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DAY OF THE 44

JACK BARTON

For the man named
Kincaid, the time of
waiting was over...



7 YEARS FOR VENGEANCE . . .

***It was the moment Kincaid
had waited for.
He could almost see the
man in his gunsights as he rode
slowly toward the fort.***

***Seven long years and
a woman, Kincaid thought. That's
what was owed him.***

***The years and the woman
were gone. All that was left
was to see the look
of death on the face of
the man who'd taken them . . .***

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**DAY
OF THE
44**

JACK BARTON

POPULAR LIBRARY • NEW YORK

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Chapter One

At seven minutes past four o'clock by his tarnished silver-plated watch, Walt Kincaid stepped from the adobe stationhouse and stood for a moment in the gallery's scant shade to let his eyes adjust to the brassy glare of sunlight. There was on his breath the smell of whiskey and on his face the scowl of a man not at peace with his world or with himself.

Shortly he crossed the dusty yard to the gateway in the wall that enclosed the stage station against the utter loneliness of Lost Squaw Canyon. From here he could look along the trace of a road leading to and from the station—and see absolutely nothing. Nothing but brush thickets, jumbled rocks, stark cliffs.

Here the Lost Squaw widened to perhaps a quarter of a mile. Since the station was located near the base of the north wall, most of this width lay before the place. To the west, only a hundred yards away, a jutting elbow of

canyon wall blotted out the view. But to the east, Kincaid could see for an empty mile or more.

A stagecoach came through once a day, heading east one day and west the next. Today's would roll in from the east, at a hard run, pause here briefly for a change of horses and to let its passengers eat, and then race on west—on out of the seven-mile gorge toward Fort Sands and the town of Robles.

Freight rigs occasionally used the road, and infrequently some rancher came through trail-driving a herd. More often a cavalry patrol from Sands would pass, and oftener still a band of Indians. Lost Squaw Canyon was in the heart of the Ute country.

Midway to the south wall a vagrant wind raised a dust devil. Overhead, above the canyon's rim, a buzzard wheeled in the pale sky.

Kincaid watched both, and saw them as symbols of his loneliness. He said aloud, "What the hell am I doing here?"

He'd asked that a hundred times before, and the answer was always the same: Where else could he find a job? Men who hired hands did not hire ex-convicts, and the stage company had taken him on only because no one else wanted to be agent at the Lost Squaw Canyon station. Some men feared the loneliness, more feared the Utes. The former could rob a man of his sanity, the latter take his very life. In the six months at Lost Squaw, Kincaid had lasted longer than any previous agent.

Kincaid's scowl deepened. He was here alone except for a hostler, the half-breed known as Injun Charlie, and Charlie's Ute woman, Sarah, who did the cooking. Since they counted for nothing, his bad temper had to be directed toward himself. Kincaid had something sticking in his craw that he couldn't forget for a minute. He was where he was and what he was because of another man, and so far he hadn't lifted a finger to pay off the debt or work off his grudge. If ever a man had reason to kill, Kincaid had. Yet he permitted Ben Drumgold to stay alive and go on fouling everything he touched.

That was his name: Ben Drumgold. In Colorado, that name meant something. It meant cattle and mines and political offices. But when Kincaid spoke it, it sounded like an obscenity.

"Ben Drumgold!"

He spat after saying it.

Ben Drumgold was big enough to have railroaded him into prison, to have robbed him of seven years of his life. One day soon—today, maybe—Drumgold would be aboard the stage, returning from a trip to Denver. He'd gone there; he would come back.

So what, Kincaid asked himself, are you going to do about him?

It wasn't a question he could answer—yet.

He looked at his watch again, then walked back across the yard. Wood smoke curled lazily from the chimney of the main building, telling that the squaw was readying a meal for the stage passengers. Kincaid went along the gallery where the half-breed was taking one of his frequent siestas. He prodded the man's slack body with the toe of his boot.

"Time, Charlie."

Injun Charlie looked up at him with incongruous china-blue eyes. He turned away, knowing that the breed would stare wickedly at his back. Injun Charlie hated all whites. He hated the Utes too.

At the well, midway between house and barn, Kincaid filled two wooden buckets with water. Carrying them into the barn, he let the four horses of the relay team drink. Injun Charlie came in to give him a hand with the harness, then drifted outside again. Kincaid waited with the animals in the comparative coolness of the barn, rolling and lighting a cigarette.

The breed reappeared. "Riders coming."

"Know them?"

"Nope."

"All right," Kincaid said. "Stay with the horses."

He moved into the yard, feeling once more the full weight of the midsummer heat. Three horsemen with a spare animal under light pack were on the road to the west, coming at a slow walk and barely around the out-thrusting canyon wall there. Kincaid had his look, then strode to the house. He crossed the main room where Sarah was setting places at the long plank table. The atmosphere there seemed almost solid with the mingled odors of a woodfire, fried bacon, boiled beans, sourdough biscuits and coffee. Kincaid entered his own quarters, a cubbyhole of a room, buckled on his gunbelt and took a shotgun from the rack. He broke the shotgun to make

sure both its barrels were loaded, then went outside and stood the weapon against the wall to the right of the doorway.

The stage was not yet in sight. He thought idly, "Late," then turned to watch the three riders as they approached the gateway in the adobe wall. It was a company rule that station agents should keep a wary eye on any strangers who showed up at stage time. Too many holdups had occurred during station stops. A standing stagecoach was easier game than one racing along the trail.

These three were not strangers to Kincaid, but he put no trust in them. Chris Dolan, the man in the lead, worked—or had worked—for Ben Drumgold. The second man was a hardcase named Lew Thorpe. The third, the one leading the pack-horse, was called Sanchez. No Mexican despite his name, he had a reputation as a gun-hand.

Dolan halted the other two at the gate with a wave of his hand and came on alone. He rode a blaze-faced sorrel gelding. He had a six-shooter at his right thigh, a booted rifle under his right leg. He reined in facing Kincaid, a heavy-bodied man with a ruddy complexion and a look of devilry about him. He grinned easily, and he grinned now as he pushed his hat back off his brow. He folded his hands on his saddle-horn and leaned forward.

"How are things, Walt?"

"Things are fine, Chris."

"Ain't seen you since you got out of the pen."

"You're seeing me now."

"That's so, ain't it?" Dolan said, his grin steady—and as worthless as a counterfeit coin. "How long were you inside, anyway?"

"Too long. As if you don't know that."

"Sure, I know. I always figured the evidence against you was rigged. I added it up after Ben Drumgold moved your woman over to his ranch."

Kincaid said nothing.

"So you should hate Drumgold's guts. Right?"

"You're asking that?"

Dolan's grin broadened. "I guess I know the answer," he said, and abruptly turned humorless. "The question is—how much do you hate him?"

Kincaid glanced at the pair over by the gate. They were slack in their saddles, puffing on cigarettes, seemingly disinterested. Their casual manner seemed as coun-

terfeit as Dolan's vanished grin. "Quit beating about the bush, Chris," Kincaid said. "Say what's on your mind."

"Drumgold will be on today's stage," Dolan said. "We had word from a friend up north. Our friend found out when the big man planned to leave Denver, and he wrote us a letter. We figured train and stage times, and he's due on today's stage." He paused, watched Kincaid intently for a moment. "I ain't been working for him for a couple of years. He done me dirt and I aim to even the score. Seemed like you'd want to work off your grudge. I heard you were here at Lost Squaw, and I thought I might let you throw in with us."

"Throw in with you for what?"

"Drumgold'll have thirty thousand dollars in specie with him. Cattle money. We'll split it four ways."

"No."

Dolan scowled. "Why not?"

"When I even my score with Ben Drumgold, it'll be in my own way."

"You scared, Kincaid?"

"Could be. Or maybe I'm just not a thief."

"He owes you plenty, man."

"So he does," Kincaid said. "And what I'd take off him wouldn't be stolen, if I want to split hairs. So let's say I'm scared. Scared of going back to the pen. That's where we'd all end up if we pulled something like your scheme. There'll be more people than Ben Drumgold on that stage. Driver, shotgun messenger, passengers. Witnesses, Chris. Witnesses to put us in Canon City."

Dolan shook his head. "You don't get it. You'll be in the clear, and us three'll drop from sight. Me and Lew and Sanchez will throw down on the driver and his shotgun messenger when the stage pulls in. Drumgold won't be any trouble. Hell, he never packs a gun. All you have to do is act as if we got the drop on you and took your guns. We'll ride out with the money, not acting like you had a hand in it. Later, when we're in the clear, we'll get your share of the loot to you."

Kincaid showed a miserly smile. "I can see you sharing with me, Chris."

"My word, Walt."

"Your word's not worth a damn," Kincaid said. "And I wouldn't throw in with you and those two hardcases if your word was as good as gospel." He reached for the

shotgun, thumbed back both hammers. "Clear out, Chris."

Dolan jerked erect in the saddle, his face darkening with anger. "All right," he said. "But you're a damn fool, Kincaid. Letting Drumgold get away with what he pulled on you." He lifted his reins, started to turn the sorrel away, then held it there. "Trouble with you, you're not man enough to square accounts—even with a man who railroaded you into the pen and stole your woman." He sneered. "No guts. You're empty inside, Kincaid. There's nothing in you but dryrot!"

"Now you've had your say," Kincaid said, and tilted the shotgun so that its twin muzzles bored at Dolan. "Clear out, Chris."

"Not yet, damn you," Dolan said. "There's one thing more. We're pulling it off, with you or without you. If not here where it's easy, then down-canyon where it'll be tough. And I'm warning you. If the driver and his guard are ready for us, we'll know you tipped them off—and by God we'll come back here and cut out your tongue!"

He jabbed spurs to the sorrel, ran it across the yard and through the gateway. He turned west along the road, the other two swinging in behind him. Shortly, they vanished around the jutting canyon wall, but Kincaid stayed under the gallery's warped roof, stung by Dolan's words. The truth could hurt. He had to admit that he was acting like a man without guts enough to square accounts with Ben Drumgold.

He stood there with the shotgun forgotten in his hands, a tall and lanky man of thirty-four with a rugged sort of handsomeness. He had faded yellow hair and gun-metal gray eyes that had grown cold and humorless during the past seven years—the seven years that Ben Drumgold had taken. *Seven years and my wife*, he thought. By taking the one, Drumgold had gotten the other. And had known he would. That was how he'd planned it. That was why he'd planned it, because he'd wanted Nora.

With his mind's eye, Kincaid turned back the calendar and saw again how it had been. In those days he possessed two things he loved, his ranch and his wife. He came by his ranch first. A small one, as cattle ranches went; not much for a man to brag about. But he took pride in it, for he had started with nothing. Ownership of Anchor Ranch, even with the burden of a heavy mort-

gage, made him his own boss, his own man. He rode its lush grassland with the feeling that here of all places on earth was where he belonged. He watched his beef fatten and his calf crop increase and he felt secure. He would grow, he told himself. He would prosper and his world would be good.

Putting up Anchor headquarters, he built solidly of log and stone. He constructed buildings that would last his lifetime and do too for the son he hoped to have one day. The ranch house was planned so that a woman would fit into it, and when he found Nora, and brought her to Anchor as Mrs. Walt Kincaid, she made it a home.

Nora. His memory of her had not grown dim, but its luster was badly tarnished. He met her on a trip to Denver, and knew at first sight that she was the woman of his dreams—a girl with an Irish brogue on her lips, a mischievous gleam in her eyes, a provocative smile that warmed a man and made him very much aware that he was a man. When he returned to Anchor, he brought Nora with him.

They had two good years, happy years, though there were no children and at times Nora was difficult. He learned that there was sadness as well as gaiety in her, and a restlessness too. In time, she became sad more frequently than gay. She let herself become a victim of the loneliness of the cattle country. She needed to be among people, many people; by nature Nora was a town girl. And gradually she came to hate Anchor Ranch. She felt exiled, and he, her husband, was no longer company enough.

The nearest town was Robles, thirty miles away. They went there as often as he could get away from the ranch, but not often enough for Nora. Their nearest neighbor was Ben Drumgold, on his great Crescent Ranch, but there was no Mrs. Drumgold with whom Nora could have been friendly. There was usually a woman in Crescent's big ranch house, one or another of the cheap women who paraded through Drumgold's life, but Kincaid would not have Nora associating with that sort.

After they had been married nearly two years, Drumgold began to visit them. Kincaid had no illusions about the man seeking his company. Drumgold was a hunter of women; yes, a rustler of other men's wives. Kincaid knew this, but he did not immediately object to Drumgold's

visits. He trusted Nora, and for a while at least, the man stopped by only on Sundays when Kincaid was at Anchor headquarters. Besides, Drumgold's visits cheered Nora. She became less moody, less restless. Drumgold was good company, an amusing talker, full of easy laughter and charm. For a time he was a regular visitor for Sunday dinner, and Kincaid himself enjoyed his visits. When Drumgold didn't spend a Sunday at Anchor, he had the Kincaids over to Crescent. Nora enjoyed those occasional calls at Crescent. The big house and its fine furnishings impressed her. There was a piano in the enormous parlor, and Nora would play it and sing. Kincaid too found those visits pleasant.

But he knew, in a back corner of his mind, that Drumgold had his eye on Nora. There came the day when he could no longer ignore it. He rode in off the range early one afternoon and found Drumgold at the house, with Nora. There was nothing out of the way about it, on the surface. It appeared entirely innocent, in fact. They sat in the kitchen drinking coffee and talking, at opposite sides of the table. But Drumgold had gone too far, coming there when he knew Kincaid would be away from headquarters.

When he was about to leave, Kincaid said, "Ben, don't come back."

Drumgold understood. He shrugged, smiled faintly, and said, "All right, Walt."

He did not come to Anchor again, but three weeks later Sheriff Mitch Worden and two deputies came. They arrested Kincaid on a rustling charge. The evidence against him was thirty head of Crescent cattle hidden in a small box canyon at the edge of his range, their quarter-moon brand worked over into an anchor—his iron.

It was a time when rustlers were causing the big outfits heavy losses, and so the law set out to make an example of him. Not even his own attorney believed his story that somebody—Crescent hands, of course—had planted the blotch-branded cattle on his range. He wasn't permitted to make that charge in the courtroom. A jury composed mostly of cattlemen quickly found him guilty. And the judge, a man who sat on the bench because of Ben Drumgold's political influence, sentenced him to ten years in the penitentiary.

Nora was in the courtroom during his trial. She visited

him once in prison, and wrote him regularly for a few months. Then for nearly a year he heard nothing from her. When he did hear again, it was in the form of a legal document served on him while he was working in a chain-gang on the road south of Canon City—a notice that Nora had applied for a divorce.

During his first year, he did have one fairly regular visitor—old Sam Rawles, his hired hand. Sam kept him posted, told him that rustlers were running off his cattle and that the bank was foreclosing on Anchor Ranch. Told him too about Nora moving into the big house at Crescent Ranch, as Ben Drumgold's new mistress.

And so he lost the two things he loved, his ranch and his wife.

Ten years they gave him. He served almost seven. Good behavior made him eligible for parole, and after so many years nobody was interested in keeping him in prison. He was a forgotten man. But he had forgotten nothing. The hatred that had been a part of him all those years did not fall away when he walked through the prison gate a free man. During those years, in his cell and on a chain gang and on the rock pile, one thing had sustained him—his resolve to kill Ben Drumgold.

It was not to be.

He stepped through the prison gate. He found Ed Hodges, a deputy sheriff from Robles, right there to meet him. From Hodges he learned that an ex-con was never wholly free.

Hodges took him by stagecoach to Robles, and to the sheriff's office. Sheriff Mitch Worden was a Drumgold man body and soul.

Worden said, "There's one job open to you, Kincaid. With the stage line, agent at the Lost Squaw Canyon station. Take it or get out of Colorado—all the way out. You've got that choice. Make it now."

Kincaid chose the job, a job the Devil himself would have shunned. He took it because he still meant to kill Ben Drumgold, and to do that he had to stay in Colorado. Also, he knew better than to defy Sheriff Worden by both turning down the job and refusing to leave the state. Such defiance would get him sent back to prison.

Kincaid having made his choice, Worden said, "You'll go out to Lost Squaw Canyon tomorrow. And one more thing. If you've got some notion of getting even with the

people who sent you up, get it out of your head. We're going to keep an eye on you and—"

"You talking about somebody in particular?" Kincaid cut in. "Ben Drumgold, maybe?"

Worden stared at him. "You make a false move, Kincaid, and I'll see that you rot in the pen. You savvy?"

"I hear what you say, Sheriff."

"Tonight you'll sleep in a cell here in the jail. Tomorrow we'll see that you catch the stage out to the Lost Squaw station."

Ed Hodges took Kincaid by the arm. Worden stopped them at the office door. "If you want to know about your ex-wife," he said, "she left for parts unknown four, five years ago. With a whiskey drummer."

"I didn't figure Drumgold would keep her for long," Kincaid said.

"I'm warning you," Worden said. "Forget Ben Drumgold. You're smart enough to know that no woman beds down with a man unless she wants it."

"I know that," Kincaid said. "But a man like Drumgold can fix things so the woman thinks she wants it."

Then Hodges locked him up for the night. He slept hardly at all. He lay in the dark cell, thinking. Drumgold had to be killed. But Nora was already dead, so far as he was concerned. She wouldn't come back to him even if he found her. She had changed. She was no longer the girl he'd married, but another person, and he didn't want her back. He did not blame her too much, however. She'd been young, and left alone. Drumgold had worked on her. He had made her what she had become.

No, he didn't blame Nora. He didn't hate her, either.

All his hatred was for the man who had robbed him of so much. It had not burned itself out during his six months at Lost Squaw Canyon. He'd seen Drumgold once in that time. Three weeks ago Drumgold had been aboard an eastbound stagecoach, on a trip to Denver. He'd been there at the station for half an hour, eating a meal and talking in his blustery way and laughing as if he had nothing on his conscience. He'd ignored Kincaid. He'd acted as if they had never before seen each other. And Kincaid had let him reboard the stagecoach and go his way.

Why?

Kincaid stood there on the gallery of the station house

now, three weeks later, and tried to understand why he had let the man live. Maybe it had been because the only way to kill Ben Drumgold was in cold blood and he could not bring himself to do murder. In a country where nearly every man went armed, Drumgold carried no gun. It was something he bragged about; something for which he was famous. In New Mexico, it was the notorious John Chisum who went unarmed. In Texas, it was the rascally Shanghai Pierce. Here in Colorado, Ben Drumgold. And like the other two, he went his arrogant way, in the midst of his enemies, and remained alive because he did not go armed. Few men would shoot down an unarmed man, even when eaten up by hatred.

Today, within a matter of minutes, if Chris Dolan's information was accurate, he would again come face to face with Drumgold. *And what then, Kincaid?* He had no answer.

East through the canyon rose the racket of the stage-coach, rousing him from his murky reverie. He eased the hammers of the shotgun off cocked, leaned the weapon against the adobe wall. The rig was in sight now, coming at a gallop. He moved to the center of the yard, called to Injun Charlie, "All right, bring that team out here."

The stage came racing in, faster than usual, swinging through the gateway at a careening, reckless pace, hauling up to such an abrupt stop that the four blowing, lathered horses set back on their haunches.

Kincaid saw that something was wrong. He saw too the right side door of the coach swing open and a passenger jump to the ground the instant the wheels ground to a stop. That passenger was Ben Drumgold.

Chapter Two

Drumgold remained by the coach, holding the door open. He was a man accustomed to giving orders, and he gave one to Kincaid now.

"Lend me a hand here!"

Kincaid realized suddenly that the shotgun messenger was missing. The driver, old Hank Weaver, sat alone on the box. He stopped by the near front wheel, looking up.

"What happened, Hank?"

"Utes," Weaver said. "They got my gun-guard. Ed Harnish. Shot him off the box." He wiped sweat and dust from his whiskery face with a red bandana. "Plugged one of the passengers. For a little while I figured we were all goners. And we've got women aboard."

"Where'd they jump you?"

"Outside the canyon."

"How many?"

"About twenty."

Drumgold said again, more demandingly, "Lend a hand here!" And this time he added, "There's a hurt man inside. Help me with him before he bleeds to death!"

Kincaid went to the open door and poked his head inside. There were five passengers besides Drumgold, one lying in an awkwardly twisted position on the floor. The wounded man's shirt was red-wet with blood. He appeared to be unconscious. Kincaid knew him. Dan Macklin. Another heavyweight cattleman from down around Robles.

Kincaid reached in, took Macklin under the shoulders, half lifted and half dragged him from the coach. Drumgold took the man's legs, and the two of them carried him across the yard and into the house. Once inside, Kincaid called to the Ute woman, "Hot water, Sarah, and the bottle of carbolic. And something for bandages."

They took Macklin into Kincaid's room and laid him upon the bed. He groaned, opened his eyes, and said thinly, "Ben, how bad is it?"

Drumgold said, "Not too bad, Dan." His tone was soothing. "A slug through your shoulder. It could have been worse, a lot worse. Take it easy."

"Give it to me straight."

"I'm telling you the truth."

"Look, if I'm cashing in my chips, I want to know it," Macklin persisted, anxiety running through the weakness of his voice. "If I'm a goner, I've got affairs to put straight."

"Dan, you've got nothing to worry about," Drumgold said. He looked at Kincaid, and as on his other stop here he kept up the pretense of never having known him. "Hurry that squaw up, will you?"

He removed hat and coat, threw them aside. He unbuttoned his vest and began rolling up his shirt sleeves. He was a coarsely handsome man of about forty-five with a dusting of gray at his temples and in his neat-trimmed mustache. His suit was of brown broadcloth, his vest of a flowered pattern; he had a vain streak and was always well tailored and freshly barbered. He was as tall as Kincaid, and half again as thick through the body. He had that air of arrogance that was characteristic of the cattle barons. He evidently intended to care for Macklin's wound, himself, and Kincaid supposed he was motivated by their being the same breed of men. The big-outfit men always stuck together, Kincaid knew from his

own ranching days. Drumgold bent over the man on the bed and began unbuttoning his shirt to get at the wound.

Kincaid stood there a moment longer, comparing Drumgold's concern for Macklin with the man's treatment of him seven years ago. The comparison added to his hatred. He swore under his breath and turned to leave the room, but Drumgold's sharp "Kincaid" faced him about at the door.

"So you recognize me now, do you?"

Drumgold ignored that. "One of the passengers is a Miss Worden," he said. "She's badly upset by what happened. Look after her until I'm through here." He paused, then added, "The lady is my fiancée."

"Your what?"

"My fiancée. The woman I'm going to marry."

"You're marrying somebody?" Kincaid said. "Hell, I thought you just stole other men's women."

Drumgold's face hardened. "Kincaid, I want no trouble with you," he said. "I never took a woman who didn't come to me willingly. If I ever took another man's woman, it was only after he'd left her in the lurch—one way or another."

"Like after he got railroaded into the pen, maybe?"

"Railroaded? You weren't railroaded, man."

"What would you call it, Ben?"

"Look! I'm not arguing with you. Get that squaw in here."

Kincaid eyed him in a speculative way, saying, "So you're going to marry this one? That's interesting, Ben. Mighty interesting. Sure, I'll get the squaw in here."

He went to hurry Sarah, and to see in what way Drumgold's latest woman was so special that the man planned to make her his wife.

Hank Weaver was leaning against the left front wheel of his Concord rig. He was chewing on a tobacco cud, brooding, and Kincaid guessed that he was thinking of his dead shotgun messenger, Ed Harnish. Injun Charlie stood midway between stagecoach and barn, holding the fresh relay of horses and staring at the four people grouped at the side of the coach. There was a sneer on Injun Charlie's dark, angular face. Behind that sneer, Kincaid knew, was a hatred born of envy. Injun Charlie lived in a private hell, tormented by his being neither

white man nor Indian. He had the idea that members of both races regarded him as an inferior. This fixation was false more often than true, but it made him feel himself an outcast and he was more intolerant than anyone he encountered. Perhaps he found reason to be contemptuous of the four people he watched, but Kincaid doubted that.

There were two women and two men, and Kincaid paused on the gallery to look them over. He rolled and lit a cigarette while at it. The two men were obviously tenderfeet, one young and the other middle-aged. The young one was of medium height and slight of build. He wore a black suit and a narrow brimmed hat. The middle-aged one was short and pudgy, wearing a checked suit and a hard hat; Kincaid took him for a drummer. He did not know what the youth might be, but he had the feeling that neither man would count for much as men went in this hard country. Dragging deep on his cigarette, he shifted his gaze to the women.

One was a chippy. Paint and powder, hair bleached to a brassy brightness; a hat with too many artificial flowers and a dress too low cut and form-fitting. A dance-hall girl. Maybe even a parlor-house girl. Ben Drumgold might have an affair with her sort, but she was not the kind he would marry.

The other was different. A lady. She too was a blonde, but naturally so; her hair reminded him of ripe wheat. Her appearance was subdued, her clothing fashionable and in good taste. She was not as young as the chippy; must be in her late twenties, Kincaid judged. She was rather tall. Her features were cameo-perfect, her complexion flawless. She was the sort a man like Ben Drumgold would choose when, at long last, he decided to marry.

Kincaid found himself thinking: *Through her you could hurt him. You could even the score without killing in cold blood.* It was a disturbing thought, so alien to his nature that it might have come to him secondhanded. But he couldn't reject it; burr-like, it clung to his mind. He understood Ben Drumgold well enough to realize that this woman must mean more to him than all the dozens of women with whom he'd been involved over the years. It could be that Drumgold the stud had at last come to love a woman. Or maybe he had reached the age where he felt it important to found a dynasty as well as an empire of cattle and mines and political offices. He might have

chosen this thoroughbred of a woman to bear his children.

Whatever the reason for Drumgold's taking her for his wife, it would hurt him badly to lose her. It would be more painful than sudden death. Kincaid knew that pain all too well. Even now, years after he had accepted the loss of Nora, the aching need in him at times became torment. He kept a jug of whiskey in his room, and when the need for Nora became too sharp, he pulled on that jug to dull the ache. . . . But at last he had found Ben Drumgold's vulnerable side. To lose this woman would hurt the man more than anything else. Kincaid wanted to disown the thought, for he knew that in hurting Drumgold in that way the woman too would be hurt. But he could not rid himself of it.

She must have felt his gaze upon her, for she turned her head and looked directly at him. Something about him touched off curiosity in her, and she examined him critically for a long moment. The three people with her kept on discussing the Indian attack in loud excited voices, all talking at once. But she appeared quite calm. If she'd been upset, as Drumgold thought, she now had herself under control. She continued to regard Kincaid in that grave, thoughtful manner. She seemed a little puzzled by him, for she began to frown slightly. Finally she crossed the yard. By the time she faced him, he knew what Drumgold saw in her. She was an extremely desirable woman, one a man would cherish rather than take and forget. There was depth to her, intelligence and character; such a woman would attract a man satiated with shallow women. As for Kincaid, he had not known any sort of woman for more than seven years, and now the blood coursed swiftly through his veins.

"Mr. Macklin," she said, her voice pleasant to his ears. "Is he dangerously hurt?"

"He's not as bad off as he thinks."

"But he should have a doctor, surely."

"He should, but he won't have—not until he gets to Robles."

"It's a long way. Can he stand the trip?"

"He'll have to stand it."

She frowned, not liking his blunt, unfeeling tone. "You're not very sympathetic."

"My being sympathetic wouldn't help him. You're Miss Worden?"

"Yes, I'm Virginia Worden," she said, a coolness in her voice. "And you?"

"Kincaid's my name. Walt Kincaid."

"May I ask you a question, Mr. Kincaid?"

"I don't see why not."

"Why were you scowling at me while I was standing by the stagecoach?"

"Was I doing that?"

"You were," she said. "Did something about me displease you?"

He gazed at her in silence for a time, seeing beauty in her face and finding it not an empty beauty. There was warmth to her. She would be a pleasant person to know, of even disposition, without extremes of moods. It seemed to Kincaid that Ben Drumgold had done well by himself—again.

He said finally, "Displease me? To the contrary. What I saw about you pleased me very much, Miss Worden—as it would any man."

"Still, you scowled," she said. "Was your scowl for someone else? Did looking at me make you think of some other person—Ben Drumgold, perhaps?"

"Now, why would you think that?"

"I saw how you looked at him when you came to help with Mr. Macklin."

"And how was that?"

"With hatred."

He'd always believed that he had a poker face, that his feelings didn't show. He said, "You have an inquisitive nature, Miss Worden."

She laughed. "And a discerning eye?" she asked. Then, grave again: "I'm curious about people, especially about those who seem to react strongly to me. Isn't that a natural thing, Mr. Kincaid?"

"Yes, but—"

"But what, Mr. Kincaid?"

"Well, sometimes it's better not to pry," he said, and turned away.

He crossed to the stagecoach and said to Hank Weaver, "You'll be going on, won't you?"

"I've got a schedule," the driver said. "Indians or no Indians, I've got to try to stay on it."

"You'll run into more trouble down-canyon."

"More Utes?"

"Road agents," Kincaid said. "They're after some money Drumgold is supposed to be carrying and—"

He was interrupted by a scream from the other woman passenger, the girl with the brassy hair and gaudy clothes. She and the two tenderfeet still stood by the coach, on the opposite side from Kincaid and Weaver. She screamed again as Kincaid started around the double-hitch of horses, and one of the men cried out in alarm. As he came past the team, Kincaid saw that the girl and the men were staring in fright toward the gateway. Two Indians sat their ponies just outside, one an old man and the other a boy of twelve or thirteen. The younger tenderfoot jerked a revolver from inside his coat and leveled it at the Indians.

"Wait a minute!" Kincaid shouted. "Don't pull that trigger, damn it!"

He leaped at the man with the gun, but reached him an instant too late. The shot blasted. The old Ute, shot squarely between the eyes, toppled from his pony. He landed in a twisted heap, having made no outcry and not moving after reaching the ground. The boy stared at the old man—his grandfather, Kincaid knew—with incredulous eyes, then looked back at the man with the gun. The tenderfoot was beading the boy, but Kincaid reached him in time to knock his arm up as the revolver went off. The shot missed its mark and the tenderfoot whirled on Kincaid. "What the hell?" he shouted, and swung his gun like a club.

Kincaid ducked low, slammed against the youth's legs, bowled him over backwards. He straightened, kicked the weapon from the tenderfoot's hand, and picked it up. The tenderfoot lay dazed for a moment, then slowly picked himself up. His wildness was gone. Now he just seemed bewildered.

"What ails you?" he demanded. "You crazy?"

"I'm wondering the same thing about you, friend," Kincaid said. "I told you not to fire that shot."

"Those Indians—"

"A harmless old man and a skinny kid."

"Harmless? I was in this stagecoach when those savages attacked it!"

Kincaid said, "Not those two," and tried to put down his anger. He glanced at the gateway. The old man lay there, grotesque in death. The kid was running his pony

west along the road. Kincaid shook his head grimly. "Now there'll be hell to pay," he said. "Friend, you're just too damn quick on the trigger."

"Now, listen, mister—"

"You listen," Kincaid said. "Those two came here once a week or so for handout of grub and tobacco. I never turned them down, and because of that the Utes left this place alone. But not now. Not any more will they leave it alone!"

"How could I know that?" The tenderfoot's face was sulky, his tone half apologetic and half defiant. "How was I to know there weren't a half hundred more somewhere out there?"

"You couldn't know that. But I told you not to shoot."

"I didn't hear you."

"You hard of hearing?"

"No."

Kincaid pointed at the other tenderfoot, the pudgy man. "What's your name?"

"Parsons. Bert Parsons. From St. Louis."

"You hear me tell him not to shoot, Parsons?"

"Well—yes."

Kincaid nodded at the girl. "You?"

She hesitated, looked uneasily at the younger man, then said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Forsythe. But I did hear this man yell at you."

Kincaid said, "Forsythe, eh? Well, Forsythe, everybody but you heard me." He held up the revolver. "You're real handy with a gun. A little too handy. How come?"

"When I learn to use a tool or a weapon, I learn to use it well," Forsythe said. "A part of my training."

"Your training?"

"I'm a mining engineer."

"Are you, now?"

"You doubt my word?"

"I don't know—yet. I just wonder about any man handy with a gun."

Forsythe flushed. There was still a smooth-cheeked, boyish look about him. "So I'm handy with a gun," he said. "But that doesn't make me a gunman. I've been working as an engineer at the Lucky Widow Mine in Cripple Creek, and I'm on my way to a job with the Faraday Mining Company at Robles. Mr. Drumgold can vouch for me. He'll tell you I'm no gunman."

Virginia Worden had joined them and taken most of this in. She said, "He's telling the truth, Kincaid. Why don't you stop badgering him? You know why he didn't hear you call to him."

He faced her. "I know?"

Her manner was chill, her eyes frosty. "I think you do," she said. "I think you merely want him to say why he didn't hear. You'd take it as a confession, and that would give you some sort of satisfaction. Isn't that right?"

He frowned. "Miss Worden, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you, really?" she said. "You were quite callous in the way you answered my questions about Mr. Macklin's condition. You were rude to me a few minutes ago, practically telling me that I should mind my own business. Now you want to humiliate this young man. For some reason, you have a grudge against—well, all of us. Or is it against the whole world, Kincaid?"

She turned to Forsythe. "It's nothing to be ashamed of," she told him. "We all felt that way—and still do. All of us who were on the stage when it was attacked. Why not let him win his point by telling him?"

Kincaid said, "Never mind. I savvy it now. He was scared. So scared he didn't hear me yell. An old man and a small boy scared him that bad." He threw the revolver to the ground at Forsythe's feet. "Keep that out of sight so long as you're here," he said. "If I catch you with it in your hand again, I'll ram it down your fool throat."

He walked over to the gateway and stood brooding over the dead Ute. After a time he called to Injun Charlie, "Bring a rope."

When the half-breed came, they lifted the body onto the scrawny spotted pony and secured it with the rope. The pony was reined with a rawhide *bosal*, and Kincaid tied it back. He led the animal away from the gate, headed it west and started it moving with a yell and a slap across the rump. The kid would find it, all right.

He turned back to Injun Charlie. "Trouble, sure, Charlie."

"Yeah, bad trouble. One way to head it off, maybe."

"How's that?"

Injun Charlie's blue eyes gleamed wickedly.

"Give the Utes the man who killed him," he said.

Chapter Three

The passengers went inside the house, and Kincaid, with Injun Charlie's help, got the fresh team hitched to the stagecoach. They worked in silence. They seldom talked, those two. The half-breed lived tight within himself, and Kincaid was habitually lost in tormented thoughts.

Drumgold stepped from the house, still in his shirt-sleeves. He said, "I want a word with you, Kincaid," and came part way across the yard, halting to light a cigar. He was frowning, looking bad tempered.

They had no neutral ground on which to meet. They faced each other like a couple of hostile dogs. Kincaid said, "Well, have it," his tone not even close to being civil.

Drumgold said, in much the same tone, "You've got a chip on your shoulder, Kincaid."

"You expect me to hold my hat in my hand and say 'sir' to you?"

"I'm talking about your treatment of the others."

"Maybe I should have pinned a medal on that Forsythe."

"He lost his head, seeing those Indians."

"And one of them is dead."

"A damn savage," Drumgold said. "He hardly matters."

"A human being," Kincaid said. "And he matters to the kid who was with him. And, yes, to me. I knew him, and he looked on me as a friend. But he matters in another way. The Utes will want to avenge his death, and I'm the one who'll have to face them—not that tenderfoot."

"Well, it was a mistake and there's no correcting it," Drumgold said, and so dismissed the dead Ute from his mind. "Aside from being rough with young Forsythe, you had words with Miss Worden. That I can't overlook."

"She complained about me, did she?"

"No. To be truthful, she didn't. I heard it from the other woman."

"I'll apologize to Miss Worden."

"Never mind that," Drumgold said. "Just keep away from her."

"You scared I'll tell her what you are?"

"The lady is aware that there were once other women in my life."

"Does she know you railroaded a man into prison to get his wife?"

Drumgold swore. "Kincaid, you've got no proof that I did any such thing. And I deny that I did. Your wife came to me after they sent you up. That I admit. But I had nothing to do with your being railroaded—if you were railroaded. Look elsewhere for a man to blame that on. Talk to the man who got your ranch after the bank took it over."

"Who's that?"

"You should know, even if nobody's told you. There's only one man who wanted your range."

Kincaid frowned in thought. Seven years in prison was a long time for a man's memory to span. Drumgold's great Crescent Ranch had been to the east of his Anchor Ranch. To the west there'd been the Ladder A outfit, owned by a man named Matthew Adams. An old man, Adams, but a big operator. On two occasions he'd tried to buy Kincaid out, claiming he needed more graze. Kincaid remembered him as a square shooter, and he

couldn't believe that the man had been capable of hiding his true nature.

He said, "It's too pat, Drumgold. You can't pass the buck like that, not when Crescent cattle—your cattle—were used in the scheme."

"By using Crescent cattle, Adams made the case all the tighter," Drumgold said. "And kept you from suspecting him. If there was a railroading, which I still don't believe."

"There was one," Kincaid said, "and you were behind it." But now, in spite of himself, a seed of doubt sprouted in his mind.

Drumgold watched him warily, puffing on his cigar. "Anyway," he said, "it's over and done with and it doesn't concern me one way or another. Your woman left me, just as she left you. She left me for a whiskey drummer and she probably left him for somebody else. No doubt she's lived with a dozen men since you last saw her." He should have taken the rocky set of Kincaid's jaw as a warning signal. Instead, he went on, "Why don't you forget her? Why brood about a woman who has no more morals than—"

Kincaid hit him, striking out in blind fury. The blow caught Drumgold on the left jaw, knocked the cigar from his mouth and snapped his head back. He swayed off balance, and then his knees buckled and dropped him to the ground. Kincaid bent over him and got a two-handed grip on his vest and shirt and hauled him to his feet.

"You made her what she is, you bastard!" he said, all but shouting it. "I ought to kill you with my bare hands!"

A voice called, "Quit it, Walt! Don't be a damn fool!"

It brought Kincaid to his senses. He threw Drumgold from him, rolling him in the dirt. Old Hank Weaver came hurrying across to them. Then Virginia Worden came from the house and ran toward them. Drumgold picked himself up and stood swaying. She caught hold of his arm.

"Ben, what happened? What did this man do to you?"

"It's nothing," Drumgold panted. "You'd better go back inside."

"It is something," Virginia said, and looked now at Kincaid as if he were a madman. "If he's attacked you—"

"Go back inside, I tell you," Drumgold said. "It's better that way."

Kincaid had nothing left but his hatred of the man. His fury was wholly spent, and he felt empty inside. It occurred to him that this was as far as he would ever get in paying back Ben Drumgold, and the realization made him bitter. He said dully, "Let her stay. You've got nothing to worry about. I won't lay a hand on you again and I won't embarrass you by talking out of turn."

Virginia kept on watching him, but she spoke to Drumgold. "What have you done to make him hate you like this?"

"Nothing," Drumgold said. "Nothing at all."

The lie showed on his face. The woman saw it, and Kincaid could see that it hurt her. He understood also why he would simply go on hating Ben Drumgold without having his revenge. It was because of her. By killing the man, he would be hurting her—perhaps wrecking her life. She should have no meaning for him at all. She was merely a stranger soon to go out of his life. But somehow she had reached deep into him, and he could not cause her sorrow.

He said to her, "Like he says, it's nothing. Not now, anyway. You've got no reason to be afraid for him. I'm done with him."

He started to turn away. Then Drumgold said, "Wait a minute," and Kincaid saw in his eyes a reflection of a hatred as bitter as his own. A few minutes ago he hadn't been important to Ben Drumgold. The man had felt nothing toward him, one way or another. But now things had changed.

Kincaid said, "Well, what is it?"

"You told Hank about some road agents."

"Yeah. They're waiting down-canyon. They're after the money you're supposed to be carrying."

"How do you know about this?"

"They were here."

"And they told you of their plans?"

"They wanted me in on it," Kincaid said. "So they could pull the holdup here at the station, where it would be easy. One of them is Chris Dolan. He figured I'd go for it because I've got a grudge against you. So far as you're concerned, I'd let them have you. But I don't want to see Hank here get shot off the box or the passengers put in danger. So you're warned."

Drumgold didn't like it. "Chris Dolan?" he said.

"And he claims that he's got a score to settle with you."

Drumgold said nothing to that, but Kincaid could see uneasiness building up in him. Obviously Chris Dolan did have a real grudge against the rancher, and Drumgold knew it.

Hank Weaver said sourly, "Utes and road agents, and me with a schedule. Do we pull out—or what?"

"No," Drumgold said. "It's too risky."

"You carrying a lot of money?"

Drumgold nodded. "Thirty thousand dollars, Hank. But I'm not concerned about the money. If I was sure no one aboard the stage would be hurt, I'd let those road agents have it."

"Well, if you're willing to stand the loss," Weaver said, "I'll pull up when the road agents hail me—and they'll have no reason to do any shooting."

"I don't trust them. This Dolan—"

"What's wrong?" Kincaid said. "Does he want your life as well as your money?"

Drumgold flushed. "I'm not thinking of my own life," he said. "I'm considering the safety of the other passengers. I—" His voice trailed off, and he looked uneasily at Weaver and Virginia. He must have realized that his words didn't ring quite true, for he added, "Chris Dolan has made threats against my life. And if there's shooting—well, more than my life may be in danger."

"So what do we do?" Weaver asked. "Just squat here?"

Drumgold still had that flush on his heavy face. He'd just admitted something that could not help but make his fiancée wonder, and it bothered him. He said, "Virginia, you'd better go inside while we work this out."

She gazed at him thoughtfully. Some sort of doubt seemed to be nagging at her. She said firmly, "If my life will be in danger when we go on, I should be a part of this discussion." She turned to Kincaid. A measure of dislike showed, but a grudging respect too. "What can be done?" she asked.

"Drumgold can stay here," he told her. "And keep himself and his money safe. The stage can go on, and help can be sent out from Robles. I don't like the idea, though. When those hardcases find out that Drumgold stayed behind, they're apt to get a little mean."

"You think they'd come here after Ben—after Mr. Drumgold?"

"Not that. They'd know I'd be watching for them, and they wouldn't risk a fight they'd have no chance of winning. What I meant was, they might shoot up the stage. Out of spite. Somebody—Hank or some of the passengers—might be killed."

"Still," Hank Weaver said, "I should make my run." Kincaid looked at him. "You know Lew Thorpe and a man called Sanchez?"

"Yeah. A couple of real bad hombres."

"They're with Dolan."

"So we just squat here?" Weaver said. "For how long?"

Kincaid shrugged. "Two, three days," he said. "There's an eastbound stage through tomorrow. We'll get the driver to send help out from Dalton."

"Well, I reckon that's it, then," Weaver said. "If Mr. Drumgold doesn't want to risk it, I don't either. But I'll catch it from my superintendent when I do get to Robles."

"It's settled, then?" Virginia said. "We wait here?" She appealed to Drumgold. "Ben?"

"I don't like it," Drumgold said.

"What's wrong with it?" Kincaid demanded.

"As if you don't know," Drumgold said. "You haven't forgotten that dead Indian. You know well enough that his people will try to get even for him. What are you trying to do—work off your grudge against me by keeping us here until the Utes attack this place and kill us all?"

"Listen, Drumgold—"

"You listen," Drumgold said. "I want a rider sent out and I want him sent to Fort Sands."

"Who do figure that rider should be?"

"What about the half-breed?"

"And have him shot off his horse by those three hard-cases?"

"I'll make it worth his while to run that risk."

"All right," Kincaid said. "Maybe you've got money enough, but I doubt it. That breed is nobody's fool."

He turned to call Injun Charlie over from the stage-coach, but at that moment gunfire racketed nearby and he knew that neither the half-breed nor anyone else would be riding to Fort Sands for help. Not for any amount of money that Ben Drumgold might offer. He shouted to Injun Charlie, then crossed the yard at a run to grab up his shotgun on the gallery. The gunfire continued, and sounded closer now.

Chapter Four

Kincaid caught up the shotgun and turned back across the yard, pausing to tell Injun Charlie, "Get rifles and cartridges from my room. Arm Drumgold and the others. We're in for it, eh, Charlie?"

Injun Charlie nodded. "Those damn Utes," he said, and headed for the house.

Drumgold, Virginia and Hank Weaver stood where Kincaid had left them, listening to the crash of guns and staring west through the canyon. The shooting was somewhere beyond the jutting cliff, so they could see nothing. Kincaid called to Drumgold, "Get her inside, man!" and saw the teacher take Virginia by the arm and hurry her toward the building. He could hear wild yelling now, the war cries of the Utes. Three riders came around the base of the cliff, tearing along at a gallop. He recognized them at once: Chris Dolan and his companions. They'd lost their pack animal and Sanchez's mount was faltering.

Behind them appeared a small band of Indians, screaming and shooting.

Sanchez's horse must have taken a Ute bullet, for it went down. Sanchez threw himself clear of the animal, fell to hands and knees. The other two reined their horses about, Dolan firing at the Indians with his Winchester while Thorpe raced back to the fallen man. Dolan's fire caused the Utes to pull up short in a confused milling. Sanchez scrambled to his feet and Thorpe took him up onto his mount. Thorpe raced along the road and Dolan continued to fire until his rifle was empty. With their quarry close to the stage station, the Utes contented themselves with shouting a few threats and then turning back along the road. Kincaid closed the gate as soon as the three road agents were inside the station enclosure.

The gate was of heavy plank, in two sections, and could be barred with a strong timber. It would not stop a determined attack by hostiles, since it was, like the wall, only five feet high, but it completed the enclosure and would help slow an assault. Once the bar dropped into place, Kincaid covered the three outlaws with his shotgun. Dolan sat his blowing sorrel over by the stagecoach. He was feeding fresh cartridges into his rifle. Thorpe had his revolver in his hand. Sanchez dropped from Thorpe's horse and lay his hand on his holstered gun.

Kincaid said, "If you're staying, you're giving up your guns."

Thorpe said, "Like hell," and Sanchez drew his Colt.

Dolan said, "Easy, boys. Easy. We're in a box."

He nodded toward the station house, at the four men watching them from the gallery. Hank Weaver had his six-shooter out. Ben Drumgold and the two tenderfeet, Forsythe and Parsons, held rifles. Also, over by the barn, Injun Charlie's rifle covered the road agents from behind.

Dolan said, "We've got no choice," and dropped his rifle to the ground, throwing down his revolver a moment later. He was calm enough, grinning at Kincaid. "You're the boss here, friend. We'll do as you say." He gestured at his companions. "Shuck your irons, boys."

Reluctantly, Thorpe and Sanchez let their weapons fall. At a sign from Kincaid, Injun Charlie gathered them and took them into the house. Dolan dismounted. He came to face Kincaid, deviltry in his eyes. The wild streak was strong in Chris Dolan, but he had a disarming charm

to go with it. "No way to treat hombres who almost lost their scalps," he said. "You act like we're bad actors, friend."

"You're quite a joker, Chris."

"We were minding our own business when those Ute bucks jumped us."

"Sure. Minding your own business."

"Just riding through, on our way to Robles."

Drumgold and Weaver came and stood listening.

Kincaid said, "And I can't prove otherwise, eh, Chris?"

"That's right," Dolan said, grinning. "It's your word against ours. And who's going to take yours, you being a jailbird?"

Drumgold said, "You're in a jam, Dolan, and you can't talk yourself out of it. I'll take Kincaid's word against yours." He was his blustery, arrogant self again. He looked at Kincaid. "You got some place we can lock them up?"

"The harness room," Kincaid said. "Chris, let's go."

Dolan's grin faded. "Look, there's no need to lock us up. You've got our guns. We can't pull anything. And would we want to, with the Utes out there? You'll need us if they raid this place."

"There's that many of them?"

"A whole damn village. Men, women, kids, horses and dogs."

"Camped in the canyon?"

"Sure," Dolan said. "By now they are, anyway."

He explained that the Utes had been outside the canyon when, early in the afternoon, he and his companions first saw them. The Indians had been on the move, headed in the direction of Lost Squaw Canyon. After their visit to the station, Dolan and the other two had gone into hiding—into camp, he termed it—about a mile west through the gorge. They'd chosen a spot among some rocks at the side of the road. They'd been watching for the stage, Kincaid knew. Instead, they'd seen two Indians—an old man and a boy—ride past. Later, the boy had returned with the old man's pony in tow, and the old man tied across its back. He'd disappeared west through the canyon, but not long afterward a band of a dozen armed braves had come along. Dolan had figured them for a war party, and he and Thorpe and Sanchez had decided to clear out. They'd no sooner ridden from the rocks than the Utes came after them, yelling and shooting.

"They were peaceful enough when we first saw them," Dolan said. "Something turned them hostile. That old buck was killed here, eh?"

Kincaid nodded.

"That explains it," Dolan said. "They want to spill some white blood to square accounts for him. Who was the crazy galoot that killed the old man?"

"One of the stage passengers," Kincaid said. "A tender-foot."

"They'll be here for him, for all of us," Dolan said. "You're going to need Lew and Sanchez and me, Kincaid. It'd be loco to lock us up."

"If we need you, we'll turn you loose," Kincaid said. "Head for the barn, Chris."

The harness room was no larger than a jail cell, and the door was flimsy. To secure the door, Kincaid piled half a dozen hundred-pound sacks of grain against it. Since it opened outward, there was small chance that the hardcases could break out.

Coming from the barn, Kincaid saw with some surprise that the sun had gone down. He'd lost all awareness of time since the arrival of the stagecoach, and the day had slipped away from him. But daylight came late and left early here in the Lost Squaw, due to its steep walls. Dusk would come shortly, and nightfall too soon. Darkness would be no guarantee against attack. The Utes differed from most Indians: they would fight at night. They preferred fighting at night, for they were by nature a bushwhacking tribe.

The stagecoach team must be unhitched, Kincaid told himself. And the road agents' two mounts should be off-saddled and put up in the barn. If an attack came, he didn't want the yard full of fear-crazed horses.

Hank Weaver and young Forsythe stood guard at the gate. Ben Drumgold and the man from St. Louis, Bert Parsons, were busy with the stagecoach. Drumgold had a pair of saddlebags slung over his left shoulder. He and Parsons were untying the cords that secured the leather apron of the Concord's luggage boot. Kincaid eyed the rancher's saddlebags, which Drumgold must have retrieved from inside the coach a minute or so ago. Cattlemen had a habit of transporting gold and silver specie in saddlebags, and Kincaid supposed that this pair contained Drumgold's thirty thousand dollars.

Thirty thousand, he thought bitterly. He earned seventy dollars a month, and to Drumgold thirty thousand dollars must represent merely the profit of a single deal. Envy? No, it wasn't that he felt. Money meant nothing to him. Ten times thirty thousand wouldn't pay him for the past seven years. Nor would it get him back his ranch and his wife. Still, he resented Drumgold's having the thirty thousand. Why should a man with no scruples have all the luck in the world? And the best part of Drumgold's luck was inside the station house. Virginia Worden was far more than the man deserved.

Having finally gotten the apron untied, Parsons lifted a valise from the boot. Drumgold took a suitcase and a woman's leather hatbox. Virginia's luggage, of course. Drumgold would fetch and carry for her, but would he be able to keep her high opinion of him? But when and if she saw him for what he was, it would almost certainly be harder on her than on the man. Ben Drumgold had a thick skin. Once he possessed the woman, her opinion of him would hardly matter. Kincaid's thoughts ran murky as he watched the two men carry the luggage to the house.

Then his reverie shattered.

"Injuns!" Hank Weaver shouted. "Injuns!"

Chapter Five

There were seven of them. They came slowly, holding their ponies to a walk. They carried their rifles with the stocks resting against their naked thighs and the muzzles pointed skyward. Four halted a short distance from the jutting canyon wall. Two reined in midway to the station. One came on to within fifty feet of the gate, and there sat his mount in an impassive, prideful manner. He was wolf-lean, and his ribs showed through his coppery skin. His face was as expressionless as stone, but his dark eyes glittered with hatred.

Kincaid said, for the second time, "Forsythe, keep your finger off the trigger." He lifted the timber that barred the gate, swung one section of the gate open. "All right, Charlie."

Injun Charlie rolled his blue eyes at Kincaid, wiped the palms of his hands on his shirt, shrugged, and stepped outside. He went unarmed, going directly to the nearest

Ute. There was some talk between them in the tribal tongue, the Ute emphasizing his words with gestures that seemed to have meaning for the half-breed. The parley lasted perhaps five minutes, then Injun Charlie started back toward the gate. He was wiping his palms again.

Kincaid closed the gate after him. "Do they want what I think, Charlie?"

"You know how those crazy Indians are."

"Tell them 'nothing doing.'"

"Better think it over, Walt."

"Charlie, I can't do it," Kincaid said. "You know that."

Ben Drumgold said, "What the hell do they want?"

Injun Charlie looked at Drumgold as if he were a half-wit. He turned back to Kincaid. "Easy way out," he said. "Give them what they want and they won't bother the rest of us. They don't blame you. The boy told it to them straight. He told them how you kept the tenderfoot from killing him. Give it to them, and they'll not bother the station. You'd better think it over."

Drumgold swore: "Look, what do those savages want?"

Kincaid said, "They want the man who killed the old buck."

"And if they don't get him?"

"They'll try to take him."

"These seven?" Drumgold said. "Why, man, we can pick them off and—"

"No shooting," Kincaid cut in. "This is only a delegation. There's more of them, a lot more, back through the canyon. If these seven don't get the man they want, they'll come back with enough warriors to make a fight of it. You heard Chris Dolan say there's a whole village camped here in the Lost Squaw."

"This one," Injun Charlie said, jerking his head toward the Ute near the gate, "says they'll kill everybody here. He says they won't even spare the man who gives away tobacco and food—meaning you, Walt. You think it over, eh?"

Kincaid turned toward Forsythe. *You and your damn gun*, he thought. The youth's face had blanched. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He didn't speak, but he looked at Kincaid like a beggar. Then he looked at the others, his frightened gaze jumping from one to the other. Ben Drumgold watched him in a coldly calculating

fashion. Hank Weaver eyed him unfeelingly, chewing on his tobacco. The old stage driver seemed to be thinking that a better man than Forsythe had died today—his shotgun messenger, Ed Harnish. The pudgy city man, Bert Parsons, regarded the young man with a definite anxiety. Injun Charlie seemed wickedly amused. Kincaid waited, but no one seemed willing to express an opinion.

Finally Forsythe burst out, "You wouldn't!"

"We'll see," Kincaid said. "Charlie, tell the Ute we'll have to hold a council to decide what to do. Tell him to come back in the morning and we'll give him our decision then."

The half-breed said, "They won't wait," but he went out to face the Ute again. He'd spoken but a few words when the Indian started an angry harangue. Injun Charlie began backing away. The Ute finally pointed to the canyon's south rim with his rifle, then kicked his pony into motion, wheeled it about. The other Indians fell in behind him, galloping west along the road.

Kincaid closed and barred the gate once more. "What'd he say, Charlie?"

"They'll give you until the moon shows," Injun Charlie said, and he too pointed to the canyon's rim. "They'll be back when you can see the moon from here."

"How long have we got, Charlie?"

"An hour, maybe."

"All right," Kincaid said. "Get the horses out of the yard, then stand watch here." He turned to the others—Drumgold, Weaver, Parsons, Forsythe. Three frightened men, he thought, and one sick with his fear. "You know how much time we've got," he told them. "We'll have a war on our hands unless you decide otherwise."

"Walt, you wouldn't give Forsythe to them," Hank Weaver said.

Kincaid said, "I have only one vote," and turned away. He crossed the yard to the house. The two women were at the doorway, watching him expectantly. He ignored them and went inside, going to his room at the back. The man in his bed was sleeping or unconscious. He did not rouse. Kincaid returned the shotgun to the rack on the wall, then picked up the last Winchester there. From a cupboard, he took two boxes of cartridges. His jug was in the cupboard. He considered it for a moment, decided to his surprise that he did not need a drink, and left the

room. Sarah had lit the lamp in the main room, the people off the stagecoach having eaten, and now she was clearing the table. He caught the squaw's inquiring glance and shook his head.

"No supper, Sarah. Just a cup of coffee."

She nodded and went off to the fireplace at the far end of the room to pour the coffee. She brought it in a tin cup, set it on the table, moved away without a word. She never had anything to say to him. She seemed to understand English when he spoke to her, but she never made any reply. She and Injun Charlie conversed in the Ute language, but seldom did Kincaid hear them hold much of a conversation. She too lived within herself.

Watching Sarah busy herself at the kitchen end of the room as he broke open one of the boxes and filled his pockets with cartridges, Kincaid wondered about her. Somehow, she'd come to be the half-breed's squaw. Maybe Charlie had bought her. Kincaid couldn't tell whether she was happy or unhappy about the arrangement; her dusky face never betrayed any emotion. Maybe in the privacy of their own back room, she was different. But here, in the main room, in his presence and when a stage was in, Sarah revealed nothing of herself. She attracted no more notice than a shadow.

She did all right by the place. She cooked white man's grub well enough, was fairly clean in her habits. She was young, and not unattractive in the calico dresses she wore. She and Injun Charlie had been at the stage station for several years, and though two company agents had been killed by Utes in that time, Sarah and her man hadn't been molested.

Kincaid wondered if it would be different now, should the Utes attack and take the place. He wondered too, in a vague sort of way, what Sarah thought of this trouble with her people—of the murder of the old man. He wondered in the same dim way if she hated the whites as Charlie did, and this brought the thought that after six months he was still a stranger to Sarah and Injun Charlie, and they to him. They made an odd threesome: he with his bitterness about the past, Injun Charlie with his torment over being a half-breed, and Sarah transplanted from the primitive life of her people to this outpost of the white man's civilization.

Civilization?

Kincaid sneered at the word. Who represented it? An Easterner who would shoot down an unarmed and harmless old Indian. And a rancher who would rig fake evidence to get a neighbor sent to prison, so he could have that neighbor's wife. And three hardcases who would plan an armed robbery. And an ex-convict who had lived seven years with the thought of revenge. . . . Thou shalt not kill, steal, covet thy neighbor's wife. Vengeance is Mine, sayeth the Lord. . . . Kincaid wondered which were the more barbaric, Sarah's people or his own.

He picked up the tin cup and sipped the hot, black coffee as he stood there by the table. Someone came into the room, stopping just inside the doorway. He looked over his shoulder and saw Virginia Worden. She was watching him, frowning. He could feel her dislike.

"Mr. Kincaid."

"Yes?"

"The others are discussing you outside."

"Oh?"

"They're saying that you want to give John Forsythe up to the Indians."

"They're taking a lot for granted."

She moved toward him, still frowning. "You can't do it," she said. "It would be—well, inhuman. He was frightened when he shot that old man. And he had reason to be frightened, after the attack on the stagecoach. Besides, it's as Lily says—he's hardly more than a boy, for all his trying to act like a man. He's less than a year out of college. Lily says he—"

"Lily," Kincaid said. "She knows all about men, does she?"

"Miss Marvin seems to be a sensible person."

"If she's that and if she knows all about men, like I think she does, she must know that I don't want to give Forsythe up to the Utes."

Virginia gazed at him in that openly curious way of hers. "Oddly enough, she's the one person who thinks you don't want to. In fact, she said, 'That Kincaid wouldn't.'"

"She knows men, all right, that Lily."

Virginia flushed. "I'd rather not discuss her knowledge of men," she said. "But if you don't want to hand Forsythe over to the Indians, why did you let the others believe you do?"

He shook his head. "I didn't," he said. "I just told

them I had only one vote. I left it up to the majority to decide. And it should be their decision. And yours. The life of every person at this station is in danger—the worst danger. Have you considered that, Miss Worden?”

Her manner changed. Her frown disappeared, and her dislike of him seemed to be forgotten. “I don’t suppose I have considered it,” she said slowly. “It’s not something a person can quite grasp, the realization that his or her life is in danger.”

“You were on that stagecoach.”

“Well, yes.”

“And frightened?”

“Badly frightened.”

“That’s how it will be again, only much worse. It’s not hard to grasp, Miss Worden.”

“But have we no hope?” she said. “Isn’t there a chance for us?”

He shrugged. “Only if we hand Forsythe over to the Utes. And you don’t want that, do you, even to get yourself out of danger?”

“No,” she said. “I couldn’t bear to see that.”

He emptied the cup, set it down, took out makings and began rolling his cigarette. Lily Marvin came bursting into the house. She swept past Virginia and faced Kincaid across the table.

“Look, Kincaid,” she said. “You’re not letting them do it, are you?”

He shaped the cigarette, put it between his lips, struck a match with his thumbnail. “Have they decided to hand him over?”

“They will!”

“Well, it’s for the majority to decide.”

“No, Kincaid. No. That poor boy, Kincaid!”

He puffed on his cigarette, studying her. She was young, certainly no older than Forsythe, but she had lived a long, long time. Her bleached hair and gaudy dress looked out of place here in Lost Squaw Canyon. The girl herself would look out of place anywhere but in a dancehall or a parlor house. He could imagine her having been the wife of half a town, yet there she stood, excited and panting, full of a genuine feeling for young John Forsythe who probably wasn’t half the man he should be even by a typical dancehall girl’s standards.

Lily said, her voice off key and too loud, “That half-

breed's telling them it's our only chance, Kincaid. That fat drummer, he's so scared he's saying we've got to save ourselves. The stage driver keeps saying Forsythe's to blame. And Drumgold claims they've got to consider us women. They'll do it, Kincaid!"

Virginia gasped, "No—not Ben!"

Lily glanced at her. "I'm sorry, honey, but your man thinks it ought to be done. Maybe he's only thinking of you and me. I'm willing to grant him that."

"No," Virginia said again. "Not Ben."

Kincaid watched her for a moment. She was beginning to wonder about Ben Drumgold, maybe beginning to doubt him. That this should happen to her did not displease him. He was that vindictive; he had that much human weakness. He would like it if she saw the man for what he really was, and turned against him. Ben Drumgold had no right to her. Kincaid picked up his rifle and the boxes of cartridges.

"We'll not hand Forsythe over to them," he said. "We'll fight, and maybe we can stand them off." He went to the door, then added, "There's a back room." He nodded toward its door. "When the attack comes, you stay in there. There's no beds, but you'll find blankets to spread on the floor. If you haven't got all your luggage, I'll have it sent in."

He turned to go. Lily said, "Kincaid."

He looked at her. "Yes, Lily?"

"I knew you wouldn't let them," she said.

He smiled in miserly fashion. "Did you, now?" he said, and went out.

It was hazy dusk. Kincaid looked toward the canyon's southern rim. No moon yet. Injun Charlie had cleared the yard of horses. He saw Charlie over by the barn with Drumgold, Parsons and old Hank Weaver. He crossed to them, handed the full box of cartridges around so each man could take a share. They all stared at him.

Drumgold said, "This means you intend to fight, does it?"

"It does."

"You'd better give it some consideration, man."

"I have."

"It's the lives of all of us as against Forsythe's," Drumgold said. "And there's the women. My God, Kincaid, we can't let them fall into the hands of a bunch of savages."

"We'll be able to put up a hard fight," Kincaid said. "There's six of us. Nine, counting those hardcases we've got locked up. We're well armed and we've got good cover. If we hurt the Utes bad enough they'll call it quits. And we'd better damn well hurt them bad enough. We'll fight, Drumgold. I give the orders here."

"The majority—"

"There is no majority," Kincaid snapped. "Forsythe, the two women and I are against it. That makes four votes to four. You get the luggage out of the stagecoach and inside the house." He jabbed his finger at the others. "You three get over to the wall and keep watch."

He walked over to Forsythe who stood by the gate. The youth turned toward him, his boyish face a white mask in the fading light. Kincaid gave him the second box of cartridges.

"Kincaid—"

"Quit worrying."

"They want to give me up to the Indians."

"They'll fight instead," Kincaid told him. "Take it easy, friend."

Night crept into Lost Squaw Canyon. Injun Charlie had misjudged the time when the moon would appear. It still did not show above the canyon's rim. Kincaid peered steadily into the darkness, his rifle resting atop the adobe wall. The others were shadowy figures along the wall, all but Drumgold. He hadn't returned from carrying the luggage into the house. Kincaid thought about that, uneasiness building up in him and becoming genuine alarm.

He moved to Forsythe. "Trouble, kid. Back me up, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Drumgold," Kincaid said, low-voiced. "He's pulling something on me. If he swings it, you'll be a goner. Get over to the stagecoach and keep watch."

Forsythe nodded and moved away. Kincaid glanced along the wall. Injun Charlie was to the left of the gate, Bert Parsons to the right, and Hank Weaver beyond Parsons. They seemed to be paying no attention to him, staring out into the darkness through which the Utes would come. He headed across the yard, passing Forsythe at the stagecoach there in the middle of it. Reaching the doorway of the house, he looked inside. He saw no one

in the lamplighted main room, but Virginia and Lily were just inside the doorway of the back room he'd told them to take. The next room, where the wounded Dan Macklin lay, was dark. Beyond it the door of Sarah's and Injun Charlie's room was closed. Kincaid turned toward the barn, but stopped midway, at the roofed and stone-buttressed well. It would serve him for cover, if need be.

He levered a cartridge into the firing chamber of his Winchester, and reflected that he shouldn't be surprised. Drumgold needed to dominate, always. He was the big man, the man of importance, and he had to have his way. His own hide was precious to him, and the life of another man meant nothing at all. Shortly, Drumgold appeared.

He stepped from the barn and looked furtively about. Then, failing to see either Kincaid or Forsythe in the inky darkness, he turned toward the front wall. Another shadowy figure came from the barn, and behind it two more. Kincaid felt no surprise. He had expected Drumgold to make a deal with Chris Dolan. The three road agents halted just outside the barn, peering one way and another. Drumgold had given them back their guns.

Kincaid moved slightly, crouching behind the circular well wall and leveling his rifle across it. Dolan spotted him at once.

"That you, Kincaid?"

"It's me, Chris. I've got you beaded."

"That dumb bastard of a Drumgold!"

"Drop your guns, Chris. The three of you."

"No, damn you!"

From behind the stagecoach, Forsythe said, "Do as you're told, friend. Why get yourself killed?"

Dolan started violently, and all three men stared toward the stagecoach. There was some whispered talk among them, and then Thorpe and Sanchez moved back to the barn doorway. Dolan stood fast.

"Be sensible, man," Dolan said. "Do you want a massacre here?"

"I'll take my chances with the Utes rather than with you, Chris."

"You'd better come to your senses, like Drumgold did."

"Drop your guns, Chris," Kincaid said. "Forsythe, you got him in your sights?"

Before Forsythe could answer, Dolan whirled and leaped into the deeper darkness of the barn. At the same time

Thorpe and Sanchez swung the double door shut, closing the three of them inside the building. Kincaid crossed to the stagecoach and joined Forsythe.

"Good enough," he said. "That door is the only way out of there. If they try to come out, open up on them. You as good with a rifle as you are with a hand-gun?"

"Yes."

"Plug them in the legs. There's no need to kill them."

"All right."

"Once we've given our decision to the Utes, we'll let them out," Kincaid told him. "We'll need them then."

He headed for the wall, seeing Ben Drumgold and Injun Charlie standing together near the gate. The half-breed backed away, as though sensing Kincaid's anger. Drumgold stood his ground, his rifle resting across his left forearm and pointed in Kincaid's direction. Kincaid knew the man's finger was on its trigger, but he kept walking toward him until he could reach out and grab the barrel of the weapon.

"There's two reasons why you won't shoot, Ben," he said. "One is, you're going to need me to side you against the Utes and against those hardcases later on. The other is, your woman would guess why you killed me and hold it against you."

"Kincaid, I'm thinking of her—only of her."

"And of your own hide too?"

"If I were afraid for myself I wouldn't have turned Dolan loose."

Kincaid nodded, impressed. "I'll take your word for it," he said. "Your only concern is Miss Worden's safety. But we're not handing Forsythe over to the Utes to be tortured. We'll take our chances and—"

He broke off, sensing a change in Drumgold's manner. He leaped forward, knocked the barrel of the rifle upward. The weapon went off, whether because of his striking it or because the man had deliberately squeezed the trigger he did not know. He drove on, slamming into Drumgold. He knocked the rancher back against the wall and wrenched the rifle from his hands. Drumgold slumped there, breathing hard.

"Kincaid," he said, "if we get out of this alive I'll make you wish you'd never been born. I'll hound you for the rest of your life."

Kincaid just grunted.

“Here they come!” Hank Weaver yelled.

A drumming of hoofs heralded the return of the Utes.

The moon was just beginning to show above the rim of the canyon.

Chapter Six

There were seven of them again, and they rode at a gallop to within a hundred feet of the station wall. Six of them halted there, in a line abreast, and the seventh came on at a walk. Armed this time with a lance instead of a rifle, he reined his pony in close to the gate. Man and pony were smeared with war-paint.

"Tell him we can't give them what they want," Kincaid called to Injun Charlie. "Tell him a lot of Utes will die if they force us to fight."

Injun Charlie talked to the Ute from inside the gate. There was a short, angry reply from the Indian. His arm whipped up, lashed forward. The lance hurtled through the air. Injun Charlie leaped back in fright, but the lance struck the wooden gate. The point embedded itself there, the shaft vibrating with an angry hum. The Ute swung his pony about and raced away, the others following him and uttering wild yells.

"What'd he say, Charlie?"

"What he said is one thing, what he meant is another," Injun Charlie said. "He said they'd come back and kill us all when the new sun rises. They won't wait that long. He hoped he could trick us into not standing watch during the night."

"It could come any time, eh?"

"It'll come when we're not supposed to be expecting it."

"We'll not be asleep," Kincaid said, and looked at the sky. The moon was just clear of the canyon rim, and smudged over by clouds. It promised to be a black night in Lost Squaw Canyon. Kincaid said, "Watch the rocks, Charlie. Some of the Utes will creep in among them. From now on shoot at anything that moves."

He went to Hank Weaver and gave him the same instructions. The stage driver had only his revolver, there not being rifles enough to go around. Kincaid promised to get the shotgun from the house for him. "But take it slow and easy, Hank. Make every shot count."

"You know, Walt," the old man said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Sure. Who hasn't?"

"A real bad feeling, I mean. Like this is trail's end for me."

"We've got a chance. A slim one, but still a chance."

"Anyway, I'm past sixty and I've lived a lot of life," Weaver said. "It's just that a man never gets so old that he wants to throw in his hand." He regarded Kincaid curiously. "Walt, you're a cool customer. Don't you ever spook?"

Kincaid lay a friendly hand on the old man's shoulder. "There's a jug in the cupboard in my room. Go take a pull on it."

"Later, maybe."

Kincaid went to Bert Parsons. The man from St. Louis was a short, thick shape in the darkness. A smell of whiskey testified that he had a bottle on him. Kincaid told him to shoot at anything he saw moving, explaining that the Indians would not necessarily be mounted when they attacked.

"Try to make every shot count," he said. "You ever been in a fight?"

"No. And I wish to God I wasn't having a part in this one."

"Know how to use that rifle?"

"I know how. Damn it, man, you should have let them have Forsythe!"

Kincaid said, "Keep watch, friend," and moved away.

He sought Drumgold next, and found him still slumped against the wall at the left side of the gate. He gave the man his rifle.

"We're in for it now, Ben," he said. "If you want to try to use a gun on me again, you'd better wait until we've got ourselves out of this mess. Then I'll be glad to oblige you—more than glad. But tonight we need each other. There's a ladder at the side of the barn. Climb it and keep watch from the roof."

Drumgold went off without a word.

Young Forsythe stood beside the stagecoach, watching the door of the barn. Darkness obscured his features, but Kincaid could feel the tension in him, the fear. That didn't worry him, however. He understood that the youth's fear was a normal reaction, not the terror that would paralyze him when the shooting started. He told Forsythe about the ladder and instructed him to take it after Drumgold settled down on the barn roof.

"Your post is on the roof of the house," he said. "Keep watch to the west." He got no reply, and he sensed some change in Forsythe's manner. "What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Couldn't I stay on the ground, Kincaid?"

"Why?"

"Well—"

"Why, man? Why?"

Forsythe lifted a hand and drew it across his face. "I'm not much good off the ground," he said, in an agony of embarrassment. "Heights make me dizzy. I can't help it, you understand. It's just that—"

"For God's sake!" Kincaid said. "Here we've got to fight for our lives and you worry about being dizzy! Look, it's only ten feet off the ground. You won't be climbing a mountain. Now you get up there like I tell you!"

Kincaid turned away on that, and Forsythe, after a moment of hesitation, went to get the ladder. He found Drumgold standing by it and explained to him what he'd been ordered to do.

Drumgold said, "All right. I'll go with you and bring the ladder back. I'm keeping it here with me."

Forsythe did not object. He carried the ladder over to the house and propped it against the wall. It was a flimsy, crudely contrived affair about twelve feet long, the rungs being fastened to the poles with rawhide lashings. As Forsythe began to climb, the rungs gave a little under his weight and the whole thing seemed wobbly. He climbed slowly, handicapped by carrying his rifle in one hand. Handicapped too by the dread in him. He hadn't told Kincaid the whole truth. All heights terrified him. Even such a height as this. He'd never been able to lean out a second-story window without feeling as if he were about to plunge to his death.

He trembled violently and broke out in a sweat before he reached the top of the rickety ladder. He needed only to maneuver himself over onto the roof now, but he couldn't force himself to make that move. He relieved himself of the rifle, easing it onto the roof, but then clung to the ladder with both hands. He couldn't help himself. He felt weak and stupid and ashamed.

Drumgold growled, "Come on. Get a move on, there," and swore.

Forsythe closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, managed to get one knee onto the edge of the roof. Below him, Drumgold took hold of the ladder and gave it an impatient tug. Forsythe had the wild thought that the ladder would be pulled from under him. He visualized himself falling, not merely ten feet but, in his imagination, a hundred times that far. Wildly, he flung himself onto the roof and scrambled, on hands and knees, away from the edge. When he looked around, the ladder was gone. That bothered him, for now he was trapped there. But the worst of it was over. So long as he kept away from the edge and did not look down, he wouldn't mind it too much.

Kincaid kicked on the door of the barn and called to Chris Dolan. When he got an answer from the road agent, he said, "Chris, we've got a fight on our hands. The Utes will attack any minute now. You three come out and lend a hand."

"To hell with you," Dolan said. "We're staying where we are. Do your own fighting."

"Listen, whether you like it or not, it's your fight as well as mine. If the Utes get inside the wall, you three will be

goners along with the rest of us. You'd better come and help keep them from getting inside."

Dolan was silent for a moment, evidently thinking it over. Then he called, "All right. We're coming out. But this better be on the level. No tricks, Kincaid. We're not letting you take our guns."

"You'll keep your guns," Kincaid said. "You'll need them."

He backed off toward the well, holding his rifle ready. The door swung open. The three hardcases came out, warily.

Dolan and Thorpe were armed with both rifles and revolvers, Sanchez with only a revolver. They halted, watching Kincaid.

"We'll have a crow to pick with you, friend, if we get out of this alive," Dolan said. "And me, I figure on doing just that. No damn Utes are going to do in Chris Dolan. And if they don't fix you, bucko, I sure will."

"So now I know," Kincaid said. "You and Sanchez take the front wall. Thorpe can watch the rear wall."

"Yeah? And where will you be?"

"Up front with you."

"Just so I know," Dolan said. "I aim to keep an eye on you, bucko."

With Sanchez, he went off to the front wall. Thorpe headed toward the rear. Watching them go, Kincaid gave way to a stab of uneasiness. The Utes were threat enough. But he had enemies within as well as without his house, and he wouldn't be safe even if the Indians were beaten off. Drumgold would try to break him somehow or other, and Dolan would make an attempt on his life. He felt trapped.

He went to the house and found the main room empty. He heard the two women talking in the room he'd given them, however. One of them—Lily, he thought—was chattering away at a great rate, just as if danger didn't trouble her at all. He went into his own room and got the shotgun and a box of shells for it. The man in his bed stirred and said, "Ben?"

"It's Kincaid, Macklin. How are you feeling?"

"Weak, is all. Mighty weak."

"Well, take it easy."

"What's going on out there?"

"We're expecting a Ute raid," Kincaid said. "I'm hoping we can stop it."

He went out to the main room, laid his rifle, the shotgun and box of shells on the table, and reached up to the hanging lamp. He was about to extinguish its flame when the door to the women's room opened. Over his shoulder he saw Virginia Worden.

He said, "We'd better have it dark in here," and blew out the lamp's flame.

He picked up weapons and cartridges and moved toward the doorway.

Virginia said, "Kincaid," and came to him through the thick darkness. She stood very close, so close that he seemed to feel the warmth of her. He waited, but it seemed that she had nothing to say to him. "Don't worry too much," he said. "There's a chance we may hold them off."

"I'm beginning to be frightened, Kincaid."

"Yes."

"I—I don't want to go to pieces. I want to hold onto my nerve."

"You will. But maybe if I sent your man to you—"

"My man," she said, in an odd tone.

He waited, but again she was silent.

"You want Ben to be with you a little while?"

"No," she said. "Just let me stand here with you a moment. You don't mind?"

"Mind? Hardly. But I had the feeling that—well, you disliked me."

"I'm so mixed up about everything and everybody right now that I don't trust my feelings. I dislike your hardness, but right now I wish you could give some of it to me. How does a person become hardened, Kincaid?"

He had the thought that seven years in prison would do it, but he merely said, "It's a hard country. A person has to be hard to live in it. You're from the East?"

"Yes. From Philadelphia."

"You're a long way from home."

"Yes—and no."

"What does that mean?"

"I no longer have a home back there," she said. "My parents are dead. After my father's death, I came to live with my brother in Denver."

"And that's how you got to know Drumgold?"

"Yes."

It had been in Denver that he met Nora. He supposed Virginia had known Drumgold no longer than Nora and he knew each other before deciding to marry. He wondered idly why she and Drumgold had not married in Denver, why they had waited.

She said, "Tell me, Kincaid; have you known Ben a long time?"

"Yes, a long time."

"And you hate him?"

He did not reply to that.

"It wouldn't be proper for me to ask why you hate him, I suppose," she said. "But I feel as though I should know the reason."

"You could ask him."

"I did. He won't discuss you, at least with me."

"I'm not important to him," Kincaid said. He moved away from her. "I'd better go out there."

"Yes. But, Kincaid—"

"Yes, Miss Worden?"

"Be careful."

He said, "All right," and left her, disturbed by the sense of intimacy that had been a part of their meeting.

Virginia watched Kincaid's tall, lean figure grow indistinct in the darkness, and she was troubled. For a moment, as they stood so close, she'd had an impulse to touch him. She knew that if he had taken her in his arms she would not have protested. The knowledge shocked her.

She was too honest to tell herself that her only desire had been to draw courage and strength from that grim, tough man. She would not deceive herself. The truth was, he intrigued her. He was a mystery, and she liked to puzzle over mysteries. She knew but two things about him: his name was Walt Kincaid and he hated the man she had promised to marry. No, there was a third: he was a man of sadness as well as of courage and strength and hatred. Her woman's intuition told Virginia that there was much to know about Walt Kincaid. The reason for his hatred of Ben Drumgold, the reason for his sadness, the reason for his living at such a lonely, dangerous place as this.

With a sense of guilt, she wondered if she were drawn to him because she had come to look upon Ben in a different way since their arrival at this isolated stage station. It bothered her to know that Ben would consider handing

young John Forsythe over to the Indians, even though she told herself that he'd entertained the idea only out of concern for her and Lily's safety. She refused to believe that he had been concerned about his own safety, and yet a tiny doubt remained to plague her. It bothered her, too, to know that both Kincaid and the outlaw Chris Dolan hated Ben. She wondered if he had in some way wronged those two men, and if there were other men who hated him so violently.

In some subtle way, Ben's whole personality seemed to be changing. In Denver, he had been one sort of person. Here, in his own country, he was another sort. She looked back in memory to their brief courtship, and knew that Ben had, as the saying had it, swept her off her feet. She'd met him at a party to which her brother Phil had taken her, a party in a mansion belonging to one of those fabulously wealthy Colorado mining men, one of those bonanza kings. She'd hardly arrived when a tall, handsome man came across the ballroom and said, "I'm Ben Drumgold. I came here alone tonight, and now I'm glad I did. May I have this dance, Miss . . . ?"

"Miss Worden, Mr. Drumgold," she'd said. "And, yes, you may."

So it had begun, and he would let it have no ending. He'd seen her home that night, and the next morning, Sunday, he'd accompanied her to church. She'd had dinner with him, and then in the afternoon he'd taken her driving in a fine carriage with a pair of matched sorrels in harness and a colored man in livery for a driver. Monday he'd taken her to lunch and then to a jewelry store. In his hearty way, he'd told her to choose anything that caught her fancy. But she had not been ready to accept gifts from him and so had said, to his and the clerk's disappointment, that she seldom wore jewelry. Ben had tried to get her to take a handsome brooch, but she'd finally convinced him, diplomatically, that he was being a little premature.

Tuesday evening he'd taken her to the theater and to supper afterwards, and that night he'd said, "We may as well understand each other, Virginia. I'm courting you. I intend to marry you."

By then she'd begun to wonder if she didn't want to be Mrs. Ben Drumgold, and in the days that followed, as Ben subjected her to a whirlwind courtship, she'd decided

that she did, indeed. But there had been times when she felt a small doubt, and even when she finally said "yes" she had a moment when she didn't feel wholly sure. Perhaps because Ben had seemed almost too good to be true—handsome, successful, a man who always had his own way, even with her. She'd feared that he wasn't as perfect as he seemed.

There'd been little things during the month he courted her. He'd been given to boasting—about his being a self-made man, about his great Crescent Ranch, about his other business interests. She'd noticed, when they were in public, that so many women—and not always women who could be called ladies—knew him, and knew him well enough to call him by his given name. She'd become aware, too, that he was impatient with waiters, clerks, hack-drivers; that he seemed to consider so many men his inferiors, and treated them in a curt, almost offensive manner. There'd been one incident. . . . A heavily-laden dray had become stuck in the muddy street after a heavy rain, blocking the progress of the carriage in which she and Ben were riding. Ben had lost his temper, shouted at the drayman to move his wagon. Words had passed between them, and finally Ben had threatened to horsewhip the man. He might have done so if she hadn't restrained him. Little things, but they'd made her a bit unsure of Ben even while he was convincing her that she was in love with him.

Now, here at this Indian-besieged stage station, she had to heed larger doubts. Ben was different. There was more to him than she'd seen, back in Denver. He had enemies, and he was a man of secrets. His refusal to discuss Walt Kincaid made her suspect that he might be a man of guilty secrets.

Virginia found herself wondering what she was doing here, and thought uneasily; I'm lost among strangers in a strange place. At the moment, her fiancé seemed to be one of those strangers. It occurred to her that she was not suited for this strange, hard land. After her mother's death, she'd spent two years keeping house in Philadelphia for her father. His health had been poorly, and she'd devoted all her energies to caring for him up until his death three months ago. Before looking out for her father, she'd been a teacher at Miss Linday's School for Young Ladies in

Germantown. She'd taught piano and the harp. She'd lived the most sheltered of lives, and life here was a far cry from that she'd known back East.

She asked herself if she would rather be back in Philadelphia, rather than to go on to Robles with Ben—if the Indians permitted them to go on. She tried to answer the question by telling herself that there was nothing for her now in Philadelphia. And at Robles? There she would become Mrs. Ben Drumgold. Ben had wanted to wait until they arrived at Robles to be married, so his friends could attend the wedding. It would be the biggest shindig Robles ever saw, he'd told her. That was what Ben wanted. Virginia did not know at the moment what she wanted, partly because she was not sure of Ben and partly—she had to admit it—because she'd gotten to know Walt Kincaid.

Lily Marvin called to her. She turned and made her way through the darkness to the back room, seating herself on one of the blankets spread on the floor. Lily was reclining on the other blanket, dimly seen in the thick darkness. Virginia caught the cloying scent of the cheap perfume the girl used. Everything about Lily was cheap and tawdry, and Virginia knew that once she would have shied away from such a woman. But she liked Lily. She actually found much to admire in the girl: she was pleasant to be with, always cheerful, and so brave in the face of danger. She could overlook Lily's faults. Thinking that, Virginia reflected that she should be as tolerant of Ben.

"Was that Kincaid you were talking to?" Lily asked.

"Yes."

"He's *mucho hombre*, that Kincaid."

"What does that mean, Lily?"

"That he's quite a man," Lily said. "You'd better watch your step, dearie."

"Watch my step? How so?"

"You wouldn't want to fall for him."

Virginia laughed. "Nonsense," she said. "I'm already engaged to be married." Then, gravely: "Lily, Kincaid hates Ben Drumgold. I keep wondering why."

"No offense intended," Lily replied. "But a man like Ben Drumgold always has enemies. I keep wondering about Kincaid, too. About why he holds down this job here when he surely could do better. Won't your Ben tell you what Kincaid's got against him?"

"No."

"You could find out from the man who got shot," Lily said. "He'd probably know, being he and Drumgold are both cattlemen and close friends. Why don't you ask Macklin about it?"

Virginia said, "Oh, I couldn't do that," and the next moment the things that troubled her seemed unimportant—for the night quiet was shattered by the bloodcurdling war cries of the Utes, and by the crash of guns.

Chapter Seven

The attack was launched just after Kincaid reached the front wall and gave the shotgun and box of shells to Hank Weaver. First came the drumming of hoofs, then the screams of the warriors, and finally the blasting of the Ute guns.

They rode at a gallop, two dozen or more. Most hung at the off side of their racing mounts, firing from under the ponies' necks, almost impossible targets.

The leaders of the band were directly in front of the station by the time Kincaid brought his Winchester into play. Prepared though he'd been for the attack, it still took him by surprise and rattled him. So it was with the others along the wall. All were slow to open fire. Kincaid missed his first shot, and his second. As he jacked a third cartridge into the rifle's chamber, he did see the shadowy shape of a Ute spill from his pony—shot by somebody else along the wall. With his third try, Kincaid chose an

Indian who rode and fired from an erect position. His aim was good. The Ute pitched from the back of his running pony.

They were past the station then, and he drove his fourth shot at their backs, hitting nothing. Now from the rocks across the way hidden weapons opened up, a hail of bullets and arrows sweeping the adobe wall. That was even more of a surprise than the mounted attack, and a more serious threat. Kincaid fired at the muzzle flashes among the rocks until his rifle was empty, and then, crouched behind the wall, he fumbled fresh loads into the Winchester. He heard a man's agonized scream above the din, and an instant later saw old Hank Weaver hit and knocked from the wall. He got his rifle back into action, but, aim as he would at the flashes over there, he wasted his shots. The rocks gave the Utes almost perfect cover.

Abruptly, the Indians across the canyon quit firing and the mounted warriors came from the east in another wild charge. Kincaid and the others were ready this time, and fired directly into the charging band. He saw two Utes topple from their ponies, saw another go down with his mount. The latter fell clear of his dying animal, hit the ground and rolled and bounded to his feet. He fled toward the rocks. Chris Dolan shot him and shouted gleefully, "Got him, by damn!" Kincaid managed to drop another as the band raced past the station with their guns blazing. Their wild charge had no sooner carried them beyond the station than the Utes forted up in the rocks took over again. An arrow struck the top of the wall almost directly in front of Kincaid. He heard the whine of a slug that missed him by inches. He heard a cry, "My God, I'm hit!" It came from the drummer, Parsons.

Kincaid was reloading his rifle when the firing from the rocks abruptly ceased. A single shot from a gun inside the station cracked, then quiet closed in there too. A quiet so abrupt and complete that it wrenched at Kincaid's nerves. No sound at all came from the rocks nor from beyond the jutting canyon wall beyond which the mounted warriors had vanished.

Several minutes passed. Then somebody said, "Is it over?" Sanchez had spoken, his voice was barely above a whisper but sharp with anxiety.

Chris Dolan said, "Over, hell!" jarringly loud. "It's only begun!"

They waited, but now, for all the sound the Utes made, they might have been alone in Lost Squaw Canyon. The quiet continued, but there was nothing reassuring about it. This was merely a lull in the storm, a respite from fury. Off to Kincaid's right, the wounded drummer groaned. From the other direction, from beyond the gate, came Sanchez's lament, "Ain't somebody going to do something for me?"

Kincaid propped his rifle against the wall. He passed Injun Charlie's obscure shape at the gate, then came to Sanchez who lay flat on the ground.

"Where you hit?"

"Left arm. I'm bleeding like a stuck pig."

Kincaid called to the half-breed. "Take him inside, Charlie. Have Sarah do what she can for him."

Injun Charlie said, "Sarah's gone."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"Back to her people."

"When, man?"

"When it got dark," Injun Charlie said. "She went over the back wall."

Kincaid stared at him, but in the darkness he could read nothing on the half-breed's face. Still, he never could see anything of what Injun Charlie thought or felt. He said, "You see what you can do for him, then. And get back here with him as quick as you can." He looked at the wounded man. "You're not out of it. You can still handle a six-shooter."

Chris Dolan called, "Kincaid, they'll take this place if they try again."

"They'll try," Kincaid said.

He moved west along the wall, coming to Hank Weaver lying on the ground. He knelt beside the old man, touched his hand, and knew there was nothing he or anyone else could do for the stage-driver. Hank had indeed come to the end of the road. Farther on, Kincaid found Bert Parsons slumped against the wall and groaning piteously. The drummer didn't reply when Kincaid asked him where he was hit. Easing him to a sitting position, Kincaid struck a match and quickly killed its flame. He'd seen enough. Parsons was bleeding from a bad crease at his left temple. His eyes looked dazed. He'd been struck by a ricocheting bullet, Kincaid believed, and was suffering more from fright than from pain.

"It's not too bad," Kincaid told him. "Is there anything left in that bottle of yours?"

Getting no reply, he felt for the bottle in the man's coat pockets. He found it, pulled its cork, held it so Parsons could drink. He let the man have a long pull at the bottle, then waited a few minutes for the whiskey to take hold. Helping him to his feet, Kincaid led him to the house. Injun Charlie and Sanchez were already inside.

The half-breed said, "I'll need some light if I'm supposed to help this man."

Kincaid said, "All right." He eased Parsons onto a bench, then closed the door. He felt his way to the kitchen and found a lantern. He struck a match and lit the lantern, keeping the wick turned low. It spread a thin glow through the room. Kincaid set it on the table, and Injun Charlie slit Sanchez's shirt sleeve so he could get at the man's wound. Sanchez sat on a bench, dripping blood on the floor.

Dan Macklin appeared at the doorway of the room in which he'd been abed, a lean, gray man of about fifty-five, with his right arm in a sling to keep its weight from pulling on his bullet-shattered shoulder. He looked tottery from shock and pain and loss of blood, but he carried his gun-rig in his left hand and apparently intended to help defend the station.

"Is it over, Kincaid?" he asked. "Or are they still out there?"

"They're still out there."

"How many did they get?"

"These two and Hank Weaver. Hank's dead."

"I'd better get out there, then."

"If you can make it, go ahead," Kincaid told him. "We'll need every man who can stand up and hold a gun."

He crossed the room, knocked on the door of the back room occupied by the women. It was opened by Virginia Worden.

"We'll need bandages," he said. "And hot water."

"All right," she said. "Is it over?"

He shook his head. "The squaw's gone," he said. "Maybe one of you—Miss Marvin or yourself—can give Charlie a hand with those wounded men. The other could make some coffee."

"We'll do all we can, Kincaid."

He nodded, turned away, then faced her again. "Keep

the door shut and stay away from the windows," he told her. "If you need water from the well, Charlie will get it. Don't have any more light than the lantern, and put it out as soon as you can. When the shooting starts again, go into the back room."

He headed for the door. Macklin was on his way out, moving slowly on wobbly legs. Kincaid stepped out after him and shut the door. The night was still quiet, ominously so. The moon was high, but barely seen because of the clouds. Kincaid walked to the well. He could see Lew Thorpe from there, a still shadow against the wall at the rear.

He called, "Anything happen back there, Lew?"

"Not a thing," Thorpe replied. "You know, a man might be able to make a getaway back here."

"He wouldn't get far, Lew."

Thorpe said, "I guess not," and cursed the Utes.

Kincaid went to the side of the station house and called John Forsythe to the edge of the roof. The tenderfoot's face was a pale blotch.

"See anything from up there?"

"Not off to the side," Forsythe said. "I could have picked off some of the Indians over in the rocks, only your orders were—"

"Pick off as many as you can when it starts up again," Kincaid said. "But duck down after each shot. They'll try to target you by the flash of your rifle. And don't forget—keep watch against a side attack. You savvy?"

Forsythe said, "I understand," and moved back to the middle of the roof.

Kincaid went to the barn. Drumgold was up there, and he'd seen fit to keep the ladder there with him. He'd had to descend it, let Forsythe climb it to the roof of the house, then carry it back to the barn. A man who looked out for himself, Ben Drumgold. Kincaid climbed until he could see onto the roof, and Drumgold came to crouch near the ladder. The man's heavy face was shiny with sweat, his breathing labored.

"You see anything off to the side, Ben?"

"No."

"When they open up again, try to pick off some of them over there in the rocks. But drop flat after every shot or they'll get you."

"All right," Drumgold said. "You were inside just now?"

"Yes."

"How's she taking it?"

"Well enough," Kincaid said. "She's not as soft as she looks."

"She doesn't understand how bad the situation is," Drumgold said. "Kincaid, I'd give everything I own to have her out of this. Are you sure there's no way out for us?"

"If there was a way out we wouldn't be here."

"No way you or the half-breed know about—that you could get her and the Marvin girl away?"

Kincaid regarded him with surprise. "You'd let me take them?"

"You or the Devil himself," Drumgold said. "If there's a way, say so for God's sake. The rest of us will stand them off until you three are on your way. Is there, Kincaid? Is there, man?"

Kincaid shook his head. "None that I know of."

"Talk to the breed. He probably knows this canyon better than you do."

"He probably does," Kincaid said. "But not better than the Utes, though. If there's a way out, which I doubt, they've got it blocked. We're caught in a trap, Ben. All of us."

Drumgold was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "You know we can't let the women fall into their hands, don't you?"

"I know it."

"You or I," Drumgold said. "Whoever is left when the Utes come over the wall."

"It'll be up to you, Ben," Kincaid said. "When they come over that wall, I'll be dead. You'd better save two cartridges. Or maybe three. The third for yourself."

He descended the ladder, quite sure that he did not want to survive Ben Drumgold. Not in the face of what the survivor would have to do.

Injun Charlie was at the well drawing a pail of water. Kincaid asked him about the wounded men.

"Sanchez has a bad arm," the half-breed said. "He lost a lot of blood. The fat one, he's more scared than hurt."

He started toward the house with the pail of water, then faced about when Kincaid said, "Charlie, listen—" The half-breed gazed at him without expression, but Kincaid

suspected that Injun Charlie's calm was a sham. He had a feeling that deep inside the man was as much a victim of fear as anyone within the besieged station. Injun Charlie might have considered himself an outcast, but he'd had it good here. For a man of his indolent nature, he could have asked for little more. He'd had a roof over his head, food when he was hungry, a woman to bed down with, and very little work. He was losing much, and certainly he knew what it was to be afraid.

Kincaid said, "Charlie, the women. We can't let the Utes take them."

"Who can stop them?"

"Is there no way we can get them away, Charlie?"

"No."

"You know this canyon," Kincaid said. "You've been here a long time. You go off prowling often enough, through the canyon and outside it. Think, man. Maybe there is a way."

Injun Charlie said, "No," again. He started to turn away, then swung about abruptly. "Once I climbed the canyon wall, not far from here," he said. "It was before you came here." He shook his head. "That is no good."

"Why not?"

"It's dangerous."

"But you got to the rim of the canyon?"

Injun Charlie nodded. "In the daylight. Even so, it was a hard climb. I don't know if I could do it in the dark. Anyway, nobody else could do it. Not those women. Ute women could, maybe. But not those soft white women."

"Where is this place?"

"West along the wall from here," the half-breed said. "Not far. Before you get to where the wall makes an angle. There's a crevice. Back in the crevice there's a way to climb to a narrow ledge. The ledge goes up the wall like this." He set down the bucket and held his hands extended one behind the other in a tilted position to show that the ledge slanted upward from the crevice. "Some places it's no wider than a man's foot. Some places there's no footing at all."

"Look, Charlie, you take the women up, eh?" Kincaid said. "Maybe you'll make it. If you don't—well, you'll die here, anyway. None of us have a chance in this place. What do you say, Charlie?"

Charlie scowled, uncertain. While he was still deciding,

gunfire broke out. The Utes had reopened the attack. Kincaid heard a wild yell from Chris Dolan. Except for the crippled Dan Macklin, Dolan was alone at the front wall. Kincaid ran to join those two, and soon the barrel of his rifle grew hot as he drove shot after shot at the muzzle flashes of the Ute guns among the rocks.

Chapter Eight

Heavy fire poured from the rocks for perhaps ten minutes. Then again the Indians broke off the fight. Once more the night was quiet, too quiet. Kincaid lifted an arm, wiped sweat from his face with his shirt sleeve. Only slowly did the tension in him ease, and then not completely. He was afraid to ask, but finally he called out, "Chris? Macklin? You all right?"

Dolan said, "I'm fine," and swore. "Macklin stopped another slug."

"How bad is he?"

"How should I know?"

"Take a look, can't you?" Kincaid said, and peered toward the shadowy figure of the man who had taken a position to the right of him during the midst of the fight. It was Sanchez, his left arm bandaged and in a sling. "You all right, Sanchez?"

"Like Chris," Sanchez said sourly, "I'm fine." He held

his revolver in his right hand. "Just fine, for an hombre as good as dead."

"Where's that tenderfoot, Parsons?"

"Still inside, soldiering on us because he's got a bullet crease."

"I'll get him out of there," Kincaid said. "Keep watch."

He started across the yard, heading first toward the barn. Reaching that building, he called up to Drumgold. "Ben, you all right?"

Drumgold eased over to the edge of the roof, keeping low so he wouldn't be a target. "All right," he said. "I think I plugged a couple of them. Did you talk to the 'breed about there being a way out of here?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Ben, listen. It's no good hoping. Charlie says he once climbed the canyon wall some place in back of the station, but he claims he couldn't take the women up it—or even make it himself in the dark."

"If there's one chance in a thousand," Drumgold said, "we've got to take it. Let me talk to the 'breed, Kincaid."

"All right. I'll send him over here."

He headed for the station house, intending to talk to Forsythe. He was passing the stagecoach in the middle of the yard when Virginia called to him from the doorway of the house. He turned toward her, and she stepped out onto the gallery to meet him.

"Something wrong?"

"It's Lily."

"What about Lily?"

"She came out here right after the shooting stopped," Virginia said. "I don't see her anywhere. I—well, I'm worried. She shouldn't be outside at all."

Kincaid said, "I'll find her," and went along the gallery to the end of the building. He heard Lily's voice as he rounded the corner, then saw her in the deep shadows along the side wall. She was talking to John Forsythe who had crawled to the edge of the roof. Hearing Kincaid's footfalls she said hastily, "I've got to go now, John," and came hurrying toward the corner. Kincaid caught her by the arm.

"What's all this?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Lily said. "Nothing at all."

"Worried about the tenderfoot?"

"Well—"

"You'd make a good target, yourself. Didn't that occur to you?"

"I was afraid he might be scared, Kincaid. I just wanted to talk to him." She pitched her voice low, almost whispering. She didn't want Forsythe to overhear. "And he is scared, Kincaid. It won't do any harm for him to know that—that somebody's concerned about him." Her tone was defiant. "No harm, Kincaid. Maybe it'll do some good."

"All right, Lily," he said. "But don't take any more chances."

He let her go, and followed her to the front of the house where Virginia waited on the gallery. The house was dark now, but the door stood open.

"You needn't have worried," Lily said to Virginia. "There's no danger right now."

Kincaid stopped and watched them, surprised at their calm. He would have expected panic or at least hysteria from any women under such circumstances. Injun Charlie came out of the house, heading toward the well with a wooden bucket. He kept on going when Kincaid said, "Come here, Charlie," but returned after leaving the bucket by the well.

"Drumgold wants to see you, Charlie."

"What for?"

"I told him about that climb you made up the canyon wall."

The half-breed took his time answering. When he did speak, he sounded angry. "I'm not risking my neck like that," he said. "I'd rather take my chances with the Utes. To hell with Drumgold."

He swung away on that, heading toward the front wall and moving faster than Kincaid had ever seen him move. Staring after him, Kincaid felt a keen disappointment. If Injun Charlie would rather stay and fight when there was so little chance of staying alive, there could be no safe way up the canyon wall.

Lily said, "What is it, Kincaid? Did you want him to go for help?"

He let them think that, saying merely, "It was a hope."

He went inside then and found Bert Parsons sitting at the table, his head swathed in bandages and his bottle in his hand.

"Get out there, man," Kincaid told him. "Get back to the wall and find your rifle."

"Listen, I'm hurt. I'm sick."

"You listen, Parsons. It's your life you've got to fight for."

"All right," Parsons said, rising. "But I'm no damn Indian fighter."

"Friend, you'd better be one," Kincaid said, and turned to the door.

Chris Dolan called to him as he crossed the yard. The hardcase said, "Macklin's still alive, but he's sure not going to be any help to us."

Kincaid went to the wounded man. Macklin was unconscious. This time he'd been hit in the chest. Kincaid told Dolan to lend a hand, and they carried him across to the house and into the room he'd occupied earlier. They put him on the bed, and Kincaid returned to the main room for the lantern. Virginia was closing the door.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Macklin."

"Oh, the poor man!"

He said, "Yes," and struck a match. Hell, Macklin was just going a little sooner than the rest of them, but he couldn't tell her that. He set the lantern to burning at a low flame and carried it into the room where Macklin lay. It was all right to show a light here. The three small back rooms had no windows. The men who'd built the station had anticipated that it would come under Indian attack. Only the main room had windows, two of them, opening out onto the yard. Virginia and Lily came into the room, both looking at the unconscious man in an anxious way. Kincaid said, "Nothing you can do for him."

"We'll stay with him, though," Virginia said.

He nodded, then said to Dolan, "Let's go, Chris."

Dolan had his eyes on Lily. He smiled faintly over some secret thought, said, "All right," and moved toward the door. This let him pass behind the two women, and he put a hand on Lily. The girl whirled like a tigress, slapping him across the face. The impact of her hand against his cheek was like a pistol shot. Dolan's head rocked back. Recovering, he muttered an oath and grabbed at the girl.

Kincaid got between them, striking Dolan with his left shoulder and reeling him backwards. "Chris, we're not

going to have that kind of trouble. Keep your hands off her."

"Since when did her kind get so touchy?" Dolan demanded. He glared at Lily. "I know what you are, sweetheart."

Kincaid said, "Let's go, Chris," and kept on crowding him. Dolan gave a strangled curse, then whirled and left the room.

Lily said, "You tell that fat drummer the same thing, Kincaid."

"Parsons been bothering you, too?"

"He can't keep his hands to himself either."

Kincaid sighed. He couldn't understand a girl like Lily. For some reason she felt a need to pretend to be the lady she was not. It occurred to him that the reason might well be young Forsythe. He said, "I doubt if Parsons will have time to bother you from now on," and he followed Dolan from the house.

The Utes opened fire again from the rocks, and this time guns cut loose from over by the jutting canyon wall. The second group of Indians was made up of the warriors who had charged the station earlier on their ponies, and from their position they flanked the men at the wall. However, John Forsythe turned his rifle on them and his aim was so accurate that the warriors soon quit. They moved off to join the others among the rocks, and Kincaid worked them over as they flitted from rock to rock and through the brush thickets. He and Forsythe took their toll of that group, together cutting down at least half a dozen shadowy figures. This did not appreciably cut down the odds, however. Kincaid estimated at least forty Utes firing at the station from across the canyon. He no longer had any hope that heavy losses would force the hostiles to give up the fight. They'd set out to take the station and evidently they were willing to pay the price.

By now they must have sent couriers out to summon warriors from other villages. That meant the attacking band would be reinforced at any time. Eventually, the station's few defenders would be overwhelmed. It hardly mattered how many Indians they shot down. There would always be more. They couldn't fight the whole Ute nation. Only a miracle could save them, and there would be no miracle. There would be no cavalry column coming to rescue them, no blue-clad troopers charging in through

Lost Squaw Canyon with bugle sounding and carbines crashing.

The Utes continued their heavy fire for some minutes, then settled down to sharpshooting. First one Indian would drive a shot at the station, then another. The shots were spaced at intervals of about ten seconds, and each came from a different position. Kincaid and the others could do no more than fire at the muzzle flash of each hidden gun.

Kincaid began to run short of ammunition. He moved along the wall to Bert Parson's position. He found the drummer crouched down, keeping himself safe behind the wall. He'd been doing very little shooting.

Kincaid said, "Go into the house, to the room where Macklin is. You'll find ammunition in a cupboard there. Maybe a half dozen boxes."

Parsons moved from the wall, still bent over. "You want it all?"

"We're going to need it all," Kincaid told him. "Hand a box up to Forsythe and another up to Drumgold. Bring the rest out here."

Parsons went off at an ape-like shamble, head down and knuckles almost touching the ground.

And now the Utes were trying a new tactic. A shot would come from the rocks, and then, when the men behind the wall answered it, several Indians fired at the flash of their guns. This made for more accurate fire by the Utes. Everytime Kincaid fired a shot, answering slugs shrieked close by or struck the wall, spraying rock dust. The others drew the Utes' fire in the same manner, and Chris Dolan, for one, soon had his belly full of it. He cursed the Indians loud and long, and finally he shouted to Kincaid that he didn't intend to shoot any more until the hostiles exposed themselves by moving forward to attack them.

It seemed a sensible idea, and Kincaid called, "All right, but keep watch. They won't come charging at us. They'll sneak closer, keeping behind cover the whole time."

The Utes kept on banging away, but now they had no muzzle flashes to serve them as targets. With the defenders' guns silent, the Indians did as Kincaid had expected. They began inching forward. Every little while he saw a furtive movement that told of a warrior shifting to a position closer to the station. He fired upon one obscure

target and heard his shot echoed by the agonized scream of the hit Ute. He ducked low immediately after firing, and none too soon. A dozen guns opened up, from shorter range than ever before. As he crouched there he saw Forsythe's rifle blaze away from the roof of the house, and a moment later the Ute guns went silent.

Parsons had taken his own good time in bringing the fresh supply of ammunition, but he arrived now and dropped several boxes of cartridges on the ground at Kincaid's feet. He was breathing hard, either from exertion or because of the pressure of his fear. He turned away at once, without a word, going to his former position off to Kincaid's right.

Leaving one box of cartridges at his post, Kincaid took the others—three of them—and went to distribute them among the men farther along the wall. He came to Sanchez first, finding him crouching down and trying to reload his revolver with his one good hand. He was having a hard time of it. Fear had him in a bad temper too, and in reply to Kincaid's query, he growled that he had plenty of cartridges. Kincaid came to Chris Dolan, twenty feet farther along the wall. Dolan stood erect, peering out into the darkness.

"You using forty-fours, Chris?"

"Yeah."

"Here's a box," Kincaid said, and placed the box atop the wall. "You'll need them before this is over."

"If I live long enough," Dolan said. "They're moving in close."

Kincaid peered beyond Dolan, looking for Injun Charlie. The wall up there was empty. "Where's Charlie, Chris?" he asked.

"How the hell should I know? Left us in the lurch, maybe."

Kincaid looked about the yard. He saw nothing of the half-breed, and when he called he got no answer. He began exploring along the wall, expecting to find Injun Charlie lying dead in the shadows at the base of it. He found no body. What had become of the man? The Utes began to shoot in unison again. This time they whooped as they fired. Kincaid headed for his post at the west side of the gate. The din outside increased. By the time he got his rifle into action, a dozen warriors had broken from cover. They came charging toward the station, aiming

for the gate in a bunch. Some of them reached it despite the heavy fire Kincaid, Dolan and Sanchez poured into them. One warrior actually scaled the gate, and when a shot from Forsythe's or Drumgold's rifle hit him, his body fell inside the yard. The others—the five who survived—had to retreat. They fired as they backed away, driving shot after shot over the wall. The rest of the band kept up a covering fire from the rocks until the five had made good their withdrawal. Then the war cries ceased, and the guns too.

It had been close, too close. Kincaid's heart pounded his ribs. If several of the Utes had gotten over the gate and forced a hand-to-hand fight, it would have been the end. While the melee lasted, the rest of the band would have rushed the station and taken it. Dolan called out shakily.

"You still with us, Kincaid?"

"Yeah. How about Sanchez?"

"He came through it," Dolan said. "Hell, they should have a bellyful now. We downed six or seven of them."

Kincaid hoped that the Utes had gotten a bellyful, and when the guns out there remained silent he clung to his hope. He reloaded his Winchester and peered toward the rocks. Again he detected furtive movements. He held his fire and continued to watch, realizing finally that the Indians were withdrawing from their forward positions. They were moving back across the canyon, perhaps to count their losses and debate whether to risk more lives. As the respite from fury lengthened, Kincaid's hope grew—and yet logic told him that the Utes wouldn't break off the fight at this point. They would be aware of losses within the station too. Enough losses to encourage them.

He became aware that he'd neither seen nor heard anything of Bert Parsons since the man came to him with the boxes of cartridges. He called to him, heard no reply, and moved along the wall. This time he did find a body. Parsons lay sprawled at the base of the wall. He'd been shot through the head. Beyond Parsons lay old Hank Weaver, dead since the fighting began. There was a dead Ute within the gate, and at least a score of dead ones outside the station walls and scattered among the rocks. Kincaid shuddered and felt sick.

He turned away from the dead drummer, knowing that he never would become hardened to the slaughter of humans, white or red.

Virginia Worden cupped her palms over her eyes. She couldn't bear to watch the suffering of the man on the bed any longer. Dan Macklin's gray pallor and pain-twisted mouth reminded her of her father's last hours. It had been an ordeal for her to see Henry Worden die, to stand helplessly by, unable even to ease his pain. It was an ordeal for her now to see this man's life slowly and agonizingly slipping away. Every little while, she felt as though she would faint. She wouldn't faint, really, but she had to ease her straining eyes.

Lily said, "You go rest a while. I'll stay with him."

Virginia hesitated.

"Go ahead, dearie. Go get a breath of fresh air." Lily smiled. "I don't want you passing out on me. I forgot to bring along my smelling salts."

Virginia promised to return shortly and left the room.

Lily watched her go with the thought that it took all kinds to make a world. No doubt there was a place for the soft, helpless kind—the hothouse variety of female. Not that she was contemptuous of Virginia Worden. Indeed, she rather envied the older woman. Since getting to know the young dude, John Forsythe, Lily had begun to wish more than ever that she was . . . well, not what she was. She yearned to be a lady, treated with respect by all men and, even more important, loved by one man alone. Preferably, one like John Forsythe.

It couldn't be, of course. She'd never had the chance. Life hadn't given her the same advantages it had given Virginia Worden. It had given her no advantages at all. She'd been born in a grubby coal mining town near Pittsburgh. Her old man, Taffy Evans, had died in a mine explosion when she was twelve. A year later her mother married a farmer, a widower with five children of his own, who promptly placed Lily as a domestic in the home of a banker in a nearby small town. She'd worked there until she was fifteen. By then she'd begun to fill out astonishingly, and the master of the house had taken notice. He'd given her furtive pats and pinches whenever the mistress wasn't close, but finally the lady became suspicious and Lily was shown the door. Her next employment had been in a sweat shop, a textile mill, in Pittsburgh, and there she met the man who started her on the twisting, downward road that had brought her, four years later, to this stage station in Lost Squaw Canyon.

His name had been Philip Marvin and he'd been the son of the owner of the mill. He'd not married her, but she'd taken his name. As Lily Marvin, she'd gone from man to man, from town to town, and now, at twenty, she felt older than the hills. Well, older than Virginia Worden, anyway. Older and wiser and tougher, for all her lack of advantages.

The man on the bed stirred slightly and tried to speak. She bent over him, feeling sad. She was like that. In this way she wasn't old and wise and tough. Her heart ached for lost kittens, hungry dogs, hurt children, unfortunate adults. She'd fallen in love with John Forsythe when she discovered that he was, for all his trying to appear a man, as frightened as a small boy. She wanted to cry for this man who was so near death.

She spoke soothingly to him, she gave him a drink of water, she held his hand. He was fully conscious now, and he wanted to talk. Lily had no first-hand experience with people about to speak their last words, but she sensed that the end was near and Macklin needed to unburden a troubled mind.

She gave him all her attention, and his words, spoken with great effort, were difficult to follow. It seemed that there was a man named Pete Harvey whom Macklin had cheated in a business deal years ago. There was also a daughter whom Macklin had disowned because she'd married a man he did not approve of. The daughter lived in Cheyenne now and her name was Mrs. Clay Allen. Macklin wanted them to know that he regretted what he'd done, cheating the one and disowning the other. As a favor, Lily was to get in touch with them, if she escaped from the stage station with her life, and tell them that his last thoughts were of them. She nodded.

"I'll do that, Mr. Macklin," she said. "You can count on me."

"You won't forget?"

"No," Lily said. "Don't you worry now."

He didn't heave a sigh of relief and then close his eyes forever, as Lily had expected now that he'd eased his conscience. He seemed less weak. He talked with less effort. He talked of his daughter as she'd been as a child, and of his wife, Mollie, who'd passed away more than a dozen years ago.

Lily finally interrupted him, remembering her conversa-

tion with Virginia about Kincaid and Drumgold. She said, "You're friends with Ben Drumgold, Mr. Macklin?"

He blinked at her, seemingly confused. She'd broken his train of thought, and he had trouble concentrating on her question.

"Not friends," he said, finally. "You can't be friends with a man like Ben Drumgold."

"But you've known him a long time?"

"More than a dozen years."

"And Walt Kincaid?"

"Five, six years."

"Tell me," Lily said. "As a favor, Mr. Macklin. Why does Kincaid hate Ben Drumgold?"

For a time, she thought he wouldn't answer. She bent over him, her face intent and her eyes pleading.

"It's important to you to know?" he asked.

"It's important to Miss Worden," Lily said. "She needs to know—well, what sort of man Ben Drumgold is. What did he do to make Kincaid hate him?"

Macklin said, with great reluctance, "Stole Kincaid's wife while Kincaid was in prison."

"Kincaid—in prison? Why?"

"For stealing cattle from Drumgold."

"Kincaid a thief? I can't believe it, Mr. Macklin."

"There was talk," Macklin said. "Talk that Drumgold framed him."

Lily said, "Oh!" And again, "Oh!"

She kept on holding the dying man's hand, but her thoughts had left him. She frowned, troubled, wondering if she should tell Virginia what she had learned. She wasn't sure that she should. She wasn't sure that Virginia would want to know. She was still pondering the problem when she heard Virginia leave the other back room and cross the dark main room and open the door to the yard.

Virginia screamed. This is it, Lily thought. This is the end.

She took it for granted that the Indians were inside the station.

Chapter Nine

Virginia's scream sent Kincaid across the yard at a run. Fear had him by the throat. His first thought was that some of the Utes had taken Thorpe by surprise at the rear wall, and were inside the station. But he saw only the girl, there in the doorway of the house, and the bulky figure of Ben Drumgold making a hasty descent of the ladder over at the barn. Thorpe appeared too, looming out of the deep shadows at the rear of the yard. He saw next what had caused Virginia to cry out like that.

A man was sprawled on the ground directly in front of the door.

It was Injun Charlie, and Kincaid knew, even as he knelt beside the man, that he was dead. He struck a match, however, and had his quick look. There was much blood, and a bloody knife—a butcher knife from the kitchen—lay beside the body. Injun Charlie had been stabbed in the throat. He'd died instantly, without a sound and with-

out a struggle. Kincaid killed the match flame and stood up. Lily Marvin had an arm around Virginia, comforting her.

"What happened?" he said. "You didn't—"

Virginia shook her head. "No, it wasn't I." She shuddered. "I opened the door and—saw him there like that."

Drumgold went to her, stepping carefully past the dead man. He took her right hand, held it between both his own, and spoke softly to her. She turned toward him, so she wouldn't have to see the murdered man. Chris Dolan came running, and after him Sanchez. John Forsythe appeared at the edge of the roof, peering down and asking what had happened. The Utes were forgotten, even by Kincaid. He looked from face to face, wondering which was the murderer and why any of them should want the half-breed dead.

Dolan found the answer. He stooped and picked something off the ground, uttered a startled grunt, then quickly struck a match. Kincaid saw it too—the scattering of gold and silver coins near Injun Charlie's body. Dolan dropped his match, gathered up the money, and faced Kincaid.

"This couldn't have belonged to that 'breed."

"No."

"It's part of Drumgold's thirty thousand?"

Kincaid nodded. "I guess so." He stepped outside to speak to Forsythe. "John, keep watch up there, will you?"

"Sure. But what happened?"

"Somebody killed Injun Charlie. You see or hear anything?"

"Not until Miss Worden screamed," Forsythe said, and moved back from the edge of the roof to watch the Utes.

Dolan said, "Somebody's made off with that thirty thousand. Me, I want to know who. Kincaid, I've got a hunch you're the man. You caught the 'breed with it and—"

"You're wrong, Chris. I've been over at the front wall, and you know it."

"I don't know it," Dolan said. "I couldn't keep track of you in the dark. I'm telling you, bucko—I want that thirty thousand." He lifted his rifle, lined it on Kincaid. "I aim to have it, no matter who gets hurt."

"So far as I'm concerned, you're welcome to it," Kincaid told him. He looked at Drumgold. "It's your money.

What do you think about this? Did you see or hear anything?"

"Not a thing. I've been watching the Utes."

"Where'd you leave your saddlebags?"

"In the room you turned over to the ladies," Drumgold said. "With their luggage."

"All right, Ben. You'd better get back to your post."

"Not yet. I want to get to the bottom of this."

"Hell, man, the Utes are still out there!"

Drumgold left Virginia, stepped down from the doorway. "Like you just said, it's my money and I'm not letting any thief have it. Not you or Dolan or anybody else. You're a little too anxious to let this drop, Kincaid. With a man murdered and thirty thousand dollars stolen, you tell me to go my way. Nothing doing. I'm not letting anybody play me for a sucker, Kincaid."

"The money's still somewhere in the station," Kincaid said. "Whoever got it isn't going anywhere with it."

"He may figure he's going somewhere with it."

"With the Utes out there, Ben?"

"That half-breed must have planned to make a get-away," Drumgold said. "Utes or no Utes. Why else did he take the money?"

Kincaid gave some thought to that, and saw that it must be true. Injun Charlie had meant to slip away. Probably it had been in the half-breed's mind to leave ever since he remembered climbing the canyon wall, so he'd decided not to go empty-handed. In spite of what he'd said about not being able to climb the wall in the dark, he had believed he could do it. Injun Charlie, liar and a thief. Kincaid found it hard to accept. He'd liked and trusted the man. Still, greed cropped up even in the face of death. It could be a stronger thing than fear, as Dolan and Drumgold were now proving. And as the murderer had proved.

Kincaid eyed the four men, wondering which had Injun Charlie's blood on his hands. He decided that Drumgold was out of it; the cattleman would merely have raised a rumpus and brought them all into it if he'd caught the half-breed making off with his saddlebags. Dolan had been at the front wall, and Sanchez too. Lew Thorpe was the likely suspect. Thorpe saw Kincaid's gaze upon him and guessed at his thoughts.

"Don't try to pin it on me," he said. "I didn't leave the back wall until the woman started screaming."

Dolan swung toward him. "Lew—"

Thorpe lifted his rifle, covering Dolan. "Pull up, Chris. I ain't trying to cross you up. You'd better take my word for it. Don't try to get rough with me. I'm warning you, Chris."

Dolan tensed over the rifle, but after a moment he relaxed. "All right, Lew. I'll take your word—for now. It wasn't me and it wasn't Sanchez. We never left the front wall." He swung around to face Kincaid again. "You," he said. "Your word's no good with me. Bucko, I want that thirty thousand dollars!"

Kincaid watched Dolan's rifle line on him again. He looked at the man behind it with more disgust than fear. "Chris, before you squeeze that trigger you'd better give some thought to this. You're going to need me. Money or no money, the Utes are still out there. And there's getting to be damn few men inside this place—too few for the odds. You can't afford to kill me. Give some thought to that, Chris."

"There's more ways than one to deal with a smart aleck like you, Kincaid."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that Lew and Sanchez and I can make you wish I'd killed you."

"You can torture a man, Chris, but you can't make him tell what he doesn't—" Kincaid stopped. Suddenly he understood what had happened here. He said, "I sent Parsons over here for the rest of the ammunition. It took him a long time. He must have seen Injun Charlie with the saddlebags and decided to take the money for himself."

"That fat drummer?"

"Could be. It must have been that way. Say he came to the house and saw Charlie in the back room picking up the saddlebags. Maybe Charlie had a light, a match burning. So Parsons caught gold fever, but bad. He went to the kitchen and got the knife. Then he followed Charlie out here. When Charlie heard him and swung around, Parsons drove the knife into his throat."

Dolan shook his head. "I can't see a tenderfoot doing for a man who was half Ute."

"You think a tenderfoot can't do murder, Chris? You're not that dumb."

"Well, get that tenderfoot over here."

"He's dead."

"What?"

"He got a bullet through the head during that last attack."

Dolan sneered. "That's mighty convenient for you, Kincaid. A dead man can't deny he's a thief, can he?"

"And he can't deny he's a murderer," Kincaid said. "But he's the man who killed Charlie and got that damn thirty thousand dollars. He knifed Charlie. The bags fell to the ground. When Parsons grabbed them up, some of the gold fell out. He didn't notice. He was in too much of a hurry to hide the saddlebags. That's how it was, Chris. And the money—"

"Sanchez," Dolan barked. "Go see if those saddlebags are with the drummer's body."

Sanchez went off across the yard at a dog-trot, disappearing through the darkness. He returned almost at once, carrying only his revolver in his one good hand. "Nope," he said. "They ain't with the body, Chris. But we should be able to find them, wherever they're hidden. Let's tear this place apart, eh?"

"I'll do the tearing apart," Dolan said. "You throw down on Drumgold. Lew, you cover Kincaid."

He waited until those two moved around behind Kincaid and Drumgold and covered them from there. Only then did he take his rifle off Kincaid.

"Hold them there," he ordered. "If they try to pull anything, beef them. If the Utes make another try, take these two over to the wall and make them fight. When I find those saddlebags, I'll tell you how we're getting out of this trap."

He turned toward the doorway, gestured at Virginia with his rifle. "You get over with those two hombres," he told her. When she hesitated, he lifted his voice to a shout. "Come on! Move!"

She stepped out of the doorway, moved carefully around the dead man. Lily started to follow, but Dolan caught her by the arm.

"You're coming with me, baby," he said, and pushed her ahead of him through the doorway. He kicked the door shut behind him, forced her across the main room to the lighted back room where Macklin lay.

The moment she entered the back room, Lily saw that

the man on the bed was dead. Her heart wrenched, and she almost cried. Then Dolan gave her a shove that sent her reeling across the room.

"You carry the lantern, sweetheart," Dolan said. When she made no move to pick up the lantern, which stood upon a bench, he lifted his hand as though to slap her. "Do as I tell you, damn it. Get it through your head that I'm the big man around here now. Pick up that lantern!"

Lily obeyed. She turned up the wick for more light and held the lantern high so that its glow reached into the corners of the room. She watched Dolan ransack the room, even to the bed on which the dead man lay, and she hated him. A change had come over Lily Marvin since her arrival at the stage station; rather, since she and young John Forsythe had been thrown together in the stagecoach when it left Dalton. Lily was still young enough to have her fanciful dreams, and in them, as in the dreams of every young girl, there was a Prince Charming. Experience had taught Lily that Prince Charmings did not exist outside dreams, but in John Forsythe she'd discovered a man to whom she wanted to belong. Of course, he had paid no special attention to her. He'd just been friendly and polite. But she'd sensed at once that he was too much of a gentleman to flirt or to force his attentions on a woman traveling alone.

Lily was—or had been before the Indians ended the stagecoach trip—on her way to Robles where a madame named Goldie Borden needed a new girl for her parlor house. Now Lily knew that she would not be that new girl, if she did get to Robles. Because of John she had made up her mind never to go into a house again. Also because of John she had come to hate all the men who had made use of her, and by some twist of mind Chris Dolan seemed to represent them all. She focussed her hatred upon him. With Lily, to hate was to want to hurt. She wanted to hurt this brute of a man, Chris Dolan. Hurt him badly. It would wipe away the taint of all the others who had claimed her body. It would make her feel clean again. She held the lantern high, watched him search the room, and waited her chance.

He looked in and under the bed. He went through the cupboard. He rooted through a chest that contained Kincaid's few personal belongings. Finally he said, "Didn't

figure those saddlebags would be in here. Let's try the main room next. Move out ahead of me, honey."

Lily gazed at him with contempt. "You know something, Dolan?"

"No. What?"

"I hope you never find that money."

"I'll find it. Don't worry. And when I do, you and me will celebrate."

"Don't let yourself get ideas about me, Dolan."

"I've already got them about you, honey."

"You try anything with me," she said, "and I'll kill you."

He stared at her for a moment, taken aback. Then, laughing, he motioned for her to go out into the main room. It was a big, spartan-bare room. There were only the long plank table and the benches beside it at one end, and the kitchen at the other. With Lily holding the lantern, Dolan quickly searched that room. Finding nothing, he kicked open the door of the room just off from the kitchen. This had been Injun Charlie's and Sarah's room. He motioned for Lily to enter, then stepped inside and began going through the sparse furnishings there.

Dolan was in high spirits now. When the Utes had driven him into the station, he'd been in the depths of a black despair. It had seemed that his long planned revenge on Ben Drumgold and his attempt to make a big stake off the cattleman had been a fiasco. But luck—the Utes and the murder of Injun Charlie—had cut down the odds against him. When they had come even, with him and Thorpe and Sanchez against Kincaid and Drumgold and the young tenderfoot, he'd managed to gain the upper hand. He felt that his luck would hold. He felt certain that he would find Drumgold's thirty thousand dollars. And he was convinced that he could escape from the Utes—with or without his partners.

He was a man of hunches, Chris Dolan. He believed in his hunches.

It was time his luck changed. He'd been down on his luck ever since Drumgold had fired him from his job at Crescent Ranch. His grudge against Drumgold was this: not only had the man fired him but he'd blacklisted him so that no other cattleman would hire him. Drumgold had that much influence. He had merely to pass the word

around, and there wasn't a job open for a rider within hundreds of miles.

As Dolan saw it, Drumgold had had no call to run him off Crescent Ranch, anyway. He was a tophand. He'd been the best damn cowhand in the Crescent crew, and the best bronc buster, as well. Drumgold usually had some woman or other in his big ranch house, and this time it had been a Mexican girl. Drumgold was away from the ranch much of the time, and he'd been away for nearly a month when the senorita began to flash her black eyes at him—at Chris Dolan. It hadn't been something he could pass up, and he hadn't figured that Drumgold would find out—or care much if he did find out. But he had found out, and he had cared.

Dolan would have overlooked losing his job at Crescent, but the blacklisting had hurt him, and his pride as well. With the cattle outfits closed to him, he'd been reduced to taking jobs unworthy of a riding man. He'd worked as hostler in a livery stable, as a swamper in a saloon, as a stamp-mill hand at a mine. He'd had a couple dozen jobs since leaving Crescent, and all of them had galled him. All of them had increased his bitterness against Ben Drumgold, and now, he told himself, he was making that hombre pay plenty for firing him and blacklisting him.

"Thirty thousand dollars!"

Dolan said it aloud as he finally convinced himself the money was not hidden in the second back room. There was still the room in which Drumgold had left the saddlebags, the room which Kincaid had given the two women.

"Nothing here," he said, turning toward Lily. He saw the hatred in her eyes, but her feelings bothered him not at all. In fact, the thought of forcing a defiant girl to submit aroused him. A violent man, he preferred his women not to be passive. But the money came first with him. "The other room now, honey," he told her. When she stood there glaring, he hardened his voice. "Move, damn it!"

Sullenly she led the way to the room she and Virginia had occupied. There were the two blankets spread on the floor and all the luggage from the stagecoach, hers and Virginia's included. She had the only trunk, a small Saratoga trunk, and its lid was raised and propped against the wall. She'd opened the trunk when she first came into the room to get her hairbrush; she'd wanted to primp.

She noticed that her clothing was no longer as tidily arranged as she'd left it. Somebody's been rummaging, she thought.

Dolan took a quick glance about the room, then went to the trunk. He poked around in Lily's effects with the muzzle of his rifle, mussing every laboriously ironed dress, skirt, shirtwaist, petticoat, until Lily, a neat person despite her gaudy taste in apparel, cried, "Stop it, you pig! Leave those things alone!"

"Yours?" Dolan said over his shoulder. "I figured this trunk belonged to Drumgold's woman." He picked up a petticoat, sniffed its scent of sachet. "Smells good. Like you do, maybe?"

"Dolan, I'm warning you—"

"You act like you've got something to hide, baby," he said, and threw the petticoat aside. "Yeah. You sure do."

He leaned his rifle against the side of the trunk, then began grabbing clothing with both hands and dumping it onto the floor. He had all but emptied the trunk when Lily heard him utter a surprised grunt, and, a moment later, a jubilant yelp. She saw him lift out a pair of saddlebags. He shook the pair of bags and she heard a musical jingle of coins.

"So it was you, baby," he said. "You know, we're two of a kind and I reckon I ain't sore at you. Not much, anyway."

He stood there grinning, both hands full, and Lily took her chance.

She swung the lantern by its bail, with all her might, straight at his grinning face.

Chapter Ten

"Kincaid!"

It was Forsythe, calling from the roof in a hoarse whisper.

Kincaid had been standing there with Drumgold and Virginia, trying to find a way to buck this situation which had gotten out of hand. He blamed himself. He should have foreseen that Dolan would attempt to take over the station sooner or later. He should have prepared for the attempt. Instead, he'd let the hardcase catch him flat-footed. He still had his revolver, heavy in its holster at his thigh. They hadn't seen fit to disarm him, perhaps because Dolan and the other two had sense enough to fear the Utes more than him. But he couldn't use the gun. With Thorpe and Sanchez, standing back there, rifles ready, he'd only get himself killed. Drumgold and Virginia too, probably. He doubted that Dolan would kill them if he got the chance. He needed them against the Utes.

"Kincaid!" Forsythe called again, alarm sharpening his voice. "They're up to something out there!"

Kincaid said, "All right, John." And then, to the men behind him: "Let's quit this damn foolishness and get over to the wall." He didn't wait for a reply, but set out across the yard. Over his shoulder, he said, "Ben, come along."

He wanted a word alone with Drumgold. While trying without success to hit upon a way to regain the upper hand here, he had decided upon something else. Upon a plan to get the two women away from the station—and, God willing—away from the Utes.

Drumgold came after him, first telling Virginia to get inside where she would be safe from flying lead. Thorpe and Sanchez followed Drumgold, still keeping him and Kincaid under their guns. They halted by the stagecoach, in the middle of the yard, covering them from there. As Kincaid reached the wall and picked up his rifle, he heard a wild yell from Chris Dolan within the house and, an instant later, a scream from Lily. He swore under his breath, but knew he could do nothing about it.

Drumgold joined him, unarmed. He'd left his rifle on the roof. Kincaid told him to go find the rifle that Parsons had been given and failed to use. Drumgold did as he was told without protest, returned and took up a position near Kincaid.

There was nothing to be seen now in the blackness across the canyon. Nothing to hear, either. They'd been quiet a long time, the Utes. So quiet that anyone not knowing them might have thought they'd stolen away to lick their wounds.

"Ben."

Drumgold turned toward him. "What now?"

Kincaid ignored the man's sour tone. Drumgold probably was stewing about his thirty thousand dollars. He said, "Ben, if Dolan finds that money, he and the other two will try to make a run for it. They'll saddle their horses and try to ride out—and leave us in the lurch."

"That's to be expected."

"Keep your voice down, man."

Drumgold growled, "All right," and moved closer.

They watched the darkness, the rocks among which the Utes lurked.

"I don't want those two to hear this," Kincaid said.

"When they ride out, the Utes will finish them off. After that, we'll be goners. I want the women out of here before that happens."

"Out of here how?"

"The way Injun Charlie intended to go. Up the canyon wall."

Drumgold grunted. "You said earlier that it couldn't be done."

"So Charlie made me believe. His stealing your money makes me think now that he knew it could be climbed in the dark. He lied about it because he didn't want to be hampered by the women. The first chance I get I'm going over the back wall and have a look at the cliff."

"So you'll try to get them away, will you?"

Kincaid gritted his teeth in the darkness. "You want to be the one, eh?" he said. "You want to try to save your own neck, do you?"

Drumgold didn't reply to that, but his silence was answer enough. Kincaid could guess at what was running through the man's mind. Ben Drumgold would be thinking that for him to have the chance at escape was only fair. He, not Kincaid, was the important one. He was the heavyweight cattleman, the man of many business interests and political influence. He would be thinking too, with renewed hope, of the years ahead with the woman he planned to marry. Drumgold was—well, Ben Drumgold.

"Not you," Kincaid said. "Not you, you bastard!"

"All right," Drumgold said. "What's to stop us all from trying to get away—you, Forsythe and myself?"

"Somebody's got to stay behind and keep the Utes from catching on right away that the women have left the station."

"So Forsythe and I are elected, the way you see it?"

"I didn't say that."

"What are you saying, then?"

"Forsythe. He'll try to get the women away."

"Why?" Drumgold demanded. "Why him?"

"I don't know. Maybe because he's young and has got his whole life ahead of him."

"Damn it, Kincaid! It was his killing that old Indian that brought this hornets' nest down on us!"

"A mistake on his part," Kincaid said. "He didn't know any better. Anyway, he's the man who goes. I'm duty-bound to stay. As for you—"

"This is your chance to work off your grudge," Drumgold said. "By keeping me here to be butchered."

"I hadn't thought about that," Kincaid told him. "The way I look at it, you've lived a long time—high, wide and handsome. And Forsythe hasn't had a chance to see much of life. So you're giving him the chance. For the first time in your life, Ben, you're giving instead of taking. You're letting Forsythe go with the women, and you're staying behind to help me keep the Utes from finding out that they've gone."

Drumgold swore under his breath.

"You find a way to talk to Miss Worden," Kincaid went on. "Tell her to pack some grub from the kitchen in a flour sack. She'll find a canteen there. Tell her to fill it with water. She's not to let Dolan or the other two see what she's up to. She's to be ready to leave on a moment's notice." He waited for Drumgold to protest again, but the man remained silent. "Another thing," he added. "Don't let her know we'll be goners. Let her think we'll make a getaway later. That will make it easier for her. You understand?"

Drumgold nodded.

The Utes were still quiet. Whatever Forsythe had seen or heard, it did not lead to an attack on the station. There was a commotion over at the house, however, and Kincaid heard Virginia call to him. Not to Drumgold, but to him.

He left the wall, started across the yard.

At the stagecoach, Thorpe and Sanchez eyed him uneasily. As he approached them, Thorpe said, "I'll keep an eye on Drumgold, Sanchez. You go with this jasper."

Sanchez fell in behind Kincaid, his revolver leveled.

Virginia and Lily were on the gallery. This time Virginia had a comforting arm about Lily. The younger woman was whimpering, shaking violently. Kincaid lay a hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right, Lily," he said. "He didn't—really hurt you, did he?"

"She killed him," Virginia said. "She says she killed him."

Kincaid rocked, mentally. How could this slip of a girl kill a burly hardcase like Chris Dolan?

Behind Kincaid, Sanchez said, "Killed Chris?" and swore.

"What happened?" Kincaid asked. "Did she tell you?"

Virginia nodded. "Dolan found the saddlebags," she said. "Lily was holding the lantern. She swung it at him, hit him in the face. He grabbed at her, and then she hit him again with the lantern—on the head. And he fell to the floor."

"That's all?" Kincaid said. "Lily, listen. He's probably not dead."

At that moment they heard a feeble cry from inside the house.

Sanchez headed for the doorway. He said over his shoulder, "You stay put, Kincaid. You hear?" He disappeared inside.

Kincaid lingered only long enough to say, "Take her around to the side of the house, Miss Worden," then headed for the barn at a run. He returned with the ladder, joining the two women at the side of the house, and propping the ladder against it so that they could climb to the roof. "Get up there with Forsythe," he told them. He saw Forsythe's head at the edge of the roof. "John, pull the ladder up after them. Don't let Dolan get at Lily."

He ran for the wall at the rear of the yard.

As he passed the doorway of the building, he heard Dolan cursing bitterly somewhere inside. He pulled himself to the top of the five-foot-high adobe wall, then dropped to the thicker darkness outside the station.

Chapter Eleven

He hugged the adobe wall, revolver in hand, reluctant to move off in the darkness. His imagination played tricks with him, making him feel that every brush thicket and cluster of rocks concealed a Ute. He reminded himself that the Indians would avoid this narrow strip between station and canyon wall because it might serve as a death trap for them. There was too little room here in which to maneuver, too little cover. He reached the base of the cliff, then moved west along it. He tried to move as stealthily as the Utes themselves, well aware that the slightest sound might alert them.

Ten long minutes later, he came to the crevice in the cliff. A fissure wide enough to admit a wagon and team at its entrance, it narrowed after he took half a dozen steps into it, and shortly was little wider than the breadth of his shoulders. He holstered his gun and sought a way to climb, and found it—a craggy slope which carried him,

with much effort, to a narrow ledge perhaps eighty feet above the canyon floor. This ledge seemed to slant sharply upward, but in the darkness he could not see far along it, and he had no time to explore farther. He would have to rely on the dead half-breed's word that the ledge did lead to the rim of the canyon, another two hundred feet above.

He made his way back down the steep slope, careful with each step, so that none of the sandstone would crumble away and fall with a noisy racket. He reached the depths of the rocky pocket, went through it to the canyon proper. Minutes later, he eased himself over the station wall and heard a voice rise in angry complaint over by the house. He moved Indian-quiet as far as the well, halted there to draw his revolver and listen to Chris Dolan's continued lament. The man was beefing to Sanchez and Lew Thorpe about the girl. He sounded angry enough, but his voice lacked force. Evidently Dolan hadn't recovered from the blows Lily had struck with the lantern. He slumped against the wall of the house, just beyond the doorway. The other two listened to his harangue without comment.

"By God, I want her," he said. "You hear?"

"You'll play hell getting her, Chris," Sanchez said mildly. "Lew says Kincaid sent both women up on the roof—and that tenderfoot's up there with a Winchester." He paused, then added in a sharper tone: "Forget her. Leave her to the Utes. We've got the money. Now let's find a way out of here so we can spend the stuff."

"No," Dolan said. "Not until I've had the girl." He swore bitterly. "She tried to kill me, I tell you."

Lew Thorpe said, "She didn't pull it off, though. You're still alive. All you've got is a sore head. Chris, we're clearing out. You savvy?"

Kincaid called out, "Yeah, Chris. Why don't you clear out?" He swung his gun up, thumbing back its hammer. "Anyway, you're not getting your hands on the girl."

Their heads swiveled, but they saw him only as a shadowy shape there by the well. Dolan shoved away from the wall, took a half dozen staggering steps toward him, then halted and stood swaying like a drunk. The saddlebags were draped over his left shoulder. His right hand rested on the butt of his holstered revolver.

"Where you been?" he demanded. "I been looking for you, hombre."

"Prowling," Kincaid told him. "What do you want with me, Chris?"

"Prowling for what?"

Kincaid had no intention of telling him about the way up the canyon wall. If these birds went first, they might make enough noise to arouse the Utes, and then the women could not get away. "For what?" he said. "To try and find out what the Utes are up to. What else?"

"Well, what are they up to?"

"They're just waiting, Chris. Just waiting."

Dolan couldn't keep his mind off Lily. "You had no business sending her up there where I can't get at her," he said. "I'm getting sick of you meddling in my affairs."

"I've got a cocked gun on you, Chris."

"You use it on me, my boys will fill you full of lead."

"I don't doubt that. And I don't want to kill you. A deal, Chris?"

"There's only one deal I'll go for," Dolan said. "My end of it's to be the girl. I want her—inside the house, alone with her."

"You gone loco, Chris?"

"She tried to kill me. She had the money in her trunk."

"She what?"

"You heard me. She had the money."

Kincaid thought about that, keeping his eyes and his gun on Dolan. After a moment he said, "All right. Maybe she was in on it with Parsons. Or maybe she wasn't. He could have hidden those saddlebags in her trunk instead of in his own traveling bag. That way, nobody would suspect him if the luggage was searched. He could have figured it would be easy to get them back if he and the girl made it to Robles. He had his eye on her too, Chris. He'd have looked her up in Robles even if he hadn't stolen the money. Get her out of your head, Chris. You're letting what she did to you drive you crazy."

"Listen, you—"

"Hold it," Thorpe said. "Kincaid, what's this deal you're talking about?"

"No more trouble from you three, and I'll help you get away."

"How?"

"Drumgold and Forsythe and I will open fire on the Utes, try to cover you."

Thorpe's palm rasped against his bristly chin. "Why would you do that?" he said suspiciously. "It sounds too good to be true."

"The rest of us will have more chance once you three are off our backs," Kincaid said. "With Dolan messing things up, we can't hold this place. The Utes could take it right now, the way things are."

Thorpe considered that, then said, "Sanchez, what do you think?"

"I say we get out of here," Sanchez said. "The sooner, the better."

Thorpe walked over to Dolan. "What about it, Chris?"

Dolan chopped at the ground with his boot heel. "All right," he said after a minute. "We'll get out of here. Here's how we'll work it—"

They got together and discussed their escape. Dolan's plan was simply to saddle their horses, then open the gate and make a run for it. They would head east through the canyon. The Utes would be too taken by surprise to open fire immediately. And since their ponies had been left west through the canyon, beyond the cliff shoulder, it would be some little while before they could start out in pursuit. Dolan and Sanchez would saddle the horses, and Thorpe would go to the gate and swing it open at the very last moment. Thorpe didn't like his part of the scheme. He argued that it would slow them up, his having to mount at the gate.

Kincaid considered the plan foolhardy. He doubted that they had more than one chance in a thousand of getting away. There was no use pointing that out to them, however. They had Drumgold's thirty thousand, and nothing on earth would keep them from trying to get away with it. They had no real choice, anyway. They would die if they rode out and die if they stayed. And their riding out would give him an opportunity to start Forsythe and the women up the canyon wall.

He said, "Lew's right. It'll slow you up to have him get on his horse at the gate. I'll open it for you."

They stared at him. "No tricks?" Thorpe said.

"No tricks, Lew."

"I don't trust you, Kincaid."

"I told you that I want you three off my back."

"So you did. But you're a little too eager."

Kincaid eased the trigger of his Colt off cocked position, holstered the gun and walked over to them. "Stay or leave," he said. "It's up to you. But if you stay, quit this fooling around and let the rest of us stand ready to fight the Utes." He ignored Dolan, talked directly to Thorpe and Sanchez. "You've got the money. Be satisfied. Leave me and the others alone. Is that asking too much?"

"All right," Thorpe said. "You'll open the gate."

"Just let me know when you're ready."

Kincaid left them, went to the side of the house and called to Forsythe to put down the ladder. When Forsythe lowered it, he set it firmly in place and climbed until he could see onto the roof. Forsythe crouched a little distance back from the edge, balancing himself with his rifle. The two women sat together in the middle of the roof. He wondered briefly if Lily really had been in cahoots with Parsons in the murder of Injun Charlie and the theft of the money. He wondered too if it really mattered, in such a situation as this.

To Forsythe he said, "Did Drumgold talk to Miss Worden about you three getting away?" He caught the youth's nod, then told him, "I'm counting on you, John. You've got to take them out of here and to a safe place. I think you're the man to do it or I wouldn't have picked you. Now listen and get this fixed in your head—"

He told Forsythe how to find the crevice in the cliff and the rocky slope deep within the crevice. He told him about the ledge that ran up the canyon wall.

"Once you're out of the canyon, head west," he said. "Keep on the move until daylight, then go into hiding until nightfall. When you start out again, swing south until you reach the road. Be careful you don't miss it in the dark. Follow the road west until you reach the Rock Creek station. That's about twenty miles from here."

Forsythe peered over his shoulder at the canyon wall, then said worriedly, "It's the only way? There's no hope, remaining here?"

"I'm giving you your only hope," Kincaid said roughly, his patience running out. "Don't give me an argument, for God's sake."

"All right. I'm sorry. You know best."

"That's right. I know best. You be ready to leave when Dolan and the others ride out. Don't wait. This will be your last chance. Take it."

"We'll be ready."

"Good. Now send Miss Worden down to get the grub and water you'll need." He started down the ladder, then paused and looked up at the youth again. Forsythe's face was pale and glistening with sweat. "Luck, John."

He saw as he left the ladder that the three hardcases had talked themselves out and were now moving toward the barn. Drumgold made a dark shadow against the front wall. At that moment a drumming of hoofs shattered the quiet. The sound took Kincaid to the wall at a run. Dolan and his partners came hurrying across the yard, and Drumgold called out excitedly. Kincaid had the hope that the approaching horsemen were, by some miracle, cavalymen from Fort Sands.

The hope died at once. The horsemen appeared around the base of the jutting canyon wall, and even in the darkness Kincaid saw that they were Indians. A score or more of them. They swung off the road and into the rocks where the other Utes were hidden. They ran their ponies to the far side of the canyon, uttering wild yells and the original band echoed them. They were from another village, Kincaid knew, brought to the Lost Squaw by a courier. Still more would be coming in from other villages, before long. The yelling continued, punctuated by occasional shots, as the two groups of Indians went through some sort of a welcoming celebration. Kincaid felt empty inside. The end would come soon. There would be much gunfire for a little while, and then a rush by overwhelming odds, and then nothing.

He thought that it had to be that, a quick nothing. He wanted to be killed in the final rush, not to be taken alive and tortured.

Dolan was his normal self again, having gotten Lily off his mind. He too understood that time was running short. He said, "Come on, come on. Let's get out of here."

He and the other two went off to the barn, running.

Kincaid moved along the wall, carrying his rifle now. He came to the moodily silent Drumgold. "Ben, you'd better go say good-bye to Miss Worden."

"You've told Forsythe?"

"Yes. They'll go over the back wall when Dolan and the others ride out."

Drumgold lingered a moment, then sighed and said, "Yes, I'd better say good-bye to her." He turned away. "Ben."

Drumgold faced him. "Yes?"

"Maybe it's in your mind to leave me in the lurch, to go with them."

"Maybe it is," Drumgold said savagely. "Damn you, maybe it is!"

"Don't do it," Kincaid said. "If I'm alone, I won't be able to hold the Utes off for longer than it takes me to fire half a dozen shots. Two of us might hold out for quite a while—long enough maybe to give Forsythe and the women their chance. They won't have any chance at all if the Utes come swarming up that canyon wall after them." He paused, letting it sink in. "Don't do it," he said again. "Not if you want to keep her safe."

"I'm touched by your concern for the lady," Drumgold said, and started across the yard.

At the far side of the canyon, beyond the jumble of rocks, a fire suddenly blossomed and painted the nearby cliff with flickering reds and yellows. Chanting in unison, some of the Utes began to gyrate about the fire in a ceremonial dance to the beat of a war drum. Their writhing shadows played against the cliff, huge and grotesque.

In the barn, working in the thick blackness there, Chris Dolan and his companions saddled their horses. Dolan had the girl on his mind again, and muttered complainingly, "All I wanted was half an hour alone with her." Sanchez swore a time or two, for saddling a horse with one hand was difficult. Lew Thorpe worried aloud: "We'll need luck to make it—the Devil's own luck."

On the roof of the station house, young John Forsythe felt sick with fear. It had been bad before—when the stagecoach was attacked; when the two Indians appeared at the gate and he shot down the old man; when the Utes first besieged the station. But then it had been a normal fear, the kind all the others felt, including those outlaws and even Kincaid. But now it was more than that. It bordered on panic. He kept glancing at the awesomely looming canyon wall. With each glance, his terror increased.

He had this fear of heights. He'd always had it, as long as he could remember. His oldest memory was of the experience that had started it all. He'd been a kid of five, then. With an older boy, a boy of seven or eight, he had wandered away from his own neighborhood in that little Maryland town, and they had gone down to the river, to the bluffs. Somehow he and his friend had gotten to quarreling—and his friend had pushed him over the edge of the highest and steepest of the bluffs. He'd fallen only six feet to a narrow outcropping of rock. He'd been hurt, of course, but the pain was nothing compared to the fear. He'd dared not move; he'd known enough not to move. Beyond the outcropping of rock, the bluff fell sharply away for a great distance—for eighty feet, he learned when older—and at its bottom was the rushing river. He'd screamed with fright at first, then cried with terror until he hadn't a sob left in his small body.

His friend had run away after pushing him over the edge, and hadn't told anyone what had happened. It had been nearly midnight when the searchers found him, and ever since, he'd had his fear of heights. Even here on the roof of this squat building, he experienced a queasy feeling when he looked down from its edge. To climb that canyon wall in the dark . . . I can't do it, he thought. I can't.

The girl there with him, the girl Lily, seemed to sense his fear. Perhaps she saw his pallor, the sweat on his face; perhaps she listened to his fluttery breathing, or even heard the too hard pounding of his heart. She said, "John, what is it? What's wrong?" She came to sit close, to lay a hand on his arm.

Suddenly, with a rush of words, he was telling her. He'd never before spoken of this, not even to his mother. He'd kept it hidden within himself, regarding it as a weakness and something of which to be ashamed. But he could tell this girl who was a stranger and yet closer to him at the moment than anyone had ever been. Even when he'd finished telling her, she did not seem to think he needed to feel ashamed.

And when he said, "I'm going to tell Kincaid that I can't do it, that Mr. Drumgold will have to go in my place," she shook her head and put her arms about him.

"I won't let you," she said. "Kincaid wouldn't hear of it, anyway. He wanted you to stay alive, and I—I do, too."

Listen, Johnny. If you lose your nerve, I'll be there. I've got nerve enough for both of us. That's one thing Lily's got plenty of, darling."

That, and a lot of love, she told herself, and pulled him down so that his head rested against her breast. She hoped that he could draw courage from her.

But at the moment, in this night charged with danger her own courage was a wobbly thing.

Chapter Twelve

Groping about the kitchen in the dark, Virginia managed to find an empty sack and a canteen. Into the sack, she put a dozen or so left-over biscuits, some jerky and a small amount of dried apple slices. This was the extent of the food on hand that could be eaten without cooking or other preparation. Virginia knew that she and Lily and John Forsythe would have no time to prepare a meal during their flight, even if they dared light a fire to cook it. Carrying sack and canteen, she left the house, shuddering as she walked around Injun Charlie's body, and went to the well to fill the canteen. She could hear the muttering of the outlaws as they saddled their horses. She heard the distant outcries of the Indians as they danced about their fire and called upon their tribal gods to help them take the station.

As she finished with the canteen, someone crossed the yard toward the house. She called softly, "Kincaid?"

The man halted. After what seemed a very long time, he moved toward her.

He said, "It's Ben, Virginia," and added in a hurt tone, "If it's Kincaid you want to see, I'll send him to you."

She could have bitten off her tongue. She said, in confusion, "I just thought—well, it's so dark I wasn't sure. I don't want to see him, Ben."

He came to stand beside her, quite close. He studied her in silence for a time, then said, "Something's gone wrong between us. It's not like it was in Denver. What's happened, Virginia? Has Kincaid been telling you things about me?"

"No, Ben. He won't say anything against you."

"So you've questioned him," he said accusingly.

Virginia felt her cheeks grow hot. "I'm sorry, but I did ask him why he hates you. I shouldn't have, I suppose."

"It hardly matters now," he said, but not forgivingly. "He told me I'd better say good-bye to you." His voice was raw with bitterness. "He seems to have you on his mind."

"Good-bye?" she said, startled. "Ben, aren't you coming too—you and Kincaid? You told me that once Lily and John and I had a start you would follow." She gripped his arm. "Ben, you didn't tell me the truth. You plan to stay here with Kincaid and—and fight the Indians so that we can escape. No, Ben. No! I won't have it that way!"

He needed to win back her high opinion of him, and for an instant he toyed with the idea of letting her believe that he did intend to be a martyr. Then he saw the cruelty of it, and said, "It's not going to be that way. We'll come along after you've had a chance to climb the cliff. Kincaid and I will keep firing at the Utes so they don't suspect what we're up to."

"But, Ben, if you wait too long—"

"I won't wait too long, Ginny."

"Ben, don't lie to me, please."

He felt very tender toward her just then. He reached out and gently touched her cheek. At the moment he believed that everything would be right between them again. "I wouldn't lie to you," he said. "I'll follow you. I'll catch up with you. I give you my word." He smiled. "Now do you believe me?"

She gazed at him intently, then nodded. "Yes, I think I do," she said. "Yes, Ben, I do believe you."

Lew Thorpe came from the barn, leading his horse. "All right," he called to Kincaid. "Open the gate!"

Kincaid called back, "Give me a minute, Lew." Then, more loudly, "John, you ready?" And, "Ben, get over here!"

Sanchez and Dolan came from the barn, riding their horses. Thorpe mounted, drew his revolver. Dolan held his gun ready.

Drumgold said, "This is it, Ginny," and kissed her. "You and the others travel as fast as you can. Don't slow down, waiting for me—for Kincaid and me. We'll catch up."

He left her.

Over at the side of the house, John Forsythe made his shaky descent of the ladder and covered the three riders with his rifle as Lily followed him. The outlaws paid no attention to him, and Dolan seemed to have forgotten the girl. Wildly excited, Dolan yelled at Kincaid to get the gate open.

At the wall, Kincaid removed the bar from its sockets and swung both sections of the gate open. He called, "All right," and moved aside and picked up his rifle.

Shod hoofs racketed across the yard. The three riders crowded each other as they galloped toward the gate. The war dance across the canyon had already come to an end, as though the Utes had some foreknowledge of what was about to happen. Sanchez was first through the gate, swinging his racing horse east along the road. A Ute gun flashed, and Kincaid drove a shot at the spurt of powder flame. Wild yells lifted, and now the night erupted into fury. Thorpe flashed through the gate an instant after Sanchez, and by some freak accident the raking fire from the rocks did not touch them. Dolan was not so lucky. He and his horse went down in a thrashing heap just outside the gate. Kincaid saw it all from the corner of his eye as he fired shot after shot at the Utes.

As he triggered the last round in the Winchester and began to shove fresh loads into the magazine, Drumgold opened up with a rifle. The cattleman was at the east side of the gate. He seemed to be making every shot count; at least, he was not shooting with frantic haste but spacing his shots like a man whose nerve was steady. Sanchez and Thorpe were out of sight now, lost in the darkness back through the canyon. Dolan lay still beside his dead horse

—the money-filled saddlebags there with him, Kincaid supposed.

He brought his rifle into action again, this time with riders for targets. A dozen or more of the Utes who had ridden into the canyon a short time ago were setting out in pursuit of Sanchez and Thorpe. He fired five times into the bunch, and saw two topple from their mounts. Then the others pounded out of range, vanishing in hot pursuit of Thorpe and Sanchez.

The Utes who remained kept up a heavy fire for what seemed an eternity, then their shooting slackened to a methodical sniping. Kincaid held his fire, waiting for a rush that would bring the Indians through the gateway. He couldn't close the gate, with Dolan and his horse lying dead there. Drumgold also stopped shooting.

"How long has it been?" he called to Kincaid.

Kincaid understood. Drumgold wanted to know how much of a start Forsythe and the two women had. "Ten minutes, maybe," he called back.

"Seems longer."

"Yes," Kincaid said, and hoped it had been longer. Much longer.

Waiting there for the end to come he thought it strange indeed that he and Ben Drumgold should be facing death together. Strange, but somehow proper too. He had little to live for. He had been stripped of all that had given meaning to his life, and there was not a single soul who cared whether he lived or died. And Drumgold, who had everything to live for, deserved no better than to die at the hands of the Utes. There should be some sort of retribution, it seemed to Kincaid. A man should be rewarded for the good he did, and punished for his wrongs. So it was proper enough that Drumgold and he were together now, and strange only because it was such an unlikely bit of poetic injustice at Drumgold's expense. Approaching death had one virtue: it made them equal.

Minutes passed, quite a few minutes.

The Utes who had ridden after the two fleeing men did not return. Those who remained across the canyon fired fewer and fewer shots. No wave of warriors came charging across the open space leading to the station gate. They had lost heavily; perhaps they no longer had the courage to expose themselves recklessly. Perhaps they were running short of ammunition. Whatever kept them from doing

more than sniping was all to the good. The longer they withheld the final attack, the farther up the canyon wall Forsythe and Lily and Virginia would be. How long would it take for them to climb three hundred feet of treacherous cliff? He turned and looked at the canyon wall, but saw only a dark mass of rock. He could detect no movement anywhere on its sheer face.

Drumgold left his position. He went to the gateway. Kincaid said, "What are you up to, man? The Utes will spot you."

"Dolan's still alive," Drumgold said. "He's still breathing."

"Get away from there, you fool!"

"In a minute," Drumgold said. He bent over the dead horse and began pulling at something. He got it loose, then ducked back behind the wall, carrying the object over his arm.

"My saddlebags," he said. "Dolan wasn't so damn smart after all!"

My God, Kincaid thought. He's still worrying about his thirty thousand.

He said, "You're crazy, Ben. Just plain crazy."

"Am I?" Drumgold said, and he was snarling now. "Am I? Do you know the kind of deal I can make with thirty thousand hard coin? Do you know the difference it makes when the other fellow wants quick action instead—"

"Snub it off," Kincaid said. "Shut up, you hog."

"Listen, you two-bit greasysack—"

"All right, Drumgold. Die with it. Just shut up and die with it, man."

There was a silence. It stretched.

"I'm not dead yet," Drumgold said, and he said it quietly, almost as if he were talking to himself. "Whether I get out or not, this money is mine. I've got a right to it and I'll keep it until—" He stopped talking, and a gusty sigh wrenched out of him. "I'll keep it," he muttered.

Kincaid expected more, but it didn't come. Then he realized that there just was no more. Ben Drumgold had summed himself up completely. For all his blustery airs of self-satisfied manhood, Drumgold had a great hollowness in him. He lived to possess. He'd earmarked that thirty thousand for some important, quick-turnover cash deal that just couldn't wait, and he'd thought about it so much that the money, and the deal, and what he

would gain by the deal had taken on a monumental significance, almost a life of its own. Under pressure like that of a minute ago he would forget himself, risk his life for it. . . .

Give his life for it?

Kincaid grunted as the blade of insight lanced a doubt that had been festering in his mind ever since the Utes closed in on the stage station.

Yes, Drumgold would give his life—or at least risk his life beyond the point of turning back—to protect and preserve any prize possession. He didn't love Virginia Worden. He wasn't capable of loving any woman; not really, not tenderly. Drumgold had spent years consorting with cheap and tawdry mistresses, and then finally he had met a true aristocrat, a beautiful, clean-run thoroughbred who represented all the style and culture and good taste he lacked but secretly envied. Of course he had come to regard her as the one paramount possession he must own. That explained the man's self-sacrificing attitude throughout the day and night. Ben Drumgold would have enough sincere concern over his chief possession to play the role of a normal, loving fiancé to the end.

That is, he would so long as he didn't see any way out for himself, Kincaid thought, and in a sour, ironic sort of way he felt a little better. He could quit being bothered by what seemed like flashes of decency in Ben Drumgold. For whatever good it would do to him, he could go on hating the bastard with a clear conscience until the Utes came in and finished them both. As for Virginia . . . well, he was gaining time for her, anyhow.

He waited.

The Utes' war-dance fire burned out. Then it flared up again and Kincaid saw the shadows of several warriors on the far canyon wall. Shortly, he saw the glare of other, smaller fires at several places among the rocks, all much closer to the station.

"They're going to pull something," he called to Drumgold. "Watch it."

It came as he spoke—a flight of flame-tipped arrows. The Utes shot the arrows high into the air so that they fell within the station. Most landed in the yard, harmlessly, but one lodged on top of the stagecoach and several dropped on the roofs of house and barn. Those

which struck the buildings burned out, but the old Concord coach quickly erupted in flames. More fiery shafts came arching through the darkness, all falling on the buildings now. The stagecoach roared and crackled, sending up sheets of yellow fire. Kincaid knew that he and Drumgold no longer dared remain at the wall. They were limned against the glare of the fire behind them, easy targets for the Utes.

He called to Drumgold, began moving toward the house. He heard a cry behind him, and turned to see Chris Dolan trying to rise. Drumgold went by him, hurrying toward the shelter of the house. Dolan started crawling. Kincaid hesitated a moment longer, then ran to the man and helped him to rise. Some Ute guns opened up as he got Dolan to his feet. He could hear the shriek of the slugs. Dolan had lost his hat and was bleeding from a wound at his left temple. Supporting most of the man's weight, Kincaid crossed the yard with him and dumped him through the open doorway of the house.

The roof of the barn had caught fire, and Kincaid, with a thought of the horses there, crossed the yard and entered the building. There were twelve animals inside. He backed them out of their stalls, one by one, then drove them, in a bunch, from the building. With yells and a couple shots from his revolver, he started them running toward the gate. They circled wide about the flaming stagecoach, and the leaders of the bunch balked at the gate because of the dead horse there. However, they hesitated only briefly. Spooked by Kincaid and the fire, they went past the dead animal at a run.

The appearance of the horses brought excited yells from the Utes. Some of the warriors ventured from cover in an attempt to capture them. While the Indians were thus preoccupied, Kincaid made a running trip to the front wall. He'd neglected to take the last of his supply of cartridges from the wall, a half-filled box. Grabbing up the box, he returned to the house and picked up his rifle which he'd left propped against the wall there. Dolan still lay just inside the doorway, groaning softly. Kincaid stepped past him.

"Ben?"

There was no reply from Drumgold. He had gone over the rear wall to save himself.

Chapter Thirteen

Himself and his money, Kincaid thought bitterly.

He knew that he shouldn't be surprised. He should have expected Drumgold to run out on him. He looked at Chris Dolan, sprawled there on the floor. The hard-case was in pain, bleeding from a head wound—helpless, useless. Drumgold had left two men in the lurch. The two men who had most reason to hate him.

The flaming stagecoach and the burning barn roof pushed back the darkness with a ruddy glare. Kincaid no longer needed to feel his way, moving about the house. He went into his own quarters. A dim glow reached back there, showing him Dan Macklin dead on the bed. He'd forgotten about Macklin. He got his jug of whiskey from the cupboard and a clean shirt from the chest in which he kept his few spare clothes. He returned to Dolan.

He knelt by the man, using whiskey from the jug to

cleanse Dolan's head wound. It did not appear to be a bullet wound. Apparently the hardcase had struck a rock on the ground when he went down with his horse. Or maybe the dying animal had kicked him glancingly with a shod hoof. The bite of the alcohol caused Dolan to writhe and groan more loudly. Tearing the shirt into strips, Kincaid bandaged the man's head. He'd forced Dolan to a sitting position so that he could wrap the cloth in place. Dolan thanked him with a curse. His voice was weak. His eyes looked dazed.

Kincaid pushed the jug close to him. "Take a pull on that."

He filled the magazine of his rifle with cartridges and replaced the fired shells in his revolver with fresh loads. He stepped past Dolan and peered across the yard. He could see nothing of the Utes from the doorway. The stagecoach was a flame-gutted skeleton now, almost ready to collapse. The barn roof burned furiously. Portions of it had fallen in, touching off small fires within the building. The Utes continued to shoot fire arrows at the station, aiming at the house now. One landed close to Injun Charlie's lifeless body. The burning portion consisted of a bit of rag smeared with tallow from a butchered pony. It flamed for a little while, then burned out. In the lurid glare Kincaid could see the bodies of old Hank Weaver and the fat drummer Bert Parsons, the murderer of Injun Charlie, sprawled by the front wall. With his mind's eye he could see his own bullet-ridden body lying here where he now stood.

Suddenly he wondered: Why? Why should I wait?

He had given the others a fair chance to save themselves. Even Drumgold. It seemed only reasonable that he should give himself as much.

He said, "Chris, listen. Can you navigate at all?"

Dolan took another long pull at the jug. The whiskey had already given him a false strength, and to a degree cleared his brain. "I can damn well try," he said. Then, accusingly: "There's a way out of here, ain't there?"

"If you can take it."

"Figured so," Dolan said bitterly. "You got the others away. The women, anyway."

"Forsythe's gone too. And Drumgold."

"That bastard," Dolan said. "He went off with the money, did he?"

"Forget the money, you fool,"

Dolan forced himself to get up. He looked more than ever the tough-hand he was. A heavy stubble of reddish beard smudged his face. A great blue-black bruise across his left cheek testified to the unmerciful wallop Lily had hit him with the lantern. He looked mean and hard and mad. He managed to stay on his feet, swaying unsteadily, however, to keep balance.

"I can make it," he said. "Just show me the way."

"Over the back wall," Kincaid told him. "Then west along the cliff until you come to a crevice. Go as far back in the crevice as you can, then begin to climb. You'll come to a ledge that'll take you to the rim of the canyon."

Dolan swore. "We could have got away, my partners and me. If we'd have known. If you'd have told us."

"Your partners got away, so far as I know," Kincaid said. "And now you've got your chance. I wasn't going to tell you three and let you spoil the women's chance. If you're going, get started. The Utes are going to get tired of waiting."

Dolan went, muttering to himself and moving on wobbly legs. He went back along the gallery of the house, then crossed the short open space to the rear wall. He had some difficulty in climbing the wall, but finally he made it and was lost to Kincaid's sight.

The stagecoach collapsed with an explosive crash and a shower of sparks. The interior of the barn was a roaring mass of flame, and black smoke rose from it. The Utes continued to shoot fire arrows at the house, but so far its roof had not ignited. Kincaid intended to give them a helping hand with the house. He went to the kitchen and poured a full five-gallon can of coal oil onto the plank floor and then touched it off with a match. He wanted to give the Utes the idea that the last defenders of the station had died within the burning buildings. Perhaps they would accept such an idea and not bother to look for sign behind the station.

He snatched up his rifle and left the house as soon as the coal oil began to burn. He ran along the gallery. He went over the wall in a hurry, a sort of fear in him now. He ran for the crevice, and Dolan's voice challenged him.

"Kincaid?"

He called, low-voiced, "Yeah, it's me," and made his

way to the narrow end of the crevice. He was surprised to find that Dolan, despite his apparent weakness back at the station, had already started to climb. The man had halted, however, a dozen feet or so above on the rocky slope.

"I'll need a hand here, Kincaid."

Kincaid said, "All right," and began to climb. His rifle hampered him but he decided against abandoning it. He would need it if the Utes picked up the trail. He was almost on a level with Dolan when Dolan said, "This is for keeping it a secret, damn you!" He looked up and saw Dolan clubbing at him with his revolver. He tried to duck, but didn't make it. His hat cushioned the blow to a degree, but there was an explosion of pain and he lost his balance. He heard himself cry out as he fell.

Dolan said, "You're bait for the Utes, bucko!" And then he laughed.

Kincaid landed in a crumpled heap at the base of the slope, filled with rage but too dazed and full of pain to rise.

For John Forsythe, the climb up the canyon wall lingered as a nightmarish memory. There was truth in the old saying that a coward dies a thousand deaths. To die literally could have been no more of an ordeal than some of the moments he had spent on the ledge that extended along the face of the cliff. More than once he had wished he were dead. Actually, wished that. Several times he'd frozen, totally unable to inch his way further along the ledge where it was inches wide, and again at spots where there were gaps to cross. A number of times, he'd been so giddy that he'd come close to toppling over the brink. And after each ordeal, he'd been on the verge of fainting—which could be just as fatal.

Yes, he'd died his thousand deaths and made it to the rim. But even now, as he led the women away from the gorge, he wasn't sure that he had conquered his fear. The truth was, without Lily he couldn't have finished the climb. Every time he froze, the girl pleaded and coaxed until he went on. When coaxing didn't work, she swore at him. And when he'd had his worst moment of all, she'd actually threatened to push him off the ledge so she and Miss Worden could go on. He still did not

know whether she would have done it, but at the time her threat had forced him out of his trance.

Upon reaching the rim of the canyon, he'd collapsed to the ground and slumped there sick with nervous reaction and with shame. And Lily had knelt beside him and held him close as she'd done earlier on the roof of the station house. She'd understood. Thinking of her understanding, he felt warm inside. He told himself, with all the earnestness of his youth, that he wanted to keep her with him always. But he doubted that Lily could find enough good—enough strength—in him to want to share her life with him. Lily would want a stronger man, he told himself bleakly. Lily wouldn't tie herself to a weakling.

Here, away from the gorge, the night seemed less dark. The going was far less difficult than on the canyon wall. Already they'd traveled a fast mile, in single file.

"John." She whispered his name, for his ears alone. "John, you're all right now?"

"Yes, Lily. Thanks to you."

"You're not mad?"

"Mad? Why should I be?"

"Well, I wasn't very nice to you a while back."

He stopped, turned to her. "You were the way you had to be," he said. "Lily—"

She said, "Yes, John?" expectantly, but he didn't finish. Miss Worden had caught up to them.

He went on again, finding the way through brush thickets and around clusters of rocks. He carried his rifle, Lily the sack of food, Miss Worden the canteen. He matched his pace to theirs, and he hoped that they were headed in the proper direction. Kincaid had told him to travel west. He did not want to stray northward, nor southward toward the canyon. After a time Miss Worden startled him by calling out, "Wait, please!" And he whirled and saw a roseate glow far behind them. Virginia Worden watched the pink glow spread and grow a bright red. Lily and Forsythe came back and stood by her. Lily laid a hand on her arm in attempt to comfort her. All three knew that it was the glare of a great fire, reflected against the night sky from within the part of the canyon they'd left. They understood. The Utes must have put the station buildings to the torch. The two men who had stayed there must be dead. Virginia was suddenly blinded by tears.

Lily said, "Dearie, I'm sorry. You don't know how sorry."

Forsythe stirred impatiently. "Yes, it's too bad, but we'd better not stay here. The Indians may start searching for us—"

"Wait," Lily said. "Give her a minute or two. After all, he was the man she was to marry." She began crying too, crying for Virginia. After a moment, she added, "And Kincaid too." She spoke as if to herself. "There was a man, a real man."

Virginia wept for Kincaid as well as for Ben. She admitted that to herself, and she wasn't ashamed. He'd been a part of her life so briefly, but she could grieve for him as much as for Ben. She blinked away her tears. Then, able to see clearly again, she did not want to watch the still brightening glare. She said dully, "Yes, we'd better go," and turned her back on the fire. Lily walked beside her now, but she felt alone, and somehow lost.

Chapter Fourteen

Ben Drumgold paused to rest and catch his breath. He'd climbed the canyon wall without too much difficulty. In his youth, before he'd made his stake, he had prospected for several years and much of that time had been spent in mountainous country. Also, his present mining interests often took him into high, rugged terrain. His past experiences on treacherous slopes had paid off well tonight. More, he'd been aided by the glare of the fire in the stage station; his ascent had not been made in total darkness.

He'd had but one fear during the climb, a fear that the Utes would see him moving along the ledge and open fire. They had not, however, probably because his moving figure had appeared to be merely a part of the intricate pattern of ruddy glare and dark shadows created by the roaring flames.

His breathing seemed slow to return to normal. His

heartbeat too. The exertion of climbing had taxed his strength, reminding him that he was well into middle age. However, after he had rested and started away from the gorge, rifle in his right hand and saddlebags over his left shoulder, he denied the evidence of encroaching years. Hell, he was still in his prime.

Ben Drumgold was good at self-deception. He convinced himself that he'd felt the strain of the climb merely because he'd let himself grow soft over the years—during the dozen years that he'd known real prosperity. He'd indulged himself too well. There'd been too many women. Too many drinking bouts. Too many all-night sessions at poker. But all that was over and done with now. There would be no more carousing, once he married Virginia. He wouldn't need any of that, with a wife like her. God, what a prize she was!

The farther he traveled from the gorge, from the flame-ravaged stage station, the higher his spirits soared. He looked forward to his reunion with Virginia eagerly. He thought of their wedding night, and wove wonderful fantasies about it. He'd had no affair with any woman since meeting Virginia, and abstinence had whetted his lusty male appetite to a razor's edge. She'd be better than any of them. Worlds better, once he roused all that thoroughbred fire. That might take some doing, but in the end she'd be worth it. She was his, by damn. His!

And yet, as he made his way through the darkness of the rock hills, a doubt began to nag him. Vain though he was, Drumgold realized that he had courted her with such urgency that she'd been swept off her feet. He'd convinced her that she was in love with him. He'd willed her to fall in love with him, and she'd done so. Or thought that she'd done so. The trouble was, a woman who had a lot of brains could get over an illusion too damn quick once she really got to thinking. And Virginia must have got to thinking.

He'd made a poor showing a time or two back at the stage station. Mostly on account of Kincaid. He cursed Kincaid. He hated Kincaid because somehow the man always made him feel guilty. Now he'd piled guilt upon guilt by running out on Kincaid. He wished he hadn't had to do that.

Still, he had to look out for Ben Drumgold. Kincaid was dead now. Too bad. But being dead, he could be

forgotten. Let the dead bury their dead. The living had to consider the living, and Ben Drumgold was very much alive.

Alive . . . but still haunted by Kincaid. The son-of-abitch was mainly to blame for things not being the same between himself and Virginia. He'd sensed, back at the station, that the man attracted her. He knew she hadn't been interested in Kincaid merely because she'd discovered that Kincaid hated him.

Jealousy began fermenting in Drumgold. Just what had drawn Virginia to a two-bit station agent, anyhow? Kincaid had nothing to offer a woman, any woman. He didn't earn enough money to support a wife. Virginia should have been aware of that. Beside Ben Drumgold, Kincaid was nothing. *Nothing*. Drumgold pulled up short, mentally. He was letting himself believe that Kincaid would escape the Ute trap. He was already dead, or soon would be. Forget him, Drumgold told himself. Forget him, damn it!

He found his way barred finally by a steep, rocky slope, and by the time he climbed it he was winded again. His heart thumped heavily against his ribs. He moved wearily into a cluster of boulders on the crest of the slope and sank to the ground to rest. He meant to stay there for only a few minutes, but nearly half an hour slipped away before he felt like getting up and going on. And then, forcing himself to his feet, he heard an alarming sound nearby.

He crouched among the rocks, slipped the saddlebags off his shoulder, readied his rifle. Peering around a boulder, he glimpsed the figure of a man who had just gained the top of the slope. Kincaid? Fear seemed to suck the moisture out of his mouth and throat. He swallowed, almost choking. This time, Kincaid really would try to kill him. He brought the rifle to his shoulder and curled his finger about the trigger.

Then he saw that it was not Kincaid. The man was too bulky. He moved too heavily. Drumgold peered down the Winchester's barrel and recognized Chris Dolan—Chris Dolan with a bandage about his head, shuffling along as though he too were dog-tired. Drumgold ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth, but it still felt dry. Chris Dolan hated him worse than Walt Kincaid did. Dolan wanted the saddlebags, too. He tightened his finger on

the trigger. He waited a moment longer, intending to back-shoot the man.

Kincaid lay there helpless, numbed by pain. The throbbing in his head was not the worst of his injuries; his hat had broken the force of Dolan's blow. The pain in his back caused the real trouble. He'd struck a jagged rock, tumbling down-slope. Each time he tried to rise, his back seemed to hurt more. He kept trying, however, and finally gained a sitting position. He rubbed his back muscles, seeking to work away the pain. His legs bothered him, too. There was no feeling at all in them.

Perhaps half an hour after his fall, he managed to get to his feet. Then, his knees buckled, spilling him against the rock wall opposite the slope. He straightened gradually, leaning against the wall, trying to manipulate his legs. They responded to his will, and soon he could stand without support. He used them for a while, walking to and fro in the crevice. He rubbed his back some more, and the pain subsided a little.

He began to pay some attention to his surroundings, to the situation. He was alone, of course. Chris Dolan was long gone. Looking through the crevice, he saw the glare of the burning buildings. And he heard a clatter of hoofs and a series of victorious yells some distance away. He took it for granted that the Utes who had ridden after Sanchez and Thorpe were returning—with their quarry scalps, judging by their jubilant cries. The other Utes let off steam with more shouts and a flurry of gunshots. The frenzied yelling continued and grew closer, telling him that the Indians had at last rushed the station and taken it.

They would find damn little, he thought sourly. Dead men and blazing buildings. They would have no torture victims, nor any loot. Then he began to wonder how long it would take them to discover that not all the station's people lay dead there. He hoped the Utes would make no such discovery but assume that those who did not lie dead in the yard had died within the burning buildings. But he could not gamble on such a thing. It was time he made his way out of the canyon.

He'd dropped his rifle in falling. It lay six feet up the slope. He retrieved it, continued to climb. When he reached the ledge, he had a view of the station. The

stagecoach was a heap of embers, the barn gutted but still smoking. The roof of the house had caved in. Within the adobe walls roared a flaming core of fire from which dense smoke billowed. The Utes swarmed about the yard—some dancing and whooping, some sitting skittish ponies, some merely staring at the blazing building.

The ledge carried Kincaid beyond the station, and higher along the cliff. At places, it was wide enough for him to move swiftly. At others, it was so narrow he had to inch his way along. There were gaps to cross, and once he had to crawl on hands and knees under an outcropping of sandstone. It took him more than an hour to reach the rim of the canyon. Then, looking back, he saw that the fire in the house was beginning to die. The Utes were still milling about the yard.

He moved away from the gorge, starting out at a dog-trot but soon slowing to a walk. The faster pace started his head to throbbing again, brought knife-sharp ache to his back. After perhaps an hour, heading west all the while, he stopped to rest. He sank to the ground, his back to a rock and his rifle across his knees. He took makings from his pocket and rolled and lighted a cigarette.

It was the first he'd relaxed since the stagecoach came racing into the station that afternoon, and that seemed a lifetime ago.

Ben Drumgold had Dolan in his sights, and then suddenly he didn't. His hands had started to tremble so violently that he couldn't hold the rifle steady. He lowered the weapon, drew a deep breath, tried again. It was no use. Fear had gotten into him, fear such as he'd not known even under Indian attack. It came of the thought that he might miss his first shot, and of the knowledge that he would get no second. Dolan carried no rifle, but he certainly had a revolver. And he would bring it into play an instant after being fired at—if Drumgold missed. Shaking this way, he would certainly miss.

The next moment, his chance was gone. Dolan had vanished beyond the crest of the slope.

Drumgold crouched there, slowly getting hold of himself. He felt as though he'd had a close call, that he'd escaped with his life by a very narrow margin. Even now, with Dolan gone, he did not feel safe. With the hardcase

prowling these hills and heading in the same direction, Drumgold was still in danger and would continue to be. Dolan was after the saddlebags, of course, and he would kill to get them. Kill without warning. Hell, Dolan didn't even need the gold for bait. If he got the chance, Dolan would do it just to work off his old grudge.

After waiting ten minutes, Drumgold slung the saddlebags over his shoulder and crept from the rocks. He moved along the crest of the slope, toward the north, holding his rifle high and ready. Not until he had covered a half mile in that direction did he feel secure enough to aim west again.

An hour after his near-encounter with the hardcase, he came upon easy going—a stretch of level ground bare of rocks and with little brush—and he made better time. He traveled a couple of miles effortlessly, and gained confidence. He felt that he had outdistanced Dolan, who must still be fumbling his way through rough country. Later he had to climb a rocky height, but it brought him to another stretch of flat terrain. His luck held. He was still making good headway when the sky behind him began to turn gray with dawn.

He felt better for the promise of daylight and the end of the night of terror. The Drumgold luck, he thought. It never fails me in a pinch!

Chapter Fifteen

With dawn at hand, John Forsythe recalled Kincaid's instructions and sought a place in which he and the women could hide during the day. He had his choice of a hundred and one likely places, for they were still traveling through broken country. He finally decided upon a shelf of rock midway up a small slope. Behind the shelf was a cavelike hollow into which they could huddle if the Utes put in an appearance. If seen by the Indians, they could not be fired upon from above and his rifle would command the approach from below.

He led the way to the shelf, which was about a hundred feet upslope, and Lily and Miss Worden followed slowly and with great effort. Both women were tired. In fact, they appeared so done-in that Forsythe doubted that they could have gone much farther. He too would be glad to rest, though he was uneasy about the Utes.

They sank to the ground in the shallow cave, Forsythe sitting cross-legged with his rifle across his knees. He faced outward, keeping watch. The eastern sky was changing from gray to pink. The surrounding country was barren as far as the eye could reach. He saw nothing but rock hills, sand flats, brush thickets.

Lily said dully, "I've never been so tired in my life." Then, fussing with her disheveled hair: "I must look a mess."

Virginia Worden said nothing. She just stared blankly out across the harsh land. Forsythe supposed she was grieving for her dead fiancé.

"Is anybody hungry?" Lily asked. "Virginia, would you like something to eat?"

"No, thanks, Lily."

Forsythe's heart went out to her, but try as he would he could think of no comforting words. He took off his suit coat and spread it on the gravel, so Virginia could lie there with something beneath her head. She did lie back, thanking him for the coat with a wispy smile. She closed her eyes, but he did not believe she slept. Lily moved close to him, bringing the sack of food and the canteen. They each ate a stale biscuit and a piece of jerky, then drank from the canteen. Afterward, Lily lay her head on his shoulder and then, as he put an arm about her waist, she sighed contentedly. Shortly, her slowed breathing told him that she was asleep.

He watched the sky become a mottled pink and gold, and finally saw the sun begin to blaze above the jagged peaks to the east. Last night seemed a long time ago, and all its horror like a bad dream. He kept very still, so as not to wake Lily, and then, when the sun was well above the hills, he saw a tiny moving speck far across the rocky land. He stirred, waking Lily.

"Somebody's coming."

Lily awoke instantly, and Virginia sat up. Both peered toward the far-off moving speck that was almost certainly a man. Virginia said, "Is it—"

"Mr. Drumgold?" Forsythe said, picking up his rifle and rising. "I can't tell. He's still too far off."

He urged them to stay back inside the hollow, so they wouldn't be seen if it should be not a white but an Indian approaching. He knelt by a slab of rock at the edge of the shelf and laid his rifle atop it. While watching the

moving speck, he kept alert for other moving figures out there. He was still uneasy about the Utes.

Twenty minutes passed before he felt sure that the approaching figure was a white man, and another ten before he identified the man as Ben Drumgold. Disappointment dredged a heavy sigh out of him and he gave Virginia Worden a guilty side glance. For he'd hoped it would be Kincaid. He did not like Ben Drumgold. Drumgold would have turned him over to the Utes to save himself and the others. He could not help but hold that against the cattleman, even though Drumgold may have been justified in wanting to do such a thing. He was alive, but others had lost their lives so that he could live. Forsythe had that on his conscience, and he regretted that the stage station had been attacked because of him. But justified though Drumgold may have been, he did not like the man. He wished Kincaid had escaped.

"It's Mr. Drumgold," he said.

He expected some happy outcry from Virginia Worden. It did not come.

"I'm glad," she said. "But is there no one else?"

"No."

"Then Kincaid—Walt Kincaid—"

"He must not have got away at the end," Forsythe said, and began to wonder about her.

Lily touched Virginia's shoulder. "It was too much to hope for," she said, and went to join Forsythe.

They stood watching Drumgold make his slow way toward them. He was limping badly. Forsythe waved several times, finally catching the man's attention. Drumgold stopped and stared in their direction, then lifted his rifle in signal that he'd recognized them. He came on faster now, at a hobbling run. Minutes later he started up the slope. Halfway up he called, "Miss Worden? She's all right?" He was carrying his saddlebags, Forsythe noted.

Virginia came from the hollow so that he could see her. "I'm quite all right, Ben," she said in an oddly toneless voice.

Drumgold gained the shelf and leaned wearily on his rifle. He was breathing laboriously and sweat trickled down his face. He had eyes only for Virginia. Forsythe nudged Lily. "Let's leave them alone for a while."

They left the shelf and descended the slope, Lily hold-

ing onto his hand. They sank to the sandy ground below, sitting close.

"She's acting strange," he said.

"Yes."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"She was a little in love with Kincaid."

"But she's engaged to Drumgold."

"So she is," Lily said. "But she got engaged to him before she met Kincaid." She pushed back a wayward strand of brassy hair and smiled fondly at him. "Don't look so puzzled—so shocked. Any woman is apt to fall a little in love with a man like Kincaid. And grieve for him when he's dead."

Forsythe blinked at her. "Any woman? You too?"

Lily's lips curled with one of those mystifying feminine smiles. "If I'd let myself," she said. Then, grave again: "She's made a mistake. Her up there, I mean. She's going to marry a wrong one. That Drumgold—he's no good for her sort."

"You've got no reason to say that, Lily," he said. "You don't know any such thing."

"I know," Lily said, and thought of what Dan Macklin had told her just before he died.

Virginia said, "Ben, I'm glad. I thought—"

He forced a smile to his sweated, unshaven face. "You thought we'd never see each other again," he said. "So did I, for a time. But my luck held." He hobbled past her, into the shallow cave, using his rifle as a crutch. He sank to the ground and began pulling at his left boot. "I had a fall among some rocks. Hurt my ankle." He got the boot off and began rubbing the injured ankle with both hands. "Our luck held, I should have said."

"Yes, Ben," she said. "Our luck."

"Is something bothering you, Ginny?"

"Yes. All those who had to die."

His face hardened. "Meaning Kincaid?"

"All of them," she said. "Including Kincaid. Was there no chance for him?"

Drumgold's face stayed hard. "Dolan was shot down at the gate, but only wounded," he said. "Kincaid had to play hero and help him. The Utes opened fire on them. Dolan got away but—" He hesitated, struck by the thought that perhaps Kincaid too had escaped. "But

Kincaid went down." He paused again, then went on with the lie. "The Utes rushed the station. Dolan and I got away by the skin of our teeth. It's too bad about Kincaid, of course. But—well, there was nothing I could do."

Virginia looked at the saddlebags which he'd dropped beside him. "You got your money back?"

"Yes. From Dolan."

"Ben, you didn't—"

"Kill him? No. But if he catches up with us, he'll try to kill me—and I'll have to defend myself. You've got to understand that, my dear."

"There's been enough killing," she said. "Far too much killing."

He said drily, "Maybe you can make Dolan see that, if he turns up," and pretended to give his whole attention to his hurt ankle, rubbing it vigorously. But his mind was busy. She was slipping away from him. He must get her to Robles as quickly as possible. The sooner he married her, the better. By the time Forsythe and Lily returned, he had decided to clear out of here fast. He didn't intend to hide in a hole all day then travel all night. Not if he could help it, by God. If Dolan showed up it would mean a gunfight. He might win it, but killing the hard-case would just drive Virginia farther away from him. And he might not win it. Dolan might kill him.

There was another danger. Suppose Kincaid hadn't been killed. All Kincaid had to do was tell Virginia that he'd run out on him, and she'd be lost for good. No, he couldn't hang around and risk it.

Forsythe said, "How bad is your ankle, Mr. Drumgold?"

"Not so bad that I can't go on," he said. "We'll rest a little while, then move along."

"Move along? Kincaid said to hide during the day, sir."

"Kincaid said?" he burst out. "Damn Kincaid! This is no hide-out. I've been following your tracks since daybreak. The Utes will have even less trouble following them. They've got horses, man. They're likely to be along any minute."

"If they're trailing us and we leave here," Forsythe said, "they'll catch us in the open. Here at least we've got some cover."

"Cover?" Drumgold looked around. "It wouldn't protect us five minutes. My God, man, they'd come riding up that slope in force and overwhelm us with their first charge. This would be a trap. Look, we've covered at least half a dozen miles. It can't be more than twice as far as we've come to the next stage station. We can make it to there by early afternoon—by midafternoon, at the latest. Say, we travel only two miles an hour. We'd get there in six hours. We may be able to travel even faster and—"

"Kincaid said it was twenty miles from his station to the one at Rock Creek."

Drumgold started to damn Kincaid again, but, seeing Virginia's gaze on him, he thought better of it. "Even so, we can hike it from here before sundown. And the farther we are on our way, the less danger there'll be of the Utes catching us. You see the logic of that, don't you?"

"You may be right, Mr. Drumgold."

"Of course I'm right, son," Drumgold said. "I've fought Indians before. And often enough to know better than to let them catch me squatting in a place like this."

He picked up his boot, thrust his left foot into it and moaned, more from consternation than pain. His ankle had swollen. It wouldn't bend. Even if he could bend it, that bloated lump wouldn't pass the ankle bend. He took his knife from his pocket. He slit the boot down the side, then managed to get his foot into it. However, when he rose and put his weight on his foot, the pain made him gasp and sit down again.

He gave Forsythe a rueful smile. "Worse than I thought," he said. "It looks like I won't be going anywhere."

"Well, we won't leave you, sir."

"Nonsense. You can't stay here."

"But—" Forsythe said, in feeble protest, and then fell silent.

Frowning worriedly, Drumgold took a cigar from his vest pocket, bit off its tip, struck a match. After lighting up, he said, "I'll tell you what, John. You're sound and you're young enough to travel fast. You go on alone. You should be able to reach Rock Creek in half the time, going it alone. Twelve, fourteen miles—" He took out his watch and checked the time. "It's twenty minutes

past six now. You'll make Rock Creek before noon, certainly. You can get horses there, and someone to come with you. Riding hard, you can make it back here in a couple of hours. What do you say?"

Lily jumped to her feet. "No, you don't, Drumgold! You're not sending him off alone. I won't let you!"

"Wait a minute, Lily," Forsythe said. "It may be the best thing to do."

He sounded as if he'd already made up his mind that it was. Oh, no, Lily thought. Oh, no.

Chapter Sixteen

Kincaid traveled without haste, almost at a leisurely pace. He had come to realize during the last hours of the night that he was a man with no place to go and nothing to do. He couldn't return to Lost Squaw Canyon even if the company rebuilt the stage station. Staying in Ute country would be suicide. They'd never rest until they got him. He dared not go back to the Lost Squaw, ever.

With the coming of daylight, he paused frequently to study his back-trail, but he saw no vengeance-seeking warriors riding in pursuit. An hour after sun-up, he came upon tracks crossing a sandy waste. Boot tracks. The tracks of low-heeled boots such as Ben Drumgold wore. He followed this trail, peering ahead for sight of the man.

Shortly, Drumgold's trail joined the sign left by Forsythe and the two women. The cattleman was following them. At times, the trail petered out on a stretch of rock

or hardpan earth. But Kincaid always found it again, and made it his own across the barren land.

The sun's heat became a weight on his shoulders. Rocks and sand reflected its glare causing his eyes to ache. He began to work up a great thirst. His head still throbbed from the blow of Dolan's gun, and a huge soreness from his fall plagued the small of his back. His rider's boots pinched.

He accepted these discomforts without conscious complaint, however. His mind was full of scurrying thoughts, like a corn-crib infested with mice. Even while he kept alert for pursuing Utes, he pondered his coming reunion with the four people ahead, especially with Virginia. It would not be easier for him not to see her reunited with Drumgold. Now that the immediate danger of violent death was past, she would belong wholly to Drumgold again. Feeling as he did about her, it would hurt him to see her like that—see her as Drumgold's woman. And how would he act when he came face to face with Drumgold? At that moment, he wanted to get his hands on the man—to beat him within an inch of his life. He gave a thought to Chris Dolan too. He'd seen no signs of the hardcase, no tracks to tell him that Dolan had come in this direction.

Mostly, however, Kincaid considered the future. His future. For the first time since his release from prison he felt like a free man. He'd been forced to take the job at the stage station by the law enforcement officers who were under Drumgold's influence. It had been a matter of taking it or of leaving Colorado, and he'd taken it because he'd wanted to be where he could get at Drumgold.

He'd gotten at the man, but he hadn't taken his revenge. He hadn't been able to bring himself to kill Drumgold. So if the Utes didn't catch him, he could plan his future. Clear out of this country, get out from under Ben Drumgold's influence and begin life anew in some distant place. That was the ticket. New Mexico, maybe. Better still, in Arizona. The Territory of Arizona was the last happy hunting ground for outlaws and outcasts, and he might gain a toehold there. In the cattle business, if he were lucky.

Lucky? Hell, he'd make his own luck, once he got beyond the reach of Ben Drumgold's influence.

Half lost in his thoughts, he didn't pay enough attention to the trail ahead. The crack of the rifle, sharp against the badlands' quiet, took him by surprise. The shriek of the slug made him flinch. He flung himself to a prone shooting position, scanning the nearby rocky slope. He saw a wispy cloud of powdersmoke at a shelf of rock midway up-slope. A second shot came, striking so close it kicked gravel into his face. He was looking across the Winchester's sights now, his finger on the trigger. Suddenly he had a target, but he held his fire. It was a woman. Virginia.

Then a man appeared up there, rising from behind a rock slab at the edge of the shelf. The man was Ben Drumgold, and he held a rifle. Virginia tried to wrench it from his hands. Kincaid watched the struggle between them with astonishment. It ended abruptly, Drumgold letting her have the weapon. With that, both turned to gaze down at him. He saw Lily Marvin come from a hollow behind the shelf. Young Forsythe did not appear.

Kincaid got up warily, half expecting Drumgold to take back the rifle and start shooting again. That did not happen, however, and he let the tension ease in him as he walked to the slope and began to climb.

All three watched him with a sort of guilt, and none had a greeting for him when he reached the shelf.

He said, "What was that all about?"

"I mistook you for Chris Dolan," Drumgold said. He turned away, sank heavily onto the rock slab. "I apologize for it."

Kincaid regarded him frowningly. He'd hobbled over to the rock. His left boot was slit. He was holding his left leg stiffly so that little weight rested upon that foot. Drumgold had injured his foot or ankle.

The man said, "A mistake, I tell you. I thought you were Dolan."

"Something wrong with your eyesight, Ben?"

"Now, listen—"

"The hell there is," Kincaid said, losing his temper. "You didn't think it was Dolan. You ran out on me, left me to face the Utes alone. You were scared I'd want to pay you back for it."

"I tell you—"

"Shut up," Kincaid said, and turned to Virginia. "You could tell it wasn't Dolan, couldn't you?"

She still held the rifle, held it in the awkward way of a person unaccustomed to firearms and therefore afraid of them. She was gazing at Drumgold with stricken eyes. "I could tell," she said. "He came out here to keep watch after John left. I heard him call out that it was Dolan, and then he started shooting. I came from the cave and—" She closed her eyes and shook her head and opened her eyes again. "Ben, I want to believe that you mistook Kincaid for Dolan, but I can't believe that you should have opened fire even if it had been Dolan."

"Dolan's after those saddlebags, I tell you," Drumgold said. "He'll kill to get that money."

"There's something more, Ben."

Beads of sweat stood out on his heavy, unshaven face. "Virginia, listen—"

"Did you run out on Kincaid, Ben?"

"No. He's wrong."

Kincaid gave a single hard bark of laughter. "Ben, I'm never wrong about you. The longer I know you, the more I know you for what you are."

"You were at the gate with Dolan," Drumgold said desperately. "The Utes opened up. I didn't see how either Dolan or you could live through it. I thought you were both goners. There was no reason why I should stay there alone. No reason why I shouldn't save myself."

Kincaid said, "All right, Ben," and now he just felt weary and disgusted. "That's your story. Stick to it. It's my word against yours, and you're the big, important man. Your word is your bond."

"My God! I wouldn't have run out on you if I'd known you were still alive!"

"I said all right, Ben." Kincaid turned away from him. He took the rifle from Virginia, tossed it to the ground at Drumgold's feet. "Thanks for keeping him from firing more shots at me, Miss Worden. He might have got me with the next one."

Virginia did not reply to that. She was still staring at Drumgold. So was Lily.

"Forsythe," Kincaid said. "Where's he gone?"

Lily said, "Ask *him* where John's gone." She walked over and stood before Drumgold. "Get him to tell you, Kincaid. Make this fourflusher tell you!"

Drumgold bent and picked up his rifle. Using it as a support, he got to his feet. He looked past the furious

Lily, at Kincaid. "He went on," he said. "He's on his way to the Rock Creek station, to get help and horses. He thought—"

"He thought!" Lily screeched. She swung about, beating the air with her fists. "This fourflusher talked him into it, Kincaid. He made John believe it was up to him to go it alone. He wanted to stay here until dark, like you told him, but Drumgold talked him out of it." She whirled to face Drumgold again. "And don't call me a liar!"

"He went willingly, I tell you."

"You'll tell me nothing," Lily screamed at him. "I'll do the telling. It's time somebody told you what you are. You've had your way long enough. Doing people dirt. All the time doing people dirt. You talked John into going on in broad daylight, with the Indians out there. You tried to kill Kincaid. You knew he wasn't Dolan. You—"

"Shut up!" Drumgold shouted. "I don't need to listen to such talk from a tart like you!"

"So I'm a tart," Lily said. "But I'm still not as low as you are, mister. Me, I know all about you—about what you did to Kincaid. Dan Macklin told me before he died, and I'm going to tell the whole world. And you're not stopping me, you—"

Drumgold's hand lashed out, catching her across the side of the face. He'd used his open hand rather than his fist, but there was enough force behind the slap to send Lily to the ground. She screamed, falling, and Virginia cried out in protest. Kincaid leaped forward and kicked Drumgold's rifle away. Losing that support, much of the man's weight bore down on his injured ankle. He yelped with pain and lurched off balance. Then Kincaid's fist thudded against his jaw and he sprawled on his back on the rock slab. Kincaid bent over him.

"You bastard," Kincaid said. "I should break every bone in your rotten carcass."

Virginia caught hold of his arm. "No, Kincaid. No!"

He shook off her hand, but then his rage drained out of him.

"All right," he said. "We'll let him get away with it. He always gets away with everything." He went to Lily, knelt beside her, helped her sit up. "You're not hurt, eh?" he asked.

Lily's face was pale except for the fiery red marks

of Drumgold's slap. "I'm just mad," she said. "Just plain mad. Give me a gun, Kincaid, and I'll kill that four-flusher. We'll all be better off then. The whole world will be better off." She pointed her finger at Virginia. "You'd better know what he is, girl. I kept it to myself, what Macklin told me, because you'd made up your mind to marry this tinhorn. But now you'd better know."

Kincaid patted her shoulder. "No, Lily," he said. "Keep still."

"She should know about him—what he is!"

Kincaid looked at Virginia. She was standing there rigid, hands clasped to her breast, eyes bleak as a blue norther. He looked at Drumgold, sitting up on the rock now but still dazed from the blow to his jaw.

"She knows what he is, Lily."

"Not the half of it!" Lily said. "Not the half!"

"Lily," he said, more firmly, "keep still."

"No," Virginia said. "Let her tell me. She's right. I should know everything."

He rose, shaking his head. "Forget it," he said. "Every man has his faults. If he's really your man, if you really feel right about him, forget it."

Virginia ignored him. "Lily, what did Mr. Macklin tell you?"

Lily's fury had run its course, and now, in a more reasonable mood, she said, "It's not pretty. Kincaid's right. I'd better keep still."

"I want to know, Lily."

There was already so much hurt in her voice that Kincaid couldn't stand it, couldn't wait to hear Lily speak her piece. He went outside, and once off the shelf, he began looking for John Forsythe's tracks.

Chapter Seventeen

Forsythe's tracks led him to the top of the slope, a hundred feet above the shelf. He halted there, in the shade of a steeple-shaped rock formation, and peered out across the rocky wilderness. He saw no movement even in the far distance, but took it for granted that Forsythe was attempting to reach the road to Rock Creek.

The closer Forsythe got to the road, the easier the Utes could spot him. Originally that road had been an Indian trail, and the Utes still used it more often than white men did. Also, the sun was blazing down, scorching the land. On foot and without water, a man could be sweated dry within a matter of hours, weakened so badly that he would collapse in his tracks. He should have warned Forsythe against that. Still, he had told him to hole up during the day and to travel only by night.

He knew he must go after the tenderfoot, overtake

him before he went too far, but he dreaded setting out. Accustomed as he was to the badland's burning sun, he shrank from exposing himself to it overly long. Already, this early in the day, his mouth felt cottony with thirst.

He stooped and picked up a small pebble to hold in his mouth and keep the saliva flowing. He shifted his rifle from left hand to right and started out. A voice called his name, stopping him. He turned and saw Virginia climbing the slope toward him. He went to meet her, giving her his hand over the last few feet to the rugged crest. He drew her into the shade of the steeple rock.

She stood silently beside him for a while, and then she said, "It's true, what Mr. Macklin told Lily?"

"Well, I don't know what he told her."

"It's strange that you should try to cover up for—for Ben."

"It's not strange that I don't like seeing you hurt."

"You said he should be my man despite his faults."

"He should, if you love him."

"Can I love a man who has such faults, who does such things?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, Virginia. Maybe it's in you to overlook them. I can tell you one thing about him. He puts great store by you. You're more important to him than anything else in his life and he'll try to make you happy. There's another thing about him you should understand. This is wild country still. It was even wilder when he came into it and tamed his part of it. It takes a certain kind of man to make a big stake in wild country—a hard man, tricky and tough and unscrupulous. What he wants, he takes. If he wasn't like that, he'd be just another little man trying to keep himself fed and going hungry a lot of the time. It may even be that he and his kind are good for this country. It can't be tamed by weaklings. Maybe it doesn't matter much that he hurts other men in his grabbing for what he wants. It ends up with a lot of men depending upon him and the others like him. So maybe that strikes a balance. I don't know. You'll have to make up your own mind about him, Virginia."

"I have," she said. "I have made up my mind about him."

"Your mind and your heart."

"My heart too."

"Just be sure you're not making a hasty mistake," he said. "Now I'm going after Forsythe. How long ago did he start out?"

"About an hour before you came, Walt."

"Walt?" he said.

She nodded gravely. "It seems that I've known you a long, long time. I feel as though I know you better than anyone in this world. That's strange, isn't it?"

"Not so strange," he said. "I'm an easy man to see through. By looking at me, a person can see what I am. I own nothing, I have no one. I have only one plan for the future, and that's to get out of this country—so far out of it that Ben Drumgold can never touch me again."

"Each of us has the same plan, Walt."

"Be sure," he said, and on impulse lifted a hand to touch her hair. "Be very sure. It's easy to make a mistake you'll regret the rest of your life."

He left her then, and followed young Forsythe's tracks.

John Forsythe made his slow, painful way along the base of some towering red cliffs. The sun blazed down on him, and the heat was that of an oven. Thirst had him by the throat. Its increasing torment reached into every fibre of his being. His legs were weakening. Every few steps he lurched like a drunkard. He wanted to stop and rest, but knew that he if he lingered for a moment along the way he wouldn't be able to go on. His vision blurred at times, but he kept his eyes on a certain spot ahead.

There was rolling country beyond the end of the cliffs, gradual slopes gray with the sagebrush. In the distance, a long, slightly twisting reddish ribbon ran through the sage's drab color. That ribbon, extending east and west as far as he could see, was the stage road. The road he must take to reach Rock Creek. Midway to the road, a lonely cluster of rocks and some green growth held out promise that it might conceal a water hole. He told himself in a panicky sort of way that he must find water there.

He left the cliffs finally and set out across the open land, aiming toward the rocks and the patch of green. Midway to the supposed water hole he suddenly became aware that he was not alone. He stopped short, peering

at the five horsemen who had appeared as by magic just beyond the green place. They reined in their ponies on a little knob of ground and faced in his direction. They were Indians.

His first impulse was to run. Then he realized that it would be a fatal mistake to turn his back. He sank to the ground, flat behind a clump of sage. He felt in his pockets for cartridges and found none. The few he'd had left when leaving the stage station were in the pockets of his coat, and his coat was back at the hideout on the slope. He had only the seven loads in his rifle and whatever cartridges remained in his .32 caliber revolver. He took the revolver from his hip pocket and put it beside him. He brought the rifle to his shoulder, drew bead on one of the five Utes. He would have to make every shot count.

With wild yells, the Utes kicked their ponies into motion and charged at him. He fired and missed, fired again and missed again. He trembled with weakness and his vision blurred. He tried to steady himself on his third shot, and failed. The Utes swerved, turning broadside to him, hanging to the off-sides of their racing mounts and shooting at him from under their ponies' necks. They drove a dozen shots at him, then tore out of range while he was still trying to steel himself for his third shot.

They came erect on their ponies out there. They swung about in his direction again. Two rode at a gallop to pass in front of him, again hanging at their ponies' sides. The others raced to take him from the rear. He listened to the beat of hoofs and the war whoops, and for some reason the racket steadied him. He didn't flinch when their rifles crashed. He drove two fast, hopeless shots at the pair passing before him, then twisted about and tried to target the other three. One of the Utes tumbled from his mount, hit the ground loosely, bounced, and then lay still. A second later another went down with his mount. The pony, a little skewbald, actually somersaulted before piling up on the ground, and its nearly naked rider hurtled through the air like a missile for perhaps a dozen feet. The Indian landed in a spread-eagled sprawl, but instantly jumped up and ran in panicky flight. The third warrior back there was clinging to the off-side of a big roan horse. He swung upright on its back and jerked hard on its *bosal* to bring it to an abrupt

stop, facing away from Forsythe. The Ute leveled his rifle, but another weapon cracked before he could fire. He dropped his rifle and slid limply to the ground. His horse shied away from his sprawled body but came to a halt not far from it.

Forsythe saw a smudge of powdersmoke hanging in the still air a hundred yards off, in the direction of the cliffs. Then he saw the vague outline of a man in the brush. He remembered the other two Utes and turned to watch them. They'd had enough. They were racing away toward the road, and the warrior who had lost his mount was following them, bounding through the sagebrush like a frightened jack rabbit. One of the riders reined in and took the horseless Ute up behind him. They continued their retreat, turning east along the road.

Forsythe tried to get up. He made it to one foot and one knee and weakness came back to hit him. He was supporting himself with his rifle, just managing not to collapse, when the man who'd saved his life rose and started toward him. It was Kincaid, looking as rugged as the land about them. His face seemed leaner than ever, almost gaunt, and, with its wiry stubble, it had an ugly, angry cast.

Kincaid was angry, all right. Thirst seared his throat and he hadn't eaten since noon yesterday. Even more, he'd had a bad scare thrown into him. He'd very nearly failed to get close enough to help Forsythe.

He said, "John, when I picked you to go with the women it was because I wanted to give you a chance to stay alive. I didn't expect you to throw away your chance like you did."

"I thought I could make it," Forsythe said. "I was sure I could reach the Rock Creek station and get help for the others."

"The hell you did. You let Drumgold think that for you."

"Well, yes. It was his idea."

"I told you to go into hiding during the day," Kincaid said, still in a wicked temper. "I told you to travel only at night." He swore bitterly. "Let it be a lesson to you. Don't ever let a man like Drumgold push you into anything against your better judgment. His kind will always try. They'll always try to make suckers of any man who can't stand up to them. From now on, you stand up to

that breed of hombre. You're still young enough to learn how to do it." He paused, getting his temper under control. "Can you make it to that water hole?"

"I can try," Forsythe said. "If you'll help me get up."

Kincaid helped him to his feet. Then, supporting much of Forsythe's weight, he helped him along until they reached the little pool of water within the cluster of rocks. There he eased him to the ground.

"Take one swallow," he said. "Just one. No more. You hear?"

Forsythe lay on his belly and drank only what water he was able to dip up with his cupped hands. Kincaid knelt and drank sparingly, then removed his hat and splashed water over his face. Forsythe followed his example. After a couple minutes, they drank a little more—and after another wait, still more. Kincaid sat back on his heels, took out makings. As he rolled his cigarette, he watched the road in the direction the three Utes had taken.

"We're in trouble," he said. "Bad trouble." He struck a match with his thumbnail, puffed his cigarette alight. "There'll be a swarm of Utes coming this way before long."

"Kincaid, I'm sorry."

"Forget it. You couldn't have known."

"I should have followed your orders."

"No. I'm not a big, important man like Ben Drumgold."

Forsythe gazed at him with bloodshot eyes. "You're a lot bigger man than ten Ben Drumgolds," he said, in the manner of a person making a discovery. "That's the truth. What are we going to do?"

"I haven't decided," Kincaid said. "Take another short drink."

He stared in the other direction, toward the site of their fight with the Utes. He watched the two Indian ponies, one a little pinto and the other a fair-sized roan. The pinto was nearer, but he gave more attention to the roan. He'd thought, when he shot the Indian off its back, that it carried a brand on its left shoulder. If he hadn't just imagined it, the horse might be of use. If he were wrong, he couldn't catch it up any more than he could catch the pinto. White men's horses spooked at the mere smell of Indians, and most Indian horses were

afraid of white men. He had to get a closer look at the roan. If there was a brand, the animal had once belonged to a white man—and still might remember it.

He dropped his cigarette, deadened it under the toe of his boot. He took another drink, then put on his hat and stood up. "Go easy on the water," he said. "If you see any Indians, let out a yell."

He picked up his rifle and walked away from the water hole, keeping his eye on the roan horse. He felt better now, physically. But he sure didn't feel better in his mind.

If he didn't catch that roan, he and Forsythe were as good as dead.

Chapter Eighteen

The pinto spooked as he approached, just as he had expected. It broke into a run for a hundred yards, then halted to see if he would follow. He walked on toward the roan, fearful that it too would shy away. It watched him, snorting and stamping. He stopped some distance from it. He began to talk soothingly.

"Easy, boy. That's it, fellow. Stand still."

The roan cocked its ears his way. It pawed the ground with its right fore-hoof, and Kincaid saw the brand. He moved closer, slowly. He kept talking to the animal in that gentle tone. Indians were notoriously brutal with horses. Some white men were rougher with them than need be. He hoped the white man who'd once owned the roan had not been that sort. He hoped the horse remembered. He kept talking and inching forward. The roan retreated a little, prancing nervously.

It was reined with a long rawhide *bosal* and had a

raggedy blanket cinched on for a saddle. As it backed away, the end of the *bosal* dragged on the ground only a dozen steps from Kincaid. He was tempted to make a run for it, but decided that such an abrupt move would start the horse off in wild flight.

"Hold still, partner. Nobody's going to hurt you."

He closed the distance between them by half, step by slow step. The roan was wall-eyed now, and still stamping. He moved closer, trying to keep excitement from sharpening his voice. The end of the rawhide rope was only a few feet away. He took another step, too quick a step. The roan started to turn. He dropped his rifle and dived for the end of the rope. He landed upon the thin strand of rawhide, but missed getting his hands on it. He felt it slipping from beneath his body as the roan continued its retreat. He grabbed wildly. His left hand got a hold on the extreme end of the rope. An instant later, he caught hold with his right. He jumped up and braced himself on the heels of his boots, hauling on the rope. The roan stopped, knowing the futility of fighting the *bosal* hitch about its lower jaw.

He walked toward the animal, still talking. He lay a hand on the roan's arched neck, patted it. The horse was trembling with fright. He talked more, stroked its neck. Then, aware that time was running short, he retrieved his rifle and led the horse toward the water hole. When he arrived there, Forsythe gazed at him with something akin to admiration.

"White man's horse," Kincaid said, pointing to the brand. "It wouldn't have worked with an Indian bronc."

He tied the loose end of the rope about the animal's neck, then removed the *bosal* hitch from its jaw. He led the horse to the water and let it drink. Once it had watered, he fashioned a halter and reins out of the rawhide and fitted the halter onto the roan. The horse accepted it, no longer frightened.

He debated a moment whether or not to ride out and try to catch the pinto, finally deciding against that. The pinto would run and it might take him far too long to catch it. Once he had hold of the Indian horse and tried to ride it, he would almost certainly have a rough time. He handed the reins to Forsythe.

"You're the decoy," he said. "When the Utes get here, they'll see that this roan is missing and maybe figure

the two of us are riding it. Maybe they'll follow it and not cut for sign. Just in case they do look for tracks, I'll try to cover mine when I get into the hills so I don't lead them to Drumgold and the women. Tell the agent at Rock Creek what's happened. Get him to send a rider to Fort Sands for help. You stay there. I'll start out with the others at nightfall. If we don't run into trouble we'll reach Rock Creek before morning."

Forsythe nodded. "But why me, Kincaid?"

"What do you mean, why me?"

"Why don't you go? Why not make sure you're safe?"

Kincaid said, "It's not a question of one of us being safe, but of decoying the Utes away from the women. Now mount up."

Forsythe got onto the roan. Kincaid handed him his rifle.

"If you see any Utes, run for it," he said. "And take it easy with this bronc in case you do have to run. Luck to you, John."

"Thanks. And luck to you, Kincaid."

"See you at Rock Creek."

"Right." Forsythe cleared his throat. "Tell Miss Marvin that I'm all right, will you? For some reason, she worries about me."

A rare smile eased the toughness of Kincaid's face. "You should guess the reason," he said. "Sure, I'll tell her you're all right."

He stood there watching Forsythe ride to the road and west along it. Then, after drinking his fill at the water hole, he picked up his rifle and started toward the hills. When he reached the base of the cliffs, he stopped and looked back. Forsythe was already out of sight.

It was stifling hot in the shallow cave. Virginia felt limp. But at least they had shelter from the direct sun. She and Lily Marvin sat well back in the cave, each worrying silently. It was hours now since Kincaid had started out to bring John Forsythe back.

Ben Drumgold sat closer to the opening, peering out into the brassy sunlight. He held his rifle across his knees. It seemed to Virginia that he'd aged years in less than twenty-four hours. His face was haggard, tormented. He looked around, caught her watching him,

"Hand me that canteen, will you, Virginia?"

She passed the canteen over without a word, watched him drink deeply from it. She wondered if they should not conserve their scanty supply of water, but she was reluctant to speak to him of that—or of anything else. She saw him as a stranger with whom she wanted no contact. It didn't seem possible that so short a time ago she had planned to be a wife to him and to let him teach her all the intimacies of marriage. He had been one man in Denver and he was another here in the back country. The true Ben Drumgold was somewhere between those two extremes, between gentleman and brute. He was a cross between the two and always capable of being either, and she was fortunate in having learned in time this truth about him.

He lowered the canteen, twisted on its top. "Water's running low," he said, and saw her studying him. "Things will be better when we get back to civilization, Ginny. You've got to understand that people aren't themselves in such a situation. I've been under a terrific strain, worrying that the Utes might take you."

Lily said scornfully, "Worrying about yourself, you mean. About yourself and your money."

Virginia said nothing at all.

Lily said, "What's happened?" She spoke more to herself than to the other two. "Why doesn't Kincaid come back with John?"

Virginia got to her feet, saying, "It has been long, too long." She moved past Drumgold, onto the shelf of rock.

"You'd better stay in out of the sun," Drumgold said.

She ignored him. She left the shelf and began to climb the slope. When she reached the crest, she was nearly spent; and now, with the sun almost directly overhead, there was no shade. She peered in the direction Kincaid had taken hours ago, shading her eyes with her hands. She gazed a long time across the rocky land, her eyes beginning to ache. She saw nothing of Kincaid and Forsythe, and her concern for them turned to fear. One part of her mind told her, however, that she need not worry, that Kincaid would find John Forsythe and bring him safely back from the rock wilderness. One part of her mind told her that Kincaid was as rugged as the land itself and that neither it nor the Indians could conquer him.

But it was one thing to be concerned about him and another to feel so deeply toward him. She distrusted her feelings, and for good reason. She had been mistaken in believing herself in love with Ben Drumgold, and she feared that her interest in Walt Kincaid was another mistake. She would have to give her feeling for him the test of time. If it endured for a period of months, perhaps for a year . . . A movement seen from the corner of her eye startled her. She turned quickly and saw a man coming toward her along the crest of the slope. He had a dirty bandage about his head and a wild look in his eyes and a revolver in his hand.

It was the outlaw, Chris Dolan.

A scream rose in her throat, but before she could give voice to it he leaped forward and struck her a back-handed slap across the mouth. Pain silenced her. It made her head spin, and when she saw him again he looked blurred.

"You want more of that, just yell," he said. "Not a sound out of you. You savvy?"

She blinked away the tears, tried to stifle her fear. But he was something to fear. His face was bristly with a stubble of beard, grimy with a mixture of sweat and dust. There was an ugly bruise across his left cheek besides the injury the soiled bandage covered. His lips were swollen, parched. Worse of all was the brutality of his expression.

"I been watching for a couple hours, trying to figure out how to get the drop on that bastard Drumgold," he said. "Lying in the rocks. Roasting in the sun. But now I know how to get at him. You're going to help!"

"No!" It burst from her. "No, I won't!"

He grabbed her right wrist and twisted her arm brutally. The pain caused her to fall away from the pressure, and she dropped to her knees. He kept his viselike grip on her wrist.

"You're walking down ahead of me, sweetheart," he said. "You're calling Drumgold out of that cave." He twisted again. "Ain't you, now?"

She nodded jerkily, unable to bear the agony.

"That's better," he said, and pulled her to her feet. "I'm keeping hold of you. When we get close, I'll stop you and then you call him out. Do it without any tricks and you won't get hurt. Now get going."

She stood firm, suddenly defiant. "Not if you're going to kill him," she said. "If you'll just take the money, all right—I'll do it. But I won't call him out to his death."

He scowled, started an angry retort, then regarded her in silence for a moment. "Did I say I aimed to kill him? Naw. I didn't say anything like that. All I want is to get the drop on him—and get hold of those saddlebags."

"You swear?"

"Yeah. On a stack of Bibles."

She didn't believe him. But the respite defiance had gained her ended abruptly. He jerked her off balance and started her down the slope. He kept her ahead of him and a little to the left, so he could shoot past her with the revolver in his right hand. About thirty feet from the edge of the shelf, he halted her.

"Now," he said.

Virginia called, "Ben! Ben, come here, please!" Then she heard the click as Dolan thumbed back the hammer of his gun. She looked over her shoulder and saw the wicked anticipation on his face. She screamed, "Ben, it's Dolan!"

She'd barely gotten it out when Dolan let go of her wrist and clubbed her with his fist. The last thing she heard was an outraged cry from Ben Drumgold and the blast of Dolan's revolver.

Chapter Nineteen

Mindful of Kincaid's warning not to tire his mount, Forsythe held it to a canter. He was tempted at times to lift the roan to a gallop, but he realized that Kincaid knew best. If he encountered Indians, his life would depend on how fresh the horse was at the moment. To save himself, he would have to outrun the hostiles.

Kincaid. Now there was a man. Once he had looked up to Ben Drumgold's sort, but no more. Never again would he regard mere business success as something to admire above all else. There was more to a man like Walt Kincaid than to half a dozen Ben Drumgolfs. John Forsythe had come by a fresh outlook since his arrival at the stage station in Lost Squaw Canyon. A more mature outlook.

He thought of Lily Marvin too as he rode through that utterly lonely country, and felt a stirring of feeling such as he'd never before known. He'd known many

young ladies back East, but none had meant what Lily meant to him now. He thought of her with a sort of aching need.

The far distances yielded no signs of humans anywhere, either white or red, and when he looked back over his shoulder, he saw no other horsemen on the road. He was both relieved and concerned. Relieved because he wanted no further encounter with those Utes. And concerned because, being the decoy, he should be leading the Indians away from Kincaid and the people at the cave.

He'd covered quite a few miles—how many, he couldn't estimate—when he topped a rise and saw a group of riders approaching far along the road. He reined in, frightened, but soon realized that it was too orderly a band to be Indians. Too orderly, indeed, to be anything but soldiers. Excitement roiled in him, and he kicked the roan into motion with his heels. Shortly, he made out the blue of the cavalrymen's uniforms. A rider left the column and came to meet him. This man, not in uniform, Forsythe took to be a civilian scout.

He was a lanky, weatherbeaten individual, and when they reined in facing each other, he gave Forsythe one shrewd glance and seemed to know everything about him.

"Trouble, eh?"

"Indians," Forsythe said, and tried to keep the quaver of excitement out of his voice. He wanted to speak as calmly as this man, and in the manner of Walt Kincaid. "They've raided and burned the stage station at Lost Squaw Canyon. There are four survivors back in the hills, two men and two women. We'll have to get to them—and as quickly as possible."

"Yeah," the scout said, and spat tobacco juice. "How many Injuns?"

"Far too many."

"Ten, twenty, a hundred?"

"A hundred would be a better guess than ten or twenty."

The scout chewed his tobacco cud thoughtfully. Then, jerking his head toward the still distant column, he said, "This detail is out of Fort Sands with orders to round up a bunch of bronc Utes. Looks like it'll find more than we'd bargained for. Still, it's B Troop with Captain Beau

McLarin commanding—and that's no outfit to run from a fight. Let's go talk to the captain."

They rode to meet the detail, and Forsythe gulped with disappointment as they drew close. B Troop appeared to be undermanned. Considering the large number of Utes, it looked like a handful. The only soldiers John Forsythe had ever seen had been garrison troops, and this detail certainly fell far short of being a spit-and-polish outfit. The men slouched in their saddles. Some chewed tobacco, like the scout. Several puffed on pipes. Their uniforms were faded and dusty and sweat-stained. The officer riding at the head of the column wore a buckskin shirt rather than one of Army issue. And he seemed in no hurry, even though he had orders to round up some Utes. The column loafed along.

Forsythe's heart sank. Just a minute ago, he'd had high hopes of riding to the rescue of the other survivors with a large number of dashing cavalry troops. From what he could see, Captain McLarin's best would not be good enough.

Kincaid sweated away the water he'd consumed at the *tinaja* and thirst began to torment him again. He'd taken a circuitous route on his way back to the hideout, attempting to confuse the Utes if they set out to track him. He'd traveled several hard miles through rocky terrain, leaving little if any sign. Now he approached the hideout from the northwest, a direction almost directly opposite that which he'd taken when setting out to find Forsythe.

The sun glared down from directly overhead. Half the day was gone. That half had been rough enough. The second half would be worse, if the Utes succeeded in tracking him.

If the Utes failed to track him, he would keep out of the sun during the afternoon, get some rest, and then, at dusk, start out for the Rock Creek station with Drumgold and the women. Nightfall would bring relief from the crushing heat. With luck, they would reach their destination by daylight. Drumgold would be a problem, of course, because of his injured ankle. But Drumgold was always a problem, one way or another.

Coming within sight of the slope, Kincaid paused and peered toward it. He saw two figures on the crest, up

there by the rocks. The distance was too great for him to identify them, but he supposed they were Drumgold and Virginia. He could imagine the man's part of the conversation. Drumgold would be pleading with Virginia to overlook his shortcomings, trying desperately to justify his actions of last night and this morning. And, being the man he was, he would be distorting the truth.

Moving on, Kincaid wondered if the cattleman, for all his easy ways with women, would succeed in winning her over a second time. He thought not. She would not make the same mistake twice. She was too intelligent, too perceptive. She must know that Drumgold was no good for her.

Ben Drumgold was no good for anyone but Ben Drumgold.

The two people began moving downslope, toward the shelf of rock and the cave, and soon the distance shortened enough for Kincaid to recognize Virginia. But the other . . . He didn't want to believe it, but the man had to be Chris Dolan.

Shock halted Kincaid in his tracks. Then he started out again at a run. As he ran he saw Drumgold step from the cave and hobble toward the end of the shelf. He saw Virginia fall, struck down by Dolan. He saw Dolan fire at Drumgold and the cattleman stagger under the impact of the slug. There was another shot, then Drumgold tumbled from the shelf and down the slope. He sprawled there, halfway to the bottom, apparently dead.

Dolan caught sight of Kincaid. He moved away from Virginia, who lay motionless, and gained the shelf. He disappeared into the shadows of the cave, but a moment later he came out carrying Drumgold's rifle. Taking cover behind the slab of rock at the edge of the shelf, Dolan started firing. Kincaid dived for cover of his own, a small boulder. He lay flat behind the rock and shoved his rifle along the side of it, trying to bead Dolan. It was no good. He had no target at all. But neither could Dolan get at him.

This stalemate continued for several minutes. Then Dolan's shout drifted down. "Kincaid! You hear me, Kincaid?"

"I hear you, Chris. Keep talking."

"I'm clearing out, bucko. With the girl."

"No, you're not. Not a chance."

"With my gun at her back, Kincaid," Dolan yelled. "You try to stop me, and I kill her. You savvy?"

There was only one way to reply to that. With a bullet. Kincaid rose to a kneeling position, leveled his rifle across the boulder, deliberately exposing himself. He hoped to draw Dolan's fire so he would have a target. *Just one shot*, he thought. *Just one shot, Chris*. He didn't get it. Dolan was too wily, too old a hand at this sort of game. Kincaid saw no movement up there until Lily Marvin appeared from the cave with Dolan behind her. The hardcase had crawled back from a slab of rock, gotten hold of the girl and forced her to come out onto the shelf as a shield for him. Kincaid swore bitterly. He couldn't fire at the man for fear of hitting the girl.

Dolan kept behind Lily as they started down-slope. She moved awkwardly, having difficulty keeping her balance on the steep slope: her hands were tied behind her. Once she nearly fell, but Dolan caught her and held her erect. As they continued their descent, Kincaid tried to bead the man. Once or twice he got him in his sights, but not long enough. He could tell that Dolan had his revolver in his right hand, holding it against Lily's back. Drumgold's saddlebags and the canteen were slung over the outlaw's left shoulder. They reached the bottom of the slope finally, and halted there. Dolan shifted to Lily's left side so that she still stood between him and Kincaid's rifle. They were only a hundred yards away now.

Dolan called, "Remember, bucko, it's the girl's life. You can't keep me from putting a slug in her."

"You can't keep me from getting you, either Chris. Just relax one second—"

"Never mind me," Dolan said. "Just keep the girl safe!"

He started walking west with her, holding her close.

Lily let out an agonized cry: "Kincaid! Please, Kincaid!"

Kincaid could only watch them go and curse his own helplessness. They went farther and farther away, beyond reach of his rifle, and by that time Virginia was calling to him from the slope. She was standing now, but none too steadily.

He left the boulder and walked heavily toward the slope. Climbing, he came to Drumgold's sprawled body. He paused only long enough to check for signs of life,

then went on without any feeling at all for the dead man. No hatred, and no relief, either. He'd stopped caring about Ben Drungold one way or another long before the man died by Dolan's gun.

When he reached Virginia, he said, "He's dead. But not by my gun." Somehow, it was important that she understand that. "Dolan shot him."

"I know, Walt."

"If you want to cry, go ahead. You've got the right."

She shook her head. "No tears. Not now, anyway. I'm beyond crying, Walt." She shuddered.

He led her to the shelf and into the cave, his arm about her. He eased her to the ground, hunkered down facing her. She was trembling, and she had that dazed look of a person suffering shock. That angry red mark across her left cheek, the mark of Dolan's fist, would darken slowly to a bruise, but she hadn't really been hurt physically. Her injuries were those of the spirit, those caused by the ordeal that still wasn't over. None of this should have happened to a woman like Virginia Worden.

But she was more durable than he knew. She was not concerned about herself. "What about Lily, Walt?" she asked. "You're not letting Dolan have his way with her, are you?"

"There's nothing I can do," he said. "He's using her as a hostage."

"But you can't just do nothing!"

"If I do anything, he'll kill her."

"He'll kill her, anyway."

"Maybe not. There's a chance."

"He will, Walt. You know he will."

He shook his head. "No, I don't know that."

"Even if he doesn't kill her, he'll abandon her—and she'll die horribly. Walt—"

He nodded. "You're right, I suppose." And as he said it he knew that she was right beyond all doubt. Dolan would abandon the girl once he felt no further need for a hostage. He was in a hurry. He would hope to reach Rock Creek before word of his banditry reached the stage station. He planned to obtain a horse there, then ride hard, with his loot, for parts unknown. He wouldn't let Lily delay him. Not Chris Dolan.

"Yes, you're right," he said more positively. "But I

can't leave you alone. If the Utes come here— No, I can't leave you."

"I'll go with you."

"You wouldn't get far. Not in this sun, and in your condition."

"Then I'll stay—and pray that the Utes don't come, Walt."

"No, Virginia."

She touched his arm. "If it were I with Dolan and Lily here, you'd not hesitate at all," she said. "Isn't that so?"

He rubbed his bristly face with the knuckles of his right hand, gouging and feeling the hurt. Then he rose with his rifle in his hand.

"I'll do what I can, Virginia, and I'll try not to be gone long."

He turned his back on her. If he looked at her again he wouldn't be able to leave her.

Once down from the slope, he set out at a dog-trot. He was soon winded and dripping with sweat, but he maintained that pace. He willed himself to continue it even after his legs grew wobbly and he began to lurch every few strides. He'd covered about a mile when he saw them in the distance.

Dolan still had Lily with him, still kept her close to him.

Too close.

Chapter Twenty

They were making their way through a broad rock field, a jungle of boulders and rock formations. As Kincaid caught sight of them, Lily lagged a little behind Dolan. But the hardcase was no more a target now than he'd been before. The range was too long for accurate shooting. To keep the girl safe, Kincaid knew he must get Dolan with his first shot.

Dolan waited for Lily, then gave her a shove in an attempt to make her travel faster. She stumbled, recovered her balance and stumbled along beside him.

Kincaid did not keep directly on their trail when he set out again. He turned toward a range of low cliffs bordering the stretch of rocks on the south. Reaching the cliffs, he moved west along their base. He no longer had the pair in sight, but that did not matter. He intended to get ahead of them.

An hour later, he moved out from the cliffs and into

the rocks, darting from boulder to boulder, from one eroded formation to another. Midway across the field, he halted amid a cluster of rocks and tried to search out his quarry. He waited some minutes, but failed to spot them. He had the uneasy thought that Dolan had seen him and gone into hiding in the hope of waylaying him. There was another possibility, a disturbing one. The man might have decided that he no longer needed Lily for a hostage, and stopped somewhere in the rocks to use her in another fashion before abandoning her. After a moment of indecision, Kincaid started working his way slowly, warily toward the center of the rock maze.

Ten minutes later, pausing to catch his breath and wipe away sweat, he heard a sound that alerted him. He couldn't make it out for a while, but finally identified it as a woman's agonized moaning. It came from the direction of a towering spire of sandrock. Carefully shifting his position, he saw Lily lying in the shade at the base of the rock. Her hands were no longer bound. She lay with one arm over her eyes. He searched the vicinity for signs of Dolan, and finally detected a tiny trace of blue smoke rising lazily from behind a boulder. Dolan was there, smoking a cigarette and no doubt working on some murky scheme. Lily had come as far as she could and collapsed, but Dolan was not yet ready to abandon her.

The advantage still lay with Dolan. The moment he became aware of danger to himself, he could again hold his gun on Lily and use her as a hostage. Kincaid's only hope was to creep closer, take Dolan by surprise and overpower him. Not easy, but he had to try. He put aside his rifle, drew his revolver, and began inching his way toward the boulder that hid Dolan from him.

Just a few yards short of the boulder, a piece of shale crumpled loudly beneath Kincaid's boot heel. The sound brought Dolan to his feet. Kincaid drove forward, around the boulder. He swung his gun up, clubbing at Dolan's head. The outlaw let out a startled yelp and ducked. The barrel of the Colt struck him a glancing blow on the left shoulder but did no real damage. Dolan lunged at Kincaid, slammed into him, caught him in a bear-hug, jerked him off his feet. Kincaid tried again with his gun, but could strike only an awkward blow. It caught Dolan across the left ear as he tightened his hold on

Kincaid's body, not heavily but one with sufficient force to cause the man to howl with pain and rage—and to throw Kincaid bodily against the boulder.

The impact jarred every bone in Kincaid's body. It knocked the breath from him. He lost his gun. His vision blurred. He slumped against the rock, saw Dolan lunge at him like a man gone berserk. Hurt, Dolan thought only to punish Kincaid. He seemed unaware that he had a gun holstered at his thigh, that he could end it with a single shot. Raging, cursing obscenely, he battered the all but helpless Kincaid with his fists. Kincaid's head rocked one way and another under the punches. He tasted blood as a blow smashed his lips against his teeth. He managed to shove himself off the rock and bring his knee up hard to Dolan's groin.

Dolan shrieked, grabbed at himself with both hands, reeled away, bent over. Kincaid staggered after him, clouted him on the back of the neck. Dolan dropped to hands and knees, then threw himself against Kincaid's legs and bowled him over backwards. No sooner had Kincaid sprawled there than Dolan scrambled after him and they locked together in a savage straining for advantage. Dolan's left ear was torn and blood streamed from it. His face was smeared with sweat and dirt, and distorted with the fury in him. He possessed enormous brute strength and he exerted all of it, battering Kincaid with fists, boots, elbows and knees.

Kincaid had just one advantage over the hardcase—a sort of desperate coolness, born of stark necessity. Even when he feared he would be beaten to death, he managed to fend off the heaviest of Dolan's punches. Somehow he kept moving so that he would not be pinned helplessly to the ground. Finally, as they rolled back and forth in a vicious grappling, he caught Dolan squarely between the eyes with a solid blow that momentarily paralyzed the man.

He kicked free during that brief respite, and lurched to his feet. But then he stood swaying, unable to press his advantage, giving Dolan an opportunity to recover. Dolan got to hands and knees, hurtled toward him in a slamming rush. They collided with a force that jarred them both, Dolan once more taking Kincaid about the middle in a bear-hug, lifting him, driving iron-legged toward the boulder to hurl him against it a second time.

Kincaid jabbed him in the face, raking him across the bridge of the nose. Blood spurted. Pain glazed Dolan's eyes. He dropped Kincaid short of the boulder. He shouted a curse and began to use his boots. He booted Kincaid once, twice and a third time to the ribs, and then, as Kincaid writhed there, he aimed a kick at his victim's head. Kincaid rolled away, and Dolan, missing the kick, was thrown off balance. Kincaid heaved to his knees, grabbed a handful of dust and gravel. He threw it into Dolan's face as he thrust himself to his feet.

Dolan pawed at his eyes, wide open to attack. Closing in, Kincaid pounded him hard about the body. Dolan staggered away, then abruptly turned in wobbly flight. He tripped, fell hard, but came up quickly. And as he came, he at last drew his gun. Swinging about, he tried to bead Kincaid and paw dirt out of his eyes at the same time. Dolan was still half blind.

Kincaid ran to get his own gun. The first shot came as he stooped to pick it up. The slug struck a rock, ricocheted. Kincaid grabbed his gun, cocked it as he brought it to bear on Dolan. The hardcase was lurching toward him, stumbling with every step, trying to steady his revolver. They fired almost at the same instant. Kincaid saw Dolan jerk violently under the impact of his slug. The man did not go down, and he did not drop his weapon. Kincaid drove another shot at him. Dolan reeled back a step. But he kept trying. He began shooting as fast as he could work hammer and trigger, wildly, blindly. Kincaid fired once more, and this time Dolan went down. For a long, agonized minute he lay there, still clutching his gun, squirming, thrashing about, trying, still trying to get up. Then he sagged face-down and did not move again.

Kincaid moved shakily to him. Dolan's left hand rested atop the money-filled saddlebags. He ignored the saddlebags, picked up the canteen, turned toward Lily. She was sitting up, staring at him in a dazed fashion.

"Is it over, Kincaid? Is he really dead?"

"It's over, Lily," he said, and sank down beside her.

He would have to rest before starting back to the hideout. He was more done-in than he'd ever been in his life.

He rested only a few minutes, however. He had to get back to Virginia. After rationing a little of the scanty

supply of water to Lily, he took a sip himself and got up, groaning. He went after his hat, which he'd lost in the fight, and his rifle. He returned and helped Lily to her feet. She could scarcely stand at first, but she had gotten over her fright and she possessed the hardihood of youth and more spunk than most men. He kept his arm about her as they started picking their way out of the rock field, but soon Lily managed to walk without his support. They came through the densest part of the rocks and then Kincaid saw a horseman approaching. For a moment he thought the rider was a Ute tracker. He wasn't. He was John Forsythe.

Forsythe came on at a gallop. He reined in with a jerk that pulled the roan back on its haunches. He hit the ground running, went straight to Lily Marvin and took her in his arms. The girl clung to him, and the look of strain on her face gave way to one of utter contentment. It all seemed very natural to Kincaid.

He let them have their way for a while, and then he said, "You were supposed to go to Rock Creek, John. Why did you come back?"

Forsythe told him of meeting the detail of cavalry from Fort Sands. "I turned back with them, to lead them to you and the others," he said. "At the water hole where I left you, we ran into a big bunch of Indians. The Utes came charging at us and—well, it wasn't pretty. The soldiers fought dismounted and from behind cover, and they all but decimated the Utes. The commanding officer gave me an escort and we set out for the cave. We found Miss Worden there and she told us about Dolan. I left the soldiers with her and came to find you."

So it was over. Really over. Already it was a part of the dead past.

And the future?

Kincaid didn't know. He thought about it while Forsythe helped Lily onto the horse. He'd decided sometime back that he would not return to Lost Squaw Canyon even if the stage station was rebuilt. Utes or no Utes, he wanted to put that scene of horror behind him. The idea of a new start in a new place still seemed good. Yes, he would do that. There might be a clean future ahead of him in Arizona Territory.

Clean, but empty, he thought bleakly. No future would be really worth while unless he had Virginia to share

it with him. She was that important to him. But he had no right to ask her to share so much hardship, so much uncertainty. It was, after all, nothing more than a dream. And a mere dream was too little to offer any woman.

They came finally to the slope below the cave. A hard-bitten sergeant and two rugged looking troopers were waiting with Virginia. They had covered Drumgold's body with a blanket. They had spread another blanket on the ground for Virginia, in the shade of some rocks at the base of the slope. They must have insisted that she try to rest there, but she rose as Kincaid approached with Forsythe and Lily, and hurried to meet them.

Her hair was disheveled, there were shadows beneath her eyes and a bruise on her left cheek. Her dress was badly soiled and torn in a half dozen places. Even so, she was beautiful in the eyes of Kincaid. A glow came to her face as she held out her hands to him. She was his for the asking, but he did not ask. She deserved better than what he had to offer.

The sergeant said, "Folks, we'd better move along," and his tone made it an order.

So they moved along, with Ben Drumgold's blanket-wrapped body tied across the saddle of a cavalry mount. The other enlisted man had given Virginia his horse, and Lily rode the roan. The sergeant had offered his mount to Kincaid, but he refused it. After all he'd gone through, even a hike across rough country under the blazing sun was no hardship.

They reached the stage station at Rock Creek shortly before nightfall, and there they were given a meal, and rooms in which to rest, and a promise of transportation to Robles in the morning. After eating, Kincaid strolled outside. Sleep was out of the question now. Tomorrow they would arrive at Robles, and he and Virginia would say good-bye.

Rock Creek station was much like the one that had been destroyed in Lost Squaw Canyon. The same adobe buildings set in a wide yard enclosed by a wall. Kincaid fashioned and lit a cigarette, drifted to the gate and stood there smoking. It was full dark now, with a ruddy moon still low on the horizon to the southeast. He smoked and brooded for some minutes, and then he heard someone crossing the yard toward him. He turned

and saw Virginia. She came to stand beside him. She slipped her arm through his and the contact touched off an odd trembling inside him.

"You should be asleep," he told her. "You need to rest."

"And you?"

"I will soon."

She was silent a moment. Then she said softly, "I couldn't sleep without knowing, Walt."

He didn't pretend not to understand. "I want you," he said. "You know that."

"Yes."

"But I'd be no good for you, Virginia."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"It's like I told you yesterday on the ridge above the cave. I'm nothing. I own nothing. I don't have a job now. I don't even have any real plans. I'd lead you a rough life, Virginia."

"For a little while, perhaps. Until you got a new start."

"My new start may not lead to much."

"I'd be satisfied."

He shook his head. "You're used to more."

"Having you, I'll have everything, Walt. Being yours, I'll be everything I want to be. Besides, there's something I know about you."

"Oh? What's that?"

"You'll do well for me, in time. You'll make me proud of you." She moved closer, hugged his arm. "I know that, darling. And I think you know it, too."

"Well, I'm going to try," he said. "If you'll wait—"

"Wait a year? Or five? Or even ten?" She laughed. "No, I won't wait. And for good reason." She watched him puff on his cigarette, then reached up and took it from his mouth and threw it over the wall. "The reason is, we're not young enough to wait. I'm not as young as Lily Marvin, and you're not as young as John Forsythe." She drew him about to face her squarely. "Everything that happened was so that this could be for us, Walt Kincaid. My coming out here from the East. My meeting Ben. Your being at Lost Squaw Canyon. I believe that somehow, Walt. I'm not letting you convince me otherwise. I'm not letting you make all we endured a senseless waste." Her arms went about his neck and she clung to him. "I'm not letting you do that."

Her lips sought his, and suddenly he knew that she would have her way now and never regret it. She was a thoroughbred. She would last.

He put his arms about her. He held her tight.

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