat slit would be with him for a long time. The scent of blood and death was still in his

nose. His stomach turned over and he wanted to vomit again. Joe had to swallow a couple of times before the sick feeling went away and his stomach settled back down where it belonged.

"How do you know so much about the Indians?" Milligan asked, the first time he'd said anything since arriving. He took a sip of cold coffee.

"Keoni and two braves came by here not long after the way station was started," the man said, shrugging his beefy shoulders. "We talked a little. He knows the whites will keep coming and that his way of life is going to change. The raids will only make things worse for him. Tolka wants to do things his own way."

Joe stood up and resettled the Dixie Navy Revolver down around his waist and retied the leather thong at his thigh.

"We've wasted enough time," Joe said, looking down at Milligan. "Let's go." Reaching into his pocket, Joe pulled out several coins and paid for the coffee.

They rode until they were halfway between the way stations, and decided to camp for the rest of the night. There was enough light from the moon for them to find an oak tree with plenty of grass and level ground to spread out their bedrolls.

"Wonder where those Indians are tonight?" Milligan asked, unsaddling the horse and kicking out his bedroll. Dropping down on the blanket, he started to remove his boots, but Joe stopped him.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," Joe cautioned as he unsaddled Serge. "You might find more than

your toes in there in the morning." Joe wondered how Milligan had gotten this far in life without a keeper.

Milligan pulled his boots back on, stood up and went to his horse. Following Joe's example, he hobbled the horse, then sat back down on the blanket.

"If those renegades are the same Indians I ran into the other day," Joe said, resting his head on the saddle, "there are only three of them, unless they've recruited some more."

Milligan didn't say anything for a while. Then Joe heard him take a long breath and let it out through his teeth.

"You know," he finally said in a low voice, "I'm beginning to have second thoughts about going back to Pecos with you. I could get myself killed.

Joe laughed at the ominous tone in Milligan's voice. "You could have gotten yourself killed, or hurt real bad, two days ago, if you hadn't come along."

The two men talked awhile longer, then dropped off to sleep peacefully the rest of the night.

Joe awoke with the dawn. Pink and orange were just coloring the sky. Stretching out on the hard ground, he sat up and glanced over at Milligan. His look-alike was still sleeping, a look on his face of a man at peace with the whole world. How could he be that calm, Joe wondered.

Suddenly, that small bell rang in the back of Joe's head. Something wasn't quite right, but he couldn't figure out what it was. Things were too still. Then it dawned on him. One of the horses was gone! The one

Milligan had been riding. The Indian horse.

"Hey, Milligan," he yelled, jumping up and buckling his gun around his waist. He kicked the sleeping man on the bottom of his boot. "Wake up! Somebody stole your horse. It's gone."

Milligan struggled to sit up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "What?" he mumbled, pushing his hair back and jamming on his hat.

"Your horse is gone," Joe repeated angrily, waving his arm in the direction where the horses had been tied during the night.

Jumping up, Milligan ran over to where Joe's horse was still grazing. Stooping, he picked up the small piece of rope he'd used as a hobble. The rope had been untied, not cut.

"Who do you think did it?" Milligan asked, looking around at Joe. Fear brightened his wide eyes and his lean face was pale.

"I don't know," Joe said, walking over and squatting down. He expected to see a lot of tracks on the ground but surprisingly there were only two sets of footprints. And they weren't boots. They were flat, the kind a moccasin would make.

Standing up, Joe walked in a slow circle until he saw three sets of horses' tracks, all unshod and heading east. Taking a deep breath, he turned around and faced Milligan, who was plainly scared.

"Would you believe that two Indians sneaked up on us while we were sleeping last night and took Chief Keoni's horse right from under our noses?"

It was more of a statement than a question, and cold chills ran up and down Joe's back making him

shiver in the morning heat. Those Indians could have killed him and Milligan with no trouble at all. He wondered why they hadn't.

"Do you think it was that Tolka?" Milligan asked, swallowing hard. His pale face was void of any expression but his eyes were wide.

"It could have been," Joe replied, not quite sure. "In any case, we've got to get that horse back. We can't make it to the way station with just Serge."

Jerking the bedrolls together, they laid them, Milligan's saddle and the grub sack on Serge's broad back and started following the slight trail.

"Why do you suppose they took only the Indian's horse?" Milligan asked, walking a little behind and to the right of Joe.

"I don't know," Joe replied, "unless they don't like shod horses. Maybe Tolka wants to prove something to Keoni."

They walked for nearly two hours, until the trail led around and into a small rocky canyon. Joe knew better than to just walk right in, but Milligan would have done that very thing if Joe hadn't grabbed his arm and jerked him back.

"Do you want to get yourself killed?" Joe snapped wearily, glaring at the man. "We don't know how many are in there."

Something told Joe there would be only three—those from the raid on the stage coach the other day.

"What are we supposed to do?" Milligan asked sarcastically, jerking his arm away. "Just stand out here in the hot sun and ask them to please bring the horse out to us?" Joe couldn't understand this

man's carelessness.

"We don't actually know that the Indians or the horse is in there," Joe pointed out slowly, knowing full well that they were. "No, we don't wait out here, or ask them. We split up, climb to the top on either side of the canyon and see if they're really there."

Walking over to Serge, he pulled out the rifle and checked the load. He started to turn and go to the left to begin the climb, but stopped and looked back at Milligan. There was a funny feeling in his stomach.

"Do you know how to use that thing?" he asked, pointing to the Colt .45 tied to Milligan's leg. He remembered Vana mentioning Milligan's ability with a gun.

"Well, sure," was Milligan's uneasy and quick answer. As if to assure Joe of his ability with the gun, he jerked the pistol from the holster, spun it around his finger a couple of times and reholstered it.

"Okay," Joe said, a feeling of dread knotted in his stomach. The fancy stuff didn't mean a thing, and he planned to straighten Milligan out later. He only hoped there would be a later for both of them. "Be careful and don't take any chances. I'll meet you back here in half an hour."

Beginning the perilous climb up the steep rocky canyon, Joe was careful where he put his feet. A loose rock could send him to a quick death. Reaching the top, he walked along the ledge until he could see down without being observed. When he was close enough to the edge, he flattened out on his belly and inched forward.

Down below, he saw the three Indians he'd an-

anticipated, sitting on the ground. Each had a rifle, a bow and quiver of arrows. One Indian was dressed differently from the others, and Joe guessed that was Tolka, the same Indian who'd ridden away from the stage. Something about him reminded Joe of Keoni. It was the purple headband holding his bushy black hair, and the purple shirt that he wore.

The three men were laughing, and Joe was surprised when Tolka reached over and clapped one young man on the shoulder.

Four horses were tied to a small juniper tree well away from the mouth of the canyon. That puzzled Joe. Why would Tolka do a thing like that? Seems like he'd want the horses out front, so Joe would be sure to see them. But then, why would Tolka steal one horse and let him and Ben live, when he could have had two horses and two dead white men to his credit? Maybe it was some kind of test for the other Indians. But that couldn't be the case. Joe knew for a fact that they'd already massacred six people on the stage.

Joe had no idea of how to handle this. He couldn't just call down and ask them to return the horse. That was a stupid thought. He couldn't drop down on them. They'd kill him. Should he just pick them off with the rifle? He could do it. That would be giving them as much of a chance as they'd given the stage passengers.

The canyon was too small to climb down undetected, and the horses were tied way at the back. Tolka and his men had planned well. They had known that Joe and Milligan would follow. They're



sly devils, Joe thought.

The best thing to do was go back down, get Milligan and try to take them by surprise. That would be two against three. Joe wondered how much help Milligan would be, as he eased down the way he'd come up. It seemed to take much longer. Reaching the mouth of the canyon, Joe stopped cold in his tracks.

Lying on the ground, in almost the same spot where he'd left him, was Ben Milligan. His green eyes were looking up at the cloudless sky without seeing it. But a look of pure terror contorted his pale face.

Ben Milligan was as dead as the dry grass around them! His throat had been slit from one ear to the other. Bright red blood ran down the front of his shirt and onto the hard-packed ground. Bending down, Joe touched his face. He hadn't been dead very long. His face was still warm. Feeling sick, Joe closed Milligan's eyes.

Joe's heart slammed against his chest as he jumped up and hurried a little way up the canyon. How had the Indians gotten Milligan so quickly? They had to have killed him while Joe was climbing up the canyon. Or maybe down? Was that what they were laughing about? Why hadn't they come after him?

It was impossible to believe that the Indians didn't know that there were two men at the canyon. They had to have seen the saddles and gear. They knew that Joe would come back after them when he found Ben. They'd be waiting for him this time!

Wishing now that he'd taken them a while ago, Joe was still undecided as to what to do. They wouldn't

be surprised by him now. Maybe they thought he was still on top. They must have seen him climbing.

Suddenly assured by the thought that the Indians still believed he was on top of the canyon, Joe hurried up the side again, across the ledge and down the other side. Flattening his body as much as he could against the rocky wall, he eased inside the canyon and began making his way along the side.

Joe's assumptions proved to be true. Sure enough, the Indians hadn't thought he'd come around the opposite way. They were sitting in silence on the ground, but not as alert as they should have been. They were facing the opposite direction this time, the way he would have come from earlier. Easing slowly around until he was directly behind them, Joe brought the rifle up to his shoulder. He hated to do it, but there was no other way. He had to avenge Milligan's death, and he'd promised to get the chief's horse back. But he wanted Tolka face to face. That would probably take a lot of doing.

Squeezing the trigger, he shot the first young Indian squarely in the back of the head. The force of the bullet knocked the man on his face in the dust and rocks. There wasn't much left of the bushy black hair. Brains and blood were splattered on the ground. Joe felt sick as the loud blast echoed through out the canyon.

Surprised by the unexpected sound and movement, the other two looked at each other. As they jumped to their feet and looked around, Joe let the second Indian have it in the chest. The husky brown-skinned man grabbed the front of his blue shirt, gave

out a low groan and crumpled to the ground.

Joe didn't see any of this because he was concentrating on Tolka, who was rushing at him. The tall, slim Indian had a thin-bladed knife gripped in his brown fingers. Holding the knife at hip level, he looked at Joe with pure hatred flashing in his black eyes. Tolka bent low and was almost close enough to touch.

Slamming a shell into the chamber, Joe pulled the trigger but nothing happened! The rifle was jammed!

A pleased look crossed the Indian's brown face. In one swift motion, Tolka stood up and rushed at Joe, the knife glittering in the sun when he raised his arm. Knowing the rifle was useless, Joe threw it down and met the Indian head on. Bending low, he grabbed Tolka around the knees and pushed forward, then jerked back before the knife could be driven into him. The impact knocked the Indian to the ground and he landed with a grunt on his back.

"Aiiiiiieee," Tolka screamed in rage, his black eyes wide in anger and hatred. His black hair waved wildly as he shook his head. On his hands and knees, he glared at Joe, muttering something Joe couldn't understand. But he had a pretty good idea of what it meant. The knife was still gripped in the long fingers.

"All right, you murdering savage," Joe growled, breathing hard through flared nostrils, "if you want me, come and get me."

As if understanding what Joe had said, Tolka jumped up and advanced toward him, his thin lips

pulled into a tight line against his white teeth. His black eyes never left Joe's face.

Joe side-stepped, and Tolka rushed past him, only to turn back quickly to come at him again. Tolka's moccasined foot slipped on a rock and he almost lost his balance, pitching forward as he tried to regain his stance. The arm holding the knife was extended. Joe kicked out with his right foot, catching Tolka in the wrist. The knife went flying. Tolka froze where he stood, glancing quickly from Joe to the knife on the ground, considering his options.

Bending and rising in one smooth movement, Tolka grabbed the knife and threw it. Joe tried to duck, but the knife grazed his face as it sailed past him. Touching his face, Joe lowered his hand. It was covered with blood. His cheek burned like fire. Dropping his right hand, he touched the Dixie Revolver. The pistol seemed to leap into Joe's hand and, just as Tolka rushed at him, Joe squeezed off a shot that caught the renegade Indian in the chest.

Tolka's right hand clutched and tugged at the front of his shirt like he was trying to pull something away. His left hand tightened into a fist and he glared wide-eyed at Joe as his knees began buckling. Blood started spreading across the front of the shirt before he hit the ground. He struggled for a second, the long fingers making four grooves in the soft dust. Then he relaxed. Tolka was dead.

Exhausted, with sweat pouring down his face, Joe dropped to the ground, his strength gone. The pistol dangled in his limp fingers. Pulling ragged breaths into his lungs, he stared at his boots to avoid looking

at the three lifeless Indians around him. He'd just killed three men in less time than it took to cook breakfast! He shook his head in remorse.

Hearing a nicker, he looked to where the horses were tied. They were pawing at the ground and pulling at the ropes. Getting slowly to his feet, Joe stepped around Tolka and went to the chestnut mare that Ben Milligan had used for a short while.

"Hello, girl," he said softly, rubbing the wide forehead. The horse moved her head up and down and returned the greeting with a low rumbling in her throat. Joe leaned his head against the slick neck and expelled a long sigh. He felt sick, thinking about the three dead Indians behind him.

They were men. Men just like him. They had beliefs and ideals like everybody else. They didn't like what was happening to their way of life by the encroachment of strangers and had tried to take matters into their own hands when the wheels of justice turned too slowly for them. Maybe if they'd waited just a little longer for Keoni to do something, things would have been different. But deep down in his soul, Joe didn't believe it.

Straightening up, Joe turned around slowly and shook his head. Looking at the three men, Joe swallowed hard and thought: there but for some streak of luck lay I.

He didn't have a shovel, so he had to use rocks to cover the bodies that he'd wrapped in the horse's blanket. It took a good while to get enough rocks to completely hide the bodies from predators to his satisfaction. Even though the Indians had been

ruthless, they deserved more than to be picked clean by scavengers. Finally, he stood up, got the rifle and walked back to the horses. Maybe Keoni can use them, he thought, running a rope through the bridles and leading them to where Ben Milligan's lifeless body lay in the blazing sun.

"You stupid, careless fool," Joe blurted out through clenched teeth, looking down at the man who'd caused him so much trouble and was to have been his way out of the trouble. "Why did you have to get yourself killed!" Rage and disgust were in his voice. "If you were alive, I swear to God I'd kill you myself!" Balling his hands into fists, Joe gritted his teeth and kicked at a rock.

Taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out, Joe removed the bedroll from Milligan's saddle, untied it and brought the blankets back and threw them down on the ground. Undoing Milligan's gunbelt, Joe shook his head sadly when he noticed that the Colt .45 was still in the holster. He probably didn't have a chance to use it! Joe's heart was filled with compassion for the young man he'd met only two days ago.

Wrapping Milligan in both blankets and tying them around his feet and head, Joe picked him up and laid him as gently as he could across the horse.

Riding out of the canyon, he led the horse with Milligan's limp body on it, with the three Indian horses behind, and headed toward the other way station. Momentarily he wondered how much work Will Dillinson had done on the building. That thought soon left Joe's mind as another took its place.

Without Milligan's word, how was he going to prove that he wasn't the one who'd raped Beth Jennings, took Vana's horse and pistol whipped Amos Cooper?

Joe had never felt so alone and defenseless in his entire life. What had he done in his past life to deserve this bad luck? How could he get out of it?





## Chapter VI

Joe didn't know whether to be glad or sorry when the way station came into view. At the least, he was surprised at what he saw. True to his word, Will Dillinson had done a lot of work in the days that Joe had been gone. The roof and three walls were finished. Only one end wall and the front door remained to be done.

Joe wondered if the amount of work Dillinson had done was out of fear that Joe would beat him up again, or just to show that he could actually do what he had promised. Joe really didn't believe that Dillinson was afraid of him or anybody else. So maybe the last was true. Joe didn't know how he'd done it, but the stage passengers would have a place to rest.

Dillinson was up on the roof, banging away with a hammer when Joe rode up. Hearing the approaching horses, he stopped his work and turned to see who was coming. He climbed down and waited until Joe dismounted.

Joe wasn't surprised to see that Dillinson was still as filthy as he'd been before. He wore the same dirty

clothes and the same stench emanated from him. But actually, Joe was glad to see him.

"Well, Dillinson," Joe said, swinging down and tying Serge to the hitch post, "you really have been bitten by the work bug." More joviality was in Joe's greeting than he actually felt.

"I don't know if it was the workin' bug or the lump you put on my head," he drew out, pushing back the battered hat to rub the mass of matted red hair. A small grin pulled at his mouth. "But I got a lot done. It'll be finished tonight."

Dillinson's eyes swept past Joe to the blanket-wrapped body on the horse, and the three Indian horses behind it.

"Ah, do you want to explain that?" he asked, nodding his shaggy head toward the body.

"You're probably looking at what was the only hope I had of clearing myself in Pecos," Joe told him remorsefully. Shaking his head slowly, Joe shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"What do you mean about Pecos?" Dillinson asked, a frown pulling his bushy brows together. "I recollect you tellin' me that you was a scout fer Fort Davis. How does Pecos figure in all of this?" His sweeping gesture took in Milligan's body and the Indian horses.

"I really don't have time to go into all of it," Joe said, wanting to be on his way back to the fort. But maybe if he talked about the situation it wouldn't sound so hopeless. "That's Ben Milligan," he explained, pointing a thumb over his shoulder. "He looks enough like me that only my mother could tell the difference. He worked for a while in a saloon in

Pecos. A judge's daughter claims he raped her. He swore he didn't, but he did take a horse and leave town. He also clobbered a deputy sheriff."

Dillinson stood, his thumbs hooked over the band of his dirty pants, and stared wide-eyed at Joe. "Don't stop now," he encouraged, nodding his head rapidly.

"I rode into Pecos," Joe went on, "got arrested, tried and sentenced to hang in only a couple of days, just because I look like him. The woman who owns the horse that Milligan took, helped me to escape. I had a job waiting at Fort Davis, and rode there. I learned that Milligan was in El Paso, and got Colonel McRaney to send me on a job that would take me there."

Joe felt like he was telling a child a story as Dillinson watched him, hanging on every word. His eyes were wide with excitement.

"I found Milligan, he was willing to come back to Pecos and straighten the whole mess out," Joe went on. "Tolka and his men stole the Indian horse that Milligan was riding, either last night or early this morning, killed Milligan, and here I am."

Joe knew he was leaving out a few things, and hoped Dillinson wouldn't pick up on it so he could leave. But that wasn't to be the case.

"Wait a minute. You mentioned some Injuns," the big man said shrewdly. "What happened to 'em? I see you got some Injun horses. I don't suppose they just give 'um to you." He shook his head slowly at the thought.

Joe watched the expression in Dillinson's eyes. The look went from curiosity to awe. For a wild moment Joe wanted to laugh, but he really didn't feel

like it. None of this situation was a laughing matter.

"You might think I'm bragging, but I'm not," Joe said humbly, pushing his hat back and taking a long breath. "Pure luck and a lot of surprise were on my side."

Confusion pulled Dillinson's bushy brows together in a frown, and he cocked his head to one side.

"What do you mean 'luck and surprise'?" he asked. "Do you always go around the house to get to the front door?"

"Well," Joe said, feeling a smile working at his mouth, "I got lucky, surprised them and killed them." It sounded so simple. Joe couldn't believe it had happened only this morning. It seemed so long ago. Almost a lifetime ago. Dillinson's mouth flew open in absolute astonishment. He stared at Joe, speechless.

"It wasn't as easy as it sounds," Joe said contritely, shaking his head.

"Anytime you can take three of them red devils and live to tell about it," Dillinson said, nodding slowly, "you done somethin' to brag about."

The heat of the day bore down on the two men. Sweat ran profusely down Dillinson's forehead, and he wiped his face with a rag from his back pocket.

"With what's-his-name there dead," Dillinson said, pointing a dirty finger at the figure drapped across the saddle, "how can you prove you're innocent in Pecos?"

Joe had been wondering the very same thing, and shook his head resolutely as he swung up into the saddle.

"I really don't know," he replied, looking down at the huge man. "Maybe I'm sleeping and having a bad dream. And when I wake up, none of this will have happened."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you to do," Dillinson said kindly, "but I do wish you a lot of luck. Somethin' tells me youre gonna need it. When you come this way again, that will be finished." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the way station. He surprised Joe by reaching up and offering his hand. The two men shook hands, each looking at the other and remembering the contrast of their first meeting.

Swinging the horse around, Joe left Dillinson scratching the mat of hair covering his big head. If someone had told Joe a couple of weeks ago that the man he'd walloped with a stick would be wishing him luck today, he wouldn't have believed it. But then he wouldn't have believed two weeks ago that he'd be in this kind of trouble today.

Stopping as often as he could to water and rest the horses, Joe was filled with mixed feelings about getting back to Fort Davis. McRaney would help as much as he could, but maybe he should bury Milligan out here in the rocks then go on to Mexico. No one could bother him down there.

"No," he said out loud. The sudden sound of his voice startled Serge and the black horse jumped. "I'm not a criminal, so why should I have to live like one! After I give these horses to Keoni, I'll go to Fort Davis and see if Eric will go back to Pecos and be a witness for me."

Once again, Joe was calmed by a false sense of

security. But believing that things would work out for the best made the miles go faster.

Sweat rolled down his back and his shirt was soaking wet. He wiped the sweat from his face with a bandana that was already wet.

Allowing himself one last stop before he reached the Indian camp, Joe watered Serge, the Indian horses and Milligan's horse at a small pond. He got sick thinking about the dead man who was wrapped in the blanket tied across the saddle.

Joe pushed away his morbid thoughts and wondered about Beth Jennings. What kind of person was she really? Was she so angry at Milligan that she'd have actually gone through with the whole thing and let Joe hang? Could she have lived with that on her conscience?

Wasn't there any other way she could have gotten back at Milligan other than accusing him of rape? Was she that devastated by his lack of interest in her? Joe knew he'd have to see her again, and he wondered how he'd act toward her, knowing that she'd tried to frame an innocent man.

Beth Jennings could be a pretty girl if she put a little more effort into her appearance, Joe thought. She'd never look anything like Vana Glaser, but she didn't have to go through life looking like a frump, either.

Maybe she was too afraid of her father to try to change her looks. Joe had an idea that living with a man like Wilson Jennings couldn't be all that pleasant. She'd seemed so sure of herself when she came to the jail to see him. But in the courtroom, she was like a scared puppy cowering in the wake of a

cruel master. But even the fear of her father didn't give her the right to jeopardize the life of two men. In a roundabout way, she was responsible for the death of Ben Milligan. He'd been coming back to Pecos to help clear Joe. Would she be pleased that she'd gotten her revenge?

For some reason, Vana Glaser popped into his mind once again and he allowed a smile to push away some of the terrible thoughts.

He'd only been with her twice, and under adverse circumstances. But he knew he wanted to see her again, and not just for her to help him out of this mess. She was a beautiful woman, and when he thought about her quick, soft kiss, he felt a slight tug at his heart.

What kind of relationship did she have with Ben Milligan? Something led him to believe that it was more than employer and employee. Suddenly Joe was in a hurry to get this Milligan business cleared up. When the horses had drunk their fill, Joe mounted Serge and started out for the Indian camp at a fast gallop.

A bank of clouds had been building up in the west and the temperature seemed to drop a little. Rain would sure help, Joe thought, looking back at the rolling dark clouds.

The Indian camp came into view just as thunder boomed overhead and a long fork of lightning split the afternoon sky.

A fat, brown, yapping dog let the Indians know he was approaching. But something told him they already knew he was near. Apparently the dog wasn't afraid of the horses, and he nipped at Serge's feet. A

husky brave dressed in black pants and a red shirt stood in the shade of a hut and watched Joe ride up. He looked at Joe for a second, then shifted his gaze to the body across the Indian horse, and onto the other three Indian horses. Joe recognized him as one of the men who had been with Keoni earlier in the week.

Joe, in his lack of Indian knowledge, didn't know whether to offer to shake hands with him or not, so he just held his right hand up, palm out, and well away from the pistol and rifle. That seemed to satisfy the man, because he did the same thing as he walked toward Joe.

"You bring Indian pony back," he said solemnly, looking skeptically at the horse with the body across it. "How you get other Indian horses?"

The Indian didn't seem as impressed as Will Dillinson had. Joe had the idea that it would take a lot to impress this brown-skinned man looking up at him.

"It's a long story," Joe began, dropping his hands on the saddle horn, "and I'd just as soon tell it one time. Is Keoni here?" The Indian nodded once and gestured with a sweep of his hand toward a large hut in a circle of smaller huts.

Joe dismounted and waited beside Serge, while the Indian went in long strides to the hut and said something to someone inside. Shortly, Keoni came hurrying from the hut to where Joe had dismounted and stood waiting.

"You did as you said you would," Keoni said, extending his hand, puzzlement in his black eyes. "Maybe you did more than you planned. Who is that? How you get horses? How you get cut on face?"



Keoni pointed to the blanket-wrapped figure draped over the saddle, and all at once the doubts of freedom came over Joe again. He was about to explain about Ben Milligan to a man who really couldn't care less and Joe felt scared because of it. How in the world would he make Judge Jennings understand?

"That," Joe began, "is Ben Milligan." Joe wasn't ready for the look of surprise on both Indians' solemn faces. Both men stared at Joe for a long time. Keoni was the first to speak.

"If that man Milligan," he looked at the body, then back at Joe, "how will he help you in Pecos? Dead man not able to talk. Long way to Pecos in heat."

Joe knew instantly what Keoni was talking about. In such hot weather it wouldn't take long for the body to begin decomposing. Joe shuddered at the thought.

Keoni noticed the shudder and shook his head slightly. This white man puzzled him. He was leading three extra Indian horses so he must have killed the riders, and Apaches don't give up possessions easily. Especially horses. But the man looked positively sick about carrying a dead man on a horse behind him.

"Maybe I should bury him out here," Joe suggested, waving his arm out across the vastness. Keoni nodded in agreement. He helped Joe untie the body, which had begun stiffening, and laid it on the ground. "I'll have to have some kind of identification that this is really Milligan," Joe said, opening the blanket just enough to reach into Milligan's shirt pocket. It was empty. Turning the body over, he

removed a worn leather wallet. Inside was Milligan's name and an address for Butte, Montana on a piece of paper, and five dollars.

"This should prove who I am," Joe said confidently, refolding and tying the blanket. He put the piece of paper in his shirt pocket and the money in his pants pocket. "I think he owes me that," he said to the expressionless Keoni.

"Those horses belonged to Tolka and two of his men," Joe went on, pointing to the three Indian horses. "This horse is the one Milligan took from you. I killed the Indians after they stole your horse from us today and killed Milligan. If you'll get the white woman's horse, I'll be on my way after Milligan is buried."

Joe felt confident again, with Milligan's identity on a piece of paper in his pocket. He took a long breath. The brave watched him stoically while Keoni gathered up the reins of the four horses.

"I help you bury him white man's way," the brave said as Keoni led the horses away. Joe was surprised at the brave's suggestion. Joe didn't have a shovel, and since the Indian made no move to get one, he surmised that he didn't have one either. "You take feet and lead," the Indian said.

Stooping down with his back to the body, Joe took hold of the cuff of Milligan's pants and stood up. He'd seen a pile of rocks about a hundred yards away from the Indian camp and headed that way.

Reaching the spot, they put the body down and the brave followed Joe's example of piling rocks around and over it. When they finished, they walked silently back to where Keoni waited, holding the reins of a

palomino mare. Besides Serge, she was one of the most beautiful horses Joe had ever seen. Joe saddled Vana's horse, anxious to go.

"How long before we hear from Senator Powers?" Keoni asked, handing Joe the reins. There was an expectancy in the black eyes.

For a second, Joe had no idea who Senator Powers was. So much else had happened to him that he'd forgotten about the proposed meeting between Powers, McRaney and Keoni. Then he remembered and shook his head.

"I really couldn't say, Keoni," Joe replied slowly, taking the reins. "If there's word at the fort, I'll come back soon and tell you."

"Now that Tolka is dead," Keoni said, his features softening a bit, "maybe Senator will hurry with word. Tolka caused most of trouble with wagon trains and stages. Good thing he dead." There was no remorse in his words. His black eyes were cold.

"Wasn't he one of your braves?" Joe asked pointedly, swinging up into the saddle and looking down at the brown-skinned man. He was surprised that the Indian would say such a thing.

"Yes," was the simple answer. "But not all Indian bad. Same as not all white man good." A small knowing smile tugged at the thin lips.

"You've got a point there," Joe relented, nodding and smiling down at Keoni. "I'll be seeing you." Joe reached down and shook hands with the man he now considered a friend.

"Soon, I hope, with word from Senator," Keoni said, smiling slightly up at Joe.

Joe was confident as he turned the horse around

and rode away from the Indian camp, the fat dog nipping at Serge's heels again and yapping at the top of its lungs. The dog followed a little way, then ran back to the two men who stood like statues.

Joe stopped at a water hole close to a cottonwood tree. There was enough green grass for the horses to graze on. Before letting the horses drink, Joe took off the clothes he'd worn and took a good bath. The cool water felt good and he thought about the last bath he'd had in Pecos. That was when Sam Bentley had arrested him. It seemed like a long time ago and a lot had happened since then.

Coming out of the water, he walked to the saddlebags and took out fresh clothes. They felt so good against his clean body. When he was finally dressed, he led the two horses to the pool and let them drink. He stuffed the dirty clothes into the saddlebags. When the horses were finished drinking, he led them under the cottonwood tree, tied them and sat down close by in the shade.

"Serge, this would be a good place to spend the night," he said to the big black horse, who made a rumbling sound deep in his throat. "You think so, too, huh? It looks like it's going to rain anyway, and this big tree will keep us dry."

Looking toward the west as he opened the grub sack, he was astonished to see how close the gray curtain of rain was. Thunder boomed loudly, causing the horse to jump, and yellow lightning split the sky like a knife. The bell that Joe was beginning to listen to went off in the back of his head and he wasted no time. Retying the grub sack, he grabbed up the horses' reins, jerked them loose from the tree

branch, jumped on Serge and rode out from under the tree just as a crackling bolt of lightning divided it straight down the middle. Part of the tree fell exactly where Joe had been sitting only a few seconds ago.

Kicking Serge hard in the side, Joe rode like seven demons were after him. Joe didn't know exactly where he was heading. He only knew he had to find shelter from the hard rain that was gaining on them.

Serge seemed to sense the urgency of the rider and stretched his long legs as far as they'd go. Huge drops of rain began pelting Joe on the back just as he came out of a ravine and saw a small shallow cave. Anything that convenient will probably have some inhabitants, he told himself, smiling wryly. But he was wrong.

Dismounting, he walked in slowly and looked around. Nothing was there. He led the horses inside, unsaddled them, then sat down and leaned back against the saddle. The rain began pouring down in sheets.

A cup of coffee would really taste good, he thought, his mouth watering. Then he realized that he hadn't had anything to eat since last night and a lot had happened since then.

Getting up, he looked outside to see if there was any dry wood close by. Luck was on his side, as he saw several sticks of dried wood about twenty feet from the opening. Dashing out, he quickly gathered up the wood, hurried back inside, and soon had a fire going.

Taking coffee pot, frying pan and meat from the grub sack, he made coffee, flat bread and fried several pieces of meat. The aroma of the cooking food made

his stomach rumble.

Slicing the bread, he put the meat inside it, then sat down at the cave opening and ate while he watched the rain pour down. Food had never tasted so good. The ground was so dry and hard that for a while the water beaded and rolled on it. But as the ground began softening, the rain soaked in.

Taking a deep breath of the freshly washed air, Joe thought about how good it was to be free and alive. That might not be the case much longer, he told himself sadly, swallowing the last drop of coffee.

Even though he had a piece of paper with Ben Milligan's name on it, he really couldn't prove to anyone in Pecos that he was Joe Howard. It would be just as easy for them to believe that he was Ben Milligan carrying a piece of paper with Joe Howard's name on it.

Joe had never hated anyone as much as he did Beth Jennings at that moment. It's a good thing she's not here right now, he thought savagely. He wouldn't feel bad about choking her at all! Watching the rain, he wondered how he should handle the situation. Should he have McRaney go with him to Pecos? Should he go by himself, find Sam Bentley first, then confront Beth and Wilson Jennings?

Each possibility had its good and bad points. He liked to think that he had enough proof on his side without having to rely on McRaney. But there wasn't really enough to say that he wasn't Ben Milligan. If he was in Jennings' shoes, he'd only believe that McRaney knew Ben Milligan and would say that he was Joe Howard because he was his friend.

On the other hand, if he rode into Pecos alone,

Sheriff Sam Bentley would have every right in the world to arrest him on sight. He had escaped from jail and was in reality a criminal sentenced by a judge.

Then a staggering thought hit him. If Wilson Jennings saw him first, he'd no doubt shoot. Any parent who cared anything about their child would put their welfare first. Jennings didn't seem to be the type to listen to anything if it contradicted what Beth said.

The rain continued falling and Joe felt safe in the confines of the cave. It was much cooler now, and he felt a drowsiness creeping over him. Sliding down against the saddle, he leaned his head back against it, and before long he was sound asleep.

Joe didn't know how long he'd been sleeping, but he woke up in a cold sweat. The same nightmare that he'd had before brought him straight up from the saddle. His hands were shaking and his mouth was dry.

There was a difference in this dream, though. This time three men dressed like Apaches floated on red clouds and were coming toward him. At first their backs were to him, and he could only see the black bushy hair blowing wildly in the wind. Then suddenly the three spun around and faced him. Laughing at him were the three faces covered with blood, and all three were Ben Milligan!

Joe ran a hand over his wet face. His breath came in hard gasps. His lungs were on fire. He couldn't believe this was happening to him. Joe took a deep breath and that calmed him down. It was then he realized that darkness had settled over the desert

much earlier than usual. The rain had eased to a slow drizzle, and Joe hoped that it would be over by morning. He had a lot to do.

He dozed off again and was awakened by the horses' snorting. Sitting up, he was startled to see a coyote sniffing at the cave's opening. Picking up a rock, he lobbed it against the gray head with a thud. Letting out a loud yelp the coyote ran off, its tail between its legs. Joe saw that morning was dawning.

"Well, Serge," he called out, getting up and dusting the dirt from his clothes, "waiting around won't make things any different, so we might as well get started for the fort."

Serge rumbled low in his throat. Joe saddled both horses, climbed aboard and gathered up the reins of Vana's horse. The air was crisp and cool as they rode out of the cave. A fresh clean smell was everywhere. New flowers had appeared overnight, and water puddled in the rocks. The horses wanted to run, and Joe was in a hurry to get to Fort Davis so he let them go.

It didn't take long for the miles to disappear beneath the horses' hoofs, and Joe felt better when he rode through the log gate at the fort. Riding over to the corral, Joe dismounted and handed both sets of reins to a private with instructions for a good rubdown, plenty of oats and water for both horses.

The sun was high and hot when Joe slung the saddlebags over his shoulder and walked across the dusty parade ground. Stepping up on the plank porch in front of the colonel's office, he stomped his feet, sending dust flying. The yellow dog lying in front of the door wagged its tail. Bending down, Joe



scratched him between his friendly brown eyes.

Eric McRaney was sitting in his swivel chair, feet propped up on the neatly arranged desk. His thin fingers were clasped behind his head and he was looking up at the ceiling. A pipe was clenched at the corner of his mouth.

"I guess you found what you were looking for," McRaney said calmly, removing his feet carefully from the desk and sitting up. A smile slid across his lean face, then he frowned at Joe's solemn expression. "What's the matter?" he asked, still frowning and holding Joe's gaze.

"I found Milligan all right," Joe said despondently, dropping into the chair in front of the desk. Unbuckling and untying his gun belt, he dropped it to the floor and stretched out his long legs.

"Well, if you found Milligan and he's the one who can help you in Pecos," McRaney said slowly, raising his brows, "why do you look like you were run over by a herd of buffalo?" Then confusion pulled his brows together, making wrinkles at the corner of his eyes.

"Milligan's dead," Joe replied simply, expelling a long breath and shaking his head. He dropped his gaze and stared down at his hands, then slowly raised his head and looked at McRaney. He wasn't ready for the colonel's reaction.

"What?" McRaney exclaimed, his brows shooting up even higher and his mouth gaping open. Shoving the chair back from the desk, he jumped to his feet. Walking quickly around the desk he sat down on the corner. "What do you mean: 'Milligan's dead'? How? Who killed him? Where's the body? What the devil

did you get into?"

Joe had known McRaney for a long time, but he'd never seen him this upset before. McRaney was a man of few words, and he's just said more this one time than Joe had ever heard before.

"Do you want a long version of what happened," Joe asked squinting a look up at McRaney, "or do you want it short?"

McRaney sighed and wearily shook his head. "Make it short. The way you tell things, we'll be here all night."

Joe stood up and walked over to the window that looked out across the desert. The mountains appeared dim in the heat. Leaning against the window sill Joe hooked thumbs over his pockets and expelled a deep breath.

"Well," McRaney prompted, turning around to face Joe. "Are you going to tell me or do I have to read your mind?"

"I found Milligan in a saloon in El Paso," Joe began laconically, taking a deep breath. "He looked so much like me that it was scary. I couldn't believe it. The only difference in us was he didn't have this scar under his eye." Joe pointed to the slight white line under his right eye, the result of a childhood fist fight with a boy in school many years ago.

"You were saying," McRaney urged, irritation beginning to edge his voice.

"Oh, yeah," Joe said, shaking his head. "His eyes were *green*. At first we just stared at each other. After the shock was over, I told him who I was and why I wanted to find him. He almost died laughing. After he calmed down, he told a completely different story

than Beth Jennings did."

Once again, Joe paused and shook his head in disbelief at the nerve of the judge's precious daughter, and he got mad all over again.

"What do you mean, 'different story'?" McRaney asked, noticing the cold look in Joe's brown eyes and the knot in his jaw. He'd always known Joe to be easy-going, and knew that something bad would have to happen to cause him to act like that.

"He swore that he never laid a hand on the girl," Joe said evenly, his mouth drawn into a tight line. "He claimed she had the hots for him but he didn't want any part of her. After all, there was Vana Glaser, so I can see why," he went on, as a slight smile pulled at the corner of his mouth.

"Vana Glaser owns the Silver Star Saloon in Pecos. She's the one who got me out of jail. Milligan took her horse and traded it to Chief Keoni. I got it back from the Indian after the renegade Tolka and his men stole our horse and killed Milligan. I got this for my effort in killing the Indians and getting a horse back." Joe touched the red mark on his cheek.

He wanted to laugh at the confused frown on McRaney's face. The colonel's eyes were as wide in surprise as they were when he'd heard that Milligan was dead.

"Whoa, wait a minute," McRaney yelled, standing up and waving his hands in the air to stop Joe's explanation. "When and how did you have time to meet Tolka? He was one of Keoni's braves, until he and a few others broke away from the tribe."

Joe told him about the stage and the dead people on it, and saw a sick look pale McRaney's face. He

went on to explain how he and Milligan were camped, and how he'd killed the three Indians after finding Milligan dead.

McRaney walked slowly around the desk and sank down in the chair. He looked up at Joe and shook his head.

"Where's Milligan's body?" he asked, crossing his long legs and leaning back.

"One of Keoni's braves helped me bury him in the desert," Joe replied, seeing in his mind the mound of rocks piled out in the middle of nowhere. After the Indians moved on, that grave would still be there for no one to see. For some reason, Joe felt sad.

"Did you get any kind of identification that it was Milligan?" McRaney asked. "How are you going to convince Judge Jennings that you're not Milligan, seeing as he's not around to corroborate your story?"

Joe chewed on the inside of his bottom lip for a second. McRaney had put words to his fears. Again the lost feeling rushed over him.

"Well," he began lamely, shoving his hands down into his pockets, "I'd kind of hoped that you'd go back to Pecos with me as a character witness. I did get Milligan's name and address, but that doesn't prove anything."

Hope sprang up in him when McRaney nodded in agreement. He felt better knowing that someone was actually on his side.

"Now that we have all of that out of the way," Joe said, "have you heard anything from Senator Powers? Keoni is anxious to know what he plans to do."

A deep frown pulled McRaney's brows together

and he stood up. Walking over to the filing cabinet in the corner, he opened a drawer, took a piece of yellow paper from a brown folder and handed it to Joe.

It was a telegram dated two days ago, with the Senator's name at the bottom. The few words explained the frown on McRaney's face. Senator Powers couldn't change his plans and come to Fort Davis to meet with the one man who could solve all their problems. It would be up to Keoni to come to Langtry to meet with him. If he didn't come willingly, the army would bring him.

"Uh-oh," Joe exclaimed, handing the paper back to McRaney. "Keoni isn't going to like this. To him that would be an arrest. He's willing to meet Powers halfway, but why should he have to go all the way to Langtry? In Keoni's eyes, he's as good as the Senator."

McRaney snorted and a disgusted look replaced the frown. "Keoni's much more of a man than Powers will ever be." McRaney said shaking his head. "Caleb Powers has always been a pompous ass."

Joe threw back his head and laughed heartily for the first time in a good while. McRaney blushed a little, then grinned at Joe.

"Well, it just seems to me," McRaney said, coming back to the desk to sit down, "that he should do all he can to bring some kind of compromise to the Indians."

At any other time Joe would have tried to think of a way to get the Senator and the chief together. But right then his mind was too occupied with his own problems to think about anything else. He wished

McRaney would suggest leaving for Pecos right away. He was in a hurry to get this mess settled.

“How soon do you want to leave for Pecos?” McRaney asked. “I’m anxious to see what this Vana Glaser looks like. Not to mention Beth Jennings. I know how much you want to see the judge.”

Joe drew back a fist and made as if to sock McRaney on the jaw. “How about in the morning?” he suggested, laughing as McRaney ducked.

“That’s fine,” McRaney agreed, nodding and standing up. “What kind of identification do you have on Milligan?”

Joe was glad that McRaney mentioned identification and reached into his pocket.

“His name and address are on that,” Joe said, unfolding the paper and handing it to the colonel. “Plus, I have Vana’s horse. She’ll swear that she knew Milligan and that I’m not him. I sort of got the impression that she knew Milligan a lot better than she admitted, and that’s why she was so quick to want to help me.” Then a thought struck Joe. “I hope she didn’t get into any trouble because of me. After all, she did help me escape and had to do a little bodily harm to the sheriff.”

An unasked question raised McRaney’s brows as he walked over to a gun rack on the wall and took down a Winchester.

“Didn’t I tell you what she did?” Joe asked, watching McRaney take a box of shells from a small drawer and shake his head. “She put a pill in Bentley’s beer so he’d sleep, to give me enough time to get out of town. She really broke the law more than I did.”

That warm feeling eased over Joe as he thought about the black-haired woman who'd kissed him softly at the back door of the jail almost two weeks ago.

"What does that silly grin mean?" McRaney asked, a twinkle gleaming in his eyes while he put shells for his pistol and rifle on the desk and walked toward the closet. "Did something else happen that you aren't telling me?"

Joe felt embarrassed at being caught with his guard down and he could feel his face turn red.

"Oh, it was nothing, really," he said. "She just gave me a peck on the cheek before I rode out of town the other day."

"That doesn't sound like 'nothing' to me," McRaney reflected, a slight smile on his angular face. "Women don't usually do things like that unless they have a good reason."

McRaney took some saddlebags from the closet, walked back to the desk and took out the folder with the Senator's telegram in it, and put it and the shells in one side.

As the two men left McRaney's office, the corporal came through the front door and saluted.

"Corporal Hunter," McRaney said, returning the salute, "I'll be leaving for Pecos in the morning. You know what to do while I'm gone."

Joe picked up his saddlebags and followed McRaney across the parade ground to the small, white house where the colonel lived. McRaney opened the door and Joe noticed that everything was as orderly there as in the office. From a closet in the bedroom, McRaney took extra clothes, put them in

the saddlebags and tied the flaps down.

Suddenly it hit Joe that this time tomorrow they'd be almost to Pecos, and he wouldn't have to worry anymore. A different kind of knot tightened his stomach.

"Let's get some supper," McRaney said, going through the living room and to the door. "I'll tell Wetherbee to put a good grub sack together for us tomorrow."

Walking back across the parade ground toward the mess hall. Joe noticed that it was much later than he thought. Purple darkness was settling over the desert and he could hear a coyote crying in the nearby mountains. A feeling of apprehension sent chills through his body.

That bell in the back of his mind told him that something was bound to go wrong when they got to Pecos.



## Chapter VII

Joe and McRaney were up way before dawn the next morning. They were already on their way to the mess hall when reveille was blown. They devoured a big breakfast of ham, eggs, biscuits and several cups of scalding black coffee. Then they went to the corral and saddled the three horses.

Joe gave serious thought to riding Vana's horse and giving Serge a well-earned rest, but decided he'd be more comfortable with the black under him. The big stallion rumbled low in his throat when Joe slid the bridle over his head.

"We've got a long way to go today, boy," Joe told him, rubbing the horse's wide forehead. Serge bobbed his head up and down as if he understood every word.

"Do you always talk to that horse?" McRaney asked, pulling the cinch tighter around his gray gelding. An indulgent smile twinkled in his eyes as he turned around to watch Joe.

"Sure," Joe answered, swinging up into the saddle, a softness in his eyes. "Serge and I talk all the time. Don't we, boy?" Joe leaned forward, patted the

horse's neck and Serge nickered.

Shaking his head in amusement, McRaney got on his horse. They rode through the gate and headed north toward Pecos.

Pink, pearl and gray of sunrise was trying to break through the low clouds as they rode along. There was no sign of the heavy rain that had pelted the dry ground two days ago. The horses' shod feet chipped the hard-packed earth. A cool morning wind rushed across the desert and over the mountains, making the ride pleasant. But it wouldn't last long. When the clouds lifted, the blistering sun would vent its wrath on anything that walked, crawled or flew.

Joe and McRaney rode in silence, although there was an amicability between them. Each had his own thoughts and the other respected that.

A hawk soared toward the mountains and Joe looked in that direction. Goose bumps ran up and down his back. The idea of Indians lurking in the mountains put knots in his stomach. But then he remembered Keoni telling that all Indians weren't bad; just as all white men weren't good. Joe felt sorry for Keoni and his people. The Indian chief, like Joe, was getting a raw deal because of something he couldn't control.

Senator Powers was being as unreasonable in refusing to come to Langtry as Judge Jennings was in refusing to hear his side of what had happened with Beth Jennings.

"Do you think Senator Powers will change his mind?" Joe asked. McRaney shook his head.

If things went in his favor in Pecos, Joe promised himself that he'd go back and help the Indians. The

business in Pecos shouldn't take more than two days.

"Did you know Wilson Jennings before he came to the fort the other day?" Joe asked McRaney as the hawk disappeared into the mountains. Turning in the saddle to face McRaney, Joe saw a frown cross his face.

"No," McRaney replied, wiping his face with a white handkerchief, "and from what little I saw of him, I'm glad. I'd hate like the devil to have him against me. He doesn't seem to be a man who's easy to reason with. He wanted to search the fort, but Bentley said no. I've known Sam for a long time."

"How much trouble do you think I'm in?" Joe asked, glancing at McRaney. The little bell told him he wouldn't like the answer.

"Well, from what little I know about it," McRaney said, "and that's only what you've told me, I'd say quite a bit. I know it's only circumstantial," he hurried on when he saw Joe was going to argue with him. "But you did rough up a man. That's assault, you know. You could have been jailed just for that. And you escaped. This thing with the girl is another matter. Since I didn't see Ben Milligan, dead or alive, I can only testify to hearsay, and that won't do."

McRaney shook his head slowly. Joe dropped his gaze to his hands folded over the saddlehorn. "You don't paint a very pretty picture for me. If you were in my boots, what would you do?" he asked softly. An idea had already formed in his mind, but he more or less wanted McRaney to sanction it.

"Well," McRaney said slowly, "if I were you, I'd try to get to the girl and persuade her to change her story and tell the truth."

Joe nodded his agreement. There had to be some way to make Beth Jennings clear his name. If he was cleared, Ben Milligan would be, too.

"It wouldn't be so bad if she was the only one I had to contend with," Joe said bitterly. "Most of the whole town is against me. I've got to see Vana as soon as we get to Pecos." A quizzical smile spread across Joe's face and he felt a little better.

"I don't know what you've got in mind," McRaney said, observing the change in Joe's eyes, "but I'll help you as long as it's within reasonable bounds of the law. Just don't bend the rules too much. After all, Sam Bentley is the sheriff in Pecos and Jennings is a full-fledged judge."

A hearty laugh burst from Joe. The sound echoed through the mountains and disturbed the hawk in the cliff. McRaney grinned at him. A pink tinge colored Joe's tanned face.

"What's so funny?" McRaney asked, trying to sound stern.

"You've just restored my faith in my fellow man," Joe answered a little flippantly, clearing his throat and swallowing. "Here you are, a military man, sworn to uphold law and order, agreeing to help a criminal if he doesn't break the law *too much*. I wish Keoni could hear you say that. He sure wouldn't trust the white eyes then."

"I know," McRaney said, nodding and grinning slightly.

The two men rode until they found a stream with a nearby cottonwood tree. It was a good place to stop and rest for a while. Taking the grub sack from behind McRaney's saddle, they gathered enough

wood for a fire, made coffee and flat bread, opened a can of beans and ate ravenously. Leaning back against the tree, they watched the horses munch on the lush green grass. McRaney took the pipe out of his pocket and tapped tobacco into it.

With their legs stretched out before them, Joe was reminded of Keoni and his braves sitting cross-legged under a similar tree when he first saw them.

"Why doesn't Senator Powers want to meet with Keoni?" Joe asked after a while. The plight of the Indians was something he just couldn't understand. All of the land had belonged to them at first. Then white people had begun pushing them back. Then the Indian retaliated, as anyone in their right mind would do were they called savages, barbarians and lower than a dog. If the tables were turned, the whites would do the same thing.

"Oh, I don't know," McRaney said slowly, taking a long pull on his pipe and blowing out a thin stream of smoke. "I think he really wants to help them, but doesn't want to be labelled an Indian lover. That wouldn't set so good with his constituency. On the other hand, if he doesn't do something, the raids will continue."

Getting up, Joe poured the last of the coffee on the fire, rubbed sand in the plates, took them and the skillet to the river and rinsed them out while McRaney filled the canteens and watered the horses.

"I kind of know how Keoni feels," Joe said, putting his foot in the stirrup and swinging up in the saddle. "We're both caught between a rock and a hard place in something that's none of our doing." He looked down at McRaney, who was still standing by

his horse. There was an odd expression on the colonel's face. He looked sad as he shook his head.

"But there is a slim hope for you," McRaney said remorsefully, climbing up into the saddle. "The Indian has none. His days are numbered. Surely this Jennings girl wouldn't want to live with a man's death on her conscience. Something tells me she'll come through for you."

"I hope so." Joe said, shuddering as the image of a man hanging by a noose popped into his mind. "I've got a little more living to do and a rope would put a stop to that."

The two men laughed and McRaney leaned over and clapped Joe on the shoulder. "You've got a point there," he said. "You've barely earned your first month's salary. By the way—what did you find out about the way stations?"

When Joe told him about meeting Will Dillinson the first time, McRaney doubled over in a fit of wild laughter.

"I'd have paid to see that," he said, regaining his composure and clearing his throat.

"Well, I don't want to go through it again just for your entertainment," Joe said, a sheepish grin on his face. "So just enjoy what I told you. Besides, the man will almost eat out of my hand now."

"I would, too, if you'd hit me over the head with a stick," McRaney said, looking at Joe and grinning.

Since they weren't in a dead hurry to get to Pecos, they set the horses at a slow gallop, and stopped to make night camp when purple dusk was just beginning to settle. There was still about an hour of

light left, but why wear out themselves and the horses?

Spreading the blankets on the ground after unsaddling the horses, Joe and McRaney stretched out and leaned back against the saddles. McRaney lit his pipe. The sweet aroma drifted over to Joe and he breathed deeply. A contented feeling eased over him and he took another deep breath. For a while he felt safe.

To anyone who saw them, they would have looked like two men on a vacation, they were that relaxed. Joe's hands were under his head, the fingers laced. Gazing thoughtfully up into the sky, he allowed his mind to relax as he watched an eagle soaring without effort on the soft air currents.

The blazing sun finally eased down behind the mountains and a coolness would soon bring a little comfort to the desert dwellers. Was there a place on earth that offered perpetual peace, Joe wondered, taking a deep breath. Probably not.

"Why did you stay in the army?" he asked McRaney without looking at him. When McRaney didn't answer right away, Joe turned his head and wasn't surprised to see McRaney staring up at the sky, just as he'd been doing.

"Oh, I don't know," he finally replied slowly, sliding further down on the blanket and resting his head against the saddle. "I guess I still had the idea that I could change the world by being in some kind of authoritative position. But . . ." his voice trailed off wistfully and he waved his hand in the air. "I guess people will be the same until the end of time,"

he went on philosophically. "Some want and take. Some want but still end up giving."

Joe didn't know if McRaney was talking about the Civil War or the conflict between the whites and Indians.

Darkness finally settled over the desert and mountains like a soft blanket. For a while everything was silent, then the sounds of the night creatures took over. An owl asked its question in a nearby tree, off in the distance a dove cooed softly, and up in the mountains a coyote bayed at the yellow moon that was just edging over the horizon.

Drowsiness pulled at Joe's eyelids, and no matter how hard he fought to stay awake he just couldn't do it. The last thing he remembered was glancing over at McRaney. The colonel had knocked the tobacco from the pipe, had put the pipe in his pocket and was already asleep. Joe closed his eyes. For a while, everything was peaceful, but then wind picked up and came howling like a mad animal across the vastness, bringing thick sand with it.

Joe didn't know how long he'd been sleeping, but was suddenly awakened by rough shaking on his shoulder. He reached for the Dixie Revolver, but apparently whoever was shaking him was prepared for it, because a strong grip closed around his wrist and stopped him.

Joe snapped his eyes open and through a haze could see McRaney bending over him. For a moment Joe thought he was going blind. He could hardly see a thing. But then he realized that they were in a blowing sand storm. Morning would have been well on the way if they could have seen the rising sun.



Everything had a thick gray haze to it.

"Joe, we've got to find cover," McRaney said, shouting to be heard over the din of the wind. "We've got to hurry."

Nodding, Joe struggled stiffly to his feet, jerked up the bedroll, saddle and slung them on Serge. The big black stallion snorted the stinging particles from his nose, as did the other two horses.

Taking their bandanas from around their necks, Joe and McRaney poured water over them then tied them over their faces.

Riding away from the river, they raced toward a canyon wall in hopes of finding some shelter from the biting sand. As luck would have it, an opening loomed before them and they spurred the horses inside. Once their eyes had adjusted to the dim light, they took a look around. The opening was actually the entrance to a small cave, and when they dismounted and walked a little way in they were surprised to see how deep it was. Coming back to the front, Joe and McRaney removed the stiff bandanas, poured water over them again and wiped the horses's noses and mouths clean of sand and grit. The animals snorted disagreeably.

"I guess we're stuck here for a while," Joe said irritably while he unsaddled Serge and Vana's horse. McRaney came back from the opening and unsaddled his horse.

They tried to sit by the opening, but the blowing sand was too much. It bit their faces and stung their eyes. Moving further back, they sat down on the ground by their saddles. They could still hear the howling wind and see the swirling sand outside.

Sitting still in the warm cave, they got sleepy and dozed off. The stifling heat didn't allow them to sleep long, though. Joe awoke feeling like he was in an oven. Sweat was rolling down his face and his blue shirt was plastered to him. Jumping up, he looked over at McRaney. Joe was amazed to see that the colonel was still sound asleep. He must be part gopher, Joe mused, shaking his head as he walked to the front of the cave.

Reaching the entrance, Joe stopped dead in his tracks. He couldn't believe his eyes. The sand was gone! Everything looked the way it should. The sky was a bright blue, with only a few fluffy white clouds easing along as if gently pushed. Birds were singing and a hawk, maybe the same one he'd seen earlier, was riding the air currents.

Joe turned and hurried back to McRaney. "Hey, Eric," he shouted, his voice bouncing off the cave's walls. He nudged the colonel in the side with the toe of his boot. "Wake up. The sand's gone. We can leave now."

The colonel sat up and rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand.

"I want you to know that you just interrupted one of the best dreams I've had in a long time." McRaney shook his head in mock disgust while getting to his feet.

"Was she blond, redhead or brunette?" Joe asked, grinning over his shoulder at McRaney. Picking up the blanket and saddle, he soon had Serge ready to go.

"She had snow-white hair," McRaney replied, tightening the cinch on his horse. "I was at my grandmother's in Tennessee. She was feeding me

custard pie with a spoon. I was just a little kid."

Joe turned slowly in the saddle and gazed down at McRaney. A smirk tightened his lips and his eyes narrowed.

"Now, come on, Eric," Joe drew out slowly. "Who do you think you're kidding? Nobody dreams about their grandmother!" Then he burst out laughing. McRaney squinted up at Joe and shook his head.

"Joe," he said wearily, "this might come as a surprise to you, but all men's dreams aren't centered around sex. There are other things in life, you know."

"Name two," Joe challenged in a low voice. Riding out of the cave, they were both laughing.

Judging from the position of the sun, it was around one o'clock. The sand storm had cost them nearly three hours. But luck was probably on their side whether they realized it or not. The delay would put them in Pecos after dark, and they would avoid a lot of notice. Joe thought about having to face Sam Bentley, then panic seized him when Beth Jennings' face popped into his mind. Feeling McRaney's eyes on him, Joe turned in the saddle to look at him.

"What?" Joe prompted McRaney.

"I was just wondering if you have a plan worked out yet," McRaney said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Yes and no," Joe answered slowly, removing his hat to wipe the sweat band and then replacing it. "Well, maybe," he went on, uncertainty creeping into his voice.

"Joe, there can't be any 'maybes' in this thing," McRaney argued. "You've got to know exactly what you're going to do before we get to Pecos."

For a moment Joe was quiet. Then suddenly he nodded his head emphatically. His mind was made up. He knew exactly what he was going to do and he was confident that his plan would work.

Riding out of a canyon and topping a hill, Joe and McRaney saw the lights of Pecos twinkling below and they started down. Now would be as good a time as any for Joe to tell McRaney his plan.

"Eric," he called out in the darkness, "you might think this is a wild idea, but I'm going to see Beth Jennings as soon as we get to town." Joe knew he was right when he heard McRaney's sharp intake of breath. He could feel McRaney's eyes on him.

"How are you going to find her, when you don't know where she lives?"

Joe had thought about that, too. But his plan would take care of that. "Vana will tell me where she lives. We'll go to the back of the saloon. I'll go to her office and see her." It sounded so simple. McRaney had other thoughts.

"What do you want me to do, hold doors open for you? I didn't come along just for the ride, you know."

"After we find the Jennings house, I want you to keep Wilson Jennings busy so I can talk to his daughter." Joe could see all of his plan falling into place. It was going to work!

The dimly lit street was crowded with horses, wagons and buggies. Loud music poured through the open windows of a second-rate saloon. McRaney was the only one of the two who attracted any attention, and that was due to his uniform. Joe pulled his hat lower to conceal his face.

Vana's saloon was situated between the hardware store and the Pecos Bank. Quieter music drifted through the windows. A good crowd was inside. Joe and McRaney rode on past the hardware store, turned left and went down the side street until they came to the alley. Turning left again, they continued on until they reached the back of the saloon. Beer barrels and empty whiskey bottles were stacked against the wall. Dismounting, Joe handed McRaney the reins of both horses. He opened the back door and eased into the semi-dark storeroom.

Closing the door softly behind him, Joe muttered an oath when his foot knocked over a bottle and it rolled a short distance across the floor. Waiting a second, his heart in his mouth, Joe moved over to another door where light showed under the bottom. Opening that door a crack, he peered out and down a long hall. No one was in the hall and he stepped out further. Seeing another door on the left of the hall, he went to it and was relieved to see the word OFFICE printed in large black letters.

Uncertain whether to knock or just go in, he pushed caution aside and opened the door. Vana was sitting at a desk, an open ledger before her. An oil lamp light cast a blue sheen over her black hair, and caused her olive skin to appear like pale honey. Joe's heart beat a little faster.

Hearing a noise, Vana jerked around in the straight-backed chair and the color drained from her face when she saw Joe. Fright widened her blue eyes. When she recognized him, a slight smile spread across her red mouth. Joe stepped further into the

room and quickly closed the door behind him.

"What in the world are you doing back here?" she asked in a whisper, a frown replacing the smile. "Don't you know that Wilson Jennings has put out a reward on you? He wants you dead or alive. Probably the first. Things have really been hot since you left. Beth is in even more disgrace."

Joe hadn't given any thought to a reward, and was surprised when he heard it.

"How much am I worth?" he asked, smiling. His eyes twinkled and he felt a tug at his heart as he gazed down at Vana's upturned face.

"This isn't a joking thing," Vana snapped quickly. "You should have kept going. Why did you come back?"

"Well, for one thing, I came back to clear my name," Joe said, thinking he'd never seen a prettier woman. "And," he went on, smiling down at her again, "I remembered a soft kiss."

Vana turned a brilliant red and fumbled with the lace at the edge of her low-cut, dark-blue dress.

"Things like that can get you into trouble," she muttered in a low, nervous voice.

"We'll talk about that later," Joe said, pushing aside a stack of papers on the desk and sitting down on the corner. "But right now I want you to tell me where Beth Jennings lives."

Disbelief widened Vana's blue eyes and she stared up at him. She shook her head sharply a couple of times.

"You've got to be completely out of your mind," she said in a level tone.

"I'd be even more out of my mind if I didn't try to find her," Joe insisted, arching an eyebrow. "I found Ben Milligan, and—"

Shock exploded across Vana's face and the color drained away, leaving her pale. She swallowed a couple of times and licked her lips.

"You found Ben?" she repeated in a shaky voice. "If you found Ben, you don't need Beth Jennings." Color crept back into her cheeks. "Where is he? Is he with you?"

"No," Joe answered slowly shaking his head. "He's not with me. I'm sorry, Vana. He's dead. An Indian killed him. He was on his way back here with me to clear both our names."

Vana clasped her right hand over her breast and sank slowly into the chair. She bowed her head and sat absolutely still. Taking a deep breath, she slowly raised her head and looked up at Joe. Her eyes were misty and she pressed her lips together so they wouldn't tremble.

"In a sense," she said in a voice just above a whisper, "Beth got just what she wanted: a man is dead because of her. Did Ben tell you what had happened between them?" Vana blinked her eyes several times before looking up at him.

Joe knew they were wasting time. Someone could come in and find him there. But he felt he had to tell her about Beth Jennings and the terrible lie she'd told.

"Ben Milligan never laid a hand on Beth Jennings," Joe said slowly, feeling the anger starting to build. He doubled his hands into fists. He had never

wanted to kill anyone as much in his life as he did Beth Jennings right then.

"What?" Vana exclaimed, her eyes wide. "I don't understand. I more or less suspected it, but why would she swear that he had?"

In a few words as possible, Joe repeated to her what Milligan had told him only a few days ago.

"There's a name for her that I won't use," Vana said in a flat voice. Her lips were tight and a small knot worked in her jaw. "I can't believe she'd do a thing like that. Why would she do such a terrible thing?"

"We're wasting time," Joe said patiently. "You can call her all the names you want, after I talk to her. We need to hurry. A friend of mine is waiting out back."

Vana's head snapped up and she asked who the friend was. Joe explained. She nodded solemnly and a set expression covered her features.

"I can't go with you," she said shortly. "I wish I could. Ride east about two miles. There's a fork in the road. Take the left. Jennings' white house is half a mile from there. What are you going to do? How are you going to handle this?" Her questions ran together.

"I really won't know until I get there," Joe said slowly, starting toward the door. Vana was right on his heels. Opening the door, she looked out and then motioned for him to follow. McRaney was still sitting on his horse, holding three sets of reins. When Vana saw her horse, she let out a squeal of delight.

"My horse!" she exclaimed. In the dim light, Joe



saw her clasp her hand over her breast. "That's Goldie! How did you do it?"

"I don't have time to explain, Vana," Joe said wearily. "I'll tell you all about it later. This is Eric McRaney, the friend I was telling you about."

McRaney and Vana exchanged greetings. Joe handed Vana Goldie's reins and swung up on Serge. "I'll see you later and tell you all about this."

Turning their horses, the two men rode back the way they'd come, headed east. The two miles to the Jennings' house were the longest that Joe had ever ridden.

"I hope you know what you're going to do," McRaney called out in the darkness. "Joe, can I ask you a stupid question?"

"Sure," Joe answered in surprise. He couldn't understand why McRaney was so perturbed. *His* neck wasn't on the line.

"Just why did you bring me along? So far, all that I've done is ride along with you, wake you up in a sand storm and hold horses. You haven't told me what I'm supposed to do when we get to the Jennings' house, except keep Wilson Jennings busy. I'm beginning to feel like a fool."

For a while the men were silent, because Joe didn't know how to answer.

"The reason I haven't told you what I'm going to do," Joe said slowly, "is that I'm not exactly sure myself." His voice trailed off. He shook his head and his shoulders slumped.

"This is great!" McRaney raged. "We're almost to the woman's house and you don't have a single idea

what to do! You could end up getting us both killed!"

What was McRaney so out of sorts about? He wasn't the one in trouble. He had nothing to lose.

But then a sobbering thought struck Joe. What if they were seen before reaching the Jennings' house? McRaney was right. Joe pulled back on the reins and halted Serge. McRaney stopped his horse. The moon slid from behind a cloud for a second, and McRaney saw Joe's face in the dim light.

"You've changed your mind so many times in the past two days," McRaney pointed out, "that if your brain was a shirt it would be completely worn out by now. Make a decision and stick to it, for God's sake! You know what has to be done."

Joe knew McRaney was right. But each time he made up his mind on what to do, something changed and he wasn't sure about what the outcome would be. Even after talking to Vana he wasn't sure.

"All right," Joe said stoically. "It's early yet and they should still be up. I guess surprise is going to be our best bet. I want to get to Beth first. You'll have to keep the judge busy while I talk to her. We'll tie the horses a little distance from the house and walk the rest of the way."

If the night hadn't been so cloudy, Joe would have seen McRaney slowly shaking his head. The men began riding again, each questioning the logic of Joe's plan. One wondered if it would work, the other was sure it wouldn't.

The simple white house came into view as the men rounded a bend. Lamps burned in two windows at

opposite ends of the house. Joe guessed that one room was the parlor. Could the other be Beth Jennings' bedroom? Would she be in it? How would she act when she saw Joe? Better yet, what would the judge do?

Dismounting, Joe and McRaney tied their horses to a tree about two hundred yards from the house. Luckily, they didn't have a dog, because he would have already been barking his head off. Picking their way carefully toward the house, they stopped once as Joe reached out and caught McRaney's arm.

"Her room is probably at the end of the house," he whispered, "but let's circle the whole place to see who's where."

Once again they started forward, crouching down when they were close to the house. Removing his hat, Joe flattened himself against a wall and peered through the lace curtain into the room. It was definitely a woman's bedroom. A pink-and-white spread was turned back on a brass bed, and a pale-blue robe was folded neatly across a plump pillow. No one was there.

"They must both be in the parlor," McRaney whispered to Joe. Joe followed him to the front of the house.

The judge and his daughter were sitting in rocking chairs on either side of a round table, reading. The judge looked as stern in shirt sleeves as he did when Joe had seen him in the courtroom. His mouth was tight and his eyes were still squinted.

Shifting his gaze back to Beth, Joe got the same impression of her. A pinched look pulled her mouth

into a thin line. Her hair was drawn back into a bun. Joe remembered what Ben Milligan had told him about Beth, and he couldn't help feeling a little sorry for her. But for only a few seconds. After all, she was the cause of all his problems.

Joe realized in disgust that his original plan wouldn't work now, and did the only thing he could. Much to McRaney's dismay, Joe drew the Dixie Navy Revolver, stepped up on the porch, eased the screen door back and kicked open the door. The latch landed with a thud on the multi-colored throw rug, and the door sagged on the hinges.

"Stay right where you are," Joe ordered in a cold, level voice. He looked first at Jennings. The judge's eyes were wide in fear. All the color had drained from his thin face and his mouth was hanging open. His thin, white-knuckled fingers gripped the book in his lap.

Glancing at Beth, Joe was stunned at the expression on her usually pale face. Her color was high, and although her eyes were wide, there wasn't a bit of fear in them. Excitement shone there instead, and her small chest rose and fell in quick breaths. Dropping the book to her lap, she folded her hands over it.

"What's the meaning of this?" the judge demanded in a furious voice. "What are you doing here? Why, you're Ben Milligan," he continued, taking a closer look at Joe, "and you," he said accusingly, shifting his gaze to McRaney, "you're from Fort Davis. You're the colonel there. You lied to me! He didn't go to Laredo. You were in this together. I'll have both of you hanged for this!"

"Is hanging all you ever have on your mind?" Joe asked in disgust. "Sit down and shut up," he ordered, leveling the gun at Jennings. "You wouldn't listen to me before. Only two people in this godforsaken town would. The sheriff and Vana Glaser knew I wasn't Ben Milligan and they tried to help me. If it wasn't for your daughter, who's so afraid of you she doesn't know what to do, all of this wouldn't have happened!"

"Afraid of me?" Jennings repeated, glaring up at Joe. "What do you mean? My daughter isn't afraid of me. Are you, Beth?" It was more of a statement than a question.

The girl didn't answer and kept looking down at her folded hands.

Rage rolled over Joe like a wild river, and he felt the muscles tighten in his stomach and jaw. Fuming, Jennings eased back down in his chair. Joe looked over at Beth.

"Miss Jennings," McRaney said, stepping up beside Joe and easing his Colt .45 back into its worn holster. "I don't believe you realize what you've done. Your irresponsible and selfish actions have caused the death of one innocent man, and almost resulted in getting another man, just as innocent, hanged."

Beth jerked around in the chair and the color drained from her face. "What innocent man is dead?" she asked, staring up at McRaney.

"Ben Milligan was killed by Indians," McRaney answered, glaring down at her. "He was on his way back here from El Paso to clear his and Joe's name. This man," McRaney continued, jerking a thumb in

Joe's direction, "is Joe Howard. I've known him for a long time. Until two weeks ago he was riding shotgun for Wells Fargo in Tucumcari, New Mexico." His eyes widened in growing anger.

"I sent for him to come to Fort Davis as an army scout. It was only chance that put him here in Pecos. I don't know, nor do I care, what on God's green earth you were trying to accomplish by trying to frame him. But, young lady, if you were a daughter of mine, I'd turn you across my knee and give you the spanking you so richly deserve."

Joe looked at McRaney. The colonel's blue eyes were blazing. Joe couldn't believe this man, who was usually so easy going, talking to a woman like that. A silence fell over the room and all eyes were glued on the tall colonel. Joe saw an opening and jumped in.

"Miss Jennings," he said pleadingly, "you've got to tell the truth. You, and only you, can straighten this out. I've seen enough injustice this past two weeks to last me a lifetime. A group of Indians are waiting to hear from a senator to see if an injustice can't be rectified for them. You don't want something like this hanging over your head, do you?"

Pushing his hat back, Joe took a step toward her. Some of the color had returned to her cheeks but her eyes were still bright. Under Joe's scrutiny, she dropped her head and stared down at her hands, clasped tightly in her lap.

Slowly, she raised her head and a cunning smile eased across her face. Glancing first at her father, then McRaney and finally back at Joe, she pursed her lips.

"You're absolutely right," she said slowly. "Only I

know the truth. And I don't believe a word the colonel said. He's your friend. If he lied for you once, he'll do it again. You're Ben Milligan and you raped me!"

Her tone was level and emotionless. A feather hitting the floor could have been heard in the silence hanging over the room.





## Chapter VIII

Without thinking, Joe reached out, grabbed the smirking girl by the arm and jerked her roughly from the rocking chair. A gasp of surprise exploded from her and she gripped the chair's arm in her thin fingers. The chair turned over and banged against the floor as Joe dragged her toward the closed bedroom door.

"Papa, help me!" Beth screamed, pulling against Joe's arm as she suddenly realized his intent. "Don't let him hurt me, Papa!" Terror edged her voice, and her eyes were wide with fear. From the set look on Joe's lean features, she knew something terrible was going to happen to her. "Papa, help!" The judge made a move to stand. His face was purple in rage.

"Take your hands off my daughter," he roared furiously, his eyes blazing and his thin chest heaving. "I'll hang you myself!"

"Keep him here," Joe snapped over his shoulder to McRaney. "We're going to settle this one way or the other tonight. You're going to tell the truth, Miss Jennings. If you have to, Eric, shoot him." Joe's eyes were cold and deadly.

"Don't you hurt my daughter," Jennings warned sternly through clenched teeth, sinking slowly back into the chair. From the dark frown on McRaney's face, Jennings knew not to argue with him.

Joe pulled the struggling, terrified girl behind him as he saw McRaney draw his pistol and aim it at the judge. Jennings glared at him, his eyes blazing. Joe jerked open the bedroom door, swung the kicking girl into the room and slammed the door shut.

"Now," he said slowly, leering down at her, his brown eyes narrowed slits as he moved menacingly toward her. "If I'm going to be accused of something, by God, I might as well do it and enjoy the pleasure of it. You can tell me if I do anything wrong, since you've been through this before."

"What are you going to do?" Beth asked in a weak voice, pressing the back of her trembling hand against her mouth. Her chest rose and fell in quick breaths. She was really frightened now. Her green eyes were wide.

"What do you think?" Joe asked harshly, arching his brows and reaching out his hand toward her. A sinister smile curled his mouth.

The pale-green cotton dress, with a square neck didn't offer much resistance when Joe gripped the top and in one jerk ripped it from the neck to the hem. Stepping closer, he shoved the short sleeves and the straps of the white chemise from her shoulders, and with a quick yank both garments and petticoat were flung to the floor. Grabbing her arm, Joe whirled her across the room and she landed face down on the bedspread so hard that her hair came out of the tight bun.

Joe didn't know how far she'd let him go before she finally told him the truth, but it would be completely up to her as to when he stopped.

Beth's mousy red hair hung straight down to her shoulders, as she raised up on her left arm to see him grab the hem of her bloomers in both hands and jerk them down and off. That left her clothed only in a pair of thick black stockings and shoes.

The fact that he was wasting time by forcibly undressing a woman who wouldn't have interested him in the first place when he could have been working or helping Chief Keoni sent a rage through Joe that scared him. But still he didn't stop manhandling her. Roughly, he pushed her back on the bed and dropped his full weight on top of her. Drawing up his right leg, he forced it between her knees, pushing them apart.

Fear dilated her eyes and Joe could see a scream building up in her throat. Slapping his left hand quickly over her mouth, Joe braced his weight on his elbow and began slowly running his right hand across her shoulder and neck. He could feel her mouth tighten under his hand and her nostrils flared when he rubbed hard over her flat breast and squeezed. She whimpered and Joe felt sick at what he was doing. She stiffened under his rough touch.

"It'll get a lot worse if you don't tell the truth," Joe said harshly, glaring down at her, his mouth in a tight line. "You know I'm not Ben Milligan. He's dead and in an unmarked rock grave out in the desert because of you. He told me he never laid a hand on you. I believe him."

Joe removed his hand from her breast and ran it

down her flat stomach with all indications of going further. "He was on his way back here with me to clear us of something you swore we'd both done. I'll admit he did favor me a lot, but that's no reason for you to lie about an innocent man. You got what you wanted: a man is dead because of you. How does it make you feel?" Her body stiffened even more. "Can you live with that?"

Her green eyes bore into his and Joe had no way of knowing what was going through her mind. Suddenly the stiffness went out of her naked body and she went limp on the bed. Joe hated himself for putting her through this. He never thought he'd see the day when he'd be doing this to any woman. But he had to do something to make her tell the truth and he couldn't understand why she was allowing herself to endure this humiliation.

Sweat lined her upper lip in little beads and glistened on her shoulders and arms. Joe raised upon his right arm and looked down at her.

"If you'd just tell the truth, all of this would stop," he urged, his mouth drawn into a thin tight line. "I don't want to do this. Nothing is worth it. But if it's the only way to get you to tell the truth, I'll do it." He started to unbuckle his gun belt.

A long shuddering sigh escaped Beth's mouth and she nodded her head. Removing his hand from her mouth and taking a deep breath, Joe stood up and pulled the spread back over her.

"All right," she agreed, gripping the spread tightly. "I fell in love with Ben Milligan." The few words seemed to be torn from her throat. She stopped and swallowed a couple of times, then sat up against

the pillows, bringing the cover with her. "He was nice to me. Not many men are nice to me because of Papa. When they find out he's a judge they don't like me anymore. Papa kept saying that a man like Ben Milligan wouldn't give me a second look. I wanted to prove that Papa was wrong. I realized that Ben was only treating me like he would any other girl in town." She paused and swallowed.

"But I loved him so much," she continued, taking a deep breath. "I couldn't stand the thought of him not feeling the same way about me. I knew he would be leaving Pecos soon. I knew he'd go somewhere else and be nice to someone else. So I told Papa he'd attacked me. He never touched me." She looked up at Joe and quickly dropped her gaze.

"I knew Papa's reputation for quick justice. If I couldn't have Ben, I didn't want anyone else to have him. If he stayed, it would have been because of Vana Glaser."

Her voice was bitter and she gritted her teeth at Vana's name. Then she took a long breath. "In a way, I was glad he escaped after Papa had him arrested." She paused and her chin trembled.

"Why on earth did you tell the judge that Ben had attacked you in the first place?" Joe asked, frowning at her, disbelief in his voice. She raised her head slowly and looked up at him.

"Papa kept telling me that Ben was only passing through and that he didn't mean any of the things he said to me. I told Papa it wasn't true. I never thought I'd ever see him again after he escaped; I thought nothing would ever come out of it. When you came to town and everyone saw how much you favored Ben

and Papa found out, I had to do something. I didn't think he'd sentence you to hang! When he did I knew you'd get away. I wouldn't have let you hang."

Joe didn't know whether to laugh or hit her. So it wasn't only revenge against Ben Milligan that made Beth accuse him of rape! It was to spite her father. Joe felt a heavy weight lifting from his shoulders. She'd tell her father the truth and that would be the end of this sordid business.

Joe breathed a sigh of relief. Walking over to the closet, he opened the door, removed a dress, took it back to Beth and turned around while she put it on. She stood up, smoothed the dress down and pushed the hair out of her face. Together, she and Joe went to the door.

The judge was sitting in the same chair as before. McRaney had straddled a straight-backed chair facing him and was still holding the Colt .45, pointed at the judge's chest.

"Judge," Joe began slowly, closing the bedroom door behind him. "I'm real sorry, but this had to be done. I swear I didn't hurt your daughter. I think she has something to tell you."

The judge glared at him with a look that could kill. His mouth was drawn into a thin tight line. He gripped the arm of the chair with white knuckles.

"I'll have you arrested for what you just did," Jennings said slowly through clenched teeth, his eyes narrowing. "I'll have you both hanged." He glanced from Joe to McRaney.

"Papa, stop it," Beth wailed. "He's right. I didn't tell you the truth. There never was an attack. Ben Milligan never touched me. I made it up to prove to

you that he was attracted to me. I wouldn't have let you hang this man. I'm sorry that Ben is dead. I'll have that on my conscience for a long time."

Joe was genuinely surprised when Beth buried her face in her trembling hands and tears began running down her cheeks. Sobs shook her thin shoulders. He couldn't help feeling sorry for her. But he wasn't going to patronize her. "Miss Jennings," he said, "a woman I saw on a stage the other day would gladly trade places with you right now. You have a lot to look forward to. She doesn't." Joe shook his head and his mouth tightened.

"Why?" Beth asked, raising her tear stained face.

"The same Indians who killed Ben Milligan scalped her," Joe said shortly. "If he hadn't been on his way back here, he would probably still be alive!"

She burst into tears again.

"Beth," the judge said, his voice cracking like a whip, "did he threaten you into saying that he wasn't Milligan? Did he hurt you? You were in there a long time." Jennings' eyes bored into his daughter like two knives.

Joe more or less suspected that Jennings would ask the question and he wasn't surprised. However, he wasn't ready for Beth's answer.

"No, Papa," she replied in a slow and tired voice, raising her head. "He didn't threaten or hurt me. Not as much as I've hurt him and poor Ben Milligan. I caused that man's death." She avoided her father's probing gaze.

Jennings glared at his daughter. "What do you mean?" he asked, frowning deeply. "How could you cause his death? *This* is Ben Milligan."

Beth walked slowly over to her rocking chair, sat down and expelled an exasperated breath.

"Papa, I'm only going to tell you this one more time. So please listen." She still avoided his eyes by looking down at her hands clasped tightly in her lap. "This man isn't Ben Milligan. He's Joe Howard, or whoever he says he is. I just told you that Ben Milligan had attacked me to prove to you that there was something between us. I wanted to prove to you that a man could be interested in me no matter who you were or how I looked."

Joe had been watching the judge to see what his reaction would be to Beth's explanation. But now he swung around to face her.

"Miss Jennings," McRaney put in, "you don't tell a lie about something as terrible as an attack, or to put it more bluntly, a rape!"

A long silence hung over the room. Through the open window they could hear crickets singing their song. An owl hooted in a nearby tree. Joe jumped as an idea struck him.

"Judge," Joe said coldly, "I think you owe me another day in court. I want this town to know what a hard-headed judge it has, and what your spiteful daughter did to me! Not to mention an innocent man getting killed." Joe spat out the angry words like bullets. "How about tomorrow morning at nine?"

The three people in the room knew that Joe's request was more of an order than a suggestion. He wouldn't take *no* for an answer.

Jennings gasped and glared up at Joe. "You've got to be crazy!" Jennings gasped. Beth's head snapped up at his outburst.



"Joe has a point, your honor," McRaney said. "You might get your image changed in town. And, I might add, there are some people in town who owe Joe Howard an apology. Among them, your daughter."

McRaney raked his eyes coldly over Beth, who sat with clasped hands and lowered eyes. Loathing and contempt burned in his glare.

Everyone was silent again, but Joe watched Jennings closely. He could almost hear the wheels turning in the judge's head. Jennings relaxed and slumped back in the chair. The metamorphosis that took place on his thin face was astounding. The sternness disappeared and the cold gleam in his eyes was replaced by a sadness that surprised even Beth. She looked at her father as someone she'd never seen before.

"You're right," Jennings agreed, expelling a long breath and nodding his head slowly. "Nine in the morning is fine. You won't need a jury. I'll do the whole thing myself. I'll see that Gib Colson and Ezra Stillman are there."

Without saying anything else, Jennings stood up and walked wearily toward the other bedroom. He opened the door, went straight into the room and closed it softly behind him without looking back.

Beth sat still in the chair. There was no emotion whatsoever on her pale face. Joe felt sorry for her, but for only a second. She'd caused too much trouble for his compassion to last very long. He just wanted to get away from her and the judge as soon as possible. Maybe then the bitter taste would leave his mouth.

"Are you ready to go, Eric?" Joe asked simply.

turning and moving toward the shattered door. Beth's strained voice stopped him.

"Mr. Howard," she said softly. He turned around to face her. She was standing up, holding onto the back of the chair. Her knuckles were white. "I can't bring Ben back. But as I said before, I'll always have his death on my conscience and I'm sorry. It will help me a lot if you'll forgive me. I know it's asking much of you, but if you knew more of my reasons maybe it would be easier." Her voice broke and her lips trembled.

Joe didn't see any need for further conversation with her. He did want to know her reasons. But mostly he just wanted to get away from her. The truth had finally come out and that's all he wanted. So he just nodded his head and pulled the damaged door closed behind him and McRaney.

"You must feel a lot better," McRaney said, swinging up on his horse. "I had no idea you could be so persuasive. What did you say to her? Or better yet, what did you do to her?"

Joe threw back his head and hearty laughter burst from his throat. It felt good to have a reason to laugh.

"Nothing that she didn't like," he finally answered, clearing his throat. "No, nothing like she'd accused me of. Although she thought for a while that it was going to happen."

The ride back to town didn't seem to take as long as the one to the Jennings' home, and before they knew it they were stopping in front of the sheriff's office.

"What do you suppose Bentley's reaction will be when he sees me?" Joe asked McRaney in a tight voice. They dismounted and tied the horses to the

hitch rail.

"He has every right to arrest you," McRaney replied pragmatically. "You did break out of jail, you know." In the dim light from the lamp in the sheriff's office, Joe saw McRaney nod his head slowly.

"Maybe we should just get a room," Joe began, then stopped suddenly. "On, no. I'm not going to face Ezra Stillman again," he went on, shaking his head rapidly and grinning slightly.

Sheriff Bentley wasn't in the office, but Amos Cooper almost jumped out of his skin when Joe and McRaney opened the door and walked in. The deputy turned white and his mouth dropped open. He shoved the chair back from the desk and stumbled to his feet. His hands shook when he tried to jerk his pistol from its holster.

"The sheriff ain't here," he stammered, fear in his small gray eyes. "I don't want no trouble." Joe wanted to laugh at the inept young man.

"Just relax," he said patiently, spreading his hands out. "There's not going to be any trouble. For what it's worth to you, this whole thing is going to be cleared up in the morning."

For the first time in days, Joe felt really confident. While he was speaking, the door opened and closed and Sam Bentley's huge body filled the small office. Joe and Bentley looked at each other for a minute, and a smile pulled at the corner of Bentley's thick lips.

"Well, I'll be," Bentley finally said slowly. "You done it again, boy. I think this sets a record. Most men don't want to be arrested a second time." He

started to draw his gun, but McRaney stopped him.

"Now, hold on, Sam," McRaney said, an amused expression on his face. Smiling slightly, he looked the big man up and down. Reaching out, he closed his hand over the sheriff's thick wrist. "In the first place, you can't arrest him. Joe's under the protection of the U.S. Army. In the second place, if he was guilty, do you think he'd come back here? We just stopped to tell you that there will be a court hearing tomorrow morning at nine to clear Joe of all the charges against him. We've talked to Judge Jennings and his daughter. There never was any assault. Miss Jennings made up the whole story to prove a point to her father. Ben Milligan was as innocent as Joe is."

Bentley lowered his head and squinted skeptically at Joe. "I knew from the beginning that you wasn't Milligan. But that don't tell me where he is. I'm guessing that since you're back here with Eric, you know the answer to that one." Joe nodded. "Where is he?" Bentley asked sternly, lowering his pistol back into its holster.

Joe recounted finding Milligan in El Paso, the Indians stealing the horse, and Milligan being killed by the Indians. Pure astonishment raced across Bentley's huge face when Joe got to the part about him killing all of the renegades.

"I guess you being here says something," Bentley said finally. "I'm not going to arrest you for breaking out of jail, although I could, you know. All I'm going to ask is that you don't leave town until after the hearing tomorrow."

Joe wanted to laugh. Bentley's request was stupid. Joe knew he'd only said it to sound official in front

of McRaney.

Joe and McRaney turned around and started for the door, in a hurry to get out into the cool night air. Bentley's deep voice stopped them.

"Howard, one question," he said. "Just why did Beth Jennings change her mind? She was so sure that you was Milligan that day in court. What did you do to convince her that she was wrong?"

Joe was unsure how to answer Bentley's question, and had to think for a second before committing himself.

"The power of persuasion and the logic of justice," he finally answered, raising his brows and shrugging his shoulders. Before Bentley could say any more, the two men went out the door and Joe closed it behind him.

McRaney stood out like a tumbleweed among roses in his uniform, and the men were drawing undue attention. They had to find a place to spend the night. Usually the livery was a logical place, but Gib Colson would probably cause a scene and they wanted to avoid it if possible. Joe smiled as an idea struck him.

"Come on," he said, swinging up into the saddle. McRaney mounted and followed Joe to Vana's saloon. McRaney didn't ask any questions. He'd learned that Joe didn't give a lot of thought to what he did. He just went on impulse and let a higher power take care of him.

Joe dismounted, opened the back door and was pleased to see a light coming from under the office door.

"Come in," her voice called out at his knock. Joe

felt that strange feeling around his heart again at the sound of her voice. She was sitting at the desk, another ledger before her, when he opened the door.

"Things must have gone your way at the Jennings'," she said, smiling up at him and folding her hands in her lap, "or you wouldn't be standing here. Am I right?" Her smile turned to a frown when she noticed that Joe was just staring down at her. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," he answered, shaking his head quickly. He couldn't admit how she affected him. Not right then, anyway. He had to find out what was between her and Milligan. "Would you do McRaney and me another big favor?" When she nodded, he went on. "We need a place to spend the night. I don't want another run in with Ezra Stillman or Gib Colson."

Vana understood his situation and nodded again. Pushing the chair back from the desk, she got to her feet. Picking up the lamp, she led the way to a storeroom opposite her office.

"There are several blankets in the corner." She pointed to the place and handed him the lamp. "Nobody ever comes in here, except me and the bartender. He won't be back again. He's already stocked the bar. You won't be bothered tonight. I'll come back later and take the horses to my place."

They looked at each other and something passed between them again. Unable to help himself, Joe bent down and lightly kissed her soft lips. Vana stepped away first and walked to the door. A soft pink glow covered her face.

"We'll talk tomorrow after all of this is over," Joe

told her, a funny feeling all over him. She nodded, smiled, and went back to her office and closed the door.

Joe and McRaney unsaddled the horses, leaving them tied to a small bush, then went back to the storeroom to spend the night.

Joe thought that the nightmare was over, now that Beth Jennings was going to tell the truth.

But it seemed that his head had no more than touched the saddle when two faces began swirling toward him. At first he couldn't tell who the faces belonged to. But as they got closer, he could see Vana and Beth. For a brief time they smiled at him. Then suddenly both faces became Beth, and the smile turned into a snarl. The face kept advancing until it was only inches from him.

Joe woke up in a sweat and he was breathing hard. Realizing that he'd only had a bad dream again, he took a deep breath and went back to sleep.

They were awakened the next morning by a light tapping at the door. Since there were no windows in the room, they had no way of knowing that it was well past sun-up.

Groggily, Joe got to his feet and pushed the hair out of his face. He wasn't surprised to see Vana standing there, a pot of coffee in one hand and a napkin-covered plate in the other. She looked fresh as a drop of rain. Again something passed between them.

McRaney watched them in silence, then cleared his throat. That broke the spell.

"I assumed you had cups," she said, coming into the room, bringing with her a fragrance of spice, "so

I didn't bring any."

Joe lit the lamp and then took the coffee pot. She sat the plate down on a whiskey crate. When she removed the napkin, the sight and smell of ham, eggs and biscuits almost overwhelmed them. Joe could feel his mouth water.

"I've never seen anything that looked so good in my life," McRaney told her, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "I'll bet you made those biscuits. Only a woman could add that golden touch."

She nodded and turned pink at his compliment. Joe knew he'd never seen a woman more beautiful than Vana Glaser.

"I'll go now and let you two eat," she said, holding her hands in front of her and smiling coyly at Joe. "There's a barrel of water by the back door, if you'd like to bathe before going to court. I brought the horses back. Just leave the plate. I'll get it later."

Without waiting for an answer, she closed the door. McRaney got cups from the saddlebags and it didn't take long for the once-heaping plate to be almost as clean as the day it was bought.

"You're crazy if you don't try to form a lasting relationship with that woman after you're through with Jennings," McRaney blurted out. There was a knowing gleam in his eyes.

"I know," Joe replied, nodding, "and I am. The only thing that bothers me is, what was Milligan to her? She won't come right out and say."

He went to the back door and rolled the water barrel inside. They bathed, shaved and changed clothes. Joe felt like a new man. Packing the



saddlebags, they saddled the horses, blew out the lamp and put the water barrel back outside.

"Well, are you ready to face the sheriff and Jennings?" McRaney asked, a dubious look on his dark face.

"Yeah," Joe answered quickly, picking up the reins. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be. I want to hurry and get it over with, so I can start to work with you. I want to see what can be done to help Chief Keoni and his people. I really like that Indian. He's the first one I ever knew."

A solemn look crossed McRaney's face as they rode down the alley, and he shook his head slightly.

"What's the matter?" Joe asked, turning in the saddle to face McRaney.

"Joe, you might be biting off more than you can chew in that matter," McRaney said slowly, taking a deep breath.

"Why?" Joe asked, a deep frown crossing his face. "Those people have a right to live the way they want to without being bothered by intruders crossing their land." Anger blistered his words.

"I know, I know," McRaney said patronizingly. "But that isn't your problem. It's between them and the government. Think about it later."

"I think you should send another telegram to Senator Powers," Joe suggested, watching McRaney. "He might change his mind. Beth Jennings did."

"Maybe," McRaney said.

Joe couldn't believe that McRaney was acting this way. Before he could press the subject further, they were in front of the sheriff's office. Bentley was sitting in a chair tilted back against the wall. The

chair creaked under his massive weight when he brought it down on the porch and heaved his body up.

"Well, Howard, are you ready for your new day in court?" Bentley asked affably as Joe and McRaney dismounted and stepped up by him on the sidewalk. "Most men don't get a second chance. Jennings was by here a little while ago and told me all about the situation."

He frowned when a strange look passed over Joe's features—one of fright. "Maybe he didn't tell me *all* about the situation," Bentley said, narrowing his eyes.

"He told you all you need to know, Sam," McRaney said, a slow grin taking away the scowl he'd had when talking about Keoni. Joe was surprised at the sudden change in him.

"I'm ready if you are," Joe said, looking from McRaney to the sheriff. At the sheriff's nod, the three men walked down the plank sidewalk toward the saloon.

Once more, the place had been transformed into a courtroom and word of mouth had filled the saloon again. The same small table was in front of the bar. A Bible and gavel were on the table and an arm chair was behind the table.

A murmur ran throughout the crowd when Joe, McRaney and Bentley came into the saloon. Joe and the sheriff sat down in the empty chairs on the right side of the saloon the same as before. The chair behind the desk and the one on the left side of the saloon were empty. Panic gripped Joe. Was it possible that Beth Jennings and her father weren't

going to show up? Surely someone as law abiding as Wilson Jennings wouldn't do a thing like that!

Had Beth changed her mind? Wasn't she going to help him? Her word was still all that stood between him and a rope. He could still hang!

"What time do you have?" Joe asked Bentley, anxiety in his voice. His mouth was bone dry. But his hands were wet and he wiped them on his pants. The sheriff was much too slow to Joe's way of thinking in removing the gold watch from his pocket.

"Seven minutes past nine," Bentley replied, replacing the watch and mopping his face with a handkerchief. Turning around in the chair, Joe met Vana's eyes and she smiled broadly at him. He tried to smile back at her, but the thought of betrayal wouldn't let him. Just as he turned back around in the chair, another murmur buzzed through the crowd.

Judge Wilson Jennings and Beth were making their way between the tables. The judge, dressed in a somber black suit, black tie and white shirt, pulled the chair back from the table and stood behind it, holding his stove pipe hat in his hand until Beth sat down in the empty chair.

Joe glanced at Beth and did a double-take. He hardly recognized her. The pitiful image of her lying naked on the bed last night flashed through his mind. Not in a sexual way, but in a way to determine if that woman was the same as this one. She looked completely different. He couldn't believe the change in her.

Joe turned around in the chair and looked at Vana. She appeared as bewildered as Joe felt. She shook her

head slightly and shrugged her slender shoulders. Joe turned back in the chair and stared at Beth Jennings again. She didn't even favor the woman who'd sat in that very place only a few days ago and accused him of raping her.

Today she sat with her head held up high, an almost serene expression on her face. Then it struck Joe what was so different about her. She wasn't wearing a hat or veil. Her hair, although it still had a mousy color, was parted on the right side and combed over to hang in waves down around her shoulders. A pink glow added color to her thin cheeks. Beth Jennings was no longer the dowdy young woman he'd seen when he was behind bars. She was almost pretty, in a green-and-white dotted blouse with long fitted sleeves and a green skirt.

No doubt feeling Joe's piercing look, she turned her head slowly and smiled uncertainly at him. Joe felt himself return the smile.

"If I didn't see it, I wouldn't believe it," Bentley said, leaning over to whisper to Joe. "She used to be ugly. I don't know what you did to her last night, but it worked."

Joe didn't know what to think, so he didn't say anything. The judge banged the gavel down on the table, preventing him from saying anything anyway.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Jennings began wearily, "the circuit court of the state of Texas and town of Pecos is now in session."

The judge's voice and eyes had lost a lot of their animosity, volume and glare. He looked like a drained old man sitting there with his hands folded on the table. "Several days ago, a young man rode

into town. He was minding his own business and on his way to Fort Davis to work."

The judge's words were addressed to the table, since he was staring down at it. Slowly, he raised his head and looked over at Joe. A sorrowful expression made Joe feel sorry for him and he couldn't believe the feeling. A couple of days ago Joe had wanted to do bodily harm to the man; even kill him. Now all Joe wanted to do was hurry and get away from the pitiful looking man sitting there. Jennings looked like every emotion had been drained out of him.

"This young man," Jennings went on in a monotone, "just happened to look like another young man who had the misfortune of spending some time here in our fair town."

Joe was shocked at the judge's low voice and the blank look in his eyes. Taking a deep breath, the judge leaned back in the chair, crossed his long legs and folded his arms across his thin chest.

"His name was Ben Milligan," he went on, swallowing hard a couple of times. "My daughter, Beth, became attracted to him."

Another murmur ran through the crowd. Joe turned around and met Gib Colson's blood-shot eyes. Colson averted his eyes quickly and dropped his head. Looking to the other side of the saloon, Joe locked gazes with Ezra Stillman, who reacted in the same way as Colson.

"Beth has never had many gentlemen callers and it's mostly because of me." Jennings continued his remorseful narration. "I felt that most of the men weren't good enough for her because I was a judge. Those I considered worthy of her couldn't stand my

conceitedness or overbearingness."

Jennings raised and turned his head looking at no one in particular. The crowd shuffled their feet and cleared their throats in embarrassment. Joe felt sorry for the man who was humbling himself so openly before all of them.

If someone had told Joe two weeks ago that he would see this happening now, he would have called him a liar.

"To make a long story short," Jennings went on, "my daughter developed feelings for Ben Milligan which weren't returned by him. She was so hurt by his rejection that she accused him of . . ."

Jennings stopped and turned a brilliant red. Joe quickly glanced over at Beth. If he hadn't known better, he'd have sworn that she was listening to a dull sermon. She chewed on the inside of her bottom lip and stared at the floor, gripping a green drawstring purse in her hands.

"Milligan was arrested," Jennings resumed. "He escaped on Vana Glaser's horse." He took a deep breath and that snapped him back. "Joe Howard looked enough like Ben Milligan to be him. This man," Jennings pointed a long thin finger at Joe, "was accused of being Ben Milligan by three people, including my daughter. He was put in jail and I sentenced him to hang. I sentenced an innocent man to hang! Thank God, he escaped."

Joe swallowed remembering how close he'd come to feeling the rope around his neck. Jennings looked down at the table and slowly raised his head. Joe was astonished when Jennings looked squarely at him.

"Would it do any good if I said I'm sorry?"

Jennings asked. Joe turned red. He couldn't believe that a judge was apologizing to him and he felt like a fool sitting there. A silence hung over the court room until a man in the back cleared his throat with a cough.

"This man," Jennings said, taking a deep breath and standing up, "went to find Milligan. He did find him. Unfortunately Milligan was killed." A gasp erupted throughout the saloon. "This hearing is to declare that Joe Howard is really who he says he is and is innocent of all charges that were against him. This whole town owes him an apology."

Jennings picked up the gavel and tapped the table lightly. Then, picking up his tall hat, he walked to Beth to help her up from the chair. She raised her head and looked up at her father. A cold expression hardened her green eyes.

Shrugging his hand roughly off her shoulder she stood and slowly opened the strings of her purse. As everyone watched in horror and disbelief she withdrew a snub-nose pistol. Her hand trembling; she aimed it at her father and pulled the trigger. The shot went wild, slamming into the opposite wall. Jennings stopped in his tracks, his thin face devoid of color.

A horrified gasp swept over the saloon. A woman in the back screamed. In the time that it took for Beth to aim the pistol again, Joe made his move. He would later wonder how he cleared the space between him and Beth as fast as he did but luck was on his side. Jumping up from the chair he dashed toward Beth, grabbed her around the waist and threw her to the floor. The pistol went off again, putting a new hole

in the bar. Taking the pistol from her cold hand Joe helped her up.

Bentley hurried over as fast as his ponderous bulk would allow and took the pistol from Joe.

"Why?" the judge asked. "Why, Beth?"

"You embarrassed me and made me look like a fool," Beth answered coldly. "No man would look at me because of you. They weren't good enough for me. You wouldn't let me dress like Vana Glaser. You said that was cheap. But you liked looking at her."

"Miss Jennings," Bentley said, shock all over his red face, "do you know what you just did? You tried to shoot your father!"

Beth turned to the sheriff.

"You don't understand," she replied tonelessly. "He governed everything I did and everyone I saw. Life with him was pure hell." Her voice trailed off. "Vana Glaser was what he wouldn't let me be."

The onlookers gasped. Vana rushed up to Beth and despite what had just happened tried to put her arm around the pale girl. Beth jerked her eyes from Bentley to the woman standing beside her.

"Take your hands off me, you barroom hussy," Beth grated between clenched teeth, drawing out each word. Stepping back, she raised her arm and slapped Vana as hard as she could across the left side of her face. "You don't owe me anything. You had Ben and you'll probably end up with Joe Howard." She turned back to Bentley. "Sheriff," she snapped, tossing her head, "take me away."

Bentley took a deep breath and hooked his thumbs over his wide belt. "Miss Jennings," he began, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I might not have the



right to do this but I'm going to ask you and your father to leave town. I think the citizens of Pecos have had all of you they want. I'm not going to give you a definite time to be gone but the sooner the better."

For a long moment the judge stared at Bentley. But he knew the sheriff was right and slowly nodded his head. Wordlessly he turned and pushed through the crowd to the street outside. Beth had no choice but to follow. They could hear the sounds of applause inside the saloon.

Joe went to Vana who still held her hand to her cheek.

"Are you all right?" he asked. She nodded and lowered her hand and Joe saw the clear imprint of Beth's hand on her cheek

Bentley exhaled a deep breath and swallowed hard.

"Okay, everybody," he said. "Everything is over. If you don't want a drink go on about your business."

Joe was startled when Bentley turned around and slapped him on the shoulder. He acted as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"Well, boy," the sheriff said in a raspy voice, "You're free to go or stay awhile. I kinda wish you'd stay. We're not all bad here in Pecos."

Joe had never felt so free in all his life. He couldn't help throwing his head back and laughing out loud.

"I must say," McRaney began, a grin on his usually solemn face, "I didn't think all of this would happen. But the important thing is that you're free. Are you ready to go? It's a long way back to the fort. We've got to help Keoni, you know."

The three men and Vana walked through the saloon to the sidewalk outside. The air smelled

better. McRaney glanced from Joe to Vana then catching Bentley's arm pulled him back into the saloon. "Come on, Sam," he said. "I'll buy you a drink."

"Are you going to stay awhile?" Vana asked, gazing up at Joe. "I heard Sam ask you to. You might learn to like it here."

Joe looked down at her upturned face. The funny feeling tightened his stomach when he remembered the feel of her soft lips when he'd kissed her earlier when she'd brought them breakfast.

"I don't know," he hedged, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "I wasn't exactly met with open arms when I first got here."

"Are you forgetting who helped you get out of jail?" Vana countered, reaching out and touching him lightly on the arm. Her touch burned through his shirt sleeve. "Or who gave you a place to sleep and who brought you breakfast?"

"No, I'm not forgetting," Joe replied. He covered her hand with his and felt her fingers tremble. He grinned down at her and their gaze held. "I think I'll work with Eric for a while. I'd like to see what can be done to help Chief Keoni and his people. I know what it's really like to have an injustice done against you."

Feeling eyes on him Joe looked up to find Ezra Stillman and Gib Colson watching them. They appeared nervous and hesitant. He knew they wanted to say something to him but weren't sure how to approach him. Part of him wanted to meet them half way but the other part refused. Just then Eric emerged from the saloon and saved him from having

to make the decision.

"Eric, are you ready to go?" Joe asked. "It's a long way to the fort and there's a lot to do."

"Don't be surprised if you see me soon," he said, a promise in his eyes. "I've been in your saloon twice and haven't had a drink yet."

"I'll save one for you," she said softly, a wide smile on her lips.

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## **PECOS JUSTICE**

When Joe Howard rode into Pecos, all he wanted was a square meal and a soft bed. What he got was a Henry rifle jammed in his ribs and a hard bunk in the local jailhouse. Seems he was the spittin' image of some sidewinder named Ben Milligan who'd raped the daughter of the circuit court judge, stole a horse, and lit a shuck for parts unknown just a few weeks before.

With the hangman's noose staring him in the eye, Howard figured the only way he'd save his neck was to track this Milligan down and drag the bushwhackin' doubleganger back to Pecos to face justice. But first he had to face a lynch mob of bloodthirsty locals who were aiming to tear him up in small pieces and paint the town red with

# **PECOS BLOOD**



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