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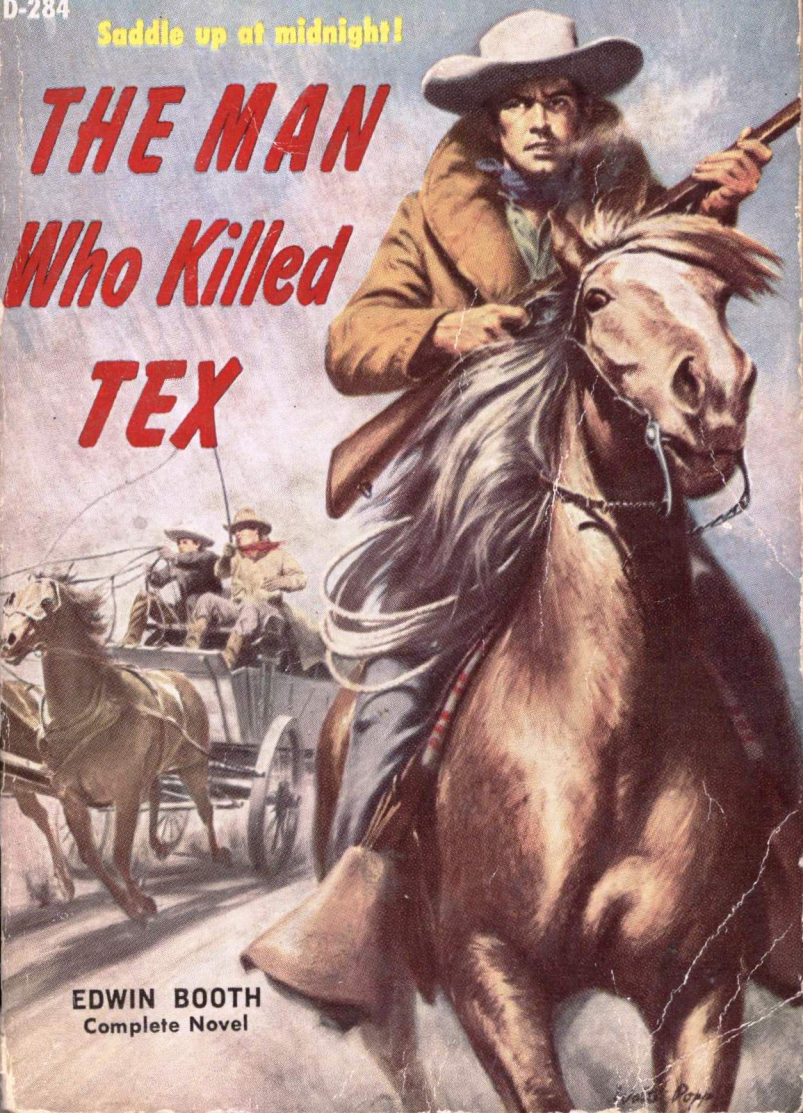
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Saddle up at midnight!

THE MAN Who Killed TEX



EDWIN BOOTH
Complete Novel

FAST FREIGHT TO BOOT HILL

"I reckon you don't know who you're talking to, mister. I'm Monte Lyman, and I'm not afraid of anybody, let alone a saddletramp drifting through town. Hell, I wouldn't even waste my time looking at you, except that I can't let folks get the idea that it's healthy to tangle with a Lyman. . . . All right, boys, go get him!"

But the man Lyman was "teaching a lesson" was no fiddlefoot drifter. Instead he was Tex's pardner—the man who had come to Cottonwood to put the Lymans out of business. And the only lesson he learned from their midnight fists was that he'd better waste no time lining his six-guns on that whole sidewinder crew—and first and foremost THE MAN WHO KILLED TEX.

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

EDWIN BOOTH has a natural background for writing good Westerns. Born in Beatrice, Nebraska, in "the year of the great San Francisco Fire," he spent the first dozen years of his life there, then moved to Colorado where he attended high school and college, guided in the Cave of the Winds, and wrangled horses in Ute Pass. Later on, he worked around New Mexico on various ranches.

Eventually, he wound up in Oakland, California, where he established himself as a public accountant, married, and found time to write yarns. ACE BOOKS have published his previous novels, which include **SHOWDOWN AT WARBIRD (D-226)** and **JINX RIDER (D-236)**.

THE MAN WHO KILLED TEX

by
EDWIN BOOTH

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THE GUNS OF HAMMER

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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS JUST past sunset when Jim Dixon left the restaurant, but already there was a chill wind blowing off the mountains to the west, bringing the smell of rain. Not the kind of night to get caught out in the open if you could help it, he told himself. Besides, this little town was probably no worse than the last, and there was always a chance that it might be better than the next.

He stepped away from the greasy smell of the restaurant and stood for a moment at the edge of the wooden sidewalk to stare thoughtfully along the two rows of shabby, false-fronted business buildings. Except for one thing, this might be any one of the half dozen cowtowns he had come through on the long ride from Colorado, the one difference being in the names on the store fronts. Among others there were the Cottonwood Hotel, Bank of Cottonwood, and the restaurant he had just left, which was called the Cottonwood Cafe. He smiled. One thing about it, a stranger couldn't help knowing what town he was in.

His horse, a bay gelding, stood tiredly at the tie-rail, its rump turned to the wind. Jim stepped down to the road and untied the reins, then climbed into the saddle and headed toward a livery stable that he had noticed on the way in.

Most of the business places were closed for the night, except for the Happy Day Saloon, but as Jim passed the hotel a man came out and lit the lantern which was hanging from a nail beside the doorway. He was a big man, his shoulders humped a little as though from habitually looking down at people. When he finished with the lantern he squinted at Jim curiously and Jim waited for him to speak; but

he went back into the hotel without saying anything, so Jim shifted his attention to the other side of the street, where another man had just come out onto the sidewalk.

The second man was small, almost dapper-looking, with a thin mustache which he kept worrying with the fingers of his left hand. He wore a tied-down gun, and the fading daylight glinted on a brass star pinned high enough on his shirt to be visible above the lapel of his coat. There was something about his looks that Jim didn't like, but he was careful to keep it from showing in his face, and he said politely. "Good evening, Sheriff."

The smaller man lifted his chin quickly, but it was a little dark for Jim to read his expression. Then he moved to the edge of the sidewalk and shook his head. "Not sheriff, stranger. I'm town marshal."

"My mistake," Jim said. He turned his horse toward where the man was standing. "I'm new here, Marshal. Figure to put my horse in the stable down the street and see what it's like to sleep in a bed for a change." He leaned down from the saddle and held out his hand. "Name's Jim Dixon."

"I'm Steve Ellis," the marshal said. He shook Jim's hand briefly. "You planning to stay around for a while, Dixon?"

"That depends," Jim said. He was about to add more, but an ingrained caution made him hold his tongue, and he merely added, "Well, if I'm going to get this horse taken care of and find me a room I'd better do it before the rain hits. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow."

"It's likely." The marshal moved back from the edge of the walk and let his hands drop to his sides. Something about the gesture reminded Jim of someone, and as he rode toward the livery stable he tried to decide who it was. Quite probably he'd never see the man again after tomorrow, so it really didn't make any difference. Nevertheless, it was still on his mind when he turned off the street into the entrance to the livery stable.

It was dark inside, but Jim could hear horses stirring in

their stalls. He dismounted and waited a moment for someone to make an appearance. When nobody did, he called, "Anybody about?"

After a bit the door to a room at one side of the barn swung open and a man came out holding a lantern. He lifted the lantern above his head and stared at Jim a little beligerently. "What's the rush?" he demanded. "I heard you come in. I would've been here in another minute anyway."

He was a man in his late twenties, to judge by his looks, and there was a truculent thrust to his unshaven jaw. Everything about him, the surly voice, the bulge of his shoulders, and especially the challenging glint in his eyes grated on Jim's nerves.

"Didn't mean to hurry you, friend," he said. "I'd like to put up this horse for the night. Looks like it might get pretty wet out before morning."

The liveryman shrugged. "All right, mister. It'll cost you six bits." He reached up to hang the lantern on a wire hook suspended from the floor of the loft above, and added meaningly, "In advance."

Jim found himself liking the man less every minute, but he reached in his pocket and took out a silver dollar.

"We've come quite a ways today, me and this horse. As long as I'm treating myself to a bed, I reckon he's due to be pampered a little too. Give him a clean stall and a good rub-down, and you can keep the change."

The man frowned at the money for a moment, then held out his hand. "You don't have to tell me how to take care of a horse," he said. He pocketed the dollar and snatched the reins out of Jim's hand. The horse jerked its head nervously, and Jim instinctively reached for the reins, then let his hand fall to his side. No doubt the man knew his business or he wouldn't be here. Probably the liveryman was just touchy about being interrupted at whatever he had been doing, and would cool off in a few minutes.

When he turned in the doorway for a final look, the livery-

man was leading his horse down an aisle between the two sets of stalls. Jim noticed with some surprise that the other animals were all watching uneasily, their eyes showing a lot of white. He shook his head and went out into the street.

Clouds were piling up in the west, and there was the distant rumble of thunder. What little daylight there might have been was blotted out by the approaching storm. Someone had lit a tar barrel in front of the Happy Day Saloon, its flickering light throwing grotesque shadows against the store buildings. Jim left the front of the stable and started toward the saloon to buy himself a nightcap, but half way across the street, he remembered that his few personal belongings were still in his saddlebags, so he turned back toward the stable.

Strangely enough, the big barn was already dark again, but a little stream of light leaked out around the partly closed door to the living quarters, providing enough illumination so that Jim was able to make his way between the two rows of stalls. He spoke softly, and the gelding responded with a nicker. Jim located him in the last stall and edged in beside him, laying his hand on the animal's back. As he had suspected, it was caked with dried sweat.

Jim cursed under his breath and left the stall. He crossed the barn and pushed through the doorway to the lighted room, a cold anger beginning to tighten his muscles. What he found did nothing to assuage his temper. The liveryman was sitting on the edge of a bunk, poring through the pages of a torn and tattered newspaper. He looked up as Jim entered, and said irritably, "Now what the hell do you want?"

"Just a couple of answers," Jim said quietly. His voice had a way of becoming deceptively soft when he was most angry, and it was soft now. "Unless I'm going deaf, you said you'd give that horse of mine a rubdown. It's easy to see he hasn't been touched."

The liveryman's face reddened, and he threw the paper on the floor. "Dammit, fella, I told you once not to tell me

how to run my business. I'll rub him down when I get around to it." He got to his feet and rammed his hands into his hip pockets. "By damn, if you don't like the way I run this stable, you can take your business somewhere else."

"A deal's a deal," Jim said. "If you didn't want to do the job right, you should've said so ten minutes ago. Now that you've taken my money, you're going to earn it." He moved to the center of the room and picked up the lantern. "While I'm here, I'll see how much else you forgot."

"Now hold on," the liveryman said. "I'm not going to—" But Jim was already out in the barn, the lantern swinging from his hand. He walked stiffly to the farthest stall and scowled at the floor. Behind him, the other man's boots pounded angrily on the worn boards.

Jim turned to face him. "You call this a clean stall?" he demanded. "From the looks of it, the hay hasn't been changed for a month." He pointed at an accumulation of dried horse droppings. "I didn't object when you charged me half again as much as I've paid anywhere else, in fact I gave you two bits extra for a little special attention, but by thunder I'm going to get what I paid for, if I have to stand over you with a club!"

The liveryman stared at him malevolently. "I reckon you don't know who you're talking to, mister. I'm Jake Lyman."

"You could be President Cleveland and it wouldn't make any difference to me," Jim said coldly. "All I want is what I bargained for, a clean stall and a rubdown. The quicker you get started, the sooner you can get back to your newspaper."

The man's eyes narrowed and he made a grab for his gun, but Jim had been expecting something of the sort. He lashed out with his boot and sent the gun sailing. "Watch yourself, Lyman," he warned. "There's no sense getting yourself killed over a dollar."

Lyman glared at him, his jaw muscles bunched. "Talking comes easy," he snarled, "When you've got the only gun. I

reckon you'd sing a different tune except for that hogleg in your holster."

Jim let out his breath in a gusty sigh. The last thing he wanted was trouble, even with a lying bully like this Jake Lyman, but things had gone too far now to back down. He hung the lantern on a corner post of his horse's stall, and draped his gunbelt beside it.

"All right, Lyman. If that's what it takes to convince you, let's get it over with."

Without answering, and with surprising agility for such a big man, Lyman closed in, catching Jim in the ribs with a blow that felt like the kick of a mule.

Jim gasped as the air exploded out of his lungs. He saw another roundhouse coming and tried to duck out of the way, but his back bumped into the corner of the stall, and Lyman's fist caught him a glancing blow on the side of the head, knocking him off balance. His feet went out from under him, and he sprawled in the passageway between the two rows of stalls.

Lyman towered over him, his teeth bared. "By God I told you to watch out, mister. Next time you'll know better." He leaped at Jim with both feet, obviously expecting to finish the fight before it was well started.

It was pure reflex that made Jim roll out of the way. His head was spinning, and there was a sharp pain in his side as though a rib had been broken, but he managed to get clear of Lyman's high-heeled boots. Fortunately, Lyman's feet skidded on some loose hay and he went to his knees. It gave Jim time to get to his feet, but he had to hang onto the side of the stall for support.

Lyman wiped a big hand across his mouth and moved in for the kill, his red-rimmed eyes narrowed to slits. He jabbed at Jim with his left, and his right fist came around in an arc that seemed destined to take Jim's head off his shoulders, but desperation made Jim twist aside just in time, and the huge fist crashed into the side of the stall with a racket that

set all the horses to kicking and yanking at their halter ropes.

Lyman stared surprisedly at his bruised knuckles for a second, and it gave Jim a chance to catch his breath and shake the cobwebs out of his head. When the big man came at him again he ducked inside the blow and buried his left fist in Lyman's belly. Lyman grunted with pain and doubled over, his chin making a perfect target for Jim's dynamite-laden uppercut.

They were the first blows Jim had landed, and Lyman backed off and stared at him perplexedly. "I'll kill you for that," he said savagely. "Nobody hits a Lyman and gets away with it." He charged at Jim with the blind fury of a wounded grizzly, his big arms outspread as though he intended to break Jim's back in a bear hug.

Jim sidestepped easily, in full control of his faculties once again, and bounced a right off Lyman's jaw. The big man went down on his knees, a dazed look in his eyes. Jim stood back and waited for him to get up, but instead of renewing the attack, Lyman made a dive for his gun, which had come to rest beside one of the stalls. Jim hurled himself on Lyman's back, slamming him to the floor. He flipped the gun out of Lyman's reach and got to his feet.

"That settles it, Lyman," he said grimly. "I don't mind a dirty fight, but when you try to bring a gun into it the fun's over." He took his own gunbelt off the post and strapped it on. "Now that you've had your try, get busy on that stall."

Lyman rose groggily to his feet. There was blood on his chin and his right fist was beginning to swell, but he gave no indication of being licked.

"You can rot in hell before I'll clean that stall," he said harshly. "Next time we meet you'll learn what happens when you tangle with a Lyman." He turned and staggered toward the living quarters, placing his feet down carefully. Jim followed, suspecting that the man might have another gun hidden somewhere; but Lyman only reached under the bunk for a warbag and threw some of his belongings in it, then

tucked the bag under his arm and went back out into the barn, leaving a trail of blood behind him. He glanced uncertainly at his gun, still lying in the dirt of the floor, then headed for the street.

In the doorway he turned. "I won't forget this, mister, and neither will you. If you're smart, you'll saddle that horse of yours and make tracks away from here before Monte finds out what happened."

"Wait a minute," Jim said. "You can't just walk off and leave your livery stable."

Lyman spat in the dirt. "It ain't my stable. To hell with it!" With that he drifted off into the darkness.

Jim crossed to the doorway and watched his dim shape outlined against the light from the tar barrel. When Lyman went into the Happy Day, Jim stepped out into the open and fashioned a cigarette, which was a little hard to do because of the shaking of his hands. It was beginning to rain, not one of the sudden violent thunderstorms he was used to in Colorado, but a steady, persistent downpour that seemed as though it might last all night. There was a smell of wet dust in the air, and the sound of the piano over at the Happy Day was pleasantly muffled.

There was something soothing about the feel of the rain on his bruised face, but he realized he would soon be soaked to the skin, so he tossed away his cigarette and went back into the barn. The fight, on top of an all day ride, had left him worn out. All he wanted to do was stretch out on a bed and sleep for a week, but he couldn't walk out and leave the place unguarded, especially since he had been the cause of the liveryman's departure. Presumably the owner of the business would find out what had happened and come down to investigate, or some local citizen would come along and Jim could send word. In the meantime, his horse still had to be taken care of.

He located a dry grain sack and used it to rub down the gelding. This familiar physical action stopped the twitching

of his muscles and calmed his nerves. By the time he was done he was himself again, and was grinning a little. Spending a night in town could be more strenuous than bedding down beside the trail, apparently, at least in this town of Cottonwood. In the morning he'd be glad to turn his back on the place and ride on. There must be friendlier towns than this in New Mexico, towns that could use a freighting business. If not, he'd push on to Texas.

Because he didn't like doing things halfway, he led the gelding out into the middle of the barn and tied him to a post, then found a rake and pitchfork and cleaned the stall. There was a pile of clean hay in one corner of the room and he spread some of it on the floor. He scooped a canfull of grain out of a bin and poured it into the feedbox, then led his horse back into the stall and tied its halter rope to an iron ring bolted to the manger.

Close to an hour had elapsed since the fight, but no one had come along to supply the information he wanted. He crossed to the doorway and looked out into the now muddy street. The two windows of the Happy Day were yellow squares of light against the surrounding darkness, and the lantern in front of the hotel glowed dimly. In spite of the rain, the tar barrel still flickered fitfully, its flame reflected in numerous pools of water in the street.

To his left, over beyond the west end of the business section, lamplight shone weakly from the windows of three or four houses. Likely the owner of this stable might be in one of them, and Jim considered crossing the saloon and inquiring, but decided against it. So far as he knew, Jake Lyman was still in the saloon, and he had no desire to renew the argument now. The fellow was nothing to him, just a mean-tempered brute who apparently thought the name Lyman gave him some sort of prestige.

He turned away from the door and moved along between the two rows of stalls. The horses had calmed down now, and he checked to make sure each one had been fed, and

wasn't tangled up in its halter rope. All the stalls were in need of cleaning, but it would be an all night job to put them in order, so he contented himself with untangling a few snarled ropes and doling out some handfulls of grain.

When he finished, he made himself another cigarette and moved over to the doorway where there would be no danger of setting fire to the hay. He struck a match and cupped it to the tip of his cigarette. As he looked up from the flame, he saw someone angling across the street toward the stable, someone wearing a long yellow slicker. Jim grunted with relief. Maybe now he could get away from here and get to bed.

Yellow Slicker was zig-zagging across the street, evidently trying to avoid the worst of the puddles. Somehow Jim got the impression that it was a woman, but this was an idea he couldn't quite accept. No woman would be out on the street alone at this time of night, certainly not in a storm such as this.

Even as he reached this conclusion, the stranger leaped the last puddle and entered the barn. A slim hand reached up to remove a water soaked felt hat, and two angry eyes looked up at Jim accusingly.

"Who are *you*, and what happened to Jake Lyman?"

For a minute all Jim could do was stare. Impossible or not, this was certainly a woman, and not like any woman Jim had ever seen before. She couldn't be over nineteen or twenty, and either anger or the beating rain had turned her cheeks almost as red as her lips.

Belatedly, Jim removed his hat. "I'm Jim Dixon, Miss. If it was Jake who was supposed to be running this livery stable, he took his stuff and cleared out. Likely whoever sent you here told you his side of what happened." He frowned. "What's your interest in it, Miss? You couldn't be the owner, surely."

"My husband is," she said sharply. "And don't call me 'Miss'. I'm Ellen Carter, Mrs. Victor Carter."

"Yes ma'am," Jim said. "I might have known." He took a deep breath.

The girl looked at him speculatively. "Just what did you mean by that, Mr. Dixon?"

"Nothing, ma'am." It wouldn't do at all, Jim decided, to tell her that he'd always feared that if he found as pretty a girl as he'd dreamed about, she'd already be married. He shook his head.

"I didn't aim to drive away your helper, but you can tell your husband he hasn't lost much." He gestured toward the stalls. "You can see for yourself what kind of a job he was doing. For six bits a night a man's entitled to a clean stall for his horse, and good treatment."

She frowned. "Jake wasn't supposed to charge six bits. Our price is fifty cents."

"Then he was holding out on you, too," Jim said. "That's another reason for your husband to be glad he's rid of him." He glanced at the street. "I reckon he'll be along pretty quick—your husband, that is?"

She bit her lip. "Mr. Carter had to leave town for a few days. That's what makes it so bad. I knew Jake Lyman wasn't much good, but there has to be somebody here to look after things."

"That shouldn't be much of a problem," Jim remarked. "There's always some puncher looking for a change of jobs."

She smiled wryly. "It isn't as simple as that, Mr. Dixon. Around this town, nobody does anything unless Monte Lyman says so. They'd all be afraid to take Jake's job if Monte doesn't want them to."

"This Monte Lyman," Jim asked curiously. "What makes him so all-fired important? Is he ten feet tall or something?"

For the first time, the girl really smiled, and it made her even more attractive. "He's not as tall as you are, Mr. Dixon, but he's an important man around Cottonwood. He owns the largest ranch in this part of the territory, most of

the store buildings on this street, and he runs the freighting company."

"Freighting?" Jim was immediately interested.

"That's right. Why?"

"Nothing, I guess. Just that I'm looking for a location to start a hauling outfit of my own." He noticed the worried look in her eyes. "Well, there's likely nothing much you can do about this until morning. If it'll ease your mind any, I'll stay here overnight. For that matter, I don't mind helping you out for a day or two if you need me. A couple of my wagons are on the road behind me, and I don't want to get too far ahead of them." He looked at her thoughtfully. "I reckon your husband will be back pretty soon?"

She dropped her eyes, and the smile faded. "I'm expecting him any day, Mr. Dixon. In the meantime, I can certainly use your help." She gave him a quick smile, then put the damp hat back on her head and went out into the rain.

Jim watched the yellow slicker until it disappeared in the darkness, then continued to watch until a light came on in one of the houses at the far end of the street. Afterwards he closed the big barn door and crossed the room to lift the lantern off the hook. He untied his bedroll from the back of his saddle and entered the room in which Jake Lyman had lived. The place was as dirty as a sty, but he was too tired to clean it now, so he merely yanked Jake's blankets off the bunk and tossed them into the corner, then unrolled his own blanket on the straw tick.

He undressed quickly, blew out the lantern, and crawled into bed. After a bit he chuckled softly in the darkness. What sort of mess had he let himself in for? Because a pretty girl had needed help, he had agreed to look after things until her husband got back, but how did he know what this might amount to? For all he knew, the man might be gone for a month, though how any man could willingly

stay away from a girl like Ellen Carter was hard to understand.

He thought about Monte Lyman then. It seemed like Lyman made big tracks around here, and he likely wouldn't feel very friendly toward the man who had licked his brother. Well, if Lyman already had the freighting business sewed up around Cottonwood, there would be no reason to hang around long anyway. With that thought in mind he fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

SOMETIME during the night, Jim awoke with the feeling that something was wrong. He lay perfectly still for a moment, trying to identify what it was that had awakened him. It came to him then that the rain had stopped, the earlier pounding on the roof now replaced by an occasional splash as water dropped off the eaves. Likely it was the sudden silence which had disturbed him, he decided, and he rolled over to go back to sleep.

As though the rustling of the straw were a signal, a match flared, its yellow light glinting on the barrel of a sixgun. An unknown voice said coldly, "One move and you're dead, stranger. I'm not bluffing."

There was a quality to the voice that made this easy to believe, and Jim lay motionless, although his eyes flicked briefly to his own gun, hanging only a foot or so from his head.

"That's playing it smart," the voice said. "Jake—light that lantern."

Jim smiled grimly. He should have guessed that Jake Lyman wouldn't let the matter drop without trying to get even. Now there were two of them to contend with, and no chance to reach his gun.

Another match burst into flame, and he saw that he had been mistaken. There were three of them. Jake Lyman, with an anticipatory grin on his face; the man with the gun, who resembled Jake enough so that Jim was sure he must be Jake's brother; and a thick-bodied man who was hatless, and whose head was entirely bald. This third man was staring at Jim blankly, his face devoid of expression.

The lantern came aglow, and Jim had a better look at the man with the gun. The resemblance was there, all right, but it wasn't so noticeable in this brighter light. Instead of Jake's sullen expression, this one had a look of shrewd intelligence. He was dressed differently, too, his jacket fitting his wide shoulders as though it were tailor made, and his gray Stetson obviously one which had cost him plenty. The most significant thing about him now, though, was his gun, which was pointed at Jim's belly.

The other two were apparently waiting for orders, and when none were forthcoming, Jake started toward the bunk, but his brother's voice brought him up short.

"Stay where you are, Jake. If you couldn't lick him with both hands, what chance would you have now?"

Jake cursed. "I could've licked him in a fair fight. He just tricked me."

"Never mind what you could've done; Tell Dummy to turn around."

It seemed like a strange thing to say, and Jim watched the bald-headed man to see his reaction, but his face was as blank as before. Then Jake reached out to touch the man on the shoulder, and his smooth round head turned to face Jake.

"Look at the boss," Jake said, and when the bald-headed man didn't obey his order immediately: "You crazy fool, Monte wants to tell you something." He pointed angrily at his brother, and the bald-headed man turned to face the one with the gun.

Jim was hoping that this might give him the break he

was waiting for, but Monte's eyes didn't shift so much as an inch.

"Hold him, Zale," he said, his lips forming the words carefully. He nodded toward the bunk.

The man called Zale nodded his head and moved toward the bunk, careful not to get in front of Monte's gun. Behind him, Monte said sharply, "Damn it, Jake, you know he can't hear a word you say. Losing your temper won't do any good."

Jake stared at him belligerently. "What the hell difference does it make as long as he can't hear me anyway?" He spat on the floor. "That dummy gives me the creeps. I don't see why—"

"A lot of things you don't see," Monte said sourly. "Except for that, I wouldn't have to get you out of these messes."

Jim didn't hear any more, because the man they were arguing about had reached the side of the bunk and was yanking the blanket loose. He let it drop to the floor, and bent down to grab Jim by the arms and pick him out of the bunk with as little effort as though he were lifting a child. Jim realized that resistance would be foolhardy, but he had the feeling that it wouldn't have made much difference anyway, in view of Zale's immense strength.

Zale turned him to face Monte, and shifted his grip so that Jim's hands were held tight behind his back.

Across the room, Monte nodded at the mute and smiled. "Just hold him there," he said carefully. He pulled up a chair and sat down, and his eyes studied Jim with some curiosity.

"I suppose you've guessed who I am, stranger?"

Jim nodded. "From your looks, and the fact that you've been called Monte, I take it you're this man's brother."

"You take it right. I'm Monte Lyman."

Jim made no reply, and a quick frown turned the corners of Monte's mouth, but he went on with no change of voice.

"There's nothing personal about this, you understand. It isn't often that Jake runs into a man he can't lick, and if he's too stupid to take care of himself he deserves whatever he gets."

Jim glanced over at his shoulder at the mute, then back at Monte.

"Did it take three of you to tell me that, or are you scared to talk to a man unless someone's holding him?"

Monte's lips thinned. "You don't know much about me, or you'd know I'm not afraid of anybody, let alone a saddletramp drifting through town. Hell, I wouldn't even waste my time looking at you, except that you licked Jake, and I can't let folks get the idea that it's healthy to tangle with a Lyman. First thing you know, they might get ideas about me."

Jim made a tentative effort to pull loose from the mute's grip, but Zale held his arms like a vise, so he knew it was useless. He considered shouting for help, but realized that this too would accomplish nothing. All they had to do was lay a gunbarrel across his skull and he'd be out entirely.

Monte glanced contemptuously at his brother "All right, Jake, there he is. Let's get it over with so I can go to bed." He frowned. "Don't hurt your hand again. You won't be much use to me if you can't handle a gun."

Jake licked his thick lips. "I've still got one hand in good shape," he said. "That's all I'll need." He moved up in front of Jim and let go with a savage blow which caught him in the pit of the stomach.

It would have doubled Jim over, but the mute held him erect. Waves of pain spread into his chest and down to his legs, and he began to retch. Then Jake hit him again, this time full in the face, rocking his head to one side. Another terrific blow landed on his belly, and his knees buckled, but Zale continued to hold him up, and Jake's fist pounded him again and again.

He was past the point of feeling anything now, and his head rolled from side to side each time Jake's fist landed. Through the haze he heard Monte say sharply, "That's enough, Jake. I don't want a dead man on my hands."

Jake backed off then, and Jim could hear his labored breathing. Monte said something Jim didn't understand, then he felt himself being laid in the bunk. He squinted up through a pink fog and saw the mute bending over him, his face as placid as before.

He must have passed out, because when he opened his eyes again he was sitting on the edge of the bunk and Zale was holding him up with one hand and putting a shirt on him with the other. Monte was still in the chair, the gun laid across his lap, but Jake seemed to have disappeared.

Jim's brain was fuzzy and his eyes were swollen almost shut, but so far as he could tell there were no broken bones, and his numerous cuts had stopped bleeding. In spite of his grogginess, he couldn't help noticing that the deaf mute was handling him very gently. Jim made a painful effort to focus his eyes, and when Zale's face became clear for a moment he saw that it was just as blank as before. It was a hard thing to understand, and apparently Monte noticed his bewilderment, for he said suddenly, "Zale can't use his face muscles like most men. The blast that took away his voice and hearing did that to him too." He laughed grimly. "He gets along all right, though, once he gets his orders. Right now his orders are to keep you from making a break."

"That shouldn't be hard," Jim said, his voice a hoarse whisper because of the dryness of his throat. "Not after what you just had done to me." He turned painfully to face the door to the stable. "Where's that brave brother of yours—out beating up some old woman? Or couldn't he even do that without help?"

Monte grinned. "Talk all you want to, mister—it doesn't bother me any. I know Jake isn't worth a damn, even if he is my brother. It's just that I can't let folks forget who's run-

ning this town. Like I already told you, nobody can talk back to a Lyman and get away with it."

The mute finished buttoning Jim's shirt and backed away from the bunk. Jim staggered to his feet, and straddled to keep from falling. Apparently he had been unconscious for some time, at least long enough for Dummy Zale to get him into his trousers and put his boots on.

Monte Lyman got out of the chair, the gun still in his hand. He glanced at the mute to make sure he was watching, and said slowly, "Bring him along and put him on his horse."

Zale nodded, and laid a heavy hand on Jim's shoulder, but Jim mustered enough strength to pull away from it, and lurched to within a few feet of Monte.

"You're mistaken, Lyman," he said thickly. "Here's one man that'll talk back to you. For my money, you Lymans are just cheap tinhorn cowards, you and your brother both. If it wasn't for—"

Monte's face whitened, and he slashed out with the gun, catching Jim on the side of the head. Jim reached for him as he fell, but his legs folded and his fingers slipped along the smooth fabric of Monte's coat. His face hit the floor, and once again he passed out.

When he came to, he was mounted on a horse, and Dummy Zale was riding close beside him to keep him from falling. It was raining again, but there was enough light so that he could see another horseman in front, his slicker a pale blob against the surrounding darkness. Likely that would be Monte Lyman, he decided, and no doubt Jake was bringing up the rear.

The way Jim felt, it didn't make much difference one way or the other. His head throbbed as if it were about to explode, and each jolting step of the horse sent shafts of pain through every muscle of his body. It didn't help any, either, that he could now see the foolishness of that speech he had

made to Monte Lyman. He must have been out of his head to pull a dumb trick like that.

Jim's horse stopped suddenly, almost throwing him out of the saddle, but Dummy Zale held him in place. He saw then that the man in front had come to a halt and turned around, his face faintly visible through the rain.

"This is as far as we're taking you, mister." It was Monte's voice, all right, as Jim had expected. "Just keep on down this road and don't turn around 'til you hit Texas." He rode close to Jim and leaned toward him. "Did you hear me?"

"I heard you." Jim was hanging onto the saddlehorn with both hands to keep from falling.

"Good." Monte settled back in his saddle. He made a quick motion, and a match burst into life, its feeble flame cupped in his hands against the rain. He held the match close to his face and said slowly, "If you see this man again, Zale, kill him."

Jim turned and saw the mute nod his head. Out of the darkness, Jake's voice said harshly, "Why not kill him now and be sure? The dirty—"

"Shut up!" Monte commanded. "If we did things your way, we'd be in jail half the time." He turned his hard eyes toward Jim.

"You're no fool, stranger, to judge by your looks. You'll have sense enough to get out while you're able."

Jim didn't answer, and Monte dropped the match into the road, where it sputtered out immediately. He headed back the way they had come, the other two falling in line behind him. For a few minutes Jim could hear the sucking noises of their horses' hoofs in the mud, and the soft jangle of bit rings. Then everything was quiet except for the splash of the rain.

How long he sat there he didn't know, but his strength was returning gradually, and the rain felt good against his face, blunting the agony of his cuts and bruises. Finally he was able to let go of the horn and sit a little straighter

in the saddle. He reached in his shirt pocket for his tobacco and found it a wet and soggy mess which he dropped to the ground. It occurred to him then to examine his other pockets, and it came as no surprise that the small sum of cash he had been carrying was missing.

The loss of the money didn't make too much difference, since he had had only fifteen or twenty dollars on him, but it aroused enough anger to focus his mind on what had happened. As he thought about it, he cursed softly. He had met some rotten characters in his time, but never anyone like Monte Lyman, who would hold a gun on a man and have him beaten up; or like Jake, who seemed glad to be part of such a one-sided deal. And these were the men who boasted openly that they were running things around Cottonwood. No wonder the town had seemed so unfriendly.

He thought about the girl, then, Ellen Carter. It was easy to see why she had been so upset over his fight with Jake. If tonight was any sample of the way the Lymans operated, they would go to any lengths to get even with anyone who opposed them.

Her face became very clear to him now, the flashing eyes and soft red lips, and her sudden smile when he had agreed to look after things until her husband returned.

Damn it, this was no time to be thinking about a girl's lips, especially a girl who was already married. What happened to her now was no concern of his. She couldn't very well expect him to risk a bullet in the back just to keep a promise to look after a two-bit livery stable.

He reached for the reins. Like Lyman had said, he was too smart a man to come back and ask for more. He'd keep on down the road and forget about Cottonwood.

It was the only sensible thing to do, he told himself, but even as he made the decision he was turning the horse the direction the others had gone, wondering if he could find the way in the darkness. After a bit he was struck by the variance between his thoughts and his actions, and he began

to grin. Why not admit it, he wanted to see Ellen Carter again, even if it was only long enough to tell her good-bye. Maybe when he got a look at her in daylight, she wouldn't be so blamed pretty after all. Then he could ride away and forget about it. For that matter he'd have to ride away and forget it anyway, but at least he'd have things straight in his mind.

The horse seemed to know where it was going, and Jim made no attempt to direct it. Likely it knew a lot more about where they were than he did, inasmuch as he had been unconscious most of the way from town. At any rate there was no particular hurry, since he still didn't have any real idea of what he was going to do when he reached Cottonwood.

The rain had been slackening, and it now quit entirely. Suddenly there was a rift in the clouds and the moon broke through, glistening on the little puddles in the road and giving Jim his first clear view of his surroundings.

Ahead of him, perhaps half a mile away, was the outline of Cottonwood's square-topped store buildings. The town was dark now, without even the lantern in front of the hotel to suggest human habitation, but by the light of the moon he could easily pick out the location of the livery stable. He pulled up for a moment to watch, thinking that the Lyman and Dummy Zale might still be about, but nothing substantiated his suspicion so he rode on.

The big barn door was standing open, and he rode in and left it that way. If any of his enemies were in town, he didn't want them to guess that he was back, at least not until he had a gun in his hand. Inside the barn he dismounted with painful slowness and tied his horse to a post, then approached the door to the living quarters and waited a moment to make sure there was no one ahead of him. After a bit he reached down and found a loose clod. He tossed it into the room. There was no response, and he was satisfied that the room was empty, so he returned to his horse and led it

to the same stall he had used before. He stripped off saddle and bridle, and adjusted the halter in the darkness.

Even this slight effort exhausted him, but he managed to stay on his feet long enough to enter the bedroom and bolt the door, then groped his way to the bunk and practically fell into it. It seemed that every muscle in his body was pulled out of shape, but in spite of the pain he soon fell asleep.

A hundred yards or so away, Ellen Carter opened her eyes and saw that the moon had come out, its silvery light making diamonds of the raindrops on her bedroom windows. She lay there only half awake for a moment, watching the droplets build at the top of the window frame and course swiftly down the wet glass. It was a pretty thing to watch, like so many other little details of nature, if you only bothered to look for them; the shape of a snowflake, the splash of a mountain stream over rocks, even such commonplace things as a horse's mane blowing in the wind.

Thinking of horses reminded her of the livery stable, and the spell was broken, for she remembered that the stable was now her responsibility, and hers alone, in spite of what she had told the stranger who had fought Jake Lyman.

To make her change of mood more acute, a cloud suddenly passed in front of the moon. Ellen shivered, and pulled the covers closer around her throat. But the chill that had bothered her was not the kind to be allayed by a blanket. It was a mixture of fear and uncertainty, fear because she was so terribly alone, and uncertainty as to the future.

It seemed almost impossible now that only a year ago she had never even heard of this little town, that she had been living in her parents' comfortable house in a quiet village in Missouri, doing the things that a respectable young lady was expected to do until she was ready to marry and start a home of her own. Which wouldn't be long, folks had said, since Ellen had every eligible young man in

town looking at her hopefully, wishing that she would hurry and make up her mind.

Lying in bed and thinking about it, Ellen smiled wistfully. Those had been good days, now that she looked back on them, days of parties and church socials and innocent flirtations, all perfectly normal for a girl of eighteen. But she had had no inclination to get married. Several of the young men were nice enough, but there was no special one she cared about much more than the others. And then she had met Victor Carter.

The smile faded now, although there was nothing unpleasant about her memory of the first meeting with the man who was now her husband. It had happened in St. Louis, where she had gone with her father on one of his business trips. Victor had been present at a dinner party to which she and her father had been invited, and she had noticed him at once, probably because he was so handsome and poised.

She'd seen him watching her, too, and before very long he had managed an introduction.

It had seemed strange for her father to object so strongly to Victor, inasmuch as his behavior had been perfect, and he had appeared to be a young man of means. About all her father had said at first was that Victor wasn't the type she should fall in love with, that he was too venturesome, an assertion which had made him even more fascinating, since Ellen herself was a high-spirited girl.

Later, her father had added that Victor was a gambler, that he traveled up and down the Mississippi on the big paddlewheel steamers, making his living off of gullible passengers, but by the time her father had come out with that, Ellen had been too madly in love for it to make any difference.

The moon was out again, but Ellen didn't notice, since her thoughts were miles away, on the unhappy episode with her father, her wedding day—if being married by a be-

whiskered justice of the peace could be called a wedding—on the first few happy weeks that she and Victor had shared, and then the heartbreaking series of discoveries about Victor's true nature, his instability, his love of excitement; and, above all, his dislike for anything that even vaguely resembled work.

Oh, he had tried once or twice—maybe not very hard—but at least he had tried. Their wanderings had brought them to Cottonwood, where he had done quite well at first dealing Faro at the Happy Day. As usual, though, he had become dissatisfied, and Ellen had known that it would be only a matter of time until he'd want to move on; but just then the man who owned the livery stable had put it up for sale, and Ellen had insisted that Victor buy it and begin to put down roots.

She sighed. Maybe that had been a mistake, but it wasn't the real cause of her trouble, because she had found out that Victor had secretly been seeing one of the girls at the Happy Day, and she was pretty sure that there had been others before. Apparently Victor's heart was as restless as his feet.

Anyway, it was too late to worry about it now. Victor was gone, and she doubted that he would return, although she told everyone that he was just away tending to some business.

She was too unsettled now to go back to sleep, so she got out of bed and went into the kitchen, the only other room in this rented cottage. From the kitchen window she could see the buildings along the south side of the street, including the livery stable at the far end. She looked at this now and noticed immediately that the big door was open.

Likely Mr. Dixon had no way of knowing that the door should be closed, but it worried her none the less. She shook her head ruefully. Everything seemed to be worrying her tonight for some reason, her troubles with Victor, the responsibility of the livery stable, the way Mr. Dixon had

looked at her—not that there was anything *wrong* about the look—and most of all, how Monte Lyman was going to react to what had happened to his brother Jake.

Now that she allowed herself to think about it, Monte Lyman was her biggest worry of all. Monte was a man who usually kept his feelings a secret, and she was too inexperienced to guess what was going on behind the mask he always seemed to wear when she was around. Still, she had the impression that he knew she was lying about Victor. Yet Monte had never indicated by so much as a raised eyebrow that he didn't believe what she said.

She turned away from the window and went back to the other room. When she was in bed again she lay for a long time staring at the ceiling. Suppose Victor didn't come back, how long would Monte Lyman pretend to believe her story? Monte was very unlike Jake, who tried to get what he wanted with his fists or a gun; but Monte always seemed to get what he wanted, too, and from the way he looked at her when he thought she wasn't watching, maybe he wanted *her*.

Once more she had to pull the blanket closer around her shoulders. Monte Lyman would be a hard man to discourage, once he got his mind on anything. For a moment she almost hoped that Victor *would* come back, even though she was sure that whatever love they had known was dead and buried.

She thought about the stranger, Jim Dixon, who had been kind enough to offer to help her out. In the morning, she'd have to tell him the truth, that there was no reason to expect her husband back in the near future, and that he was free to leave. After all, it was none of his concern, and it wouldn't be fair to hold him to a promise he had made when he didn't know the true facts.

Just thinking about the stranger was somehow reassuring, and she soon went back to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

A CROWING ROOSTER awakened Jim at dawn, but for a moment he was unable to muster enough energy to crawl out of the bunk. When he did manage to put his feet on the floor he sat on the edge of the bunk for several minutes and looked around bleakly at the dirty room.

Apparently Jake had never bothered to clean the place at all, and every corner was cluttered with discarded clothes, empty cans, and worthless junk of all kinds. A big gray rat was nibbling at a dry crust of break over by the far wall, and Jim frowned in disgust. He looked at the nail from which he had hung his gunbelt, and was surprised to find it still there, evidently overlooked by the Lymans after the fight. He lifted the gun out of the holster, but by then the rat had ducked into a hole, so he just checked the cylinder to make sure it was still loaded, and dropped the gun back in the holster again.

A horse kicked the side of its stall, and Jim rose stiffly to his feet. He glanced down at the clothes he was wearing and grinned wryly. The way he looked now, dirty and bloody and rain-soaked, he sure fitted the rest of the room.

There was a cracked mirror hanging on one wall, and he crossed the room to squint at his reflection, frowning at the scars and bruises, and running his fingers through the bristles on his jaw. If Mrs. Carter saw him in this condition she'd likely start yelling for help, and he wouldn't blame her.

Fortunately, there was a half-filled water bucket on a bench under the mirror, and a washbasin beside it. Jim stripped off his clothes and washed himself the best he could without reopening any wounds, then dragged his war-bag from under the bunk and put on some clean underwear

and a fresh shirt. He looked at his razor for a moment, but decided against using it. Shaving would be too painful an operation in his present condition, and he'd be sure to start bleeding again.

He finished dressing and strapped on his gun, then unbolted the door and stepped out into the barn. What he wanted most right now was a cup of hot coffee, so he crossed to the big doorway and looked up the deserted street toward the cafe, but there was no smoke coming out of the chimney yet, and he knew he would have to wait. While he waited, he started tending to the horses, filling their feed boxes and bringing fresh water from a barrel which he found outside the back of the barn.

The restaurant still showed no sign of being open, so he started working on the stalls, moving out one horse at a time and cleaning out the dirt and replacing it with fresh hay.

He was on the third stall when he heard footsteps out in front and turned quickly toward the doorway, his hand moving to the gun at his side, only to drop again as he saw Ellen Carter coming across the street.

She wasn't wearing the slicker this time, and Jim couldn't help grinning as he remembered how he had tried to fool himself out there in the rain in the middle of the night. He might have known she would be even better looking in daylight than at night, that the rest of her would be as pretty as her face.

He moved out from between the stalls and reached up to touch the brim of his hat. "Morning, ma'am," he said. "You're up early."

She seemed a little startled at first, as though she hadn't expected to find him still there, but she recovered quickly and smiled. "I usually get up early, Mr. Dixon. I just wanted to make sure that everything was all right."

From the way she was looking at his face, Jim knew that she wanted to ask about what had happened during the

night, but he was pretty sure that she would let him be the one to mention it if he wanted to. Just to test his hunch, he gave her plenty of time to ask, and he was pleased when she controlled her curiosity.

"Everything's fine, ma'am," he said. "Except that I'm beginning to feel the need of some breakfast. I've been fixing to go to the restaurant when it opened. Maybe if you could stick around here long enough—"

The question was still in her eyes, but she said promptly enough, "Certainly, Mr. Dixon. Go right ahead. I'll take care of the place until you get back." She frowned. "I've got something to tell you, but there's no hurry about it. I'll tell you after you eat."

"Sure, ma'am, whenever you say." Jim went into the bedroom and washed his hands, then came out and pulled the door shut behind him. He saw her watching him, and grinned.

"I wouldn't go in there right now, ma'am, not 'til I've had a chance to straighten things up a little." He started toward the street, then remembered suddenly that he was without funds. He hesitated a second, but went on without saying anything about it. He couldn't very well tell her that much without telling her the rest, and he considered his trouble with the Lymans a personal matter, nothing for her to worry about.

The cafe was open, but there were no other patrons there when Jim went in, only the owner, who was nursing a fire in the big cookstove. He looked up at Jim and nodded.

"I see you stayed over, mister—"

"Dixon," Jim said. "Jim Dixon." He extended his hand across the counter.

The restaurant man took it. "I'm Sully Madden." He stared at Jim's face "You need a doctor worse than you do a cook, Dixon. We've got a good one here, Doc Bowles." He frowned. "You didn't look like this last night. What the devil happened?"

Jim grinned. "I just got careless, Madden. A man's a blamed fool to get careless around a bunch of strange horses." He sat down on a stool at the counter. "Maybe I'll see a doctor later on, but right now a cup of coffee's a lot more important."

Madden shrugged. "It's your business, Dixon, not mine." He poured a cup of coffee from a big pot on the stove, and set it on the counter.

Jim started to reach for it, then changed his mind. "Before I drink this, it's only fair to warn you I haven't any money. You'll have to carry me until I get paid—that is if you're willing to take a chance."

"But last night you had—" Madden looked at Jim in surprise. "I guess that's something else that's none of my business." He scratched his chin. "You sound like you're already working for someone. How come you got a job so quick?"

"You might say I fell into it," Jim said. "I'm working for the Carters, over at the livery."

"Carters? What happened to—?"

He broke off whatever he had been about to say, and looked uneasily toward the street, a worried frown on his face.

Watching him, Jim felt a touch of sympathy for the man. Madden was probably like a lot of other townsmen; quiet men who wanted nothing out of life but the right to live peacefully and make a decent living. Why was it that there always had to be someone like Monte Lyman to mess things up?

"Don't worry about it, Madden," he said quietly. "Nobody has to know you did me a favor." He smiled. "I'll even say you charged me double if it'll save you any embarrassment. Now how about something a little more filling?"

"Sure, Dixon." The cafe man smiled crookedly. "It's hell not having any guts, but I've got a family to think about." He turned away and busied himself at the stove.

While Jim was eating, the door opened and an old man came in. He looked to be well up in his seventies—to judge by his white hair and the leathery toughness of his face—but his dilapidated felt hat was perched at a cocky angle, and there was a gleam in his faded blue eyes.

Madden looked around from the stove and nodded.

"Hello, Luke. What the blazes got *you* up so early?"

"Up early, hell," the old man said. "I ain't rightly been to bed yet." He grinned, revealing tobacco-stained teeth. "Seems like somebody must've slipped something in my liquor last night. When I woke up, they'd locked me in, and I had to wait 'til Lucky Odom came down and let me out."

Madden shook his head. "You're a danged fool, Luke. Why can't you get it through your head that you're not a youngster any more? Why doggone it, most men your age would be taking it easy by now, playing with their grandkids or something."

Luke snorted. "It's talk like that that makes me sick to my stomach, Sully. Who the blazes wants to play with a bunch of grandkids—not that I haven't got a few here and there, if I only knew where to look." He moved along the counter, weaving a little, and stopped beside Jim.

"You must be the feller that beat the hell out of Jake Lyman. By gravy I'd like to shake your hand!"

Jim had already started to grin, and now he couldn't help laughing. Something about the feisty little man lifted his spirits more than the coffee had. He held out his hand, and Luke took it in a surprisingly powerful grip.

Madden stared at them uneasily. "You'd better watch yourself, Luke," he said solemnly. "Not that I've got any quarrel with anyone, but if Jake was to hear you talking like this you'd be in hot water up to your scrawny old neck."

"Phaw!" Luke said disgustedly. "Everybody knows I don't pack a gun any more, and even a Lyman would think twice before he gunned an unarmed man, at least where anyone

could see him." He jabbed a finger in Madden's chest.

"I've been shot at by owlhoots in my time, mauled by a grizzly or two, and had to dig a few arrows out of my hide now and then, but I'm still around. I'll be damned if I'm going to die from a broken leg on account of my knees knocking together. Now quit bellyaching and give me a knockdown to this poor feller that's being poisoned by your grub."

Madden let out his breath in a great sigh. "All right, Luke, you're too pig-headed to know common sense when you hear it." He looked at Jim.

"Mr. Dixon, this is Luke Turner, the dangdest old fool in the territory. Luke, meet Jim Dixon."

"Mighty proud to, Dixon," Luke said, and shook hands again. "Anytime those Lymans give you any more trouble, just let me know. I ain't so big, but I know a lot of mean tricks."

"Thanks. I'll remember that." Jim watched the old man stomp out of the cafe, and turned in time to catch Madden smiling at Luke's back.

"Luke's all right," Madden said apologetically. "He's done everything he said, and a lot more too. Forty years ago he was a government scout, and before that he trapped beaver where no other white man had ever been. It's just that he worries me sometimes, the way he struts around."

He turned away and went to the back of the restaurant for a pail of water. By the time he returned, Jim had cleaned his plate.

"Much obliged, Madden," Jim said. "I'll pay you for this."

Madden didn't answer, and Jim got up and left the cafe, wondering grimly if he should have added, "provided the Lymans don't get me first."

The sun was high enough now for its rays to hit the road. Jim stood for a moment in front of the cafe, feeling considerably better than when he had gone in. Across the street, the same big round-shouldered man he had seen hanging

out the lantern the night before was now sweeping the sidewalk in front of the hotel. He pretended not to see Jim standing there, but Jim was sure he was watching him out of the corner of his eye, and it bothered him. Did the whole town know about his fight with Jake, or were the townsmen so cowed that they watched every stranger this way?

Seen in daylight, Cottonwood was a fairly decent looking town, but of course any place looked better after a good rain. The store fronts had been washed clean, and the trees from which the town got its name stood tall and shining under this first light of morning.

Jim turned and looked up the street to his right, toward the end of the town he had not passed through on his way in. There were a number of houses there, but beyond the houses, at the far end of the street, was a squat building with the words on the side *Monte Lyman—Freighting and Hauling*, and in smaller letters, *Feed and Grain*.

There were two or three sheds in back of the main building, and a small corral. A wagon was just pulling out from beside the building, the driver yelling at his team. It came toward where Jim was standing, and pulled up in front of a store next to the hotel on the other side of the street. Jim saw the name on the store window *Simon Trautner's Hardware*.

The driver shouted toward the store, and presently the door opened and an angular, gray-haired man came out onto the walk. He was wearing a canvas apron and had apparently been doing some heavy work, as he wiped sweat from his forehead, and started talking to the driver.

Because Jim was interested in anything connected with freighting, he instinctively tried to hear what was said, but he couldn't get much of the conversation, only enough to learn that the wagon was to pick up some merchandise somewhere and bring it back. One thing he did notice was that the storekeeper didn't smile or make any jocular remarks. Jim let his trained eye run over the equipment, and saw

that it was in poor shape, the wagon badly in need of paint, and the horses poorly matched. It struck him as being rather strange that a man of Monte Lyman's appearance and apparent affluence would allow things to deteriorate like this.

The wagon rolled on down the street, and the hardware man went back into the store, moving a little wearily.

Jim let his glance travel past the hardware store. There was a harness shop on the other side of the hotel, then a barber shop, and beyond that was the livery stable, where Ellen Carter would be waiting to tell him whatever it was that she had been referring to.

He left the cafe and cut across to enter the hardware store. The gray-haired man looked up sharply from a piece of machinery he was assembling, and dusted his hands on his apron. He moved up to face Jim, and said bluntly, "I know what happened last night, mister, and I don't want to hear any more about it. If you're here to stir up trouble, you can just leave me out of it."

From his voice, Trautner—if the name on the store was his—was almost at the breaking point, so Jim was careful to keep his voice low.

"You're jumping at conclusions, Trautner. I don't like trouble any more than you do. If there's any more of it, I won't be the one to start it."

"So?" The hardwareman shook his head doubtfully. "According to what they're saying, you picked a fight with Jake Lyman. That's not the kind of thing a man would do if he wasn't looking for trouble."

Jim grinned. "You've heard only one side of it, but I'm not here to talk about Jake Lyman, so let's forget last night." His smile faded. "I'm interested in knowing about that shipment you're having picked up. If it's no secret, where is it coming from, and what sort of stuff is it?"

Since the man had made no comment about the use of his name, apparently he was Trautner. He stared at Jim

now in evident surprise at the way the conversation was going.

"It's no secret, I reckon. It's three boxes of machinery, and it's at the depot over in Flintville. That's about forty miles from here."

"I know. I rode through the place a couple of days ago. That's where the railroad ends." Jim met the man's curious eyes. "How much would the three boxes weigh?"

"Around four hundred pounds," Trautner said. "Say, what're you driving at?"

"Just a minute." Jim made a few calculations in his mind. "If he's filling his wagon with other shipments, that ought to cost you around six dollars, laid down at your door."

Trautner smiled grimly. "I could've told you that, without going all around the barn about it. It ought to be back here by Thursday, too, but it won't. I'll be lucky if I get it in ten days."

"Wagon trouble?"

"Sure. Wagon trouble, and just plain don't-give-a-damn." It was easy to see that Trautner had been fretting about this for a long time, and couldn't help blowing off now that he had someone to talk to. "Not only that, it'll cost me twenty-five dollars." He got control of his temper. "What's it to you, stranger? You don't give a hang how much I pay for my hauling."

"Maybe I do," Jim said. "After all, hauling's my business, or it was, up in Colorado." He held out his hand. "I'm Jim Dixon, Mr. Trautner. Thanks for the information."

The merchant shook his hand hesitantly. "Now don't get the idea I'm taking sides," he said uncomfortably.

"Don't worry," Jim reassured him. "There's only one side around here. I've found that out." He grinned. "Monte Lyman's side."

He left the store, reaching automatically for tobacco which wasn't there. No wonder Monte Lyman went to such lengths to keep the town afraid of him. Between his high rates and

his poor service he wouldn't stay in business a week if anyone dared patronize another outfit. Well, maybe Monte didn't care especially. Maybe his ranch and other interests were more important and the freightyard was just a sideline.

Across the street, the town marshal came out of his office and stood for a moment on the edge of the sidewalk, looking up the street. Jim left the front of the hardware store and angled across the street toward him. Perhaps the marshal held the key to the situation. Surely Monte Lyman couldn't buffalo a whole town without the law knowing something about it.

The marshal saw him coming and turned to face him squarely, his arms dropping to his sides in the same oddly familiar way that Jim had noticed the night before. Jim lifted a hand in greeting.

"Morning, Marshal."

"Good morning," Ellis said coldly, and frowned at Jim's scars. "I hear it didn't take you long to get into trouble, Dixon."

"No trouble," Jim said, wondering just how much Ellis knew about what had happened. "I suppose Jake Lyman told you his side of the affair." He grinned. "The way he'd tell it, I'm surprised you didn't try to throw me in jail."

The marshal touched the tip of his mustache with the fingers of his left hand. "If I thought you belonged in jail you'd be there."

"Why sure, Marshal," Jim said, a little surprised at the man's arrogance, but not wanting to provoke an argument. He smiled. "Since I'm not, could I see you in your office for a minute?"

"Come in." Ellis opened the door and motioned for Jim to enter, then followed him in and sat down behind a desk. "What's on your mind, Dixon? If it's about your fight with Jake Lyman, I'd advise you to forget it. As long as Jake's willing to let it drop, it's none of my business."

Jim studied the man a moment, wondering what it was

about his looks that didn't inspire confidence. His eyes were steady enough, he decided, but there might be a little weakness in the chin.

"Suppose I told you that Jake didn't let it drop? Suppose I said he got help and came back in the middle of the night?"

The marshal frowned. "Is that what you're saying, Dixon? Because if it is, I'd want you to give me some proof. You can't expect me to take the word of a stranger against one of our leading citizens."

"No. I suppose not." Jim glanced around the little office, with its faded *Wanted* dodgers tacked to the wall, a gun rack holding two carbines and a double-barreled shotgun, and a newspaper clipping hanging from a nail. From the headline, it was an article about Johnny Dohrmann, whom Jim had seen once on a trip to Denver. He realized then what it was about Ellis' mannerisms that had looked familiar. Either consciously or by accident, the marshal was imitating the famous lawman. Jim wondered if Ellis could match Dohrmann in anything besides appearance.

The marshal stirred restlessly. "All right, Dixon, if you've got something to say, say it. I've got things to 'tend to."

"Sure, Marshal." Jim turned away from the clipping and met Ellis' eyes. "Like you say, you'd want some proof." He shrugged. "Let's forget I even mentioned it. I just wanted to find out how things stood." He put a hand on the door-knob. "Reckon I'd better be getting back to the livery stable. Mrs. Carter likely has things to do."

"You're not planning on working over there steady, are you?" the marshal asked sharply.

"No," Jim said. "I just told her I'd stick around until her husband gets back."

The marshal shook his head. "That might be a long time, Dixon. If I were you I'd saddle up and ride out. Hanging around here will just get you into trouble."

"With you, Marshal? Is that what you mean?"

Ellis frowned. "Not with me, damn it. Maybe you don't

know it, but you picked the wrong man to have a fight with. The Lymans are pretty important people around here."

"I know. They told me so themselves," Jim said dryly. "Tell me, Marshal, who is it you're working for—Monte Lyman or the town of Cottonwood?"

"Damn you, Dixon, that's a hell of a thing to ask!"

Jim grinned. "Maybe it's a hell of a thing to answer, too. Is that what you mean?"

The marshal's lips twitched. "Watch your step, Dixon. I'm a man that can't be pushed too far."

"I know just what you mean, Marshal. Fact is, I feel the same way myself." He opened the door. "Well, if you want me for anything, I'll be over at the livery stable. I don't reckon it'll hurt me any to wait until Carter comes back."

The marshal didn't answer, and Jim stepped out onto the sidewalk. Across the street, a horse was tied at the hitching rail in front of the stable, a big gray stallion with a fancy saddle and flashing silver ornaments on the bridle. As he headed across the road he was remembering that Monte Lyman had been riding just such a horse in the middle of the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

MONTE LYMAN'S back was toward the street, but he turned his head as Jim entered the barn, then whirled around to face the door, his hand falling to his gun. From his obvious surprise, it was clear that he had taken it for granted that Jim had left the country.

Fortunately, Jim had been forewarned by seeing Monte's horse tied at the rail, otherwise his reaction to Monte's gesture might have resulted in gunplay, an eventuality which would have been complicated by the fact that Ellen Carter

was almost directly in line behind Monte. Since Jim had anticipated Monte's move, he was careful to keep his hand away from his gun, and he pretended not to notice Monte's action, or even to recognize the man.

"Sorry I took so long, Mrs. Carter," he said. "I stopped to talk to a couple of men."

"It's all right," Ellen said, stepping out from in back of Monte. "This is Mr. Lyman, Mr. Dixon. It was his brother that you . . ."

She hesitated, and Jim saved her the embarrassment of continuing by turning toward Monte and holding out his hand.

"I'm sorry about that little fracas with Jake, Mr. Lyman. There was no sense in our fighting. I guess both of us were a little touchy last night."

Monte was trying to compose his features, and Jim could see that he was having trouble figuring what was going on. He seemed reluctant to take his hand any distance from his gun, and when he did hold it out for Jim's handshake, he withdrew it almost immediately.

"Jake's old enough to settle his own arguments," he said heavily. His left hand was fumbling with the front of his coat, and Jim noticed that there was a button missing, which seemed odd, since it appeared to be the same coat he had been wearing last night, and Jim hadn't noticed anything wrong with it then.

It was a seemingly insignificant thing, but Jim decided to see what he could do with it. He pointed at the dangling thread.

"Looks like you've had an accident, Mr. Lyman."

Monte gestured impatiently. "It's just a button missing. I'll get another one at the mercantile."

"I'm not so sure about that," Jim said. "That's a pretty fancy outfit, and buttons like those aren't easy to find." He leaned forward to examine one of the remaining buttons, enjoying Monte's patent displeasure.

"You know, there's just a chance I might have one like that myself. Stick around a minute and I'll see."

"Forget it," Monte said, so sharply that Ellen looked at him in surprise, but Jim was already heading for the door to the bedroom, and he didn't hesitate. He was remembering how his fingers had clutched at Monte's coat just before he had passed out.

The button was there, all right, in with the other litter on the floor. He picked it up and grinned down at it, then hurried out into the barn.

Monte scowled at him, and there was a puzzled look on Ellen's face, but Jim acted as though they would be delighted with his find. He moved up in front of Monte and held the button alongside one of the others. "I thought so," he said. "It's a perfect match." He grinned. "I was right about it being expensive, too."

Monte grabbed the button out of his hand and shoved it in one of his pockets. "All right, Dixon, so it's expensive." He reached in his pocket and held out a dollar. "I reckon this ought to cover it."

Jim shook his head. "Like I said, Mr. Lyman, a button like that is worth money. That one set me back about twenty dollars, besides causing me a lot of trouble." He met Monte's eyes squarely. "The trouble part is something I'll have to charge off to experience, but I can't afford to lose money on the deal."

Ellen had been listening quietly, but now she spoke.

"Surely you're joking, Mr. Dixon. No ordinary button could be worth twenty dollars."

"No ma'am," Jim admitted, "But this isn't an ordinary button." He looked at Monte. "How about it, Mr. Lyman? Wouldn't you say the price was right?"

Monte's face reddened, but he jammed his hand in his pocket again and handed over two tens. His lips twisted. "Since you've got such a collection of buttons, I'll know where

to send my friend. One of my men was looking for one just yesterday. Fellow by the name of Zale."

"Send him around," Jim said. "Likely I've got something he can use too." He turned toward the stall. "Well, I've got work to do."

Monte didn't answer, and he and Ellen moved out into the street. A moment later Jim heard a horse taking off at a gallop, and he grinned wryly. Monte had been caught off guard for at least once in his life, but the next time wouldn't be so easy.

He led a horse out of the stalls and found Ellen Carter watching him.

"What was all that talk about the button, Mr. Dixon?" she asked. "If it was a joke, I don't think Mr. Lyman appreciated it."

Jim shrugged. "Some men just don't have any sense of humor, ma'am. Maybe Mr. Lyman is one of them." He nodded toward the stalls. "These horses, are they all yours, or are you just stabling them for someone?"

"There's some of each. The buckskin you're holding belongs to Lucky Odom, who owns the saloon." She frowned. "I suppose if you don't want to tell me what's going on here, there's no way I can force you to."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Mrs. Carter. You know how it is with us men. We're always up to some fool thing or other. It's nothing for you to concern yourself about."

She sighed. "All right, then. Anyway, what I wanted to tell you is that you needn't feel obligated to stay on here any longer. I appreciate your offer of help, but you probably have other things to do."

"You mean I'm fired, ma'am? Did I do something wrong?"

"Damn it," she said. "You know that isn't what I meant." She moved a step closer and looked at him across the back of the buckskin.

"What're you up to, Mr. Dixon? You get involved in a fight as soon as you hit town, then you offer to help me out

because I have no one to look after the stable, and now there's this thing about the button. Then when I try to release you from your promise, you pretend to think I'm firing you." She shook her head. "What kind of a man are you, anyway?"

Jim took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "I reckon I'm just an ordinary run-of-the-mill feller," he said. "Just a man that got tired of the long winters up north and started looking for a warmer place where there was room for a good freighting outfit." He scratched the bristles on his chin. "I'm not much uglier than average, ma'am, right after a barber gets through working on me. Maybe if you don't fire me you'll see for yourself one of these days, now that I've got the price of a haircut." He grinned. "So help me, ma'am, until I sold that button I didn't have a cent on me."

She smiled, and there was a twinkle in her eye. "You win, Mr. Dixon. I don't know what you're doing here, but if you want to stay on, you know I'll be glad to have you—until Mr. Carter comes back, that is."

She left then, and Jim watched her cross the street, the early morning breeze whipping her dress around her slim legs. When she passed out of his range of vision he let out his breath in a sigh. Until her husband came back. That's what she had said, and that was how it had to be. He tied the buckskin to a post and got back to work, but it was some time before he managed to get his mind away from Ellen and back on Monte Lyman.

When Monte left the livery stable he jabbed his spurs into the stallion's flanks and headed back toward his ranch, the Rocking L. It had been his intention to drop by the freighting office, but his encounter with Jim Dixon had changed his plans, and had also left him with a taste in his mouth as bitter as gall. To add to his frustration, he was

sure that Jake would remind him that he, Jake, had urged him to kill Dixon last night on the road.

Well, maybe he should have, but that had its disadvantages too. Of course when he had first come to Cottonwood it had been necessary and desirable to eliminate a few men who had tried to stand in his way; but for over a year now, things had run along pretty smoothly, and no killings had been necessary. The townsmen realized that the power was still there if he ever had to use it, and they were careful not to step out of line, which was the way he wanted it.

He swore savagely, and lashed the stallion with the ends of his reins. Damn that stupid brother of his anyway! Actually, Jake was a lot dumber than Dummy Zale. If he had only used some common sense he could have avoided that fight last night, and Dixon would have ridden out by now. And if he had had to fight someone, why did it have to be a man like Dixon, who obviously wasn't the kind to be scared out of town by a bad beating and a warning?

As a rule, Monte managed to control his emotions, having learned long since that the man who got places was the one who used his head instead of his fists; and by the time he was halfway to the ranch he was able to study the situation objectively and consider the possibilities.

Of course there was the simple solution—the one Jake would understand—just kill Dixon and be done with it. The town had sat still for killings before, and would do it again, especially since there was no organized group to offer any resistance. In fact, there was no one with guts enough to speak up, except that old bantam rooster Luke Turner, who didn't carry any weight anyway.

However he discarded that idea immediately. Killing Dixon might be all right with most of the townsfolk, but Ellen Carter would have no use for a man who was responsible for such violence, and it was important that he avoid offending her, if at all possible.

As it always did, thinking of Ellen Carter stirred his

emotions in more ways than one. It bothered him that he should have to walk lightly where Ellen was concerned, but on the other hand he was determined to have her for himself, and he knew she couldn't be had like one of the girls over at the Happy Day. Of course she was married, too, but that didn't give him any reason for worrying. Her husband was a no good woman-chaser, and probably wouldn't ever show up in Cottonwood again. If he did, he could be disposed of easily enough, or bought off.

No, it was Ellen herself who was the problem. She had made a bad bargain in marrying Victor Carter, but she wouldn't be the one to back out of it, and even if she were to become a widow, she'd have to be handled with kid gloves. The man she might consider marrying would have to be someone she respected, someone she thought would supply all the qualities that her first husband lacked.

Monte smiled coldly. There were ways of doing it, all right. All he had to do was keep her from realizing his intentions. He would let her run the livery stable, and even give her some help. Then, when she had come to trust him and depend on him, he'd see to it that she received word of her husband's death—in fact he'd even arrange the death if necessary. After that it would be easy. A single woman didn't have a chance out in his part of the country, and she would be so dependent on him, that marrying him would seem the natural thing to do.

He came to the Rocking L turn-off and left the main road. After a bit he reached the ranch headquarters, which consisted of a low rambling house and a number of other buildings, all of them made of adobe except for one of the sheds, which was made of scrap lumber.

Jake was sitting on the edge of the veranda, and he looked up as though he expected to be upbraided, but Monte had gotten over his rage, and asked calmly, "Did everybody else ride out?"

Jake nodded, and got to his feet. "All except the cook

and Dummy Zale." He frowned. "The Dummy's up in the hayloft fooling around with that broken-winged quail he makes such a fuss over. Dammit Monte, there's something haywire with that man. I wish you'd get rid of him."

"Because he likes to patch up crippled animals?" Monte demanded. He stepped out of the saddle. "There's nothing wrong with Dummy, nothing for you to worry about, that is. One thing about him, I know I can trust him. Since I saved his life that time he figures I'm God Almighty." He made an impatient gesture, irritated with himself for having bothered to explain. "Forget about Zale. There's something more important to think about." He lowered his voice. "You remember Ace Conroy?"

Jake grinned. "Sure I do. I saw him kill them two punchers over at Flintville last month. Why?"

"He hangs out over at Dutch's Deadfall, down south of here. I want you to find him."

"Suppose I do?" Jake demanded. "What should I say you want him for?"

"You don't have to say," Monte said flatly. "Just tell him there's a job for him, the kind of job he likes. Tell him that someone will meet him in back of the Happy Day tomorrow night at eight o'clock." He took a roll of bills out of his pocket and peeled off three or four. "Give him these so he'll know you mean business."

Jake started to say something, but Monte stopped him with a glance.

"Don't let anyone see you talking to him if you can help it. Whatever you do, don't mention any names. I don't imagine Conroy knows you by sight, but if he does, just forget the whole thing and come back."

"All right." Jake started toward the corral, then turned back.

"What's it all about, Monte? What's the idea of hiring Ace Conroy?"

Monte's lips curled in a bitter grin.

"I'll give you a hint, Jake. Dixon didn't take my advice last night. He rode back to Cottonwood."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "Dammit, I told you—"

Monte went into the house without answering. Jake stared at the closed door for a moment, then turned toward the corral. A little later he rode out and headed the opposite direction from Cottonwood.

Although Jim had gotten the best of Monte in their brief verbal encounter, it gave him no lasting satisfaction. This was only a minor skirmish, not a real battle, and his temporary advantage was no excuse to pat himself on the back. No doubt Monte had based his strategy on the assumption that Jim would have left town, and finding him still there had upset his plans for a moment. However, Monte was a clever man, otherwise he wouldn't have been able to get Cottonwood in his power; and being clever, he could revise his plans to meet the new situation.

As he worked, Jim gave the matter considerable thought. On the face of it, there was no reason why Monte should give a hang what happened to the livery stable. It was a small enterprise at best, and if he wanted to get control of it all he had to do was spread the word around that it wouldn't be healthy to patronize the place.

But Monte hadn't shown any inclination to use rough tactics on the Carters. Instead, he had permitted his brother to help Mrs. Carter out, at least to the extent of keeping the place going.

If Monte didn't want the business, what did he want? The answer wasn't hard to figure. He wanted Ellen. Wanted her bad enough to go to a lot of trouble to disguise his intentions.

Jim was raking muck out of one of the stalls when he reached this conclusion, and he yanked so hard on the rake that the handle broke. This relieved his tension, and he grinned wryly. He'd better come out of the clouds and keep

his eyes open for whatever Monte was thinking of to get even with him for ignoring his warning.

Nothing happened during the remainder of the day, and by sunset he had succeeded in putting the barn into some kind of order: straightening out tangled harnesses, repairing torn grain sacks, and brushing down horses that had not felt the bite of a currycomb for many days.

He had met several of the townsmen, too; Lucky Odom, who ran the Happy Day, and who came in for his buckskin just after noon and spoke to him politely enough, but showed plainly that he didn't want to get friendly; the big round-shouldered man he had seen in front of the hotel, whose name was Ben Macey; and Doc Bowles, a smallish man with keen gray eyes, who took his buggy to go out to some nester's shack where he expected to deliver a baby.

They had different ways of showing how they felt, but they all looked at Jim peculiarly, as though they were trying to figure out what kind of a fool he was to stand up against the Lymans.

Doc Bowles even put it into words. He studied Jim for a moment, then said bluntly, "I presume you know what they're all saying, Dixon, that you won't last the week out." He smiled when he said it, and Jim felt no resentment. "They're even offering odds on it over at the saloon."

Jim grinned. "Might be a chance for someone to pick up some easy money, Doctor. They were betting the same way up in Gunnison once and I fooled 'em."

The doctor chuckled. "Maybe you're right at that. At least the chances would be better than mine of getting paid by this nester." He got into his buggy and took the lines Jim handed him. "Well, be a little careful, young man. I'm just a country doctor, and I can't do much for a man if he's too bad off."

"I'll remember that, Doctor."

Jim followed the buggy to the door, and was surprised to see how dark it had gotten already. It struck him then that

he was hungry, and he washed up and went across to the cafe, choosing a seat from which he could watch the door of the livery stable.

Afterwards, when he had paid for his supper and enough extra to cover his breakfast, he headed for the Happy Day, not so much because he was thirsty as to demonstrate that he intended to move about as he chose.

There were several horses in front of the saloon, and at least two of them wore the Rocking L brand, which he now knew was Monte Lyman's. Inside, two of the half dozen patrons were obviously punchers, so he felt sure that they were Rocking L men. They looked at him closely, but no one said anything as he took a place at the bar and ordered a glass of whiskey. He drank it slowly, grimly aware of the tense stillness, then nodded at Odom and left.

Out in the street again he reached for his tobacco and remembered that he didn't have any, so he headed for the mercantile.

To get there he had to pass the marshal's office, and Steve Ellis was standing in the doorway, sucking on a thin cigar. He took the cigar out of his mouth and said with feeling, "You've still got time to change your mind, Dixon. It's a nice night for riding."

Jim glanced at the sky. "So it is, Marshal," he agreed. "A nice night for sleeping, too, and I've got some catching up to do."

The marshal shrugged. "It's your problem, Dixon. At least for now."

"That's a fact," Jim said, and went on to the mercantile. A dried-up little man hurried up to wait on him, presumably Fred Hillegoss, as that was the name on the window. He had already started to close up, so Jim got his tobacco and left promptly.

Everything was quiet at the stable, and he stood in the doorway and watched the sunset fade as he smoked his cigarette. Ben Macey came out of the hotel and lit the

lantern again, and a little later Steve Ellis set the tar barrel to flickering. Down beyond the business section, lamps began to glow in the scattering of houses. Jim tried to decide which one would be Ellen Carter's, but he couldn't be sure. Anyway, that was the wrong thing to think about, so he forced himself to stop it, and looked instead at the sky, thinking how different it seemed tonight with the stars shining, from the night before, when it had been stormy.

Across the street the two Rocking L cowpokes came out of the saloon and headed out of town, and Jim closed the big door and groped his way to the bedroom, where he lit the lantern and looked around at the dirty room. He hadn't found time today to clean it up, but he hoped to get at it tomorrow, unless, he reminded himself, something went wrong tonight.

To help make sure that nothing did go wrong, he hung a blanket over the window, which was too warped to be opened, and bolted the bedroom door. This didn't quite satisfy him, so he balanced a chair against the door in such a way that it would fall over and awaken him if the door was jarred.

With this taken care of he stripped to his underwear and put out the lantern.

Sleep came quickly, and almost before he knew it, it was daylight again. The chair was still leaning against the door, and he felt a little foolish for having been so cautious, but a little grateful, too, that nothing had happened. He got out of the bunk, only a trace of stiffness remaining to bother him, and even managed to shave without reopening any cuts.

Madden served him his breakfast without comment, and he returned to the livery stable and got busy with his chores, afterward finding time to sweep out the bedroom and clean up the mess left by Jake. He had supper at the cafe, and and went back to stand in the doorway of the barn and watch the day fade, hoping secretly that Ellen would drop

in. She didn't, and at about nine o'clock he crossed to the Happy Day for his nightly drink.

This time there were no Rocking L horses at the hitching post, and the only customer in the saloon was Simon Trautner. Trautner was talking to Odom across the bar, and both men looked up as Jim pushed through the bat-wings. They nodded, and Odom said, "Evening, Dixon," but there was no mistaking their uneasiness, and Trautner looked away quickly without speaking.

A little annoyed, Jim took a position at the far end of the bar, and tossed a silver dollar on the damp wood. Odom set a glass in front of him and filled it, and while he was getting Jim's change the bat-wings opened again and a stranger came in.

The stranger was a hawk-faced man who might have passed as a puncher at first glance, but Jim noticed the way his gun was hung, and paid particular attention to his hands, which were smooth and soft, without the scars and callouses of a working cowboy.

Having noticed this, Jim carefully ignored the man. Obviously he was a gunslinger, but he was a stranger, and no concern of Jim's.

The newcomer paused just inside the bat-wings for several seconds, then moved over near where Jim was standing.

"Dixon?" he asked. "Jim Dixon?"

Immediately suspicious, since he was sure he had never seen the man before, Jim turned to face him, the glass of untasted whiskey in his left hand.

"That's my name, stranger," he said. "But I don't remember meeting you anywhere before."

There was an unpleasant grin on the man's sharp face. "No reason you should, Dixon. The only reason I recognized you, they told me what you'd look like."

"They? Who told you?"

"What a question," the stranger said. "You know who I

mean, Harper and Townsend." His lips curled. "I suppose you're going to claim you never heard of 'em. They told me you would."

Jim stared at the man, wondering what he was working up to, and pretty sure that he knew. The names Harper and Townsend held no meaning, but there was undoubtedly some reason for bringing them into the conversation.

Odom and the hardware man were silent now, and the stranger's voice seemed louder than necessary as he said, "All right, Dixon, they didn't say you had to remember their names. They just told me either to get the money or bring you back. Take your choice."

What the man had said didn't make any sense at all, but the look in his eyes did, and the way his hand hovered above the butt of his six-gun. Someone had sent him, all right, but not to get any money. Could this be Monte Lyman's way of getting back at him? It really didn't make any difference at the moment. Whoever was in back of it had put Jim in a spot where he had little to choose between. He could argue with the man, thus giving Odom and Trautner the impression that there was some basis for his insinuations, or he could refuse to go along, and face an almost certain bullet.

It was a situation requiring a quick decision, and Jim made one.

"You're a liar," he said flatly. "You never heard of—"

Obviously the man had expected something else. Surprise held him motionless for a second, then his hand clawed at his gun.

Jim pitched the full glass of whiskey at the man's gun and the liquor splattered over the fast-moving hand. It was just unexpected enough to break the smoothness of his draw, and in the half-second of grace Jim got his own gun out and pulled the trigger.

The stranger's gun had started to come up, but his finger tightened on the trigger too soon and the bullet buried itself

in the floor. His knees buckled, and he took one falling step and crashed into the bar.

It had happened so rapidly that Odom and Trautner seemed unable for a moment to grasp what they had seen. Then their expressions changed, and Trautner said surprisedly, "You've killed him!"

Jim nodded. "You men heard the whole thing. So far as I know, there's no such people as Harper and Townsend. This man was a gunny, and somebody hired him to kill me." His lips thinned. "Monte Lyman, likely enough. He said he'd do it if I came back."

As soon as the words were out, he realized his mistake. These two men were his only witnesses, and they wouldn't testify to anything that Monte Lyman didn't like. That much was apparent from the sudden fear on their faces.

Out on the sidewalk there was the clatter of boots, and Marshal Ellis burst through the batwings, his gun in his hand.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MARSHAL glanced quickly at the dead man, then at Jim's gun, which was still in his hand. He seemed about to lift the muzzle of his own gun, but apparently he wasn't quite sure what Jim would do, for he holstered it instead. Ignoring Jim for a moment, he bent down and rolled the gunman on his back.

If he recognized him, he gave no indication. After a brief look he straightened up and faced Jim along the bar.

"Tell me about it, Dixon. What happened?"

Jim now holstered his gun too, and said quietly, "This man came in here with some kind of cock-and-bull story about two men he called Harper and Townsend. He claimed I was supposed to give him some money or he'd take me

back with him. When I objected, he went for his gun. I was lucky enough to outdraw him."

"As simple as that," the marshal said. He nodded toward the corpse. "Who was he, Dixon?"

"You tell me," Jim said. "I never saw him before."

"No?" The marshal looked at Jim with raised eyebrows, then turned toward the other two men. By now there were several onlookers in the saloon, drawn by the sound of gunfire, but they were standing well away from Jim and the marshal.

"How about it, Trautner, what can you tell me about it?"

Trautner rubbed his cheek nervously.

"It's pretty much what you've already heard, Marshal. This stranger—" He pointed at the body. "—he came in and said he was looking for Jim Dixon, that two men had sent him to get some money. I think their names were Harper and Townsend, like Dixon said. Anyway, Dixon called him a liar, and the next thing I knew, the stranger was dead."

"Which one of them went for his gun first, Dixon or the stranger?"

Trautner looked at Jim a second, then let his eyes fall. "I can't tell you that, Marshal. I turned to say something to Odom, and it happened while I wasn't looking."

Jim stiffened. "Wait a minute, Trautner. You saw the whole thing. You know he grabbed for his gun first. Good Lord, man, speak up!"

Trautner's face flushed, but he shook his head. "That's all I saw, no matter what you think. You can ask Odom if you want to. Maybe he saw something."

"Not me," Odom said quickly. "I was looking at Trautner when the shooting started."

"Well, Dixon?" The marshal's voice was silky smooth.

"Dammit, Marshal," Jim exploded. "Can't you see what's going on here? Both of these men know what happened, but they're afraid to tell the truth. Likely that's partly my fault for suggesting that Monte Lyman might have sent him."

The marshal frowned ominously. "Don't make it any worse than it is by dragging Lyman into it. I haven't seen him or any of his crew in town since yesterday."

"That doesn't mean he couldn't have hired this gunslinger to trick me into a showdown." Jim's voice softened as his temper rose. "Look at the man, Marshal. He's got gunhawk written all over him."

"All the more reason to think you drew first," the marshal said. He let his hand fall close to his gun. "We could talk all night and not settle anything, but we're not going to. I'm locking you up until I find out a little more about what happened." He held out his left hand. "I'll take your gun, Dixon."

"Start taking," Jim said flatly. "That's the only way you'll get it."

There was a stir in the group by the door as the marshal pondered Jim's reply. Jim could see the indecision in the lawman's eyes, but he knew there could be only one outcome. A man in Ellis' position didn't dare back down or he was finished. On the other hand, Jim was determined not to be thrown into jail in this town which was ruled by Monte Lyman.

The others in the room seemed to realize this too, and they became deathly quiet. Then suddenly there was a commotion and Luke Turner said crossly, "Let me through here, you danged fools, before them fellers start blasting each other off the map." He burst through the group and stomped over to stand directly between Jim and the marshal. His back was toward Jim, and he said sharply, "You always was a fool, Ellis, but you're breaking your own record tonight. What's the idea of making out like you was going to jail this man? He ain't broken any laws."

Ellis was angry, but Jim thought he might be a little relieved too. "What're you driving at, Luke? He just killed a man." He pointed at the body.

"Sure he did," Luke said testily. "And if he hadn't, it

would've been *him* lying there." He poked a finger in the marshal's chest. "I saw the whole thing through the window. Conroy went for his gun, and this feller beat him to the draw." He turned to give Jim a warning glance, then looked back at the marshal.

"Maybe you don't even know who that man was, Marshal, but I do. Ace Conroy, one of the orneriest bushwhackers in the territory." He cackled derisively. "Seems to me if I was a lawdog I'd know enough to recognize a skunk like that when I saw one, dead or alive."

The marshal jammed his gun back in the holster as though he would prefer to be ramming it down Luke's throat. He whirled to face Trautner and Odom. "Damn it, why didn't you—"

"Don't try passing it off on them," Luke said. "Like they told you, they weren't watching at the time."

Jim stared at the old man in surprise, but didn't interrupt. It was only a miracle that had put Luke at the window at just the right time, and Jim wasn't in any position to question miracles. He looked up in time to see the relieved expressions on Trautner's and Odom's faces, and then the marshal said grudgingly, "All right, Dixon, it looks like there's been a mistake here."

Jim nodded. "It does at that, doesn't it Marshal?" He held out his hand to Luke.

"Reckon I owe you a lot for what you just did. I'll be looking for a chance to pay you back sometime."

"Sometime hell!" Luke snorted. "I'll settle for a drink right now."

"Fair enough," Jim said, grinning. "Name your poison."

"Odom knows," Luke said, and stepped up to the bar.

The saloon man nodded and reached for a bottle. "This one's on the house, gentlemen." He looked at Jim guiltily. "Sorry I couldn't do you any good, mister, but I can't tell about something I didn't see."

"Forget it." Jim tossed a dollar on the bar. "I'll pay for

our drinks. Mr. Big might not like it if he heard you'd treated me."

"That's telling him, by grab!" Luke said, and downed his drink in one gulp. "Much obliged, young feller. I'll see you around."

"Hold on," Jim said. "I'm leaving too." He fell in beside the old man, and they moved away from the bar, stepping aside to avoid two men who were carrying the dead gunman out the door under the marshal's supervision.

Outside, Jim laid a hand on Luke's shoulder.

"Saving my neck in there won't win you any prizes from Monte Lyman," he said. "He's liable to do something about it, even if you aren't wearing a gun."

"Reckon he might try," Luke admitted, and spat in the dust. "But that's something I'll worry about when it happens." He grinned. "Hell, if I was to waste a lot of time worrying about all the things that never happen, I'd have to cut down on my drinking." He started to leave, but Jim grabbed his arm.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Maybe *you* won't worry, but I will. I'm more or less responsible for you, now that you've got yourself tangled up in my troubles. I've got an idea. Why don't you move over to the livery stable? There's plenty of room for both of us, and they won't be able to catch us off guard so easy."

Luke shrugged. "Why not? I've got nobody waiting up for me at home. Come to think of it, I've got no home for that matter." He stepped off the walk and headed toward the livery, Jim at his shoulder. Ben Macey was in the doorway of the hotel, and to Jim's surprise he nodded and wished them a good night.

Something had been troubling Jim, and when they reached the doorway of the stable he laid a hand on Luke's shoulder.

"Tell me something, Luke. If you were at the window, how come you weren't the first one in the saloon?"

The old man grinned, his eyes shining in the glow from the hotel lantern.

"I'm glad it was you that asked that, instead of the marshal." He peered up and down the street, and lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. "I didn't miss it far, did I? Wasn't that about the way it happened?"

Jim let out a roar of laughter. "Why you lying old buzzard! You didn't even—"

"Not so loud," Luke cut in. "It got you loose, didn't it?"

"It sure did," Jim agreed. "But how come you sided with Trautner and Odom when they said they didn't see who drew first?"

The old man chuckled. "Suppose I'd called 'em a couple of liars? They would've put up an argument about me being at the window. The way it is, I backed them up and they can't make a liar out of me without admitting that they were lying too." He looked at Jim craftily. "Time you're as old as I am, son, you'll find out a slick tongue's almost as good as a fast gun."

"In that case," Jim said. "You're pretty well armed." He shook his head. "Puts me in mind of Collie Peterson, one of my drivers. He can talk a bronc into not bucking." He reached for the big door to close it, then hesitated. "Anything you want to get before we turn in?"

"Nope." Luke grinned. "I ain't in the habit of wearing silk nightshirts or anything."

Jim closed the door, and they went into the bedroom, where he lit the lantern. He pointed at the bunk. "You're welcome to sleep there if you want to. By tomorrow night we'll rig up another one."

Luke shook his head. "I'll take a chance on something I can't roll out of. Just give me a blanket and I'll do fine."

"Have it your own way," Jim said. "Here's the one Jake was using. I shook it out good, and hung it in the sun most of the day."

"Reckon I've slept under worse ones," Luke said. He took

a pipe out of his pocket and began tapping tobacco into it from a sack, his faded eyes on Jim's face. "Tell me something, son, how come you got mixed up in this fracas with the Lymans? Did you know them somewhere before?"

"No." Jim grinned wryly. "Until I brought my horse in here a couple of nights ago I'd never heard of Jake or his brother. I'm beginning to wish I still hadn't."

"Then damnit why don't you pull out while you're still able? Nobody said you had to stay."

Jim took his time answering. Why *did* he stay? As Luke had said, nobody was forcing him to. No one would thank him for it, either. Maybe the local citizens didn't like being under Lyman's thumb, but they were used to it now—the way a horse gets used to a poorly fitted collar—and they didn't want anyone to upset the balance, or make them aware of their own lack of courage.

He shook his head. "Reckon I got tossed off of too many broncs when I was young, Luke, and lit on my head. Anyway, I can't stomach the idea of being pushed around by a man like Monte Lyman."

Luke grinned. "By grannies I wish some of these fellers around Cottonwood had been throwed on their heads a little oftener then. Maybe they'd have gumption enough to get up on their hind legs."

"Don't be too hard on 'em," Jim said reasonably. "They likely aren't fighting men, and they have families to think about." He sat on the edge of the bunk and began pulling off his boots.

"Hogwash!" Luke said. "Having families is all the more reason to hold their heads up. Dammit boy, there's enough men in this town to run the Lymans clean out of the country, if they went at it the right way." He aimed the stem of his pipe at Jim like a gun. "Figure it this way. Monte's got about six punchers working for him at Rocking L, not counting Jake and Dummy Zale. Then there's Yance Burham, that runs the freight yard for him, and a couple of

no good drivers. Say maybe a dozen, counting himself. Hell, there's twice that many in town, if they was to pitch in together."

"Counting the marshal?"

Luke swore. "I reckon you'd have to count Steve Ellis with Lyman's bunch. I don't think he knows it yet himself, but he's Monte's man. Anyway, we'd still have 'em outnumbered."

"You're forgetting something, Luke. A dozen men who know what they're doing are better than two dozen without any leader." He peeled off his shirt and hung it on one of the corner posts of the bunk. "I've had a chance to size this town up, and it's in a bad way. They're all so used to being walked on that it'd take a charge of dynamite to get 'em off their rumps. Besides, it's none of my affair. All I'm looking for is a place to start a freighting outfit. I've got my wagons and horses following somewhere in back of me, with a couple of drivers at the reins—men who've worked for me a long time. They'll keep on my trail until I find a good place to set up in business again."

"Then I reckon you'll soon be moving out," Luke said dispiritedly. "It's a cinch there ain't room for another freight line around here."

Jim grinned. "No? Have you talked to anybody that's been using the one Monte runs?"

Luke paused in the act of unbuttoning his shirt. "You ain't figuring to run competition to Monte Lyman, are you? Dang it boy, even if you was to get your wagons here, nobody'd have guts enough to give you their business. For that matter, I doubt if your drivers could even get the wagons in, with Monte Lyman's men liable to spot 'em."

"Maybe not," Jim admitted. "But those two drivers of mine aren't exactly Sunday School teachers. Tex Forbes is plenty handy with a gun, and Collie Peterson won't be sitting back watching the clouds go by." He nodded thoughtfully. "Now that you put it up to me that way, maybe I'll

stay after all. I wouldn't want Lyman to get the idea he'd scared me out."

Luke didn't say anything, and Jim went on.

"Reckon that's what I'll do, so I'll send them a message on the next stage and let them know where I am. Now let's forget it and get some sleep." He blew out the lantern.

Across the room, the floor creaked as Luke lay down. Nothing was said for several minutes, then Luke said quietly, "You're a funny one, Dixon. You take fifteen minutes to convince me that there's nothing here worth staying for, and then you tell me you're fixing to stick around. It don't make sense." He was quiet again for a moment, then went on.

"Seems to me you changed your mind mighty quick like. I don't suppose Ellen Carter's got anything to do with this, has she?"

"Don't talk like a fool," Jim said, angry because the old man had put into words the thing he was trying to forget. "Mrs. Carter's a married woman."

Juke sniffed audibly. "That ain't going to stop Monte Lyman, son. I'm too old a goat to be fooled by his pussy-footing."

Jim stirred restlessly in the bunk. "You're imagining things, Luke. He wouldn't go that far, not with the girl's husband still alive."

He waited for an answer, but Luke was silent. After a bit he raised up on his elbow and stared into the darkness. "Well—would he?"

Luke chuckled softly. "How would I know? Besides, you said yourself that the girl's got nothing to do with it. Now keep still and let me get some sleep."

Jim did, and presently Luke began to snore, but sleep didn't come quickly to Jim. Was the old man right? Did Ellen Carter have something to do with his decision to stop at Cottonwood? He stared into the blackness, seeking an answer. Of course not, he told himself. It was just that he had found a town that could use his services, and the fact

that he didn't want to be told what to do. The girl had absolutely nothing to do with it.

Just the same, it was Ellen he dreamed about when he finally went to sleep, not freight wagons.

The light of morning made the problem seem simpler, and he found himself a little excited at the prospect of getting back into business again. Luke was already up when he awoke, and he could hear him moving around out in the barn.

Jim shaved and dressed, and while he was finishing up, Luke came back to the bedroom.

"So you finally woke up," he said. "I was beginning to think you'd sleep all day."

Jim glanced out the window, from which he had removed the covering. "What time is it, Luke, about five-thirty?"

"Or later," Luke said. "I've been up for two hours or more. Already watered the horses and filled their feed boxes."

"You didn't have to do that."

"Shucks. I'd rather be busy than standing around all day waiting for some folks to come alive." Luke gave Jim an inquiring glance. "Besides, you might be needing a good man when you start your business, and I've got to show you what I can do. I'm pretty good around horses."

"I thought you didn't think much of my idea," Jim said, grinning. "All right, if you've changed your mind, I'd better get that note off to my men. It'll take them a few days to get here."

"Go ahead and write it," Luke said. "I'm going over and get some breakfast."

He left the barn and started across the street, and Jim went back to the bedroom, got a piece of paper out of his warbag, and wrote a brief note to Collie Peterson, telling him and Tex Forbes his plans. As an afterthought he added a postscript. "There may be trouble down here. Don't come if you don't want to." That would bring them as nothing

else would, and it would put them on guard at the same time.

He folded the note and sealed it, then addressed it to Collie Peterson at Flintville. By the time he had finished, Luke was back at the barn, picking his teeth with a straw. He saw the letter Jim was holding, and nodded toward the hotel.

"Leave it with Ben Macey," he said. "It'll go out on the noon stage."

"Good enough," Jim said. "I'll drop it off on my way to breakfast. See you in half an hour."

It was his first visit to the hotel, and he looked around curiously, noting that the big uncarpeted lobby was neat and orderly, and the windows recently cleaned. A door opened at the back of the lobby and Ben Macey came into the room. "Something I can do for you, Dixon?"

Jim nodded. "I understand there's a stage out of here at noon."

"That's right." Macey looked at Jim speculatively. They were about the same height, but he still managed to give the impression of bending down. "You going out on it, Dixon? Can't say as I blame you much, after what happened last night."

"No. Just wanted to send this letter." Jim handed him the note to Collie Peterson, and a dollar with it. He looked around to make sure they were alone, and added quietly, "I'm interested in what you meant by that last remark. What made you think I might be pulling out?"

Macey frowned at the letter, then looked up at Jim and lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

"I guess there's no harm tellin' you, Dixon, as long as no one's in hearing distance. If it was me, and someone wanted to get rid of me bad enough to hire a man like Ace Conroy, I'd figure the smart thing to do was get moving."

"Then Conroy was a hired gunman?"

The hotelman nodded. "He worked for anyone who'd pay his price. At least that was his reputation."

"And last night—who was he working for then?"

Macey's face became as expressionless as though a mask had fallen in front of it. He dropped the dollar in his pocket and gave Jim the change. "All right, Dixon," he said. "This'll be there tomorrow." He turned as though the conversation were over, but Jim laid a hand on his shoulder

"Just a minute, Macey. I'm not done yet."

The hotel man turned to regard him with cold eyes. "What is it, Dixon? What's the matter?"

"That's what I want to know," Jim said shortly. "What is the matter? Isn't there anyone in town with guts enough to speak his mind? You look like an intelligent man, Macey, and you don't strike me as being a coward, but you're afraid to mention Monte Lyman's name. There's no one to hear you, and you can always deny telling me, but what's the reason?"

Macey moistened his lips nervously. "All right, Dixon, I'll answer your question, but don't ever mention it again. There's something the matter here, all right, and it's on account of Monte Lyman. We tried to buck him at first, and all we've got to show for it is three graves up on the hill behind town." His eyes hardened. "One of those graves belongs to my best friend, but I'm not going to do anything about it, not when the same thing could happen to me. Besides there's no law in town to back me up, just Steve Ellis, who's scared to belch unless Lyman tells him to."

Jim started to speak, but Macey stopped him with a gesture. "You asked me a question, Dixon. Now let me finish." He looked around at the lobby.

"Take this hotel. I opened it nine years ago, and it was beginning to pay off pretty well when Monte Lyman hit town. It still is, but Monte buffaloed me into taking him on as a partner, so now half the profits are his. It's the same with most of the other businesses in town. You don't see his name on the windows, but he's there, just the same."

He faced Jim defensively. "You asked for it, Dixon, and there's your answer. Likely you're going to ask why I don't do something about it. Dammit, don't you suppose I've thought about it a million times? I'm scared, that's all there is to it. I know what'll happen if I step out of line, and I'm too yellow to take a chance. Everybody else feels the same way. Don't try to change us. Just go away and leave us alone."

Jim shook his head. "That's something I can't do." He felt sorry for the man, but couldn't actually blame him. "Well, be sure that letter gets out on the stage. I'll see you later."

"You might."

Jim left the hotel and headed for the restaurant. Macey was right, in a way. An ordinary citizen wouldn't have a chance against a man like Monte Lyman, who would shoot first and ask questions afterward. Yet someone ought to stop him.

He reached the restaurant and went in. Sully Madden served him without trying to engage him in conversation, then went to wait on some other customers who were seated at the tables watching Jim curiously.

After a while the door opened and Monte Lyman came in, followed by Dummy Zale. Monte looked around the room quickly, then spotted Jim at the counter and came toward him, the big mute trailing along behind him, his eyes staring at Jim blankly. Something about his expression, or lack of it, gave Jim a creepy feeling, and he remembered what Monte had told Zale to do if Jim came back to town. Apparently the orders had been rescinded, for Zale made no attempt to lay hands on him.

Lyman took the seat at Jim's left, and Zale remained standing. The rancher nodded. "Been wanting to see you, Dixon," he said, making no effort to keep his voice low. "I understand you had a fight last night with someone named Ace Conroy, and you said something about me being

mixed up in it some way. I just want to tell you that I had nothing to do with it."

"All right, you've told me." Jim emptied his coffee cup deliberately and started to get to his feet.

"Wait a minute," Lyman said sharply. "That isn't all I came here for I've been thinking we might get together. You don't have any job to speak of, and I can always use a good man."

"To take over Conroy's work?" Jim asked. "No thanks." He moved around so that Dummy Zale wouldn't be at his back.

"Since you've said your piece, Lyman, I'll offer *you* a proposition. Do you want to hear it?"

"Go ahead," Monte said. "I never lost anything by listening."

The other patrons had all stopped eating to listen in on the conversation, and the room was oddly quiet without the clatter of knives and forks.

"It's about your freighting business," Jim said. "I've looked at some of your equipment, and it's in poor shape, so apparently you don't pay much attention to the outfit." He smiled. "In spite of what you may think, I'm in favor of settling things peacefully. You put a fair price on the freight yard and I'll take it off your hands."

Monte shook his head. "Not a chance, Dixon. I've built that up into a nice little moneymaker and I'm not selling out. Any objections?"

"Not a one." Jim raised his voice a trifle, so that no one could miss what he was going to say.

"Like you said, you've got a moneymaking proposition there, but it isn't because of your service. It's because you charge three or four times what the hauling's worth, and take your time about it. All right, I gave you a chance to sell out and you turned it down, but that doesn't mean you're going to keep riding the gravy train forever."

He looked around the room, noting the attention he was getting.

"I'm opening up a freighting outfit of my own, Lyman. I'll haul merchandise at a price men can afford to pay, and I'll give good service. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Monte stared at him calculatingly, and Dummy Zale looked at Monte as though expecting some orders, but there were none forthcoming, so Jim tossed a half dollar on the counter and walked out, leaving a stunned silence behind him.

CHAPTER SIX

AS SOON AS he had seen Jim enter the cafe, Luke Turner had moved back into the dimness of the livery stable and prepared to go to work. The years had made him a little wary of his countrymen, but he couldn't help liking the big man from Colorado, with his soft voice and ready smile, and a toughness which made him buck up against a man like Monte Lyman.

Luke was in one of the stalls, brushing down a bay mare belonging to Ben Macey, when a light footstep in the doorway made him look up, and he saw Ellen Carter enter the barn, her firm figure silhouetted against the sunlight behind her. Luke wasn't too old to appreciate a pretty girl, and he stared at her admiringly for a moment before moving out of the stall to face her.

"Morning, Mrs. Carter."

She seemed a little surprised, and looked around quickly before she smiled and acknowledged his greeting.

"Good morning, Luke." Her smile was a bit uncertain, and she added quickly, "I expected to find Mr. Dixon here. Is anything wrong?"

"Nope." Luke shook his head. "But just give us a little time and something will be." He looked at Ellen curiously. "I reckon you heard what happened at the saloon last night, how Ace Conroy tried to trick Dixon into getting shot, and ended up dead himself."

"No. I hadn't heard." She stiffened perceptibly, and Luke thought she lost a little color, but there was nothing in her tone to indicate that she was going to make a fuss about it, and Luke was pleased. It bore out the opinion he had already formed, that Ellen Carter had a lot of good sense as well as good looks.

"There's not much to tell," he said. "Somebody hired Conroy to work Dixon into a corner where he'd have to go for his gun, but Dixon was a little too fast for him."

"You mean he killed the man?" Ellen asked uneasily.

"It was either that or get killed himself," Luke said. "You wouldn't expect him to stand there and let the man shoot him."

"No. I wouldn't expect him to do that." Ellen was visibly shaken. "It just seems as if there should be some way of settling things without bloodshed."

"Not when that's what one of the fellers is aiming for," Luke said pointedly.

Ellen frowned. "You said the other man was called Ace Conroy. Isn't he the one who shot those two men over at Flintville a while back?"

Luke nodded.

"If Mr. Dixon just rode in from Colorado, it hardly seems as if they'd know each other this soon. Why in the world would Conroy want to kill him?"

"Don't ask me," Luke said. "Maybe Monte Lyman could tell you."

"Oh." A troubled frown darkened Ellen's face. "Then it must have something to do with that fight between Mr. Dixon and Jake." She shook her head unhappily. "I was afraid of something like this; that's why I told Mr. Dixon he was

free to ride on." She looked up at Luke sharply. "I think something happened even before last night—something that Mr. Dixon wouldn't talk about. Did he say anything to you?"

"Nopé." Luke grinned. "I reckon you mean those cuts and bruises on his face, but I don't know how he came to have 'em, and I ain't fixing to ask. I guess he'd tell me if he thought it was some of my business."

"And the same thing goes for me—is that what you mean?"

"It ain't what I said, ma'am." Luke's leathery face creased in a frown. "Tell me something, Mrs. Carter. What're you fixing to do?" He gestured toward the rows of stalls. "Even if nothing more happens you can't expect Dixon to run this place for you very long. He's got a notion to start a freighting outfit, and this ain't a thing to be run by a woman."

"I suppose it isn't," she admitted, with a trace of anger. "I suppose you're right about Mr. Dixon having more important things to do, too, but he knows he's free to leave anytime he wants to. Anyway, when my husband gets back—"

"Yes?" Luke saw the defiant expression in her eyes, and was sorry for her, but he couldn't help adding, "When'll that be, Mrs. Carter? You got any idea?"

She bit her lip. "All right, maybe I haven't. Maybe he won't come back at all. It's nobody's business but my own."

"Now don't get riled, girl," Luke said gruffly. "When you're as old as I am, you ain't got time to be polite. I reckon we both know you've seen the last of your husband. You might as well admit it and start doing something about it."

"Like what?" she asked, obviously puzzled.

"That's for you to decide," Luke said. "If you think your husband's as good-for-nothing as I do, you can get loose from him. There's laws to take care of things like that. After all, he's the one that ran out."

She shook her head soberly. "I've thought about it, Luke, but I can't do it. Maybe I'm foolish, but I married Victor for better or for worse, and I'm not going to be the one to break the agreement."

Luke didn't share her viewpoint, but he had to admire her honesty. "Like I said, you're the one that's got to do the deciding, only you can't go on the way you are, not with Monte Lyman watching you like a hawk waiting to pounce on a field mouse." He gave her a solemn look. "Dammit, girl, if you can't do anything else, sell this place and go back where you came from. Missouri, wasn't it?"

She didn't answer for a moment, and when she did her voice had a far-away quality, as though he had awakened some buried memory. "I won't do that, Luke, not go back to Missouri. I burned that bridge behind me." She smiled grimly. "There's no reason I can't sell the livery, though, if I can find anyone to buy it. Maybe Monte Lyman?"

"Maybe," Luke repeated without enthusiasm. Somehow he couldn't picture Monte as making a fair offer, especially if Monte was after Ellen rather than the livery stable. He was about to say so when he heard footsteps out in front and saw Jim Dixon coming into the barn, an odd smile on his face.

Jim's smile changed to one of genuine pleasure as he saw Ellen standing there watching him. For the moment he thought of her simply as a pretty and very desirable girl. Then he remembered how unattainable she was, and his smile faded.

"Good morning, Boss," he said lightly. "I see you've been talking to my new partner."

"Partner?" Ellen looked at him in confusion. "I'm afraid I never did get around to asking Luke why he was working here. Not that I have any objections," she added quickly, and turned to smile at the old man.

"He's just funning you, ma'am," Luke said. "After that

fracas over at the saloon, he got the idea I ought to be where he could watch me."

Jim saw the question in Ellen's eyes, and said quietly, "Apparently Luke already told you about the trouble last night. What he probably didn't mention was that except for him I'd likely either be in jail or on the dodge for shooting the marshal."

"Oh dry up," Luke said crossly. "I didn't do anything!"

Ellen let her glance shuttle between them, then looked at Jim with disconcerting intensity. "I don't suppose I'll ever hear the truth of it, but it doesn't make any difference. I've decided to sell the stable anyway. It's the only sensible thing to do."

This was one thing for which Jim had not been prepared, and he could only stare at her for a moment. Then he saw Luke looking uncomfortably at the ground, and had an inkling of what they had been talking about. "Hold on a minute, ma'am," he said. "Maybe Luke's been feeding you a lot of mullarkey. If you're thinking of selling the livery to get me out of a tight spot, you're making a big mistake."

"No," she said firmly. "It's no mistake. This is no business for a woman, and it's just going to cause more trouble. I'll sell out, and you can move on and find another town for your freighting business. That's what you want to do, isn't it?"

Jim's smile was a little strained. "Not any more, ma'am." He rubbed a hand across his lean jaw. "Anyway, if you think selling out will make me move on, you'd better change your mind." He gave Luke a wry grin, then looked back at Ellen.

"I just tried to buy the freight yard from Monte Lyman. When he wouldn't sell, I let it be known that I was going to give him a little competition."

"Good heavens!" Ellen exclaimed, and put a hand on his arm as though she meant to stop him physically. "You can't do that, Mr. Dixon. Nobody would dare give you any bus-

iness even if they wanted to. Not around here. Not if Monte Lyman told them not to."

Jim looked down at her hand on his sleeve and resisted an impulse to cover it with his own. "We'll see, ma'am. Maybe they aren't all as scared as we think. Maybe they'll let Monte Lyman know they can't be bossed around forever."

Apparently realizing that it was no use arguing, Ellen soon left, and Jim and Luke got busy cleaning out the stalls; the older man looking at Jim appraisingly from time to time, but keeping his thoughts to himself. When he finally did speak, which was while they were stopping for a mid-morning smoke, he said bluntly, "If you're making this fool play on account of the girl, you're wasting your time. She's bound to stick to that fiddle-footed husband of hers no matter what. Seems like she doesn't hold with divorce."

Jim thought about it a minute. "If that's the way she feels," he said, "I wouldn't want her any different."

Luke laughed softly. "I reckon not," he agreed, "but you sure as hell want her the way she is, and you ain't going to get her." He laid a hand on Jim's shoulder. "It's too bad, son, but that's the way it is."

"I've wanted things before and lived without 'em," Jim said. "I guess I can do it again." It wouldn't be easy, he added mentally, but at least he could see that nobody took advantage of her situation. Especially not Monte Lyman.

"Here comes Lucky Odom," Luke said mildly. "I wonder what he wants."

"His buckskin, most likely. He took it about this time yesterday."

But Odom didn't want his horse, or at least not for the usual reason. He stopped in front of the two men and stared at them nervously, finally letting his gaze come to rest on Jim.

"I'll be taking my horse, Dixon," he said. "Guess I might as well pay what I owe, too, if you'll tell me how much it is."

Jim frowned. "Is that the way they've been running this, Odom—collecting in the middle of the month?"

The saloon man didn't meet his eyes. "Not as a rule, I guess, but I'm giving my business to someone else and I want to straighten up my bill."

"I see," Jim said, and was pretty sure he did. "All right, Odom, how much have you been paying?"

"Five dollars a month."

Jim did a little calculating. "Then you owe me two dollars, provided you were paid to the end of last month. Does that sound right?"

"Sure." Odom handed over two silver dollars, and followed Jim into the barn. When his buckskin had been saddled and he was mounted, Jim didn't release the reins immediately.

"Mind telling me where you'll be stabling your horse after this?"

Odom shrugged. "There's no secret about it, I guess. They've got room for some horses up at the freight yard. Quite a bit cheaper, too," he added lamely. "A man's got to get by as cheap as he can."

"Sure."

Odom rode out of the barn, and Jim looked at Luke and grinned. "Monte doesn't let any grass grow under his feet, does he?"

"Nobody ever accused him of being a fool," Luke said. "This is just a start." He nodded toward the street. "Here comes Ben Macey already."

Jim followed the direction of his glance, and saw the hotel man's shape outlined against the store fronts. Without waiting for Macey to speak, he turned to Luke and said shortly, "Put the rigging on his horse, Luke; I want to talk to him a minute." He moved up to meet Macey just inside the doorway.

"That's what you're here for, isn't it, your horse?"

Macey nodded. "Like I told you, I'm yellow. Somebody else can be the hero if there's going to be one."

Strangely, Jim could feel no anger toward the man. It took

courage to stand up against a tyrant like Monte Lyman, and if Macey had ever possessed any courage it was now a thing of the past. He nodded. "Nobody's asking you to be a hero, friend. Just as a matter of information, though, how much is Lyman going to charge you?"

Macey's shoulders lifted and fell. "What's the difference? Even if he only charged a dollar a month to start with, he'd raise it to ten as soon as you're out of business." He took a purse out of his pocket. "Here's five dollars. I figure I owe for the whole month."

"I'm not one of the Lymans," Jim said, and handed him three dollars change. "All you pay for here is what you get." He moved aside to let Luke lead Macey's horse into the doorway, and watched the man mount. "One of these days," he said, "You'll find out you're making a mistake. When you do, let me know."

Macey looked at him grimly. "You won't be here, Dixon," he said, and rode off toward the other end of town.

By noon the only horses left were five belonging to the Carters, Jim's bay gelding, and one which was owned by Simon Trautner. Jim had already saddled Trautner's horse, and was waiting for the hardware man to come after it. When Trautner failed to show up, Jim led the horse out of its stall. "No point in waiting," he said dryly. "Either we're in business or we're out."

Luke didn't offer any comment, and Jim mounted the horse and rode out into the street. He dismounted in front of the hardware store and tied the horse at the rail, then entered the building.

Trautner stared at him from behind a counter. "Who told you I wanted my horse?" he demanded.

A little surprised, Jim studied the man's expression a moment, then said, "Hasn't Monte Lyman given you the word? No one's supposed to do business with Carter's place any more. You can rent a stall up at the freight yard."

"Dammit, Dixon, don't you think I know that already?"

Trautner came out from behind the counter, and Jim could see the signs of strain on his face.

"Let's get this straight, Trautner. Are you planning to ignore Lyman's orders?"

The hardware man smiled wryly. "That's what I've been telling myself, mister, but you sure aren't making it any easier, bringing my horse over and everything."

Jim shook his head. "I don't get it. The last time I saw you, you wouldn't even tell the marshal the truth to save my neck, and the time before that, you almost ran me out of the store for fear someone might get the idea you were treating me like a white man."

Trautner stared at him. "That's what's been bothering me, Dixon, that and what you said about there being only one side to be on in Cottonwood, Monte Lyman's side." He swore softly. "I wasn't always a coward, and I'm ashamed of myself for acting like one lately." He managed a weak grin. "After all, I've got no one depending on me like the others have. I don't know why I should be so blamed choosy about what happens to me."

"So you figure to show everyone how you feel by defying the Lymans." Jim held out his hand. "I'd be proud to shake your hand, Trautner. That took a lot of nerve."

Trautner gripped Jim's hand heartily. "Not so much nerve, Dixon. I just want to be able to look at myself in the mirror when I shave. Now take my horse back over there before I have a chance to change my mind."

Jim shook his head. "I'm not taking him back, friend. If you stood up to Lyman on a thing like this, he'd have to do something drastic to keep the others in line. It just isn't worth that much to keep one horse in the barn. You go ahead and stable him wherever Lyman says."

The merchant couldn't conceal his relief, but he said stubbornly, "I'm not bluffing, Dixon. I'm sick of Monte Lyman and his high-handed way of running things."

"Good," Jim said, and smiled. "Just keep getting sicker,

and one of these days you'll have your chance to get cured in a hurry, and it won't be over something as small as this horse business." He turned toward the door, then paused with his hand on the latch. "I'll let you know when the time comes."

Trautner's change of heart was the most encouraging thing that had happened, and Jim retraced his steps to the stable feeling almost cheerful. If one man had the nerve to revolt against Monte Lyman's rule, maybe there was a chance of winning support from some of the others. Of course as Trautner had said, the others were family men, and that would make a difference.

Luke Turner was standing in the doorway, biting off a chaw of tobacco. He looked up at Jim and said sourly, "What the devil are you looking so happy about? Anybody'd think you liked being put out of business."

"Shucks," Jim said good-naturedly. "I've been working pretty steady for two days. You wouldn't want me to kill myself off, would you?"

"Go ahead," Luke said. "Laugh your head off." He jabbed a finger in Jim's chest. "I reckon Ellen Carter'll think it's a big joke, too, not having any money coming in."

This sobered Jim instantly. "That's something I want to ask you about. You've been around here a long time, and I'm new. How much would you guess this place earned in a month?"

Luke stared at him. "You can make a pretty good guess. About all there is besides the regular monthly customers is someone passing through once in a while. That wouldn't amount to ten dollars a month." He frowned. "Why? What difference does it make now?"

Instead of answering him immediately, Jim turned to look around at the inside of the barn. He crossed to glance out a back window at a small pasture with a broken-down fence around it. "How about this meadow? Is that part of the property?"

"Always has been," Luke said. He had followed Jim across the room, and was watching him narrowly. "What the tar-nation are you driving at, young feller?"

Jim turned to face him. "I'll tell you later, Luke, after I have a talk with Mrs. Carter." He led his gelding out of a stall and laid the saddleblanket across its back. "By the way, you'll have to tell me where she lives."

"Third house past the restaurant," Luke said, "but I wouldn't go there if I was you. Folks are already wondering about you moving in here and going to work for her. If Monte Lyman hears that you've started calling on her at her house he's liable to—"

"To hell with Monte Lyman!" Jim said with sudden anger. "If he's got anything to say, let him say it to my face."

Luke squirted tobacco juice at a knothole, and his face twisted into a grin. "When he does," he said. "I just hope I'm around."

The third house beyond the cafe was a small unpainted cottage much like the others, but there were freshly starched curtains at the window, and the glass was clean. Jim tied his horse to a tree and crossed the dirt yard to knock on the door.

It opened almost at once, and Ellen Carter looked out at him in obvious surprise. She had a towel around her shoulders, and had apparently just finished washing her hair, which hung damply to her shoulders in a way which should have been unbecoming, but instead gave her a piquant charm.

Jim was trying to act unconcerned, but something must have shown in his face, for the color rose in Ellen's throat, and her smile was a little forced as she asked, "What is it, Mr. Dixon? Is there anything wrong?"

"No ma'am." Jim forced a grin. "It's just that I wanted to see you for a minute, on business."

"Why of course." Ellen opened the door wide and stepped

aside to let him enter. She motioned toward the kitchen table. "We can talk here."

"This'll be fine." Jim waited for Ellen to sit down, then pulled up a chair and faced her across the table. He looked around at the neat kitchen and was aware of the smell of baking bread, an aroma he hadn't enjoyed for a long time. His eyes moved back to Ellen, and he was about to say something about the way she looked, but he didn't let the words pass his lips. This relationship had to be kept on a strictly business basis, and this was the time to start things off on the right foot.

"I've been thinking about your livery stable, ma'am, your's and your husband's."

She didn't interrupt, and he went on.

"As near as I can figure it, you don't take in more than sixty dollars a month."

She nodded. "That's a little high, but go ahead."

"All right, what I've been thinking is this. You've got a good solid barn, with room for sixteen horses, and there's a pasture out back that could be used if the fence was fixed." He was more at ease, now that he was talking about things with which he was familiar, and he looked at her squarely.

"For all this, you take in around sixty dollars a month, which isn't too bad, but there's nothing you can count on, because Monte Lyman's liable to scare away all your customers any time he takes a notion."

"I don't think—"

"Let me finish, ma'am, before you make up your mind." Jim didn't want to tell her that Monte had already driven off all the customers, not until he had to.

"All right," Ellen said. "Go on. What is it you're working up to?"

"Just this, ma'am. I'm going to need a building for my freighting business, with stalls for my horses, and somewhere for my men to bunk. I'm willing to pay you sixty a month for

the use of your property, and you can still have anything we take in for the rent of your own horses."

Ellen stared at him a moment in frank surprise, then smiled a little wistfully. "It sounds too good to be true, Mr. Dixon, and I'm afraid that's just what it is. Probably you're just feeling sorry for me because I'm in trouble." Her smile vanished. "I'm sorry, but I can't accept charity. We both know that you haven't a chance with your freight yard when Monte Lyman sets out to stop you. It just won't work."

She started to get up, but Jim reached across the table and took her by the wrists.

"Wait, Mrs. Carter. You're wrong." For some reason, it had become vitally important to make her believe him. "I took the trouble to find out something about this territory before I left Colorado. There's no other freighting outfit between here and the railroad back at Flintville, and none for the next hundred miles south. At least half a dozen towns are going to be needing more and more supplies as the country fills up, and there's no reason I can't get the business."

In his urgency, he had unconsciously drawn her toward him so that they were both leaning across the table, their faces only inches apart. She was staring at him intently, her lips parted a little. Without thinking, he rose halfway out of his chair and kissed her full on the mouth, his pulse pounding at the warmth of her lips.

For a second she returned the pressure, then a startled look came into her eyes and she drew away violently, breaking his hold on her wrists. "No!" she said in a whisper. "Can't you see what we're—"

She didn't finish the sentence, but color rushed into her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Ellen—Mrs. Carter." Jim stared at the marks his fingers had made on her smooth wrists. "So help me, I didn't intend to—"

"Don't apologize, Mr. Dixon." To Jim's immense relief, there was no anger in her eyes, only regret. "Maybe it's

just as well it happened. In the future, we'll remember to keep things on the right basis."

"Then you're going to accept my proposition?"

She nodded. "If you're willing to stake everything on it, I guess I can take a chance too." Her lips curved in a smile. "After all, Mr. Dixon, I haven't got much choice. Monte Lyman was just letting me stay in business until—well, until he—" She bit her lip, and turned to look out the window, but Jim could guess what she meant, and his eyes narrowed.

Ellen's next words brought him up short.

"There's one thing, Mr. Dixon. When my husband comes back, he'll have to decide whether to continue our agreement or not."

"Sure," Jim said flatly. "When your husband comes back." He picked up his hat and headed toward the door, and Ellen let him out. As he climbed into his saddle, two riders came up the street, headed toward Lyman's freight yard. They both turned to look, and Monte Lyman said without smiling, "Good morning, Dixon." He glanced sharply at the house, and his lips curled, "Isn't it sort of early in the morning to go courting? Or doesn't it make any difference as long as there's no husband around?"

Blood pounded in Jim's ears, but he didn't move, for the second rider was Jake, and he had a carbine across his knee, its muzzle pointed at Jim's chest.

Monte made an angry gesture and they rode on, but Jim couldn't help remembering Luke's warning, and his thoughts were bitter as he headed for the livery stable. Monte had said it to his face, and he had done nothing. He swore softly. How in the hell did a man fight an outfit like the one that ran Cottonwood?

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN Monte Lyman left Jim in front of Ellen Carter's house and continued on toward the freight yard, his face was set in such an ugly scowl that even Jake had enough discretion to keep still. Knowing Ellen Carter as he did, Monte was sure that there had been nothing about her visit from Dixon to justify his insinuations; and for some vague reason this made him more furious than ever. Up to now, he had taken pains to give Ellen the impression that he had only the most honorable feelings toward her; that he looked on her as a respectably married woman, and as such, one in whom he could have no personal interest. Now, after what he had said to Dixon in a burst of anger and jealousy, Ellen would see him in a different and less favorable light. And he was sure that she had overheard, since he had made no attempt to lower his voice.

Monte swore under his breath. Likely he had been a fool to go to so much trouble in the first place. Maybe he should have gone after Ellen the way he went after everything else he wanted. She was just a woman, wasn't she? A woman with no husband to defend her, living in a town where he, Monte Lyman, gave the orders, and where no one had guts enough to interfere. No one but this man from Colorado, who wasn't any bigger than a lot of others, or any better able to survive a bullet in the back.

Looking at it this way, Monte's tension eased, and some of the fierceness left his face. As though he noticed the change, Jake chose this time to ask pointedly, "What're you going to do, Monte—let him move in on you?"

"Meaning what?" Monte demanded.

"Oh hell," Jake said, apparently sensing that Monte's anger had faded and it was now safe to talk. "You ain't fool-

ing me any. You've wanted that Carter woman ever since she hit town."

"Any reason I shouldn't?"

Jake grinned and licked his thick lips. "Hell no. I wouldn't mind—"

Monte's open palm caught him on the side of the face.

"You'll keep away from her," he said savagely. His lips curved in a sneer. "What's the matter? Haven't you got enough nerve to draw on me?"

Jake tried to outstare him, but his eyes fell away and he took his hand off his gun. "Dammit, Monte, you'll go too far one of these times. Just because you're a few years older than me don't mean you can—"

"Oh dry up." Monte made an impatient gesture with his left hand. "You're not going to buck me, and you know it. In the first place you're scared, and in the second place you know what'd happen if I wasn't here to hold things together." He laughed harshly. "Why that bunch of hardcases I've got working for me would take over the whole set up, and you wouldn't be able to stop them."

"They're liable to anyway," Jake grumbled. "If you don't give 'em some action pretty quick. They didn't hire on to punch cows."

"Don't worry, they'll get action all right." Monte turned in the saddle to glance back toward the center of town, paying particular attention to the livery stable, where Dixon was just stepping out of his saddle. "Maybe that's what we all need, myself included. A man gets soft when things come too easy." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "Go back to the ranch and gather up the crew. Tell them to oil their guns and be ready to ride to town tonight. We'll show these damned storekeepers who's in the saddle!"

Jim turned from unsaddling his horse and saw Jake Lyman ride past at a gallop, headed toward Rocking L. Coming so shortly after the incident at Ellen Carter's doorstep, it re-

kindled his anger and he swore so violently that Luke Turner looked up at him in surprise.

"What's the matter, young feller? Something bite you?"

Jim smiled without humor. "Just wondering where Jake Lyman was headed for in such a rush."

"Wherever it is, he's up to no good," Luke said. He put down a water bucket he had been carrying. "Jake and Monte rode by together just a few minutes ago. I figured they'd be heading for the freight yard, likely to see if everyone moved his horse over there."

"I saw them," Jim said with feeling. "Jake held a gun on me while Monte said a few things I'm not likely to forget in a hurry."

"The hell you say!" Luke's jaw muscles knotted. "About Ellen, wasn't it?"

Jim nodded. "Probably I should have listened to you and not gone over there."

"It wouldn't've made much difference," Luke said glumly. "Monte's been playing it easy, where Ellen Carter was concerned, but he'd be bound to get to thinking about you and her being friends, and sooner or later—" He kicked the side of the stall. "Dammit, if I wasn't such a no-good old has-been, we'd go out there and give them fellers something to think about!"

"Take it easy, old timer. This isn't your fight." Jim grinned at Luke over the side of the stall. "And don't get any hare-brained ideas. Things have changed since you were a youngster. We've got laws now, and we've got to watch our step."

"Monte Lyman's laws," Luke said sourly. He bent over to pick up the bucket. "By the way, you promised to tell me why you were asking so many questions about this barn."

"That's right, I did." Jim told him of his arrangements with Ellen, while the old man listened attentively.

"So it's all settled," Luke said when Jim finished. He frowned. "Maybe it's none of my business, but how the blazes do you expect to pay sixty dollars a month rent? If

you figure to make it off your hauling, you're plumb loco. Nobody around here is going to give you any business. Not with Monte Lyman telling 'em not to."

"We'll see," Jim said, thinking about Simon Trautner. "At any rate, Mrs. Carter will get her rent all right, at least for a while. Collie Peterson is bringing me the money I got when I sold out in Colorado. I figured it'd be safer with him than with me, being as he and Tex Forbes are sticking together." He slapped the gelding's rump and moved out of the stall. "In the meantime, we'd better get busy fixing that fence." He grinned. "By the way, I don't expect you to work around here for nothing. You'll have that job taking care of the horses if you still want it."

There was no mistaking the pleasure on Luke's face, but he only said gruffly, "Sure. I'll look after the horses if you want me to, but what the blazes would I want with money?"

Before Jim could answer, there was the rattle of hoofs in the road, and Doc Bowles' buggy filled the doorway. The doctor was slumped in the seat, and he raised a limp hand in greeting. "Takes a homesteader as long to have a baby as it does to do everything else," he said disgustedly. "Except to pay the doctor." He got stiffly to the ground and held out the reins. "If anyone gets himself shot in the next eight hours he'll just have to lie where he falls. I'm going to bed." He saw the expression on Jim's face then, and frowned.

"What's the matter, Dixon? You seem surprised."

"I am," Jim admitted. "To tell the truth, I'd forgotten about you being out of town. I guess that's why you came here with your buggy."

"Why shouldn't I come here?" the doctor demanded. "I've been keeping my rig in this barn for the last five years." He looked past Jim at the stalls, and frowned. "Where is everybody? Is there a posse out or something?"

Jim grinned. "No posse, Doc. They've all moved their animals to Monte Lyman's freight yard."

"Oh. On Lyman's orders, I suppose." Dr. Bowles let out

his breath in a huge sigh. "I'm a little disappointed, Dixon. I thought Monte Lyman would think up something more spectacular than this." He yawned. "Well, I'm still going to bed. If anybody comes looking for me, tell them I died."

"Sure, Doc," Jim said, and added, "you can move your horse when you've caught up on your sleep."

The doctor snorted. "I'm not moving anything, young man." A tired smile turned his lips. "I've got one advantage over the other citizens of this flea-bitten town. Monte Lyman is pretty self-sufficient, but he can't be sure he won't come down with something that'll require a doctor, and I'm the only doctor this side of Flintville. I'll keep my buggy right where it is."

The doctor trudged off toward his office, and Jim started unharnessing the mare, feeling somewhat encouraged by what he had just heard. It was comforting to know that at least one man in town wasn't taking Monte's orders.

The rest of the day Jim and Luke kept busy working on the pasture fence, resetting loose posts and replacing broken planks. In order to have enough lumber it was necessary to reduce the size of the enclosure, but Jim figured that it would be adequate, and he would rather have a small strong corral than a big flimsy one.

It was slow tedious work, but it left him with plenty of time for thinking, and he found himself recalling his meeting with Ellen that morning, reliving for a moment the thrill of her brief response to his kiss; then being chilled by the thought that he had no right to think such thoughts.

It came to him then that he had never felt this way about any girl before, and he knew that he was hopelessly in love with her. Hopeless was the right word, he told himself, for Ellen was a married woman.

He hammered home a nail with such force that Luke straightened up from his work. "What's the matter, son?" he asked.

"Nothing." Jim shook his head as though he could clear it

of unwanted thoughts. He stepped back and looked at the fence. "Reckon that'll do. We might as well call it a day."

"I was beginning to wonder," Luke said with feeling. He glanced at the sky. "My belly's been telling me for an hour it was supper time." He punched a knobby fist in Jim's chest. "You'd better quit your daydreaming, young feller, or you're liable to be looking up at grass-roots. A moose could've walked up behind you and you never would've noticed."

Jim grinned. "That's what I've got you for, to make sure that nothing like that happens." He pocketed his hammer and picked up a can of nails. "All right, you go ahead and eat. I'll wait 'til you get back."

Luke stomped through the barn and out into the street. Jim watched him until he had entered the restaurant, then let his gaze move along the far side of the street. Steve Ellis was standing in front of his office, the dying sun reflecting from his star. He stared at Jim without any sign of speaking, and on impulse Jim raised a hand in salutation, and called, "Evening, Marshal. Looks like another nice night."

Ellis frowned at him for a moment as though trying to read some hidden meaning into the words. Finally he nodded stiffly and went into his office.

There was something amusing about the marshal's attitude, and Jim chuckled to himself. Likely Ellis hadn't been told whether or not it was all right to speak to him, and wasn't taking any chances.

It was dark when Luke got back, and he smelled faintly of whiskey.

"Stopped at the Happy Day," he explained. He lowered his voice. "Something's up, Jim. Odom was as jumpy as a grasshopper, and I found out a couple of Lyman's crew were in for a drink this afternoon."

"You're just looking for trouble," Jim said jokingly. "There's nothing wrong with a man stopping in for a drink, even one of Lyman's men. As to Odom being on edge, you'd be nervous

too if somebody had just ordered you to move your horse to another stable. Probably he was threatened."

"It's more than that," Luke maintained stubbornly. "Maybe I never had any book learning, but I can tell when things ain't right, and I smell trouble tonight."

"Then I'd better go get some supper. I never did like trouble on an empty stomach."

If anything was amiss, Jim saw no inkling of it at the cafe, nor at the Happy Day when he stopped for a drink. Odom treated him with cool reserve, but that was only to be expected after what had happened. He returned to the livery stable and found Luke smoking his pipe in the doorway.

"Notice anything wrong?" Luke wanted to know.

"Nothing new," Jim said. "I still think you're looking for something that isn't there."

Luke shook his head, making the bowl of his pipe move from side to side in a red arc. "Maybe I am, but I don't mind telling you I'm uneasy. By now Monte must have an idea what you're up to, after us banging on that fence all afternoon."

Jim shrugged. "All right, old-timer, we'll stand guard tonight if it'll make you feel any better. I'll take first watch, and call you at midnight."

"Good." Grumbling to himself, Luke knocked the dottle out of his pipe and crossed to the bedroom. After a bit Jim heard his ragged snoring.

Jim stood in the dark doorway and watched the town go to sleep. For a long time there was a light in the Carter house. Shortly after it went out, a man rode into town from the direction of the freight yard and dismounted in front of the marshal's office. It was too dark to recognize him, but Jim heard him knock on the office door, and then heard the marshal's suspicious voice. After a moment the marshal came out into the street. He disappeared for a moment and returned leading a horse. Leather creaked as he stepped into

the saddle, and both men rode off in the direction from which the stranger had come.

At about ten o'clock, Ben Macey stepped out of the hotel and blew out the lantern, and a little later the light went out in the Happy Day. After that there was no indication of life except for a woman's high-pitched giggle from somewhere over toward the saloon, and a little later the baying of a dog as the moon began to rise.

Jim smiled as he recalled Luke's uneasiness, then his smile faded as he thought about what he had let himself in for. Because of a girl he could never hope to possess, he had bound himself to stay on here and challenge a man who held the whole town under his heel, and in so doing he had agreed to pay rent for a building which he might not be able to use at all. He shook his head. It just didn't make sense. But even as he told himself this, he knew he was lying. Anything made sense, when the girl was Ellen Carter, and a man like Monte Lyman was plotting against her.

When he judged it to be midnight he crossed to the dark bedroom and shook Luke's shoulder. Instantly the old man flailed out with his arms, almost knocking Jim over.

"Whoa!" Jim said. "Take it easy. It's me, Jim Dixon."

On account of the darkness he couldn't see Luke's expression, but the old man's curses were eloquent indication of his frame of mind.

"Dammit boy, don't ever do that! I've done half my sleeping with Injuns around, and me never knowing when they might take a notion to lift my hair."

"Sorry," Jim said. "All I wanted was to tell you it's midnight."

"Well, next time just say so and keep far enough away so I can't put a knife in your ribs before I know who you are."

Jim laughed. "All right, you old catamount. I won't make the same mistake twice."

Luke snorted, and Jim heard him cross the room and go

out into the barn. Smiling, he took off his boots and dropped into the bunk without bothering to undress. A few minutes later he was asleep.

Luke's loud whisper awakened him, and he reached for his gun. "I'm awake. What's up?"

"Horses coming," Luke said softly. "A bunch of 'em."

"Be right with you." Jim pulled on his boots and buckled his gunbelt around his waist. He found Luke waiting in the open doorway to the street.

"They're coming from out toward Rocking L," the old man said. "Dammit, I told you—"

"Sure you did." Jim laid a hand on Luke's shoulder. "You keep out of this, old-timer. It'll be me they're after, not you."

Luke didn't answer, for by now the horsemen were very close, the hoofbeats a thunder of sound in the otherwise still night. Jim remembered about the marshal then, and swore quietly. Monte wasn't taking any chances, even though Ellis did take his orders.

The riders spread out along the far side of the street. Jim counted eight of them. Monte's voice rose suddenly, and they drew back out of the moonlight into the shadow of the buildings, where they would make poorer targets.

"Dixon!" Monte yelled. "Come on out herel!"

"I'm right here, Lyman. What's on your mind?"

There was a quick crunching of gravel as Monte yanked his horse into deeper shadow, and Jake's voice said savagely, "Dammit, Monte, you don't have to ride me down!"

It was a stand off for a moment, neither side offering a clear target, but Jim knew what could happen if Monte's men started emptying their guns into the livery stable. Of course they were in a similar spot themselves, which might make them hesitate, but it was nothing he could count on.

Monte spoke again. "You're all through here, Dixon, but I'm giving you a choice. Either ride out of there with your hands over your head, or we'll drag you out."

"Why?" Jim asked, stalling for time. "What makes you so anxious to get rid of me? We hardly know each other."

"Damn you!" Monte shouted. "You know why. Anyway, I didn't come here to argue. You've got ten seconds to make up your mind, then we start shooting."

"We're staying," Jim said calmly. "Don't forget this thing works both ways."

"We?" Monte said surprisedly. "Is there someone with you?"

Luke had been quiet, but now he yelled wildly, "I'm here, Monte, but I'm getting out. I ain't even got any gun."

Jim's jaw sagged, and he reached for Luke's shoulder, but the little man twisted loose and ran into the street, his hands over his head.

"Don't shoot, fellers! I ain't having any part of this!"

Jeering laughter came from the far side of the street, and Monte said sarcastically, "Let him go, men. He isn't worth wasting lead on."

Jim stared at Luke's retreating form and felt a sharp pang of disappointment. He would never have picked Luke to be a coward, but there was no denying the evidence of his own eyes.

"All right, Dixon, that leaves you outnumbered eight to one. You going to use your head and come out with your hands up?"

"And get shot in the guts?" Jim's laugh was harsh. "Not a chance, Lyman. If you want me, you'll have to come after me."

Before Monte could issue an order, Jim flung himself away from the opening and sprawled full length behind the stone foundation. It bothered him that when the shooting started some of the horses might get hurt, but this was out of his hands now. He drew his gun and waited.

A gun barked twice, and Monte shouted furiously, "Hold it, you fools! There's an easier way than this. Jake, you and

Braden go around in back and set it afire. We'll get him when he makes a run for it."

Jim clamped his jaws in anger. The idea of facing such lopsided odds was bad enough, but being smoked out was even worse. If only Luke had stuck with him, they might have had a chance. As it was, he couldn't cover the back without leaving the front wide open.

He got up from the dirt and made his way quietly to the stalls, hoping there might be time to get some of the horses out. Untying his own gelding, he led it to the back door and drove it out into the pasture. A shadowy shape was moving across the far side of the corral, and he snapped a quick shot in that direction.

He was answered by a startled curse, and the figure turned and ran, taking the fence in one leap. From over to the left another gun began to yammer, and splinters flew off the wall near Jim's face. As he returned the fire, other guns opened up out in front, and a horse squealed in pain.

Jim emptied his gun toward the man on his left, then ran toward the stalls, meaning to free as many of the horses as he could, but knowing that it was almost hopeless. He managed to get one more animal out of its stall, but they were all frightened now, and it fought the rope. Then he heard the crackle of fire, and smelled smoke.

There was no use fighting the crazed horse any longer, so he released the halter and began shoving shells into his gun. At least he might take a few of Monte's men with him.

Suddenly someone out in the street yelled, "Fire!"

It was so unexpected that Jim paused in the act of ramming home the last shell. Why would anyone bother to shout about it when they had known all along what was going to happen?

A voice which was unmistakably Monte's mouthed a fierce oath, then added, "Come on, all of you! This can wait!"

In stunned amazement, Jim heard the clatter of hoofs fading in the distance. Suspecting a trap, he crossed to the

doorway and stared down the road, where the riders were just about opposite Ellen's house. Beyond them, yellow flames laced the sky above the freight yard.

Jim sucked in a deep breath. So that was why Luke had played the role of coward! The old campaigner had realized how little help he would be in a gunfight, and had figured out a plan of his own. Jim was ashamed of himself for having doubted him.

The fire that Monte's men had started had failed to get much of a foothold, and Jim put it out with a few bucketfuls of water from the barrel behind the barn. As a precaution he turned the other horses into the corral, including one which had a bullet crease across its flank.

By the time he was through, the whole town had been aroused, and lights were burning in most of the windows. Even Monte Lyman would hesitate to start anything now, Jim decided. Besides, Monte had plenty to keep him busy with his own fire, which was still burning, though not quite so brightly.

Jim lit the lantern and hung it from the wire hook in the ceiling. He took the rope from his saddle and went out into the corral, where the horses had now quit milling around and were standing quietly. His own gelding came up to nuzzle his shoulder, and he reached up to scratch between its ears, then moved on to the one with the bullet crease, a bay which he now realized belonged to Dr. Bowles. The mare didn't try to run, so it wasn't necessary to use the rope. He took hold of its halter and led it back into the barn, putting it in the stall nearest the light.

The bullet hadn't dug very deep, but it had left a gouge which would give trouble unless taken care of. He located a bottle of carbolic acid he had noticed, and got a basin and clean rag from the bedroom.

As he worked, part of his mind was worrying about what had happened to Luke. Was it possible that the old man had been caught? It hardly seemed likely, but the idea was dis-

turbing. Monte would have little consideration for the man who had set fire to his freight yard, and his pride must be hurting him at having been tricked.

Jim had poured some of the carbolic into the basin of water and was dipping the rag in it when he heard a noise out in the street. He dropped the rag and drew his gun, turning to face the doorway.

A horse came into sight, and he was surprised to see Dummy Zale in the saddle, his face as expressionless as ever. He waited for Zale to ride on, but the big man stepped out of the saddle and entered the barn.

Remembering Zale's tremendous strength, Jim felt a shiver crawl up his spine. Zale was not wearing a gun, which seemed strange, but Jim had the feeling that bullets would have little effect on the man. Besides, he couldn't very well shoot an unarmed man.

If Zale saw Jim's gun he gave no indication. He moved ponderously across the barn, apparently intent on crowding Jim into one of the stalls. Jim stared at him in fascination, still trying to decide whether he should shoot the man if he had to.

At the last second, Zale veered away from Jim and entered the stall with the wounded mare, laying his big hand gently on the animal's rump. The mare turned her head to look but gave no sign of being afraid.

Jim let his gun hand fall at his side, and watched in silence as the big mute examined the bullet crease, running his thick fingers along the skin next to the cut. When he had apparently satisfied himself about this, Zale bent down to pick up the basin. He held it close to his nose, shook his head, and tossed the contents into the dirt. Pushing past Jim as though he were not there, he went out to the street and got something out of his saddlebags. He returned to the stall, and Jim saw that it was a small can of ointment. With infinite care, Zale spread the ointment along the cut. He looked at Jim a moment, then handed him the can. As

though the matter no longer interested him, he left the barn and rode off toward Rocking L.

Completely baffled, Jim stared at the can a moment, then crossed the room to put it on a shelf. Could this be the same man who had held him while Jake Lyman pounded him into unconsciousness? It didn't seem possible, but there couldn't be two of them.

After a bit there was the sound of more horsemen returning from the fire. Jim put out the lantern and watched them from the doorway as they rode past. He counted only five riders, and though he waited half an hour or so longer, no one else went by in the direction of Rocking L. Taking into consideration that Zale had gone past earlier, this still left two of Lyman's crew unaccounted for.

This bothered him, but he decided that it was possible that two of the men had been left on guard at the freight yard. Besides, there was something else that worried him even more. What had happened to Luke Turner?

CHAPTER EIGHT

AFTER ANOTHER hour, Jim was convinced that Luke had run into trouble and was in need of help. He hated to leave the stable unguarded, but Luke's safety was more important, so he left the barn by the back door and headed toward the freight yard, picking his way with care, and keeping in the shadow of the store buildings as much as he could. He disliked being caught afoot if anyone spotted him, but there was no chance of reaching his destination undetected on horseback. He had thought to wire the rowels of his spurs so that they wouldn't rattle, and experience had trained him to move with a minimum of noise.

He made a wide circle to avoid the little cluster of

houses at the edge of town, and approached the freight yard from the south side, stopping in a grove of cottonwoods to stare searchingly at the still smoking embers of the main building, and at the three other shacks which were still intact.

The smell of charred wood was strong in his nostrils, but there was no scent of burned horseflesh, for which he was genuinely thankful. Nobody who had worked with horses all his life wanted them to suffer, and Jim was no exception.

Remembering the two Rocking L men who had failed to make the ride back to the ranch, Jim strained his eyes in an effort to locate them here, but he soon concluded that if they had remained behind they must be inside one of the unburned buildings.

With this decided, he turned his attention to the three structures, which together with the corral comprised all that was left of Monte's freight yard. A careful inspection showed him that one of these was nothing more than a three-sided shed, with the open side toward the corral. Presumably it housed Monte's wagons, although Jim couldn't be sure of this as he couldn't see what was in it.

One of the other buildings appeared to be a tool house or storage shed, and the other was obviously living quarters for the manager, the man Luke had called Yance Burnham.

There was nothing more to be determined from this distance, and to reach any of the buildings meant crossing an open patch of moonlight and exposing himself to view if anyone happened to be looking out the windows of the house. Getting closer was a ticklish thing to do, since it was likely that Burnham would be wide awake after all the excitement, but it was the only way to get the answer to his questions; so Jim took a deep breath and left the shelter of the grove, running bent-over to the shack he had decided was the wagon shed.

He reached it safely, and pressed himself against the back wall for a moment to catch his breath. Feeling a little

more confident, he edged around the corner of the shed and ducked inside.

As he had surmised, there were two or three wagons in the place, and space for a couple more. It hardly seemed like the kind of spot for anyone to be hiding, so he turned his attention to the neighboring building, the one he guessed to be a storage shed.

This building had no windows or doors in the two sides that he could see from his present vantage point. It was almost directly between where he stood and the main house, so it screened him temporarily. Drawing his gun, he moved away from the wagon barn and ducked across to the side of the shed.

Over in the corral, horses were moving around restlessly, probably spooked by the fire and the still strong smell of smoke. If they should notice him and start a racket, he'd be in a bad spot. All he could do was hope that they wouldn't.

He took off his hat and pressed an ear against the side of the shed. There was a queer noise inside, which he couldn't at first identify. When he did, he had to grin. What he heard was a man snoring, and it sounded a great deal like Luke Turner.

The degree of his relief made him realize how afraid he had been that the old man was dead, and for a moment some of the tenseness drained out of him. Then he thought about the two missing riders, and his nerves tightened. No doubt Monte had left them behind for a purpose, and even now they might be watching him from some shadowy hideout.

Another sound caught his attention now, the sound of a man's breathing. He tried moving his ear away from the side of the shack and there seemed to be no change in its intensity, so he was satisfied that the man wasn't inside the shed. In that case he must be sitting or standing in front of the door, probably taking his turn guarding the prisoner.

Jim considered the possibility of dashing around the

corner of the building and trying to take the man by surprise, but ruled it out. Quite likely he could have the man covered before he knew what was happening, but there was still the second man to account for, not to mention Yance Burnham and possibly one or two drivers. He frowned. Someone might even be inside the shack, ready to kill Luke if anybody tried to take him away.

He looked around for some hint of a better scheme, and his eye fell on the corral. After a quick consideration of the possibilities, he crept away from the shed and made his way to the high pole fence. One or two of the horses nearest the fence began to stir uneasily, and their eyes shone in the moonlight, but he walked as quietly and naturally as he could, and managed to reach the gate without causing too much commotion.

He was in full sight of the house windows now, in case anyone should be watching, and his palms were damp with sweat as he slipped back the wooden bar and opened the gate, praying that it wouldn't squeak.

It didn't, and he moved inside the corral, circling until he was on the side away from the gate.

The horses were all watching him now, and when he took off his hat and whirled it over his head they exploded into action, shattering the silence with their squeals and the pounding of hoofs. Some of them found the open gate, and they burst out into the clearing at a gallop.

Jim didn't wait to see any more. At the first squeal, he scrambled over the fence and dove toward the shadow of the tool shed. What little noise he made was drowned out by the racket from the corral, and he rolled against the base of the building and waited.

He didn't have long to wait. A startled curse erupted from the far side of the building, and gravel rattled as boots pounded on the ground. A man raced around the corner of the shack and stopped to stare at the corral, his feet only inches from Jim's head, but his interest elsewhere.

"Braden!" he yelled. "Someone's in the corral. Hurry up!"

As he lumbered toward the fence, a door banged open at the house, and a voice called surprisedly, "Where are you, Monk? Who was it that—"

"Never mind who it was, dammit! Get out here and find him!"

Bare feet padded across the porch, and Braden let out an oath. "Got to get my boots," he shouted.

"To hell with your boots! Come on!"

Braden came into view, limping a little as he ran. Jim started to push himself to his knees, but just then a third man banged across the porch and headed for the corral. This one had stopped to put on his boots.

Jim got to his feet and raced around the corner of the shack. The door was fastened with a heavy padlock, so he knew there was nothing to do but try to break down the door itself. Inside, someone was bumping around noisily.

"Stand back," Jim called. "I'm coming in."

He backed off a step and charged into the door. There was a loud crash and the sound of splitting wood, and the door hinges came loose from the wall.

"Luke! Come on out! We've got to hurry."

"Can't, dammit," Luke said angrily. "They've got me hog-tied."

"Good Lord!" Jim kicked away the remnants of the door and stepped inside. Sounds from the direction of the corral advised him that his presence had already been discovered, and he knew he wouldn't have many seconds grace before they were on him.

Luke swore. "Get out while you can, Jim. There ain't time to cut me loose."

Jim reached out toward the voice and his fingers touched cloth. He found Luke's belt and wrapped his fingers around it, dragging the old man to his feet. Grabbing him around the waist, he threw him across one shoulder and sprang through the doorway, heading for the cottonwoods at a trot.

Behind him a gun began to roar, but the bullets whistled past their heads without doing any damage. They had reached the edge of the grove, and Jim laid the old man down behind the thick bole of a tree. He stepped behind another tree and threw a couple of warning shots toward the corral, then yanked a knife out of his pocket and slashed at Luke's ropes.

"Good thing you're just a runt," he said "Come on. Let's get out of here."

"Suits me." Luke took a step and fell on his face.

"What's the matter? Are you hurt?"

"Dammit no! My feet are asleep. Give me a hand and I'll try again."

"Just a minute." Jim triggered two more shots toward the freight yard, then holstered his gun and helped Luke to his feet. "See what you can do now. I'm damned if I'll carry you all the way to the livery."

"Who said I wanted to go there anyway?" Luke demanded. "I was having a good sleep until you busted it up." He made a few clumsy steps, and then his legs began to work more naturally. The shooting behind them had stopped, Lyman's men apparently having realized the futility of throwing lead into a grove of trees.

Jim led the way, and they retraced his earlier route, entering the stable through the back door. He closed it after them and bolted it, made sure the big front door was barred, and went into the bedroom and lit the lantern.

Luke looked at him a little sheepishly "I suppose you're going to give me a tongue-lashing for getting caught. Dammit, how was I to know one of 'em would come out before I could get clear?"

"You had no business pulling a stunt like that in the first place," Jim said. "You could 'ust as easy have been shot."

Luke grinned "Seems to me you wasn't doing so well yourself the last time I saw you. What happened?"

"You know," Jim said. "You drew 'em off with that fire."

He held out his hand. "I'm obliged to you again, Luke, but you can't keep sticking out your neck every time I get in a jam."

"Shucks. Somebody's got to keep you young squirts out of trouble." Juke scratched his jaw and gave Jim an oblique look. "Come to think of it, I reckon I'm obliged to you, too. They weren't keeping me in that shack just so I wouldn't get chilly." He yawned "Well, now that we've made our speeches, how about letting me finish my beauty sleep?"

Jim laughed "Go ahead, old-timer I guess nobody'll bother us again tonight, but there's sure to be hell popping in the morning when Monte finds out that you got away."

"Plenty of time to worry about that when it happens," Luke said. He dropped down on his blanket and wrapped it around him. Before Jim could get his boots off, the old man was snoring.

Another rainstorm came with the morning, and Jim lay in the bunk for a few minutes listening to the steady drumming on the roof. Then he heard Luke moving around out in the barn, and he twisted around to put his feet on the floor.

After what had happened in the night he felt stiff and disgusted, but he forced himself to shave and put on a clean shirt, and when he faced Luke he was able to grin.

Luke stared at him accusingly "About time you got up," he grumbled "Things keep happening, and you lie there in your blanket."

"What kind of things?" Jim demanded. "Has Lyman's crew been around?"

"Nope, but someone else has. A feller looking for Ellen Carter."

Jim was instantly alert. "A feller? You don't mean her husband do you?"

"Dang it, if I meant her husband I'd say so." Luke shoved his hands in his pockets. "No. It wasn't him. Some feller with a star on his vest. Deputy sheriff, I think he was." He saw

that Jim was about to leave, and grabbed his sleeve to stop him.

"Now don't get all fired up about it. He's already seen her, and he's over talking to Steve Ellis now."

"What did he want?"

"Didn't say," Luke said. "He had a package for her, though, something that looked like a bundle of clothes."

Jim puzzled over it without reaching a solution. He crossed to the doorway and saw a saddled horse at the marshal's hitchrail. It was a roan he had never seen before, and the brand on its hip was unfamiliar. He looked at Luke.

"I suppose you've already had breakfast?"

Luke nodded.

"Then I'll go over and eat. Maybe I'll find out what the deputy was here for."

Luke nodded again, and Jim started out the door, then stopped as two horsemen came up the street. It took him only a second to recognize Monte Lyman and Dummy Zale, and he stepped back into the doorway, motioning for Luke to get out of sight.

"I'll wait and see what Lyman's up to. It may be something about that fire you started."

Monte turned in at the marshal's office and dismounted. He handed his reins to Zale, and gave Jim a hard-eyed stare before entering the office. Zale followed him with his eyes, apparently expecting some orders, but Lyman didn't turn his head.

"There's an extra six-gun in my saddlebags," Jim said quietly. "Maybe you'd better get it, just in case."

Luke moved off toward the other side of the barn, and as he did, Monte Lyman came out of the marshal's office, Steve Ellis and the out-of-town lawman behind him.

Ellis looked across at Jim and said something, and Monte nodded, whereupon the marshal stepped to the edge of the sidewalk.

"Come over here a minute, Dixon. I want to see you."

"Sure, Marshal."

Jim crossed the street, which was still muddy though the rain had stopped, and stepped up on the sidewalk.

"What's on your mind, Marshal?"

Ellis seemed a little confused, and Jim surmised that it might have something to do with the presence of the deputy, although that man was standing back as though he had no intention of involving himself in what was going on. He was a sensible-looking man with thoughtful eyes, and Jim liked his looks.

"I believe Luke Turner has been staying over at the livery stable," Ellis said. "Have you seen him this morning?"

"Of course I have." Jim pretended to be surprised at the question. "I couldn't very well help seeing him when we sleep in the same room. Why?"

The marshal looked around at Monte as though for some indication of how to proceed, and Jim realized that the deputy's presence had kept them from arranging this in detail.

Monte elbowed the marshal aside.

"I'll tell you why, Dixon. Luke Turner set fire to my freight yard last night, and I want him thrown in jail for it. I'm getting damned tired of your smart tricks."

"My smart tricks?" Jim said. He glanced up and saw the deputy frowning thoughtfully, then laid his gaze on Monte. "What're you talking about, Lyman? The only thing I've done lately was keep you and your crew from setting fire to the stable last night." He gestured toward the barn. "You can see for yourself where they started it. I was lucky to put it out before it burned the whole building." He glanced up to make sure that Zale was watching, and added slowly, "Not to mention the horses that were in there."

Monte's lips curled in a sneer. "You got anyone to back that up, Dixon?"

"Why yes, it happens I have," Jim said. "Luke Turner." He turned toward the marshal.

"By the way, Ellis—where were *you* last night?"

"I was tending to business," the marshal said with a show of anger.

"Sure you were," Jim agreed. "Nobody said you weren't. I just wondered where you were, that you didn't hear the commotion."

Ellis hesitated. "I was out west of town, if it's any of your business. Yance Burnham told me there was trouble out there."

"Yance Burnham?" Jim looked at Monte Lyman. "One of your men, isn't he, Lyman? Mighty convenient, wasn't it, having the marshal out of town when you rode in?" He threw a quick glance at the deputy, and saw that he was taking it all in. "Well, what do you want to do, get Luke over here to tell about how you tried to burn us out? We might as well get everything cleared up while we're about it."

Monte's face turned purple. "What's the use?" he said sourly. "You've probably told him what to say." He turned away and almost bowled over the marshal in his haste to get to his horse. When he had mounted, he stared at Jim ominously.

"You're pretty slick, Dixon, but this isn't over yet." Without waiting for an answer, he whirled the stallion on its haunches and rode off at a gallop, Zale following him at a more conservative speed.

Neither Jim nor the marshal said anything, and the deputy cleared his throat noisily. "Well," he said, "I guess I might as well be on my way. I've got a long ride ahead of me before I reach Flintville."

"Sure." The marshal shook his hand perfunctorily and went into his office, letting the door slam behind him. Jim started away, but the deputy said, "Wait a minute, Dixon. I've got something to tell you."

Jim glanced at the door, and shook his head. "Not here, Sheriff, if it's anything personal."

He walked across the street and the deputy followed,

leading his horse. They stopped just outside the livery stable.

"Don't know as you'd call this exactly personal," the deputy said. "It's only that I passed a couple of freight wagons just outside of Flintville, and one of the drivers asked me to look you up and tell you they were on the way."

Jim grinned with genuine pleasure. "That's the best news I've had in weeks, Sheriff. I'm much obliged to you for trouble."

"No trouble at all," the deputy protested. "I had to make the ride anyway on account of that Carter deal." He shook his head. "I sure feel sorry for that girl."

Jim stiffened. "What girl, Ellen Carter?"

"That's right. I forgot you weren't over at the marshal's office when I told him about it." He looked at Jim soberly. "Is she a friend of yours, Dixon? Mrs. Carter, I mean?"

"I work for her," Jim said. "Good Lord man, get on with it. What did you come to see her about?"

"About her husband," the deputy said. "He got killed over near San Felipe. The sheriff gave me the job of breaking the news to his wife—widow, that is. Blamed if it's the kind of job I care for. I—"

The deputy's voice droned on, but Jim hardly heard him. Victor Carter was dead; Now there was no longer any reason for him to conceal his feelings toward Ellen. For a moment he wanted to shout with joy, but then his natural caution asserted itself. Suppose there were some mistake?

He grabbed the deputy's arm. "You're sure of this? It isn't just a rumor?"

The deputy looked startled. "Hell, Dixon, of course I'm sure. I helped bury him myself, and I just gave Mrs. Carter the clothes he was wearing, and about twenty dollars we found in his pockets." He made a face, "A stinking job, too. We didn't find him for a couple of days, and the buzzards had time to work on him." He glanced down at Jim's hand on his arm. "I didn't kill him, fella. All I did was bring the news."

"I'm sorry." Jim released the man's arm. "I reckon you caught me off-balance." He frowned. "Who did kill him? Did you catch up with him?"

"No." The deputy shook his head disgustedly. "We found tracks going toward San Benito, but we lost 'em in the rocks. There was two horses, so I reckon whoever killed him took Carter's horse too." He held out his hand.

"Well, I've got to be on my way. If Carter was a friend of yours, I'm sorry about this." He glanced across at the marshal's office.

"I don't savvy what all the argument over there was about, Dixon. Is there anything the sheriff should hear about? This is part of his territory, you know."

Jim thought about it a moment, but shook his head. "No. We've got a few troubles here, but they're things the town has to straighten out for itself. Thanks just the same." He grinned. "If you meet up with Collie Peterson and Tex Forbes on your way back, tell them the pot's on, and there's a candle burning in the window."

"I'll do that." The deputy lifted himself into his saddle, and a few minutes later he rode out of town toward Flintville.

"I'll be damned!" Luke said suddenly, and Jim jerked because he had forgotten the old man entirely. He glanced down the street at the corner of Ellen's house, and wondered what her thoughts would be in the face of such an unexpected announcement.

Luke stalked out of the barn and grabbed Jim's sleeve. "Don't just stand there looking silly," he said. "Do you want the whole town to see how glad you are that Carter's dead?"

Jim allowed the old man to draw him into the barn.

"I'm not exactly glad," he said. "I had nothing against the man. I didn't even know him."

Luke snorted. "Maybe you ain't glad he got himself killed, but you're sure tickled about Ellen not being a mar-

ried woman any more." He scowled up in Jim's face. "I suppose you think all you have to do now is ask her and she'll marry you as fast as if there was a flood coming and you had the only rowboat."

"I didn't say so, did I?"

"No, but you're sure thinking about it." Luke waved a finger at him. "Chances are she'll sell out and go home, now that her husband's dead. That's all that was keeping her here anyway. Likely she had a row with her folks when she left home, but they'll all bawl a little and throw their arms around her if she comes home wearing black."

Jim shook his head. "She won't do that, Luke. She said she'd never go back."

Even though he had made the assertion himself, the words were unconvincing, and his brief elation faded. Luke was nobody's fool, and he had probably made a shrewd guess. For the first time, Jim realized how little point there would be in this struggle between himself and Monte Lyman if Ellen were not around.

"Suppose she did stay?" Luke asked more calmly. "Is there any reason to think she'd put her money on a feller like you, a man that's crazy enough to tackle an outfit like Monte Lyman's?" His voice dropped. "Dammit, son, she'd be liable to be a widow again before she got used to her new name." He frowned. "Wait a minute. If you and her was to go away someplace—somewhere that Monte Lyman couldn't find you—"

Jim shook his head. "It wouldn't work, Luke. Monte Lyman wouldn't take being licked, and I can't ask Ellen to spend the rest of her life behind drawn shades—wondering every night if I'd be coming home, and every morning if this would be the day he'd catch up with us."

He smiled bleakly. "No. This thing has to be settled where it started, right here in Cottonwood."

Luke grinned. "Bull-headed, ain't you? I sort of figured that's what you'd say." He glanced down at the gun in his

hand. "All right, what do we do next? Go out and raid Rocking L?"

"You'll like that, wouldn't you?" Jim cuffed the old man affectionately on the side of the head. "You might as well put that iron back where you found it. We're here to run a freight yard, not to fight a war. If we can get one shipment through, it'll hurt Lyman worse than anything we could do with our guns." He hesitated.

"Collie and Tex ought to be here some time tonight, and I think maybe we've got our first customer, unless he loses his nerve."

"Trautner?"

Jim nodded. "How'd you know that?"

"Just figured it out," Luke said. "He's been getting pretty sore lately, and he's got no family to hold him back." He shook his head grimly. "Just the same, I doubt if he'll go through with it."

"We'll see." Jim took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. At least one thing Luke had said was true; there was a pretty fair chance that Lyman would try to have him killed. If he succeeded, what would become of Ellen? Her livery business was practically gone, and without the rent from the barn she would be destitute.

There was only one thing to do, and it had to be done right now. He went into the bedroom and found a piece of paper in his warbag. With a stub of pencil he wrote down what he had decided upon, signed it, then went back to where Luke was waiting.

"Here's something I want put in a safe place," he said. "Take a look at it, and you'll know what I mean."

Luke stared at the paper solemnly, then gave Jim a sly look. "Better read it to me, son. My eyes ain't as good as they might be."

"But you—" It struck Jim then that the old man had never learned to read, and he ended the sentence with a cough. "All right, what it says is that Ellen Carter is a half

partner in the freighting business starting as of now, and if I should die, the other half goes to Collie Peterson and Tex Forbes and you. That way, I'll know there'll be somebody to run it for her."

Luke stared at him. "You didn't have to—" He spat in the dirt. "Hell, I guess I know how you feel. I'll get Ben Macey to put it in his safe." He took the paper and folded it carefully. "You want me to keep still about this?"

Jim shook his head. "No. I want you to let the whole town know. The way I feel about Ellen Carter is nothing I'm ashamed of."

CHAPTER NINE

TO ELLEN CARTER, the news of her husband's death was so unexpected that she found it difficult to accept. Her first reaction, when she was finally able to convince herself that Victor was really dead, was one of relief; and for the first time she understood just how much strain she had been under for the last few months. Not being a hypocrite by nature, she couldn't pretend to herself that she felt any genuine regret at her husband's death. The regret was that the marriage had resulted in such bitter disillusionment.

Now she was free, and it was this freedom which brought with it the feeling of release, but close behind was another emotion, fear for the future. No longer was there anything to wait for, not even the tenuous possibility that her husband would come back. She was alone now, faced with the responsibility of making her own decisions.

It seemed perfectly natural that she should think of Jim Dixon, in fact she had been thinking of him a good deal of the time anyway, particularly since he had kissed her so unexpectedly the day before. Her instinctive response to that

kiss had left her a little confused as to her own feelings. If any other man had tried to kiss her, she would have slapped his face, but somehow she had felt no indignation at Jim's obviously impulsive action; nor did she feel ashamed of herself for making no effort to stop him. Somehow it had seemed natural and right for it to happen.

She was interrupted in her thoughts by a knock on the door, and when she crossed to open it, she found Ben Macey's wife waiting there.

Mrs. Macey was a motherly-looking woman with gray hair and gentle eyes. Ellen had always liked her, and she reached out to take her by the hand and draw her into the house.

"Come in, Mrs. Macey. I can't tell you how glad I am to see you."

"Thank you." Mrs. Macey stepped into the kitchen, and put her arm around Ellen's slim waist. "Figured you might not want to be alone just now," she said. "Ben told me about your husband." She shook her head. "It's too bad, child. I'm awfully sorry for you."

Ellen squeezed Mrs. Macey's hand. "It was real nice of you to come over." She moved away from the older woman's arm, and motioned toward a chair. "Sit down, and I'll pour each of us a cup of coffee."

"Thank you," Mrs. Macey said again, and looked at Ellen speculatively. "I'm glad you're taking it so well, Mrs. Carter. Some young women would carry on and it wouldn't help at all."

Ellen smiled. "I won't try to act broken-hearted about it, Mrs. Macey. Victor had his good features, but you probably know that things weren't going too smoothly. I doubt if anybody has many secrets in a town like this."

"That's a fact." Mrs. Macey smiled. "You just found out about your husband's death an hour ago, but I bet everybody in town knows it by now, and it won't be long until all the ranches within twenty miles are talking it over." Her smile faded. "Fact is, I just saw Monte Lyman and one

of his men riding toward Rocking L a few minutes ago, so they'll know about it soon."

Ellen set two cups and saucers on the table, and picked up the coffee pot from the stove. Mention of Monte Lyman had sent a little chill down her back, and she spilled a few drops of coffee on the table.

When she started to apologize, Mrs. Macey held up her hand. "You've got a right to be nervous, girl. Losing a husband and getting to be a partner in a freighting business all in one day is enough to make anyone jumpy."

"A partner?" Ellen stared at the woman in surprise. "I don't know what you—"

"Land sakes, you mean you didn't know about it?" Mrs. Macey shook her head. "That's all over town, too, how you're half owner of the freight yard Mr. Dixon aims to start." She sighed. "Though how he expects to make a go of it is beyond me, with every merchant in town scared to do business with anyone but Monte Lyman."

Ellen stirred her coffee absently, her mind in a whirl. Jim Dixon had said nothing about this, so it must have been something he had decided upon since learning of Victor's death. Probably it was his way of making up for the loss of her livery business. But he had already gone too far, in agreeing to rent the building. She had accepted that generous offer because there had still been the nebulous chance that Victor might return and pay him back, but now that she was a single woman she couldn't accept such favors.

"What's the matter, Ellen?"

Ellen glanced up from her coffee cup and saw Mrs. Macey staring at her in a peculiar way.

"Matter? Nothing's the matter, Mrs. Macey."

Mrs. Macey shook her head. "You've been staring at that coffee for five minutes and haven't even tasted it." She reached across to take Ellen's hand. "Would it help you to talk to someone? I'm a gabby old fool, but I can listen too."

The older woman's friendliness was comforting, and Ellen

smiled. Actually she did want to talk to somebody, but what could she say? Could she tell Mrs. Macey about Jim Dixon's kiss and make her understand what it had meant, or express her fear of what Monte Lyman would do now that she was no longer married? No. Those were things that she had to straighten out in her own mind before she could talk about them.

She shook her head. "I guess talking wouldn't settle anything, but thank you for asking." She took a sip of coffee. "Here, let me fill your cup."

Mrs. Macey didn't mention it again, but when she got up to leave half an hour later, Ellen had about made up her mind what she had to do. Staying here would only cause trouble—trouble for her, and trouble for Jim Dixon, who was already in danger. She'd sell everything she could, and go away. Maybe then Jim Dixon would move on to some place where Monte Lyman's vengeance couldn't reach him.

All day, Jim Dixon had been taking frequent glances down the Flintville road, but evening came with still no sign of Collie and Tex, and their failure to appear began to worry him. The deputy hadn't mentioned exactly when he had passed them on the road, or how fast he had traveled, and of course a man on horseback could make better time than a freight wagon, but it seemed as though the wagons should have arrived by now.

By the time Ben Macey came out of the hotel to blow out the lantern, Jim was definitely uneasy. Was it possible that the deputy had innocently let it slip about seeing the wagons? If so, and if Monte Lyman had found out about it, there might be trouble.

Midnight came, and Jim couldn't stand the uncertainty any longer. He lit the lantern and began putting the gear on his gelding.

Luke had gone to bed, but he now stuck his head out of the bedroom door. "Going someplace, son?"

Jim nodded. "I'm going to ride out toward Flintville and see what's happened to my drivers. They should have been here before this."

"Likely they got sleepy and stopped," Luke said mildly. "They'll show up in the morning."

"I hope you're right, but it isn't like Collie Peterson to be slow about anything." Jim hauled himself into his saddle. "Keep your eyes peeled, and if I'm not back by daylight, go over and tell the marshal there's something wrong."

"Helluva lot of good he'd do," Luke said disgustedly.

"I know, but he's all we've got. Nobody else in town would lift a finger for fear it might make Lyman sore."

Luke didn't answer, and Jim rode out and turned toward Flintville.

The gelding had had hardly any exercise in the last few days and was eager to go, so Jim let him have his head and the town was soon left far behind. When he had gone about two miles, Jim pulled the horse to a canter. He went on for another half-hour or so and suddenly heard the faint sound of distant shooting. He rose in the stirrups long enough to decide that the shots were somewhere in front of him, then kicked the horse's flanks and leaned low in the saddle.

The gunfire increased in volume, and he could distinguish the sharp explosions of pistols and the heavier boom of a rifle. Then he rounded a bend in the road, and ahead of him in the moonlight was a wagon. It was lying crossways on the road, and there was one horse lying in front of it. The other half of the team had apparently broken loose and run away.

As Jim spotted this, the rifle boomed again, and a spurt of orange flame erupted over the dead horse. Someone let out a curse which ended in a scream, and a voice Jim recognized yelled loudly, "Come on, you bastards! What're you waiting for?"

"Colliel" Jim shouted, and whirled his horse toward the man who had screamed. "It's Jim. Watch your fire!"

The man in the road let out a rebel yell. "Get 'em, Jim! They're over by those trees. I think there's about four of 'em."

Jim headed his horse toward the trees, reining it from side to side in order to present as poor a target as possible. Six-guns barked spasmodically from the shadows, and he aimed at the flashes and emptied his gun, then wheeled the gelding aside and rammed fresh cartridges into the cylinder.

He had just turned back for another run when Jake Lyman's voice yelled furiously, "Come on, men! Let's get out of here!"

Hoofs pounded, and branches snapped as the Rocking L men hurried to get away. To keep them from changing their minds, Jim triggered a few more shots in their direction, then turned his horse toward the wagon.

Collie Peterson stood up in back of the dead horse, the rifle in his hands. "Jim?" he yelled. "If that's you, sing out!"

"It's me." Jim rode up and pulled his horse to a stand. "What happened, Collie? Where's Tex?"

Collie swore. "They were waiting for us, and we rode right into it. They must've known there was two wagons, because they let me get even with 'em before they opened up. My team spooked, and I likely would've got clean away, but they shot one of the horses. I managed to cut the other one loose, but I didn't have time to get clear before they had me covered." He groaned. "If you hadn't come along, I'd be done for."

"What about Tex?" Jim asked grimly. "Did you see anything of him?"

"No." Collie's voice was harsh. "There's been more shooting back there, so they must have split up. I'm afraid—"

"You wait here. I'll take a look."

Jim took off down the road, which was almost as visible as though it were daylight. He had gone only a quarter of a mile when his horse shied at something in the grass. Jim pulled him to a stop and got down, feeling sure he knew what he would find.

It was Tex Forbes, all right, with a bullet hole in his chest. Jim touched his cold cheek with his fingers, and felt for a pulse in his wrist, then straightened up and stared toward Rocking L with hard eyes. Someone was going to pay for this. Tex was too good a man to die this way.

He bent over to hoist Tex's body across his saddle, and noticed that Tex's belt had been cut. It didn't strike him at first what this meant, then he remembered the money they were bringing. He reached inside Tex's shirt and there was no moneybelt.

Back at the wagon, Collie Peterson stared dumbly at Tex Forbes' lifeless body for a moment, then turned his head stiffly to look at Jim.

"Who was it, Jim? Who killed him?"

"Some of Monte Lyman's bunch," Jim said, and was filled with remorse. "It's my fault. I shouldn't've let you ride into a thing like this."

Collie held up a hand. "You know that ain't so, Jim. We would've come regardless." He looked down at the dead horse. "What is it we're up against here?"

"A man that aims to be king," Jim said flatly. "Monte Lyman. That was his brother Jake giving the orders. Monte lets somebody else do most of his dirty work." He sucked in a deep breath and let it out again. "Well, if I can find the horse that ran away, maybe we can get this wagon to town. This horse I'm riding is harness broke."

He stepped down and laid Tex's body in the wagon. "I see they took his moneybelt," he said quietly. "Was he carrying the money?"

"Just half of it," Collie said. "I've got the rest."

"That's a break." For some reason, the money didn't seem very important any more, with Tex lying there dead. Neither did the loss of the other wagon, which Lyman's crew had presumably stolen. Likely that had been their real purpose, to take the wagons. Killing Tex had been only incidental.

The missing horse was grazing in a little meadow half a

mile down the road, and Jim brought it back. Collie had already removed the harness from the dead animal, and they put Jim's gelding in its place, laying the saddle in the back of the wagon.

An hour later they rode into Cottonwood. Jim pulled up in front of the marshal's office and banged on the door, getting a savage satisfaction out of waking Ellis at this hour of the night.

Presently a light glimmered inside the building, and the marshal opened the door. He had the lamp in one hand, and his gun in the other, and he stared at Jim and Collie suspiciously.

"What's up, Dixon?"

"Something I want you to see," Jim said shortly. "It's in the wagon."

Ellis hesitated a moment, then pushed the door wide and stepped out onto the sidewalk. He held the lamp over his head and squinted at the wagon, then turned and said sharply, "Who is it? I never saw the man before."

"One of my drivers from Colorado," Jim said. "Jake Lyman and some of his bunch ambushed him out on the road. They took his moneybelt and the wagon he was driving."

The marshal looked at Collie. "Who's this man?"

"Another of my drivers, Collie Peterson. Collie, this is Marshal Ellis."

"Howdy." Collie held out his hand, but the marshal didn't appear to see it.

"Tough luck, Dixon," he said. "I guess you know that Doc Bowles is our undertaker here."

"I know." Jim noticed the nervous way in which Ellis fidgeted with his mustache. "Well, what are you going to do about this, Marshal?"

"Do?" Ellis made a show of sounding tough. "I'm not going to do anything, dammit. You said yourself that this hap-

pened out on the road. All I'm supposed to take care of is the town."

"I see." Jim nodded slowly. "All right, Marshal. Just be sure you remember that, in case the shoe happens to be on the other foot next time."

"Now hold on," Ellis said stiffly. "What're you driving at? Are you planning to start something?"

Jim grinned. "What's it to you, Marshal? I'll make sure it's outside your territory if I do." He motioned to Collie. "Come on. We're not going to accomplish anything here."

They moved the wagon to Doc Bowles' office, and Jim rapped on the door. The doctor listened quietly to his account, and took a brief look at the body.

"Bring him in and lay him on the table," he said. "I'll take care of everything." He rubbed the back of his neck wearily. "I'm sorry about this, Dixon—real sorry."

"Thanks." Jim and Collie took the body into the office, then got back in the wagon and drove across to the livery stable. Luke Turner met them in the doorway, a lantern in his hand.

"Saw you over across the street," he said. He held out a hand to Collie. "Reckon you'll be Peterson. I'm glad to meet you." His eyes were angry. "It's a dirty shame what they did to your partner. I heard Jim telling the marshal about it."

"Yes," Collie said. "It sure is."

Jim started unhitching the horses. "We might as well get some sleep before daylight," he said. "There's little enough time as it is." He nodded toward the bedroom. "Help yourself to the bunk, Collie. Luke and I have our own places to bed down."

"Sure." Collie took a blanket roll out of the wagon and went into the bedroom, and Luke started helping Jim with the horses. When they were taken care of he looked at Jim questioningly.

"What d'you aim to do next, Jim? Are you ready for that raid on Rocking L?"

Jim shook his head. "Not yet, Luke. I mean to win this fight legally if I can. In the morning I'm going to have a talk with Simon Trautner. If he'll give us a job of hauling, we'll show these folks that Monte Lyman isn't the kingpin he pretends to be. That's all it takes, just something to give the town some guts again." He grinned bleakly. "We've just got one wagon, and we'll have to use saddle stock to pull it, but when you haven't got beef, you have to eat rabbit."

"What d'you do when you haven't got money?" Luke demanded. "Use pebbles?"

"We've got money," Jim said. "Tex was carrying half of it and they took it off of him, but Collie still has the other half."

"Are you sure? Did he let you count it?"

"Sure I'm sure."

Luke grinned. "You're a trusting son-of-a-gun, ain't you?" His grin faded. "Do you really think you'll get Trautner to give you that job?"

"We'll see," Jim said. "There's nothing I can do until morning."

When morning came, he was far from optimistic about it. Several things had happened since his last talk with the hardwareman, including the two fires and now Tex Forbes' murder. It was enough to make even a brave man hesitate, and Trautner had admitted that he was a coward. Nevertheless, Jim stopped at the hardware store on his way back from breakfast.

Trautner looked even more haggard than the last time he had seen him, and there was a nervous twitch to his face muscles as he recognized Jim in the doorway. It was easy to see that he didn't relish this visit.

Jim crossed over to face him across the counter, and

held out his hand. "How are you, Trautner?" he asked quietly.

The merchant shook his hand, but Jim noticed that his fingers were clammy.

"I'm all right, Dixon, so far." He swallowed painfully. "What can I do for you?"

"I guess you know," Jim said. "I'm ready to give Monte Lyman a little competition. You said you wanted to help."

The twitch in Trautner's cheek became more violent, and he rubbed it uneasily.

"That was a couple of days ago, Dixon. Since then I've been thinking about things." He rested his hands on the counter. "There's nothing we can do, just one or two of us. Now the way I see it, you've got to get everybody in town to stick together. When you can do that . . ." His voice trailed off into silence.

All the irritation which had been piling up in Jim's mind boiled to the surface. But his voice was misleadingly soft as he said, "You know that doesn't make sense, Trautner. Somebody has to be first." He met Trautner's eyes with an unwavering stare. "I got the idea you were man enough to be the one. I sort of thought you wanted to quit hating yourself."

"Dammit, it ain't my fight. I've got to look out for my own interests."

Jim looked around at the neat array of merchandise, then faced Trautner again. "*Your* interests? Don't you mean yours and Monte Lyman's?" He slapped a hand on the counter. "Dammit, man, can't you see what this will come to? This month Monte takes half your profits. Next month he'll want two-thirds. By next year, who knows?"

Trautner's features were set in lines of dogged defiance, and Jim searched for some way of reaching him. He asked suddenly, "How long have you been here, Trautner?"

"How long? Do you mean here in Cottonwood?"

Jim nodded.

"Almost twelve years," Trautner said. "Why?"

"Twelve years," Jim repeated. "Then I guess you've never had much Indian trouble. You've never seen cabins burned, and women and children taken captive or worse."

"No," Trautner said. "You ought to know that, Dixon. There's been no Indian uprisings around here for a long time."

"Ever stop to figure why?" Jim asked quietly. "Did it ever strike you that the only reason folks can live here in peace is because a few early settlers had the courage to risk their necks to make the place safer?" He held Trautner's glance with his own.

"How about you, man—are you going to leave this place any better than you found it? Are you going to let the youngsters in Cottonwood have a decent town to grow up in, or are you going to turn it over to a man like Monte Lyman? That's what you'd better be thinking about, instead of saving your own hide."

Trautner stared at him a long moment, then let out his breath in a groan.

"All right, Dixon. You don't give a man much choice. What do you want me to do?"

Jim sagged with relief. "Just let me do some hauling for you, Trautner. It doesn't matter what it is, anything to show Lyman that he hasn't got this town by the throat any longer."

"Well, there's supposed to be some rolls of barbed wire over at Flintville. Lyman's man said he couldn't bring them back with the other stuff he was to pick up. Claimed he didn't have the room, but I guess the real reason was that Monte doesn't want anybody stringing barbed wire around here. He figures to let his cattle roam anyplace they want to."

"That's another idea he's going to have to change," Jim said. "Well, just give me a note so they'll let me have the wire."

"Sure." Trautner took a piece of paper out of a drawer,

and wrote a few words on it, then handed it over. His mouth twisted in a wry grin. "You're a hard man to discourage, Dixon, damned if you ain't. I'm liable to end up hating you worse than I do Lyman."

Jim smiled. "It'll be a change from hating yourself, if that's any satisfaction." He pocketed the note and turned toward the door.

"Just a minute," Trautner called. "What am I supposed to do next? What if Lyman finds out what you're up to, and does something about it?"

"He won't, if I can help it," Jim assured him. "Nobody needs to know why I'm sending the wagon to Flintville—not until we pick up the wire, anyway, and I'll get it back here as fast as I can, so it's not likely anyone will catch on until they see the wire. There is one thing you might do, though. If you've got any friends you're sure of, you might try to persuade them to throw in with us."

"I've got friends," Trautner said. "But not when I ask them to buck Monte Lyman."

"Don't be too sure of that," Jim said soberly. "Anyway, you might give it some thought."

He left the hardware store then, and went back to the livery. Collie Peterson was brushing down a horse, but he stopped what he was doing and came over to the doorway.

"Doc Bowles was in here while you were out. Wanted to know if it'd be all right to bury Tex at ten o'clock. I said it would. Is that agreeable to you?"

Jim nodded. "Ten o'clock will be fine." He smiled grimly. "This isn't much of a way to welcome you to Cottonwood, fella, by burying your best friend. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault," Collie said. He lowered his voice. "Luke and me were talking about what happened last night, and he said you wouldn't be riding out after the men that did it. He's wrong, ain't he?"

"No. He's right."

Collie's jaw fell. "You mean you're going to let 'em kill

Tex and not do anything about it? Dammit, Jim, that ain't like you at all. Why I remember that time up at Lake City—"

"I remember it too," Jim said. "That's why I don't want it to happen again. Too many innocent people had to pay for it." He laid a hand on Collie's shoulder. "Someone's going to pay for killing Tex, but it's got to be done legally, and there's no use dragging the law into this the way this town feels. We couldn't find a witness around here who would speak up against Lyman even if we got him into court."

"Who said anything about getting anyone into court?" Collie demanded, shaking off Jim's hand. "They killed Tex. That's all I have to know." His face was white with anger. "If you've turned yellow on me, I'll do it alone."

"Wait!" Jim reached for Collie's arm, but the driver jerked loose.

"Don't give me any more orders! I'm going to find this Lyman outfit and let 'em know Tex has at least one friend that ain't going to crawl in a hole and hide!"

Jim grabbed his shoulder, and this time Collie couldn't break loose.

"Listen to me, Collie," Jim pleaded. "What you're fixing to do would ruin everything. I'm not forgetting about Tex, but we've got to do this my way."

"Your way, hell!" Collie snapped. He knocked Jim's hand off his shoulder and started to turn.

Jim's jaws clamped, and he lashed out with his right fist, catching Collie on the point of the jaw, and knocking him off his feet into the side of a stall.

The driver bounced off the planks and rolled to his feet, his hand clawing at his gun. Before he could complete the draw, Jim's fingers closed on his wrist, and the gun dropped from his fingers.

"Now shut up and listen to what I've got to say," Jim said bluntly. "I'd like to pay them back for Tex as much as you would, but I'm not going at it like a loco steer, and I'm

not letting you make a damned fool of yourself either. If you don't like the way I'm running things, saddle a horse and get the hell out of my way!"

Collie glared at him a minute, then began to grin. He slapped dust from his levis, and said dryly, "Reckon I was wrong, Jim. You ain't lost your nerve after all. I had no business blowing off like I did." He started to bend over for his gun, then gave Jim a questioning look.

"Go ahead and pick it up," Jim said, and his grin matched Collie's. "I don't reckon you're going to shoot me now that you've cooled off." His grin faded.

"I hope not, anyway, because we've got work to do, and we're short-handed as it is." He looked around and saw Luke watching them, and added, "We've got our first hauling job, and right after the funeral we're going to get started. Before we're through, we're liable to have all the shooting we want without fighting with each other."

CHAPTER TEN

JIM WAS NOT surprised when most of the town showed up for Tex Forbes' funeral. These people might be afraid to take a stand against a man like Monte Lyman, but they were warm-hearted and sympathetic by nature, and death was one thing which they were used to sharing.

Ellen Carter was there, standing next to an older woman whom Jim knew to be Ben Macey's wife. After the brief graveyard service she came to offer her sympathy.

"I'm terribly sorry about this, Mr. Dixon. I just can't tell you how sorry."

"Tex was a good man," Jim said simply. He nodded at Collie, who was standing grim-faced at his side. "This is Collie Peterson, Mrs. Carter. He was with Tex when it happened."

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Peterson," Ellen said. "I just wish it weren't under such unhappy circumstances."

"I reckon none of us wanted it this way," Collie said. His eyes hardened. "Nobody but the bunch of rats that killed him."

Jim saw that the townsfolk were all listening, and he took Collie's elbow. "We'd better be going, fella. There's work to be done." He nodded at Ellen. "It was nice of you to say what you did."

He started to turn away, but Ellen laid a hand on his sleeve, and said seriously, "There's something I have to talk to you about, Mr. Dixon. Will it be all right if I come by the livery stable on the way home?"

Jim was about to say yes, but he checked himself. Much as he wanted a chance to be with Ellen, he couldn't risk letting anything interfere with his plans. Quite likely Ellen would try to persuade him to abandon his deal with Trautner, so the best thing would be to keep her away until it was too late.

"Could it wait until noon?" he asked. "We've got a couple of things to clear up if it won't make any difference."

She nodded. "I'll see you then." She rejoined Mrs. Macey, and they left.

Collie gave Jim a searching glance. "Who's the girl, Jim? You never told me anything about her."

"No," Jim agreed. "I didn't." He looked around at the rapidly dwindling group by the grave, and turned to leave. Besides him, Collie Peterson fell into step. When they were out of hearing of the others, Jim said, "Mrs. Carter and her husband owned the livery stable where we're making our headquarters."

"Owned?"

"That's right. Mrs. Carter owns it now. She just found out yesterday that her husband was killed."

"That's tough," Collie said. "She's too nice looking a girl to get a deal like that." He glanced up at Jim and frowned.

"Meaning no offense, Jim, but the way you looked at her and everything, well, are you in love with her?"

"I am." It didn't even occur to Jim to be evasive.

Collie grinned. "I'll be damned. I never figured you to go soft on *any* girl." He clapped Jim on the back. "More power to you, boy." His grin faded. "How does she feel about it? Have you asked her?"

Jim shook his head. "I haven't had much chance, since she had a husband until a day or so ago." He grinned. "Luke says I'm a fool to even think about it, that she wouldn't listen to me anyway, with things the way they are."

"I don't know about that," Collie said thoughtfully. "That look she gave you was sort of hard to figure out, too." He shrugged. "Well, it's none of my business, but how do you think she's going to feel when she shows up this noon and finds you gone?"

They were crossing the street toward the livery, and Jim didn't answer immediately. Inside the stable, Luke was cleaning a double-barrelled shotgun, and he looked up a little defiantly when they entered. "Figured this might come in handy," he said. "So I borrowed it from Sully Madden."

"Handy for what?" Jim demanded. "You thinking of going hunting?"

"Might," Luke said. "Hunting polecats." He leaned the gun against the wall and hooked his thumbs in his galluses. "I've been thinking about this bunch of barbed wire you're fixing to pick up for Trautner. There's no reason me and Collie can't go after it, no reason at all. With him driving, and me riding shotgun, we'll get it through slick as a whistle."

Jim thought about it a moment. Actually, there was no reason to suspect trouble as long as Monte had no way of knowing their plans, and only he and Trautner possessed that information, and of course Luke and Collie. When it came to that, his own absence from town would be more liable to arouse suspicion than for the other two to make the

trip. In addition, he hated the idea of being gone when Ellen might need him.

Apparently taking his silence for refusal, Luke said argumentatively, "Hell, Jim, I was riding shotgun before you was born. We won't have any trouble."

"All right, you ring-tailed catawampus," Jim said. "Go ahead and make the trip if you want to." He turned to Collie. "That is if it's all right with you."

"Suits me," Collie said. "Anything that'll bring things to a boil is all right with me."

Jim raised a warning hand. "Now don't forget what you're going for. It isn't to look for a showdown with Lyman's bunch, it's to bring back a load of barbed wire." He frowned. "This is Tuesday, isn't it? I've sort of lost track of the days."

Collie nodded, and Jim went on.

"All right, let's get this straight so there won't be any hitch. You two can leave right away, and you ought to get to Flintville by tomorrow night. That'll give you plenty of time to pick up the wire Thursday morning and start back. You'll have to go a little slower with a load, but I want you to time it so as to reach here around three o'clock Saturday morning."

"Sure," Collie said, "But why three o'clock? Wouldn't it be better to get back in daylight, so we could go right to the store and unload?"

"It's be easier, maybe, but not as safe. Some of Lyman's men might spot you before you hit town. Another thing, I'm going to ride out after dark Friday night and meet you, and I've got to know where you'll be at midnight."

"How about those two big rocks about ten miles out of town?" Luke suggested.

"That'll be fine," Jim said. He looked at Collie. "Likely you noticed them last night. You must've passed them just a little before the ambush."

"I remember them," Collie agreed. "All right, we'll be there at midnight Friday. We'll wait for you at the rocks."

"Fair enough. Now let's get the wagon ready. You can use the horse you came in with, and that big gray. They ought to work all right together."

"We'll make out," Collie said. He reached inside his shirt and unbuckled his moneybelt. "You'd better take this, Jim. It makes me nervous."

Jim rolled up the belt and stuck it in his pocket, remembering then to hand over the note Trautner had given him.

Half an hour later Luke and Collie rode out. Jim watched until the wagon disappeared around a bend in the road, then went back into the barn and busied himself around the stalls.

Promptly at noon, Ellen appeared in the doorway. She had changed from the dark dress she had worn to the funeral, and was wearing a white dress with a ribbon at the throat. There was just enough breeze to ruffle her hair and press her skirt against the softly rounded curves of her body.

"Anybody here?" she called.

Jim moved out from between the stalls, his pulse a little faster as it always was when Ellen was around. "I'd invite you to come in and sit down," he said, "But there aren't any chairs." He joined her in the doorway. "Likely it's just as well to stand here where everyone can see us anyway. There's some folks who'd like nothing better than an excuse to gossip."

A quick frown disturbed the smoothness of her brow. "You're probably thinking of Monte Lyman. I couldn't help overhearing what he said in front of the house the other day." She looked up at him soberly. "That's one reason I had to talk to you, that and what I heard about you making me a partner in your freighting business. You shouldn't have done that, Mr. Dixon. There was no reason—"

"Now hold on a minute," Jim said. "There was plenty of reason. After all, it was my fight with Jake Lyman that

started all this trouble. If it hadn't been for that, you'd still have your livery customers."

"And if you hadn't stayed here to help me out you'd be starting business somewhere else, with nobody like Monte Lyman to shoot at your drivers and steal your wagons." She reached out impulsively and took hold of his arm. "I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I have a perfectly good reason for what I'm about to say, so don't try to stop me. I've thought it all over, and I'm going to sell out what I have left and go away. That's the only thing that can keep this from causing more bloodshed."

Jim felt as though he had been kicked in the stomach. For a few hours he had dared hope that Ellen might learn to return his love. The thought of losing her now was more than he could accept.

He looked down at her hand, and covered it with his own. "All right, Ellen, maybe that wasn't a very good reason, so I'll give you the real one. The reason I made you a partner in the business is that I've fallen in love with you. So much in love that nothing else makes much difference."

Her lips parted, and it was hard for him to remember that folks were watching from behind store windows. Even so he might have drawn her close, but she let go of his arm and backed off.

Fearing that he had offended her, he said quickly, "I know this isn't the right time to tell you about it, or the right place, but I can't let you go without at least letting you know how I feel."

She smiled, her eyes tender. "You don't need to apologize for anything, Jim. What you just said would make any girl proud, and if it weren't for—" She shook her head unhappily. "Can't you see how this is going to end? Monte Lyman always takes what he wants, and he has a dozen men to do his bidding. You can't possibly defy him and get away with it, not with the whole town afraid to do anything."

"But except for that—except for Lyman, would there be any chance?"

She nodded, and a faint smile turned the corners of her mouth. Then the smile was gone, and she said dismally, "That doesn't alter things, though, because what I said is still true. Monte Lyman won't change, and if I stay around he'll have you killed. That's why I've got to leave."

"Wait, Ellen." Calling her by her own name seemed natural, and he hadn't failed to notice how quickly she had started calling him "Jim." "Before you say any more, there's something you ought to know. This town isn't quite as scared as you think. I've found one man who's willing to take a chance against Monte Lyman, and there may be others if he gets away with it."

He told her about Trautner then, and where Collie and Luke had gone. "At least give me time to finish what I've already started," he begged. "If you won't do it for me, do it for the town."

She bit her lip. "All right, Jim I'll stay and see how it turns out, but it isn't for Cottonwood. Folks here don't deserve what you're doing for them. If they did, they'd pitch in and help."

"Don't be too hard on them," Jim said. "Some of the men would take a chance if they had only themselves to think about. They've got wives and children, and that makes it tough."

"I suppose you're right," Ellen admitted thoughtfully. She gave him her quick smile. "Well, if everyone's watching us, I'd better leave and let them get back to work."

She turned away then, and Jim watched until she had almost reached her house. As she reached the house she turned and waved, but instead of going in, she suddenly crossed the street and walked up to knock on the door of a little cabin which Jim had had pointed out to him as belonging to Fred Hillegoss, the man who ran the mercantile. It puzzled him a little. Why would Ellen be calling on Mrs.

Hillegoss? There seemed to be no obvious answer, so he left the doorway and went back to work.

For the next couple of days he found plenty to do to keep him busy from dawn to dusk, taking out only enough time to go over to the cafe for his meals, and to have one drink each evening at the Happy Day. He made it a point to stay away from Simon Trautner's, and the other townsfolk seemed to be getting used to seeing him, although they showed no signs of becoming friendly.

By Friday noon he had about run out of work, and it was then that he thought about making a sign.

There was already some faded lettering on the front of the building, apparently put there by an earlier owner, and it was now so faint and chipped as to be unreadable. Jim had noticed half a can of green paint in the barn, and it occurred to him to make a new sign. He studied the wording for some time. Since Ellen was now his partner, her name rightfully belonged beside his, but the idea of calling it Carter and Dixon didn't please him, since it evoked memories of her dead husband.

After much thought, he decided to call it *The E & J Transportation Company*. He had just finished painting it over the door and was standing back to look it over when a horseman came in from the Flintville road and pulled up to watch.

Jim turned to look at the stranger and saw a man of perhaps thirty, mounted on a poor specimen of a horse, but dressed in flashy clothes which had seen better days. For some reason the stranger seemed amused, but Jim controlled his irritation and said politely, "Howdy, mister. You looking for someone?"

The stranger's amusement increased, and he said enigmatically, "I was, but I don't think I am any more." He gave Jim a closer scrutiny. "Would you be Jim Dixon?"

"That's right." Jim was bothered by the man's expression, and began to wonder if it could be another of Monte Lyman's tricks. "Am I suppose to know you?"

The man laughed, revealing small white teeth, "You really should, Dixon. After all, we're partners."

"Partners?" Jim put down the paint brush and wiped his hands on his pantslegs. "What're you driving at?"

The stranger shrugged. "All right, then, let's say you and my wife are partners. It amounts to the same thing. I don't imagine you want to argue the point."

Across the street, Marshal Ellis came out onto the sidewalk, but Jim didn't even notice him. His mind was too busy trying to grasp this stunning announcement. It couldn't be true, and yet he had the hollow feeling that it was.

Sudden rage drained the blood from his cheeks and his hand moved toward his holstered gun, but a vestige of caution made him hesitate, and he let his hand fall to his side. If this man was really Ellen's husband, he was as safe from Jim's bullets as though he wore inch-thick armor.

Marshal Ellis' voice broke the strained silence. "My God, Carter!" he said unbelievably "I thought you were dead!"

Carter laughed "Now where would you get that idea, Marshal? I never felt better in my life."

The marshal told him about the deputy's visit, while Carter continued to smile. When Ellis was through, Carter said as though it were a good joke, "Hell, Marshal, that's easy to explain. Somebody crawled in my window over at Flintville one night and stole my clothes. Likely he's the one that got shot."

Jim's first surge of anger had subsided to despair, but even so he was cool enough to realize that Carter was lying. There was something too smug about his ready explanation.

"This man you're talking about," Jim said. "I suppose he left a note telling about Ellen being my partner in the freighting business?"

Carter's eyebrows lifted. "So it's 'Ellen' already, is it? You don't waste much time, do you mister?" He shook his head "As a matter of fact, I heard the news about you in a saloon over at Flintville." His lips curled in a sneer "A thing like

this gets around, Dixon, when a man leaves his wife for a couple of days, and someone moves in behind his back."

"Damn your dirty tongue!" Jim made a lunge and pulled Carter out of the saddle. Carter grabbed for his gun, but Jim's action had been too unexpected, and before he could complete the draw Jim snatched the gun out of its holster and tossed it over beside the barn. His left hand closed on Carter's shirtfront, and his right fist drew back.

"Hold it, Dixon!"

Something in the marshal's tone turned Jim's head, and he saw the gun aimed at his back. The marshal's eyes were a little wild, and Jim realized with sudden clarity that Ellis was only a hair's breadth from squeezing the trigger. It came to him then that nothing would please the marshal more than an excuse to kill him, thus ridding himself of an embarrassing problem, and adding to his stature as a gunman.

Jim shoved his left palm into Carter's chest, knocking him off his feet and sprawling him in the dust. "All right, you foul-mouthed bastard," he said savagely. "It seems you've got the law on your side, but don't stretch your luck. And don't expect me to believe that yarn about having your clothes stolen. Likely you killed the man yourself, and fixed him up to look like you so that you could clear out and not be followed." His lips thinned. "Things began to look different when you saw a way of cutting yourself in on someone else's business. Isn't that right?"

Carter picked himself up out of the dust, his face flaming with humiliation and anger. The front of his shirt was ripped, and there was dirt on his cheek. In an attempt to recover some of his lost dignity, he said peremptorily, "Arrest this man, Marshal. You saw what he did."

The marshal hesitated, and Jim said harshly, "You're welcome to try, Ellis, if you're taking orders from a man like Carter, a skunk that can't even talk decent about his own wife."

As though he had found some justification in Jim's final

words, the marshal turned his attention to Carter. "You'd better go home and cool off," he said lamely. "Chances are you talked a little fast."

Carter swore. "I'll go home, all right, but I won't cool off." An ugly gleam came into his eyes. "You're damned right I'll go home. When a man's been away from his wife as long as I have, he's got things to tend to." He laughed suggestively. "I reckon Ellen will be real glad to see me."

Jim had a curb on his temper now, but he said with feeling, "Remember this, Carter. You may be Ellen's husband, but you do just one thing to make her unhappy and I'll kill you." He bent down and retrieved Carter's gun from the dust, and crossed over to drop it in the man's holster.

Carter hesitated a second, as though debating something in his mind, then turned and pulled himself into the saddle. He raked the horse with his spurs, and took off toward the house at a gallop.

There was a sour taste in Jim's mouth, and he turned sharply away before Carter reached his destination. The marshal was scowling at him, and said bluntly, "Why don't you give up and move on, Dixon? There's nothing for you here in Cottonwood."

For just a second Jim was tempted. Now that Carter was back, everything he had been fighting for was suddenly meaningless. What had the town given him except trouble? Better to charge it off to experience and get the hell out. Then he thought about Tex Forbes, and he knew that it was no longer that simple. A man could take a beating and get over it; he could lose half his capital and a team and wagon and it wouldn't break him, but he couldn't let someone murder one of his men and go unpunished.

He met the marshal's probing gaze and said quietly, "I'll stay, Marshal. There's times when a man hasn't any choice."

As though Jim's words contained some hidden meaning intended for him personally, the marshal stiffened. For just a passing moment some of the slackness left his face, then

his shoulders slumped and he turned away. At that moment Jim knew for sure that Ellis was a coward, and he felt sorry for him.

It was typical of Victor Carter that he had twisted the facts a little in telling how he had learned of Ellen's being made a partner in the freighting business. Actually, he had picked up the information in the stage office at a little town ten miles east of San Benito, where he had planned on boarding the east-bound stage. A driver who had been waiting to make his run had revealed enough so that Carter was able to guess the rest, and he had hurried to take advantage of the situation, abandoning his plan to return to his old haunts on the Mississippi. This he had done without hesitation, even though he had already gone to considerable trouble to make sure that his plans would be a secret, even contriving to kill an unknown drifter and planting enough evidence on his body to identify him as Victor Carter.

On his fast ride to Cottonwood, Carter had pictured Jim Dixon's chagrin at discovering that the man he had presumed dead was now a half-owner in his business. There had been other interesting thoughts to relieve the monotony of sand and sagebrush too. Ellen was everything a man could ask for, with only the one drawback that she tied a man down. Now that she had unwittingly dropped this plum into his lap, he'd be happy to pick up what he had been so willing to cast aside.

Unfortunately, things weren't working out quite as he had pictured them. In the first place, there had been that humiliating affair in front of the livery stable. The memory of being knocked into the dirt for everyone to see was bitter as gall, and now he was finding out that his visions of a passionate reunion with Ellen were going sour as well.

Ellen was facing him now, her features composed after the first shock of seeing him again after thinking him dead. At first she had been too stunned to resist his amorous em-

braces, but then she had drawn away from him, not only in the flesh, but as though they were strangers.

"What's got into you?" Carter demanded petulantly. "You're not going to be sore because I stayed away a little longer than I planned on?"

"No. I'm not angry because of that." Ellen's voice was cold, in a way that he had never heard it. Something had happened to her, all right "It isn't any one thing, Victor; it's all the dishonest things you've done in the past six months; the lies you've expected me to believe, the nights you've spent with that woman over at the saloon, everything." Her steady gaze didn't waver. "And now, the way you suddenly show up just when someone who is honorable and decent has done something generous for me."

"Oh come on," Carter protested "That had nothing to do with it. I just finished what I went for, so I came back."

"Don't make it worse by lying to me again."

Carter's anger mounted at his failure to deceive her. "All right, damn it, suppose I did find out about Dixon? Why shouldn't I come home in a hurry? Good Lord, Ellen, we've got something good here, if we use our heads. I did a little asking around about Dixon, and he's got quite a reputation up in Colorado for making money. All we've got to do is coast along and he'll make us rich."

Ellen shook her head. "I won't do it. I'll make him tear up the agreement"

Carter's palm caught her on the side of the face, leaving an angry red print

"Don't talk like a fool! I've waited a long time for something like this, and you're not going to cheat me out of it." Realizing that this approach would get him nowhere, he lowered his voice and said apologetically, "I didn't mean to hit you, Ellen. I'm sorry." He reached for her hand, and she didn't draw back this time, but her fingers were limp. "Can't you see what this means? Money enough to have the things we want, without having to grub for them?"

"I'm sorry, Victor. All I can see is that there's finally someone with courage enough to do something for this town." Her voice took on a little animation. "Why already he's persuaded Simon Trautner to let him—"

She came to an abrupt stop, and Carter sensed that she had said more than she had meant to.

"To let him *what?*" he demanded.

"Nothing." Ellen took away her hand. "Anyway, it doesn't make any difference now. Whatever we had, you and I, it's gone. We might as well admit it."

Carter's temper burst its bounds then, and he reached out and seized the neck of her dress. "You're still my wife," he snarled.

He yanked on the cloth, and the dress ripped to the waist. Carter's tongue flicked across his lips and he reached out to grab her, but something in the back of his mind sounded a sharp warning. Dixon had promised to kill him if he did anything to make Ellen unhappy. The memory of that look in Dixon's eyes cooled some of his passion, and he let his arms fall at his sides. No woman was worth getting killed for, not when there were others to be had for the price of a drink. Besides, she'd still be here when he finished something else that had to be taken care of.

Without speaking, he turned and left the house, vaulting into the saddle in feverish haste. He had some information to sell, and he knew who would buy it. Seconds later he was spurring toward Rocking L.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JIM WAS IN the corral and didn't see Carter ride out, nor did he hear about it when he went to the cafe for supper, or afterwards when he stopped in the Happy Day for a drink.

The thought of Carter and Ellen being together was maddening, but he tried to keep it out of his mind and concentrate on his plans for the night.

At nine o'clock he closed the big door and took the lantern into the bedroom. Just in case anyone should happen to be watching, he waited a few minutes before blowing it out, then made his way quietly to the stall where his gelding was tied, already saddled and bridled. He led it out the back door and to the edge of town and beyond, then mounted and headed toward his rendezvous with Luke and Collie.

It was a clear night and there would be a moon later on, but already there was sufficient starlight to make objects easily discernible, and if you listened you could hear all kinds of night noises: the slow swish of an owl's wings in flight, the scurrying of mice and other small night-feeders, and the faint whisper of a breeze through the pines.

One part of Jim's mind was recording these impressions, but most of his thoughts were on the coming showdown with Monte Lyman—a showdown he knew was unavoidable when Monte found out about the shipment of barbed wire. The wire itself was of slight importance, but to the town it would be a sort of symbol, some tangible evidence that Lyman's power over the community had become less absolute. Yet, even successful delivery of the shipment to Trautner's store would not settle anything. On the contrary, it would only aggravate the situation. Unless it gave the townsfolk sufficient encouragement to make them pitch in and help, it could easily prove disastrous.

Jim shook his head grimly. Certainly there had been no indication as yet of any reawakening of courage among the merchants. Even Trautner had gone into the scheme in a half-hearted way, and the others had seemed more withdrawn than ever for the last few days. For a moment Jim was almost bitter enough to call the whole thing off. What difference did it make now, he asked himself. He wouldn't stay around no matter how it turned out. The very thought of

seeing Ellen Carter every day, and knowing that she belonged to someone else, was torture.

Yet he kept riding toward the appointed meeting place, and in spite of his bitterness he knew he would go through with it. Monte Lyman had to be stopped, and Tex Forbes' murder avenged, and there was something in Jim's makeup which wouldn't let him quit until the job was done.

It was now almost time for the moon to rise, and the slight breeze had died to a whisper. Even the other faint sounds had stopped, as though all nature were holding its breath. It tightened Jim's nerves, and made him a little uneasy. He had known the feeling before, when there was such an unexplained silence. There was usually a simple explanation, but tonight he found it hard to shrug off.

As a precaution he reined off the road and made a wide circle toward Rocking L, his ears strained for any suspicious sound. He could find nothing wrong, so he returned to the main road and continued on. Likely it was just his imagination, he told himself. After all, there was no way for anyone to know his plans.

As soon as Jim was out of sight, Joe Braden led his horse out of a clump of cedar and climbed into his saddle. The Rocking L rider was sweating in spite of the coolness of the night. Dixon had come too close for comfort, and Braden had been afraid that his horse might make a noise and give him away, in which case Monte Lyman's rage would have known no bounds. Braden cursed fervently, and wheeled his horse toward where the others were waiting.

Monte Lyman stirred restlessly in his saddle as he waited for Braden to bring word of Jim's progress. He had drawn away from Jake and Victor Carter, not wanting to be bothered by his brother's sullen complaints, or by Carter's nervous efforts to bolster his own flagging courage.

Monte had decided long before this that Carter was a coward and a weakling, and yet by an ironic quirk of fate

the gambler's astonishing return from the dead had provided him with the biggest break to date. Until the time Carter had ridden into the Rocking L ranchyard earlier in the day, one of Monte's main worries had been that Ellen and Dixon might decide that the odds were too great, and take off together for parts unknown, possibly to some part of the country where Monte didn't dare follow.

Now that Carter was back, any alliance between Ellen and Jim Dixon was out of the question. In addition, Carter's skimpy information about a deal between Dixon, Simon and Trautner had provided the explanation of why Dixon's driver and Luke Martin had taken the wagon out a few days before. It was pretty clear now that they were going after a shipment of hardware, probably the barbed wire which Monte had refused to haul.

Nothing could have suited Monte better. Here was a chance to get rid of Dixon once and for all. Afterwards . . . He looked around sourly at the gambler. His cruel smile would have made Carter blanch had he been able to see it.

The sound of an approaching horse interrupted his thoughts, and he scowled suspiciously down the trail until he recognized Braden, then pulled out to intercept him. "Well?" he demanded. "Did he show up?"

"Yeah." Braden reined his horse to a stop. "He's gone on up the road."

"You're sure he didn't see you?"

"I'm sure." Braden took off his hat and mopped his forehead. "He's not taking any chances, though, from the way he's acting." Braden's frown could be seen in the first moonlight. "Maybe we ought to have brought along more of the men."

Monte swore. "Don't try to do my planning for me, Braden. The others are doing a job, too, all except Dummy Zale, and he's no good on a job like this where he can't see my lips."

Jake and Carter had pulled alongside, and Jake said

harshly, "Yeah, we're better off without the Dummy. All he cares anything about is some lousy pigeon or a sick colt."

"Or me," Monte said dryly. "That's more than I can say for anyone else." He cut off Jake's attempted reply with an impatient gesture. "We're not here to argue. If Carter got the right dope from his wife, Dixon likely aims to meet the other two out on the road somewhere and come in with the wagon."

"I've got it right," Carter said, with an attempt at authority. "She wouldn't say much about it, but I'm no fool." His laugh was a little forced. "By God I'll show her what happens to a man she double-crosses me with." The laughter died, and he added nervously, "You're pretty sure there'll be just three of them?"

Monte grinned. "What's the matter, Carter? Are you getting cold feet?" He leaned across the saddlehorn. "There's just three, and one of them is Luke Turner, so we've really only got two to worry about." He pointed a finger at his brother. "You've been telling everybody what you'd do to Dixon, so I'm giving you your chance, but I'll be there to back you up if you miss."

"I won't miss," Jake bragged. "I'll . . ."

Monte had already turned his attention to Braden.

"Your job is to pick off the driver."

Braden nodded, and Monte laid his gaze on Carter.

"I'm counting on you to get rid of the old man. I reckon he won't give you much trouble." He tightened up on his reins.

"Now remember, we want to let them get as far as our turn off. That'll give us a chance to dump their bodies in the wagon and get them to the ranch in a hurry, just in case anyone rides out this way to see what the shooting's about." He glanced up at the moon, which was now well above the horizon. "Come on, men. We've got time to get set before they get back. We'll tie our horses far enough from the road so that they won't give us away, and if one of you makes a sound before I give the signal, I'll kill him!"

Although he had found nothing on which to base his suspicions, Jim's nerves were still bowstring tight when he came to the rocks where he had arranged to meet the wagon. He pulled up in the shadows and whistled softly, and presently Luke Turner appeared at his side without a sound.

"Looking for someone?" he asked mildly.

Jim couldn't help jerking, and the old man chuckled. "What's the matter, boy, did you expect me to come with a brass band?"

"I wasn't counting on you being an Indian," Jim said, and grinned down at him. "Did you get the wire all right?"

"That's what we went after, ain't it?" Luke faced up the road and gave a soft owlhoot, and immediately there was the creak of harness leather. After a moment the wagon came into sight around a curve, and Collie Peterson raised a hand in greeting. He pulled up beside them and grinned at Jim in the moonlight.

"Here's your danged wire, fella, right on schedule." His grin faded, and he added curiously, "What's the matter? You look about as happy as a preacher with the hiccups. Has something gone haywire?"

Plenty, Jim thought, remembering about Victor's return, but that wasn't Collie's worry, so he shook his head. "Nothing I can put my finger on, but I don't like the feel of things. It was too quiet back the road." He smiled crookedly. "Reckon I'm just jumpy."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Collie said "I've known you to feel that way before, and there was usually a reason." He squinted down the road. "Well, what do we do next?"

Jim glanced the direction that Collie had. The road was plainly visible for quite a distance now, but the moon was far enough past the full stage, so that its light had lost a good deal of intensity. In order for a man to do any accurate shooting he would have to be fairly close to his target. He came to a decision, and said quietly, "Chances are

there's nobody except us within a mile of the road, but if there is, and if they mean to cause us any trouble, I'd lay money on it they'd be down by the Rocking L turn off where things were so quiet. Luke, I want you to get in the back of the wagon between those rolls of wire and stay out of sight. Collie can keep driving, and I'll ride out in front and off to one side. The wagon ought to make enough racket to drown out what noise I'll be making, and if there's anybody waiting for us, there's a chance I may spot them before we ride into a trap."

Luke snorted. "If anybody's got to go ahead, it ought to be me. You'll make more noise than a herd of buffalo."

"We'll have to chance it," Jim said mildly, knowing that Luke was just worried about his safety. "Well, give me time to get out of sight, and then start moving."

He reined the gelding off the road into the trees. They didn't grow close together here, but they afforded some concealment, and a carpet of pine needles deadened the sound of the horse's hoofs. Presently he heard the crunch of wagon wheels as Collie put the team into motion.

Jim rode like this for perhaps an hour, keeping close enough to the road to be able to follow the progress of the wagon, but far enough back to stay out of sight. At the end of the hour they were approaching the Rocking L turn off and he doubled his vigilance, dismounting so as to make a smaller target, and leading the gelding.

In spite of his forebodings, nothing seemed to be amiss. The unusual stillness which had worried him at this point earlier was no longer noticeable, and everything seemed peaceful.

After listening for several seconds he decided that his hunch had been wrong. He got back into the saddle and turned the gelding toward the road, meaning to rejoin Luke and Collie for the rest of the ride to town.

The wagon was close enough now so that it made quite a racket. Jim pulled up at the edge of the trees to wait, and

as he did, a shaft of moonlight glinted for an instant on some metal object at the edge of the trees on the far side of the road . . .

Jim's breath caught in his throat. There might be some innocent explanation for the reflection, but there wasn't time to investigate, nor was there time to head off the wagon. He drew his gun and snapped a quick shot toward the spot which had caught his attention.

A man cursed, and he recognized Jake Lyman's voice. Then gunfire erupted from the far side of the road, the bullets spattering into the trees from which Jim had fired, but Jim had anticipated such a reaction and swung the gelding to one side.

Up the road a bit, Collie's voice rose in a shout, and the reins slapped against the horses' rumps. The wagon came swaying down the road in a shower of gravel, Collie holding the lines with his left hand and using his right to handle his six-gun, which was throwing lead into the darkness where the ambushers were hidden.

Jim whirled his horse toward the same spot, but held his fire as he waited for a flash to tell him where the ambushers were. He heard Collie's hammer click on an empty cartridge, and knew that the driver would have no chance to reload.

Immediately afterward, a man on foot burst out of the trees and took deliberate aim at the wagon. Jim tried to wheel his mount and get the man in his sights, but knew that he would be too late. Then there was the dull boom of a shotgun, and the man flung his arms over his head and went over backward, his pistol flying out of his hand.

A gun spoke at the edge of the trees, and Jim felt something yank at the back of his jacket. He returned the fire without any expectation of hitting the unseen gunman, and at once there was the sound of someone running, followed after a minute by the pound of shod hoofs.

The whole thing had happened in a matter of seconds, and the wagon was now out of sight around a bend in the road

Jim swung his horse into a patch of shadow and sat listening. As near as he could tell there were at least three riders heading toward Rocking L at a gallop.

He was about to follow the wagon when he remembered the man Luke had blasted with the shotgun. There was just a bare chance that he might be alive, so he turned his horse and rode back to where he had fallen.

The ambusher was sprawled on his back, and in the moonlight Jim could see the spreading pool of blood. He stepped out of the saddle and bent down for a closer look, keeping a tight grip on the gelding's reins, since the animal had smelled blood and was ready to bolt.

There was no question about the man's being dead. Luke's shotgun charge had caught him full in the chest, almost tearing him in two. His face, though, was unscarred, and Jim recognized him as Joe Braden, one of the men Monte Lyman had left to guard Luke the night the freight yard burned.

Jim led his horse to a small tree and tied it, then picked up Braden's body and laid it across the saddle. No one could do anything for Braden now, but his blood-spattered body would be convincing evidence that Monte Lyman had planned this ambush.

With the horse carrying double, Jim didn't catch up with the wagon until it reached the edge of town. Collie had drawn the team to a stop, and he and Luke watched worriedly as Jim came alongside.

"You all right, Jim?"

"Never better," Jim said. He remembered the shot that had yanked at his jacket, and reached behind him to find a long tear in the cloth, but no other evidence that the bullet had caused any worse damage. "Now about you two?"

"Not a scratch," Collie said. "I guess that warning shot of yours threw them off stride." He pointed at the body. "Who's your friend?"

"Joe Braden," Jim said. "One of Lyman's men." He grinned at Luke. "Bringing that shotgun was a smart idea, old timer. Using it when you did was even smarter."

"Smart, hell," Luke said. "Don't take any brains to empty a shotgun when some danged fool stands right out in the open and asks for it." He spat in the road. "This thing ain't over by a long shot. It's just starting. What happened to Braden ain't going to slow Monte any. Come daylight and he'll be here in his warpaint."

"We're not waiting for daylight," Jim said sharply.

Luke's head bobbed up. "What're you talking about? You ain't going to tackle Rocking L?"

Jim nodded. "Probably I should've done it sooner, but I wanted to handle this legally. I will yet if the marshal has guts enough to go along with it, but if he hasn't, it's up to us. If Monte Lyman gets the idea he can waylay our wagons along the road and get by with it, we might as well hand him the town on a platter." He looked at the two men thoughtfully.

"I'm speaking for myself, of course. If either of you wants out, it's up to you."

"You loco or something?" Collie demanded. He slapped the lines. "Where do we go first?"

"To the marshal's office," Jim said. "We've got to give him one more chance. Maybe he's changed his mind."

But it soon became evident that Marshal Ellis hadn't undergone any change of heart. He wouldn't even step out into the road to look at Braden's body. "What if it is Braden?" he muttered. "It's still none of my business, Dixon. Like I told you before, I'm just interested in what goes on in town."

Jim was fighting to control his temper. "You're all the law closer than Flintville," he said bluntly. "Someone has to take charge here, and if it's you, folks will be willing to follow. All you have to do is swear in a posse. Good Lord, man, this isn't the time to get technical about town limits!"

"You've already got my answer," the marshal said. "Now quit bothering me or I'll throw you in jail."

"For what?" Jim demanded. "For trying to save the town?"

The marshal didn't answer, and Jim's temper got the best of him. He drew his gun and put a bullet through the office window. "All right, Ellis. There's your excuse to do something. Now let's see if you've got guts enough to jail me!"

He slid his gun back into his holster and let his hand hang at his side. "Come on, man. This is sure something that happened in town. Let's see you do something about it."

Somewhere down the street a window banged open, but the marshal didn't move. His lips were twitching nervously, and his breathing was loud and agitated.

Jim turned his back deliberately and lifted Braden's body off the saddle. He dropped it on the wooden sidewalk at the marshal's feet, then turned his attention to Ellis again.

"You might as well ride out," he said quietly. "Go somewhere and get yourself a job punching cows. Whatever it takes to be a lawman, you don't have it. Maybe it's lucky for you you found out when you did." He motioned to Collie. "Come on fella, we've still got that wire to deliver before we head for Rocking L."

The marshal let them go without saying anything, and Jim walked across the street, leading his horse with its blood-soaked saddle. He wrapped the reins around Trautner's hitchrail and motioned for Collie to stop the wagon close to the walk.

Before he had time to reach the door, it opened and Simon Trautner stepped out, a rifle in his hand. "So you made it," he said. "I figured you would. That's why we've been waiting for you."

"We?"

The hardwareman nodded. "Ben Macey and Sully Mad-

den are inside. They've been staying with me nights, and it's a good thing they have, too, or at least it was about an hour ago."

"Meaning what?"

"Well, a few of Monte's men were here, intending to make some trouble." He shook his head angrily. "The kind of trouble that made them bring along a can of kerosene. They lost their nerve when they found out I had help."

"But Ben Macey and Sully Madden said they'd have no part of it," Jim said in surprise. "I don't understand—"

"Let them tell you themselves then." Trautner stepped to the door and said something, and the two men came out. "Dixon wants to know how come you decided to take a hand in this. You might as well tell him."

Ben Macey stared at the rolls of wire, then turned his attention to Jim.

"It was our wives that made us do it, Dixon, not anything you said." He laughed softly. "Dammit, that Carter girl persuaded 'em we were making a mistake letting Lyman get by with what he's been doing. She's called on every married woman in town, and talked an arm off 'em."

"Ellen?" Jim felt a glow of pride. So that was why she had gone to the Hillegoss house the other day. But where was Hillegoss now? He looked toward the store window. "How about the others? Are they around someplace?"

It was Madden who answered, a little sheepishly. "Maybe their wives ain't such good talkers as ours, or maybe they're waiting to see how far we get before we run into something we can't handle. They ain't crazy about bucking Monte Lyman."

"Who is?" Jim said. He glanced at the sky. "Well, in a couple of hours it'll be daylight. If we don't do something before then, Monte's liable to bring his whole crew and wipe us out. Our only chance is to get the jump on him before he expects us. Luke and Collie and I are going to make a

stab at it, but if you three men will come along we'll have a better chance. How about it?"

Trautner looked at his companions a moment. "Shucks," he said wryly. "We're in it so far now it's too late to back out. What do you want us to do?"

"Get your horses and meet us in front of the livery stable," Jim said. "We'll saddle some fresh mounts and be ready to ride." He turned to Collie Peterson. "Unhitch the team and leave the wagon where it is. We'll unload it when we come back."

"If we come back," Collie said quietly. He got out of the wagon and started unbuckling the harness.

Ten minutes later the little group headed toward Rocking L, with Jim in the lead. Behind them the town lay dark and silent, unaware of the danger six men were risking to insure its future.

Thinking about it, Jim wondered bleakly if it was worth the risk. Then his thoughts turned to Ellen Carter, and his moment of uncertainty passed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AT THE EDGE of town, Jim turned in his saddle and motioned for Luke to pull up beside him. "You've been around here a long time," he said. "Is there any way of reaching Lyman's place without following the road?"

"Sure there is," Luke said promptly. "There's a creek bed that's dry this time of year. Why?"

"There's a chance that Monte might have a lookout posted somewhere along the road. It isn't likely he'll be expecting us so soon, but we can't afford to take the risk of being spotted. They've got us outnumbered, and we won't have a chance unless we surprise them."

The old man chuckled. "Maybe you ain't so ignorant after all, young feller." His eyes gleamed in the moonlight. "Suppose we do surprise 'em, what do you aim to do?"

Jim had been struggling with that problem ever since he had decided to make the raid. Never having seen the Rocking L headquarters, he couldn't formulate his strategy as to details; but what he hoped to do was get the crew covered before they suspected anything, then disarm them and keep them under guard while he released any livestock in the barns, and set fire to the buildings. He explained this to Luke now, loud enough so that the others could hear.

"What about Monte and Jake?" Luke demanded. "They won't be sleeping with the others. They've got rooms in the main house."

"Then we'll keep the house covered until we've got the crew taken care of. After that, we'll give them a chance to come out and surrender."

Luke snorted. "Monte Lyman ain't likely to give himself up," he said harshly. "Even if he did, what good would it do? You ain't got any place to hold him."

"Luke's making sense," Collie cut in. "I say we'd better cut 'em down. They sure as hell didn't give us any chance a while ago."

"No," Jim said. "We've got to take the law in our own hands up to a certain point, but they're going to get a fair trial. Likely most of the crew will be willing to leave the country rather than take their chance in front of a judge, but I'm going to see to it that Monte shows up in court."

"You've got to catch him first," Luke said pointedly.

"Then let's get about it. Now where's that creek bed you were talking about?"

Luke pushed ahead and angled off to the right. After a bit he slid his horse down the bank of the dry creek and swung left again. The others followed, strung out in single file.

The creek bed was damp from the recent rains, so they rode with hardly any noise. After about an hour Luke motioned them to stop. "We're about there," he said. "It's right around the next bend."

Jim nodded, and took the lead again. He rounded the bend and eased his horse out of the creek as quietly as he could, then stopped in the shadow of some brush.

Below him in a shallow depression the ranch buildings were clearly visible in the moonlight, a long one-story house to the left, a bunkhouse facing it across the yard, and several other buildings beyond—including a big barn. There were no lights burning in any of the buildings, and Jim's hopes rose. Apparently everyone was asleep.

Luke touched his elbow. "You want me to have a look before you ride in? One feller would have a better chance of getting there without being spotted."

"No, thanks," Jim said. "I'll go myself. This was my idea."

Luke started to protest, but Jim motioned him to silence. He turned toward Collie Peterson. "If I don't come back in ten minutes, the rest of you come down as quietly as you can. We want to do this without any more killing than necessary."

He dismounted then and handed Collie his reins. Bending down, he took off his spurs and wrapped them in his handkerchief, then faded into the brush alongside the creek bed. He took advantage of this protection as long as he could, but the creek veered away from the direction he wanted to go, so he had to take a chance on crossing an open stretch. He reached the side of the bunkhouse and crouched against its thick foundation, his gun in his hand.

There was no reaction inside the building, so he crept around the corner and straightened up beside the doorway. It struck him as odd that there should be no sound of snoring, but having gone this far he knew it would be useless to turn back. If they had spotted him and were waiting to jump him, they could shoot him as he ran back across the

open space. Faced with this choice, he slipped quietly through the doorway away from the opening.

His finger was tight on the trigger and his heart pounded against his ribs, but nothing happened. Suspicion began to build, and he strained his ears, but was unable to hear even so much as a man's breathing. Cursing mentally, he moved to the first bunk and found that it was empty.

He struck a match then, and his suspicions were confirmed. All the other bunks were empty too.

For a moment he could only stare in stunned disbelief as the truth came to him. While he and his handful of men had taken the roundabout route to Rocking L, Monte Lyman and his crew must have been riding the main road to town. By now there would be slight chance of overtaking them, and the town would be helpless, without even the protection of the few men who had dared take up arms. Both the livery stable and the hardware store, Monte's most likely targets, were unguarded.

The match scorched his fingers, and he dropped it with a curse, then stiffened as it flickered out on the floor. There might still be a way, even though Monte's bunch would by now have a head start. Luke had used the trick before and it had worked. Why not try it again?

He grabbed a straw mattress off the nearest bunk and ran out into the yard, making no attempt at concealment. There was a small shed near the bunkhouse, and he tore open the mattress and scattered straw around its base. Taking another match from his pocket, he bent down and set fire to the straw. It caught quickly, and almost at once a sheet of flames licked at the wall.

A door squeaked in the main house, and Jim whirled with his gun in his hand, but it was only the Chinese cook who came out, his eyes wide with fear. At sight of Jim's gun he rushed back into the house, slamming the door behind him.

There was a clatter of hoofs then, and Collie Peterson came racing across the yard at a gallop, leading Jim's horse

"What's going on?" he yelled. "Where's Lyman's crew?"

"They've lit out!" Jim said fiercely. "Likely they went to town to wipe us out." He pointed at the flames, which were now shooting high into the air. "This might bring them back, unless they've gone too far to see it." He looked at the others, who had followed Collie into the ranchyard.

"This plays hell with our plans, men. Our only hope now is that they'll see the fire and turn back. They have no way of knowing there's so many of us, and if we keep still they may figure we just set fire to the place and ran. There's just a chance they might ride into a trap." He looked up at the merchants. "You three tie your horses out of sight and wait in the bunkhouse. With those thick walls it's about the safest spot on the place, and you can shoot through the windows when the time comes."

Trautner licked his lips nervously. "Where'll you be, Dixon? Wouldn't it be better if we all stuck together?"

"I'll be in the main house, and Collie will be in the barn. That way we'll have a chance of catching them in a cross fire."

"But suppose they don't—"

"Dammit, there's no time to argue. What do you want us to do—tuck our tails between our legs and run? They'd just follow us and finish what they meant to do when they headed for town." He lowered his voice. "Like it or not, we're in this all the way now, and we've either got to stand up and fight, or keep riding."

"I suppose you're right," Trautner said reluctantly. He wheeled his horse toward the bunkhouse, and Macey and Madden followed. They rode out of sight behind the building for a moment, then came back on foot and went in.

Jim squinted at the fire, and tried to guess how long it would continue to burn. They would need the illumination when the Rocking L crew returned, if they did return. He looked up at Collie.

"It's a bum setup, fella, but it looks like we're stuck with

it. I want you to get both our horses out of sight and pick yourself a spot over in the barn. If they give us any kind of a chance, I'll try to bluff 'em into believing we've got them surrounded, and tell them to throw down their guns. Don't start shooting until I do."

"Just so you don't make me wait too long," Collie said. "One of the bastards is the one that killed Tex." He rode off toward the barn, leading Jim's horse.

"How about me?" Luke asked. "I've got as much interest in this as anybody."

"Go up the road a ways and hide," Jim ordered. "If they ride in, let 'em get past without seeing you, but be ready to give 'em a blast with that shotgun if they get jumpy and try to turn back. They've got us outnumbered, but maybe we can keep them from finding it out. Now get moving!"

"Yes sir!" Luke kicked his horse into a gallop.

Jim took a quick look around the ranchyard, then ran to the main house. The door was unlocked and he yanked it open and went in, closing it behind him. Light from the fire filtered through two or three windows, making it easy to find his way around. He passed into another room and found that it was a sort of office, apparently the one from which Monte directed operations. There was a gun rack on one wall, and Jim picked out a rifle and made sure it was loaded.

This room was on the corner of the house and had windows on two sides, so that it was possible to see the road, as well as the ranchyard itself. Jim crouched below a window sill and stared toward the road. Almost immediately he became aware of the faint rumble of hoofs, and a little later a band of horsemen came into sight—Monte Lyman at their head.

They were coming at a gallop, and Jim groaned with relief as it appeared that they were too concerned with the fire to think about a possible ambush. Then Monte suddenly

straightened in his stirrups and pulled his stallion to a sliding halt.

"It's a trap!" he yelled. "Someone's in the bunkhouse. The door's shut."

There was a moment of confusion as horses bumped into each other in their riders' anxiety to turn back. Men cursed and Monte's voice rose above the tumult.

"Stay back until the fire burns out!" he shouted. "Just hold your fire, and by God we'll—"

Luke's shotgun boomed, and Jim saw that one of the Rocking L crew had tried to make a run for it. At once several riders poured a withering fire into the trees. A gun barked from inside the bunkhouse, and one of Monte's men pitched out of the saddle. Two or three others emptied their guns at the bunkhouse windows, and someone inside let out a yell.

Jim stared at the scene in bitter frustration. For a second there had been a chance, but now the advantage lay with Rocking L. One of their men was out of action, but there were still nine or ten left, and any one of them was twice as dangerous as the townsmen. Not only that, but Monte had now succeeded in withdrawing them from the light of the fire, and all they had to do was wait for daylight, which would not be long.

The man who had been shot out of his saddle groaned and tried to sit up, then fell back into the dirt. Suddenly another of Monte's men rode out of the darkness and pulled up beside him, seemingly unconcerned over the fact that he made a perfect target. Suspecting a trick of some sort, Jim raised the rifle to his shoulder and held the man in his sights. Then the man turned so that he had a better view of his face, and he saw that it was Dummy Zale.

Zale dismounted deliberately and kneeled beside the wounded man. When he straightened up he had the man in his arms, holding him as gently as though he were a baby. He had carried him halfway to the house when someone

yelled excitedly, "Come back, you fool! They'll kill you!"

Jim recognized Victor Carter's voice, and had the answer to a question which had been bothering him. Now he could guess how Monte had found out about the load of wire, and why he had been lying in wait for them on the road.

He straightened up from his cramped position and started to turn away from the window, then froze as a dark shape filled the doorway to the other room. Before he could raise the muzzle of the rifle, Monte Lyman said in astonishment, "Dixon! I'll be damned if I—"

His six-gun started to come up into line, and Jim acted instinctively, hurling the rifle across the room. It slammed into Monte's shoulder as the gun went off, and his bullet only grazed Jim's right arm, but even this was sufficient to numb his hand, making it impossible for him to draw his gun. He charged across the room and drove his left shoulder into Monte's chest, and they crashed to the floor in the next room.

Monte grunted from the impact, but he kept hold of his gun and tried desperately to get it in position for a shot. Jim clamped the fingers of his left hand around Monte's wrist and put all his strength into twisting it away. His right arm still had no feeling in it, and was of no use against Monte's fingers, which were clawing at his throat.

Both men were struggling for breath, and Jim knew that he couldn't hold out much longer unless he regained the use of his right arm. He put every ounce of strength into one terrific surge, and Monte's wrist snapped back, the gun crashing to the floor.

Monte cursed in pain and anger, but his left arm didn't loosen its hold of Jim's throat. Suddenly his voice rose in a shout. "He's in here, damn him! In the office. Come and get him!"

Jim tried to break loose, and he smashed his left fist into Monte's face, but the blows were too short to have any real power, and Monte clung to him like a leech. Then there was

the sound of boots in the back of the house, and a man raced into the room, a gun in his hand.

Light from the fire shown in his face, and Jim saw that it was Victor Carter.

Carter recognized him at the same time, and there was a triumphant grin on his face as he raised his gun and thumbed back the hammer.

"Dixon!" he said. "By God this is something I'm going to like, putting a bullet in the man that took my woman away from me!"

Someone else had come in the front door, but Jim couldn't take his eyes off Carter's face. He saw the jaw muscles tense, and he made one last effort to save himself by rolling suddenly to one side, pulling Monte with him.

Carter's gun spouted flame, and Monte's breath whooshed out of his lungs as the bullet slammed into his back. Carter cursed, and took a step forward so that his gun was only inches from Jim's belly. "By God I won't miss this time, Dixon."

Suddenly he was jerked off his feet, and Jim saw that Dummy Zale had spun him around with a huge hand on one shoulder. Zale's eyes were as blank as ever, but his mouth was open as though he were trying to shout, and it gave him an inhuman expression.

Carter saw it too, and screamed wildly. "I wasn't after Monte! It was an accident. Good God, Zale, you aren't going to—"

As though he suddenly realized the futility of shouting at a deaf man, he tried to bring his gun into position, but Zale twisted it out of his hand as though it were a toy. He raised it above his head and brought it down in an arc, and Jim heard Carter's skull burst like an eggshell.

Jim's arm was beginning to come back to life, and he put his hand on his gun, but Zale didn't come near him. He bent down to look at Monte's unseeing eyes, then turned and left the room.

Outside, the night had suddenly exploded in gunfire. Jim crossed to the window and saw that the Rocking L crew was pouring lead into the bunkhouse. He lined up his gun on a shadowy figure and squeezed the trigger. The man yelled in pain, but turned and fired at the house, his bullet shattering a window.

Jim ran out the front door, wanting desperately to stop this battle, but not sure he could convince them that Monte was dead. He dashed around the corner of the house to get out of the light, and cupped his hands to his mouth.

"Monte's dead!" he shouted. "Put up your guns!"

There was a moment of silence, then Jake Lyman yelled wildly, "He's lying, men. Don't listen to him. There's a thousand dollars to the man that kills him!"

Instantly the shooting resumed, and lead began to spatter against the end of the house. Then there was a thunder of hoofs up the road, and Luke Turner yelled excitedly, "Here they come, Jim, the whole damned town!"

Startled, Jim saw a line of riders pounding down the road, rifles shining in their hands. Luke's shotgun boomed, and as though this were a signal, the firing stopped.

"Hold your fire!" Jim yelled, and ran out into the light. "There's nothing to fight about any more. Monte Lyman and Carter are both dead, and I don't know how many others." He walked toward the Rocking L crew. "Come out in the light with your hands up and we'll let you go."

There was a moment's delay, then two or three men stepped out of the shadows, their hands held high. Jim started toward them, then grabbed for his gun as one of the men dropped into a crouch.

Both guns blazed, and the man snapped erect as Jim's bullet slammed into him. His hat flew off, and Jim saw that it was Jake Lyman.

There was no more fight in the others, and Jim ordered them to throw down their guns. The bunkhouse door opened,

and Trautner came out, holding onto Sully Madden for support. Ben Macey followed them.

Jim turned to face the new arrivals, who had formed a semicircle at his back. Lucky Odom grinned at him uncertainly. "We finally came to our senses," he said. "Reckon we was almost too late."

Jim grinned. "Just in time, I'd call it." He pointed at the Rocking L crew. "As long as you're here, it might be a good idea to give these men an escort for a few miles. When it's daylight, take a good look at them, just in case any of them ever try to come back." He turned toward the bunkhouse.

"Trautner. Are you hurt bad?"

"Just scratched a little," Trautner said. He grinned. "Honest to God, Dixon, I haven't felt better in years. I'm breathing again."

"Good." Jim saw Collie Peterson coming toward him from the barn, and moved out to meet him.

"I guess this makes up for what they did to Tex," he said. "Likely you'll find our other wagon around here someplace, too, and maybe the money they stole."

Collie grinned. "I'll find it, all right." He looked at Jim curiously. "You going to help me look, Jim?"

Jim looked around at the circle of faces, and thought about Ellen Carter, about how she had shamed them into taking up arms. About other things, too, her red lips and soft cheeks, and the way she smiled. He shook his head.

"You handle it, Collie," he said. "After all, it's just money. I've got more important things to do."